VIAJE AL VESUBIO (VOYAGE TO VESUVIUS)

Ángel De Saavedra

Analysis by Valérie Tosi

Article, Travelogue

Ángel De Saavedra's *Viaje al Vesubio* (1844) is a Romantic travel account describing the author's ascent of Mount Vesuvius. De Saavedra builds on the aesthetics of the Sublime to depict fire, lava, smoke, and the trembling earth, describing Nature as majestic, terrifying, beyond human control. The volcano reduces man to insignificance, exposing the fragility of existence before nature's primordial, indifferent power, and reminding the excursionists of buried civilizations of the past.

Year of Publication	1844
Publication Place	Madrid
Editor	Unspecified
Entity	1844 eruption of Vesuvius
Magazine	Revista de España y del Extrangero

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption 1844 eruption of Vesuvius

REAL EVENT

Time	July 31, 1844
Location	Campania Italy
Coordinates	40.821360, 14.426208
Impacted Areas	the volcano's base
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius

Typology	Explosive, Effusive
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial, Stratovolcano

Anthropization Level	Towns

"The lower parts of the mountain are studded with towns, villages, and palaces, that rise among vineyards and gardens, the property of men who forget their danger while seeking to derive wealth from the fertility of its soil" (Auldjo 3-4)

Villages

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Villas

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Agriculture Areas

"The lower parts of the mountain are studded with towns, villages, and palaces, that rise among vineyards and gardens, the property of men who forget their danger while seeking to derive wealth from the fertility of its soil" (Auldjo 3-4)

Volcanic eruption 1844 eruption of Vesuvius

LITERARY EVENT

Time	July 31, 1844
Location	Campania Italy
Impacted Areas	the volcano's base
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Emission Of Lava, Lapilli, Volcanic Bombs
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial, Stratovolcano
Anthropization Level	Towns, Villages, Tourist Places
Ecological Impacts	Changes In The Volcano's Shape

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Ángel De Saavedra
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Córdoba, Spain
Nationality	Spanish

Reactions	Curiosity, Wonder, Fascination, Awe, Terror

Reactions

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Reactions	Terror, Astonishment, Fascination, Wonder, Curiosity

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Travellers
Reactions	Curiosity, Wonder, Fascination, Awe, Terror

Affects/Reactions

Name	Travellers
Reactions	Terror, Astonishment, Fascination, Wonder, Curiosity

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	"Indescriptible Prodigio" (De Saavedra 501)
Metaphors	"la boca del infierno" (De Saavedra 502)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus, Locus Amoenus, Hell, Mythical Creatures, Supernatural
Syntax	Complex Noun Phrases
Punctuation	No Peculiarities
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives

Ángel De Saavedra, 3rd Duke of Rivas was a Spanish poet, dramatist, painter, and politician. He wrote initially in a neoclassical style, later with a distinctly Romantic sensibility that made him one of the most representative figures of the Spanish Romanticism (Fino 198). Between 1848 and 1850, he served as Minister of the Interior and Ambassador in Naples, at the Bourbon Court. His *Viaje al Vesubio* (1844) is a first-person account of the author's impressions of a strenuous yet thrilling excursion to reach the summit of Mount Vesuvius in July 1844 to admire the fiery lava and the sunrise.

Between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries there was a remarkable production and circulation of illustrations of Southern Italy's active volcanoes: paintings, drawings, and engravings by various artists depicted volcanic landscapes, eruptions, and past disasters. Some images were in the style of the natural science illustrations; others dramatized volcanic events by representing patron saints floating in the sky and common people attempting to escape the catastrophe. In this context, Etna and Vesuvius were also "imbued with historical and cultural values" (Scaramellini 31) rooted in the Ancient World. As observed by Johann Gottfried Seume, Vesuvius was the most interesting volcano in the world (33) despite its smaller size when compared to Etna. With the same words, De Saavedra defines Vesuvius "un enano sí se le compara con el Etna" 'a dwarf if compared to Etna' (De Saavedra 502; my trans.), but at the same time he underlines its preponderance from cultural and scientific perspectives, and its accessibility in terms of distance and travel time.

In his journey to Mount Vesuvius, De Saavedra seemed to follow the route illustrated in John Auldjo's series of engravings *Sketches of Vesuvius with Short Accounts of its Principal Eruptions* (1832), in which the author – through a romantic spectacularization of the volcano and its performances – aimed to "excite in travellers […] an interest in its historic and topographic details" (Auldjo, *Preface*). *Viaje al Vesubio*'s narrative sequences too follow Auldjo's *Sketches*: the account begins with the description of Mount Vesuvius and Mount Somma, which stand on a common base (De Saavedra 501; Auldjo 1), and continues with the description of the fertile slopes of the volcano and its summit covered with ashes (De Saavedra 501; Auldjo 4). De Saavedra's description of the "millares de piedras de todos tamaños encendidas" 'Thousands of stones of all sizes, glowing' (De Saavedra 502; my trans.) ejected from Vesuvius's new cone mirrors – in an almost ekphrastic mode – Auldjo's account of "cannon balls" and "spheroids" (Auldjo 11) striking on the lava. The same is true for the description of the smoke column and the lava fountains at night (De Saavedra 502; Auldjo 17). Another aspect that is worth mentioning is that both works feature first-person narratives interwoven with short accounts of the eruptions of Vesuvius from 79AD to 1832, combining personal observations with geological history to underline the boldness of travellers and artists exploring places exposed to natural risks.

De Saavedra's description of Mount Vesuvius builds on Romantic aesthetics, reading the volcanic landscape through the lenses of the Picturesque and the Sublime. The volcano is an iconic "landscape element" (Scaramellini 44), characterised by majesty and vividness. It is also a "natural element" (44) that can influence either positively or negatively human life, creating fertile ground or destroying civilisations. The volcano is portrayed as a mighty mountain with "atrevidos contornos" 'audacious contours' (De Saavedra 501; my trans.) that rise against a clear sky, evoking the grandeur that fascinated Romantic painters and poets. The picturesque aesthetics emerges when De Saavedra describes the volcano's slope as a place of perpetual spring, with "abundante y lozana vegetación" 'an abundant and lush vegetation' that contrasts with "su elevada cima cubierta de escorias y cenizas" 'its summit covered with scoria and ashes' (501; my trans.), and a huge variety of colours. De Saavedra and his fellow travellers climbed Mount Vesuvius on July 31 at night, fascinated by the image of the moon illuminating the path to the volcano's crater, where a minor eruption had been taking place.

The volcano is described as a "coloso" 'colossus' (501; my trans.) on whose shoulders they would climb, and whose mouth would soon open before them. It is compared to a titan wearing a helmet with a red plume. At close range, the volcano ceases to be perceived as an anthropomorphic creature; as the narrator approaches it, Vesuvius begins to be perceived as a natural entity displaying a complex geological history: "Vesubio, que desde lejos parece tan liso, unido y poco fragoso, tiene quiebras asperísimas, profundos valles y espantosos despeñaderos" 'Vesuvius, which from afar appears so smooth, uniform, and scarcely rugged, has extremely rough ravines, deep valleys, and terrifying precipices' (501; my trans.). Affects are influenced by proximity and distance as well: "horror da el verse á los pies de aquel inmenso coloso que parece esconde su frente en la región del fuego y á cuyos

hombros se va á subir" 'it is terrifying to find oneself at the feet of that immense colossus, which seems to hide its head in the realm of fire, and whose shoulders one is about to climb' (501; my trans.). Distance triggers mythologizing – Vesuvius as a giant – and infuses horror, namely a kind of 'digested' fear filtered through cultural *topoi*, while proximity demands reckoning with the mountain's physical reality, and infuses "terror", a feeling of anticipatory dread that is linked to the power of unpredictable natural elements.

While climbing Vesuvius, the excursionists are confronted with a reminder of past eruptions (like the petrified stream of lava originated by the 1822 eruption) and the latent energy beneath the volcano's surface. This proximity awakens risk awareness, respect, humility, and fear. De Saavedra faces risk with a combination of curiosity, fascination, wonder, and fatalism. Even though he is aware of Vesuvius' dangerousness, his attitude remains more contemplative than alarmist. By underscoring the paradox of serene populations living for centuries near a deadly force, he presents himself as a man who is not intimidated by a fleeting encounter with the volcano. The presence of risk heightens the emotional impact of the journey but never overwhelms the narrator's aesthetic reflections and "consideraciones filósoficas" 'philosophical meditations' (502, my translation).

During the ascent, vegetation becomes scrubby, and the terrain turns rough and dangerous. Once before the crater and the erupting cone, De Saavedra and the other excursionists remain "mudos, inmóviles, extasíados, confundidos..." 'mute, still, ecstatic, confused…' (501; my trans.) at the overwhelming spectacle of the smoke column and lava fountains. The use of ellipsis suggests the inadequacy of a unique, specialized language in describing what the narrator defines a "indescriptible prodigio" 'indescribable wonder' (501; my trans.). To overcome such impasse, De Saavedra uses a hybrid descriptive style, combining subjective impressions rich in figurative language, literary *topoi*, and scientific data, along the lines of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of volcanic eruptions (Casapullo 40).

First, the narrator builds on the *topos* of fireworks to describe Vesuvius's eruption as a spectacle; then, he dwells on morphologic details and scientific data, following the example of Auldjo's *Sketches*: Vesuvius's crater is a circular basin with a diameter of three hundred yards and a depth of a hundred; its bottom is a crust that covers the abyss and is made of cold lava merged with incandescent material and sulphur. In the middle of the basin rises a small 70-yard-high cone whose circular mouth ejects light and a column of thick smoke (De Saavedra 502). This realistic, scientific description is combined with mythological suggestions and established similes: the roaring of the volcano is compared to "la respiracion de un coloso aherrojado" 'the breathing of a chained giant' (502; my trans.), but is also likened to a musketry fusillade, a simile widely used also in eighteenth-century accounts of Vesuvius's eruptions, in which terms like "firecrackers", "artillery fire", "arquebus" (Casapullo 40; my trans.) are recurrent. Lava flows are compared to "culebras de fuego [que] serpentaban entorno del montecillo" 'fire snakes that crawled around the hillock' (De Saavedra 502; my trans.). This simile contributes to depict the volcano as something alive and in restless motion. When Vesuvius is not erupting, in the periods of quiescence, "el genio exterminador que habita en sus entrañas" 'the exterminating genius who lives inside its guts' (502; my trans.) is believed to be sleeping. In this passage, De Saavedra mentions a popular belief that mirrors the mythology of Campi Phlegraei narrated in Strabo's *Geographica* and Diodorus Siculus's *Bibliotheca Historica*. What strikes the reader is that the adjective "exterminator" is also used by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi in his poem "La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto" (1945), perhaps signalling a common, Romantic fascination with the dual power of nature as both a creator and destructor.

Through the use of the verb "vomitaba" 'vomited' (502; my trans.), which builds on "the tradition of humoral medicine" (Casapullo 40; my trans.), the volcano is represented as a living being, "a sick organism that needs to expel the superfluous material accumulated inside" (40; my trans.). This personification reflects an idea of unstable boundaries between the organic and inorganic worlds that pertains to eighteenth-century geology, and is preserved in eighteenth-century volcanology. The frequent use of the terms "boca" / "mouth" (De Saavedra 501, 502; my trans.) and "entrañas" 'guts' (502; my trans.) is coherent with such tendency.

The sublime aesthetics is evident in moments of awe and "delightful horror [or] tranquillity tinged with terror" (Burke 136), when in the narrative setting there is a shift from a classic *locus amoenus* – the fertile, flower-filled volcanic slopes bathed in perpetual spring – to a *locus horridus*, marked by

ash, sulphur, lava, and roars. The narrator points out how the volcano constantly changes its shape, eruption after eruption, with its basin suddenly turning into a huge hellish mouth that is able to bring "la desolacion y el exterminio á muchas leguas de distancia" 'desolation and extermination up to many leagues away' (502; my trans.).

In the most historical part of the account, Saavedra references multiple eruptions – from the catastrophic AD 79 event to the violent outburst of 1822 – interweaving geological memory with emotional intensity. Not only do these recollections have a didactic goal, but they also emphasize the unpredictability and destructive power of natural forces, serving a philosophical function: they evoke the different scales of geological time and human time, and the impermanence of civilizations despite their capacity for rebirth. A tension emerges from the clash between present beauty and buried catastrophe.

In the last part of his account, recalling the spectacle of the sunrise admired from Vesuvius' summit, De Saavedra confronts God's "beneficencia en la puerta del cielo, en el sol" 'benevolence in the gate of Heaven, in the sun' with "lo terrible de su ira en la boca del infierno, en el cráter de un volcán" 'his terrible wrath in the hell's mouth, in a volcano's crater' (502; my trans.). This passage, which builds on the semantic field of hell, underlines the contrast between the divine light of the Overworld and the hellish glow of the Underworld, unveiling the link between the poetics of sublime and the historical, cultural manifestations of the ecophobic condition (Estok 2018). De Saavedra's account exemplifies the 19th-century Romantic traveller's fascination with aesthetic wonder. Volcanic risk is neither dismissed nor fully confronted: it becomes an emotional catalyst for awe, introspection, and philosophical musing.

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