THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Analysis by Valérie Tosi

Historical Novel

Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) is a historical novel set in ancient Pompeii before and during the catastrophic eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. Bulwer-Lytton combines romance with drama and antiquarian detail to explore the themes of love, civilisation, moral decay, fate, religion and social fragmentation. The eruption functions as a symbolic force of divine retribution, exposing human hubris and the fragility of civilisations built on corruption and excess.

Year of Publication	1834
Publication Place	London
Editor	Richard Bentley
Entity	Eruption of Vesuvius

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption Eruption of Vesuvius

REAL EVENT

Time	79 A. D.
Location	Campania Italy
Coordinates	40.821360, 14.426208
Impacted Areas	Pompeii, Herculaneum, Oplontis, Stabiae
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology

Explosive

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

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, 6: 143); "flames and the smell of sulphur" (Pliny the Younger, 6: 145)

Explosive

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

Explosive

"the pumice stones also descended" (Pliny the Younger, 6: 144)

Volcano/Eruption Typology

Terrestrial

Stratovolcano

Anthropization Level

Agriculture Areas

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

Villas

"[Rectina and Tasco's villa] below Vesuvius" (Pliny the Younger, 6: 143); Pomponianus' villa at Stabiae (Pliny the Younger 6: 144); Pliny the Younger's house in Misenum (Pliny the Younger 6: 148)

Settlements

"the attractiveness of the coast had made it thickly populated" (Pliny the Younger, 6: 143)

Towns

Ecological Impacts

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.)

Atmospheric Changes

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

Earthquake

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

Destruction Of Animal Species

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

Social Impacts

Deaths

"[Pliny the Elder's] 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, 6: 155)

Destruction Of Dwellings

Destruction Of Facilities

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

Destruction Of Public Buildings

Injuries

"It wrought much injury of various kinds […] to men and farms" (Cassius Dio 307)

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Glaucus
Age	Adult
Gender	M
Native Place	Rome
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Unawareness

Affects (Specific)

Name	Glaucus
Gender	M

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Aristocrats

Volcanic eruption eruption of Mount Vesuvius

LITERARY EVENT

Time	79 A. D.
Location	Campania Italy
Impacted Areas	Pompeii, Herculaneum
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Pre-disaster (causes / context)
Base/Complex	Mount Vesuvius
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Ash Rainfall, Gases, Lapilli, Volcanic Bombs

	Emission Of Pumice Stones
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial, Stratovolcano, Explosive
Anthropization Level	Villas, Cities, Public Buildings, Religious Buildings And Sites, Remote Dwellings, Arenas, Streets
Ecological Impacts	Earthquake, Atmospheric Changes, Destruction Of Plants, Destruction Of Animal Species, Changes In The Volcano's Shape
Social Impacts	Deaths, Injuries, Destruction Of Goods/Commodities, Destruction Of Public Buildings, Social Disruption, Trauma, Relocation, Recovery, Destruction Of Dwellings

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Glaucus
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Athens
Nationality	Greek
Reactions	Calm, Happiness, Unawareness

Name	Ione
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Naples
Nationality	Italian With Greek Ancestry
Reactions	Calm, Happiness, Unawareness

Name	Arbax
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Egypt
Nationality	Egyptian
Reactions	Unawareness

Name	Nydia
Age	Adult
Gender	Female

Native Place	Thessaly
Nationality	Thessalian
Reactions	Unawareness

Name	The Witch Of Vesuvius
Age	Old
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Apprehension, Awareness, Fear

Reactions

Name	Glaucus
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Athens
Nationality	Greek
Reactions	Fight For Survival, Intervention, Cooperation, Solidarity, Heroism, Fear, Order, Empathy, Escape

Name	Ione
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Naples
Nationality	Italian With Greek Ancestry
Reactions	Fight For Survival, Escape, Loss Of Consciousness, Terror, Passiveness

Name	Arbax
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Egypt
Nationality	Egyptian
Reactions	Escape, Hindrance, Self-Absorption, Cowardice, Rage, Madness

Name	The Roman Sentinel
Age	Adult

Gender	Male
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Immobility Paralysis, Heroism

Name	The Witch Of Vesuvius
Age	Old
Gender	Female
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Self-Absorption, Escape, Terror, Survival Instinct

Name	Nydia
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Thessaly
Nationality	Thessalian
Reactions	Escape, Fight For Survival, Cooperation, Solidarity, Heroism

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Patricians
Reactions	Unawareness, Calm, Happiness

Name	Plebeians
Reactions	Unawareness, Calm, Happiness

Name	Christian Priests
Reactions	Unawareness, Calm

Name	Pagan Priests
Reactions	Unawareness, Calm

Affects/Reactions

Name	Patricians
Reactions	Escape, Fight For Survival, Disorder, Self-Absorption, Terror

	Panic

Name	Plebeians
Reactions	Escape, Fight For Survival, Disorder, Self-Absorption, Terror, Panic

Name	Christian Priests
Reactions	Prayer, Fatalism, Escape, Terror

Name	Pagan Priests
Reactions	Prayer, Fatalism

Name	The officers
Reactions	Escape

Name	The army
Reactions	Escape

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	79 Ad, Pompeii, Vesuvius, Corrupted Civilisation, Doom, Hubris, Divine Nemesis
Metaphors	"the Burden of the Atmosphere" (Bulwer-Lytton 3: 246) "the sudden Phlegethon" (Bulwer-Lytton 3: 283)
Similes	"the cloud […] appeared to assume quaint and vast mimicries of human or of monster shapes […] the unsubstantial vapours were as the bodily forms of gigantic foes" (3: 269) "as from the jaws of hell, gushed the sources of the sudden Phlegethon" (Bulwer-Lytton 3: 283)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus, Locus Amoenus, Deities, Death, Ruins, Civilisation, Prophecy, War, Panicked Mob, Hell, The Downfall Of Society, The End Of The World, Superstition, Apocalypse, Hubris
Syntax	Hypotaxis, Complex Noun Phrases, High Frequency Connectives
Punctuation	High Frequency Punctuation Marks, Multiple Commas, Multiple Semicolons

The Last Days of Pompeii by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, first published in 1834, is a historical novel set against the backdrop of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD, a catastrophic event that destroyed the Roman cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. The novel was inspired by the author's trip to Italy in 1832-33, when he was "fascinated by the ruins of Pompeii and the artifacts preserved in the Naples Museum" and by "Karl Bryullov's vast and dramatic painting *The Last Days of Pompeii*" (Daly, "The Volcanic Disaster Narrative" 271), which he could admire in Florence. On August 27, 1834, Vesuvius erupted after a decade of growing disturbances. Details of the disaster appeared in London newspapers and magazines on September 22, alluding also to the 79 AD disaster. Therefore, as observed by James C. Simmons, "the violence of Vesuvius and the tragedy of Pompeii were brought dramatically before the public at the exact time *The Last Days of Pompeii* was released by the publishers on September 29, 1834" (104), influencing the book's positive reception.

The 79 AD eruption of Vesuvius and its ecological and social impact can be investigated by building on ancient testimonies and modern scholarship. Pliny the Younger's Epistles VI.16 and VI.20 to Tacitus, for example, provide the most vivid eyewitness account of the tragic event, describing the pine-shaped eruption cloud, the fall of pumice and ash, the violent tremors, the suffocating gases that claimed Pliny the Elder's life, and the fear and chaos among Pompeii's population. Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, which spans the period from the foundation of Rome to AD 229, complemented Pliny's letters with a broader perspective on ecological devastation, discussing the collapse of Vesuvius's crater, the destruction of farms and livestock, and the earthquakes. Strabo's *Geographica*, written between 14 and 23 AD, highlighted the fertility of Vesuvius's slopes, suggesting why the area was so densely populated and thus vulnerable to catastrophic events. Later, modern scholars drew on these accounts, combining them with geological and archaeological evidence. In his studies on Vesuvius, for example, Mario Baratta described the collapse of the prehistoric crater, the immense volumes of ash and debris, the lava flows, and even the burial of Pompeii's port.

Blending novel, romance, and drama, Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* explores the themes of love, fate, science, morality, and the inevitable fall of corrupt societies, using the 79 AD eruption of Mount Vesuvius as both a literal and metaphorical narrative climax. Indeed, in the novel, the volcanic disaster can be interpreted as a symbol of divine retribution, aimed at punishing the immorality of Pompeii by confronting various social groups and individuals with their limits and vulnerabilities. The plot line weaves together the lives of several characters whose fates intersect in the days preceding the devastating eruption and during the disaster: Glaucus, a Patrician of Greek ancestry, and the Greek noblewoman Ione, his beloved, embody youthful virtue and idealized love, yet their happiness is threatened by Arbax, a manipulative Egyptian priest who desires Ione for himself. Through deceit and intrigue, Arbax imprisons Ione and attempts to frame Glaucus for a crime he did not commit. In the midst of these events, nature asserts its overwhelming power as the eruption of Vesuvius interrupts and overturns all human designs. Finally, Glaucus rescues Ione, while Arbax meets his deserved fate.

The city of Pompeii, represented as a world of moral decadence and pleasure-seeking lifestyle, is a symbol of progress, complacency and excess, as emerges in the following passage:

Pompeii was the miniature of the civilization of that age. Within the narrow compass of its walls was contained, as it were, a specimen of every gift which luxury offered to power. In its minute but glittering shops, its tiny palaces, its baths, its forum, its theatre, its circus–in the energy yet corruption–of its people, you beheld a model of the whole empire. It was a toy, a plaything, a showbox. (1: 20)

The expression "energy yet corruption" is emblematic of the analogy between geological and sociopolitical forces that emerges throughout the novel. The eruption of Vesuvius is the actual catastrophe that annihilates Pompeii, but Bulwer-Lytton suggests that other destructive forces were already at work within the city's walls. Indeed, just as Vesuvius hides a seething core beneath a dormant mountain, Pompeii hides moral decay, political corruption, social inequalities, and "religious-

cultural conflict among Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Christian protagonists" (Ziolkowski 812) beneath the surface of its glittering civilization.

From a chronological and cultural perspective, "[t]he text uses the reader's foreknowledge of the coming catastrophe to create a heightened sense of the ordinariness and dailiness of these 'Last Days', alongside a very modern experience of acceleration and eventfulness". Indeed, the epoch portrayed in the novel "resonates more with the 1830s than with 79 [AD]" (Pettitt 170). In Bulwer-Lytton's days, "[a] sense of the contingency and unpredictability of events, be they political or geological, economic or meteorological, encouraged an anxious focus on futurity" (170); moreover, "a newly paradoxical sensibility of mundanity and repetition punctuated by, or spliced together with, national or global events beyond the control of the individual" (170) was emerging in the British cultural imagination. Therefore, the novel expresses the author's "desire to establish not only the reconstructed present of that ancient moment but also the historicity of his readers' present" (172).

Regarding the topic of risk perception, early in the novel, the residents of Pompeii live in a state of obliviousness to the catastrophic risk posed by Mount Vesuvius. Despite the presence of signs of volcanic activity, such as earth tremors and persistent clouds of smoke lingering over the top of the mountain, the population seems to be largely unaware of Vesuvius's gradual awakening.

Many of the characters, particularly those who are wealthy, educated, or in positions of power, share a commodified and aestheticized view of the Vesuvian landscape as a *locus amoenus*. Indeed, before it turns into a *locus horridus* in the eruptive phase, Mount Vesuvius is depicted as a source of natural resources – due to the presence of luxuriant vineyards and orchards on its slopes –, a theatrical scenery to contemplate, a symbol of emotional states, or a romantic setting for secret encounters. Bulwer-Lytton's characters admire Mount Vesuvius's beauty and majesty and explore its surroundings but are basically unaware of the danger it constitutes to their life. Their aestheticized relation with nature – which is rooted in the aesthetics of the Picturesque – results in risk unawareness and unpreparedness to the event of a natural catastrophe. Talking with her beloved Glaucus, for example, Ione refers to the Vesuvius as "a mountain", not a volcano, and compares its calm, namely its illusory dormancy, with the ostensible placidness of her protector, an Egyptian man named Arbax: "His calm, his coldness […] are perhaps but the exhaustion of past sufferings, as yonder mountain […] which we see, dark and tranquil in distance, once nursed the fires forever quenched" (1: 97). In this passage, **Vesuvius** is treated as a symbol of dormant passions. When Glaucus and Ione see that "over that grey summit, rising amidst the woods and vineyards that then clomb half away up the scent, there hung a black and ominous cloud, the single frown of the landscape" (1: 97), their "faintest presentiment of evil" (1: 98) is soon obliterated by their mutual confidence. Their amorous passion leads them to make decisions that prioritize aesthetic pleasure and emotional connection over rational consideration of potential risks.

The temporal remoteness of past eruptions and Pompeii's economic and cultural grandeur have contributed to obliterating its citizens' awareness of phenomena pertaining to geological timescales and indicative of the nothingness of the human era within the Earth's history. This can be seen in the way Bulwer-Lytton's characters go about their daily lives, engaging in leisurely pursuits, ignoring ominous signs, and remaining unconcerned about the growing activity of the volcano. The dramatization of their attitudes and behaviours highlights a key theme in the novel, namely hubris, a social and moral flaw that has been widely investigated in nineteenth-century literature. Indeed, during the Regency Era, when Bulwer-Lytton's novel was published, rapid industrialization, imperial expansion, strict social hierarchies and scientific progress created a backdrop for the literary exploration of human pride and self-confidence. In this sociocultural context, the depiction of Pompeii as "the showbox" of the Roman Empire evokes a reflection on the showboxes of the British Empire, where "*[d]*eterminants of disaster were accruing already in the nineteenth century *[…]: wealth disparity, a big population increase, and a shift towards predominantly urbanized living*" (Pettitt 176). The author seems therefore to use the natural disaster as a device to thematize how developed, self-confident societies often ignore long-term risks – whether environmental, socioeconomic, or moral – until they reach a breaking point. Furthermore, the erupting volcano can be read as "an image of revolution and the eruption of repressed political energy" (156), reflecting English concerns with "the burning lava of the French Revolution" (Cobbet qtd. in Pettitt 156).

As the narrative proceeds and Arbax's treacherous nature emerges in all its sordidness, the reader becomes aware of Ione's underestimation of both Arbax and the volcano's inherent dangerousness. In Vol. I, Book II, chapter VIII, the narrator mentions the Vesuvius and describes "a deep and massy cloud, which for several days past had gathered darker and more solid over its summit" (1: 272–273). Some pages later, he intervenes in an ironic way to give his own views on the characters' attitude towards volcanic risk. First, he explains that "as Rome itself is built on an exhausted volcano, so in similar security the inhabitants of the South tenanted the green and vine-clad places around a volcano whose fires they believed at rest forever" (278); then, he adds: "Above all, rose the cloud-capt summit of the Dread Mountain, with the shadows, now dark, now light betraying the mossy caverns and ashy rocks, which testified the past conflagrations, and might have prophesied–but Man is blind–that which was to come!" (1: 279). In his final consideration, the narrator uses em dashes to highlight a moral and philosophical concept appearing in religious, philosophical and literary sources from *The Gospels* (i.e. Matthew 15:14) to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, and 17th century utopian narratives: blindness as moral deficiency, ignorance, and lack of perception.

As the city is shaken by minor earthquakes, people begin to sense that something is amiss, even though many continue to ignore the looming danger. The classic human tendency to delay action until the risk becomes undeniable is reflected in the characters' panic only when the eruption is fully underway, and Pompeii is struck by violent earthquakes and falling ash. The only one character who is aware of the risk posed by the Vesuvius is the witch who lives in a cave at the foot of the volcano. After witnessing volcanic activity, she visits Arbax and warns him of an impending catastrophe: "Hell is beneath us […] the dim thing below are preparing wrath for ye above" (2: 140). Her description of the stream of molten lava in the depth of the volcano is reminiscent of William Hamilton's account of the "river of red hot and liquid metal" (Hamilton 6) in his *Observations on Mount Vesuvius, Mount Etna, And Other Volcanos* (1774), as emerges in the following excerpts:

in that abyss I have of late marked a red and dull stream creep slowly […] and heard many and mighty sounds, hissing and roaring through the gloom […] last night, as I looked thereon, behold the stream was no longer dull, but intensely and fiercely luminous. (3: 181)

this morning […] I looked again down the abyss, and I saw vast fragments of stone borne black and floating over the lurid stream; and the stream itself was broader, fiercer, redder than the night before. (182)

Finally, the witch recalls an Etruscan prophecy that says: "When the mountain opens, the city shall fall–when the smoke crowns the Hill of the Parched Fields, there shall be wo and weeping in the hearths of the Children of the Sea" (3: 182-183). Her predictions are filled with superstition and apocalyptic imagery, as she speaks of fire, destruction, and death, framing the eruption as both a physical and spiritual reckoning for the city.

Regarding the phenomenal aspects of the eruption, the third-person narrator describes "a vast vapor shooting from the summit of Vesuvius, in the form of a gigantic pine-tree" (3: 246), "[a] mountain-cloud [that] cast forth from its bosom a shower of ashes" (3: 247), "vast fragments of burning stone" (3: 247), "showers of ashes and pumice stones" (3: 251), "darkness that covered the heavens" (3: 255), columns of boiling water" (3: 261), "the fatal air" (3: 263), and "rivers of the molten lava" (3: 283). He also gives information about changes of the volcano's shape as "Its summit seemed riven in two" (3: 282). Bulwer-Lytton's representation of the eruptive phenomenon and its impact on the physical landscape is reminiscent of Pliny the Younger's account of the 79 AD event in his letters (*VI.16* and VI.20) to Tacitus. Bulwer-Lytton would likely have read the 1813 edition of *The Letters*, translated by William Melmoth, which was one of the most widely available and influential English translations of the time. Even though in a note to Book V (Vol. III), he pointed out that he had represented the event "very little assisted by invention" (3: 313), he had creatively combined Pliny's descriptions of the darkness that enveloped Pompeii with "the lurid expectations of fire portrayed in paintings" (Pyle 20). He had also invoked the phenomenon of volcanic "lightning" (3: 259), described by Pliny in terms of "lightning flashes" (Pliny the Younger 148), and documented by Hamilton in his *Supplement* to C*ampi Phlegraei: Observations on the Volcanos of the Two Sicilies* (1779). Other visual suggestions inserted in the novel's descriptive sections were probably inspired by paintings, prints, magazine articles, posters, dioramas, shows, and topographic models circulating in London from the 1820s onwards (Pettitt 148–151; Daly, "Under the Volcano" 22–32).

In *The Last Days of Pompeii*, volcanic lightning is defined "horrible beauty" (3: 268) by the narrator, who directly refers to Edmund Burke's concept of Sublime. The epithets "the Dread Mountain" (2: 279); "the Burden of the Atmosphere" (3: 246); "terrific mountain" (3: 259); "the mighty mountain" (3: 261); "the Fatal Mountain" (3: 280); "The Mountain of the 'Scorched Fields'" (3: 297) also pertain to the aesthetics of Sublime, focusing on the clash between nature's grandeur and human nothingness. Coherently, phrases such as "the doomed Pompeii" (3: 256), "the impotence of human hopes" (3: 271) or "the lesson of despair" (3: 271) emphasise human helplessness in the face of nature's fury.

In Vol. III (Book 5) the author uses similes and metaphors pertaining to the semantic fields of monstrosity and war to describe the astonishing atmospheric changes caused by the eruption: "the cloud […] appeared to assume quaint and vast mimicries of human or of monster shapes […] the unsubstantial vapours were as the bodily forms of gigantic foes,–the agents of terror and of death" (3: 269). War, with its imagery of battle, conflict, and violence, serves as a metaphor for the fierce, uncontrollable aspects of nature, underscoring both the beauty and the terror that nature could inspire.

The semantic field of hell is invoked in the excerpt "as from the jaws of hell, gushed the sources of the sudden Phlegethon" (3: 283). The choice of Phlegethon as a metaphor for the stream of molten lava that flows towards Pompeii, which perhaps built on Plato's "view of volcanic fiery currents as streams flowing from the pyriphlegethon" (Pyle 8), enhances the novel's apocalyptic and moral themes. Indeed, by using this metaphor, Bulwer-Lytton seems to draw connections between the eruption and the concept of Last Judgement.

From an intersemiotic perspective, Bulwer-Lytton seems to have found inspiration in art to represent the reaction of Pompeii's citizens to the eruption of Vesuvius. The description of a panicked and desperate mob trying to get to safety while buildings and temples collapse recalls John Martin's painting *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1821), Karl Pavlovich Bryullov's *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1830-1833) and Alessandro Sanquirico's illustration *The Eruption of Vesuvius* (1830) for the opera *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1825) by Giovanni Pacini. In particular, Bryullov's painting, which "focused on the Pompeians and the 'panopticon of human despair and fear of death,' rather than the power of nature" (St Clair and Bautz 361), influenced Bulwer-Lytton's dramatization of the devastating impact of the eruption on the citizens. By building on "the artistic conventions of the apocalyptic sublime in which human beings are shown as tiny, terrified, and helpless victims of overwhelming forces of nature or of the vengeful wrath of the Judaeo-Christian god" (361), his narrative illustrates the break of the social contract in the face of a natural disaster: as the eruption unfolds, people's instincts shift from societal duties to personal survival, with everyone turning into *homo homini lupus*. This dreadful condition is plainly expressed in the sentence "The sudden catastrophe […] had, as it were, riven the very bonds of society" (3: 258) and the phrase "the cries and trampling rush of the scattered crowd" (3: 251), which alludes to the collateral risk represented by collective panic. The following passages further dramatize the disruption of the social pact:

[…] safety for themselves was their sole thought. Each turned to fly — each dashing, pressing, crushing, against the other. Trampling recklessly over the fallen — amidst groans, and oaths, and prayers, and sudden shrieks, the enormous crowd vomited itself forth through the numerous passages. (3: 247).

The whole elements of civilisation were broken up. […] Each hurried blindly and confusedly on. Nothing in all the various and complicated machinery of social life was left save the primal law of self-preservation! (3: 272)

The fugitives are described as "wild – haggard – ghastly with supernatural fears" (3: 271), wretched creatures incapable of speaking, consulting, and advising. The *topos* of the panicked mob evokes Bulwer-Lytton's association between the volcano and the devastating force of the people, presenting the energies of the urban masses as purely destructive.

The novel's historical context seems to justify these analogies: "Volcanic energies close to home included the recent Tithe Wars in Ireland (1821–24), the campaign for Catholic Emancipation, and the campaigns for reform in England itself that led to the 1832 Reform Act" (Daly, "Under the Volcano" 35).

In his novel, Bulwer-Lytton also explores how wealth, social status, religion and moral character may impact individuals' response to natural disaster: the privileged are more concerned with self-preservation and material loss, while many of the poorer citizens lack the resources to escape and are at the mercy of the eruption's fury. The eruption's social impact is portrayed in vivid, dramatic detail, with descriptions of the growing chaos in the streets of Pompeii. Some individuals attempt to flee the city, while others are paralyzed by terror. While "the universal shrieks of women" (3: 246) echo within the city's walls, "men stared at each other, but were dumb" (3: 246), "the officers fled with the rest" (3: 250), and the Nazarenes stand still in a state of "awe […] robbed […] of fear" (3: 276). The fear of death and the loss of security leads to rash actions, with some characters abandoning loved ones in their fight for survival, while others trying to seek shelter or comfort from religious rites and superstitions. However, the eruption proves indifferent to their prayers, highlighting the futility of superstition in the face of nature's overwhelming power. The novel paints a grim picture of the lower classes' fate, showing how they are overwhelmed by the power of hostile nature. The case of the Roman sentry, a soldier who guards the gates of Pompeii, deserves attention; the narrator describes his immobility in these terms: "He remained erect and motionless at his post. That hour itself had not animated the machine of the ruthless Majesty of Rome into the reasoning and self-acting man!" (3:266). The Roman sentry represents the Roman state's rigid control and the mindset of blind obedience. His behavior illustrates how hierarchical and militaristic systems of power may lead to the erosion of individual agency and rational thought in the face of unpredictable catastrophes.

The novel's conclusion does not invoke the notions of resilience or reconstruction but those of relocation and conversion, as Glaucus and Ione find safety in the new setting of Athens, where they become Christians. Pompeii is left irretrievably destroyed, its social fabric dissolved, and its population scattered.

From a linguistic perspective, Bulwer-Lytton's lexicon is highly ornamented, full of archaisms and Latin and Greek insertions referring to architectural elements, Roman festivals, musical instruments, and deities, which give his narrative a sense of antiquity and classical authenticity. On a syntactic level, his sentences are usually long, with multiple subordinate clauses strung together by commas, semicolons, and dashes, creating a rhythm that mimics oratory. In the first part of the novel, the prevalence of hypotactic structures allows him to offer vivid and detailed descriptions of places and characters that are representative of the grandeur and excess of the Pompeian society. In some cases, embedded clauses let the author-narrator step outside the story to instruct, judge, or contextualize, such in the example "–but Man is blind–" (1: 279) mentioned above.

In The Last Days of Pompeii, Bulwer-Lytton merged historical reconstruction and antiquarian interest with scientific knowledge and literary invention to investigate a well-known geological disaster through the lens of social, cultural, and moral critique. By situating the 79 AD eruption of Mount Vesuvius within a framework of moral allegory and social commentary, his historical novel underscored the interplay between natural and social forces in shaping – and reshaping – individual destinies and societies. Furthermore, it suggested that love and virtue may endure while civilizations and their corrupted customs are doomed to collapse in the face of greater and uncontrollable forces.

Bulwer-Lytton built on classical sources to offer a realistic representation of Pompeii's ancient civilisation, founding inspiration in nineteenth-century visual culture to dramatize the sublime terror of the 79 AD geological catastrophe. His representation of Pompeii as a microcosm of the Roman empire threatened by an impending natural disaster and sociopolitical and religious turmoil reflected Victorian concerns with the impact of industrialization, urbanization, economic growth, and political reforms on the stability of the British Empire.

The novel's persistent emphasis on hubris, risk unawareness, corruption, and social fragmentation illustrates how the author used the theme of volcanic disaster as a vehicle for meditating on human vulnerabilities from a transhistorical perspective. In conclusion, *The Last Days of Pompeii* shows how disaster narratives function not merely as sensational depictions of catastrophic past events but as critical commentaries on the contingencies of the present, inviting readers to recognize the fragile equilibrium between human ambition and the unpredictable forces of nature.

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