Topic Two: **On uses of the "vortex" trope before Austen**

May 2009

That figurative uses of the term "vortex" came into being only in the latter half of the 18th century, and were in idiomatic use in the 1790s is attested by the following etymology in the OED:

1652 In older theories of the universe (particularly that of Descartes), a supposed rotatory movement of cosmic matter around a central axis, regarded as accounting for the origin or phenomena of terrestrial and other systems.
1653 A body of such matter carried around in a constant whirl.
1700 A violent eddy or whirl of air; whirlwind or cyclone, or the central portion of this.
1704 A whirl or swirling mass of water; a strong eddy or whirlpool.
1761 *fig.* A state or condition of human affairs or interests comparable to a whirl or eddy by reason of a rush or excitement, rapid change, or absorbing effect.
1779 A situation into which persons or things can be steadily drawn, or from which they cannot escape (J. Moore, *View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland and Germany,* I. i. 8: "whirled round again in the v. of dissipation and gaming").
1792 A constant round of excitement and pleasure.

That Jane Austen considered such figurative use to have become clichéd in fiction by the time she published *Pride and Prejudice*, is evident from her often quoted comment in a letter of 28 Sept., 1814 to her niece, Anna, who had sent her a draft of a novel for comment:

> "Devereux Forester's being ruined by his vanity is very good; but I wish you would not let him plunge into a 'vortex of Dissipation'. I do not object to the thing, but I cannot bear the expression; – it is such thorough novel slang – and so old, that I dare say Adam met with it in the first novel he opened."
>
> *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deidre Le Faye (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 277.

If the phrase was indeed so worn, in what prior novelistic contexts had it been used, and by whom?

For a start, over a decade earlier William Godwin had used it (anachronistically) in *St Leon* (1799), a novel which avowedly sought 'to mix human feelings and passions with *incredible* events', and with which Austen may well have been familiar. In a letter of 1801 she tells her sister Cassandra that Mr Pickford (a visitor at Bath) is "as raffish in his appearance as [she] would wish any Disciple of Godwin to be". It may be that Austen's distaste also extended to aspects of Godwin's novel writing.

But is Godwin's use of the phrase trite or not?

In Chapter I, "Travels of St Leon", the respected Marquis of Damville, by his moral guidance and generous bestowal of his beautiful, genial and intellectually accomplished daughter, saves the eponymous St Leon from his love of splendour and ruinous addiction to gaming. Six years later, as he is dying, Damville again implores his apparently reformed son in law as follows:

> "Do not … be drawn aside by ambition; do not be dazzled by the glitter of idle pomp and

> decoration: do not enter the remotest circle of the vortex of dissipation! Live in the midst of your family; be the solace and joy of your wife; watch for the present and future welfare of your children; and be assured that you will then be found no contemptible or unbeneficial member of the community at large!" *(St Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*, London: printed for G.G and J. Robinson, 1799, p. 48).

Nevertheless, St Leon does go on to suffer progressive alienation from his domestic and private affections as he brings poverty, privation and disrepute to his family, not only by his eventual resumption of heavy gambling on his return to Paris, but also by his later, secret possession and use of the alchemical gifts he has accepted from a mysterious stranger. His bleak life becomes that of a friendless, immortal wanderer. So, particularly in retrospect, the overlay of Dantean connotations of 'the remotest circle' (that is, Limbo) could be thought to invest Damville's use of the 'vortex' trope with a canniness and suggestion of spiritual fatality quite appropriate to the nature of Godwin's tale.

Another prior text, not a novel, but one which may be said to fit more justly and appropriately with Austen's biblical joke, is Dr James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, first published in two volumes in 1766, but reprinted many times in new editions during the latter half of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth. In Sermon VII, Fordyce laments the paucity of men and women whose conversation is "enlivened with vivacity and spirit, enlightened by intelligence and tempered by politeness", and imputes this small number to "that whirl of dissipation, which like some mighty vortex, has swallowed up in manner all conditions and characters" (*Sermons to Young Women*, London: Cadell and Davies, 1814, I, vii, p. 207). Fordyce's use of the phrase does indeed seem an inflated generalization. Moreover, Austen draws attention to the fustily outmoded and chauvinistic nature of Fordyce's "improving" household tome in *Pride and Prejudice* when she has her "conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly" clergyman, Mr Collins, choose to entertain his young female cousins by reading from the *Sermons* in preference to the interesting circulating library novel offered to him (Penguin English Library Edition, 1979, Chpt.14, pp. 113, 174)).

Herself a regular reader of circulating library fare, Austen may also have read an anonymous, epistolary novel published in 1802 by Minerva Press called *The Orphans of Llangloed. A Modern Tale,* which exposes the affectations and vices of contemporary English upper class society, and in which another variant of the phrase appears. Unhappily removed from her purposeful and protected life at her homely castle in the idyllic countryside of the south of Wales, the novel's sixteen-year-old, orphaned heroine, Lady Juliana Glendower, is for the most part shocked and appalled by the manners and culture with which she is confronted in the "smoke and confusion" of London. In a letter to Mrs Middleton, who has been responsible for her virtuous upbringing and fine education, and whom she addresses as her "respected mother," Juliana confides information about her activities and one new acquaintance "that [she] truly value[s]." This is Lady Callenberg, "who, in the midst of depravity, preserves a mind untainted by vice or the errors of fashion" (Vol. II, pp. 30-1). However, as Juliana later writes to her friend, Lucy Lloyd, Lady Callenberg is unfortunately married to a man who is "deeply infected with the contagion of fashion", and who, in spite of being "possessed of vast talents," has perverted "his gifts of Nature ... to plunge into the deepest vortex of modern licentiousness" (p.49). Not simply Minerva slang, Juliana's register of extremes here is consistent with her epistolary "voice," appropriate as it is to her youth, situation and moral values. Moreover, in a verbatim account of Lord Callenberg's outwitting of his tailor, Mr Brandon – which reads like a satirically comic scene for the stage (pp. 49-56) – Juliana goes on to illustrate the nobleman's cunning and pride in his duping of tradesmen to avoid paying his debts. The "deepest vortex" drawing him down is not only his gambling, monetary extravagance and excessive drinking, but also his cheerfully callous indifference to the rights and needs of others.

Hackneyed or not, the frequent use of "vortex" figurations for such vices was no doubt symptomatic of, and appropriate to, the excesses of the times, particularly the prevalence of gambling in tens of thousands or "deep play" as it was called – we only have to think of Charles James Fox who had lost £140,000 by the time he was 25, and the huge debts incurred by Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Moreover, as in *The Orphans of Llangloed*, ruinous gambling is also linked to spiralling depression and suicide. Nevertheless, strikingly apt tropes can often lose their edge, not only to everyday, idiomatic repetition, **(1)** but also to exaggeration or swagger. In the case of "vortex," hyperbolically inappropriate usage did not escape the wit of Maria Edgeworth, whose novels Austen declared that she liked (in another letter of 1814 to her niece, Anna: *Letters,* op. cit., p.278). Edgeworth's comic critique of "vortex of dissipation", which anticipates by more than a decade Austen's own disparaging comment, occurs in one of her *Moral Tales for Young People* of 1802 called "Forester".

The idealistic but misplaced rejection of practices of politeness and sociability by her tale's youthful protagonist is Edgeworth's opening gambit:

> "Forester was the son of an English gentleman, who had paid some attention to his education, but who had some singularities of opinion, which probably influenced him in his conduct toward his children.
>
> Young Forester was frank, brave, and generous, but he had been taught to dislike politeness so much, that the common forms of society appeared to him either odious or ridiculous; his sincerity was seldom restrained by any attention to the feelings of others. His love of independence was carried to such an extreme, that he was inclined to prefer the life of Robinson Crusoe in his desert island, to that of any individual in cultivated society. His attention had been early fixed upon the follies and vices of the higher classes of people; and his contempt for selfish indolence was so strongly associated with the name of gentleman, that he was disposed to choose his friends and companions from amongst his inferiors: the inequality between the rich and the poor shocked him; his temper was enthusiastic as well as benevolent; and he ardently wished to be a man, and to be at liberty to act for himself, that he might reform society, or at least his own neighbourhood" (Maria Edgeworth, *Moral Tales for Young People,* Vol I, introduction by Gina Luria (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974), pp. 1-2)).

After the death of his father, the nineteen year old Forester is cared for by his guardian, the kindly Dr Campbell, who plainly sees "both the defects and the excellent qualities of his young ward" and who hopes

> "that by playful raillery, and by well-timed reasoning, he might mix a sufficient portion of good sense with Forester's enthusiasm, might induce him to sympathize in the pleasures of cultivated society, and might convince him, that virtue is not confined to any particular class of men; that education, in the enlarged sense of the word, creates difference between individuals more than riches or poverty" (pp.6-7).

However, having flatly refused to learn to dance and suffered an intolerable blow to his pride one night at a ball, Forester dons his old coat, quits his guardian's house, and takes the road to Leith where he intends to engage himself as assistant to a gardener. Next morning at breakfast, Dr Campbell is apprised by a letter from Forester of his reason for leaving:

> "Not withstanding your kindness, not withstanding the friendship of your son Henry … I must ingenuously own to you, that I have been far from happy in your house. I feel that I

> cannot be at ease in the vortex of dissipation; and the more I see of the higher ranks of society, the more I regret, that I was *born a gentleman*. Neither my birth, nor my fortune shall, however, restrain me from pursuing that line of life, which I am persuaded, leads to virtue and tranquillity. Let those, who have no virtuous indignation, obey the voice of fashion! … Thank Heaven, I have yet the power to fly—I have yet sufficient force to break my chains—I am not yet reduced to the mental degeneracy of the base monarch, who hugged his fetters because they were of gold.
>
> I am conscious of powers, that fit me for something better, than to waste my existence in a ballroom; and I will not sacrifice my liberty to the absurd ceremonies of daily dissipation (pp. 66-7)."

One can't help thinking that Dr Campbell's suitably common sense reply would have appealed to the creator of Mr Bennet:

> "You tell me, that you have the power to fly, and that you do not hug your chains, though they are of gold!—Are you an alderman, or Dedalus? Or are these only figures of speech? You inform me, that you cannot live in the vortex of dissipation, or eat of the bread of idleness, and that you are determined to be a gardener. These things have no necessary connexion with each other. Why should you reproach yourself so bitterly for having spent one evening of your life in a ballroom, which I suppose is what you allude to, when you speak of vortex of dissipation, I am at a loss to discover" (p. 69).

The good doctor's dry humour in the face of his ward's unconsciously ironic hyperbole may also have suggested to her that no self-respecting author could use "vortex of dissipation" in a serious context thereafter — especially of a character called "Devereux Forester".

1. For example, in the nineteen year old Byron's letter to Elizabeth Bridget Pigot, Gordon's Hotel, July 13, 1807: "I am here in a perpetual vortex of dissipation (very pleasant for all that), and, strange to tell, I get thinner, being now below eleven stone considerably", in *The Works Of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, Vol. I, 1798 – 1811, edited by Rowland E. Prothero.