

Unravelling volcanic love in Emmanuel Roblès's novel *Vesuvius*

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Abstract: This article analyzes the antithetical trope of the volcano, drawing on Emmanuel Roblès scholarship and the concept of the “sublime” in his novel *Vesuvius* (French title: *Le Vésuve*, (1961). Set in Allied-occupied Naples in the spring of 1944, Naples is represented as an international melting pot where soldiers and residents meet and watch in disbelief as the semi-dormant, smoking Mount Vesuvius suddenly awakens, spitting out streams of lava that annihilate surrounding villages, causing numerous casualties. Throughout the narrative, the volcano functions paradoxically as both a creative and destructive force: creative, as a metaphor for passion, but also for social upheaval and the trauma caused by war and bombings. At the same time, the volcano embodies the destructive potential of this passion, foreshadowing the instability and inevitable collapse of an idealized vision of love. Its latent violence reflects the corrosive effects of war, trauma, and obsessive desire, suggesting that the same force capable of generating intense emotional and imaginative renewal can also consume and devastate. As theorized by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, the sublime emerges in encounters with violent forces – such as natural disasters or intense emotions – that destabilize the subject while simultaneously elevating perception beyond the ordinary. In the novel, the volcanic eruption mirrors the narrative arc: the eruption of Mount Vesuvius parallels a passionate love affair as it reaches its paroxysmal phase. Both constitute overwhelming experiences that defy comprehension, eliciting awe in the face of the immense power of volcanic forces. In *Vesuvius*, both passionate love and volcanic eruptions coincide, releasing uncontrollable energy, yet they remain transient phenomena.

Keywords: Burke; Emmanuel Roblès; Kant; Mediterranean; Naples; World War II; the sublime; *Vesuvius*.



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Photo by U.S. Navy, 1944.

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<https://volcano.si.edu/gallery/ShowImage.cfm?photo=GVP-00053>

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Introduction

Vesuvius tells the love story of a young Algerian-born Frenchman called Serge Longereau and a young Milanese bookbinder, Silvia Damiani, in Allied-occupied Naples during World War II, against the backdrop of the overpowering presence of Mount Vesuvius. Although the novel is purely fictional, it has an autobiographical dimension¹ and draws on a real event: the eruption of the volcano in March 1944 when explosive

¹ Roblès worked as a journalist and war reporter from 1942 to 1945, professions that took him around the globe. In 1943, he became a war correspondent for the Airforce and worked in Corsica and Sardegna (Roblès, “Naissance” 34). He also discovered Naples: “I spent approximately four months in Naples over the course of three separate stays. It was a confusing city, devoured by all kinds of evil, despair, the war, occupation, and still it was bursting with strength and a lust for life” (Depierris 79). The novel reflects the author’s familiarity with the volcano, the city and its residents, given that he sojourned in Naples in 1943 and 1944. During his stay, he witnessed bombardments of both the German aviation and the Allied aviation, and the outbreak of Mount Vesuvius. As he told Pierre Depierris: “The eruption offered an unforgettable spectacle and, twice, I went up to the observatory to marvel at the streams of lava as they were flowing down the plain. Entire villages were completely wiped out” (Depierris 79-80). Interestingly, even the love affair recounted in *Vesuvius* is inspired by a real event: the story of a French lieutenant Roblès knew, who fell in love with a young Italian woman and who deserted the army for her (Depierris 81). It wasn’t until almost two decades later that Roblès penned a book set in Naples about that very period. Given his interest in international affairs, it is not surprising that he incorporated major current events, particularly the Spanish civil war, the Algerian war of independence and World War II in his other novels and plays.

bursts sent ash and debris into the air, lava flows destroyed several villages, and ash fell over the nearby city of Naples, even damaging allied aircraft stationed nearby (see photo above and the photo gallery published by the Smithsonian Institution). While the 1944 eruption was moderate compared to the catastrophe of 79 CE that destroyed the city of Pompeii, it was nonetheless very destructive locally (see Cole and Scarpati 2010). The ash plume rising above the summit of Vesuvius was photographed during the volcano's 1944 eruption, near the end of a prolonged eruptive period that had begun in 1913. This final eruption generated extensive lava flows and powerful explosive activity, excavating a crater approximately 300 meters deep at the summit. Its climactic (paroxysmal) phase lasted from 28 March to 4 April 1944 (Smithsonian Institution).

This article offers a close reading of the intertwined motifs of love, happiness, and the volcano as a locus of the sublime in Emmanuel Roblès's novel *Vesuvius*. It examines Roblès scholarship and the novel's extended metaphorical conflation of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and Serge and Silvia's passionate love affair, arguing that both natural catastrophe and erotic intensity are represented as sublime experiences that overwhelm the senses, destabilize the self, and momentarily transcend ordinary existence. As Edmund Burke (1729–1797) argues in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (40). Throughout the narrative, the awe-inspiring spectacle of the erupting Mount Vesuvius is described at length and repeatedly associated with the overwhelming amorous passion experienced by Serge and Silvia, whose love similarly suspends reason and transforms their perception of reality. The Burkean dimension of terror and astonishment is complemented by Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) understanding of the sublime in *Critique of Judgment* (1790), where the sublime is associated with what is "absolutely great" and with the mind's capacity to rise above experiences that exceed ordinary comprehension. (96–97)

In Roblès's novel, Mount Vesuvius embodies this dual movement: it is at once a terrifying force of destruction and a source of renewal, fertility, and transcendence. The volcano's eruption not only serves as a metaphor for Serge and Silvia's amorous passion but also amplifies the historical trauma surrounding them – the terror of war, the devastation caused by bombings, and the collective upheaval experienced by occupied Naples in 1944. As Guy Riegert pertinently observes, "Vesuvio and the fire in the sky are metaphors for love, as shown by the countless images of fire explosions, burns" (49–50). I agree with his assessment that the novel is foremost a love story. Yet *Vesuvius* is also undeniably a war novel, and other scholars have rightly examined its representation of violence, occupation, and historical trauma (see Albes 1990; Berneiser 2023). Although the text offers a remarkably precise portrayal of Naples during the spring of 1944, Roblès himself emphasizes that its primary focus is the transformative power of love: "The narrative undoubtedly contains a representation of the city that I wanted to be as accurate as possible, but at least for me, it recalls an intense love affair" (Riegert 48). The volcanic imagery that structures the novel therefore functions on multiple levels: the dormant, smoldering, and eruptive volcano parallels Serge's emotional awakening, his infatuation

with Silvia, and his gradual transformation from a cynical seducer into a man capable of devotion and sacrifice. At the same time, the volcano's constant threat of eruption mirrors Serge's own vulnerability as a soldier wounded twice in battle. The couple's love unfolds under extraordinary circumstances, intensified by the simultaneous presence of war and natural catastrophe, and briefly reaches a sublime intensity in which desire appears to transcend suffering and death. Yet, like the volcano itself, this exalted moment cannot be sustained. After Serge recovers from his injuries and decides to return to the war, both the eruption of Vesuvius and the lovers' passion begin to subside, eventually giving way to the ordinary rhythms of postwar domestic life. The novel thus presents the sublime as both a moment of transcendence and a reminder of human fragility and transience: the most overwhelming experiences of beauty, love, and passion cannot endure indefinitely.

Serge: a soldier in search of love and happiness

Love, dignity, injustice, suffering, and death – often in the contexts of the Second World War or the Algerian war of independence – are major themes in Roblès's works, including *Vesuvius* (Delgado 10; Goldmann 282). *Vesuvius* is narrated by first-person protagonist Serge Longereau, a twenty-four-year-old French pied-noir lieutenant from Oran, Algeria, who recovers from a hip injury in Naples. Set in Allied-occupied Naples in the spring of 1944, the city is portrayed as a “melting” pot where Allied soldiers, deserters and the local population meet and watch in disbelief as the semi-dormant, smoking Mount Vesuvio awakens, sending streams of lava down its slopes and destroying surrounding villages.² During his temporary leave in Naples Serge is housed in a pensione by Signora Ruggieri, an elderly lady who rents out rooms to a group of American aviators and injured Algerian soldiers. While recovering from his injury, Serge aimlessly roams the streets. He drinks, flirts with young Neapolitan women, sleeps with several, hangs out with his Jewish friend and fellow soldier Joe Cohen, and liaises with his two non-commissioned officers, Messaoud and Fernandez, and the Algerian pied noir-Castanier.³ As Roblès himself and the male protagonists he depicts in his other novels,⁴ Serge is a pacifist (Shepherd 160) who abhors violence and bloodshed. Serge aspires to find profound joy, peace, love, and happiness. These aspirations are, however, thwarted

² See Berneiser (2023) for an analysis of the novel using Mary Louise Pratt's concept of contact zones, defined as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery of their aftermaths” (Pratt 34).

³ See Albes (1990) for links between Camus and Roblès and the “Algerian” dimension of *Vesuvius*.

⁴ Roblès is known for his novels *Cela s'appelle l'aurore* (1952), *Les Hauteurs de la ville* (Prix Fémina 1984), his autobiographical novel *Saison violente* (1974), Neapolitan play *Montserrat* (1954), as well as his poetry, short stories, and translations of works by Federico García Lorca and Miguel de Cervantes. *Vesuvius* is not the only novel set in Italy: *Cela s'appelle l'aurore* (1952), *Un printemps d'Italie* (1970), *Venise en hiver* (1981) and parts of *La Croisière* are also set in Italy (see Santangelo 97-98). In *Vesuvius*, Roblès associates the Italian language with love, for example when he has Serge murmur “*Oh Silvia, sei bella*” (29).

by his duty to serve in the Second World War. As in Roblès's other narratives, happiness is a central theme in the novel:

There is little folklore or local color, the story always centers on individuals, their passions, their conflicts, their desperate search for happiness. . . In a complex and incomprehensible world, they must fight to find happiness, because happiness and above all women and the promise of happiness they embody for men are important. But this happiness cannot be morally reprehensible; it must respect moral humanist values. (Goldmann 282)

Indeed, the search for happiness, love, and fulfillment is at the core of *Vesuvius*. References to happiness abound. For example, Serge muses: "I wanted no woman but Silvia. Silvia alone! Silvia [...] In a flash I was convinced that some beneficent power presided over my life, giving it meaning and guiding it toward happiness" (69). Likewise, Silvia has no thought for anything in the world except their happiness (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 125). As in Michel Curtiz's movie *Casablanca* (1942), which centers on the love-struck characters Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund, Silvia's and Serge's search for happiness is thwarted by external circumstances that are out of their control, notably the war in which Serge must fight even though Silvia tries to convince him to desert.

Roblès: a Mediterranean author in search of dazzling moments of the soul

Clearly, for Serge, love is the one redeeming force in the face of uncertainty and a cruel war. Orphaned (since Serge's biological father is deceased) and forced to interrupt his studies due to the war, Serge finds himself far from home, alienated, uprooted, and, like Camus's character Meursault in *The Stranger*, in an environment that leads him to question the existence of God and the meaning of life (Rozier 22-23). The negative aspects associated with the war are offset by what Roblès scholars refer to as the "Mediterranean spirit": love, a youthful energy, and a lust for life. Lebanese writer Évelyne Accad echoes Kréa and other critics (see Shepherd 2000; Santangelo 94-95), all of whom stress the importance of this aspect in Roblès's novels:

[...] the Mediterranean spirit is the idea that everything is precarious; destiny is something mobile which changes. One might rejoice about something one day, but it may change tomorrow, because time moves on. It means questioning time, looking at death with familiarity and even fascination and often having to face violence and war. It is also the revelation of the treatment of women in a male-dominated society. To all these questions and turmoil, the ultimate answer is love. (Accad 29)

The lack of stability in wartime, violence-ridden Naples is mirrored by the unpredictable and lethal force of the volcano. Throughout the novel, Mount Vesuvius, a gigantic, overwhelming, all-consuming, destructive force, represents the kind of passionate, consuming love and happiness that Serge seeks. Willing to sacrifice his life,

he wants to find happiness before he dies to justify his passage on earth:

I knew very well that I, here on this February afternoon in Naples of 1944, on the Piazza Dante where Sardinian soldiers were strolling, the badge of the four Moorish heads on their sleeves, where a broad yellow panel under Dante's statue bore two enormous letters: V.D., I knew well that I would not accept the idea of dying – *dying*, I mean, without having known one of those dazzling moments of the soul which justifies one's passage on this earth. (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 16)

Surrounded by destruction and aware of his own mortality, the narrator realizes that merely staying alive is not enough for him to justify his existence. Serge longs for a transformative experience, a “dazzling moment of the soul” – a profound encounter with love, beauty, or truth that would give his life lasting significance. Falling in love with Silvia opens up such a space of existential humanism in which authentic moments of inner illumination redeem the uncertainty, fragility, and transience of human existence. After meeting Silvia, he realizes that her love offers him such “dazzling moments of the soul” as well as stability, happiness, and fulfillment in life.

Vesuvius: a symbol of the transformative power of love and the sublime

Serge's chance encounter with Silvia whom he meets at an antique bookstore has a profound, transformative impact on Serge. Incidentally, it is while “leafing through a collection of prints of Vesuvius” (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 17) that Serge first sees Silvia and falls in love with her. Their fortuitous encounter has a cataclysmic impact on Serge, comparable to the eruptive force of Mount Vesuvius that famously obliterated an entire civilization in 79 AD and caused damage thereafter but also purified and fertilized the land. The imagery of Vesuvius evokes the philosophical concept of the sublime. In Burkean terms, the volcano embodies the terrifying grandeur of nature whose destructive force overwhelms the senses while eliciting fascination and awe. Serge's encounter with Silvia similarly shatters his emotional equilibrium.

Yet the narrative ultimately moves toward a Kantian conception of the sublime: the violence of Serge's passion becomes the catalyst for moral and spiritual elevation because Silvia is profoundly religious. Rather than remaining imprisoned by eroticism and sensual desire, Serge in the course of the novel undergoes a profound inner transformation through which his love is sublimated into fidelity and self-sacrifice. Vesuvius thus symbolizes not only the egotistical and destructive force of passion but also its capacity to generate a higher moral consciousness. Serge, whose previous behavior toward women was condescending, becomes literally transformed by Silvia, who appears in his mind's eye shrouded in a halo of light, radiating beauty, perfection, purity, and religious morality. Silvia quite literally “erupts” in his life with the destructive force of a volcano, changing him forever. She unknowingly unravels Serge's former promiscuous self and creates a new faithful, sublimated self. Connected to Shiva, the god of creation and destruction, and as a psychological symbol, the volcano “represents the passions [*sic*] which, according to [psychoanalyst Charles] Beaudoin, become the sole source of our

spiritual energy once we have managed to master and transform them” (Cirlot 361). Serge is acutely aware of his transfiguration. Having barely met Silvia, he tells his fellow soldier Joe that he wants to marry her (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 79). Soon after they meet and start dating, Serge – after previously telling Joe that he is not in the least inclined to attend a classical music concert – invites Silvia out to a performance of Mozart at the Teatro di San Carlo. For the first time in a long time, he can forget the cruelty and horror of war, the battle of Monte Cassino, the mass graves and corpses he had to see in an all too recent past. Later, when they are dancing in a bar, Serge realizes that Silvia offers him respite from a cruel reality – the battlefield – to which he knows he will soon have to return: “Oh Silvia, Silvia, I had just entered a realm where good and bad had lost all meaning, a realm where at last one could forget the horror of the dead lying up there in the snow, those tragic bodies mangled by the shells! (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 79). Mount Vesuvius is paradoxically both a positive and a destructive force in the novel. In keeping with its symbolism in mythology, where it is invested with antithetical powers, the volcano is paradoxically endowed with both positive and negative forces, fertility and evil (Cirlot 361).

The majestic and threatening presence of Mount Vesuvius mirrors the destruction caused by bombings but also announces and symbolizes Serge’s yearning for a passionate, pure, wholesome, untarnished, and sublimated love which materializes in the shape of Silvia. From the beginning, the reader has the acute sense of an impending doom that awaits Serge given recurrent references to the dormant, then smoking, smoldering, and finally eruptive volcano that causes havoc, destroying villages and killing civilians. The horrific memories of Monte Cassino, with its corpses and mass graves, exemplify Burke’s concept of the sublime, in which terror, death, and overwhelming violence inspire both dread and awe. Silvia’s presence, however, enables Serge to transcend these traumatic memories through beauty, music, and love, suggesting a shift toward Kant’s idea of the sublime as an “attitude of the mind” (Meredith 93). For Immanuel Kant, the sublime lies not in the terrifying object itself but in the mind’s ability to rise above suffering through moral and spiritual elevation. Rather than merely escaping the horrors of war, Serge discovers in Silvia the possibility of inner renewal and a higher purpose that transforms his understanding of life. Silvia gives him hope and a reason to live in an otherwise bleak environment. *Vesuvius* highlights the transformative power of love, which causes Serge to turn away from the temptations of carnal desire embodied by prostitutes (Teresa and others lined up at the hotel Arizona) and female soldiers such as Doris, a member of the Women’s Army Corps whose advances he almost accepts but then rejects because he is obsessed with Silvia. After kissing Silvia for the first time, he finds his “whole body affected by this brief embrace [...] thirsting for happiness” (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 67).

On a Sunday afternoon, Serge takes Silvia out to visit the ruins of Pompeii. As they drive to the ruins of Pompeii in a borrowed Fiat, Silvia alerts Serge to the majestic presence of Mount Vesuvius, which emits a puff of gray smoke:

It was Vesuvius rising there in front of us, but too high for my eyes to search for its snow-capped summit where its whiteness stood out, arid against the deep blue of

the sky. Viewed from Naples it seemed plastered on the horizon, smooth and shining as a sheet of metal foil. But from here, the eye could gauge its volume, its formidable mass plastered in the middle of the countryside, superbly rooted in the regions which it dominated [. . .]

Down below, houses – white and yellow – stood out from the greenery around them, but above, as we came closer, all was scalded rubble, crevasses edged with sickly brown, compact trails of lava. And yet, for all its savage power, Vesuvius seemed in tune with the world of man, and the gardens at its base gave it a peaceful, dreamy air. As for me at Silvia's side on the road to Herculaneum on this Sunday afternoon, with cannon thundering from one end of the world to the other, with thousands of men falling amidst the clamor of the war, I felt as purified and clean as the snow which sparkled at the summit of the crater, each of its crystals infused with new light. (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 43-44)

The passage's hyperbolic language underscores the representation of Vesuvius as an embodiment of the sublime, a force whose immense scale and destructive power inspire both awe and reverence. As Burke writes in his essay "Of the Sublime": "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, it to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a force of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (13). In Burkean terms, the volcano's massive, towering crater, rivers of lava, and smoking summit embody the sublime by overwhelming the observer emotionally and inspiring admiration and awe. In Burkean terms, the volcano's gigantic dimension, its lava flows, and smoking crater evoke the terrifying grandeur of nature that overwhelms the senses while attracting the observer. At the same time, the contrast between the volcano's barren slopes and the fertile landscape at its base reflects its dual capacity for destruction and renewal, reinforcing its symbolic ambivalence. The passage also evokes the Kantian sublime, as Serge's contemplation of Vesuvius elevates him beyond the violence of war, allowing him to experience an inner purification mirrored by the snow-capped summit.

In his chapter "The Dynamical Sublime in Nature," Kant highlights the link between sublimity and an individual's own imagination and vocation which override any sense of terror: "[...] nature is called sublime merely because it elevates the imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can make itself sensible of the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature" (111-112). A symbol of transcendence, Vesuvius thus becomes a "double symbol, expressing both the haunting of violent destruction and its overcoming, its sublimation" (Tritsmans 236). The immaculate whiteness of the snow offers hope and redemption for the bloodshed and destruction of the war, visually symbolized by the stream of lava and broken rocks that pile up at the bottom of the volcano. Rather than succumbing to the terror represented by the volcano and the surrounding conflict, Serge discovers through the whiteness of nature – the snow-capped mountain – and Silvia's virginal innocence a transcendent sense of moral renewal. The faintly smoking, then awakening volcano heralds Serge's and Silvia's blossoming love, a love that is pure in its innocence, as the fresh snow that covers its

summit and the corpses of fallen soldiers elsewhere. Recurring references to Dante Alighieri's Beatrice Portinari underscore the importance of Silvia as a symbol of spirituality, love, and salvation. Lengthy descriptions of Mount Vesuvius, volcanic eruptions, and flows of lava as the one above appear throughout the novel, particularly in the scenes where Serge, his fellow soldiers, and Silvia drive up twice to the observatory to obtain a better view of the awe-inspiring spectacle offered by Mount Vesuvius. Again, these detailed passages are inspired by the author's own experience. In a series of interviews, Roblès recalls the infernal smell of sulfur; he notes that everything seemed beautiful yet fragile, and that happiness is short-lived. (Depierris 81)

Vesuvius and the narrative arcs of happiness and passion

In the first part of the novel, Serge's overwhelming feelings for Silvia are not yet fully reciprocated, and Serge's transformative subliminal love at first only concerns Serge as Silvia stubbornly rejects his advances. And yet, she agrees to see him every day. She even introduces him to her elderly uncle and bedridden aunt, and the two go to the movies to watch *Golgotha* featuring Jean Gabin as Pontius Pilate. As Serge grows increasingly frustrated with Silvia's prudishness, *Risorgimento* reports that Mount Vesuvius has stopped smoking, a phenomenon that hasn't occurred in 141 years and indicates that an eruption is imminent. When Serge finally declares his love, Silvia reluctantly lets him kiss her. The following day, a Saturday on March 18, 1944, Vesuvius finally erupts, and the couple goes to the bay to watch the grand spectacle unfold along with thousands of Neapolitans. Seeking refuge in a café and discussing the importance of happiness in life, Silvia explains that passion needs to be fought for on a daily basis. Meanwhile, Serge has a bad premonition that happiness will not last long for him. Serge knows that his happiness is short-lived because, as soon as he passes his health check, he will be reassigned to a front-line combat unit at Monte Cassino. However, for Silvia, who is in love for the first time, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius coincides with her very own emotional turmoil and "eruption" into womanhood. Her overwhelming emotions are, as literary critic Simon Pierre-Henri writes, synonymous and "symbolically simultaneous with an explosion of love" (*Diagnostic* 183). While the lava flows, sulfurous smoke and ashes have not yet reached Naples, the eruption results in 24 dead and nearly 3000 homeless in San Sebastian, Salerno, and elsewhere.

As the plot progresses, the death toll grows; with its reddish, purple glow, the volcano inspires terror and awe and appears to be omnipresent. When they go to a café to dance, Silvia elects to sit down in a corner "near a glass door which opened onto a courtyard where the cracked cement flooring was tinted purple from Vesuvius" (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 79). Soon after, Serge gets beaten up badly by a group of Australian rangers who enter the café intending to kidnap and rape girls, including Silvia. Serge and Silvia manage to leave the café, in the "sickening light from Vesuvius, a light that stained the wall, the streets, the houses, blood red. Even Silvia's face, so close to mine, Silvia now saved and out of danger – that miracle that made me smile – showed me that her lips still moved, not perhaps with words of encouragement, but as it might be, to give formal notice of my death..." (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 86-87). The red light from Vesuvius symbolizes

death, destruction, and the lasting trauma caused by the violent attack, seemingly turning the entire city into a battlefield. Although Silvia has been saved, Serge is so badly injured and traumatized that he imagines that her moving lips are not offering comfort but instead announcing his death. Silvia dresses Serge's wounds in her apartment, while Serge reflects on Vesuvius: "A silence. Vesuvius continued to hurl out fire and flames into the night, spread lava over the terrified countryside" (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 93). The flame and fire spewing volcano hints at Serge's possible future death at Monte Cassino and the symbolic death of his former sense of safety.

The eruption of the volcano, chaos and passion

After the brutal attack in the café, the first part of the novel concludes with an "emotional crescendo" as Silvia finally gives in and reciprocates Serge's kiss. It is only in the second part – after Mount Vesuvius erupts in full force – that their relationship is consummated. Their amorous relationship is morally reprehensible because Serge's lovemaking occurs out of wedlock. After Silvia loses her virginity, the lovebirds start isolating themselves. They no longer go to bars and cafés but hide from the outside world in her small apartment, spending hours in bed. In the second part of the novel, Vesuvius finally calms down. It is still smoking abundantly, but as the flows of lava are subsiding the war flares up again. The city is bombarded and turns into a hellish chaos, killing many civilians. The local population is exasperated, calling on the occupational forces to leave: "*Canaglia! Canaglia! Tutti! Alleati! Tedeschi! Italiani! Tutti!*" (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 113). Serge suffers another injury as he helps rescue people from the ruins of burned buildings, carrying the charred body of a dead child in his arms. This traumatic experience has irrevocably changed Silvia as well. She is no longer the shy girl he first met at the bookstore but "[. . .] consumed by an intensity of passion that overwhelmed me. Her magnetic fervor overcame my slightest hesitation, my slightest pang of conscience" (117). Serge becomes aware of his own and Silvia's metamorphosis: she is no longer rational but driven by intense emotion and passion. Her overwhelming fervor has such a powerful effect on Serge that it erases his own feelings of guilt, the guilt he feels for not being on the battlefield. Love and desire have transformed both characters, who no longer appear to act and think rationally. Silvia, who keeps repeating that she can no longer live without Serge, convinces him to desert the war effort. Silvia's amorous passion, which is mentioned throughout the narrative, is likened to Mount Vesuvius, as she talks Serge into deserting for the sake of their love, which is the only thing that counts in her opinion:

As I drew closer, she murmured that she loved me more than life itself and had no thought for anything in the world except our happiness [. . .] Hadn't I already done enough, fulfilled my duty? My wound proved it, so of what use were new dangers, new risks? And I listened, fascinated, to this incredible, this cruel and incredible confession of her selfishness, this seething passion in her heart which seemed to expel all other feelings, *like the lava on the side of Vesuvius laying waste the orchards and the vineyards creating a desert in its victorious, irresistible flow.* (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 125, emphasis mine)

Silvia's love for Serge has become so intense that it overshadows everything else, including duty and concern for others. Comparing her passion to the lava of Vesuvius suggests that her love is egotistically powerful, unstoppable, consuming all moral restraint. Overwhelming emotion can become both a source of devotion and a force that destroys everything in its path. Serge must, Silvia demands, wait out the end of the war in hiding inside her apartment. Again and again, her passionate love is linked to the eruption of the volcano. When Serge roams the streets of Naples looking for Silvia, he muses, "I remember how at the time of the eruption of Vesuvius I had come there, to this same spot, at this same hour, and had passionately called Silvia's name into the red night" (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 162). Serge initially submits to Silvia's selfish demands. He is ready to sacrifice his honor and virility by hiding in her apartment, but after a visit from his friend Joe, who mourns several close relatives, he is so guilt-ridden that he decides to rejoin the war to free Europe from Nazism.

Dignity and honor take precedence over love

The complexity of volcanic activity mirrors the intermingling of external factors that impact Serge's decision, as he eventually decides to honor his responsibilities on the battlefield: "I understood obscurely that I could not fail the man I had become, with his load of friendships, memories, aspirations, and desires" (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 135). Serge's change of mind reflects the attitude of male protagonists in other novels (for example, *Les Hauteurs de la ville*, 1948) in that he recognizes the importance of his dignity (Santangelo 53), which would be irrevocably tarnished if he deserted the war effort. As tectonic plates shift and rocks melt into magma, Serge realizes that the realities of war and the widespread fear, chaos, and misery it causes, including in Naples, where the population suffers from food shortages, take precedence over his personal – and Silvia's – selfish need for happiness. When an utterly dejected Joe confides in Serge and tells him that his sister, his brother-in-law, and their children were killed in a concentration camp, he decides to come out of hiding to join the Allied Forces to free Europe from Nazism. Immanuel Kant, links war to the sublime under certain conditions: "War itself, it is carried with order and with a sacred respect for the rights of citizens, has something sublime in it and makes the disposition of the people who carry it on only more sublime, the more numerous are the dangers to which they are exposed and in respect of which they behave with courage" (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 102). For Serge, the sublime manifests itself primarily in relation to the passion he feels for Silvia (and vice versa) as expressed in multiple hyperbolic love confessions and scenes of lovemaking – particularly in the second part of the novel, with its many references to nudeness and erotic intimacy. By the end of the third part, however, the sublime shifts to the war effort, as Serge decides that he cannot cowardly remain hidden in Silvia's apartment. Serge leads his battalion to the front at Monte Cassino, and again, he is wounded in action during a bombardment by US forces of the Abbaye at Monte Cassino.

The denouement of the narrative is characterized by its banality. In the fall, when Serge is released from the hospital and moves into a small apartment provided by the

army, Silvia resumes work at the bookstore, and they get married. Silvia shocks her aunt by refusing to wear a white dress because she is no longer a virgin. But their relationship appears to be somewhat tarnished, less passionate than before: “She made every effort to be an agreeable companion, abounding in attentions, even-tempered, but her effort was too obvious and lacked the touching spontaneity of before. Even in our lovemaking, despite my apparent compliance, something was missing in her fervor, and our present amorous activities were not to be compared with the abandon of the spring” (Roblès, *Vesuvius* 192). Silvia appears to be less infatuated and to have changed emotionally. She has lost the passion and spontaneity that previously defined her relationship with Serge. Although she tries to act passionately, her affection now feels forced, suggesting that their love has somewhat weakened. Serge’s decision to leave Silvia and to fight at Monte Cassino has diminished the intensity of their relationship, replacing passion with obligation and distance. Silvia is disappointed because Serge did not put her and their happiness first (see Landi-Bénos 106-107). By rejoining the war, he refuses to acknowledge Silvia’s suffering and sacrifices their passion. Similarly, by prioritizing the common good and duty over *her* passion and regaining his dignity and honor, Serge fails to fulfill Silvia’s demand for absolute love. As a result, the volcano of their passionate love has gone dormant.

Conclusion

A “hymn to joy” and to the “immortal character of the Mediterranean” (Kr  a 1135), *Vesuvius* is also a hymn to youth, vitality, exuberant love and passion, as illustrated by the tropes of the dormant, smoldering, erupting, and finally quiescent volcano. The volcano’s arc – from dormancy to eruption and eventual calm – mirrors the trajectory of Serge’s and Silvia’s relationship, while its terrifying grandeur evokes the aesthetic experience of the sublime. Their amorous passion culminates in April, intensified by the dual imminence of military violence and the volcanic eruption, before inevitably cooling, like the volcano itself. *Vesuvius* uses the inherent ambivalence of the volcanic trope as a force that is simultaneously generative and destructive, making *Vesuvius* a narrative engine in its own right. In Burkean terms, *Vesuvius* embodies the overwhelming power of nature, inspiring awe and terror through its capacity for sudden devastation; the lovers’ passion is equally irresistible, destabilizing, and all-consuming. Yet Robl  s ultimately approaches a Kantian conception of the sublime: confronted with both war and volcanic eruption, Serge does not succumb to fear or desire but undergoes a profound inner transformation. He discovers through Silvia’s love a fleeting sense of moral elevation that momentarily transcends the horrors of war. Although Serge eventually marries Silvia in a religious ceremony, he cannot fulfill her demand for absolute love, suggesting that the sublime, by its very nature, cannot be sustained indefinitely. As a result, the volcano of their overpowering passion has gone dormant. Like *Vesuvius*, whose eruptions alternate with periods of dormancy, the narrative suggests that amorous passion and transcendence are necessarily ephemeral, leaving behind not permanence but a sense of having briefly touched the extraordinary.

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