

A files

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When Sir William Hamilton, diplomat, avid collector of antiquities, future patron of the British Museum and amateur volcanologist, arrived in Naples in November 1764 it was from within a cultural milieu in which the modern separation of sciences into characteristically distinct fields of knowledge had hardly begun and indeed the science of geology as we know it barely existed at all. In the absence of convergent thinking on the ‘proper’ way to study the earth and its phenomena, there was no consensus, no standard reference books, no common technical language, few shared techniques and a dispersal of theoretical structures.¹ While volcanoes had become the focus of intense scientific, artistic and popular fascination in the preceding decades, this interest had come into conflict with how they had traditionally been understood by scholars and theologians. Resolutely embodying the material implications of the original catastrophe, the great flood, they had always offered apparently irrefutable evidence of the bible’s truthfulness. But as the Enlightenment lustfully stripped natural phenomena of biblical prejudice, to the dismay of many the earth suddenly began to yield radically different conclusions on the centrality of mankind’s role in the Creation. Even as the general cosmological significance of volcanoes seemed to be waning, Mount Vesuvius, in seeming defiance, was almost continuously active throughout the eighteenth century, and became a perpetual source of anxiety and titillation. Painted images of Vesuvian eruptions abounded, and were snapped up by wealthy grand tourists drawn to the newly excavated ruins of Pompeii. Adventurous travellers like Goethe even attempted to peer into the ‘hellish’ mouth of Vesuvius, confusing an Enlightenment model of the volcano with the dangerous sensorial collapse at the heart of a sublime experience. The rhythms of Vesuvius, imagined or felt, infused the intellectual and emotional landscape of all that encountered it with a tangible sensuality. In Voltaire’s volcano paintings, Goethe’s travel writings and the description of Emma Hamilton’s ‘monstrous’ body, one can feel the heat given off by the edge of one world and the singed beginnings of another.

Early volcanologists laboured under the widely held assumption that the earth was just several thousand years old, and would exist only for a few thousand years longer. Drawing on the bible’s description of two sustained periods of geological stability, they sought to match their observations to the premise that the life of the planet could be charted as an inexorable movement from Genesis to Armageddon, bisected in the middle of its history by the great flood. But the flood remained a puzzle for seventeenth-century scholars, hard pressed as they were to find any evidence of its actual existence. One nagging question remained ever present in their thoughts: when the flood eventually receded, where had all the water gone? After much debate, it was proposed by some that the added extraterrestrial volume of water had drained passively through the permeable flesh of the earth’s strata, pouring into great open caverns deep within its core. There it lay stagnant and fermenting, producing an ancient stockpile of flammable vapours which, upon reaching a critical mass, were ignited and expelled through the mouths of volcanoes. According to this logic, it

Volcanic Rhythms

Sir William Hamilton’s Love Affair with Vesuvius

Noam Andrews

Surely the Neapolitan would be a different human being if he did not feel himself wedged between God and Satan.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Italian Journey, 1817

noes produced parallel intimations of this absorption through an upwards motion that hinted at an unspent catastrophe coiled within the earth’s centre. Surveying, mapping and representing the volcano was therefore deemed the closest one could get to understanding the true landscape of the impending apocalypse.

In contrast to the flurry of theological conjecture surrounding volcanoes, Hamilton’s own writings portray a man with a marked disinterest in speculation. Though not averse to the previous century’s belief in deep underground caverns of fire and combustible gases, Hamilton confined his own research to direct observation. An obsessive geologist, he climbed Mount Vesuvius 22 times in his first four years in Naples, sending detailed specimens and descriptions of the mountain’s volcanic character back to the Royal Society in London – of which he was elected a fellow in 1766.⁴ To help him, he hired a number of artists and assistants who collected volcanic samples, made observations on the changing shape of Vesuvius’ cone and crater, documented lava flows, measured stone sizes and who drew the billowing ash clouds and light effects produced by each eruption. Hamilton would also often have himself painted into descriptive scenes of Vesuvius, as if to proclaim their reality and confirm his central role as witness. All of these observations were sent back to the Royal Society and almost immediately diffused into the public domain through their publication in *Philosophical Transactions* and other journals.⁵ From these it is clear that Hamilton was on hand to observe the major eruptions of Vesuvius in March 1766 and October 1767 and again in 1779 and 1794, the last, he claimed, being the most devastating display since AD 79. Deliberating on these discoveries and experiences more fully, in 1776 Hamilton published the first of two landmark volumes, *Observations on the Volcanoes of the Two Sicilies (Campi Phlegraei)*, composed of bilingual folio plates with 59 hand-coloured copper engravings based upon paintings by the English artist Peter Fabris. These observations encompassed both the general activity of the volcano in various phases of eruption as well as its material by-products, such as lava and other volcanic matter.⁶ Greeted with a great deal of public fascination, the *Campi Phlegraei* occupied a transformational space in the development of the Enlightenment’s scientific gaze, privileging as it did an outward, empiricist view on the structure of matter. Defining this gaze,

was the flood itself that had changed form, culminating centuries later in volcanic activity that signified the release of pent up divine fury. Thomas Burnett, in his *The Theory of Earth* (1684), published an eschatological addendum to this idea, shared by many scholars of his day: namely, that volcanoes were redoubling their ferocity, hurtling towards the eventual consumption of the whole world – itself conceived as a flammable object – in a burning conflagration of pitch, coal and brimstone.² Thomas Robinson put forward an alternative theory: he believed that the earth was an animal, and that its internal heat, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions were all signs of biological life.³ What all these popular theories about volcanoes had in common was the idea that just as the flood had traced an inevitably downwards trajectory into the bowels of the earth, so volca-



Pierre-Jacques Volaire, *Eruption of Vesuvius in 1771*
Private Collection/© Agnew's, London, UK/
The Bridgeman Art Library

Jacob-Philippe Hackert,
The Eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1774
Neue Galerie, Kassel, Germany/© Museumslandschaft
Hessen Kassel/The Bridgeman Art Library



Joseph Wright of Derby,
The Annual Girandola at the Castel Sant' Angelo, Rome, 1776
© National Museums Liverpool (Walker Art Gallery)

Joseph Wright of Derby,
An Eruption of Vesuvius, Seen from Portici, c 1776
University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, Wales/
The Bridgeman Art Library

Hamilton proudly described engravings as having been completed 'under my own eye, and by my own direction, with the utmost fidelity'. As a pictorial record of quantifiable descriptions in a scientific field with few recordable events, Hamilton's unexaggerated and unembellished research on Vesuvius was among the first serious endeavours to represent an active volcano, an ambition that has secured its relevance to contemporary volcanology.

If Hamilton felt any pressure to prove (or disprove) the idea that the earth was older than the bible, that it in fact predated Genesis and thus cast into doubt mankind's centrality in the Creation, he concealed it rather well. Many of his contemporaries failed to elude the facile causality of the volcano as a sublime, biblical object and would soon find their work ensnared in a tangled web of biblical justification and consequentially erroneous theoretical contortions. Hamilton, by contrast, stripped the catastrophic spectacle of biblical tropes, theatrical overtones and sublime artifice in pursuit of an all-important accuracy of description. At a time when the magnitude of Vesuvius' physical presence was matched only by the intensity of the cultural pressures it exerted on eighteenth-century discourses, Hamilton's reliance on firsthand observation enabled him to pragmatically sidestep the 'semi-scientific' fantasy and obligatory classical hyperbole. Even as his work helped undermine established religious beliefs, Hamilton refrained from referring to Genesis or the bible as a whole. Instead, during one of his ascents of Mount Etna, he simply noted that, based on his years of experience observing Vesuvius, and the time it took for volcanic processes to work their way down into the soil, the earth would indeed have to be many thousands of years older than the bible held it to be.

While the study of volcanoes came into sharp focus during the Enlightenment, the desire to represent catastrophe can be traced much further back, to the work of medieval and early Christian artists, and specifically to depictions of that seminal catastrophic precursor to volcanoes, the great flood. At first the illustrations tended to focus on Noah as the central figure, often accompanied by a disproportionately small ark floating on a tranquil sea. In the late middle ages, increasingly standardised depictions of the flood developed a moral, redemptive dimension. Included as subjects were the tripartite images of Noah's family, their building of the ark and their subsequent history – the before and after neatly skirting the universal devastation wrought by divine catastrophe. Later still, with his radical recalibration of the subject matter on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo focused on the suffering of the damned, the positive lessons of reconstruction fading into the background of the fresco's frame. The cultural trajectory from resurrection to devastation was elaborated by Nicolas Poussin in *Winter or The Flood*, painted as one of a series of *Four Seasons* between 1660 and 1664. In *Winter*, the flood is elevated in all its harsh and unremitting glory to the role of the subject, finally claiming its place in the centre of the canvas, the stylisation of victimised humanity clearly submissive to the unforgiving and antagonistic performance of nature itself.⁷ An immensely celebrated and influential painting in its time, the delirious reorientation of catastrophe as the prime subject of the medium gained in intensity as artists proceeded to enthusiastically paint the flood in a manner 'after Poussin'.

In the period spanning the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the apocalyptic sublime continued to engage with catastrophe by broadening the scope of the subject. Representations of the flood as the artistic device of choice for signifying divine wrath expanded to

include diverse thematic 'natures' – the Gothic supernatural (dreams and fantasies), landscape (great heights and depths) and the especially popular natural catastrophes.⁸ The flood was of particular significance here, symbolically connecting the natural catastrophe with the divinely decreed apocalyptic catastrophe. Nevertheless, the conception of landscape painting as an ideal or epic construction was giving way to the topographical painting as a factual portrait of a sublime locale.⁹ In the era of the Grand Tour, and particularly in the aftermath of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), young British gentlemen actively sought out the natural sublime, hungry to experience and to represent their experiences. Vesuvius, a truly antique volcano, was the obvious choice. Not only did it possess ambiguous biblical overtones, but for the greater part of the eighteenth century it was a tangibly terrifying experience. In many ways more authentic than other stops along the Grand Tour, this site was alive: visitors could revel in the volcano's sublimity, cautiously witnessing occasional spurts of pre-catastrophe. Letters by numerous gentlemanly tourists attest to the strength of its captive power, and muse – with much shivering of the spine – on contemporary parallels with Pompeii, that other most exquisitely preserved catastrophe of antiquity. Was it mere coincidence that since being caught *in flagrante* with Pliny, Vesuvius had saved its most intense ejaculations for the Enlightenment? ('When day dawned again his body was found entire and uninjured ... its posture as that of a sleeping rather than a dead man.'¹⁰) The ascent of Vesuvius became *de rigueur*, the climax of travel patterns that gradually coalesced into what became known as the Grand Tour itinerary.

The promise of viewing an active volcano kept grand tourists returning to Naples. As the highlight of any tour, a live action re-enactment of a historic catastrophe could be incorporated into their bedroom view and, safely mediated by distance, relegated to a source of entertainment. One typical travel account – that of Margaret Grenville in 1761 – describes the thrill she felt on witnessing, from the window of her villa in Naples one night, 'a magnificent eruption at Mount Vesuvius which created two streams of lava that wended down the hill at considerable length'.¹¹ Touched by nature's neat accommodation of her idea of a volcanic eruption, she concludes that this scene perfectly answers 'Mr Burke's idea of the sublime'. To remind themselves of the catastrophic spectacle, grand tourists like Miss Grenville often bought or commissioned paintings capturing the landscape seen from their windows, emblematically represented by the volcano glowing a bright red despite being bathed in the placid white light of the moon.

As the sublime geological successor to the original catastrophe of the flood, the volcano (and Vesuvius in particular) was the subject of numerous eighteenth-century sketches and paintings by amateurs and artists alike, most notably Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797), Pietro Antoniani (c. 1740–1805) and Pierre Jacques Volaire (1729–1792), whose specialisation was in painting a spectacular Vesuvius erupting in the moonlight. Nearly all of his paintings exploit the extreme contrast between a sea of burning red lava flowing down a mountainside and the otherworldliness of the moonlit Bay of Naples.¹² The light emanating from these two sources – mountain and moon, explosive and ethereal – illuminates a striking ambivalence in the eruption itself, as if each exists distinct from the other. Unperturbed by the drama of the scene unfolding around them, the figures in these paintings do not display the panic one would expect from being in such close proximity to an eruption. Instead, the rum-

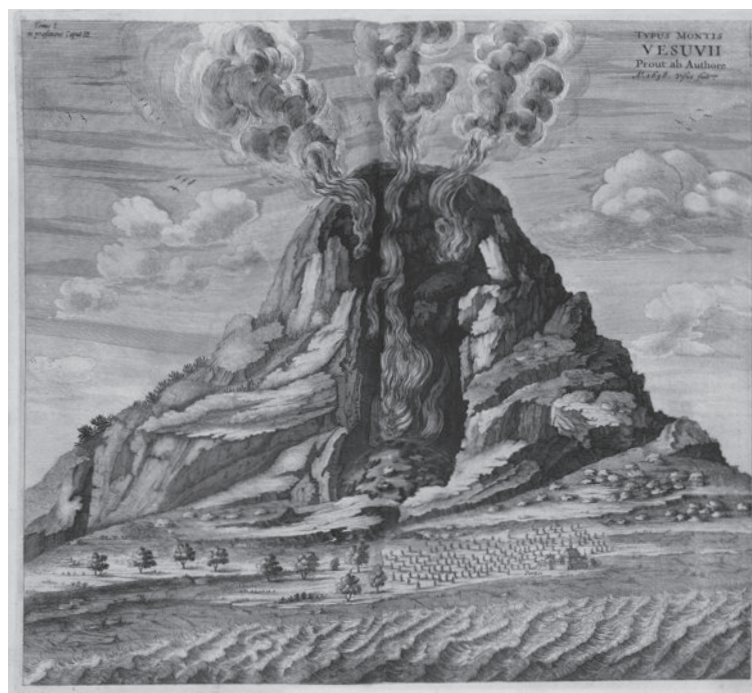
blings of Armageddon, far from the watery condemnations of Poussin, function, perhaps strangely, as sustained moments of calm. Everywhere there are grand tourists casually watching the destruction wrought by the volcano, their attitude signifying above all else that there is time – time to watch, time to think, time to escape, time to enjoy the catastrophe.

Unlike Voltaire, who discovered that the earnings he made from his paintings grew in direct proportion to his exaggeration of Vesuvius' catastrophic power, his rival and contemporary Wright often referred explicitly to an equivalent architectural model in order to embellish his recordings of volcanic activity into a sublimely heightened spectacle.¹³ The *Girandola*, an enormous revolving wheel that shot fireworks in all directions on the occasion of the Easter festivals in Rome, was the other plasmatic highlight of the Grand Tour. The language describing this prodigious display of pyrotechnics emerges again in the vocabulary of grand tourists upon arriving in Naples, with the resplendent artifice of the shower of sparks at St Peter's cathedral mimicked by the natural similitude of the volcanic display. In 1793, for example, Lady Palmerston described Vesuvius as releasing 'red hot stones which resemble the stars of a number of rockets',¹⁴ while the musicologist Charles Burney describes Vesuvius in 1770 as 'the most ingenious and splendid fireworks I ever saw'.¹⁵ After witnessing the display mounted for the inauguration of Pope Pius VI in 1775, Wright was so struck by the coincidence of the relationship that he began painting a pair of *Girandola* and Vesuvius paintings – *An Eruption of Mount Vesuvius, with the Procession of St Januarius's Head* (1778) and *The Annual Girandola at the Castle of St Angelo, Rome* (1776).¹⁶

Around the same time as Wright was using architectural metaphors to capture the experience of seeing Vesuvius erupt, Hamilton was similarly engaged with exteriorising, not so much the sight of Vesuvius, as the sensation of seeing it. His *Vesuvian Apparatus*, the details of which have only been discovered in the last few years, was composed of a typical painted representation of Vesuvius and a symbiotic, mechanical object craftily grafted onto its back – hints of Duchamp to come. This volcano machine bore little relation to the garish volcano science projects that haunted some of our youths, and that involved testing the 'reactive effects of yeast and hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, vinegar and lemon juice' in order to determine the mixture which 'produces the most explosive reaction'.¹⁷ The *Vesuvian Apparatus* operated under a wholly different set of intellectual constraints, aiming not to produce the most exuberant explosion but to explore the mechanisms of the volcano's performance, both geological and theatrical, through the animation of its image. To induce feelings of proximity to an active Vesuvius in an unsuspecting London audience, Hamilton drew heavily upon

Burke's qualitative criteria for the permutations of sublimity achieved by natural phenomena. His volcano machine thus needed to fulfil the following 'essential' categories of the fashionable eighteenth-century sublime experience: 'Sound and loudness – excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul... Suddenness – a sudden beginning ... has the same power. The attention is roused by this... Light – as it overpowers the senses, is a very great idea.'¹⁸ Hamilton employed a micro-version of these phenomena to great effect, not by creating a model of Vesuvius, but by choreographing an animated two-dimensional reproduction of it. Driving this multi-media, pre-cinematic experiment was a manually operated mechanism capable of portraying the rapidly changing aspect of a continuous stream of lava and the terrific noise created by volcanic eruptions.¹⁹ The apparatus consisted of a wooden cabinet, approximately 80 × 130 × 50cm, with a removable painted transparency of plate xxxviii in the *Campi Phlegraei* depicting an active Vesuvius. Inside the cabinet a clockwork mechanism, set in motion by its connection to several counterweighted

strings, controlled the moving parts located behind the painting. When the *Vesuvian Apparatus* was turned on, the combination of gears caused a cylinder with irregular perforations to rotate, producing a continuous flutter of lights directly behind the lava in the painting. At constant intervals the arched pieces were made to rise and fall, revealing or concealing a more intense light aligned with the fractured summit of Vesuvius. One of these arches was attached to a mallet. After a certain predetermined rotation, the mallet would strike a drum, simulating (within the somewhat hushed environs of the late-eighteenth-century drawing room) the din of a volcanic eruption.²⁰



Section through Vesuvius, from Athanasius Kirchner, *Mundus Subterraneus*, 1664
© The Natural History Museum, London

While the *Vesuvian Apparatus* was intended to reproduce the experience of witnessing a volcanic eruption, it recreated the effect from the safety of a Neapolitan villa. In this way, the machine literally added media to this immortalised view: the volcano remained as far removed conceptually from the frame of the cabinet as it would have been spatially to the grand tourist. But even as the device challenged a certain pictorial hegemony, Hamilton's reliance on pre-Enlightenment technology stemmed from a desire to control the uncontrollable which was very much of its time. In Hamilton's volcano machine, as with music or even more physiological studies into respiration, time becomes a predictable element, signifying structure. As opposed to his incredibly restrained and modern approach to the observation of volcanoes, we have here the conceit of interpreting Vesuvius as a mechanised system of repetitive terrestrial rhythms. Thus Hamilton was complicit in portraying the volcano as an object with a fundamental internal logic which could be mapped and accurately simulated.

The volcano's deadly, unpredictable physicality is denied for the sake of an amusingly contrapuntal orchestration of light and sound.

By basing the performance of his volcano machine upon a quantifiable and overlapping sequence of rhythms, Hamilton demonstrated, in life, the recklessly confident eighteenth-century approach to Vesuvius portrayed by the figures in Voltaire's paintings. He was, however, not alone in this. The overestimation of rhythm as enabling a safe space of encounter, with sustained periods of calm between 'beats' or eruptions, is elaborated by Goethe in his *Italian Journey*, where he breathlessly describes his ascents to the summit of Mount Vesuvius. On 2 March 1787 Vesuvius is, disappointingly, 'altogether quiet. Neither flames, nor roaring, nor shower of stones.'²¹ But four days later, encouraged by a steady stream of volcanic smoke, Goethe can barely contain his excitement. Abandoning his villa in Naples, he once again attempts the climb, desperate to be there when the volcano, in the static frequency of choking smoke, erupts on cue. Vesuvius obliges – a Rorschach alien landscape of fiery streams, nipples, barrel corks, hook-like contrivances and satanic fumes melting the earth underfoot into resplendent 'incandescent ground', a transformational state-change to a fiery liquidity that threatens to consume the observer, returning their body to the soil upon 'this hellish peak that had been raised up in the midst of Paradise'.²² Vesuvius is thus envisaged by Goethe as both a geological and a temporal threshold, an unstable boundary condition surrounding an unfathomable portal to the 'profoundest depths of the earth'. While the audiences for the *Vesuvian Apparatus* at the British Museum or the Royal Society experienced a scaled-down volcano at the moments simulating an eruption, Goethe, alone and wandering through a scaled-up version of Hamilton's volcano machine, experiences Vesuvius in the opposite space created between the expulsions of matter; the hypnotic actions of the clockwork sublime draw him ever closer to its peak, their regularity promising safety. Unlike the *Vesuvian Apparatus*, however, this regularity is a deception. Assuming the frequency of eruptions as signifying the depth of the mountain's fitful slumber, Goethe is compelled to peer into the 'yawning enormous abyss' – an act so terrifying that it 'challenges the contrary spirit in man to defy it'. At the edge of the chasm, in a state of excitement and trepidation, he loses sense of time and is unable to count the precious intervals before retreating to the safety of lower ground.²³ Transfixed at the edge of an accessible hell, yet seeing nothing but smoke veiling 'the interior of the pit', Goethe barely has time to pull himself back as a 'terrible charge' is disgorged, 'a violent thunder resounding out from the deepest abyss, then thousands of stones ... hurled into the air, veiled in clouds of ash'.²⁴

For Goethe, Vesuvius is the site of a near fatal confusion between an Enlightenment model of reality and the wayward behaviour of reality itself. Vesuvius still emits the irregular beat of an impending catastrophe – irregular both because we cannot understand its structure and perhaps because there is no structure at all. The *Vesuvian Apparatus* in this sense served as one of several powerful artistic meditations that defined the volcano as approachable, a place where the courageous grand tourist could go to lose themselves – a place that exceeded their capacity to rationalise the earth's behaviour while also offering an opportunity for a visceral, exhilarating experience that contravened the Enlightenment ordering of the world. In records of travel writing from the Grand Tour onwards, Vesuvius persistently functions as a metaphor for desire, for romantic and sexual adventures liberated from the entanglements of social restriction.²⁵ In this way the volcanic landscape, at once topographic and erotic, possessed a transgressive nature, which was mirrored in encounters with local residents and in the lasciviousness of the expatriate community.

Here, the anthropomorphic reciprocity described by the texts defines a space in which antiquity, sexuality, the southern climate and Vesuvius are all intertwined in *double entendre*.

But this too opened up a set of liminal possibilities. Set against the backdrop of excavations at the base of the volcano, and the salvation by late eighteenth-century British society over the remains of Pompeii and Herculaneum (preserved and re-conjugated as neo-classical symbols of wealth and privilege),²⁶ Hamilton's second wife Emma Hart became her own volcanic object. A young woman of exceptional beauty, she married Hamilton in 1791 and moved from London to join him in his villa in Naples. From the outset, friends and associates discerned a worrying connection between Emma's beauty and Hamilton's aesthetic passions as a collector. Horace Walpole, for example, remarked that Hamilton had 'actually married his gallery of statues', while even Hamilton himself is said to have claimed that Emma alone of her sex, 'exhibited the beautiful lines found on Etruscan vases'.²⁷ And as with all impending disasters, there were warning signs, had anyone cared to heed them. Though Emma's future cuckolding of Hamilton with Lord Nelson is well documented (most famously in Susan Sontag's historical romance *The Volcano Lover*), it was her troubled performances in Naples that foreshadowed the catastrophe of her marriage to Hamilton.

The nature of this calamity was played out in Hamilton's thinly veiled erotic habit of encouraging Emma to dress in Greek costumes for the purpose of entertaining their guests. In writing about his visit to the Palazzo Sessa, Goethe describes how Hamilton led him to a secret vault containing 'his artworks and his rubbish'. There, surrounded by pilfered objects from Pompeii, stood a chest 'standing upright, open in front, painted black inside and surrounded by a splendid golden frame'.²⁸ This was indeed the concealed erotic centre-piece of Hamilton's burgeoning archaeological collection – a low-tech *Vesuvian Apparatus* with the sole function of containing Emma's body and transforming it into a moving representation of classical and Hellenistic imagery. Emma was not allowed to speak during the performances as Hamilton felt that her accent would reveal her abjectly lower-class origins and ruin the classical illusion. Thus, surrounded by recently excavated statues and vases still covered in Neapolitan dust, with the continual background eruptions of Vesuvius framed by a nearby window, Emma danced for her livelihood.

For Hamilton, Emma was a living statue, animated as much by her adjacency to Vesuvius as by the daily discovery and appropriation of artefacts from Pompeii, which provided a wealth of postures and body positions which could be absorbed into her performance. Whether complicit in her own objectification or powerless to resist it, Emma initially seemed to enjoy the process of her body's antique reinventions. Her 'Attitudes' – a series of poses that responded to her audience's educated familiarity with the visual themes of antiquity – became a regular treat for grand tourists visiting Naples, and actively contributed to Hamilton's greater ambition to recreate the past in the imagination of his guests. A fellow traveller, Sir Morritt, writing home to his mother, relates how one evening Emma 'with the assistance of one or two Etruscan vases and an urn' became 'a Sibyl, then a Fury, a Niobe, a Sophonsiba drinking poison, a Bacchante drinking wine, dancing and playing the tambourine, an Agrippina at the tomb of Germanicus and every attitude of almost every different passion'.²⁹ Voicing the contradictory sentiments that often characterised reviews of Emma's performances, Sir Morritt went on to describe how a hapless painter in the audience had 'cried with pleasure the whole time'.

Over five years in Naples, Emma had been pushed and pulled, sculpted and flattened into the intense material production characteristic of the Grand Tour and had even become a generator of neo-classical artwork herself. As she continued to be used as a test-bed for the latest discoveries from Pompeii, Emma began to develop a certain paranoia, perhaps confounded by the surplus of replications surrounding her. ‘The house is full of painters painting me. He [Hamilton] has now got nine pictures of me and two a painting. Marchant is cutting my head in stone... There is another man modelling me in wax, and another in clay.’³⁰ It was inevitable, perhaps, that after countless sittings and portraits her body began to slowly mimic the voluptuous grandeur of Vesuvius, that force of nature to which she had always been compared. In November 1796, Sir Gilbert Elliot found Emma’s figure ‘nothing short of monstrous for its enormity, and is growing every day... She is all nature and yet all art’.³¹ In a succinct and decidedly unflattering appraisal of the situation, Lady Berwick wrote ‘she is twice as fat as two years ago and very coarse’.³² Like Vesuvius, Emma seems to have defied easy description, her physical mass acting on guests in a heady cocktail of arousal and fear. Interestingly Emma, realising that somehow the balance of power had subtly shifted in her favour, seems to have relished the delicious possibilities afforded by her role of outrageous host entertaining a sublimely captive audience. In its bloated later years, her ‘Attitudes’ erupted into a debauched and vocal medley of musical genres. As one poor grand tourist wrote, Emma finished off the day by singing an operatic lament that ‘made us shudder and cry’, followed by the dancing of a brisk tarantella with castanets and the singing of vaudevilles.³³

In *The Classical Gazetteer*, William Hazlitt’s exhaustive compilation of the geographic sites of the ancient world, Mount Vesuvius is perfunctorily defined as ‘a mountain of Campania, above Herculaneum and Pompeii. The great eruption, after many centuries’ quiescence, which overwhelmed these cities, destroying 250,000 persons, among whom was the elder Pliny, occurred under Titus, AD 79’.³⁴ Here the sheer size of Mount Vesuvius is inseparable from the cultural reverberations produced by the eruption that sealed the fate

of Pompeii and precipitated the birth of archaeology. ‘Finally destroyed by an eruption of Vesuvius, after several partial subversions’,³⁵ the ill-fated city was, in Hazlitt’s mind, destined to be destroyed by one thing if not the other. And he was right. As Pompeii steadily transformed from pastoral landscape into archaeological site, the artifice-laden preservation wrought by Vesuvius was compounded by mythologising, sensationalism and sentimentality.³⁶ The neutered and historically compromised tourist destination of today is neither frozen in time nor death, but serves as proof that there is no respite from the well-intentioned.

Hamilton’s Vesuvius had less to do with the spurious practices of constructing antiquity and more to do with the actual duration, frequency and rhythm of the live event – the eruptions of Vesuvius. These moments charted a magnetic space of sensuous possibility which captured Hamilton’s imagination and became the focus of his life’s work and scientific legacy. Typified by his clear-headed encounter with Vesuvius in all its cataclysmic geological power, this early scientific effort has retroactively assumed heroic dimensions of cosmological importance. Hamilton’s measurement of the flow of volcanic lava, itself a measurement of time, came to undermine the credibility of the bible’s chronology, a feat that no scholar or autodidact before him had definitively been able to accomplish. But for Hamilton what seems to have distinguished volcanoes from other geological formations is their ability to generate time and its recording – that is, to simultaneously destroy and preserve and in so doing to generate. On one side lies the meditative – eighteenth-century paintings depicting calm rather than fear and the hypnotic pull of the volcanic edge (reeling in Werner Herzog like a latter-day Goethe in *La Soufrière* (1977)). On the other side, technocratic and fetishistic devices – the rhythmic choreography of the *Vesuvian Apparatus* and Emma’s hybrid status as quasi-archaeological object. Together they form two parts of the same volcanic whole – the imaginative space of experience and the imaginative construction of time. As Herzog himself put it, ‘we became eager to look at the source of the silence’, as if, one might add, we had all the time in the world.

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