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PREFACE
Rummagings, 8: "O God! O Montreal!": Samuel Butler in Canada

In 1874-75, some three years after the publication of *Erewhon* (1872), Samuel Butler found himself in Montreal investigating the affairs of the Canada Tanning Extract Company, a firm in which he had invested and lost a large sum of money (see Raby 147-60). "I was on Montreal Mountain for the first time and was struck by its extreme beauty," he wrote soon after his arrival in June 1874:

> It was a magnificent summer's evening; the noble St. Lawrence flowed almost immediately beneath, and the vast expanse of country beyond it was suggested with a colour which even Italy cannot surpass. Sitting down for a while I began making notes for *Life and Habit* [1877] of which I was then continually thinking...." (qtd. In Jones 1:213)

"[I] had written the first few lines," he adds, "when the bells of Notre Dame in Montreal began to ring, and their sound was carried to and fro in a remarkably beautiful manner. I took advantage of the incident to insert, then and there, the last lines" of the "first passage of *Life and Habit*.... 'Do this, this, this, which we, too, have done and found our profit by it,' cry the souls of his forefathers within him. Faint are the far ones, coming and going as the sound of bells wafted to a high mountain; loud and clear re the near ones, urgent as an alarm of fire'" (212-13).

After returning briefly to England in the summer of 1874, Butler was back in Montreal and full of praise for Mount Royal:

> There is a good high hill behind the town, some 700 or 800 feet high, with rocky ground and native forest. I never saw so good a natural pleasure-ground to any city; and the views over the St. Lawrence and far away to the Algonquin mountains are delightful. And the colour is splendid. I can get to the best parts in an easy hour's walk and go to them almost every day as soon as the office is closed. This is a great pleasure to me. (qtd. in Jones 1:215)

But on the whole Butler was not enamoured of Montreal and Canada. "When they have nicer things to eat they will be nicer people," he would

tell a correspondent nearly seventeen years after he left the country for good in September 1875, "and when they are nicer people they will have nicer things to eat; but so long as their food is what it is the Lord will harden their hearts and they will not bring forth the fruits of good living. What a vicious circle it all is! For good living is both the fruit that is to be borne and the thing that is to bear the fruit, is it not?" (2:124).

What dismayed Butler more than Canadian food, however, was the Philistinism of many of the Montrealers with whom he had contact. One result of his perception that the city's "inhabitants are as yet too busy with commerce to care greatly about…art"—specifically the "masterpieces of Greek art"—is "A Psalm of Montreal," the genesis of which he describes in his *Note-Books*:

> In the [Montreal] Museum of Natural History, I came upon two plaster casts, one of the Antinous[1] and the other of the Discobolus[2]…banished from public view to a room where were all manner of skins, plants, snakes, insects, etc., and, in the middle of these, an old man stuffing an owl.
> "Ah," said I, "so you have some antiques here; why don't you put them where people can see them?"
> "Well, sir," answered the custodian," you see they are rather vulgar."
> He then talked a great deal and said his brother did all Mr. Spurgeon's printing.
> The dialogue—perhaps true, perhaps imaginary, perhaps a little of the one and a little of the other—between the writer and this old man gave rise to…[the poem]." (*Note-Books* 392)

When she received "A Psalm of Montreal" in a letter from Butler in April 1875, one of his correspondents pronounced it "delightful" and read it to several friends who also thought highly of it (see Jones 1:220), as apparently did Butler, "for he often recited it and gave copies of it to friends" and included it in his *Selections from Previous Works* (1884) (*Note-Books* 387).[3] Indeed, "[s]o popular was the satire, with its implied, put down of Montreal," observes John Robert Colombo, "that in 1913, when Rupert Brooke visited the city, he sought out the *Discobolus* in the gallery of the Art Association and was able to report that he found it "'very well, and, nowadays, look[ing] the whole world in the face, almost quite unabashed'" (67).

"A Psalm of Montreal" is by no means a masterpiece either of poetry or of satire, but its juxtaposition of the *Discus-Thrower* with "the skins of owls" retains its power to amuse, as does its caricature of "the man of skins" whose principal claim to respectability is his brother-in-law's con-

nection to Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92), the charismatic, controversial, and influential Baptist preacher whose sermons were drawing enormous congregations to his chapel in London, England:

> Beautiful by night and day, beautiful in summer and winter,
> Whole or maimed, always and alike beautiful—
> He preacheth gospel of grace to the skins of owls
> And to one who seasoneth the skins of Canadian owls:
> O God! O Montreal!
>
> When I saw him I was wroth and I said, "O Discobolus!
> Beautiful Discobolus, a Prince both among gods and men!
> What doest thou here, how camest thou hither, Discobolus,
> Preaching gospel in vain to the skins of owls?"
> O God! O Montreal!
>
> And I turned to the man of skins and said unto him, "O thou man of skins,|
> Wherefore hast thou done thus to shame the beauty of the Discobolus?"
> But the Lord had hardened the heart of the man of skins
> And he answered, "My brother-in-law is haberdasher to Mr. Spurgeon."
> O God! O Montreal!
>
> "The Discobolus is put here because he is vulgar,
> He has neither vest nor pants with which to cover his limbs;
> I, Sir, am a person of most respectable connections—
> My brother-in-law is haberdasher to Mr. Spurgeon."
> O God! O Montreal!
>
> Then I said, "O brother-in-law to Mr. Spurgeon's haberdasher,
> Who seasonest also the skins of Canadian owls,
> Thou callest trousers 'pants,' whereas I call them 'trousers,'
> Therefore thou art in hell-fire and may the Lord pity thee!"
> O God! O Montreal!
>
> "Preferrest thou the gospel of Montreal to the gospel of Hellas,
> The gospel of thy connection with Mr. Spurgeon's haberdashery to the gospel of the Discobolus?"
> Yet none the less blasphemed he beauty saying, "The Discobolus hath no gospel,
> But my brother-in-law is haberdasher to Mr. Spurgeon."
> O God! O Montreal!

In his *Memoir* of Butler, Henry Festing Jones observes that, coincidentally, Butler's *Heatherley's Holiday*: *An Incident in Studio Life*, which was

exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874 and is now held by Tate Britain, "contains, not only a cast of the Discobolus, but also…a stuffed owl" (1:220). Together with its headnote, "A Psalm of Montreal" was reprinted in *The Blasted Pine* (1957), where it perhaps came to the attention of A.M. Klein, who makes it the target of an allusion as Drizen, the protagonist of "Stranger and Afraid," slips into madness and Joycean logorrhoea in the final paragraphs of the unfinished novel (see Bentley 237 and 242 n37).

Notes

1 Probably a copy or replica of the nude statue of Antonous, the lover of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, that was made after the beautiful young man's death in 130 AD and restored and augmented in the eighteenth century by the Roman sculptor Pierantoni.

2 The *Discobolus* of Myron or *Discus-Thrower* is a lost ancient statue of a nude man in the act of throwing as discus that is known only through Roman copies and replicas of them.

3 The poem was also published "with Butler's consent" in the 18 May, 1878 issue of *The Spectator* (London) (*Note-Books* 387).

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