STERMINATOR VESEVO (VESUVIUS THE GREAT EXTERMINATOR)

Matilde Serao

Analysis by Biancamaria Rizzardi

First-Person Account

Matilde Serao's *Sterminator Vesevo* (1906) is a journalistic reportage that recounts the 1906 eruption of Vesuvius and its impact on local communities. Beyond documenting the emission of ash and lava, and describing the condition of the ruined Vesuvian villages, Serao denounces political inertia and calls for a sense of collective responsibility. She turns the eruption into a test of national solidarity and civic responsibility, urging scientists, authorities and citizens to act, aid the displaced and rebuild.

Year of Publication	1906
Publication Place	Naples
Editor	Francesco Perrella
Entity	1906 eruption of Vesuvius

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption 1906 eruption of Vesuvius

REAL EVENT

Time	April 4-21, 1906
Location	Campania Italy
Coordinates	40.821360, 14.426208
Impacted Areas	Ottaiano, Boscotrecase, Somma Vesuviana, San Giuseppe Vesuviano
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius
Typology	Explosive Explosive Explosive

Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial, Stratovolcano
Anthropization Level	Villages, Churches
Social Impacts	Deaths, Injuries, Destruction Of Dwellings, Destruction Of Goods/Commodities, Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites), Resource Depletion, Social Disruption, Trauma

Volcanic eruption 1906 eruption of Vesuvius

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1906
Location	Campania Italy
Impacted Areas	Ottaiano, Boscotrecase, Somma Vesuviana, San Giuseppe Vesuviano
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Ash Rainfall, Volcanic Bombs, Lapilli
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial, Stratovolcano
Anthropization Level	Villages
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes
Social Impacts	Deaths, Injuries, Destruction Of Dwellings, Destruction Of Goods/Commodities, Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites), Resource Depletion, Social Disruption, Trauma, Recovery

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Common people
Reactions	Awareness, Caution

Affects/Reactions

Name	Common people
Reactions	Escape, Fight For Survival, Prayer, Disorder, Terror

	Survival Instinct, Doubt, Panic, Despair, Trauma, Distrust, Irrationality, Helplessness, Resignation

Name	The army
Reactions	Solidarity, Heroism, Cooperation, Order, Pragmatism

Name	Women
Reactions	Empathy, Solidarity, Order, Heroism, Pragmatism, Helplessness, Terror, Survival Instinct, Fight For Survival, Despair

Name	Children
Reactions	Escape, Helplessness, Terror, Trauma

Name	Politicians
Reactions	Cooperation, Intervention, Order, Rationality

Name	Journalists
Reactions	Concealment Of Information

Name	Journalists
Reactions	Sharing Of Information, Rationality, Trust

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Matilde Serao, Sterminator Vesevo, 1906 Vesuvius Eruption, Civic Responsibility, Ethical Journalism, Resilience, National Consciousness, Community Aid
Similes	"The gigantic black mass rises powerful and straight […] and it looks like a dark sea petrified in its foaming waves […] a hardened dead sea" (Serao 35-36)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus, Hell, Cruel Nature, Nemesis, Death, Miracles

Syntax	Hypotaxis, Complex Noun Phrases, High Frequency Connectives
Punctuation	Multiple Commas, Multiple Stops, High Frequency Punctuation Marks, Multiple Exl
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Sterminator Vesevo (1906) by Matilde Serao (1856-1927) is a reportage dealing with the events that followed the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the first half of April 1906. Serao, journalist and writer, was a prominent figure in the Italian literary scene at the turn of the 20th century. Founder and director of several newspapers (including *Il Corriere di Roma*, *Il Mattino* and *Il Giorno*), she also published novels and short stories. Some of her most famous works are *Il ventre di Napoli* (1884), *Fantasia* (1883), *La virtù di Checchina* (1884), *Il romanzo della fanciulla* (1886), *Addio amore* (1890), and *Il paese di Cuccagna* (1891).

When Mount Vesuvius erupted on April 24, 1872, Serao was living in Naples, where she first heard "the roars of the mountain that sounded like cannon shots" (Serao, *San Gennaro* 266; my trans.) and saw "three rivers of fire which flew down the mountain" (266; my trans.). At the time, she could also see a procession of women praying Saint Gennaro for protection from fire, acknowledging the power of religious beliefs and folklore in shaping the commoners' attitudes towards the threat posed by the volcano.

After the great eruption of 1872, Vesuvius's behaviour had shifted from a three-year phase of solfataric phenomena to a state of strombolian activity marked occasionally by lateral outpourings of lava, until the first week of April 1906. Then, an increase of the tension of a magma saturated with steam caused an explosive eruption, with "scoriae and lapilli" (De Lorenzo 476) ejected from the volcano's newest fissures. This pyroclastic fall – consisting of volcanic bombs, lapilli, lava, and ash – destroyed the Vesuvian villages of Boscotrecase, Ottaiano and San Giuseppe, causing several injuries and killing 200 of their "hapless inhabitants" (477).

In *San Gennaro nelle leggende e nella vita / San Gennaro in Legend and Life* (1909), Serao underlined how, during the 1906 eruption, journalists had a double task: not only did they have to observe and describe the prolonged disaster in its factuality, but they also had to understand and express the range of emotions related to the tragic event. She was aware that in times of crisis the media could play a pivotal role not only in reporting facts but in shaping public perception, fostering a collective moral response, and mobilizing aid. When Serao saw "the pine of Vesuvius, the famous pine, the pine of the eruptions" (Serao, *San Gennaro* 249-252; my trans.) on April 7, 1906, she recalled the volcanic disaster she had witnessed at the age of sixteen. Above all, she recalled her feelings of fear, uncertainty, and sense of helplessness. Over the seventeen days of the 1906 eruption, she documented the events as an accomplished journalist, even though sometimes her pen "refused to find the words that might say all, or suggest all without saying it" (279; my trans.). In those dreadful days, "she could only write confusing and broken words, and vague expressions [as] writers and journalists were, ultimately, men and women, they had blood and nerves, and all human suffering was their suffering" (282; my trans.). What she maintained was that serious writers and journalists could not help but empathize with suffering human beings, having to balance objectivity and emotional involvement for effective communication. Initially, she reported the events in the newspaper *Il Giorno*; then, her articles were collected in the volume *Sterminator Vesevo*, published by Francesco Perrella in 1906. An English translation by L. Hammond appeared in 1907. Serao chose to title her work with lines from Leopardi's poem "La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto" ("The Broom, or the Flower of the Desert") (1845) in which Vesuvius is represented as a powerful symbol of nature's destructive force and a reminder of the fragility of human existence.

Serao's reportage is divided into thirty-four chapters whose titles are representative of her moral values, militant journalism, and writing style. For example, the title of the first chapter, "Quia pulvis es" (Remember you are dust) is taken from Genesis 3:19, and introduces a passage dealing with the

themes of hubris, human vulnerability, and the collapse of civilisation in a context of natural disaster. "Si parli al popolo!" (Let us speak to the people!), "Si puniscano i colpevoli!" (Let the Guilty Ones Be Punished!), and "Salvate la terra!" (Let the Land Be Saved!) are direct calls to action, where politicians and institutions are required to ensure justice and take charge of the disaster recovery. Other titles like "Verso il paese del fuoco" (Towards the City of Fire), "Nelle città morte" (In the Dead Towns), "Nel paese della morte" (In the Country of Death), or "La nuova Pompei" (The New Pompei) are emblematic of how Serao's documentary intent interweaves with literary suggestions to emotionally engage the readers. Titles related to the devastation of Vesuvian towns and the natural landscape are alternated with titles that introduce specific subjects, like "Gli eroi" (The Heroes), "Una donna" (A Woman), "Il Generale Durelli" (General Durelli), "I bambini" (The Children), reflecting the cinematographic quality of Serao's journalistic writing, namely her ability to shift from very long shots – passages where the setting is dominant – to long and near shots – where human figures and their physical and emotional conditions are observed at close range.

As observed by Francesco Bruni, Serao's realism is anecdotic and documentary, fluctuating between attention to detail and generalisations (489-547). Enrico Panzacchi has underlined how her journalistic writing is permeated with "a poetic quality, intimate and frank" (236); her prose, in which she uses a lively and conversational language, is inspired by the Italian Verismo, but – due to ist autobiographical quality – is also permeated with subjective impressions.

In *Sterminator Vesevo*, Serao tells the story of the eruption by blending factual reporting with literary motifs and *topoi*. Furthermore, she subtly explores the emotions stirred by the tragedy, and appeals to Christian values of solidarity and generosity.

Building on a *topos* explored by Italian and foreign authors such as Giovanni Lotti, Giovan Battista Bergazzano, Giacomo Leopardi, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Serao describes the changes in the landscape capturing the chaos and terror of the disaster that befell the country, underlying how it struck a cheerful society unaware of its vulnerabilities. In the first chapter, "Quia pulvis es…", she describes "un'immensa nuvola che chiudeva il monte in mobra fitta, nera, caliginosa: oscura e triste […] sulla foglia smagliante" '[a]n immense cloud which wrapped all the mountain in a black thick smutty shade, and fell dark and menacing […] on the brilliant gathered crowd' (43; Hammond 19). Then, she mentions "il giorno di festa […] in cui Pompei fu distrutta" 'the feast day when Pompei was destroyed' (43; Hammond 19), highlighting the clash between the spectacle of the eruption and "la folla circolava, chiacchierava, rideva" 'the marry crowd happily circulating' (43; Hammond 20). In the second chapter, "Verso il paese del fuoco" (Towards the City of Fire), Serao once again emphasizes the contrast between the unpredictability of the volcano's destructive behaviour and the people's unawareness of the impending catastrophe: "[i]l caro paese, così floridamente cinto di orti e di vigneti […] così tranquillo pare sotto il suo terribile nemico" 'that fine country, so richly surrounded by farms, vines, gardens, and which seems stil so calm under the grasp of its terrible enemy' (47; Hammond 30). Through the personification of the volcano as an enemy – which contrasts with a reference to its generative forces, namely its capacity to produce fertile soils – Serao suggests how the citizens of Boscotrecase and the other Vesuvian towns have always been on alert under the threat of a benevolent nature that can suddenly turn into a ruthless antagonist along the path of civilisation. In this context, tourists are portrayed as unaware of the scale of the disaster, or unconcerned with its tragic consequences. They only aim to enjoy the spectacle of a sensational nature, and show themselves disappointed when they realise that the lava flow has stopped.

The eruption phases are depicted in real time, paying attention to visual and sonic elements, as emerges in the following excerpt:

Ma mentre saliamo, verso la lava, romba, romba, sulla nostra testa, il cratere del Vesuvio. Continuamente, in volute nerastre, in volute grigiastre, in volute biancastre, una maestosa colonna di fumo, di cenere, di lapilli si eleva, densa, sformandosi nell'elevarsi, formandosi novellamente, più larga, più alta, colossale […] fiamme lunghe si elevano, come in un velo, e scintillano punti di fuoco che sono masse incandescenti, che ricadono in pioggia, intorno al cratere […] Romba il monte: e colossalmente alitando, gitta fumo e cenere e lapillo: e fiammeggia sinistramente; e gitta pietre di fuoco, massi di fuoco, macigni di fuoco. (49)

But while we climb up towards the lava, the mouth of Vesuvius above our heads, roars and thunders. A great column of white, gray, and black smoke stands erect on the cone, and not withstanding the full daylight, we see through those dark and light clouds, long flames arising as through a veil, and showers of sparkles fall in a mass of fire around the mouth […] The mountain thunders, and breathes as a colossus, it sparkles terribly, dashing stones of fire, masses of fire, rocks of fire every where. (Hammond 34)

In this passage, which is emblematic of Serao's 'impressionistic' realism, she uses various rhetorical devices to engage her readers on a sensory level. First, she personifies Vesuvius as a giant being, highlighting its immense, divine power. The crater is likened to the mouth of a colossus, whose fury manifests in the ejection of pyroclastic materials. In the chapter titled "Ignis ardens", the volcano's body is compared to a human body: "il sangue del volcano pulsa ancora nelle vene di sasso" 'the blood of the Volcano beats yet in those stony veins' (117; Hammond 205). Moreover, Vesuvius is portrayed as a murderess mother "che port[a] nel suo ventre la fiamma e nei suoi fianchi lo sterminio" 'carrying flaming and destruction in its breast' (117; Hammond 206), mirroring Leopardi's reflection on nature's inherent cruelty.

In the except quoted above, the image of the veil, which suggests mystery or obscured vision, contrasts with the violence of the explosions, creating an atmosphere of eeriness where something beautiful yet terrifying is contemplated through an aesthetic filter. The experience of the Sublime is underlined by the mention of the observers' "stupor taciturno" 'silent wonder' (50; Hammond 35) and "orrore mescolato di audacia […] una nuova follia" 'a daring and audacity nearing madness' (51; Hammond 37). Second, the repetition of the word "fire" at the end of the phrases "stones of fire, masses of fire, rocks of fire", and the climatic progression stones-masses-rocks underscores the escalating and hellish nature of the phenomenon portrayed, while the repetition of the word "thunders" evokes the violent, booming sounds associated with the eruption and contributes to expressing a feeling of relentless power. Third, regarding the use of adjectives, not only does the progression "white, gray and black" reflect the dynamics of smoke emission, but it also suggests a shift from light to dark, and an increasing gradation of intensity and danger. The adverbs "continuamente" 'continuously', "novellamente" 'repeatedly', "colossalmente" 'colossally', "sinistramente" 'threateningly' – which have been obliterated or replaced by similes in the English translation – add rhythm, emphasis, and emotional depth to the original passage, shaping an oppressive atmosphere where man is overwhelmed by a devastating, apocalyptic force. In this scenario, the volcano is not a static entity, but a living being continually re-creating itself as if it were an intelligent or mythic force. This aspect is further remarked in the following sentence: "La gigantessa massa nera si leva, possente, irta, scabra […] e pare un oscuro mare pietrificato […] un mare irrigidito e morto. Ah che non è morto! Vi vive, dentro, ancora la Fiamma, ancora il fuoco e ogni tanto, scintilla, divampa, mostra la sua incandescenza" 'The gigantic black mass rises powerful and straight […] and it looks like a dark sea petrified in its foaming waves […] a hardened dead sea. Ah! Why isn't it dead? Fire and flames are still living within, and now and then it blazes, burns out, shows its incandescence' (50; Hammond 35–36). The metaphor "lagrime di fuoco" 'drops of fire' (50; Hammond 36), as well as the "atroce convulsione del monte" 'these terrible convulsions of the mountain' (52; Hammond 44) mentioned in the chapter "A Prayer", builds on the Galenic "tradition of humoral medicine" (Casapullo 40; my trans.), where the volcano is represented as a living being, and sometimes "a sick organism that needs to expel the superfluous material accumulated inside" (40; my trans.). Regarding syntax and punctuation, this passage features long sentences characterised by a marked use of commas and coordinating conjunctions (especially *and*), which contribute to emphasizing the unrelenting pace of the eruption.

In the chapter titled "Una preghiera" (A Prayer), Serao defines the Vesuvian citizens "un popolo perseguitato da un orrendo flagello" 'a population struck by such terrible calamity' (52; Hammond 41). As emerges the English translation, Hammond narrows the focus on the current calamity, while in the source text Serao evokes a long history of volcanic threat and human resilience. Furthermore, Serao builds on a longstanding cultural and literary tradition that reads volcanic disasters as a manifestation of Nemesis, defining the eruption "[un] tremendo castigo" '[a] tremendous punishment' (52; Hammond 42). This concept is reiterated in the chapters "Ignis ardens", where she sees the lava flow and the phenomenon of volcanic lightning as signs of a "divinità vendicatrice" 'a revengeful divinity' (117; Hammond 206), and "Il mare di lava" (The sea of lava), where she compares the smoking

crevices on tha piceous surface of solidified lava to the "incenso [che arde per] un Dio sconosciuto, un dio di terrore e di sterminio" 'incense [burning] to an unknown God, a God of terror and destruction' (123; Hammond 218).

The social impact of the disaster that struck the Vesuvian villages is first described through objective and numerical data, in line with the referential and informative functions of journalistic writing: "[…] campi sepolti, […] colture distrutte […] Venti o trenta case sono crollate in Somma Vesuviana: una chiesa è in grave pericolo: l'altra è lesionata" 'buried fields, […] destroyed harvest […] Twenty or thirsty houses have tumbled down at Somma Vesuviana, one church is in great danger, the walls of another are cracked' (63; Hammond 70, 71). In Granilis barracks, Naples, "sono ricoverati tremila e ottocento profughi dai comuni vesuviani" 'three thousand and eight hundred people from the Vesuvian villages have been sheltered' (79; Hammond 112). In Ottaiano, perhaps three hundred people died when the church's roof collapsed, while the number of displaced people is estimated to be one hundred and fifty thousand.

However, besides offering these pieces of information, Serao focuses on the human and social dimension of the tragedy. First, she appeals to the conscience of all Italians, asking them to pray because "l'Italia tutta […] trema di dolore, al sentire la favolosa e pur reale istoria di tanta catastrophe" 'All Italy is trembling with sorrow, listening to the fabulous and yet real story of such a great catastrophe' (53; Hammond 43). In her call to prayer, building on a moral worldview shaped by Christian values, she underlines how human beings are vulnerable in the face of a dreadful cataclysm. However, she clarifies that also more pragmatic people, namely "tutti coloro che pensano e agiscono" 'all those who can think and act' (54; Hammond 45) must fight against the destruction "[cercando di] attenuarlo, di governarlo, di renderlo meno atroce, meno funesto" 'try[ing] to master it and render it less terrible than it is' (54; Hammond 45). At a time where volcano early warning systems were not available, the Christian values of solidarity and generosity are seen as the key factors in building resilience and trigger disaster recovery among the civilians. Therefore, Serao appeals to women and men of good will to mitigate the calamity so that "al flagello si opporrà un'altra massa di volontà, pensante e ragionante" 'to this terrible catastrophe will then be opposed another amount of will, of thinking and reasoning will' (54; Hammond 46). This passage is particularly meaningful as human rationality and solidarity are contrasted with the blind and ruthlessness of nature, whose will is therefore considered agential yet irrational. The ruling classes – from the prince to the anonymous officer – must guide the uneducated people through the use of a language of fraternity founded on "tutte le civichè virtù" 'all the civic virtue' (55; Hammond 47).

Serao also appeals to scientists and businesspeople to save the land:

Chiamate gli uomini di scienza, quelli che della scienza fanno studio per migliorar la vita, e dite loro che si uniscano, che osservino, che notino e che rivelino agli ignari il segreto per salvare questa terra morta. Chiamate gli uomini di finanza, quelli che la finanza conoscono non come una vana ridda di cifre, ma perché serva alla vita, e che essi formino un grande Progetto, perchè sia salvata la terra. (100)

Call men of science, those who study science to better life, and tell them to get together, to observe, to notice, to reveal to the ignorant the secret to save this dead land. Call men of finances, not those who understand it as a mere dance of cyphers, but those who know what it means to life, and let them form a great project, by which the land may be saved (Hammond 162).

Serao advocates for a pragmatic and ethical application of knowledge, aligned with social responsibility. Knowledge is not static or elitist, but a tool to educate and empower the ignorant, identified with the vulnerable, illiterate population affected by the eruptions. Implicit in this appeal is the belief that no single force – not science, not money, not politics – can rebuild alone. Only through cooperative action can the "dead land" be saved.

In the chapter titled "Si parli al popolo" (Let us speak to the people), Serao maintains that in the days following the disaster, the population's terror turned into a frenzy, with this fear assuming "un carattere pericoloso, furioso" 'a furious dangerous character' (75; Hammond 101). In the following paragraphs, she underlines how the illiteracy of many Neapolitans is likely to negatively impact the process of recovery, because "la disperazione del fanciullo, la disperazione del selvaggio" 'the despair

of the child, of the savage' (75; Hammond 101) – resulted for the Neapolitans' incapacity to read newspapers and get informed about the alert level and ongoing actions – might completely disrupt the social pact, resulting in chaos and civil conflicts.

In this context, fair journalism plays a pivotal role in supporting the communication of correct information, enhancing resilience and triggering consistent action. Using imperatives, Serao points out how reliable information is a key factor in disaster recovery, while misinformation and false information worsen social crisis: "Finisca questa follia di menzogne, d'invenzioni, di esagerazioni: finisca questa pazzia allarmista: finisca questa infamia delle false notizie, in certi giornali, solo per vendere delle copie" 'Let this folly of lies, inventions, and exaggerations end, and with it, this infamy of false news printed in some papers with the sole intent to sell them' (55; Hammond 47). In this regard, she sharply attacks the journalists working for *Agenzia Stefani*, who, during the eruption had telegraphed all over the world that the Vesuvian Observatory had been destroyed, alarming and paralysing the Neapolitan people. In Serao's view, journalists must stick to the facts, helping the city of Naples to revive and begin again its work. Furthermore, as "poveri cronisti dei dolori umani" 'poor writers of human troubles' (60; Hammond 64), journalists must "[raccontare il dolore] perchè esso commuova il cuore della gente all'eroismo e alla pietà" '[relate the sorrow so that] it might touch the heart of people to heroism and pity' (60–61; Hammond 64).

Regarding the human response to the unexpected catastrophe, Serao provides a cross section of the population's conditions after the catastrophe, focusing on its most vulnerable subjects, namely uneducate people, women, children, and old people. With a quasi cinematographic writing technique, she presents the frames of a surviving family through shifts from long shots to close ups, and viceversa: first, they are observed at a distance, on a *char-à banc*, as a whole unit; then, Serao focuses on single figures: the mother – as pale as dead – with a child under her arms, the father, holding another child, and several other children that form "un vero grappolo umano, dagli occhi sgomenti" 'a real human pile, sad and deserted' (66; Hammond 78).

According to Serao, the soldiers have been the heroes of the eruption. The first of them is none other than Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia, Duke of Aosta, nephew of King Vittorio Emanuele. Their heroism lies not only in their courage, but also and above all in their untiring activity "di fronte alle fatiche, ai disagi, alle provazioni" 'before fatigue, privations and sacrifice' (71; Hammond 91). Their efforts in looking for the dead and the wounded, besides their industriousness in demolishing the tumbling houses and building temporary shelters is considered a sort of triumph over the destructive forces of nature as "[Essi] hanno affrontato la lava e hanno affrontato i lapilli" 'They have defied and conquered the lava, and lapillus' (71; Hammond 92). Another heroine of the tragedy is Elena of Orléans, Duchess of Aosta, who helped officials and doctors among the dead and the wounded.

Serao's *Sterminator Vesevo* is not only a vivid chronicle of the 1906 eruption of Vesuvius, but also a profound meditation on the social dynamics related to unpredictable and natural disasters. Her literary reportage weaves together motifs and *topoi* pertaining to European and Italian literary traditions, the emotional depth of a first-person account, and the realistic approach of militant journalism. While she acknowledges the vulnerability of human beings and civilisations in the face of cataclysms, she refuses to succumb to Leopardi's cosmic pessimism, challenging the obliterating power of "the Great Exterminator" by confronting it with the power of civic virtues. Indeed, she envisions a path toward resilience rooted in human cooperation, rational planning, and ethical responsibility. In Serao's vision, recovery is possible only when knowledge, empathy, trust and correct information converge, turning the collective will of a society determined to rise from the ashes into action.

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