

The Modern City and the Construction of Female
Desire: Wells's *In the Days of the Comet*
and Robins's *The Convert*

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In October 1906, the well-known Fabian social reformer Beatrice Webb threw down the book she had just finished and dashed off a letter to Millicent Fawcett, president of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. She had changed her mind, she wrote, about the suffrage. Mrs. Fawcett was free to publish Mrs. Webb's testimony of her conversion to votes for women. On November 5, 1906, that testimony appeared for all to see in the central correspondence column of the *Times*.¹

That same November, Dorothy Richardson declared in *The Crank* that a celebrated novelist's "return to imaginative writing . . . was, surely, matter for rejoicing to all his readers." Yet she went on to castigate his latest novel for the incomplete nature of his reformist social vision:

So far he has not achieved the portrayal of a woman . . . His women are all one specimen, carried away from some biological museum of his student days, dressed up in varying trappings, with different shades of hair and proportions of freckles, with neatly tabulated instincts and one vague smile between them all.²

The very next year, the actress, novelist, and suffrage agitator Elizabeth Robins published a novel whose profits she shared equally between the Fawcett faction of the suffrage movement (the so-called "constitutional suffragists") and the more militant Women's Social and Political Union.³ Its heroine is an energetic and lovely young woman named Vida Levering, whose life is dedicated (as her name suggests) to that Archimedean search for a lever to move the world—or at least, to move Parliament to grant votes for women. Vida Levering attributes her conversion to suffrage work to the same book that catalyzed Beatrice Webb and disturbed Dorothy Richardson by its unimaginative and stock female characters: H. G. Wells's *In the Days of the Comet*.

What can we make of these three dramatic encounters with this visionary novel of political and sexual reform? Ironically, both more and less than

Wells might have expected. Anthony West, the son of Wells and Rebecca West, implies in his father's biography that Webb's conversion was a move *toward* what Wells's novel represented:

She had never until then had any use at all for the feminist movement, and had even spoken out against the agitation for votes for women in scathing terms. *In the Days of the Comet* turned her right round. As soon as she had finished the novel she dashed off a note to my father to tell him so, and within the hour she had written a more formal letter to Dame Millicent Fawcett . . . to let her know the good news. (p. 305)

However, Webb's diary entry for that day reveals her response to the work to be not the unqualified praise such a conversion might suggest, but rather a troubled assessment of the novel's strengths and weaknesses as a document of social reform. Asserting—against Wells's central position in the novel—"I still reject 'free love' as a method of development," Webb concluded: "H. G. Wells is, I believe, merely gambling with the idea of free love—throwing it out to see what sort of reception it gets—without responsibility for its effect on the character of hearers."⁴

While Beatrice Webb was ambivalent about the novel as social gospel, and Dorothy Richardson condemned its unrealistic idealization of women, Elizabeth Robins used her protagonist in *The Convert* to air an assessment almost wholly negative.⁵ Reading *In the Days of the Comet*, Vida Levering makes the bitter discovery that H. G. Wells, "the keenest intelligence we have applied to fiction . . . knows nothing about women" (pp. 207-08). Moreover, Robins's character castigates Wells for assuming that women can figure only in the private realm, but can make no contribution to public policy.

[His hero] says to the heroine—to his ideal woman he says, "Behind you and above you rises the coming City of the World, and I am in that building. Dear heart! you are only happiness!" That's the whole view of man in a nutshell . . . [a woman is] a minister of pleasure, negligible in all the nobler moods, all the times of wider vision or exalted effort! Tell me . . . in the building of that City of the Future, in the making of it beautiful, shall women really have no share? . . . That this man should think foundations can be well and truly laid when the best of one half the race are "only happiness, dear!" She turned on the threshold. "Whose happiness?" (p. 208)

There is pungent irony in the fact that Webb and Robins found Wells's novel pivotal for the suffrage struggle less because of the utopian vision it intended to articulate than because of its unintendedly retrograde vision of women—and of *what women want*. Vida's parting shot, from the threshold of suffragism, links women's role in the city to her happiness and problematizes

the issue of female desire, raising the question: what is woman's happiness? A comparison of the cities envisioned in Wells's and Robins's early modern novels of social reform will reveal that the authors answer this question very differently, despite the reformist intentions they shared. That remarkable difference has important implications for feminist criticism and urban studies.

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In the Days of the Comet turns on the appearance of a comet, whose misty green tail envelops the earth and catalyzes a marvelous conversion in all who breathe its vapors. As is so often the case in Wells's novels, the plot is driven by both scientific and sexual ardor. The young narrator burns with a reforming zeal equalled only by his passionate love for the working class woman who spurns him for his upper class rival. Wells's evocation of the world before "the change" wrought by the comet joins his other portraits of the ills of modern life, which were cherished texts to feminist reformers. Vera Brittain, on a speaking tour for the League of Nations Union in 1925, described New York in Wellsian terms to Winifred Holtby: "It is a queer feeling to be alone in the largest hotel in the largest city in the world—a city like no other city, filled with terrestrial monstrosities, which at night appears like the grim ghoulish worlds imagined in some of the novels of H. G. Wells."⁶ But the city that Brittain's letter recalls is the city before "the change." The coming of the comet changes both the cities and the people who live in them: in the three short hours the earth passes through the comet's tail human nature undergoes such a massive shift that the great statesman Melmound can find but one word to explain his abrupt change of heart from absorption in military planning to a sudden scepticism about all affairs of state: "I know what has happened to me. It's Conversion."⁷

Propelled by mass conversion experiences, society goes to work after the Change to abolish all that is not harmonious and beautiful. Wells's account of the resulting destruction of the cities is an ambivalent, nostalgic hymn to the cities of modernism, each engendering by its different mood and surroundings a different aesthetic vision, from the disorderly charm of London and the tasteful control of Paris to the brutal energy of New York:

Where is that old world now? Where is London, that sombre city of smoke and drifting darkness, full of the deep roar and haunting music of disorder, with its oily, shining, mud-rimmed, barge-crowded river, its black pinnacles and blackened dome, its sad wilderness of smut-greyed houses, its myriads of draggled prostitutes, its millions of hurrying clerks? The very leaves upon its trees were foul with greasy black defilements. Where is lime-white Paris, with its green

and disciplined foliage, its hard unflinching tastefulness, its smartly organized viciousness, and the myriads of workers, noisily shod, streaming over the bridges in the grey cold light of dawn? Where is New York, the high city of clangour and infuriated energy, wind swept and competition swept, its huge buildings jostling one another and straining ever upward for a place in the sky, the fallen pitilessly overshadowed? (pp. 973-74)

Wells's vision of the modernist city "before" the change focuses on specific city scenes familiar from modernist literature of the streets and boulevards, with the populace of each city reflecting in its spatial surroundings the familiar modernist mood of atomization, shock, and chance. Yet after the change, in contrast, "those cities of growth and accident are altogether gone" (p. 974). The city of the future reflects both different aesthetic codes and a different social vision, encompassing vast changes in social and sexual organization.

While the narrative sketches out that new order in all its variety, Wells's working-class hero only slowly grasps its implications: he need not relinquish the woman he loves simply because she also loves another. Initially, he resists such sexual sharing, making his feelings known in the highflown, sexually-stereotyped rationalizations that propelled Vida Levering to the suffrage cause: "I have given myself now to a new mistress—and it is I, Nettie, who am unfaithful. Behind you and above you rises the coming City of the World, and I am in that building. . . . No conflict of passion. . . must distract me" (p. 990). While he metaphorically describes the future world city as a woman, such a gynocentric construction of *his* new desire holds little promise for women. As Vida points out in *The Convert*, woman is not only unable to help build the future city whose gender she shares; she is never even consulted in its design. The protagonist's fantasy affair with the woman-city, whose welfare preoccupies him to the exclusion of his romantic ties to his actual beloved, grants woman no selfhood or authentic desire of her own. Because his vision of social progress never questions the nature of *woman's desire*, the hero never alters the quality of his relations with women. Interrogating woman's role in Wells's future city, asking with Vida Levering "whose happiness?" we must still answer, "his."

In her diary, Beatrice Webb also explored the implications for women and society of Wells's vision of sexual relations:

In the Days of the Comet. . . ends with a glowing anticipation of promiscuity in sexual relationships. The argument is one that is familiar to most intellectuals—it has often cropped up in my own mind and has seemed to have some validity. Friendship between particular men and women has an enormous educational value to both (especially to the woman). . . . But there remains the question whether, with all the perturbation caused by such intimacies, you

would have any brain left to think with? I know that I should not—and I fancy that other women would be even worse off in that particular.⁸

While Wells's fiction joins a long line of texts figuring women's motivation as exclusively erotic, Webb's commentary on it, asserting the power of desires other than the erotic in women's lives, joins an intertextual network discrediting that figuration. In these texts, as Nancy Miller points out,

egoistic desires . . . assert themselves paratactically alongside erotic ones. The repressed content . . . would be, not erotic impulses, but an impulse to power: a fantasy of power that would revise the social grammar in which women are never defined as subjects; a fantasy of power that disdains a sexual exchange in which women can participate only as objects of circulation.⁹

To the female desire for power—power to reform human relations, power to improve the world—Wells's utopia of free love offers little. Its benefits to women would be outweighed by its costs: the “perturbations” caused by multiple intimacies. Would the free-loving woman have “any brain left to think with”? Without it, what power could she wield?

If Wells's vision of female desire is simple or even simplistic, his representation of woman's place in that new city, supposedly the incarnation of all human desire, is simply mythic. The pre-comet city may be archetypally modernist, but with its passing and the erection of new rational cities with names like Caerlyon and Armedon, the Golden City, and the City of a Thousand Spires, Wells's vision of the future retreats into the past, with important consequences for his representation of gender relations. More feudal than futuristic, his cities resemble nothing so much as Tennyson's idyllic Camelot. They are “cities made by the loving hands of men for living men, cities men weep to enter, so fair they are, so gracious and so kind” (Wells, p. 975). Constructing these cities as women, men may weep to enter them, but once inside they rule them. Although *In the Days of the Comet* replaces sexual exclusivity with free love, in all realms but the sexual Wells joins his hero in retreating to a patriarchal, feudal vision, betraying what Robins called his “old-fashioned prejudice in favor of the ‘dolly’ view of women” (Robins, p. 208).

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Propelled by Wells's “dolly view of women,” Robins's *The Convert* situates woman's desire in a different relation to the modern city. Rather than serving as man's ideal happiness in some mythic city, Vida Levering plunges into present day London, there to fight for the key to her own practical hap-

piness: *Votes for Women*. The novel originated in Robins's suffrage play of that name. Subtitled "A Tract," *Votes for Women!* was unabashed in its desire to win converts to the suffrage cause. Ironically, Robins relied on the advice of H. G. Wells, along with Henry James and William Archer, to ensure that the message of the play would reach men as well as women (Marcus, p. viii).

Despite Wells's original advisory role, the novel that grew from the play took a perspective on urban space and female desire drastically different from the one Wells put forth in his novel only a year before. While *In the Days of the Comet* turns on the hero's changed conception of private sexual life, crucial to *The Convert* is a shift in the heroine's understanding of public urban space, a shift that is prompted by her own private sexual catastrophe. Before the novel begins, Vida Levering's love affair with prominent MP Geoffrey Stonor has ended, tragically, in an abortion and bitter estrangement. The ultimate consequences of this private calamity are far-reaching and public, and as they wind to their conclusion, distinctions between personal and political, private and public, collapse. While at the opening of the novel Vida Levering splits London into a public masculine political realm and a private female social realm, by the conclusion she sees London as a world in which private and public distinctions dissolve in the struggle for women's suffrage. Two contrasting scenes, one from the beginning of the novel and one from the middle, suggest the trajectory of Vida's political development.

Vida Levering first appears in the novel as a guest at her sister's dinner party. The world she encounters there is ingrown, privileged, self-congratulatory. As the Ambassador, who "knows his London," describes the milieu, "we are the most tolerant society on the face of the earth" (p. 19). Yet events reveal that this London really functions by what Herbert Marcuse has called repressive tolerance, silencing with its disregard whatever threatens the reigning ideology. In particular, it ignores the cause of women's suffrage. Vida's appearance in her sister's drawing room presages the disruption she and her fellow suffragists will create in the larger authoritarian world beyond the drawing room.

It is seldom that in this particular stratum of London life anything so uncontrolled and uncontrollable as a "sensation" is permitted to chequer the even distribution of subdued good humor that reigns so modestly in the drawing-rooms of the Tunbridge world. If any one is so ill-advised as to bring to these gatherings anything resembling a sensation, even if it is of the less challengeable sort of striking personal beauty, the general aim of the company is to pretend either that they see nothing unusual in the conjunction, or that they, for their part, are impervious to such impacts. (p. 9)

As the drawing room scenes illustrate, Vida's disruptive force lies in her challenge to the controlled environment of an inert society. To the anaesthetic drawing room atmosphere she introduces the shock of her physical beauty. And just as Vida's beauty disrupts the quiet of the drawing room, so her actions—once she converts to the suffrage cause—will challenge the ruling class's habitual defense against any "uncontrollable" political movements: the defense of denial ("to pretend either that they see nothing unusual in the conjunction, or that they . . . are impervious to such impacts").

Vida's challenge to the repressive tolerance of the drawing room is emblematic of her developing discovery of the personal significance of public space, an insight rooted in the novel's theatrical origins. When *Votes for Women!* was produced at the Court Theatre in 1907, it was most praised for its Trafalgar Square scenes (Marcus, p. viii). Vida joins her creator in appreciating both the personal nuances of public, political scenes and the public significance of personal desire. When Vida apologizes to a dinner companion for talking exclusively about her own concerns, she coins a phrase compactly linking female desire and public, urban space: "I've been rather horrid. I went and Trafalgar-Squared you, when I ought to have amused you" (p. 174). Vida's comment implies that for a woman to be concerned with her own desires, rather than those of her male companion, has political rather than sexual implications given the social taboo against female self-absorption. So the spatial locus of the figure is not Soho, haunt of prostitutes, but Trafalgar Square, traditional site for demonstrations by groups agitating for more power.

Just as Webb's focus on the conservation of female mental power moved her to discredit Wells's exclusive narrative attention to (male) erotic desire in his figuration of the ideal city after "the change," so in *The Convert*, Robins's stress on the female desire for power transforms the syntax of the urban narrative. In the novel's first Trafalgar Square scene, during which Vida begins her conversion to the suffrage struggle, Nelson's monument figures the impact upon London of free female speech.

Was the great shaft itself playing a part in the impression? Was it there not at all for memory of some battle long ago, but just to mark on the fair bright page of afternoon a huge surprise? What lesser accent than just this Titanic exclamation point could fitly punctuate the record of so strange a portent!—women confronting the populace of the mightiest city in the world—pleading in her most public place their right to a voice in her affairs. (p. 86)

The "great shaft" no longer defines and memorializes Nelson's imperial power, but now has the more humble role of an exclamation mark, punctuat-

ing women's suffrage speeches. Phallic punctuation subverted, the monument comes to stand not for male power but for female empowerment. This "fair bright page" of one afternoon in the suffrage struggle enacts a woman's authorial empowerment as well, in its initiatory function for the narrative that becomes Robins's *The Convert*.

Given Robins's irritation with Wells's "dolly" view of women, it is not surprising that the radically revised urban vision of *The Convert* includes a strikingly different representation of female desire. While Wells's narrative escapes an initial flirtation with modernism to retreat into nostalgic feudalism rather than true reform, Robins's urban vision accommodates a genuine shift in social and sexual relations. Before "the change," Wells's main image of the woman/city encounter is the street walker, condemned to urban isolation and poverty (so goes the myth) by her illicit desires. While woman's options after the change in the "city of the world" initially appear broader, reality is otherwise: that male-constructed, male-inhabited city does not express or accommodate the many varieties of female consciousness. Rather, Wells's woman is still constrained to the love motive, still imagined as propelled not by creativity, work, or the desire for power, but by love alone. The marriage plot still reigns supreme, though now it figures an "open marriage."

In *The Convert*, in contrast, the dominant female motive is gradually revealed to be not love but work, and the novel's ending escapes the hermetic confines of the marriage plot. To Wells's image of the future city where woman exists as "only happiness" (only men's happiness), Robins offers a counter image of the present city, in which women are subjects, not objects, of desire. And that desire is, as always for women, truly multiple.¹⁰ As the novel reveals them, these multiple desires include not only the desire to love and be loved, but also the desire to do meaningful work and—perhaps most important—to give authentic voice to one's experiences as a woman. The move from object to subject coincides with a move from marginality in the drawing room to centrality in Trafalgar Square and a shift from silence or speaking for others to articulating one's own—multiple—desires. While in an early scene of the novel Vida expostulates, "What absurd things we women fill up the holes in our lives with!," by the novel's conclusion Vida has abandoned the leisured lady's way of life to acknowledge the desire for power she only jokingly admitted earlier: "I'm afraid the truth is I like managing things" (p. 42). Moreover, by the conclusion the erotic subtext motivating female activity (as a way of "filling up . . . holes") has given way to a manifest political text based on a non-erotic construction of female desire. The speech Vida gives near the novel's conclusion explicitly rejects the erotic motivation in favor of the political: "it would be a bad day for England if all women felt about all men *as I do*" (p. 270). Linking her private suffering

when she found herself pregnant and abandoned to the sufferings of homeless women of the streets, Vida's speech converts her friend Jean from being the object of another's desire to the subject of her own. After the speech, Jean resists the directions of her fiancé, Geoffrey Stonor, "Here! follow me! . . . We can get out quicker on this side," retorting, "I don't *want* to get out." Instead, she informs Stonor that she is going "to ask that woman to let me have the honour of working with her" (p. 270).

Jean's conversion is accompanied by a new sort of speech: before, she expected to speak only for her politician husband; now, Jean learns to speak politically for herself. In acknowledging her hostility to men and her motivation by political rather than erotic desire, Vida has also changed the nature of her speech. No longer does Vida speak of love for Stonor or even of her desire that *he* speak of his love for their child. Now she speaks of a better world for all women. Muted for so long by her personal sufferings, now that she speaks and works to end the sufferings of others, Vida has been transformed from "a lady who is not accustomed to speaking . . . in Trafalgar Square, or . . . as a matter of fact, at all," to a woman who is "free to say what [she thinks]" (pp. 262, 289).

iv

Robins's London of free female speech and Wells's harem-like City of the Future are both creations of the early modern era: Wells's novel was published in 1906, Robins's in 1907. Criticism has by now formulated in some detail just what such an early modern genesis might mean, both for the portrait of the modern city and for the modernist novel in which such a portrait appears. In their introduction to *Visions of the Modern City*, William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock survey the three stages of literary representation of the modern city. To summarize their argument briefly (and consequently somewhat brutally), those stages are: the industrial revolution (Dickens, Mayhew, Engels) with its focus on "revolution in lifestyle and consciousness"; high modernism (Joyce, Eliot) in which "the defining context of modern life became an urban one, and modern consciousness an urban consciousness," while writers focused on "the psychological, internalized landscape of the city and its effect on human consciousness"; and universal urbanity where the city has become a "nonspatial area" and the movement to a decentralized urban field has required the visual vocabulary of the nineteenth-century city to change. While Sharpe and Wallock's last category is in danger of merging with postmodernism, as defined variously by Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, their list is an otherwise faithful rendition of literary criticism's construction of modernism and the modernist city.¹¹ Yet if we approach the

novels of Wells and Robins expecting to find in both such a modernist portrait of the city, we risk some disappointment.

Manifestly, Wells's portrait of the city in *In the Days of the Comet* owes much to modernism. The novel both displays the traits of what Sharpe and Wallock call the "industrial revolution" stage of the literary portrait of the city and anticipates in places the individualistic and psychologically-obsessed city of high modernism. Yet while we can discover the modernist city in Wells's novel, if our chosen text is *The Convert*, we will have a harder time—despite its equally urban setting—in locating the familiar qualities of literary modernism. As with so many texts by women, it eludes our neat plot categories and clashes with our sense of literary probabilities.

The dynamic that Nancy Miller has identified in the work of women novelists—the move from a love-based plot structure to one defying the novel's generic stress on love-and-marriage as the crucial female story—operates in *The Convert* as well. Vida Levering begins as a single woman jilted by the man she desired; she ends as a woman in single pursuit of her newly articulated, non-erotic desire for female emancipation and enfranchisement. Vida's modern London is transfigured by that shift in the meaning of female desire, so as to render inappropriate the classic definition of modernism, "in which each aspect of city life seems to generate or demonstrate a characteristic of this artistic movement—multiplicity of meaning, loss of sequential or causal connection, breakdown of signification, and dissolution of community."¹² Rather, the city that Elizabeth Robins represents in *The Convert* is not the classic high modernist city of anomie, fragmentation, and alienation, but a city where increasingly unified, committed, and purposive collective work is possible. Once desire is freed from its narrowly (hetero)sexual context, meaning no longer fragments, but begins to consolidate. As the novel affirms the perspective of its suffrage heroine, the novel's spatial field shifts and its female characters move from marginality to centrality in early modern London. Causal connections become clear to women newly empowered by their pro-suffrage work, and in each case a link is forged between the narrowly personal and the broadly political aspects of desire. So Jean Dunbarton comes to understand the relationship between Vida's abandonment by Geoffrey Stonor and her concern for the lot of homeless women; Stonor sees the link between his abandonment of Vida and the need of all oppressed women for the vote. By the end of the novel, community is not dissolving but forming, as women work together to achieve the franchise. In short, while the sovereign unified male subject—represented climactically in the crucial Trafalgar Square suffrage rally scenes as the great shaft of Nelson's column—is decentered, that decentering is but the enabling act for a reconfiguration of the novel and its characters around a central modern event: the suffrage struggle.¹³

The focus on the suffrage cause, as the social articulation of a different notion of female desire (from its private figuration as erotic/romantic love to public figuration as political or creative power), accounts in part for the disjunction between Wells's and Robins's novels of social reform. Rendered only as object of male sexual desire, women are marginal to Wells's cities, before and after the supposedly transformative comet; in contrast, the nature of female desire is the central problematic of *The Convert*. Yet the contrast between the representations of female desire in the modern city in these two early modern reformist novels suggests that we must also recognize the gender bias in our definition of modernism and of the modernist city. Critical neglect of writing by women in the modern period has distorted the very construction of modernism, limiting literary critics to a partial and hence inadequate formulation of the period. The failure of Robins's novel to fit our categories for the modernist city really signals the failure of our categories to take adequate account of female experience and discourse.¹⁴ As recent analyses of the woman writer's treatment of the modern city have demonstrated, women have experienced and have written about the city differently from men, and consequently they have constructed a very different kind of modernism. As modern women writers encountered and transformed the textual city to make generic plots more accommodating to their own desires, they told a very different tale from that of their high modernist brothers: a tale not only of the disfranchisement and disintegration of the sovereign male subject, but also of woman's enfranchisement, both literal and literary.

NOTES

¹ Anthony West, *H. G. Wells: Aspects of a Life* (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 305.

² D. M. Richardson, "In the Crank's Library: *In the Days of the Comet*," *The Crank*, 4 (November 1906), 372-76. Anthony West asserts that it was during this month that Dorothy Richardson began her ill-fated love affair with H. G. Wells. In West's egregiously partisan biography, Richardson's literary activities receive the same mocking treatment as her romantic ones: "she hadn't the light touch needed to make a success of hack work for the dailies and had a positive nose for the unrewarding outlet, selecting as her markets such publications as *Ye Crank*" (West, p. 341). Of course, that Richardson had a brief, unhappy love affair with Wells does not invalidate her criticism of his novel. I am grateful to Diane Gillespie for calling this review to my attention.

³ Jane Marcus, "Introduction: The Divine Rage to Be Didactic," *The Convert*, by Elizabeth Robins (London: The Women's Press, Ltd., 1980), p. vii. Subsequent references to *The Convert* will appear parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Lovat Dickson, *H. G. Wells: His Turbulent Life and Times* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 153.

⁵ In this assessment, Vida Levering echoed her creator, who fumed in a letter to the secretary of the Women Writers' Suffrage League, "what is this about H. G. Wells reading at a Suffrage meeting! Mr. Wells is a profoundly interesting person and a genius but he has used his great powers publicly not only to ridicule the suffrage cause but . . . to misrepresent the workers in it," quoted in Marcus, p. xii.

⁶ Quoted in David C. Smith, *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), p. xi.

⁷ H. G. Wells, *In the Days of the Comet: Seven Science Fiction Novels of H. G. Wells* (New York: Dover Publishing Inc., 1934), p. 949. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text. Curiously, both Wells and Robins chose conversion as their metaphor for the change their characters experience. Yet the conversions, while similar in name, are dramatically different in kind. Wells's characters take the customary route from unredeemed and brutish incivility to a new, redeemed, rational (albeit still sexist) civility. The conversion experiences of Robins's characters are less amenable to a religious construction: converted to the suffrage movement, they are less self-abnegating, more assertive and disruptive. Conversion on Robins's terms would be anathema to Wells, at least where women are concerned.

⁸ Dickson, p. 153.

⁹ Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," *PMLA*, 96 (January 1981), 36-48, 41.

¹⁰ Luce Irigaray is one of the foremost current exponents of this theory of the multiplicity of female sexual desire. Susan Suleiman's concise summary of Irigaray's argument recalls the transformed meaning of the monument in Robins's Trafalgar Square scene:

At the risk of a tremendous generalization, one can say that all of Irigaray's critique . . . is directed against the cornerstone of Freudian and Lacanian theory: the primacy of the phallus. It is the erection—if one may put it that way—of the phallus to the status of transcendental signifier that enabled Lacan to theorize the exclusion of women from the symbolic, that is, from the Law of the father and from language. . . . The insistence on the uniqueness, and the unicity, of the erect phallus has rendered impossible the realization that woman's sexuality is not one but multiple, not based on the gaze that objectifies but on the touch that unites. . . .

Susan Rubin Suleiman, "(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism," *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 7-29, 12-13.

¹¹ William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, "From 'Great Town' to 'Nonplace Urban Realm': Reading the Modern City," in Sharpe and Wallock, eds., *Visions of the Modern City* (New York: Heyman Center for the Humanities, Columbia University, 1983), pp. 7-46, 16-23. See also Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 146 (July-August 1984), pp. 53-92; and Jean

Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture* (Townsend, Washington: The Bay Press, 1983), pp. 126-34.

¹² Sharpe and Wallock, p. 11.

¹³ The focus on political consequences in the world—the attainment of the suffrage—that ties this text to realism also positions it between the centered position of male modernism (which, as I have pointed out, *The Convert* deliberately *decenters*) and the equally male postmodernist vision that would succeed it. As E. Ann Kaplan has speculated in her recent study of that supremely postmodernist form, MTV, the feminist concern for change not just in discourse but in material social conditions has limited the appeal of postmodern art forms for feminist artists. See Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987).

¹⁴ While the effacement of the female contribution to literary modernism has clearly distorted and narrowed the critical paradigm of modernism, it is not adequate simply to attach a supplementary female modernism. As Shari Benstock points out, "Tempting as it might be . . . to oppose women Modernists to a parent culture defined as monolithic or to argue that a collective female experience resulted in a homogeneous women's literature . . . such readings produce all too predictable results: individual experience (for both male and female) is once again submitted to communal claims," *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 32. However, it is crucial to realize that women have articulated a distinct and different response to the modern city, which must be considered by critics seeking a fuller picture of literary modernism. See, for example, Susan Squier, ed., *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), and Bonnie Kime Scott's forthcoming collection, *The Gender of Modernism* (Indiana University Press), which are only two of a number of works that aim to rectify the male-oriented nature of modernist studies.