

Chapter 1

THE LAST DAYS OF PUBLISHING

When you visit Pompeii, as perhaps you have, as up to a million people do each year, and walk stony expanses that were once bustling streets in a Roman West Palm Beach, you are, of course, a tourist at the end of a world. You'll inspect rehabilitated villas like the House of the Faun, sealed under twenty-three feet of pumice and ash that red-hot August day nineteen centuries ago. Perhaps you'll venture to the outskirts of what was once a town of twenty-five thousand, with baths, stadiums, gladiatorial barracks, and a port for galleys carrying Phoenician wine and Egyptian jade. There you'll enter the Villa of the Mysteries, where Dionysian murals still stain walls the ocher of dried blood, the artistic blood of a lost age. As you stroll the town, you'll note excavations that were once rooms or gardens or temples but now look like the graves they became. At the Antiquarium, a name reflective of the deep dive you're taking into the stony pools of time, you'll see

plaster of paris casts of people buried in their lives that morning in 79 A.D. which, as Pliny the Younger wrote Tacitus, turned into the darkest of fiery nights.

Pliny's decision to refuse an offer of a boat ride to Pompeii from his uncle Pliny the Elder undoubtedly saved his life. ("I replied that I preferred to go on with my studies.") The Younger was surely the first tourist at the end of his world, and in the letter he composed long after, his tone is fittingly observational, at times even antic. There's something thrilling in such a stance, as in his cool description of his asthmatic uncle's beachside death from sulphur fumes. ("His body was found intact and uninjured, still fully clothed and looking more like sleep than death.")

Tourists often experience a chill on viewing those Pompeian figurines with the frozen peace of so many George Segal sculptures. We all yearn to be reminded that worlds can end without us. Take a look at the Grain Lady, named for her proximity to a thresher, or the Lovers, who died clutched in each other's arms, but who, for all we know, were the Haters, or the Strangers, or the Pimp and His Whore.

In Pompeii, you may also catch hints of our own world's end, for you can penetrate the rubble of history just so far before reaching all that could possibly end now. But never forget that you're in an archaeological theme park, viewing historical pornography—something I find no less moving than the nicknames we give those who were consumed by the unimaginable, or the gift shops that sell obliteration as entertainment.

My favorite among the town's many Pygmalions-in-reverse is the Scribe. He was found in a sitting position in the House of the Scholar and near at hand was a stylus, the assumed instrument of his trade. I like to imagine that while others fled, he was consumed by his work. No scrolls were found near him as at the Villa of the Papyri in nearby Herculaneum where the writings of a previously unknown stoic philosopher were recovered virtually intact, so we can't guess how he spent his last minutes. We can't even

know whether he was the Poet, the Letter Writer, the Accountant, or simply a man who found himself near a stylus in the final moments of his life. He was probably one of countless Pompeians who helped the rich carry out the niche activities that wealth invariably allows. In fourteenth-century Hangzhou, the French scholar Jacques Gernet informs us, an aristocratic Southern Sung household would have employed a man solely to train pet crickets, just as in West Palm Beach today a family may employ a personal shopper.

If you visit the National Archaeological Museum in Naples with its trove of Pompeian mosaics, you can, as I did, buy a T-shirt with the image of the Scribe on it. Some find it ghoulish, but the thought of world's end spawning a vigorous trade in images of the long dead pleases me.

Sometimes, to amuse myself, I think of the Scribe as the Editor. On the day his world ended, the Romans still wrote on papyrus imported from Egypt, and reading was normally done aloud in the presence of others, not to the self alone. Much would happen after his town was buried. That Christian invention the book would not arrive for centuries, and long after his world ended others would open for Boccaccio and Dante, Pirandello and di Lampedusa, Primo and Carlo Levi, all now obliterated from this earth. Only later would the sonnet, the novel, the memoir, the comic, and the hypertext be spun out by pen, typewriter, and computer. Only later would nationalism, fascism, communism, Auschwitz, and the bomb make their appearances. And yet he's not completely of another time, for Mount Vesuvius still steams.

For an extra gratuity, your Italian guide will drive you to the foot of the mountain and take you on a trail up wooded and vined slopes to its "lips"—the mouth, that is, of one of the only volcanoes in Europe that might still belch hot gas, glowing ash, and pumice onto human populations in a deadly *nuée ardente*. As you approach those lips an almost lifeless terrain confronts you, the result of a mini-eruption that greeted Allied troops advancing

up the boot of Italy in 1944. In medieval times, the records tell us, vineyards grew on the mountain's midslopes, producing a wine of some regional renown until, in 1631, several thousand people once again died in a local apocalypse.

Perched on those lips, looking into the crater, you might remember that Spartacus, the slave who raised an army and defied Rome, hid there around 54 B.C. Then, tangles of vines, bushes, and flowers lent it an almost unimaginable lushness. So it goes. In 1980, a flow of lava burned our own Mount St. Helens's slopes free of life, yet scientists were astonished by the blinding speed of its return, just as Hiroshima and Nagasaki today are bustling urban megascapes.

Worlds beyond measure may succeed our moment, and for each of them except the last there will be tourists. Every death is the end of the world for someone. And someday, of course, the world will end. In the meantime, smaller worlds end all the time. The urge to conjure up such endings has been unceasing, even if how we choose to imagine them says more about what has yet to end in us.

Facing the future of the book, my ex-wife, Connie Burian, thought an age, a world, was ending. She told me so. She was, you might say, my Pliny the Younger. And since she assumed the world ending wasn't hers, her comments rang as strangely to my ears as his might have to his uncle's, had he miraculously appeared on that sulphurous beach so long ago.

I returned to work early on the Monday morning she was to take up her new post. April 24, 2000, to be exact. Byzantium Press was deserted. I strolled down our hallway, looking into offices where computers throbbed and message lights blinked. A phone rang four times before being automatically answered. At eight, the air-conditioning came on, a hissing intake of breath that filled the air with subtle murmuring.

I felt like one of those cinematic survivors of atomically emptied cities as I stepped into the office that was no longer Margo Deare's, that had once been John Percy III's, and came face-to-face

with my only best-selling author, Walter Groth. I stepped back in surprise, then laughed—a startlingly hollow sound when you're alone in the world—for “Walter” was a cardboard cutout. On a yellow Post-it where his jacket pocket might have been, someone had scrawled, “Margo, tell us what you think!” The shelves still held Margo's books, arranged by spine color, but our former managing director's desk had been swept bare and its drawers, when I sat in her chair, were empty.

I stared out at Times Square. Even in the light of morning, the sides of buildings boiled with imagery. Somewhere below, traffic moved and people headed for work, but from the twelfth floor the world was soundless and uninhabited. Kicking at the desk, I spun myself until the office turned to a ghostly blur. Before Percy III sat here, this had been air.

Byzantium's old building, that gargoyled edifice on Spring Street, is now stuffed with Italian designer boutiques. From his father, John Percy II—“Second,” as he was called until his death in 1963—Percy III inherited a shabby, fifth-floor corner office with creased walls and a large walnut desk. Second had been William Dean Howells's last publisher. Howells, so the story went, commandeered his office to oversee the production of his final book and died there of gout. Growing up with “Old Percy,” that domineering Protestant patriarch of police gazette fame, Second had been unfazed by Howells's presence. Before he went to war in 1917 and came back blinded in one eye (“a reasonable fate for a publisher,” Percy III once told me), the building had housed a telephone exchange and, in the previous century, a shirtwaist factory. An Indian burial ground was rumored to lie under the building.

Sometime in 1980—I had been an editor for seven years—I received a proposal for a book about publishing from a promising young academic. The first chain bookstores were just spreading into the malls and the first wavelet of publishing takeovers just rising to sight. It was the year before Byzantium would be swallowed up by the Desmond & Dickinson Publishing Group. But when I