

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than 1,000 words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

The Telltale Teeth

To the Editor:

Theodore Ziolkowski's essay "The Telltale Teeth: Psychodontia to Sociodontia" (*PMLA*, 91, 1976, 9–22), turned up the crucial piece of a puzzle which has been nagging me for a long time: an explanation for Tolstoy's preoccupation with Count Vronsky's teeth in *Anna Karenina*. Unlike Spinell of Mann's "Tristan" or Rubashov of Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Vronsky's teeth are in excellent condition throughout the long novel. They make their first appearance at the end of Part I, shortly after Vronsky has met Anna and followed her back to Petersburg from Moscow: "he again went off into roars of hearty laughter, showing his compact row of strong teeth."¹ In seven other instances he either smiles or laughs, showing "his compact row of teeth" (pp. 164, 325, 491); "his close-set teeth" (p. 117); "his fine teeth" (p. 395); "his fine white teeth" (p. 418); or "his strong white teeth" (p. 554). However, near the end, following Anna's suicide, we learn that Vronsky's "teeth have started aching" (p. 705).

According to Tolstoy's strict morality this reckless and passionate, yet not unlikable, nobleman embodies the wrong values: "Marriage had never presented itself to him as a possibility. Not only did he dislike family life, but in accordance with the views generally held in the bachelor world in which he lived he regarded the family, and especially a husband as something alien, hostile, and above all, ridiculous" (p. 52). On the other hand, Levin, the hero, is deeply committed to marriage, to the sanctity of the family, and to the strong bond between husband and wife. Furthermore, Vronsky's impeccable aristocratic manners are unmasked and shown to be insincere and superficial: "In the depths of his heart he did not respect his mother and . . . he did not love her but in accordance with the views of the set he lived in, . . . the more submissive and respectful he was externally, the less he honoured and loved her in his heart" (p. 56).

The same falseness and superficiality extends to his views on art. When Vronsky and Anna leave Russia for Italy, he throws himself into painting, dresses in artist's garb, and imitates schools of painting. When he praises the technique of Mikhaylov, an artist who embodies Tolstoy's views on art, the painter is angered.

To him technique cannot be divorced from subject matter. Form springs from the artist's thought and subject matter and is organic; it cannot be imposed upon the material "by means of mechanical skill alone" (p. 431). Shortly afterward Vronsky abandons painting and leaves Italy. He is disenchanted with the artist's life, and he returns to Russia to take up the life of the great landowner, becoming a justice of the peace and a town councillor. Tolstoy also condemns this new way of life and, through Levin, indicates the artificiality of the provincial administration and the hypocrisy of the landowners.

In all his pursuits Vronsky is seen as a rootless individual vainly searching for some meaning in life. His attempts, however, are all doomed. Tolstoy is particularly hostile to Vronsky's final venture—his enlistment in the Serbian War. He depicts it as the latest passion of the upper classes, an excuse for the charity functions, for the balls and speeches of "the idle crowd."

Vronsky's tooth begins to ache after he has decided to go off to the war following Anna's suicide. He says, "I am glad that there is something for which I can lay down the life which I not only do not want, but of which I am sick! It will be of use to somebody," and he moved his jaw impatiently because of the incessant gnawing pain in his tooth, which even prevented him from speaking with the expression he desired" (p. 706). When he sees the train coming, however, he remembers Anna and her tragic death. He forgets his toothache, and instead has a feeling "not of pain but of tormenting inward discomfort" (p. 706). Vronsky's wasted existence is finally epitomized by the festering tooth. Only when he thinks of Anna, who has expiated her illicit love through suicide, thereby impressing upon him a higher code of morality and honor than his, does the tooth cease aching. His tears are a genuine indication of remorse.

The two figures—of teeth and tears—come up earlier in another interesting juxtaposition, this time in relation to Anna's husband, Karenin. After she has told him that she is Vronsky's mistress, she bursts out crying. Karenin, who is always described as a mechanical bureaucrat, nevertheless has a spark of humanity, and this is shown by his discomfort at the sight of tears. Later, when he is left alone the pity for her vanishes. He is overjoyed to be relieved of his anguish. It is so much neater and simpler to deal with paperwork, so good to

“live and think of other things beside his wife” (p. 254). He justifies his view by labeling her a depraved woman, and refuses to recognize that his denial of warmth and love played a big part in her rejection of him. As Karenin dismisses Anna, so Tolstoy pronounces judgment upon the bureaucrat, and finds him wanting. The image of the toothache appears here as Karenin roots his wife out of his life and thoughts, just as an aching tooth is drawn out of a man’s body. “After terrible pain and a sensation as if something enormous, bigger than his whole head, were being pulled out of his jaw, he feels, scarcely believing in his happiness that the thing which has so long been poisoning his life and engrossing his attention no longer exists” (p. 254). Tolstoy obviously subscribes to an “organismic” view of marriage and of the family. The destruction of bonds between husband and wife indicates the collapse of the family unit and the disintegration of society.

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Note

¹ *Anna Karenina* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 106.

To the Editor:

In his engaging article “The Telltale Teeth: Psychodontia to Sociodontia,” Theodore Ziolkowski dates a change in the portrayal of teeth as objects of beauty: “In literature the inevitable inversion of the image took place among many writers at the beginning of our century” (p. 14). Three hundred years earlier another inversion of tooth imagery, which Ziolkowski fails to note, took place in English poetry. Partly in response to the dried up energies of Petrarchan imagery, and its consequent petrification, poets in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries produced a spate of anti-Petrarchan poems and images. “Deformed mistress” poems and “paradoxical encomia” were important in this reaction and often utilized unflattering pictures of teeth.

While, as Ziolkowski states, “teeth do not belong to the standard canon of attributes—such as hair, eyes, cheeks, lips—normally cited in classical and medieval literature” (p. 12), in Italy, by the end of the fifteenth century, teeth (pearly teeth in particular) began to appear as part of the expected beauty of a Petrarchan lady. In the sixteenth century, it was not out of place for Firenzuola, in his discussions of female beauty, to comment on the size (not too small), shape, spacing, and color (ivory) of a beautiful woman’s teeth. Among the first English reactions to this conventionalized picture was Sidney’s scrambling of attributes in an influential description of Mopsa (*Arcadia*, 1590). Thus, the pearls expected in Mopsa’s mouth turn up elsewhere: “Her twinkling eies bedeckt with pearls, her lips as

Saphir blew.” John Lyly, with a keen sense of effect, also used this kind of scrambling. In *Endymion*, Sir Tophas exults over the possibilities in loving old matrons: “What a sight would it be to embrace one whose haire were as orient as the pearle! whose teeth shall be so pure a watchet, that they shall staine the truest turkis!” Not content to be a mere detractor, Lyly, in the same play, became an extractor: “How harmlesse she is being toothlesse!”

The most obvious technique for depicting unflattering teeth was simple inversion; instead of pearl or ivory, teeth became black. William Drummond of Hawthornden, in “Thirsis in Dispraise of Beautie,” thus brought Tasso to English audiences: “Eyes set by Chance, and white, Teeth blacke and thinne.” Donne, in “The Anagram,” stressed the paradoxical nature of black teeth: “Though they be Ivory, yet her teeth be jeat.” The image of teeth “black as jet” was quite popular, and occurred in poems by Sidney, Donne, King, and Herrick, who contemplated, in “No Lothsomenesse in Love,” loving one who has “grinders black as jet.” Perhaps because teeth are small things, Herrick paid close attention to them; in “Upon Some Women” teeth became yet another area where women can be false: “False in breast, teeth, haire, and eyes.” Swift, of course, offered a much expanded version of this falsity in “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed.” Characteristically, Herrick also depicted beautiful teeth, as in “A Short Hymne to *Venus*,” in which teeth and lips are the only attributes mentioned:

GOddesse, I do love a Girle
Rubie-lipt, and tooth’d with Pearl:

A mid-century plea for similarly comely teeth came in the distinctly minor voice of Edmund Prestwich, who recommended, in “How to Chuse a Mistress,” “teeth even and white.”¹ But the teeth of many mistresses were not even or white, and were often half gone.

For instance, in “The Deformed Mistress,” by Suckling, teeth play a prominent, if conditional and half-negative, role:

Provided next that half her Teeth be out,
I do not care much if her pretty Snout
Meet with her furrow’d Chin, and both together
Hem in her Lips, as dry as good whit-leather:

Poets less well known than Suckling often matched, with less polish, his jauntily ugly descriptions. “A Poeticall Poem, by Mr. Stephen Locket to Mistrisse Bess Sarney,” from *Wit Restor’d* (1658), offered a strong picture of dental spacing and color:

Thy teeth more comely than two dirty rakes are,
Thy breath is stronger than a dozen jakes are.

Writers even more anonymous than Mr. Stephen Locket added, through ballads and conspicuously “low” verse, some of the most memorable tooth