Ch. 3: Narrating Personality: George Gissing, Late-Victorian Psychology, and the Novel Aesthetics of Withdrawal

In the previous chapter, we saw a significant recalibration of the relations between will and character in the discourse of physiological psychology in the 1870s and 80s. The movement I described there involved a departure from a normatively evaluable conception of individual character as the effect of a series of enacted intentions—a departure, that is, from a model concisely captured in John Stuart Mill’s account of “confirmed character” as that which is consolidated through a paradoxically purposive “habit of willing” that ultimately produces a subject whose pursuit of rational ends proceeds “independent of the feelings of pain or pleasure.”\(^1\) In the psychological writings of Maudsley, Sully and George Meredith, I argued, the regime of individuality called “character” retains both its normativity and its constitutive relation to deliberative volition—it is still the locus of a fantasy of self-sovereignty that serves to legitimate political and social hierarchies. A crucial difference between the inherited liberal model of character and the category as it appeared in the later psychological writings turns on the meaning and operations of will: absent from the psychological account of character is the earlier model’s emphasis upon a self-consolidating \textit{repetition} of willing that “confirms” a heroically purposive subject, one increasingly indifferent to those feelings (of pleasure, pain and more) that might obstruct the enactment of reasoned intentions. Character as defined by the later psychological writers is, by contrast, an eminently bodily and affective ideal. The body they describe, moreover, is an astonishingly complex one comprising a

\(^1\)\textit{System of Logic}, Book 6, Chapter 2
plurality of organs, energies, interests and inclinations. Crucially, in such writings, will and character are still subject to normative evaluation, but the terms of evaluation change. This psychologized regime of character valorizes the willful enactment of those intentions in which “every interest of the entire body, every organic energy, has direct or indirect representation. Therefore it is that in the will is contained character: not character of mind only, as commonly understood, but character of every organ of the entire body, the consentient functions of which enter into the full expression of individuality.”

The evaluation here of volition in terms of fullness of expression (or, in another formulation, in terms of “just and adequate expression of the whole self”) and the concomitant relocation of “character” in a complex body may appear to be in line with Lauren Goodlad’s claim that, over the British nineteenth century, the discourse of character is sapped of moral normativity and the democratic political potentialities that attended that normativity—a change she codes as the displacement of an inclusive and transformative “prescriptive” notion of character (one in which anyone, regardless of class, could become a man of character, and thus deserve political and social enfranchisement) by a naturalizing “descriptive” one (one in which an individual is what he is, and accordingly subject to reified taxonomies of inclusion/exclusion). Alternatively, the transformation I describe in chapter 2 could be read, if not in terms of Goodlad’s depoliticizing trajectory, in the more or less apolitical terms of the secularizing epistemological shift in Victorian

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3 James Sully, *Outlines of Psychology*, 1884.
discourses of the mind described by Rick Rylance—a shift, that is, away from residual notions of the soul (which haunted even associationist thought) and towards more secular, physiologically-grounded accounts of mental life. My claim, however, has been that the discursive recalibration of will and character, the emergence in character discourse of the “full self,” was keyed to problems of (self-)sovereignty, and accordingly was energized by historically-specific political anxieties about British empire and mass democracy. Such energies are evident, I’ve argued, not only in the recurring pattern of parliamentary metaphor in psychological descriptions of the “full self” (Maudsley’s “complex State”; Sully’s problematics of “representation”; Leslie Stephen’s “internal parliament”), but also in Meredith’s narrative recourse to the new psychologized model of character in Diana of the Crossways (1885). The consummation there of a marriage plot explicitly burdened with Unionist allegorical valences was effected, after all, by a male “Saxon” character whose legitimating self-sovereignty is inseparable from a capacious receptivity to a spectrum of (at times contradictory) affiliations, feelings, and interests—private and public, bodily and abstract. In Meredith’s novel, domination of Ireland by Britain and of women by men is legitimated in some literal sense by the English constitution, by a ruling subject whose disciplined aliveness to the complexity of experience confers upon it an authority to make decisions that is irreducible to mere decisionism.

This chapter maintains the project’s focus on the psychologization of character in the Victorian period, but pivots to a slightly later moment, a set of

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5 *Victorian Psychology and British Culture*, 2000
questions around literary form, and to a body of texts marked, famously, by a far
more fraught relationship to images and logics justifying bourgeois hegemony in
Britain than anything found in Thackeray or Meredith. That is, this chapter attends
to the problematics of character and self-representative volition in the work of
George Gissing, a writer largely remembered in the 21st century as the greatest
English incarnation of nineteenth-century literary naturalism, as a depressive realist
chronicler of the depredations and degenerations endured by urban artisans,
laboring women, and indigent hacks. To his contemporaries, however, Gissing was
also known as—and regularly reviewed in terms of being—a “psychological
novelist.”6 This is perhaps unsurprising in one who kept himself apprised of
developments in contemporary psychology (both continental, particularly through
the work of Theodule Ribot, and British, through his friendship with Henry
Maudsley) and who moreover was a protegé of George Meredith. Gissing’s work is
particularly fascinating when read in terms of the late-Victorian transformation in
the discourse of character. Across Gissing’s oeuvre, as I will argue below, a
trajectory can be traced in which a residual notion of volitional character (one
centering on the productivity of fidelity to reasoned intention) gives way to one that
not only resembles, but even perfects the logic of the “full self” elaborated in the
previous chapter. Attending to his novels in this regard is worthwhile not simply for
further literary confirmation of the conceptual reconfiguration previously
described, however. In Gissing, I want to suggest, psychological personality

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6 Language here from contemporary reviews of Thyrza (1887), Born in Exile (1892),
Our Friend the Charlatan (1901), and especially Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft
(1901).
displaces character as the dominant articulation of individuality. Deliberation and conscious willing—and the architecture of normativity in which such capacities are situated—are demoted, no longer serving as privileged locations through which the novelist represents and evaluates individual interiority. Moreover, Gissing’s development of an aesthetics of personality coincides significantly with a long-term shift in both mode of address and literary form: while figures and themes continue to recur, the tragic plots of the early novels of social critique give way to the proto-modernist description of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1901).

I. *Thyrza, Marriage Plots, and the Antinomies of Personality*

*Thyrza* (1887) features many of the narrative elements that come to seem paradigmatic to readers of Gissing’s fiction: a descriptive preoccupation with the mechanical rhythms and sordid sensations of an urban industrial lifeworld; central characters whose intellectual tendencies alienate them from the pleasures and practices appropriate to their respective class positions; a working-class heroine, cribbed from Dickens, who proves miraculously immune to the environmental and hereditary forces that animalize the men and women around her; and, of course, a plot tracing the career of a misguided, if not megalomaniacal, philanthropic project. In this case, the deluded altruist is Walter Egremont, the Oxford-educated son of a London industrialist who aims to bring about “the spiritual education of the upper artisan and mechanic class” () by personally giving a series of lectures on English literature and establishing a free library in Lambeth (location of the factory that
produces the family fortune). His altruistic schemes, however, are derailed when he falls in love with Thyrza, the angelic proletarian fiancée of Gilbert Grail, his only enthusiastic student. Egremont intends to defy class convention and marry Thyrza but, acting on the advice of a close friend, abruptly leaves for America in order to reflect seriously before taking such a momentous step.

In the U.S., Egremont undergoes a dramatic transformation, a diegetic shift mirrored by a narratological one. In the strange chapter titled “Three Letters,” the third-person narrator turns implied editor: the chapter consists of a selection from Egremont’s side of an ongoing correspondence with the prudent friend in England. The chapter details a profound shift in the novel’s protagonist. While Egremont’s familiar inclinations remain the same—“those tastes which were born to [him]” remain “in fact as strong as ever”—he experiences a strange failure of will: “I cannot
read the books I wish to read; I cannot even think the thoughts I wish to think” ().

The newfound incapacity to think and read as he should like is attended by the manifestation of new, unsuspected capacities: Egremont finds himself “laughing heartily at American humour,” associating “on terms of equality and friendliness with men from whom [he] should formerly have shrunk,” and having a profound reaction to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (). He summarizes the transformative effects of his American experience thus:

> In fact, I believe that for me the day of theories has gone by. I note phenomena, and muse about them, and not a few interest me extremely. The interest is enough. I am not a practical man; I am not a philosopher. I may, indeed, have a good deal of the poet’s mind, but the poet’s faculty is denied to me. It only remains to me to study the world in its relations to my personality, that I may henceforth avoid the absurdities to which I have such a deplorable leaning.

The transformations described in this chapter of *Thyrza* do not add up to another predictable iteration of diseased masculine will, that trope through which late-Victorian writers worried about imperial contraction, hereditary disease, or social degeneration. Egremont’s American brutalization is temporary and always attended by an ironizing self-consciousness. Crucially, it produces self-knowledge that translates to self-discipline: in particular, Egremont must resists the temptations of theory—intellectual-affective orientations that produce clarity of intention and coherence of thought, but always at the heavy price of some distortion of a complex personality. On his return to England, Egremont gives up philanthropy and *Thyrza* (and the utopian aspirations bound up in both), instead proposing marriage to a wealthy friend of the family and resolving to pursue an existence of leisurely amateurism.
Summarized in this way, *Thyrza*—its plot, central characters, and ideological energies—appears to land squarely within the Victorian novel’s horizons of convention. The marriage proposal with which the novel ends could be read in terms of the productive socialization of individuating desire that Nancy Armstrong describes in both *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) and *How Novels Think* (2005). In the latter work, after all, Armstrong claims that the house specialty of the Victorian novel is the aesthetic production of “the individual as a subject layered by successive displacements.” On her account, the agonistic but aural form of individuality that Victorian novels present depends on a series of transferences of the protagonist’s original desire—transferences always haunted and energized by the attractions of the displaced object: “The protagonist of Victorian fiction does not become an individual on the basis of what and how intensely he or she desires; individuality depends on how he or she chooses to displace what is a fundamentally asocial desire onto a socially appropriate object” (8). In the case of *Thyrza* the model works, up to a point. Egremont’s desires for cross-class social amelioration and a working-class woman can convincingly be read as “asocial,” given that sociality in the novel is predicated on the preservation of hierarchical stratification (whether considered in terms of economic class, biopolitical population, or both).9

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In illuminating tension with the paradigm described by Armstrong, however, is the affective register of the novel’s concluding displacement-event. Indeed, Gissing goes to great lengths to stage the profound diminishment, even absence, of desire attending Egremont’s engagement. In the conversation leading up to his proposal to Annabel, the socially-appropriate object of desire, Egremont confidently describes the form his life would take if he were to remain in England:

I should live the life of a student, and of a man who looks on contemporary things with an artistic interest, though he lacks the artistic power to use his observations. In time I should marry. I should have pleasure in my house, should make it as beautiful as might be, should gather a very few friends about me. I should not become morbid; the danger of that is over. Every opportunity I saw of helping those less fortunate than myself I should gladly seize; it is not impossible that I might seek opportunities, that I might found some institution—of quite commonplace aims, be assured. . . . And so on.

The counterfactuality of the conditional mood here is at ironic variance with a future described with all the inevitability and obviousness of the indicative. As suggested by the ubiquity of the first-person pronoun in this passage, Egremont’s future is less a matter of aspiration and possibility than one of managed self-repetition ("And so on"). Nor is the strange calm of the concluding narrative event located only in Egremont. Annabel waxes narratorial, offering an autobiographical account of earlier stages of deluded feeling when she was guided by “an ideal of love” (). Literally giving her hand to Egremont as she accepts his proposal, Annabel makes a gesture that is at once kitschy and strangely evidentiary: “I can talk of these things without a flutter of the pulse. Is it not true?” ()

Journal of Narrative Theory, 40.2 (2010): 156-188; Also Adrian Poole, Halperin and Raymond Williams.
The conclusion of the plot of *Thyrza*, then, looks less like the displacement of asocial objects of desire than the displacement of desire itself. I want to suggest that this ambivalent conclusion, which simultaneously consummates and devitalizes the novel’s marriage plot, follows from Gissing’s attempt to inscribe an emergent conception of the individual subject—personality—within the Victorian novel. That is, the real climax of the action of *Thyrza* occurs when Egremont excavates, recognizes and properly assumes his personality in the U.S.—processes all enabled by escaping the distorting social and erotic interpellations of his native England. Moreover, the conception of personality at the heart of late Gissing, I argue, is a historically-specific discursive object.

That "personality" designates a set of protocols and forms of individuality that overlap with but are incompatible with those of "character" is not a claim unique to this project. But the term as I understand it to operate in Gissing differs significantly, for instance, from its influential description by Warren Susman in "Personality and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture." There Susman tracks the displacement of character by personality in American advice literature at the turn of the century. Susman’s personality is a highly performative mode of self-disciplined subjectivity that strives to produce impressions of singularity and magnetic vitality in scenes of market competition (whether commodities are being sold, employment pursued, or marriage sought).10 Closer in form and discursive positionality is the “personality” that became the central object of twentieth-century

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Anglo-American psychology. Kurt Danziger argues that prior to the 1920s, the terms personality, temperament, and character were used more or less interchangeably in English-language psychological writing. Attending the consolidation and professionalization of psychology as a scientific discipline, however, was a terminological clarification of its unifying object of study. Temperament fell out of favor on account of its identification with “physiological reductionism”; “character” was abandoned on account of its “moralistic connotations” and “historical association with the concept of will, a concept that had become anathema to scientifically-minded American psychologists.”

“Personality” won out, Danziger argues, not only on account of its prior medicalization in the late nineteenth century, but also and crucially because of its constitutive complexity: “Unlike ‘character,’ whose reference was to something unitary, ‘personality’ was essentially diverse, an assembly of various tendencies. Its health depended on the relationship among its components” (127).

While the historical process of conceptual winnowing that Danziger describes is at some distance of time and discursive location from the texts treated in this chapter, I have cited him because the opposition he describes between the unity of character and the diversity of personality, as well as the notion of health associated with the personality, is crucial to them. Other relevant scholarship on the category of personality in late nineteenth century: Ian Hacking on multiple personalities; Nicholas Rose on the emergence of psychiatry.

12 Other relevant scholarship on the category of personality in late nineteenth century: Ian Hacking on multiple personalities; Nicholas Rose on the emergence of psychiatry.
annotated in the 1880s, asserts that “in psychology the idea of personality is as fundamental as in biology is the idea of individuality. But the person, the ego, the thinking subject, assumed as a perfect unity, is but a theoretic conception. . . . Our personality breaks up into an infinity of sensations, sentiments, images and ideas, past or future; it is only a synthesis, an aggregate, a sum that is evergoing addition and subtraction, but of which the whole reality is in the concrete events which compose it.”

Certainly, “personality” appears in this passage more as an occasion for philosophic contemplation of the mutability of self than a precise concept bearing prescriptive force—how could an “evergoing” process involving an “infinity” of elements be known, let alone subjected to treatment or discipline? This conception of the unity of personality as the impermanent product of an ongoing process of coordination of constitutive elements, however, is developed more thoroughly in Les maladies de la personnalité (1885). There Ribot provides a systematic evolutionary account of the development of personality, or in a favorite paraphrase, “psychic individuality.”

He describes complex individual animals as evolutionary heirs of the “colonial” consciousnesses observable in various forms of primitive sea life. What differentiates more developed forms of individuality, such as that seen in humans, from predecessors are the nervous system, “pre-eminentely the factor of co-ordination,” and the “cortical substance” of the brain, “which represents all the forms of nervous activity: visceral, muscular, tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, motor, significatory” (50).

15 Daniel Harris’ dissertation.
of the various nervous processes of the individual body, "consciously personality, accordingly, cannot be a representation of all that takes place in the nervous centers: it is but an extract, a synopsis of it." Ribot concludes that "the organism and the brain, as its highest representation, constitute the real personality, containing in itself all that we have been, and the possibilities of all that we shall be. The complete individual is inscribed there, with all its active and passive aptitudes, sympathies and antipathies; its genius, talents or stupidity; its virtues, vices, torpor or activity. Of all these, what emerges and reaches consciousness is only a small item compared with what remains buried below, albeit still active. Conscious personality is always but a feeble portion of physical personality" (51).

The appeal of a form of self marked by the demotion of conscious intention, an ontological continuity with animals, a physiological reification of personal identity, and a degree of obscurity and complexity that precludes any conclusive individual self-knowledge is, perhaps, not immediately obvious.\(^{16}\) It is hard to imagine, for example, how such a self could be translated into a set of edifying invitations to personal imitation of the kind we find in Samuel Smiles’ \textit{Self-Help} (1859). And while the dominant metaphor of a subsequent depth psychology is key to the passage above—crucial aspects of the complete, authentic individual "buried below" the contents of consciousness—the model would seem to offer little in the way of the therapeutic possibility that psychoanalysis holds out for its subjects.

\(^{16}\) Indeed, objection to Ribot’s account arose even among the adamantly materialist physiological psychologists. James Sully, for example, while generally admiring of the work, objected to Ribot’s underestimation of the efficacy of “the intellectual factor”: “I cannot understand how a mere sum of nervous processes…can transform itself into even the most rudimentary form of an ego.” \textit{Mind}, London: (1885): 108.
Indeed, the ideal psychoanalytic subject is restored from a pattern of self-sabotaging repetition to a position of (relative) self-sovereignty after consciously working through repressed desires and traumatic experiences. A norm of self-aware intentionality—however provisional, mediated or precarious—underwrites the talking cure in many, if not most, of its formulations. The subject of personality as outlined in Ribot, however, seems comparatively reified—less a history of attachments, traumas and displacements to be remembered and worked through than an enormously complex thing to be endured or speculatively contemplated.

Some of the fantasmatic attractions of this late-Victorian notion of personality, however, come into focus in “Multiplex Personality,” an 1886 article by the F.W.H. Myers, one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research. The article provides a popularized version of Ribot’s conception of psychic individuality, or in Myers’ words, “the multiplex and mutable character of that which we know as the Personality of man” (648). The article opens with a series of famous cases of dissociation, sudden amnesia, double consciousness, and transformations of character effected by physical injury. The cases are united less by a coherent diagnostic taxonomy than by a pattern of sudden, apparently unmotivated transformations in behavior. All are instances of “the retrogressive change of personality, the dissolution into incoordinate elements of the polity of our being.” These retrogressive alterations are worth contemplating nonetheless, Myers claims, for what they reveal about personality, which he likens to a “vast manufactory, in

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17 “Multiplex Personality,” *The Nineteenth Century*, 20 (1886): 648-666. The article was widely republished after its initial appearance here.
which thousands of looms, of complex and differing patterns, are habitually at
work." (655):

Now, how do I come to have my looms and driving-gear arranged in this
particular way? Not, certainly, through any deliberate choice of my own. My
ancestor the ascidian, in fact, inherited the business when it consisted of little
more than a single spindle. Since his day my nearer ancestors have added
loom after loom. Some of their looms have fallen to pieces unheeded; others
have been kept in repair because they suited the style of order which the firm
had at that time to meet. But the class of orders received has changed very
rapidly during the last few hundred years. I have now to try to turn out
altruistic emotions and intelligent reasoning with machinery adapted to self-
preserving fierceness or manual toil. ... In this perplexity I watch what
happens in certain factories ... where the hidden part of the machinery is
subject to certain dangerous jerks or dislocations, after which the gearings
shift of themselves and whole groups of looms are connected and
disconnected in a novel manner. From hence I get at least a hint as to the
concealed attachments; and if I see that new arrangement working well I
have an object to aim at; I can try to produce a similar change, though a
smaller one, among my own looms and by my own manipulation.

Myers’ metaphor is of course bizarre and strained. Its instability and baroque
weirdness, I want to suggest, are less a function of writerly limitation than of the
tensions inherent to the concept of psychological personality circulating in the late
1880s and 1890s: counterfactual possibilities of feeling, thought and action reside
within organisms that are subject to profound hereditary determination;
personality is a kind of highly intricate machine that we inherit, but also the
potential site of a form of profound individual agency; an individual subject is his
personality, but also its owner-operator. Crucial to the fantasmatic work of the
concept, the machinery of personality is only ever partially employed by the
demands of particular situation—other fabrics of being can always be made from
“hidden parts” and disused looms. The exhilaration in “Multiplex Personality”
originates less in the particular technologies of alteration it proposes as sites for
further research (drugs, hypnosis) than in the certainty that different configurations—more moral and more efficient selves—reside within.  

II. Born in Exile: The Impersonality of Opinion

The narrative investment in personality in Thyrza, of course, does not manifest itself in transports of future-oriented exhilaration. Nor is it explicable in terms of fantasies of end-oriented self-alteration. Walter Egremont does not reform himself in order to re-commit to philanthropic work and to an unconventional future with Thyrza, after all. Rather, he leaves the scene—in Myers’ terms, his firm stops taking orders it is ill-suited to meet. The subsequent sudden presentation of unexpected capacities and feelings, and the disruption of habitual self-understanding it produces, ultimately has less to do with being in the United States than being out of England—extricated from the reified set of social and emotional positions that structure desire and self there.

Godwin Peak, the protagonist of Born in Exile (1892), however, undergoes precisely the kind of spontaneous reorganization that features in so many of the case studies through which Myers develops his notion of personality. Peak, on a listless holiday in Exeter from his deadening work as an industrial chemist in London, encounters Buckland Warricome, a former classmate at Whitelaw college.

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18 Reference here to subsequent genres of self-help literature that resemble personality fantasy, particularly the contemporary neoliberal discourse of “lifehacking.”

19 The particularities of his location, employment and social life in the U.S. are studiously unnarrated. The U.S. functions as a kind of psychologized version of Locke’s imperial fantasy of America as barren wilderness.
(Peak had been a prize-winning scholarship student at Whitelaw, but had abruptly abandoned his studies upon learning of his working-class uncle’s intention of leaving the East End to open a “rest’rant” across the street from the college.)

Despite a pang of fear that that his genteel former classmate knows the compromising circumstances of his abrupt departure from Whitelaw, Peak accepts an invitation to lunch. The rich atmosphere and soothing upper class speech of the Warricombe’s Devonshire home exert a powerful, transformative effect on him.

The embittered rationalism that has characterized Peak until this point in the novel (and recently found its most dramatic expression in an anonymously authored atheist article in The Critical) is strangely absent in his reply to a question posed to him by Warricombe’s father about a sermon that both men had happened to hear the previous day in Exeter cathedral:

Peak's reply was one of those remarkable efforts of mind—one might say, of character—which are sometimes called forth, without premeditation, almost without consciousness, by a profound moral crisis. A minute or two ago he would have believed it impossible to recall and state in lucid terms the arguments to which, as he sat in the Cathedral, he had barely given ear; he remembered vaguely that the preacher (whose name he knew not till now) had dwelt for a few moments on the topic indicated, but at the time he was indisposed to listen seriously, and what chance was there that the chain of thought had fixed itself in his memory? Now, under the marvelling regard of his conscious self, he poured forth an admirable rendering of the Canon’s views, fuller than the original—more eloquent, more subtle. For five minutes he held his hearers in absorbed attention.

This much-remarked upon moment in the novel—in which unintended operations of memory and interpretation transform the awkwardly self-conscious lower-middle-class atheist into a genteel aspirant to the Anglican clergy and suitor of Warricome’s sister—marks a significant turn in a plot that until this moment had all the marks of early-Gissingsesque slow decay. Following this moment, Peak
assumes the fraudulent identity that this strange feat of involuntary biblical exegesis opens to him—he gravitates, that is, towards a social position that better corresponds to the capacities and sympathies that manifested themselves so surprisingly at this moment.

Peak's project of self-realization through duplicitous upward mobility is of course doomed. His atheist past comes to light before he is able to execute his two-part plan to join the Anglican ministry and marry a Warricombe daughter. Exposed as an apparent hypocrite, Peak returns to his joyless work as a chemist in London, eventually dying alone while abroad. Even before the Warricombe circle learns of his atheist article in The Critical (his “savage attack” on a work of theology that attempted to reconcile natural science with Anglican dogma), Peak struggles to reproduce his new identity. In order to ingratiating himself to Mr. Warricombe (whose daughter and influence Peak wants to secure), he attempts to assuage the elder man’s anxieties about the tenability of Christian dogma in the nineteenth century. In doing so, Peak finds himself making precisely the kinds of arguments about the relation between Christian belief and the natural sciences that he had himself publicly attacked for their flimsiness and intellectual dishonesty:

Under stress of shame and intellectual self-criticism (for he could not help confuting every position as he stated it) his mind often wandered. When he ceased speaking there came upon him an uncomfortable dreaminess which he had already once or twice experienced when in colloquy with Mr. Warricombe; a tormenting metaphysical doubt of his own identity strangely beset him. With involuntary attempt to recover the familiar self he grasped his own wrist, and then, before he was aware, a laugh escaped him, an all but mocking laugh, unsuitable enough to the spirit of the moment. Mr Warricombe was startled, but looked up with a friendly smile.
At first glance, this narration of Peak’s psychic disintegration would seem to be straightforwardly grounded in that most Victorian of norms, sincerity: disparity between public avowal and felt conviction unravels the fabric of self. We could thus gloss the existential agonistics on display here as following from a simple conflict between the authentic core of Peak’s intellectual being (which manifests itself in the compulsive mental refutation of the arguments Peak is making orally and in the involuntary “mocking laugh” that punctuates his speech) and the unreal persona he has adopted.

_Born in Exile_, however, refuses the logic of sincerity and its tidy, normative partitioning of integrated selves (those who avow the true content of their convictions) and disintegrated selves (those who don’t). Attention to an important earlier scene of opinions avowed, in which Peak composes the satirical book review for the atheist journal, suggests that it is _the opinion-form itself_20—and not the sincerity of the avowing subject—that is at issue in the novel. Though Peak is persuaded by a friend’s assertion that “nothing would benefit [him] more than getting [his] soul into print”, the process of composition through which he mediates his atheist convictions is described in terms less suggestive of souls than of animal bodies. Indeed, Peak’s sincere avowal of opinion is not a scene of self-consolidation so much as involuntary spasm:

> [A]lready he had trembled with an impulse to write something on the subject, and during his journey home a possible essay had begun to shape itself. Late as was the hour he could not prepare for sleep. His brain throbbed with a congestion of thought; he struggled to make clear the lines on which his satire might direct itself. By two o’clock he had flung down on paper a conglomerate of burning ideas, and thus relieved he at length went to bed.

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20 Hadley, _Living Liberalism_.
Trembling, throbbing, flinging, burning, relief: the passage codes the mediation of opinion not as the externalization of a best self (i.e., a soul in print), but rather as the ejection of foreign material. Whatever the actual content of the text that is subsequently published in *The Critical* (the novel provides no selections from the essay), Peak’s article is coded here not as an object of self-externalization and identification so much as an unsavory body fluid.

*Born in Exile*, I want to suggest, marks a significant departure from the social-critical procedure that informs Gissing’s earlier novels of working- and lower-middle-class life. Novels like *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), *The Nether World* (1889) and *New Grub Street* (1892) present (frankly anti-egalitarian) critiques of English class society in the form of tragedies of unrecognized quality: the disastrous conclusions to the careers of Gissing’s lower-class protagonists function as protests against an unjustly hierarchical social system. The earlier, potentially politically-charged problematic gives way, however, to a more existential one: the solitary, silent fate of Godwin Peak, by contrast with his predecessors, ultimately has less to do with the injustices that obtain in a national lifeworld structured by reified class positions than with the characterological imperatives of sincerity—the imperative to repeat oneself in public. Marked by a “complex brain” (and a face “which no two observers would interpret the same way”), Peak is the site where the novel thinks through a mode of self that can only be distorted, or even damaged, by principled fidelity to opinion. That is, through the figure of Godwin Peak, the novel engages with personality, a register of self more intrinsic to the liberal subject than
character, but one whose constitutive complexity—even incoherence—necessarily complicates projects of affiliation, solidarity and national belonging.

III. The Form of Personality in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*

In the decades following its single-volume publication in 1903, the *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, the work of Gissing’s most widely read and acclaimed in its author’s lifetime, was discussed primarily in terms of genre and truth claim: Was the text to be read as a kind of aestheticized diary—one that, for all of its unconventional formal features, more or less unproblematically revealed the opinions, temperament and self-understanding of George Gissing? Or were the text and its narrator better understood as imaginative constructions that did not align meaningfully or consistently with the person and life of Ryecroft’s author? The problem *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* posed to contemporary readers is far less interesting than the paradoxical and almost unanimous answer that informs contemporary reviews, introductions to short story collections, and the many biographical essays published in British and American literary periodicals in the years following his death: the figures and events described are wholly fictitious, but *Ryecroft* is accurate autobiography all the same.

In *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, a 1912 biography of Gissing written by the novelist’s oldest and closest friend, for instance, Morley Roberts quotes short, decontextualized utterances from *Ryecroft* and then illustrates their truth with

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21 The work initially appeared in four parts over the course of 1902 in the *Fortnightly* under the title “An Author at Grass.”
anecdotes from his own time with his subject. The same tendency is evident in “George Gissing,” a 1906 essay written by Austin Harrison, who flatly asserts there that “in no way should Ryecroft be regarded as an autobiography.”22 And yet despite this protestation, in the same short piece Harrison (in a procedure anticipating Roberts’ more sustained treatment) draws upon passages of Ryecroft for insight into its author’s mind and character. Harrison’s treatment of the notorious episode in which Gissing was expelled from Owens college after stealing from classmates to support his lover turns to Ryecroft for an authoritative gloss: “As he himself wrote many years later: ‘Within my Nature, there seemed to be no faculty of rational self-guidance’” (218).

This critical conflation of Ryecroft and Gissing is remarkable not only for the evident, non-trivial divergences in the lives of the real and fictitious authors (Gissing did not unexpectedly inherit a £300 annuity; nor did he live and die in Devon etc.). Even if we set aside the non-alignment of key biographical particularities, there is the stagey emphasis in The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft upon the sheer mediated-ness of the text that readers encounter. In a preface signed “G.G.,” a fictitious editor explains that the work was assembled from entries in a diary kept over the final four years of his dead friend’s life. G.G. claims that while his dead friend’s diary was “not intended for the public,” it was most likely going to be reworked by Ryecroft into “a book which should be written merely for his own satisfaction” (). G.G. claims in the preface that upon detecting traces of “literary purpose” in his friend’s papers, he decided to edit and publish The Private Papers of

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22 “George Gissing,” The Nineteenth-Century and After, 455.
Henry Ryecroft. Such a task was difficult given G.G.’s certainty that Ryecroft himself would never have agreed to publish a “first-person volume”: “he would feel it too pretentious” (). Further difficulty was posed by the question of selection and arrangement. As Ryecroft’s entries in the fictitious “irregular diary” from which Ryecroft is drawn appeared chronologically and were dated only by month, G.G. decides that titling individual entries or arranging them according to subject “would have interfered with the spontaneity which, above all, I wished to preserve” ().

Given “how suitable many of the reflections were to the month with which they were dated,” G.G. selects the best of them and arranges them into a book divided into four seasons. The readers of Ryecroft, then, are positioned to imagine the post-preface text as an object that assumed its shape through the agency of an editor whose selections and arrangement were never authorized by their ostensible author. The fictitious editorial project dramatized in the preface is one of preserving the remarkable “sincerity” and “spontaneity” of an original sprawling diary while adapting its contents to the form of the commodity book.

[Then the chapter will further develop an account of the strange textual aesthetics of personality portraiture in The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft: its eschewal of plot, ostentatiously arbitrary arrangement of time, thematic condemnation of social and political engagement, and unique textual apparatus (one contemporary reviewer noting that it is the first work of fiction in English to feature an index—a formal feature that speaks volumes about the strange objecthood of personality).]