

## IN BRIEF

- Literary references to dental prostheses

## Prosthetic prose

M. E. Richardson<sup>1</sup>

This penultimate article in the literary series presents some interesting and amusing references relating to dental prostheses.

All specialities of dentistry are represented in the literary archives. Dental prosthetics is no exception and commands its fair share of references. They range from the satisfied customer mentioned in a letter to Lord Lucas from J M Barrie<sup>1</sup> 'The really big event is that Johnny Mackay (Michael's gillie) has a new set of artificial teeth. He wears them and joins in the talk with a simple dignity, not boastful, but aware that he is the owner of a good thing – rather like the lady who passes round her necklace.' to the critical observer, Michael O'Beirne<sup>2</sup> 'She came forward beaming under a hat like a plateful of glazed fruit. She had a depressingly flat, stagnant face of which the only vivid feature was a set of china-bright false teeth. Her age was obviously past fifty. Her tiny pearl teeth were so numerous, so ridiculous and nauseating as she chattered with a blank expression, that the effort to hide my revulsion was like suffocation.'

### PRIMITIVE PROSTHESIS

Literature provides verbal images of some early forms of dental prostheses examples of which can be found in dental museums. Jonathan the 'boughten' boy in Joan Brady's<sup>3</sup> *The Theory of War* showed inge-

nuity and resourcefulness after all his teeth were extracted by the Peaslee travelling salesman:<sup>4</sup> 'Without any teeth (he) couldn't speak properly, so he didn't speak at all ... he stole candle leavings from Wify's cupboard and a piece of seasoned wood from Alvah's store. The method came to him whole, as God-given as the great train itself. He searched out a clump of clayey earth, bit into it to make a mold of his gums and filled the mold with wax to make a template. He whitened jaws and teeth to size and joined the jaws together with leather thongs. He had to hold the upper plate with his index finger when he spoke, but he could make himself understood again. Teeth and claws were back in business.'

...For the next few weeks ... he watched, body taut with concentration, to see just how upper teeth fit onto lower teeth. His next set was to be carved out of bone.

...'Teeth? Is that all? Who cares about teeth? Well. I guess the answer to that question is that I care. And plainly you care. Wouldn't you like to speak? Of course you would. Those teeth of yours really are God-awful. Frank says you made them: remarkable to make a set of teeth, incredible, an amazing feat. I never knew anybody who – But you can't speak because of them? What about without them?'

Jonathan gestured that without them he couldn't speak at all.

'Why not go to a dentist? Denver's loaded with them. You can't work on the railroads like this. Really you can't.'

Jonathan pulled his pockets inside out: no money.

College sighed. 'Yeah, and you're going to need thirty-five bucks at least. Have another drink. It's on me. Of course it is.'

My grandmother has a pair of false teeth, made out of porcelain and gold. They glint when the sun catches them.' he sighed again. 'Buy a piggy bank this month instead...'

...He rifled his pockets and thrust a wad of notes at Jonathan. 'Take it. Fifty dollars. That'll get you a decent set of teeth.'

...Jonathan's dentist wore a mustache waxed into tusks that wobbled when he spoke. 'Real teeth? They come very high and they rot, dear boy. Ivory rots, too, of course, but it's quite reasonable. Porcelain's best, but expensive. I wear porcelain myself. See?' The dentist slid his own teeth out into his palm. 'Springs may be old-fashioned, but the father of our country wore them. How about ivory teeth in a vulcanite base? With springs? Wonderful stuff, vulcanite. What do you say to forty-five dollars?'

...Two weeks later the dentures were in Jonathan's mouth.'



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Dorothy Wordsworth,<sup>5</sup> sister of the poet, faced the prospect of her new dentures with justified trepidation. 'She expected as soon as the gums were healed to be fitted with a complete new set; meanwhile she could not show herself even at church. The artificial teeth of the period consisted of two rigid half-hoops, with carved bone, tusk, or sometimes sheeps' teeth, held in place by a hinged steel spring which forced them hard against the wearer's gums. The owners of these doubtful luxuries were frequently seen to take them out at table, in order to eat without pain. Almost equally distressing to the sensitive was the traditional jocularity they aroused. Charles Lamb, the kindest of men, dwelt on "Eating, Talking, Biting etc. but not gnashing – gnashing of Sea Horse teeth must be horrible", until Dorothy was forced to turn away with "averted looks"



**AMERICAN TEETH**

Like many things American their artificial teeth are considered by some to be the acme of perfection. Luigi Barzini<sup>6</sup> in his book *O America* subscribes to this view.

'Then there were the dentist's show cases. Here and there in the city were small glass cases, hung during office hours by the street entrances of the dentist's rooms. They were filled with rows of splendid laughing dentures. The sign in gold letters said "DENTISTA AMERICANO" and an American flag in the background showed that the national pride covered, among many other, more tremendous achievements, the minute perfection of dental prostheses, so perfect, in fact, they could not conceivably have been created anywhere else. They were a minor illustration of the American's unrelenting war against man's destiny, the fatal decay of old age, one more proof of their capacity to invent better materials than those made by God on the day of Creation. God, in fact, rarely bothered to make teeth as even, incorruptible, and resplendent'.

An Anglo-Irish Lady of Mary Colum's<sup>7</sup> acquaintance was apprised of the American reputation. 'Then she got to what my uncle later declared was the whole reason of her asking them to luncheon. A lot of her teeth had been knocked out by the fall off her horse, and more had been pulled on account of decay and toothache. She had had a set of false teeth made by a Dublin dentist, but they did not fit very well and joggled around in her mouth in a disagreeable way. She had heard that the Kaiser and

the King of Italy had American dentists, and that American dentistry was a miracle, and she was wondering, if she had a cast of her mouth made, if Anne would take it over and get a set of American teeth sent to her by parcel post. Anne thereupon invited Lady C over to America to get the teeth made, but the lady shook her head. She never intended to leave Ireland again and disliked travel anyway. How the matter of the teeth was settled, I never knew.'

Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's<sup>8</sup> *Lolita* thought highly of his dental prosthesis which was, of course, made in America. 'At the hands of charming Dr Molnar I had undergone a rather serious operation, retaining only a few upper and lower front teeth. The substitutes were dependent on a system of plates with an inconspicuous wire affair running along my upper gums. The whole arrangement was a masterpiece of comfort, and my canines were in perfect health.'

Even the 'cheap American dentist' in George Orwell's<sup>9</sup> *Coming up for air* was 'a bit of an artist' 'I was trying to shave with a bluntish razor-blade while the water ran into the bath. My face looked back at me out of the mirror, and underneath, in a tumbler of water on the little shelf over the washbasin, the teeth that belonged in the face. It was the temporary set that Warner, my dentist had given me to wear while the new ones were being made. I haven't such a bad face, really. It's one of those bricky red faces that go with the butter-coloured hair and pale-blue eyes.

I've never gone grey or bald, thank God, and when I've got my teeth in I probably don't look my age, which is forty-five.

But at that moment I didn't feel like the life and soul of the party. And it struck me that nowadays I nearly always do have a morose kind of feeling in the early mornings, although I sleep well and my digestion is good. I knew what it was of course – it was those bloody false teeth. The things were magnified by the water in the tumbler, and they were grinning at me like the teeth in a skull. It gives you a rotten feeling to have your gums meet, a sort of pinched-up, withered feeling like when you've bitten into a sour



apple. Besides, say what you will, false teeth are landmarks. When your last natural tooth goes, the time that you can kid yourself that you're a Hollywood sheik is definitely at an end. And I was fat as well as forty-five...

Warner is one of these cheap American dentists, and he has his consulting-room, or 'parlour' as he likes to call it, half-way up a big block of offices, between a photographer and a rubber-goods wholesaler...

When I got the new teeth in I felt a lot better. They sat nice and smooth over the gums, and though very likely it sounds absurd to say that false teeth can make you feel younger, it's a fact that they did so. I tried to smile at myself in a shop window. They weren't half bad. Warner, though cheap, is a bit of an artist and doesn't aim at making you look like a toothpaste advert. He's got huge cabinets full of false teeth – he showed them to me once – all graded according to size and colour, and he picks them out like a jeweller choosing stones for a necklace. Nine people out of ten would have taken my teeth for natural.

I caught a full-length glimpse of myself in another window I was passing, and it struck me that really I wasn't such a bad figure of a man. A bit on the fat side, admittedly, but nothing offensive, only what the tailors call a 'full figure' and some women like a man to have a red face. There's life in the old dog yet, I thought. I remembered my seventeen quid, and definitely made up my mind that I'd spend it on a woman. There was time to have a pint before the pubs shut, just to baptize the teeth.'

**IRISH TEETH**

In 1930's Limerick a certain Mr and Mrs McCourt were fitted with new dentures.

The consequences to young Frank and his brother are related with inimical style in his autobiography *Angela's Ashes*:<sup>10</sup> 'Dad says he has holes in his teeth big enough for a sparrow to raise a family. He has a few left but he gets them pulled at the clinic and applies for a false set. When he comes home with the new teeth he shows his big new white smile that makes him look like an American and whenever he tells us a ghost story by

the fire he pushes the lower teeth up beyond his lip to his nose and frightens the life out of us. Mam's teeth are so bad she has to go to Barrington's Hospital to have them all pulled at the same time and when she comes home she's holding at her mouth a rag bright with blood. She has to sit up all

night by the fire because you can't lie down when your gums are pumping blood or you'll choke in your sleep...

When the bleeding stops and Mam's gums heal she goes to the clinic for her false teeth. She says she'll give up the smoking when her new teeth are in but she never does. The new teeth rub on her gums and make them sore and the smoke of the Woodbines eases them. She and Dad sit by the fire when we have one and smoke their cigarettes and when they talk their teeth clack. They try to stop the clacking by moving their jaws back and forth but that only makes it worse and they curse the dentists and the people above in Dublin who made the teeth and while they curse they clack. Dad claims that these teeth were made for rich people in Dublin and didn't fit so they were passed on to the poor of Limerick who don't care because you don't have much to chew when you're poor anyway and you're grateful to have any class of a tooth in your head. If they talk too long their gums get sore and the teeth have to come out. Then they sit talking by the fire with their faces collapsed. Every night they leave the teeth in the kitchen in jamjars filled with water. Malachy wants to know why and Dad tells him it cleans them. Mam says, No, you can't have teeth in your head while you're sleeping for fear they'll slip and choke you to death entirely.

The teeth are the cause of Malachy going to Barrington's Hospital and me having an operation.

Malachy whispers to me in the middle of the night, Do you want to go downstairs and see if we can wear the teeth?

The teeth are so big we have trouble getting them into our mouths but Malachy won't give up. He forces Dad's upper teeth into his mouth and can't get them out again. His lips are drawn back and the teeth make a big grin. He looks like a monster in a film and it makes me laugh but he pulls at them and grunts, Uck, uck, and tears come to his eyes. The more he goes Uck, uck, the harder I laugh till Dad calls from upstairs, What are you boys doing? Malachy runs from me, up the stairs, and now I hear Dad and Mam laughing till they see he can choke on the teeth. They both stick their fingers in to pull out the teeth but Malachy gets frightened and makes desperate uck uck sounds. Mam says, We'll have to take him to the hospital, and Dad says he'll take him. He makes me go in case the doctor has questions because I'm older than Malachy and that means I must have started all the trouble. Dad rushes through the streets with Malachy in his arms and I try to keep up. I feel sorry for Malachy up there on Dad's shoulder, looking back at me, tears on his cheeks and Dad's teeth bulging in his mouth. The doctor at Barrington's

Hospital says, No bother. He pours oil into Malachy's mouth and has the teeth out in a minute. Then he looks at me and says to Dad, Why is that child standing with his mouth hanging open?

Dad says, That's a habit he has, standing with his mouth open.

The doctor says, Come here to me. He looks up my nose, in my ears, down my throat, and feels my neck.

The tonsils, he says. The adenoids. They have to come out. The sooner the better or he'll look like an idiot when he grows up with that gob as wide as a boot.

Next day Malachy gets a big piece of toffee as a reward for sticking in the teeth he can't get out and I have to go to the hospital to have an operation that will close my mouth.

#### TURKISH TEETH

Auda's Turkish teeth were invested with a sacreligious dimension observed by T E Lawrence<sup>11</sup> 'Suddenly Auda scrambled to his feet with a loud "God forbid" and flung from the tent. We stared at one another, and there came a noise of hammering outside. I went after to learn what it meant, and there was Auda bent over a rock pounding his false teeth to fragments with a stone. "I had forgotten," he explained, "Jemal Pasha gave me these. I was eating my Lord's bread with Turkish teeth!" Unfortunately he had few teeth of his own, so that henceforward eating the meat he loved was difficulty and after-pain, and he went about half nourished till we had taken Akaba and Sir Reginald Wingate sent him to a dentist from Egypt to make an Allied set.'

#### DYNAMIC DENTURES

Poorly fitting dentures are a source of embarrassment to the wearer but are often a subject of amusement to an observer such as Elspeth Huxley:<sup>12</sup> 'What I remember most about him was his set of very badly fitting false teeth. They seemed to have a life of their own, jumping up and down without relation to the words emerging from his mouth, rather as, in the early days of sound-tracks, the voices often failed to synchronise with the actor's lips. I always believed them to be kept in with elastic, and sometimes it was a near thing that they stayed in at all. His face was lean and cadaverous, he spoke with a strong Australian twang, and now and then he gave a long, impressive hoicking in his throat that

ended in a bold spit like the crack of a stock-whip.'

Thomas Mann<sup>13</sup> found them more distasteful than amusing as he watched 'an old man ... with wrinkles and crow's-feet round eyes and mouth; the dull carmine of the cheeks was rouge, the brown hair a wig. His neck was shrunken and sinewy, his turned-up moustaches and small imperial were dyed, and the unbroken double row of yellow teeth he showed when he laughed were but too obviously a cheapish false set

... Thus he was forced to endure the importunities of the ghastly young-old man, whose drunken state obscurely urged him to pay the stranger the honour of a formal farewell. "We wish you a very pleasant sojourn," he babbled, bowing and scraping. "Pray keep us in mind. Au revoir, excusez et bon jour, votre Excellence," He drooled, he blinked, he licked the corner of his mouth, the little imperial bristled on his elderly chin. He put the tips of two fingers to his mouth and said thickly: "Give her our love, will you, the p-pretty little dear" — here his upper plate came away and fell down on the lower one.'

Marcel Proust<sup>14</sup> knew 'a thoroughly good woman, a nice, kind-hearted lunatic; the only thing I could never understand was why she never managed to get a set of false teeth that fitted her; they always came loose half-way through a sentence and she was obliged to stop short or she'd have swallowed them.'

In the case of the 'Priest' of Cynthia Asquith's<sup>15</sup> acquaintance the amusement was to the wearer. 'I have never known anyone so intoxicatingly responsive to any attempt to amuse him. He was subject to absolute paroxysms of laughter. The first symptom of a paroxysm was that one tufty eyebrow would shoot high above the other; then as his hand flew to his mouth to hold back the false teeth which otherwise were apt to get laughed out of it, a sort of drowning look came into his eyes, and the whole of his tiny frame crumpled up in convulsions of mirth. These fits of laughter were often quite alarming, for, like so many people who live to a great age and seem to enjoy perpetual youth, The Priest had an officially weak heart. They left him gasping and blue in the face, and sometimes he would have to lie down for several minutes to regain his breath. Indeed, I often thought he might



be the first man literally to die - and how could man die better? - of laughter.'

Sean Day-Lewis<sup>16</sup> described how his father, the Poet Laureate, coped with his ill fitting dentures with considerable aplomb. 'Negative Capability or not, Cecil had survived another year and was managing even his disabilities with style. Reciting with Jill at Halifax in Yorkshire that October he became very worked up at the climax of his dramatic monologue 'The Disabused'. His false teeth shot out, he caught them, replaced them and carried on as though this was a natural part of the action. He was very proud of that catch, much more proud of it than of his reading, and he boasted about it afterwards, pointing out that he had made it left-handed.'

And then 'There was, for instance, a canon, known to William Plomer,<sup>17</sup> who, while preaching, removed his false teeth, held them at arms length, gave them a long and quizzical look, and then popped them into place again!...

#### PROSTHETIC TRICKS

Removeable prostheses provide the means to amuse or shock by grotesque distortion of facial features, especially in the mouth of an extrovert schoolboy 'He had two companions now, one boarder, Chit McCloskey, and a day-boy, Jimmy Millar. It was always in the mornings at Religious Instruction that he met Millar. Millar had two false teeth and when he got the master's back turned he would wink at Colm, open his mouth and move the false teeth up and down with his tongue. Colm often laughed at him, and when the master lifted the cane Millar sat still, his mouth closed tightly, and his black eyes full of innocence.'<sup>18</sup>

This little trick, in Arthur Conan Doyle's<sup>19</sup> *A Case of Identity*, was considered to be grounds for divorce 'The husband was a teetotaler, there was no other woman, and the conduct complained of was that he had drifted into the habit of winding up every meal by taking out his false teeth and hurling them at his wife'.

#### PROSTHETIC ACCIDENTS

His dentures constituted a fire hazard to Compton McKenzie's<sup>20</sup> friend. 'He had dozed off in one of the armchairs in the Sandpit with a lighted cigarette. Suddenly he leapt up with fumes coming from his mouth; that lighted cigarette had set fire to his false teeth ... I saw those fumes with my own eyes and I heard Sydney Dark's shout

of dismay as he leapt up and hauled the denture out of his mouth.'

Lost overboard! Uncle Leo was not the first nor even the last to suffer such ignominy.

'Uncle Leo X11 attended to the details of the operation as if it were being performed on his own flesh. His singular interest in false teeth had developed on one of his first trips along the Magdalena River and was the result of his maniacal love for bel canto. One night when the moon was full, at the entrance to the port of Gamarra, he made a wager with a German surveyor that he could awaken the creatures of the jungle by singing a Neapolitan romanza from the Captain's balustrade. He almost lost the bet. In the river darkness one could hear the flapping wings of the cranes in the marshes, the thudding tails of the alligators, the terror of the shad as they tried to leap onto dry land, but on the final note, when it was feared that the singer would burst his arteries with the power of his song, his false teeth dropped out of his mouth with his last breath and fell into the water.

The boat had to wait three days at the port of Tenerife while an emergency set was made for him. It was a perfect fit. But on the voyage home, trying to explain to the Captain how he had lost the first set, Uncle

Leo X11 filled his lungs with the burning air of the jungle, sang the highest note he could, held it to his last breath as he tried to frighten the alligators that were sunning themselves and watching the passage of the boat with unblinking

eyes, and the new set of false teeth sank into the current as well. From then on, he kept spare sets of teeth everywhere, in various places throughout his house, in his desk drawer, and on each of the three company boats. Moreover, when he ate out he would carry an extra pair in a cough drop box that he kept in his pocket, because he had once broken a pair trying to eat pork cracklings at a picnic. Fearing that his nephew might be the victim of similar unpleasant surprises, Uncle Leo X11 told Dr. Adonay to make him two sets right from the start: one of cheap materials for daily use at the office, and the other for Sundays and holidays, with a gold chip in the first molar that would impart a touch of realism. At last, on a Palm Sunday ringing with the sound of holiday bells, Florentino Ariza returned to the street with a new identity, his perfect smile giving him the impression

that someone else had taken his place in the world.'<sup>21</sup>

Peter Ustinov<sup>22</sup> observed that false teeth could serve as a means of self mutilation. '(Sergeant C) was only twenty-eight years old, and had lost all his teeth, not fighting, you can be sure of that, but out of ignorance. He munched on gums, like an old man, and had a predilection for cake, soft crumbly cake he could assimilate. He would watch the parcels arrive and make a mental note as to who were their recipients. ... and whatever the parcels contained we would inform him that we had some excellent toffee... His cratered face would twitch with irritation. "Fuckin' date," he would rasp, "you fuckin' well knows I can't fuckin' eat fuckin' toffee," and he would slink away ...

(Finally he)made a graceless and terrible exit from our lives! False teeth had been ordered from the Army Dental Corps round about 1936, but with the usual administrative complications, they did not arrive at the right mouth until late spring of 1942. His gums were suddenly separated by two sets of gleaming white castellated fortifications, while his cheeks were stretched unnaturally, so that his murderous pale eyes reposed on wet, red carpets, like a bloodhound. He croaked and barked his incomprehensible orders as usual, but with a hideous assurance. Suddenly a particularly grating yell turned into an unearthly wail. We all dared to look, and saw him stagger. After a moment, blood streamed from his mouth. Unused to his new embellishments, he had bitten right through his tongue and was now near to fainting with pain and panic.'

#### SIBILANT TEETH

Prince Ivan Ivanych ...'was a tall man of about seventy ... His face, with its quiet and open expression, ... greatly pleased me, for, in spite of the thin half circle of hair which was all that was now left to him, and the want of teeth disclosed by the set of his upper lip, his face was a remarkably handsome one.

He had a custom (due to his false teeth, of which his mouth possessed a complete set) of raising his upper lip a little as he spoke, and producing a slight whistling sound from it.'<sup>23</sup>

In the case of Sir Ralph Richardson it was the absence of his teeth which caused the whistle according to Peter Ustinov<sup>22</sup> 'his love affair with machines had cost him several teeth, and ... by 1945 there was a complicated system of bridge-work lodged in that noble mouth, which was a tribute to the unrelenting march of dental science' ... On one occasion 'he appeared on the set ...



whistling like a kettle on certain sibilants, a sound which he evidently attributed to someone other than himself, since he kept looking around him to find its origin. It was clear that he had left the bridgework at home.

"Why can't we shoot?" asked Ralph, with a piercing whistle ...

Mickey slipped off to call Ralph's home....

"Your house wants to talk to you on the phone, Mr Richardson," he said....

"Confound it. All this is quite insufferable." he declared, with one final blast as he went to take the call....

He reappeared a moment later, walking a little unsteadily, his hand to his brow ...

"It's nothing. Nothing. A migraine. Comes over me suddenly ... I have some powders — a prescription, you understand ... like a fool, I left them at home ... they'll bring them out here ... straightaway, straightaway ... perhaps if I could lie down a moment ..."

Twenty minutes later a Bentley drove up

to the studio gates, and a small packet was delivered for Mr Ralph Richardson.

Ten minutes after that Ralph reappeared, once again in high spirits.

"I feel much better now, *Mens Sana In Corpore Sano*", he announced. All that latin and not a trace of a sibilant whistle.'

And finally Anatoli Rybakov's<sup>24</sup> novel *Children of the Arbat* includes an account, too long for inclusion in this article, of the vicissitudes and rewards of the prosthesis in Soviet Russia summoned to make new dentures for Stalin.

Photographs are from the BDA Museum Image Library

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