Apropos Doors, Janus and Tristram Shandy

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APROPOS DOORS, JANUS AND TRISTRAM SHANDY

In the course of a discussion of “Doors as Limina,” the French critic, Claude Gandelman, suggests that literary research, by failing to “deal systematically with doors in fiction, has failed to understand what may be a “metaliterary tale” of the fiction itself—or, perhaps, something so far unknown about the genre, if any, the fiction belongs to.”¹ He then goes on, by way of illustrating how the “Doors as Limina” would appear as a tool of literary research, to discuss briefly Madame Bovary, a work “full of doors and windows,” and Kafka’s Before the Law, a story that involves a man seeking justice, a doorkeeper and a series of doors (pp. 53-54). For Gandelman, Flaubert, in particular, “seems to need an opening of a door in order to write a new chapter or describe a change in the mood of his heroine” (p. 54).

Tristram Shandy is a work replete with both the use and the mention of doors and windows. There is, for example, the parlour door, the most often used and mentioned, the dressing room door, Toby’s sentrybox door, and the door to Mrs Wadman’s house. Even the parts of doors, the bad hinges on the parlour door (TS, 3.21.239), various key-holes (TS, 3.38.277; 8.35.729), and the rapper on Mrs Wadman’s door (TS, 9.16.768), have a role in the narrative. On the “affair of hinges,” the author tells us, he “had a speculative consideration,” one that leads him first to a comparison of door-hinges with the hinges of government and then on to Trim’s conduct with his masters (TS, 3.22.240).

So, following a Gandelman-like suggestion, what use can we make of this—almost—embarrassment of riches? What kind of reading does it produce? A quick answer is many different kinds of readings. A feminist critic might argue that the closed parlour
door, by excluding woman from the conversations of Walter, Toby, and Dr. Slop, reveal Sterne’s anti-feminist stance; or we might, in a more structural way, try to make a case for door and windows being control devices on the sequencing of narrative events. One can find, for example, Sterne beginning, or ending, a chapter with the opening, or closing, of a door (TS, 2.5-6.114; 4.14.343-45). In one case he excludes the reader from the story with an order to shut the door:

“----------------------------------------Shut the door.-------------------------------------”

(TS, 1.4.6).

What I would like to do here—playing the theme on an octave as low as possible—is attempt to relate the use and mention of doors in Tristram to Sterne’s representations of class and gender conflicts. The idea is to show what kind of explanatory power one gets from approaching Tristram this way, rather than to say that one is somehow logically obliged to approach it this way.

“Obviously a god is hidden in Tristram Shandy and his name is Muddle, and some readers cannot accept him “ (E. M. Forster). This god is, assuming that you believe in him, a major one. (Some years ago some students obviously agreeing with Forster, started applauding after I read his remark to them.) But what about the minor, or lesser, gods, if any, in Tristram? If they exist, are they also hidden? Can we recognize them and their effects? One I would like to nominate here, is Janus, the Roman god of beginnings (the first month of the year, of course, is named after him) and the god of doors, gates, bridges or various kinds of communicating structures. Janus, while well known to eighteenth-century writers, is referred to by name only once by Sterne. This occurs in the
visitation scene of *Tristram* where the episode of the hot chestnut falling into Phutatorius’ open fly is recounted:

One chestnut, of more life and rotundity than the rest,

…was actually sent rolling off the table; and as

*Phutatorius* sat straddling under----it fell perpendicularly into that particular aperture of *Phutatorius*’s breeches….

which in all good societies, the laws of decorum do strictly require, like the temple of *Janus* (in peace at least) to be universally shut up (*TS*, 4.27.380).

The general reference is to Janus, the two-headed god. A temple was built to him, according to Livy, by Numa Pompilius “at the bottom of the Argiletum” in Rome (*Ab Urbe Condita*, 1.19). As Livy, Ovid and others tell the story, the Temple had a complex purpose. Open, it signified that a war was in progress; closed, that peace reigned. Associated with Janus was the archway (the city gate) from which the army set out to war. To go through the arch the “right” way was thought a necessary condition of victory. The Fabii, who were defeated at the battle of the Cremera, went through it the “wrong” way (Livy, 2.49).

The correlation door:open $\Rightarrow$ war; door:shut $\Rightarrow$ peace, then became a central message, transmitted through western and English culture, of the Janus god. Its association with January, the first month of the year, can perhaps be explained, as it is in Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* (1741), as the month that “opens,” in the fashion of a door, the new year. Ovid calls Janus and the first month of the year, the “opener of the silently gliding years” (*Fasti*, 1, 65).
Many of the naughty stories about Janus, we recall, are also due to Ovid, his best known perhaps being the god’s seduction of the maiden Carna. Because of his guilt for the act, Janus made her the goddess of door hinges—by her divine power she opens what is closed, and closes what is open (*Fasti*, VI, 101-168).

Now it seems to me that a case can be made for a Janus-type structure, and “message” of peace or war, for several scenes in *Tristram*. War begins, or a warzone opens, when a door, or doors, are opened; peace begins when a door is shut. An open door allows trouble to come in; words to be exchanged, misunderstandings and cross-purposes to develop. Take, for example, a scene between Walter and Obadiah. Obadiah opens the door to the parlour, Walter and Toby’s chief place of habitation, to inform his master that “the family is out of yeast” (*TS*, 5.2.415). This act disrupts Walter’s calculation on the “expense of riding post from *Calais* to *Paris*, and so on to *Lyons*” and it sets in motion a longish, cross-purposed, dialogue about which horse to ride to fetch the needed yeast. In summary form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WALTER</th>
<th>OBADIAH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take the coach-horse</td>
<td>But he wants a shoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then ride the Scotch horse</td>
<td>He cannot bear a saddle on his back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then take PATRIOT</td>
<td>PATRIOT is sold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then go on foot</td>
<td>I had much rather walk than ride, said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Obadiah</em>, shutting the door</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What plagues! Cried my father
going on with his calculation.

In this we are reminded of the Sterne’s motto for Tristram (from Epictetus) of the greater trouble from words than things. Words open the door to the start of trouble. But should we conclude that peace returns when Obadiah exits the room? Walter, we notice, goes back to his calculations. But can this be called peace, or merely the cessation of war?

Much of the action of Tristram, as has often been noted, is realized as class and gender conflict. There are disputes between My Father and My Mother about the marriage settlement (TS, 1.16.47-49), as to where she is to give birth to Tristram (TS, 1.18.52), how to dress him (TS, 6.18.526-29) and the like. Susannah gets Tristram’s name wrong; she ignores a summons by her master (TS, 4.12.339). Obadiah ties knots in Dr. Slop’s bag (TS, 3.8.196), he carries gossip, he bothers Walter with—to Walter—trivial requests. Some unnamed servant, because he or she neglects proper care of the parlour door, allows the noise of its hinges to break the meditations of Walter (TS, 3.21.239); Trim, on the whole a “good” servant, does damage to the future of the Shandy family, through the agency of Susannah, with the business of the lead sash-window weights (TS, 5.17.449; 5, 23.456).

The intelligible ground for much of this “warfare” is talk and performance with doors (and windows). Walter talks at length about the squeaky hinges on the parlour door; a “rap” on the door elicits a long discourse by the authour on the nature of time and narration (TS, 2.7.116-125); My Mother eavesdrops on a conversation between Walter and Toby at the key-hole of the parlour door (TS, 5.5.426-27); a window drops on Tristram’s penis (TS, 5.17.449); the authour’s tailor, attempting to collect on a bill, knocks insistently at the authour’s door (TS, 9.17.769). Since performance with doors is
mainly the act of opening, and shutting, them, performance becomes a way for Sterne to create boundaries and crossings in Tristram. A closed door, by creating a boundary, acts to separate husband and wife, master and servant; opening the same door, the parlour door, or the kitchen door, allows the various characters to cross into the territory of the other. Crossing, as an invasion, creates war. The ultimate invasion, from the individual’s point of view, is that of death: “when DEATH himself knocked at my door—ye [the authour’s ‘spirits’] bad him come again; and in so gay a tone of careless indifference, did ye do it, that he doubted of his commission—“(TS, 7.1.479). Announcement of the death of Tristram’s brother comes in the form of a letter through the parlour door (TS, 5.2.417). Plates VII and VIII (LY), which depict Death coming for Sterne through a door, carry out the same theme.

With the exception of the passage in Tristram (TS, 4.27.380), we have nothing to suggest that Sterne deliberately used Janus-like effects to structure episodes in Tristram. Proof that he did lies generally in effects, not causes, and what seems to be the case with the opening and closing of doors. We can assume, however, given the sexual antics of Janus—as represented especially by Ovid—that Sterne would have found the god, and the Janus-idea, attractive. Further “evidence” for the Janus-effect in Tristram arises from relative explicitness. The Janus-effect, in short, seems to me far more explicit in Tristram than it is in any comparable work of the eighteenth-century. Swift’s Instructions to Servants, for example, has an open door as an index to a conflict between master and servant. But it lacks the quality, salient in most Janus representations, of a door making intelligible the beginning of conflict; or, at least, some new adventure.
Let me end with one further piece of “evidence” for the Janus-like effect in *Tristram*, namely, Hogarth’s two illustrations for *Tristram*. In his letter to Berenger about Hogarth, Sterne mentions only one illustration and adds that “it wd mutually illustrate his System & mine” (*Letters*, pp. 99-100). What this “System” is no one can say—or at least elicit a critical consensus.⁵ But the illustrations, taken together, have the appearance of sending the message of peace and war. In both, the viewer eye is drawn, not only to the furnishings and atmosphere of the depicted spaces but also to how they communicate, or fail to communicate, with the outside. In Sterne’s text, the door to the parlour (where Trim reads the sermon) is very prominent. With the exception of Jonathan and the fat kitchen scullion, everyone in the story goes in and out of it. Hogarth leaves both the use and mention of the narrated door completely out of his illustration. Walls unbroken by either doors or windows surround the actors in the scene. In the baptism-dressing room scene, however, he adds an extra door to the single door mentioned in the narrative and then allows both of them to remain open. The open doors become an index, almost an introduction to the beginning of Tristram’s misfortunes “I have been the continual sport of what the world calls Fortune….in every stage of my life” (*TS*, 1.5.8); “I was begot and born to misfortune” (*TS*, 1.15. 46-47).

If we want to speculate a bit more about the disparities between Sterne’s text and Hogarth’s illustrations—on the subject of doors—we might, following Podro, proceed something like this:⁶ In looking at an illustration in a text, one that is supposed to say something about the text, we may become aware of certain differences. First, we are aware that what the illustration depicts, the subject, does not exactly replicate the text, the narrative or what happens. The illustration, or the text, may deny some feature of the
other; or, one may promote a feature not remarked, or demoted, in the other. Secondly, we are prone to think that narrative is mostly about the passage of time, of the general order “now ---> then,” in contrast to the arrangement of forms in space of a picture. Finally, the “recognition” of the subject of a picture presupposes a “difference” between what is present and what we imagine. By stimulating our imagination to go beyond what is immediately present, something else is added to the subject.

Is this what Sterne had in mind with “it wd mutually illustrate his System & mine”? That text and illustration mutually stimulate the imagination to find what is not present, or explicit, in the other? It is a pleasant to think that Hogarth’s treatment of doors, particularly his addition of an extra door to the baptism scene, assists the reader in finding the Janus-effect in the narrative.

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NOTES


4 “Masters and Ladies are usually quarrelling with the Servants for not shutting the Doors after them.”
