POMPEII

Robert Harris

Analysis by Valérie Tosi

Historical Novel

Robert Harris's *Pompeii* (2003) is a historical novel that deals with the story of Marcus Attilius, a Roman aqueduct engineer — a profession akin to a geologist for his knowledge of rocks and water — in the days before the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. As Marcus investigates the failure of the Aqua Augusta water system and various signs of geological unrest, he uncovers Pompeii's corruption and social injustices.

Year of Publication	2003
Publication Place	London
Editor	Hutchinson
Entity	Eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption Eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD

REAL EVENT

Time	79 AD
Location	Campania Italy
Coordinates	40.821360, 14.426208
Impacted Areas	Pompeii, Herculaneum, Stabiae, Oplontis; Terzigno; Naples Bay
Base/Complex	the volcanic complex Somma – Vesuvius

Typology

Explosive

"The pine tree, rather than any other, best describes its appearance and shape, for it rose high up into the sly on what one can describe as a very long trunk, and it then spread out into what looked like branches" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 16: 143); "flames and the smell of sulphur" (145)

Explosive

"ashes were falling on the ships, whiter and thicker the nearer they approached” (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 16: 144); "ash intermingled with pumice stones" (144); "the ash, now abundant and heavy" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 20: 149); "everything was buried by deep ash as though by snow" (150)

Explosive

"the pumice stones also descended" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, letter 16: 144)

Explosive

"stones which were black, charred, and split by the fires" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 16: 144)

Other

"a black and menacing cloud, split by twisted and quivering flashes of fiery breath; it opened up in extended shapes of flames, like lightning flashes, but greater" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 20: 148)

Volcano/Eruption Typology

Stratovolcano Terrestrial

Anthropization Level

Cities Settlements

Agriculture Areas

"Mount Vesuvius […] is covered with very beautiful fields" (Strabo, vol. 3, bk. 5, ch. 9: 367)

Sea Coast

"the attractiveness of the coast had made it thickly populated" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 16: 143);

Villas

[Rectina and Tasco’s villa] below Vesuvius (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 16: 143); Pomponianus’ villa at Stabiae (144); Pliny the Younger’s house in Misenum (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 20: 148)

Ecological Impacts

Earthquake

"violent earthquakes" (Cassius Dio 305); "buildings were shaking with frequent large-scale tremors" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 16: 144); "earth-tremors […] everything […] seemed to be not merely shifting but turning upside down" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 20: 147–148)

Destruction Of Plants

Destruction Of Animal Species

"the shoreline had advanced, and left many sea-creatures stranded on the dry sand" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 20: 148); "It wrought much injury of various kinds […] to men and farms and cattle, and […] it destroyed all fish and birds" (Cassius Dio 307)

Atmospheric Changes

"it was daylight elsewhere, but there it was night, blacker and denser than any night" (Pliny the Younger, vol. 6, Epist. 16: 145)

Changes In The Volcano's Shape

"the central part [of Mt. Vesuvius has] become concave" (Cassius Dio 305); "before the Plinian eruption […] the current cono didn’t exist; in the conflagration of 79 AD the prehistoric crater

collapsed" (Baratta, Il Vesuvio 8; my trans.)

Social Impacts	Injuries

"It wrought much injury of various kinds […] to men and farms and cattle, and […] it destroyed all fish and birds" (Cassius Dio 307)

Deaths

Death of Pliny the Elder: "his breathing was choked by the greater density of smoke, and this blocked his gullet […] two days after his eyes had closed in death" (Pliny the Younger, VI, Epist. 16: 155)

Destruction Of Dwellings

"houses ablaze" (Pliny the Younger, VI, Epist. 16: 144)

Destruction Of Facilities

"the port of Pompei was buried" (Baratta, "Il porto" 265; my translation)

Volcanic eruption Eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD

LITERARY EVENT

Time	79 AD
Location	Campania Italy
Impacted Areas	Pompeii, Herculaneum
Emphasis Phase	Pre-disaster (causes / context), Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Base/Complex	Mount Vesuvius
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Gases, Ash Rainfall, Lapilli, Volcanic Bombs, Emission Of Pumice Stones
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Stratovolcano, Terrestrial
Anthropization Level	Cities, Villas, Religious Buildings And Sites, Public Buildings And Sites, Facilities
Ecological Impacts	Earthquake, Changes In The Volcano's Shape, Destruction Of Animal Species, Destruction Of Plants, Atmospheric Changes
Social Impacts	Deaths, Injuries, Destruction Of Goods/Commodities, Destruction Of Dwellings, Destruction Of Public Buildings, Destruction Of Facilities, Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Marcus Attilius Primus
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Rome
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Unawareness

Name	Pliny The Elder
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Novum Comum
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Unawareness

Name	Numerius Popidius Ampliatus
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Unawareness, Denial, Disregard

Reactions

Name	Marcus Attilius Primus
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Rome
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Escape, Solidarity, Heroism, Survival Instinct

Name	Pliny The Elder
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Novum Comun
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Cooperation, Intervention, Heroism, Wonder, Curiosity, Fascination

Name	Numerius Popidius Ampliatus

Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Escape, Fight For Survival, Self-Absorption

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Patricians
Reactions	Unawareness

Name	Plebeians
Reactions	Unawareness

Name	Erudite people
Reactions	Unawareness

Name	Slaves
Reactions	Unawareness

Affects/Reactions

Name	Patricians
Reactions	Escape, Disorder, Self-Absorption, Terror, Panic, Fight For Survival, Madness, Loss Of Consciousness

Name	Plebeians
Reactions	Escape, Fight For Survival, Disorder, Terror, Panic, Self-Absorption, Madness, Loss Of Consciousness

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Robert Harris, Pompeii, 79 Ad, Vesuvius, Marcus Attilius

	Aqua Augusta · Corrupted Civilisation · Risk Denial
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus · Hell · Fire · Apocalypse · Deities · Mythical Creatures · Thunder · Technocracy
Syntax	Hypotaxis
Punctuation	No Peculiarities
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives

Robert Harris' *Pompeii* (2003) is a historical novel set during the reign of Emperor Titus. The story begins on Tuesday 22nd August 79 AD, two days before the eruption of Vesuvius, and develops over four days. The protagonist is Marcus Attilius, a Roman *aquarius* (aqueduct engineer) in charge of the Roman aqueduct *Aqua Augusta*, which supplies various towns around the Bay of Naples, from Pompeii to Misenum. Due to a prolonged water shortage in the area and a persistent smell of sulphur, Attilius hypothesizes a blockage of the aqueduct somewhere between Mount Serinus and Pompeii. Therefore, with the approval of Pliny the Elder, he leads an expedition around Mount Vesuvius to locate the aqueduct's obstruction and repair the damage. His enterprise is hindered by Numerius Pompilius Ampliatus, a corrupted wealthy man that aims to profit off the water crisis by building expensive thermal baths. Theodore Ziolkowski underlines how both Edward Bulwer Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and Harris's *Pompeii* follow a similar pattern, "with a fictional love story […] embedded in an action taking place […] in the days immediately preceding the eruption of 79 CE" (811-812). Here, Ampliatus' daughter Corelia provides the romantic subplot of the novel. Attilius discovers that the aqueduct has been damaged by ground deformation and fix it. However, the plug in the aqueduct turns out to be a result of volcanic activity deep beneath Mount Vesuvius, which soon erupts and destroys Pompeii.

The "Author's Note", which gives some information about the Roman calendar and timekeeping, is followed by three epigraphs: the first, taken form Tom Wolfe's lecture *The Human Beast* (2006), deals with America's pre-eminence in the fields of science, economy, medicine, technology, military force, social justice and human rights at the beginning of the Third Millenium; the second, taken from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (77-78 AD), describes Italy's imperial grandeur in terms of women, military forces, arts and crafts, and talents; the third, taken from A. Trevor Hodge's *Roman aqueducts and Water Supply* (1992) celebrates the Roman water system comparing it to the one of 1985 New York. Such paratextual devices draw a parallel between ancient Rome and contemporary America, expressing a transhistorical critique of developed civilisations' overconfidence and self-celebration in spite of their multiple vulnerabilities. Robert McCrum has observed that Harris's novel draws a "parallel between Roman and American globalisation" (2003); similarly, Alan Cowell has underlined how *Pompeii*'s narrative "meanders through a familiar modern landscape of sexual deviance and corrupted power, ambition and arrivisme" (2003), showing that "No empire lasts forever" (2003). In a 2011 interview, Harris stated that after reading about new research on the destruction of Pompeii in the summer of 2000, he could make the story of Pompeii's destruction "an allegory" ("Writing *Pompeii*" 332) of an American idealized community in a state of threat. The novel thematises the vulnerability of sophisticated, technological civilizations and their artefacts in the face of nature's destructive forces. For Harris, the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD parallels the catastrophic effects of global warming, with "nature suddenly turning" (336). It is a "*memento mori* for a settled civilization" (337-338) like contemporary America. It is through Attilius's voice that Harris suggests the idea that "Civilisation [is] a relentless war which Man [is] doomed to lose eventually" (223).

At the beginning of the novel, like in Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Pompeii is represented as a lazy, hedonist, corrupted, and sometimes cruel society, where private interests dominate over public good: if Lytton portrayed Pompeii as "a model of the whole empire" (vol. 1: 20), Harris similarly describes it as "a great microcosm of Roman life" ("Writing *Pompeii*" 336). Pompeian citizens are

portrayed as overconfident in their ability to control nature: the Aqua Augusta aqueduct, the city's urban planning and its thermal baths are exhibited as symbols of their unrivalled civilisation. There is a recurring denial or dismissal of natural warning signs, suggesting not only a strong belief in human superiority over natural forces, but also a dominant interest in private goods and property rather than collective issues. For example, when some red mullets in Ampliatus' private pool are found dead, he charges a slave of having poisoned his fish instead of investigating why the aqueduct's water is contaminated with sulphur. Similarly, the disastrous earthquake occurred seventeen years before has not taught Pompeii's builders and engineers to develop new and better building techniques; on the contrary, it has been merely used as an opportunity for building speculation by wealthy people like Ampliatus and his entourage. These attitudes parallel contemporary societies' tensions where corporate power often subverts environmental or public safety concerns in the name of profit.

The novel deals with the physical and social dimensions of geological risk by focusing on the professional figure of the hydraulics engineer and showing how fiction can explore the technical, political, and ethical dimensions of the engineering practice. Harris does not present Attilius' enterprise in an epic, tragic, or moral mode but develops instead a "scientific plotline [creating] a historical-volcanological mystery" (Mendelsohn). In the previously mentioned interview, Harris himself stated that while Lytton's novel focused on "Christianity and the punishment and paganism" ("Writing *Pompeii*" 339) Pompeii "[i]s essentially about a guy who has to fix something that's broken" (338). Attilius's struggle is neither that of a Prometheus-like hero defying gods nor that of an opponent of false religion; on the contrary, he is a detective-like engineer that uses knowledge, experience, and intuition to fight against natural forces while unveiling and denouncing illegality ad corruption among the wealthy patricians. From the beginning of the novel, Attilius is presented as a rational and pragmatic character: "Attilius had no time for gods […] He placed his faith instead in stones and water" (Harris, *Pompeii* 10).

As Priyan Dias has observed, Attilius faces the challenges many engineers usually have to cope with; furthermore, he has the essential qualities all engineers should possess. First, he works for a public institution (the Empire) and does not let himself get involved in dirty business concerning the use of a common good – water – as a private commodity. Second, building on not only "the laws of architecture and hydraulics" but also on "a taste, a nose, a feel for water, and for the rocks and soils" (48), he is able to use three kinds of logical reasoning: deductive, inductive and abductive (Dias 256). Third, he builds on documented past experiences to improve his knowledge of the geological reality surrounding Pompeii; by reading some papers belonging to the previous *aquarius* Exomnius, who has been missing and is later found dead by Attilius himself, he gradually realises that Mount Vesuvius is a volcano. Fourthly, not only does he use theories and mathematics, but he also "exercis[e] leadership, management, and even public relations skills" (257) by motivating his men, setting intervention plans with Pliny, and communicating with Pompeii's politicians. Finally, he shows ethical concerns and empathy towards the most vulnerable people. Harris draws a contrast between Pliny, the naturalist and observer, and Attilius, the engineer and doer, showing how it is only the latter who can combine theoretical knowledge and pragmatism to assess risk and survive a natural disaster. According to Dias, Harris also aims to underline how famous scientists like Pliny the Elder usually achieved cultural immortality despite their self-absorption and contemplative attitude, while engineers like Attilius were often underrepresented in literature and historical sources despite their active role in serving society (259).

On a structural level, each chapter is introduced by an epigraph taken from scientific sources discussing a) the relation between the volcanic explosivity index and the duration of quiescence intervals between eruptions; b) the importance of the measurement of the time interval between magma intrusion and the subsequent eruption to predict when an eruption is going to take place; c) the relationship between alterations in the percentage pf certain gases (such as SOs, HC1) and the occurrence of a volcanic eruption; d) the relationship between earthquake swarms, faults, and changes of pressure near masses of magma; e) the influence of magma movements on the flow and temperature of groundwater; f) the chemical composition of the magma erupted from Vesuvius in 79 AD; g) the sponge-like appearance of the distinctive stone found in the vicinity of Vesuvius; h) the interplay of old and new masses of magma, resulting in convection and vesiculation; i) the influence of pressure on magma's physical characteristics and flow; j) how earthquakes can influence the emission of magma; how the subsidence of rock may cause explosive eruptions; k) how magma

intrusion causes swellings of the earth's surface; l) how full moon can influence the pressure of tides on the coast, and trigger eruptions; m) the phenomenon of phreatic eruption; the starting time of Vesuvius's 79 AD eruption; n) the power of the 79 AD eruption in mathematical and physical terms, comparing it to Hiroshima's atomic bomb; o) the consequences of the contact between magma and groundwater; p) the ejection of pumice stones during the 79 AD eruption; q) how an eruption column can collapse due to its density producing flows of lava and pyroclastic materials; r) how predicting the end of an eruption is more difficult than predicting its beginning; s) how human body can survive extremely hot temperatures. Harris builds on four main sources to frame *Pompeii*'s chapters: Jacques-Marie Bardintzeff and Alexander R. Mcbirney's *Volcanology* (2000), Haraldur Sigurdsson's *Encyclopaedia* of Volcanoes (1999), Peter Francis's *Volcanoes: A Planetary Perspective* (1993), and Burkhard Müller-Ullrich's *Dynamics of Volcanism* (n. d.). He has clarified that this device allowed him to solve a technical problem, namely "how to describe what was going on in the volcano when the Romans didn't even have a word for volcano" ("Writing *Pompeii*" 333). Furthermore, these epigraphs casted "every scene in an ironic light" (333): in fact, while all the characters are unaware of what is going to happen, the reader, guided by scientific knowledge, anticipates the inevitable.

Harris dramatizes the sociocultural and political dynamics of risk communication and response in a society characterised by intellectual elitism, lack of integrated approaches to natural phenomena, and political corruption. In the novel, he mentions ancient writers who were most likely aware of Vesuvius' volcanic characteristics. Vitruvius, for example, in Book II of his treatise *De architectura* described *pozzolana* and *spongia* (pumice) as types of volcanic ash and stones formed by the earth being burned by subterranean fires. After acknowledging the presence of pumice stones on Vesuvius, Strabo compared it to Mount Aetna in his *Geographica*, hypothesizing its volcanic nature; furthermore, he considered the land's fertility around Vesuvius a sign of its past volcanic activity. In his *Naturalis historia*, also Pliny the Elder reported the presence of pumice stones in the area of the Phlegrean Fields and noticed unusual water behaviour below their surface. However, in Harris's Pompeii, scientific books and past chronicles are buried in public and private libraries and are unknow to most people. Even Pliny, when Vesuvius begins to erupt, recognises that "He had never before paid much attention to the mountain" (Harris, *Pompeii* 325) because of its 'obviousness', and admits that he has been "as blind as old Pomponianus, who thought it was the work of Jupiter" (329). In this passage, science based only on fragmentary, analytical approaches and on the study of "Nature's esoteric aspects" (325) is compared to religious superstition.

In *Pompeii*, the pursuit of profit over concerns for public safety is dramatized through the figure of Ampliatus. In the novel, two scientific sources dealing with a possible volcanic origin of Mount Vesuvius – excerpts from Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones* and Strabo's *Geographica* – appear as possible solutions to the puzzle represented by water scarcity and tremors. They are found by the *aquarius* Exomnius in Pompeii's library, and are later stolen by Ampliatus's henchman Corax. Ampliatus turns out to be unable to read Strabo's Greek text and, regarding Seneca's book, he maintains that "[his] business is building not books" (Harris, *Pompeii* 300). Furthemore, he deliberately refuses to inform his citizens about a possible natural risk in order not to create panic and lose his grasp on the leadership. Indeed, he decides to feed his people with "the prophecy of the sybil" (301), who has predicated an amazing future for Pompeii. What he embodies is the *hubris*, ignorance, and recklessness of a society more concerned with contemporary luxury and power than with the geological history and related natural risks of its homeplace.

Harris cites implicitly other sources such as Dio Cassius and Diodorus Siculus a to show how scientific knowledge coexisted with myth in the ancient world. Building on local folklore, Dio Cassius wrote that giant-like shapes appeared in the smoke of 79 AD Vesuvius' eruption, foreshadowing the advent of Domitianus's reign. Diodorus told that Heracles defeated Cumae's giants bringing the land of the Phlegrean Fields under cultivation (Connors 130). In the novel, it is Brebix, a freedman and former gladiator, that explains to Attilius that "Giants have been seen […] Wandering over the earth [whose voices] sound like claps of thunder" (193).

Harris's novel explores how risk perception and preparedness are always filtered through politics, science, technical knowledge, and culture; furthermore, it shows how internal failures worsen societies' responses to external shocks.Focusing on the figure of the hydraulics engineer, it demonstrates how the supervision of infrastructure systems could provide indirect early warnings of

impending natural disasters. It also dramatizes risk inequality, unveiling how a state of emergency may result in scapegoating, riots, and social disruption when authorities, scientists, officers, and citizens are unable to cooperate for public safety.

From an intersemiotic perspective, Harris seems to have found inspiration in art to dramatize the reaction of Pompeii's citizens to the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. The description of a panicked and desperate mob "emerging from the darkness, shadows out of shadows" (377), "dragging out boxes, carpets, pieces of broken furniture" (378), and trying to get to safety while buildings and temples collapse recalls Karl Pavlovich Bryullov's painting *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1830-1833). Harris's description of the Stabian Gate brings to mind Alessandro Sanquirico's illustration "The Eruption of Vesuvius" (1830) for the opera *The Last Day of Pompeii* by Giovanni Pacini. Both these scenes and Harris' narrative illustrate the break of the social contract in the face of a natural disaster, with "an entire town driven mad" (Harris, *Pompeii* 377) and fugitives compared to "ants whose nest had been kicked to pieces" (380).

Harris frequently uses personification to depict the earth as a living, sentient being, one capable of responding emotionally and physically to human actions. In the second part of the novel, in the chapter titled "Hora duodecima", Pliny's thought aligns with environmental ethics and highlights a power imbalance between man and the natural world. Like a contemporary environmentalist, Pliny hypothesizes that "Perhaps Mother Nature is punishing [them] for [their] greed and selfishness [as they] torture her at all hours by iron and wood, fire and stone" (201). Mining and dumping, expressions of the "anthropo-narcissism of the Anthropocene" (Estok 89) are violent practices that make the earth "quive[r] with anger" (Harris, *Pompeii* 202). Pliny's incapacity to grasp the dynamics of the eruption leads him to change his view of nature from a source of wonder to an "enemy" (331), showing a psychoemotional attitude that Simon Estok has identified as *ecophobia*, and which often involves the personification of nature as a "gendered hostile enemy" (Estok 72). This gendered personification foreshadows the eruption of Vesuvius as a vengeance from a violated Earth, elevating the novel's themes to a transhistorical, moral parable about the consequences of human hubris and greed. Furthermore, they support the idea that natural and social orders are interconnected: when one is violated, the other disrupts. When the ash cloud turns red due to the phenomenon of lighting, it is compared to "a vivid vein of blood" (337), contributing to the representation of nature as a vengeful entity moving from the depths of the earth to the sky. The epigraph of this section, which deals with rock's subsidence, implicitly draws a connection between ground sinking and the collapse and the erosion of society's foundations in times of crisis. Indeed, as the water stream in the aqueduct continues to decrease, riots and other episodes of social violence occur against the most vulnerable people, as if "Man and Nature were bound by some invisible link" (199). Later in the novel, Musa observes how "The mountain has cracked and spewed" (260). The polysemy of verb 'to spew', which can mean 'to eject' but also 'to vomit' suggests that common people keep on believing that the earth is reacting angrily to human misbehaviour. At the end of the novel, just before dying from exhalations, Pliny realises that not only "Men mist[ake] measurement for understanding" (392), but they also position themselves "at the centre of everything" (392) as if Nature were a cosmic judge – and partly mirror – of their moral conduct.

This final consideration is apparently at odds not only with Pliny's previous assertions, but also with Harris's use of personification and similes to make the erupting volcano an embodiment of a vengeful Mother Nature willing to punish humanity for its sins. However, a more careful reading of the novel unveils that Harris's aim is not to dismantle poetic analogies between nature and society's mechanisms. Rather, he intends to dismantle anthropocentric associations between natural phenomena and human behaviour by recognising – through the voice of a well-known and authoritative historical character and man of science – the unpredictability and agency of nature, a nature that over the centuries we have increasingly and blatantly tried to domesticate and remake in our image.

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