

Snapshotting the 'Other': images of the 'otherness' in Samuel Butler's life and work (1835-1902)

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We had better live in others as much as we can if only because we thus live more in the race, which God really does seem to care about a good deal, and less in the individual, to whom, so far as I can see, he is indifferent. After we are dead it matters not to the life we have led in ourselves what people may say of us, but it matters much to the life we lead in others and this should be our true life.

S. Butler, "Living in Others", The Notebooks

There is a peculiar heroism abroad in the world since the invention of cameras: the heroism of vision.

S. Sontag, On Photography

I.

Samuel Butler is generally known as the author of *Erewhon* to distinguish him from his two namesakes, the seventeenth-century poet, author of *Hudibras*, and the Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry, headmaster of the Shrewsbury public school, his grandfather. His father, Revd. Thomas Butler, was a practical and reserved man who brought up his first son Samuel for a destined career in the Anglican church. Refusing to be ordained, Samuel first left England for New

Zealand and, once he came back, he attended an art school in London with the aim of becoming a painter. Progressively disillusioned with academic training, he devoted himself to a multifarious activity as a musician, photographer and writer of pungent and far-reaching literary, artistic, religious and scientific critique¹. By family origins and educational background, Butler belonged to that intellectual élite so brilliantly portrayed by Stefan Collini². For that reason, the image of an isolated and unheard debunker of the Victorian *mores* can be regarded rather as a ‘myth’ built up by the anti-Victorian and modernist writers at the beginning of the twentieth century³. Yet the silent contempt adopted by contemporary critics towards many of Butler’s writings is as well-known as it is the form of sneer expressed by other critics in front of his shifting, sharp irony and the difficulty of positioning him in the context of Victorian literature⁴.

Among the growing tendencies toward specialization in Victorian times, Butler remained an outcast. His contemptuous remarks aimed at scholars, experts and the whole academic establishment, consciously shut him out of intellectual circles. In opposition to the officially recognized centers of learning and training, he sided himself with the out-of-date tradition of the eighteenth-century polymath, the amateur escaping every disciplinary definition⁵. Far from isolated himself from his own age, his writings voiced the increasing sense of discomfort and anxiety in front of the unresolved ambiguities and growing contradictions of the first industrialized country and Imperial world power. Even though

1 *Samuel Butler: An Annotated Bibliography of Writings about Him*, eds. H.-P. Breuer and R. Parsell (New York-London: Garland, 1990); *Samuel Butler, Wollschwein und Tafelsilber. Notizen eines viktorianischen Querdenkers*, hrsg. Studententeam der Freien Universität Berlin unter der Leitung von M. Pfister (Passau: Stutz, 2005). For recent biographical works, see: L. M. Holt, *Samuel Butler, Revisited Edition* (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989); P. Raby, *Samuel Butler: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1991); and *Samuel Butler, Victorian against the Grain: A Critical Overview*, ed. J. G. Paradis (Toronto [etc.]: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

2 S. Collini, *Public Moralists. Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

3 The view has been endorsed on the basis of the admiration Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster and G. B. Shaw, among others, expressed in the early Twenties. See: V. Woolf, “A Man with a View” and “The Way of All Flesh”, *Contemporary Writers* (New York: Hartcourt, 1965), 28-35; E. M. Forster, “The Legacy of Samuel Butler”, *The Listener*, 12 June 1952; G. B. Shaw, “Samuel Butler: The New Life Reviewed”, *The Works of George Bernard Shaw*, XXIX (London: Constable, 1931), 55-67.

4 This line of criticism persisted well into the 1930s, when biographical studies focused on Butler’s personal character, especially his private relations, idiosyncrasies, and sexual dispositions, rather than on his literary production. For example, M. Muggeridge, *The Earnest Atheist: A Study of Samuel Butler* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1936), and P. Henderson, *Samuel Butler: The Incarnate Bachelor* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967²). An overview of opinions on Samuel Butler is given in P. Cohen, “Stamped on His Works: The Decline of Samuel Butler’s Literary Reputation”, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 18 (1985): 64-81.

5 Once asked to identify himself for cataloguing purposes, Butler gave a self-definition as ‘philosophical writer’. The episode is in Butler’s essay “Quis Desiderio...?” *Essays on Life, Art and Science* (London: Grant Richards, 1904), reprinted in S. Butler, *Collected Essays*, II (New York: AMS Press, 1968²). The text is available from the Project Gutenberg website.

sometimes Butler presented himself as a curmudgeonly English philistine, he was in fact an assiduous traveler and well-read cosmopolitan who spoke and wrote French and Italian, taught himself German well enough to follow learned controversy, translated the classics and considered Italy his second country.

Over years of travelling and sojourning outside his motherland, Butler's literary endeavors covered different genres: letters, diaries, tourist and art books. They all feature a worldview at work, conveying a notion of cultural history through encounters with landscapes, works of art, and individuals – past and present, real and imaginary. Even Butler's most famous book, *Erewhon*, is the story of a journey, one of a very peculiar kind: it is an adventure in a bizarre world representing a satire of the Victorian society in all its aspects, along the tradition of *Gulliver's Travels*⁶. Behind the 'incarnate bachelor', the eccentric and the aesthete, through the bulk of his letters, journey's accounts and travel guides, the reader discovers a restless traveler, curious and attentive, sometimes daring, always respectful of peoples and places abroad. His occasional excursions into satire and criticism are good-humored and show an intimate and direct involvement of the author with his chosen subjects.

New Zealand was Butler's first formative experience. After acquitting himself well in the first class of classic trips at Cambridge, where he ranked 12th, he worked among the poor in London in order to prepare for ordination. This provided him with his first direct experience of the 'others', whose welfare was the object of one's duty, according to the moral sensibility of Victorian educated classes. The 'culture of altruism', in its interrelations with selfishness and other human motives, belonged to the dominant Victorian culture: a system of obligations, in which others' identity was not problematized, accepting the notion of the human community as a whole⁷. From his experience in the parish of St. James's, Piccadilly, the young Butler began to elaborate a critical view on the whole system of tenets that he received from his education and gradually assumed an antagonistic position. Challenging his family traditions, he refused to be ordained: as a response to his parents' discomfiture, he declared his will to be an artist⁸. As the family letters reveal, his father finally came to terms with his decision of not becoming a clergyman and proposed a compromise regarding alternative professions, since that of artist was out of question⁹. After distressful arguments (among them, Samuel's proposal to move to Liberia as a cotton-

6 *Erewhon, or Over the Range* was published anonymously in London by Trübner & Co. in 1872. Its sequel, *Erewhon Revisited*, was published in 1901.

7 Collini, *Public Moralists*, 64. Also, T. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: British Academy, 2008).

8 As biographical studies show, Butler's experience in London affected his decision. That resolution was not taken on the basis of any kind of social criticism: it was rather his acquaintance with non baptised poor and the 'empirical' observation of the inconsistencies of his Christian upbringing that generated doubts and finally rebellion.

9 See: *The Family Letters of Samuel Butler (1841-85)*, ed. A. Silver (London: J. Cape, 1962), 88-89.

planter, which was dismissed by the father as “the wildest conceivable vision”), he succeeded in obtaining permission, and economic help, to leave for New Zealand and settle there as a sheep farmer¹⁰. The Reverend regarded this activity as socially decent and economically profitable, if well run, and so fit to earn his son the means to be independent. At the same time, it was a good chance to test his capacity to deal with real life and take advantage of the wide possibilities offered by the new colony, which was established only a decade before. In accordance with the ‘energizing myths of English imperialism’, quite popular among the masses at home, new territories overseas were then seen as lands of opportunity for the “troubled generation” of mid-Victorian upper-class young men by whom the conventional paths of employment were no longer taken for granted¹¹.

II.

The ship ‘Roman Emperor’ sailed from Gravesend on 30th September 1859 and reached Lyttelton in New Zealand at the beginning of the following year. During the voyage, and when he settled in the part of the island he named ‘Mesopotamia’, Butler wrote letters home to inform his father about the state of his new business. These letters, together with daily records and few articles for a local newspaper, formed the volume *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement*¹². The book was published in 1863 after the initiative of Reverend Butler, for he supposed that his son’s experience would be of interest for general readers at home and an inspiration for other young men willing to emigrate to Canterbury settlement, which had been started under the aegis of the Anglican clergy¹³.

Although heavily altered by the editors, *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement* is an interesting source of knowledge about Butler’s experience in the colony, the only available one, since he admitted to have destroyed all his papers related to this

10 *The Family Letters*, 67-68. Also, *The Correspondence of Samuel Butler with his Sister May*, ed. D. F. Howard (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 38-42.

11 Collini, *Public Moralists*, 37-50. See also: K. T. Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Besides the positive notion of the colony as land of chances waiting to be grasped, there were also images of opposite sign, as places of confinement, savageness, alienation. See: M. Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (London; Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 3; A. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow [etc.]: Pearson; Longman, 2005); on the complexity of the British experience of empire and the shaping of a ‘dream of global supremacy’ from a different perspective, that of captivity narratives, L. Colley, *Captives. Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850* (London: J. Cape, 2002).

12 S. Butler, *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement*, eds. A. C. Brassington and P. B. Maling (Auckland-Hamilton: Blackwood & J. Paul, 1964; orig. ed. 1863). The text can be found on the Project Gutenberg website.

13 It would also meet the reader’s taste for adventure and travel stories. Later on, Butler dismissed the authorship of the book because of its ‘priggishness’ and numbered *Erewhon* as his ‘Opus 1’, cf. letter to Mr. Alfred Mars (1889), cit. in W. G. Bekker, *An Historical and Critical Review of Samuel Butler’s Literary Works* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1964), 96.

period abroad¹⁴. The account begins with the description of the vessel journey; although the voyage is narrated in a quite usual way for the genre (complete with emigrant *nécessaire*, advices for travelers, descriptions of voyagers' conditions and pastimes, sea storms and fish), there are humorous intervals and instances of keen observation that the author moulds in a plain, colloquial narrative style. The comic flare of the author can be glimpsed in the opening narration: the confusing scene of the crowd boarding the ship; Butler looks at the picturesque characters with a sort of snobbish detachment mingled with sympathy and subtle irony. During the journey, between his reading of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Liebig's *Agricultural Chemistry*, he will occupy his time by setting up a choir, directing it and inviting members of inferior classes as well¹⁵.

Upon arrival at Lyttelton, Butler did not spare time in order to find a suitable plot of land. The land rash had begun shortly before, but by the time Butler arrived, there was no unoccupied estate in Canterbury. On a good horse, one of the main characters in his narrative, he set off Westwards, into the still unexplored mountain ranges. His first home was 8 miles up a remote tributary of one of the great snow-fed rivers, deep in the mountains, far from the nearest human setting¹⁶. Wild areas of tussock slopes, bushes, wide river-beds and narrow rough gorges, sprawling glaciers and sharp peaks are not leading features in the narratives: the rough landscape provides the background where the race to claim land takes place. The main concerns are practical and economic matters: building a suitable hut, improving the farm, keeping the flock healthy, following the market's fluctuations and government's land policy¹⁷. The romanticizing, lavish descriptions of nature, by then so fashionable, have little right to existence in those wild quarters. He describes his awe at the summit of Mount Cook, truly amazed by the view from the mountain-top that he conquered after an arduous seven-hours-trek. Soon afterwards, all the suggestive power of the narrative is

14 Apart from other emigrants who mention Butler in their memoirs, which are not numerous anyway, a source of references and information is P. B. Maling, *Samuel Butler at Mesopotamia* (Wellington: R. E. Owen, 1960). This publication, supported by the National Historical Place Trust of New Zealand, offers introductory chapters to some of the remaining letters and manuscripts of Butler's period in the colony. On Butler's initial years, see the well-informed biography: Raby, *Samuel Butler: A Biography*.

15 *A First Year*, 26.

16 The description of the struggle against the wild and the quest for usable land closely reminds of the opening of *Erewhon* and its location, evidently inspired by the rugged landscape of New Zealand, cf. J. Jones, *Cradle of Erewhon, Samuel Butler in New Zealand* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1960).

17 After the failure of a first expedition, Butler straightforwardly noted: "our motives were pounds, shilling and pence, and where this failed us, we lost all excitement and curiosity". Little hankering was felt in gazing at the virgin environment and in the pleasure of discovery *per se*. Since the priority was mainly economic in kind, more enthusiastic tones were displayed in the long descriptions of the tenure. The letters to his father are extremely detailed about the business, from botanical and zoological aspects to material and economic improvements of the sheep-farming.

reversed by a most mundane remark, which cannot but create a satirical effect of the breathless vista and, by contrast, of the different values of the colonial man:

I am forgetting myself into admiring a mountain which is no use for sheep. This is wrong. A mountain here is only beautiful if it has grass on it. Scenery is not scenery – it is ‘country’, *subaudita voce* ‘sheep’. If it is good for sheep, it is beautiful, magnificent, and all the rest of it; if not, it is not worth looking it¹⁸.

After discussing the different methods to make money in the colony, he describes life in the back-country in full detail: discovery expeditions, dangers of a completely unknown environment, hardships, routine activities and tough way of living, lacking the essential comfort. Episodes of everyday life, where gentlemen are described breakfasting “mutton and bread” at dawn, washing themselves in streams and lakes, attending their flock after having quizzed the boys at the city College or read Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, depict vibrant highlights of colonial life¹⁹. Such a frugal living, “between that of a dog and an emperor”, played an indelible part in the development of Butler’s character. As he wrote to his aunt in September 1861, it was for him a way out of an increasingly oppressive situation at home, the only chance to gain the means to follow his aspirations without depending on his father’s financial control²⁰. In the new country, however, Butler preserved his gentleman-styled manners as far as he could. Robert B. Booth, one of Butler’s employees, recorded his memories of a hard life with a tinge of British glamour under Butler’s management. Butler is recalled as “a literary man”, his sitting-room filled with books, easy-chairs and a piano²¹.

Butler enjoyed the company of neighbors and occasional visitors and seemed satisfied with his new homestead: he finally had acquired whatever a “mortal can desire”. Yet, he added, he missed “the intellectual society of clever men”²². He

18 *A First Year*, 63. The same denigration towards the awe-inspiring panoramas and scorn for ‘purple’ prose will return in Butler’s autobiographical posthumous novel *The Way of All Flesh* (1903).

19 A life that to many emigrants, used to that ‘training of well-made characters’, i.e. the late Victorian public schools, ought not have appeared so harsh. Even Butler, whose health had been often weak, wrote to his family that he had never felt so fine before. Cf. *The Family Letters*, 93-106, esp. 104; *A First Year*, 37, 48-49, and “Our Emigrant”, article written in 1861 for *The Eagle*, the St. John’s College journal, reprinted in *A First Year*, 129-130. See also the two-volume biography by Butler’s inseparable friend, his ‘Boswell’, H. Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler, Author of Erewhon (1835-1902): A Memoir, with Bibliography*, I (London: Macmillan, 1919), 87.

20 Samuel wrote long letters to explain his reasons against his father’s objections. The strict attitude and the lack of sympathetic feelings notwithstanding, Canon Butler’s biggest worry was to save his son from taking impulsive and unconsidered decisions, cf. *The Family Letters*, 62-90.

21 R. B. Booth, *Five Years in New Zealand (1859-1864)* (London: J. Hammon & Co., 1912), cit. in Maling, *Samuel Butler at Mesopotamia*, 26-27. The complete text of Booth’s memoirs can be found on the Project Gutenberg website. On colonial experience in New Zealand: I. Hunter, *Age of Enterprise: Rediscovering the New Zealand Entrepreneur, 1880-1910* (Auckland, N. Z.: Auckland University Press, 2007).

22 Cf. Samuel Butler to his aunt Mrs. Philip Worsley, September 19, 1861, in *The Family Letters of Samuel Butler*, 102-106.

entertained other farmers who came to visit Mesopotamia and left positively impressed by Butler's hospitality and manners. In his turn, Butler appreciated them for their lack of pretension, plain manners and sheer cordiality. In the abovementioned letter to his aunt, he states: "I like the squatters here as a class very much. They are fine fellows. There is more liberal feeling prevalent here than at home. The very atmosphere seems unsectarian, but on the whole sheep, horses and scab are the main topics of the day". Other annotations in his correspondence complete the picture of the first immigrants and offer some interesting information regarding the state of the colony. In the last chapter of the book, Butler repeats the opinion on his fellows, but he incidentally adds that they are fine "when they are away from drink [...] they are often admirable men save in the one point of sobriety. Their political knowledge is absolutely nil, and, were the colony to give them political power, it might as well give gunpowder to children"²³. As far as Butler became used to the colonial life and could have originally planned to settle down for a long period, he never identified himself with other colonists nor did he take interest in the social setting of his new home. Neither nature nor inhabitants were particularly interesting to him. As his observations on New Zealand flora and fauna are written in a quite literary, descriptive prose, for his father's perusal (he was an amateur botanist), so the scarce remarks on the natives do not register a deep sensitivity beyond the curiosity for the novelty and strangeness of the place²⁴.

The fact that for his dark complexion he was once mistaken for a Maori provoked a hilarious outburst in him. He did not see much of the natives whom he deemed to be on the verge of extinction. In political terms, he endorsed the government line towards them, because in his words "the only effectual policy in dealing with them is to show a bold front, and at the same time, do them a good turn whenever you can be quite certain that your kindness will not be misunderstood as a symptom of fear"²⁵. The encounter with the exotic in the foreign country is offered by Butler's visual prose in a brief portrait of a Maori woman he once saw in town, a passage excluded from the publication.

I saw her standing near the market place in X'Church the day before I left it last – her petticoat was of dark green and the upper part of her dress was scarlet – a kerchief was folded not ungracefully about her head and she was smoking a short black pipe – splendidly coloured. There she stood staring vacantly at the sky in the middle of the street – her face not unpleasing, with a gentle patient expression rather resembling that of an amiable good tempered animal than an intelligent being – her stature wonderfully tall so much so as to have won for her the appellation among her kindred of 'Mary in the clouds'. [...] My eyes were rivetted at once by a figure so

23 *A First Year*, 116.

24 Different in tone and style, much simpler and direct, were the notes written for his personal record, cf. Bekker, *An Historical and Critical Review of Samuel Butler*, 99-100.

25 *A First Year*, 115.

new & so picturesque, and the same sensation of what a jumble it all was came over me as I noticed that the name of the shop against which she stood was 'Turnbull' – Turnbull – and Mary in the clouds – there was no doubt however whose star was in the ascendant [...]'²⁶.

The vividness of the image and the subtle irony emerge from the contrast between the female figure in a gaudy, Westernized dressing, and the shop sign, symbol of the advancing modernization²⁷. The rhetoric beyond Butler's scenes of local life is thus conformed to the official imperialistic discourse: far from the old notion of the good savage, the indigenes are to be treated with firm hand by their Western rulers, be domesticated – meaning, civilized – by imposing English paradigms on them. Butler's Mary-in-the-Clouds, that "amiable good tempered animal", has nothing to do with the "wild and gorgeous apparition" in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, of course: the bulk of turn-of-the-century works originating in imperial travel had yet to come, just as the pluralist notion of cultures conceptualized around 1900. The implicit equation between culture and civilization was still the dominant view, as it was displayed by the Victorian ethnological writings of E. B. Tylor or, later, J. G. Frazer²⁸.

Nonetheless, a sense of situational displacements of colonial experience arises from Butler's narrative; his prose suggests a personal quest for an idiom to cope with the incongruities of images and impressions of the colonial country²⁹. From the beginning, the narrative is built on the contrast between civilization, human activity and English tidiness, from the one hand, and the mobility and desolation of the local environment, from the other. His arrival in the colony starts with the description of the meal at the local pub, "so foreign and yet so English": the reader is immediately made aware of both the differences and similarities with England.

26 Maling, *Samuel Butler at Mesopotamia*, 43. Probably the same female figure inspired the joke about his choosing a Maori wife in the letter to his aunt: "I want a wife dreadfully here. What will you say if I marry a Maori? Unfortunately there are no nice ones in this island. They all smoke, and carry eels, and are not in any way the charming simple-minded innocent creatures which one might have hoped".

27 A similar incongruity reappears in *Alps and Sanctuaries*. In the final chapter, the description of the popular festivity in Locarno, celebrating the Virgin Mary, is darkened by big advertisements hanging around in town: at the end of the sacred procession, the advertising figures (a man in a hat smoking Richmond Gem cigarettes and a woman working Wheeler & Wilson's sewing machine) seem likely to substitute the religious images of the saints and the Madonna as new icons in the imaginative world of laymen, cf. S. Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries of Piedmont and the Canton Ticino, with illustrations of the Author, Charles Gogin, and H. Festing Jones* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1881), chapter XXIV.

28 Tylor's *Primitive Culture* was published in 1871; *The Golden Bough* came out in 1890. See: G. W. Stocking, jr., *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888-1951* (London: Athlone Press, 1996), and the monographic issue of *Victorian Studies* (spring 1998) on Victorian ethnographies.

29 On this point, R. Norrman, *Samuel Butler and the Meaning of Chiasmus* (Houndmills [etc.]: MacMillan, 1986), and R. Norrman, *Wholeness Restored. Love of symmetry as a shaping force in the writings of Henry James, Kurt Vonnegut, Samuel Butler and Raymond Chandler* (Frankfurt am Main [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1998), 31-94.

To convey the unfamiliarity and diverseness of the world at the antipodes, Butler begins to place various perspectives alongside each other, drawing references, images and idiom from diverse and incongruous sources. It is the kind of style Butler would develop in his satire of the Victorian values, *Erewhon*, that world apparently similar to England, yet disturbingly different, where the sick were criminals, the colleges taught unreason, and the churches were banks³⁰.

III.

Though the cultural milieu in the colony was unsophisticated and quite tedious, living there did not stifle Butler's intellectual vitality. It was in the four years and a half that he spent there when he gathered much of the materials he then revisited in *Erewhon* and its sequel. It was there, during the long nights in his hut, where he cultivated the germs of his religious and scientific thinking, a sign that even at the antipodes it was possible to follow the issues of the day³¹. *Darwin among the machines* and *Lucubratio Ebria* were written in New Zealand and published respectively in *The Eagle* and in *The Press*³². In New Zealand, Butler began to write the pamphlet entitled *The Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as given by the Four Evangelists, critically examined*, printed afterwards in London by Williams and Norgate³³.

The quarrel with Darwin and his ideas about religion have already been examined³⁴. Nonetheless, the concepts of 'cunning', 'habit', 'unconscious memory', as treated by Butler in his attempts to restore the place of 'mind in the universe',

30 For a discussion of Butler's narrative, *Erewhon* in particular, as a Menippean satire, see: N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University Press, 1957), esp. 229-232. F. Marroni, "Nel mondo alla rovescia di *Erewhon*", *Spettri senza nome: modelli epistemici e narrativa vittoriana* (Roma: Carocci, 2007).

31 In the colony Butler began to collaborate with the local newspaper *The Press*, founded by James Edward Fitz-Gerald, the first Superintendent of the Province. In times of Fitz-Gerald's periodical leaving, Butler acted as editor in charge, see: Bekker, *An Historical and Critical Review of Samuel Butler*, esp. 12 on; Maling, *Samuel Butler at Mesopotamia*, 28-29; Holt, *Samuel Butler*, chapter 1.

32 *The Eagle* was the journal of St. John's College, Cambridge. The first essay was re-written and enlarged when he came back in London and appeared in *The Reasoner*; it was then finally elaborated in chapters XXIII, XXIV and XXV of *Erewhon*, composing "The Book of the Machines".

33 It was "the blind deference that is usually paid to the letter of Scripture", in spite of the discrepancies in it, which mostly inspired his critique and sardonic remarks, cf. *The Family Letters*, 104-105. For a revised analysis of Butler's attitude towards religion, cf. T. L. Jeffers, *Samuel Butler Revalued* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), chapter 2.

34 See: B. Willey, *Darwin and Butler: Two Versions of Evolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), and P. Greenacre, *Quest for the Father: A Study of the Darwin-Butler Controversy* (New York: International Universities Press, 1963). More recent, D. Amigoni, "The Written Symbol Extends Infinitely: Samuel Butler and the Writing of Evolutionary Theory", *Samuel Butler, Victorian against the Grain*, 91-112.

played such a pivotal role in the path of his intellectual development that it would be simplistic, even pretty unfair, to dismiss the issue as a mere provocation by a rancorous and ambitious amateur who was “desperately trying to say something original without possessing an original mind”³⁵. Setting apart the issue of originality, he used all his irony skills to exhibit the complexity and the infinite variety of human experience against the cult of progress and the dominant scientific episteme³⁶.

In the struggle for his own identity (against all the revered institutions of religion, family and education), he found in the Darwinian concept of evolution a potent ally and a means to debunk the foundations of received truths. His initial enthusiasm towards Darwin’s work was supposedly genuine, as suggested by his early letters³⁷. By pushing to the extreme the ideas expressed in his early essays on Darwinism, reflecting upon the consequences implicit in the theory of the ‘survival of the fittest’, Butler detected what it seemed to him a dogmatic and teleological argument at the basis of the whole scientific system. In his detection of paradoxes in the evolutionary theory, Butler discovered a less mechanical explanation in the Lamarckian idea of instinct (what Butler called ‘unconscious memory’ or ‘inherited mind’) against that of accidental mutations put forth by the new scientific orthodoxy. Reason or logic were not enough to account for the richness and complexity of human experience. From a more limited viewpoint, he was living proof of the important role that intimate inclinations and personal ambitions played in the ‘evolution’ of the individual³⁸. Such ideas were expressed in a key passage of *Life and Habit*, where a meaningful mental agent was brought to the fore and introduced as another force beside that of chance variations³⁹. He regarded evolution as a series of functional adaptations, which an organism cunningly performed for the fulfillment of its own needs. In the human domain in particular, Butler paid special attention to ‘culture’ (meant at large as an expression of peculiar needs) and its influence on the formation of identity. Against the leading anthropological theories of the day, his insights into evolutionary

35 A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Unbelievers. English Agnostic Thought, 1840-1890* (Collins: London, 1964), 105.

36 Butler deeply disliked the Crystal Palace and everything it symbolized: Britain’s pretence of grandeur and its confidence in an unlimited and positive progress. *Britain, the Empire, and the World at the Great Exhibition of 1851*, eds. J. A. Auerbach and P. H. Hoffenberg (Aldershot [etc.]: Ashgate, 2008).

37 See: Samuel Butler to Charles Darwin (13 May 1872), cit. in Holt, *Samuel Butler*, 28. On Butler’s first adherence to Darwinism and his subsequent reaction to it in the context of Victorian scientific debate, see: M. Verzella, “Darwinism and its Consequences: Machines Taking over Man in Samuel Butler’s ‘Absurd’ Tableau”, *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, 18-19 (2004-2005): 151-168.

38 As Ernest Pontifex, main character and Butler’s alter-ego in *The Way of All Flesh*, who is able through many experiences to break free from his family heritage and follow his own path.

39 The relations between those two dimensions were at the centre of *Luck, or Cunning?* (1886) which completed Butler’s forays into evolutionary speculations. In *The Way of All Flesh* the role of accidental processes was parodied in the episode of Christina Pontifex, Ernest’s mother, who decides important matters in her own life by playing at cards with her sister, cf. *The Way of All Flesh*, chapter 11.

processes subverted the traditional hierarchy between race, culture and identity: shifting the attention at the level of the inventive capacity in meeting conscious or unconscious requirements, he redefined the evolution of culture in Lamarckian terms and posed the questions of racial identity on a different ground. He rather focused on humans' creative and dynamic dimension, that "unconscious memory" supervising the "other departments" by which the organism is composed. It was the creative power of the mind and its possibility to work consciously on thought or reason, as on other "machinate extensions", that, in his view, granted continuity and uniqueness to human life, beyond any mechanistic or biological account⁴⁰.

Such a view Butler extended to other fields of research; in particular his works on Italy are shaped by his interest on identity in the sense that what he found striking in a piece of music, a work of art or any human process, was the creative mind behind it and the social relations which supported and gave expression to it. He first visited Italy with his family in 1843 and afterwards he paid many visits to the south, even when he was burdened with financial troubles. He found in Lombardy, Piedmont and Canton Ticino his personal "playground", a country where landscape, art and people had not yet been corrupted by what he called "priggishness", that formal adherence to conventions that he detected in his protestant and rational homeland⁴¹. Elinor Shaffer, in her *Erewhon of the Eye*, convincingly discusses how Butler, in his notes on his travel through Italy, displayed lines of thought that had begun in *The Fair Haven* and had been developed through the series of his essays on evolution⁴². Supported by an amazing photographic apparatus, she also points at the fundamental interweaving between the photographic medium and Butler's written notes, in order to understand his appeal for the oddities and 'sports' of human behavior and appearance⁴³. Photography appears to have been for Butler the ideal medium

40 On this point, see Amigoni, "The Written Symbol Extends Infinitely".

41 *Alps and Sanctuaries*: Italians are praised as "the quickest witted people in the world, and at the same time have much more of the old Roman steadiness than they are generally credited with [...] they have all our strong points, but they have more grace and elasticity than we have" (140). The same attitude is even more evident in *Ex Voto: an Account of the Sacro Monte or New Jerusalem at Varallo with some notice of Tabachetti's Remaining Work at the Sanctuary of Crea* (London: Trübner, 1888). The page numbers in the footnotes refer to the Jonathan Cape edition (1924). The English text is also available from the Project Gutenberg website. See: C. Zdanski, "Alps and Sanctuaries Revisited", *Culture*, 7 (1993): 31-45, and C. Zdanski, "Samuel Butler, Local Identity, and Periodizing of Local Italian Art: the Travel Writer-Painter's View of Art History", *Samuel Butler, Victorian against the Grain*, 223-250.

42 E. Shaffer, *Erewhon of the Eye. Samuel Butler as Painter, Photograph and Art Critic* (London: Reaktion Book, 1988). *The Fair Haven, A Work in Defence of the Miraculous Element in Our Lord's Ministry upon Earth, both as against Rationalistic Impugners and Certain Orthodox Defenders* (London: Trübner, 1873) is a parody of Christian belief where two imaginary characters discuss the veracity of miracles just in order to prove the opposite, i.e. the inconsistencies and contradictions in the Gospel on the basis of rational thinking.

43 Along with drawings, paintings and watercolours, Shaffer's book provides some 90 photographs out of more than 3000 shot by Butler during his journeys. St. John's College, Cambridge, houses Butler's materials (notes, letters, drawings, snapshots, etc.). From the college website it is possible to consult the complete list of Butler's photographs, see: <<http://janus.lib.cam.ac.uk/db/node.xsp?id>

for casting his sardonic eye on others and expressing his vision of the world with a powerful visual imagination⁴⁴.

The accounts of his wandering around the alpine valleys, his sojourns in out-of-the-ways inns, and the description of the local 'low' art, reveal his curiosity about every little thing. The narrative is full of witty and colorful anecdotes and practical information on places, food and accommodation which are as integral a part of the descriptions as his comments on religion, culture, art. His attention upon the Italian Sacri Monti (Sacred Mountains), with their complex of architecture, frescoes, and sculptures featuring peculiar forms and ways of seeing, was not a mere expedient to write about something new for the English audience. On one side, Butler's choice of artists, epochs, regions and styles was a deliberate provocation against the usual itinerary of the Grand Tour; on another, the fondness of sacred representations, produced in a verist style by despised or neglected craftsmen, corresponded to a precise idea of art, its social function and its relation with reality. Moreover, the theatricality and populist literalism of the Sacri Monti were features extraordinarily well-suited to the photographic medium and to Butler's interest for the interaction between verbal and visual, real and representation.

Contemporary controversies on art criticism were the immediate context of Butler's writings on Italy. But behind the polemical purpose of offering his personal response to the diatribe on the decline of contemporary art (against the Aesthetic and Classicist movements), an implicit but no less important aim can be acknowledged by his use of images. In the opening pages of *Alps and Sanctuaries*, Butler reflects on the effect of stimulating one's way of being or line of thinking by the experience of something different, but something not *too* different⁴⁵. He considers the power of illusion and the temporary sense of departing from the usually accepted set of standards as powerful modes of filling some of the gaps in life experience. He states that "it is a bad sign for a man's peace in his own convictions when he cannot stand turning the canvas of his life upside down, or reversing it in a mirror, as painters do with their pictures"⁴⁶. The direct allusion is to the loss of critical capacities among his contemporaries who find easier to rely on ready-made and received opinions, delivered by the Church of England, the British Academy, or the Darwinian scientists⁴⁷. For Butler, cultural evolution does

=EAD%2FGBR%2F0275%2FButler>. See also J. G. Paradis, "Photography and Irony: The Samuel Butler Photography Exhibition at the Tate Britain", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 33 (2005): 318-322, on the London exhibition dedicated to Butler between November 2002 and May 2003.

44 Shaffer, *Erewhon of the Eye*, esp. chapter 4; E. Edwards, "Samuel Butler's Photography: Observation and the Dynamic Past", in *Samuel Butler, Victorian against the Grain*, 251-286.

45 The process is different from the nonsense tradition, which confined in "disjoined world [...] removes the reader (and, indeed, the author) from the anxiety of difference", cf. A. Colley, "Edward Lear's Limerick and the Reversals of Nonsense", *Victorian Prose*, 26 (1988): 285-300.

46 *Alps and Sanctuaries*, 50.

47 The scarce consideration for the critical capacities of his contemporaries is a recurrent topic: "The public buys its opinions as it buys its meat, or takes in its milk, on the principle that it is

take place in the rare moments of exemption from imposed norms: in art from what he called “the aesthetic reign of terror”, in science from the evolutionary theory, in religion from the established dogmas.

In order to learn “what one likes and what one does not like”, it is not necessary to contemplate nor to study for hours on end, as the academics want us to believe, says Butler. In art, as in every field where the human is involved, it is the rapidity of the first impression that gives way to catch one’s inner thoughts and feelings; a more rational meditation is not excluded, but more often than not it risks blurring the whole process⁴⁸. Presenting something abnormal (i. e. out of the accepted norms), by words or pictures, forces the reader or the viewer to the perception of the unknown or undefined details, involving that ‘affective consciousness’ mentioned by Roland Barthes in his work on photography⁴⁹. The technique Butler recurrently uses is the one already seen in his youthful description of the Maori woman. A suggestive *pendant* is given in the first chapter of *Alps and Sanctuaries* by the anecdote of an Italian woman in London, who, missing the wayside shrines, says her prayers in front of a dentist’s shop. The humorous cameo is followed by remarks about the power of imagination and illusion and their role in the progress of mankind, suggesting how worthy results can rise from unworthy causes or irrational motives⁵⁰. The incongruous setting of the old female figure praying in the middle of Hampstead Road and its unfamiliar effect find more than one echo in the scenes of the life of Christ and Saints, re-enacted in the remote mountain chapels of Italian sanctuaries which Butler described in words and photographic illustrations⁵¹. The holy scenes, combining life-size statues and frescoes gazed only through grilles and peepholes, represent virtually that kind of tragicomic, paradoxical and estranging reversals of form and matter Butler was so fond of. He gives an

cheaper to do this than to keep a cow. So it is, but the milk is more likely to be watered”, S. Butler, “Public Opinion”, *The Notebooks*, ed. H. Festing Jones (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985; orig. ed. 1912). The text is available on the Project Gutenberg website.

48 *Alps and Sanctuaries*, 23-24.

49 Elements of disturbance are characteristic of the photographic representations because of their theatricality, what is called the *punctum*: R. Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard: Seuil, 1980). On the photograph’s effects on consciousness, F. J. Raddatz, “Does a Photograph of the Krupp Works Say Anything about the Krupp Works?” (from *Die Zeit*, Feb. 3 1978), in *Conversation with Susan Sontag*, ed. L. Poague (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 88-96.

50 *Alps and Sanctuaries*, 27. In this passage he talks about the positive power of alcohol upon human intellectual progress, since “the human intellect owes its superiority over that of the much lower animals in greater measure to the stimulus which alcohol has given to imagination”.

51 His admiration for the primitive and popular forms of art is revealed in his letters to Italian friends and in his determination to have his writings published even at his own expense. Cf. the selection of correspondence with Italian friends A. Durio, *Samuele Butler e la Valle Sesia. Da sue lettere inedite a Giulio Arienta, Federico Tonetti e Pietro Calderini* (Varallo Sesia: Tipografia Testa, 1986), and the letters from Italy to his sister in *The Correspondence of Samuel Butler*.

example of this visual form of grotesque in a hilarious description of the search, beyond the illusionistic framework, of the true statues of Adam and Eve in the chapel of the Capture of Christ in Varallo:

On investigation, we found, against the wall, two figures dressed as Roman soldiers that evidently had something wrong with them [...]. Then the question arose, which was Adam, and which Eve? The farther figure was the larger and therefore ought to have been Adam, but it had long hair, and looked a good deal more like a woman than the other did. The nearer figure had a beard and moustaches, and was quite unlike a woman; true, we could see no sign of bosom with the farther figure, but neither could we with the nearer [...]. The drapery showed that curiosity had been already rife upon the subject, and, observing this, Jones and I gently lifted as much of it as was necessary, and put the matter for ever beyond future power of question that the farther, long-haired, beardless figure was Adam, and the nearer, moustached one, Eve⁵².

The discovery of the replacement of the original Eve with a Roman soldier and the identification of the smaller figure with Adam suggests an exchange of roles which only a farsical 'anatomical' inspection by Butler and his friend Henry Festing Jones can ascertain.

IV.

The power of the holy representation to create uncertainty and a sense of displacement in the visitor, making him wonder whether what he is seeing is real or not, is amplified by Butler's use of photography⁵³. Butler's humorous photograph of himself with the statue of Scotto (the forgotten craftsman who, for Butler, was Gaudenzio Ferrari's master) shows his self-identification with the minor, almost forgotten artist; so much is his pose similar to the terracotta statue that the distance between what is real and what it is not becomes unclear.

Beside those of the Italian chapels, most of Butler's photographs belong to the Victorian genre of street scene, portraits, and architecture. Many were taken in Italy, in places he knew well because he had stayed there for some time, like Varallo or Trapani, where he spent some months on the trails of the 'authoress'

52 *Ex Voto*, 120-122. Thanks to their friendship with the local authorities, Butler and Jones were permitted to enter the chapels of the Sacro Monte after the closing time, explore them and take pictures at their ease.

53 He first got acquaintance with photography during his days at Heatherley art school in London. Here photography was mainly used for portrait pictures in Pre-Raphaelite mode; besides, a practice of humorous photographic poses was growing in the path of the satirical tradition in painting and graphics. Butler would have been more attracted by the latter ironic development. Cf. G. Seiberling, *Amateurs, Photography and the mid-Victorian Imagination* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), L. Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry. The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), Shaffer, *Erewhon of the Eye*, 19-26.

of the *Odyssey*, another example of the ambiguity of identification⁵⁴. Many snapshots present naive or distorted subjects and the so-called ‘imaginary portraits’ of humans likened to animals. The comical vein of these images is striking, as was in the grotesque realism of the Sacri Monti. There is a parallel between the groups because the world of the holy mountains is reflected in the photographs of peasants and townspeople of the mountain valley: the funny boy, the lame boy, the beggar, scenes of market place life, local festivals and animals. Here, another reversal is at work: hyperreal statuary and human subjects blur into each other, resulting in ambiguous and tricky meanings. The camera seems to give Butler the chance to play a sort of ‘Guess Who?’ game that the viewer has little probability to win since the joke often depends on the changeability or unlikely success of the identification. He plays with trivial details – as in the case of the statues of Adam and Eve – or insists on reading the figures not simply as ‘types’ but through a sort of ethnographic realism, as the social and cultural are read off the appearance of the figure – as in the case of one of the finest statues at Varallo: il Vecchietto (the old man) whose direct gaze and simple pose Butler re-encounters in many of the town-people portrayed in his snapshots.

Moments of strange recognition are numerous in Butler’s prose, too: in his writings he often indulges in a guessing game, identifying Rameses II with an old woman in Holborn “holding a tin cup”, Mary Queen of Scots is a lame woman wearing surgical boots “near the Horse Shoe in Tottenham Court Road”, Henry VIII runs a restaurant in Oxford Street, Falstaff is a driver “of the St. Gothard diligences” now retired, and Dante is a waiter on the Lake Maggiore⁵⁵. Butler himself gives some clues accompanying his photographs with Homeric passages or brief ironical comments. A case in point is “Snapshotting the Bishop” (1892), where in a few lines Butler conveys his sense of irreverence and the pleasure he derives in playing with visual representations:

I must some day write about how I hunted the late Bishop of Carlisle with my camera, hoping to shoot him when he was sea-sick crossing from Calais to Dover, and how St. Somebody protected him and said I might shoot him when he was well, but not when he was sea-sick. I should like to do it in the manner of the *Odyssey*:

...And the steward went round and laid them all on the sofas and benches and set a beautiful basin by each, variegated and adorned with flowers, but it contained no water for washing the hands, and Neptune sent great waves that washed over the

54 In *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897) Butler interpreted the epic poem as written not by a blind itinerant poet but by a Sicilian young woman he identified with Nausicaa. Revisiting one of the exemplary author for the education of the male ruling class, both in gender and in style, was a sharp indictment of Victorian establishment, which in fact considered Butler’s interpretation as scandalous. D. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone. Religion, Homer and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. chapter 6; M. Beard, “Why Homer Was (Not) a Woman: the Reception of the Authoress of the *Odyssey*”, *Samuel Butler, Victorian against the Grain*, 317-341.

55 S. Butler, “*Ramblings in Cheapside*”, *Essays on Life, Art and Science*.

eyelet-holes of the cabin. But when it was not the middle of the passage and a great roaring arose as of beasts in the Zoological Gardens, and the promised hecatombs to Neptune if he would still the raging of the waves...

At any rate I shot him and have him in my snap-shot book, but was not sea-sick⁵⁶.

For Butler, photography is like hunting, there is something aggressive in it, something that violates the intimacy of the chosen prey, an intrusion into its hiding places. At the same time, he is playing with the new medium: he mocks the supposed realism of photographs, then supported by the positivistic belief in the possibility of measuring and systematizing everything, from the objects of the outside reality to the twists of the innermost human feelings⁵⁷. From this viewpoint, Butler's uses of written and visual images can be seen on the background of that "semiotic angst of inevitable regressive effect" leaning to the dissolution of the referent's pivotal function in the Victorian *Weltanschauung*⁵⁸.

In the ambiguous, cheating dimension of the visual images, Butler found his favorite means: it gave him the chance to indulge in his inner wit, more related to speed and fugacity than to permanency and majesty of Victorian aesthetics⁵⁹. The ephemeral moment of the snapshot, along with its uncertain identification, allowed him to represent a reality which was undergoing quick changes: indeed, the multiplication of the representational modes of the real and the imaginary was casting doubts on the very notion of reality and the belief in the objective knowledgeability of it. Consequently, questions of identity too were formulated in new, precarious and fragmented forms in a process of re-negotiation that in the industrialized society would often end in forms of alienation. Recognizing the fragmentation of the human experience (a dividing process potentially *ad infinitum*, in spite of any attempt at containing it), Butler anticipated a fundamental aspect of the modernist sensibility, which elaborated on the idea of the impracticality of coping with the outer world without involving the subject's identity in a self-reflexive process. An idea which still bears profound implications nowadays.

56 S. Butler, "Snapshotting a Bishop", *The Notebooks*.

57 S. Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990; orig. ed. 1973).

58 F. Moretti, *Il romanzo di formazione* (Torino: Einaudi, 1999), 212: "un'angoscia semiotica" stemming from the end of a particular phase of Western sociability and affecting late-Victorian literature.

59 Shaffer, *Erewhon of the Eye*, 29-39.