The Juggernaut Roles in England: The Idol of Patriarchal Authority in Jane Eyre and The Egoist

It is considered a very meritorious act for Hindoos to commit suicide, either by drowning in some sacred stream, or by allowing the wheels of the car of Juggernaut to pass over them. But, where British influence prevails, these things are now prohibited.

Thomas Hodson (1851: 59)

The word Juggernaut, which denotes any object, institution, or idea bearing destructive and inexorable force, is now a relatively familiar English term. In the nineteenth century, however, English readers and writers were acutely aware of its foreign origin. The word is derived from the Hindi Jagannāth, the name of an idol of Krishna, the most famous of which resided at a temple in Puri, India. Translated literally, the name means “lord of the world.” At the turn of the nineteenth century, this idol became a widely recognized emblem of Oriental idolatry, a focal point of imperial concern, disgust, and amusement. It was remarked upon and described in Parliamentary debates, East India Company despatches, missionary tracts, and travel narratives. By turns sublime and picturesque, dangerous and ludicrous, Juggernaut functions throughout these texts as a vivid image of heathen idolatry.1 By the 1840s, however, it also paradoxically served as a figure for varieties of destructive violence and idolatrous worship detected by novelists and social critics at home. As the word wanders from descriptions of outlandish India into descriptions of the domestic social field, it provides intriguing case studies of domestic autoethnography, compelling
evidence of the Victorian anxiety that England had failed to distinguish itself from colonial otherness.

Early in the nineteenth century, the temple of Juggernaut became a frequent stop on Anglo-Indian tours of India. Colonial officials, missionaries, and travelers were particularly fascinated by the annual spectacle of Rath Játrá, the car festival, during which Juggernaut rode forth on an enormous vehicle through a vast crowd of votaries. Attempting to convey the “lofty and massive dimensions and clumsy architecture” of Juggernaut’s car, Godfrey Charles Mundy (1832) calculates that it “is nearly forty-five feet in height, has a platform of thirty-five feet square, and moves upon sixteen wheels of solid timber” (254). Descriptions of the procession typically reflect intermingled awe and contempt. A. Stirling (1825) finds it “impressive” and “astounding,” but also insists that it “excit[es] the strongest sensations of pain and disgust in the mind of every Christian spectator” (323). Emma Roberts (1837) describes the idol itself as “gigantic” and “hideously ugly” (260). English observers express particular disdain for idolatrous zealotry as they sketch a scene peopled with “20,000 frantic devotees” (Parks 382) pulling the car by ropes through a “fanatical multitude” (Mundy 254) of idolaters who gaze upon the idol “in stupid admiration” (Stirling 321). A recurring word tells much about English attitudes. In his Lectures on India (1851), Caleb Wright refers to Juggernaut as a “monstrous form” (106). For Fanny Parks (1850), it is a “monstrous idol” (382), for Mundy, a “monster deity” (254). Roberts refers to Juggernaut’s car as a “monstrous vehicle” (261). The word “monstrous” indicates an effort to convey the dimensions of the idol. It also expresses aesthetic distaste for the “hideous” image and religious disapproval of worship of an object constructed by humans. In a broad way, the word articulates the extent to which English observers perceived the grand idolatrous spectacle as strange, otherworldly, and unnatural.

Strangest of all to English observers were reputed incidents of idolatrous suicide. The word Juggernaut carries destructive associations owing to accounts of the festival such as the one furnished by Eliza Fay (1817), who, despite the fact that she was unable to view the procession herself, claims to be “credibly assured” that the idol “is taken out in an enormous car, with a great number of wheels beneath which his votaries prostrate themselves with the most undaunted resolution; firmly persuaded that by thus sacrificing their lives, they shall pass immediately after death into a state of everlasting felicity” (171). In The Curse of Kehama (1810), Robert Southey helped to popularize this image of fanatical self-sacrifice to the monstrous idol. The narrator sketches