The scattered dinner tables of the modern world, the chase and eddy of the various currents which composed the Society of our time, could only be dominated by a giant of fabulous dimensions. 

Woolf, “How It Strikes a Contemporary”

... their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables even.

Woolf, Orlando: A Biography

In an unsigned essay published in 1923 – a year after modernism’s so-called annus mirabilis – Virginia Woolf declared the independence of a new literary generation. She did so not, as one might expect, on the grounds of its recent spate of creative energy. On the contrary, her essay complains of a “barren and exhausted age... incapable of sustained effort,” whose meager output is “littered with fragments, and not seriously to be compared with the age that went before.” What sparse praise she bestows on her “contemporaries” is qualified by assertions of their deficiency: a few phrases of T. S. Eliot might endure, and Joyce’s Ulysses, a “memorable catastrophe – immense in daring, terrific in disaster,” might persist, but as a whole the “moderns” had produced little of value to offer to the canon. 'Lamenting the dearth of literary talent among her peers, she argues that not one had produced anything to “penetrate beyond our day to that not very distant future which it pleases us to call immortality. ... We must look back with envy to the past,” she confesses.

“How It Strikes a Contemporary” (a title borrowed from Robert Browning) indicates the degree to which Woolf was preoccupied with guiding the critical reception of “modernism” in advance by positioning “the moderns” within the longue durée of English literary history. 2 What most defined this new generation of writers, according to Woolf, was not a specific aesthetic style or formal innovation, but an historic schism.
“We are sharply cut off from our predecessors,” she claims: “A shift in the scale – the war, the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages – has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present.” This scalar shift was so extreme, she contends, that those who came of age in the wake of the war could no longer identify with the lived experience of their predecessors. “Every day we find ourselves doing, saying, or thinking things that would have been impossible to our fathers.” The war had, in her view, ruptured the continuity of history itself, opening a rift so vast that generations on either side might as well be living in separate worlds.

Woolf’s historicizing arguments bear directly on the authors discussed in this book. Contemporaneous but not “contemporary,” these specific authors – Wells, Hardy, and Conrad – were the very figures against which Woolf defined the membership and principles of “modern” novelists. Moreover, the persistent tendency among literary scholars to place the former group into one period, and Woolf into another, reflects her own efforts to promote the significance of a generational divide. Woolf insisted, for example, that there was “no master in whose workshop the young are proud to serve apprenticeship. Mr. Hardy has long since withdrawn from the arena, and there is something exotic about the genius of Mr. Conrad which makes him not so much an influence as an idol, honoured and admired, but aloof and apart.” Her much-cited essay, “Modern Fiction” (1919), likewise expresses “unconditional gratitude for Mr. Hardy, for Mr. Conrad” before dismissing “even a work of such originality” as *Ulysses*, which “fails to compare, for we must take high examples, with *Youth* or *Jude the Obscure*. It fails, one might say simply, because of the comparative poverty of the writer’s mind.” Yet as Woolf’s praise for the “immortal” works of these older authors rises to the level of eulogy, her ageist subtext becomes increasingly clear: Hardy (“withdrawn”) and Conrad (“aloof and apart”) have become inaccessible to her generation, and incapable of identifying with it.

As for Wells, then one of Britain’s most prominent, prolific novelists, Woolf judged his representations of the contemporary world to be out of touch. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), she memorably paints Wells as a purveyor of false utopias – a socialist who has lost sight of fundamental changes in “human character.” She argues that if Wells were to encounter a hypothetical train passenger, a “Mrs. Brown,” he would overlook what her idiosyncrasies of dress, gesture, and demeanor disclose – that her lived reality is private, interior, and subjectively experienced. Instead, “Mr. Wells would instantly project upon the windowpane...
a vision of a better, breezier, jollier, happier, more gallant world, where these musty railway carriages and dusty old women do not exist.”

Withholding the gratitude she bestows on Hardy and Conrad, she goes on to assert that Wells has excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking [him] for having shown us what it is that we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do. . . . [T]he sooner English fiction turns its back on [him], as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul.

Yet by framing her disparagement of Wells as a struggle for the very “soul” of “English fiction,” Woolf also seemed to be implying that the moderns might not yet be so “sharply cut off” from those they sought to succeed. And if we instead perceive Woolf’s criticism to be playing a more active role in cutting off Hardy, Conrad, and Wells – all of whom were alive and writing during the early twentieth century, The Great War, and for much of her career (Wells, of course, even afterwards) – we begin to apprehend the ways in which Woolf’s generational understanding of literary history depends on relegating certain writers to the past – on rendering these living contemporaries untimely.

This chapter argues that Woolf had more in common with Hardy, Conrad, and Wells than her critical essays would suggest. Though she is typically celebrated for her commitment to diminutive scales, for her intensive rather than extensive approach to narrating lived experience, and for her principle to “not take it for granted that life exists more in what is commonly thought big than what is commonly thought small,” Woolf also explored “immensities” – including deep time, national identity, and literary history – by working in popular genres. Her frequent returns to genre seem at odds with famous injunction to discard “the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelists” and instead to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall,” to “trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.” Yet working at this atomic level of detail proved exhausting, and the strenuous effort of writing “serious poetic experimental books whose form is so closely considered” – especially To the Lighthouse (1927), The Waves (1931), and The Years (1937) – left her feeling creatively depleted. Following each she found a reprieve in genre, with Orlando: A Biography (1928), a 300-year personal history; Flush: A Biography
(1933), an account of Victorian lives told from the point of view of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel; and *Between the Acts* (1941), whose metatheatrical pageant play abridges English history in four short scenes. By embracing rather than discarding generic conventions, Woolf created historical pastiches – narrative sketches or outlines that (to borrow Pound’s phrase) “include history.” Though these works tend to be regarded as less artistically serious than Woolf’s major novels, I argue that their significance lies in what their capriciousness affords: the capacity to scale out from “closely considered” form, to playfully mix the predominant literary conventions of the past, and to expand fiction across broad swathes of historical time.

In *Orlando, Flush*, and *Between the Acts*, Woolf tarries with the idea that historical periods are demarcated by widespread changes of temperament and sensibility, by shifts of “human character.” These affective shifts are expressed by the prevailing aesthetic qualities (and ultimately, the artistic quality) of the period to which their authors belong – be it Elizabethan, Georgian, Victorian, Edwardian, or “modern.” While Woolf often described these changes as punctual events (e.g. “on or about December 1910”), they tended to appear so only in retrospect, and as manifestations of collective, rather than individual experience. Representing this form of aggregated experience, however, required a much larger perspective than those we commonly associate with Woolf’s novels: far exceeding “the everyday,” the “moment of being,” and the “atomic” order of the mind’s impressions, this common experience occurs on the scale of the generation.

In this chapter, I attend to how the generation functions for Woolf as a means of narrating scales beyond the conventional lifetimes of individual characters, for representing the broader horizons that she associated with the “climate of the age.” For Woolf, I argue, “climate” denotes an extensive, affective concept inclusive of both weather and social temperament. I begin with *Orlando*, a novel that navigates “climate change” in this doubled sense of over a range of scales – local, national, and global – by stretching a single human lifetime over centuries. Mobilizing nonrealistic conceits to exceed the restrictive temporalities of realism (as Wells does in *The Time Machine*) allows *Orlando* to connect chronologically disparate dates and events. By nevertheless adhering explicitly to biographical form – not in the allegorical, Lukácsian sense of novelistic containment but as a fictional rendition of the genre of biography, of life history – it cultivates a mode of temporal development that preserves subjectivity over the *longue durée.*
I go on to consider how the expansive historical outlook that Woolf cultivates in *Orlando* opens onto the present crises of global warming and mass extinction. While Woolf neither perceived nor described those crises in contemporary terms, her novel testifies to the fact that literary fiction has been representing the ineffable situation of climate change, both explicitly and unconsciously, for much longer than we might suspect. *Orlando*, I argue, models the experience of climate change in ways that anticipate today’s growing calls for new forms and genres that can help to make sense of our unstable and uncertain temporalities. By conceptualizing climate as both a meteorological and sociological phenomenon, it attunes us to an “aesthetic sphere” that extends across and beyond territorial borders and demarcations of period. Finally, I examine historical repetition and reenactment as a means of cultural reproduction in *Between the Acts*, describing how these exercises in “one-making” are made ironic by the looming specter of total war – the final, existential conflict that threatens to connect all generations through extinction.

**Orlando and the Genres of Deep Time**

As “a rough measure of historical time,” a generation can refer to “the average time it takes for children to grow up, become adults, and have children of their own, generally considered to be about thirty years.” Yet Woolf’s application of the term “generation” rarely signifies a linear process of biological reproduction; rather, her meaning corresponds more closely to the definition proposed in Karl Mannheim’s influential essay “The Problem of Generations” (1923). Mannheim identifies generations as social phenomena that are shaped when significant historical events, experienced in youth, instill a cohort with collective “modes of behavior, feeling and thought.” This understanding of the term is clearly operative in Woolf’s discussion of the “contemporary” in 1923 – a category she limits to “young,” “modern” writers for whom the Great War was the formative experience. Elsewhere, she links the concepts of “genre” and “generation” by depicting history not as a straightforward, chronological sequence of dates, but as a shifting, evolving series of styles, each of which reflects a distinctive change in human character.

This connection resonates with sociological theories of “entelechy” that emerged in the interwar period. The historian Walter Pinder described generational entelechy as form of collective consciousness: “an unfolding process, with its own unity, inner aim, and law of development,” that informed the “various arts, languages, races, and styles” of self-organizing...
groups within a wider social milieu.\textsuperscript{16} Robert Wohl observes that Mannheim “was impressed by Pinder’s insight into the noncontemporaneity of contemporaries and the notion of entelechies, which he identified as an adaptation and extension of Alois Reigl’s idea of \textit{Kunstwollen} or ‘art motifs.’”\textsuperscript{17} Changes in creative expression were thus regarded by sociologists of the time as reliable metric for grasping the pace of generational change. In “The Problem of Generations,” Mannheim associates the unfolding process of artistic forms directly with the periodic succession of social cohorts, arguing that a rhythm in the sequence of generations is far more apparent in . . . free human groupings such as salons and literary circles – than in the realm of institutions, which for the most part lay down a lasting pattern of behaviour, either by prescriptions or by the organization of collective undertakings, thus preventing the new generation from showing its originality.\textsuperscript{18} “The rhythmic pulse (what Mannheim calls the “tempo”) of generational change was more readily discernable in the rise and fall of fads than in institutional structures; the informal, ephemeral style of the former captured the quickening pace of developments that the latter worked to retard. For Mannheim, this meant that “the aesthetic sphere is perhaps the most appropriate to reflect overall changes of mental climate.”\textsuperscript{19}

Mannheim’s formulation has been influential among literary scholars who aim to expand beyond narrow historicism by tracing the lifecycle of forms and styles over the \textit{longue durée}. Franco Moretti has gone furthest toward adapting it in an effort to demonstrate that patterns in literary history can usefully track sociological phenomena, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{20} In \textit{Graphs, Maps, Trees}, he identifies the “hidden tempo” of the novel’s overarching history – its rise, diversification, and territorial expansion – in the rhythmic pattern of genre formation. He borrows Fernand Braudel’s \textit{Annales school} model of a “tripartite” historical structure, which consists of three concentric scales, “Event, cycle, \textit{longue durée}: three time frames which have fared very unevenly in literary studies.”\textsuperscript{21} For Moretti, these distinct temporal scales are significant insofar as each brings a different set of objects into focus:

Most critics are perfectly at ease with the first one, the circumscribed domain of the event and of the individual case; most theorists are at home at the opposite end of the temporal spectrum, in the very long span of nearly unchanging structures. But the middle level has remained somewhat unexplored by literary historians; and it’s not even that we don’t work within that time frame, it’s that we haven’t yet fully understood its specificity: the fact,
I mean, that cycles constitute temporary structures within the historical flow. That is after all the hidden logic behind Braudel’s tripartition: the short span is all flow and no structure, the longue durée all structure and no flow, and cycles are the – unstable – border country between them.  

Moretti contends that within the tripartition of literary history, the middle-ground, or “cycle,” remains the most unstudied phase, since its unstable formations cannot be neatly scaled down to the “individual case,” nor up to ontological category of “nearly unchanging structures.” He goes on to suggest that these “cycles” might be measured in the temporary structures of genres, which appear to flow and ebb over a regular period of “twenty-five years or so.” These findings, however, raise another important question: where does the oscillating twenty-five-year rhythm of genres come from? The temporal pattern of genres, he speculates, corresponds with the progression of social “generations.” While Moretti immediately expresses reservations about mapping sociological theory onto literary history, he concludes that a generational model – in which the habits and tastes of succeeding cohorts are reflected in trends of literary production and consumption – represents the best fit for the data. In similar ways, then, both Mannheim and Moretti find in the overlapping rhythm of genres and generations a strong correlation between the lifecycles of literary forms and the lifecycles of social formations.

In Orlando, Woolf utilizes this rhythm to drive narrative progress. The shifting cycles of genre become a means of navigating between the individual case (what the protagonist experiences subjectively, firsthand) and the longue durée (the flow of time to which specific events contribute, but which remains irreducible to them). By measuring history in terms of changes in the “aesthetic sphere,” and “changes of mental climate,” Woolf invokes a metaphor that becomes literal. The hyperobject of climate itself heaves into view, taking on its own force and agency within the novel. It disrupts the lives and fortunes of characters, alters the course of national development, and shapes the development of new artistic modes for representing it.

Orlando is an oddity in Woolf’s oeuvre. It departs from the “method” of interior subjectivity and impressionistic description that Woolf claimed to have “made perfect” in To the Lighthouse (1927) just a year earlier. Formally experimental, Orlando nevertheless turns away from the high seriousness of Woolf’s prior novel by offering a wry, credulous account of a protagonist who after more than 300 years is just approaching middle age, who suddenly changes from a man to a woman midway through the story, and who experiences the progress of history from a continuous point of view.
Orlando’s perception of “time passing” therefore occurs over multiple, seemingly disconnected scales, ranging from the Dallowayan intensity of the single day to the superhuman lifespan of centuries. In this respect, the character Orlando is perhaps less like any of the Ramsays and more like their summer home on Skye, whose temporal perspective occupies the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*. Staged as an interlude between two longer sections consisting of a single day, “Time Passes” condenses the decade of the Ramsays’ absence (and the deaths of three family members) into a lyrical flow. Emptied of human characters, the slow force of entropy works invisibly but inexorably upon the house: routines of daily life are suspended and “stillness” prevails, punctuated only occasionally by an explosion of sound as when “a board sprang on the landing,” an event that the narrator relates to “a rupture” following “centuries of quiescence.” This famous passage invests time itself with narrative agency (an agency reinforced by the intransitive construction “time passes”).

Houses are likewise charged with temporal significance in *Orlando*. But whereas the Ramsays’ summer residence represents a site of seasonal renewal, Orlando’s home is designed to capture the cyclical rhythms of days, weeks, months, seasons, and years. The massive palace (modeled on Vita-Sackville West’s ancestral pile, Knole House) is a “calendar house” where “three hundred and sixty-five bedrooms were full for a month at a time. Guests jostled each other on the fifty-two staircases” (82). *Orlando* parodies the conceit of “Time Passes” as the biographer/narrator describes a variety of ways for marking time, moving up and down the scales in a playful reference to Woolf’s prior novel:

Here he came then, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. He saw the beech trees turn golden and the young ferns unfurl; he saw the moon sickle and then circular; he saw – but probably the reader can imagine the passage which should follow … how things remain much as they are for two or three hundred years or so, except for a little dust and a few cobwebs which one old woman can sweep up in half an hour; a conclusion which, one cannot help feeling, might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that “Time passed” (here the exact amount could be indicated in brackets) and nothing whatever happened. (74)

Here the reader is reminded that ordered regularity is essential for temporal scalability. Only repeating patterns can be meaningful chronometers, since temporal units – day, week, month, season, year – are demarcated by cyclical returns to their beginnings. Sheer repetition, however, does not
signify progress, and the biographer’s comment that, “nothing whatever happened,” suggests that there has been no significant change from routines that could be reorganized in “half an hour.”29 Nevertheless, this regimented “punctuality” is at odds with Orlando’s affective sense of time, which, “though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man” (72). Obliquely channeling Bergson, Proust, and Einstein, Orlando’s biographer grapples with the relativistic ways in which “the mind of man” can exert “equal strangeness upon the body of time,” by stretching out the subjective experience of an hour “to fifty or a hundred times its clock length” or by condensing it into a “falling second,” shading it “a thousand tints,” and filling it with “all the odds and ends in the universe” (72). Even as the novel undertakes the staggering task of narrating over three centuries, Woolf’s commitment to the mind’s “queer” operations on the “body of time” calls attention to a major scalar dilemma for biographical form, one that preoccupies and motivates modernist fiction and Woolf’s writing especially: how to measure the felt significance and intensity of subjective experiences whose temporalities cannot be made to conform to the organizing logic of chronological sequence.

But whereas in most of Woolf’s novels this problem tends to be addressed by an inward turn – a move toward dailiness and interiority – in Orlando it motivates what Davis characterizes as an “outward turn” among late modernists who sought to “render legible their moment of systemic disorder by attending to the particulars of everyday life” in the hope, “in the end, that the arrangement of those particulars might yield some tangible knowledge about a crumbling world-system.”30 But instead of extrapolating the total from the specific, Orlando’s formal challenge is to find a middle ground between the temporal horizons of the instant and the longue durée, both of which are potentially expansive enough to block narrative progress entirely. Woolf here uses genre as a medium, linking it formally to the temporal succession of generations. This strategy is apparent in her original conception of the novel, which framed her friend and lover Vita Sackville-West not as an individual but as an ancestry, a family tree whose origins stretched back to Queen Elizabeth.31 In Vita’s own account of her lineage and its noble seat, she remarks, “such interest as the Sackvilles have lies, I think, in their being so representative. From generation to generation they might stand, fully equipped, as portraits from English history . . . let them stand each as the prototype of his age, and at the same time as a link to carry on . . . and they immediately acquire
a significance, a unity.” 

Woolf’s diary imagines the possibility of tracing a generational history of England along these lines:

One of these days, I shall sketch here, like a grand historical picture, the outlines of all my friends. . . . It might be a way of writing the memoirs of one’s own times during people’s lifetimes. It might be a most amusing book. The question is how to do it. Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman. There should be Lytton. & it should be truthful, but fantastic.

Woolf’s entry describes her interest in working across several genres in a single text: “like a grand historical picture” it should dramatize events that have defined an age in the manner of a historical novel; as a “memoir of one’s own times during people’s lifetimes” it should develop the structure of a biography by focusing on a central figure whose constellation of ideas, impressions, and activities characterize a distinctive historical moment or milieu; and as an “amusing book” that imagines the adventures of a Vita as a “young nobleman,” it should include the heroic and fanciful aspects of romances, like its namesake, Orlando Furioso (1516). “The question is how to do it.”

Woolf’s solution was to splice these genres, to create a hybrid that was more than the sum of its parts. In this respect Orlando resembles something like a scientific romance, a hybrid form which, as I discussed in Chapter 1, utilizes the expansiveness of romance to narrate scientific perspectives that exceed the representational capacity of the realist novel whose conventional focus is the individual subject and its temporali- ties. While Orlando does not stretch to the extremes of The Time Machine, its plot is nevertheless pulled across four centuries of (mostly) English political, social, and cultural history. The Time Machine and Orlando both explore “truthful” information using “fantastic” conceits; the latter, which is limited to the speed of centuries, is merely a slower method of time travel. And while Orlando’s passage through the longue durée lacks some of the former’s spectacular aesthetics, by slowing down it gains space for character development that is lacking in Wells.

Baffled by Orlando’s formal promiscuity, one early reviewer wondered “whether to regard it as biography or a satire on biography; as a history, or as a satire on history; as a novel, or as an allegory.” Yet to definitively resolve its generic ambiguity would be to miss the point, since Orlando sets out to confuse these distinctions. But it is Orlando’s representation of “history” that makes it truly difficult to categorize, because, as we will
see, its chronotope of climatological progress marks a radical departure from the precedent of the historical novel and arrives at something resembling an entirely new form.

**Woolf’s Climates of History**

Romance, biography, and historical novel, *Orlando* experiments with these generic modes by shifting between them like focal lengths, braiding them into an outline of history that is simultaneously truthful and fantastic, factual and fictional. This modal shifting begins in the opening section of the novel, which lays the foundation for a more or less predictable bildungs narrative structure. It introduces the titular protagonist, a sixteen-year-old nobleman favored by Elizabeth I, whose progression toward maturity requires him to secure the future of his bloodline, title, and estate by marrying. Having already courted two other women, Orlando seems to have found his ideal match in the third. The lady in question is high-born, well-mannered, and, like Orlando, fond of dogs. “In short, she would have made a perfect wife for such a nobleman as Orlando,” says his biographer, “and matters had gone so far that the lawyers on both sides were busy with covenants, jointures, settlements, messuages, tenements, and whatever is needed before one great fortune can mate with another when, with the suddenness and severity that then marked the English climate, came the Great Frost.” (25)

Since Orlando’s fictional biography has, at this point, hardly begun, we are prepared for the change of fortune signaled by the conditional perfect tense, “would have.” This novel will not follow a conventional marriage plot. However, the event that arrives at the end of the sentence to disrupt the byzantine legal process of joining two embodied “fortunes” can hardly be expected. It appears with such “suddenness and severity” that the biographer must break off from Orlando’s narrative to report the astonishing scenes that accompanied the unprecedented cold of winter, 1608–09.

The Great Frost was, historians tell us, the most severe that has ever visited these islands. Birds froze in mid-air and fell like stones to the ground. At Norwich a young countrywoman started to cross the road in her usual robust health and was seen by the onlookers to turn visibly to powder and be blown in a puff of dust over the roofs as the icy blast struck her at the street corner. The mortality among sheep and cattle was enormous. Corpses froze and could not be drawn from the sheets. It was no uncommon sight to come upon a whole herd of swine frozen immovable upon the road. (25)
The cataclysmic effects of the Great Frost are so widespread and extraordinary that they mark a categorical shift away from the bureaucratic transactions that constitute the “official” world of the English aristocracy – these are suspended, though not entirely eradicated, by the sudden change of climate, a force that has neither regard for nor awareness of human affairs.36

A multiscalar approach to narrative form is thus essential to the way that the novel handles its historical content, particularly its representations of “climate change.” Almost immediately, this historic weather event expands the “horizon of expectations” that have been established in the first few pages, and Orlando’s character development stalls as the narrator moves into a horizontal survey of historical accounts and anecdotes.37 Since the Great Frost is so pervasive that everyone and everything belonging to the time (all social classes; the human and nonhuman world) is affected by it, reintegrating these vivid, but seemingly superfluous descriptions with Orlando’s plot will now require the concept of “character” itself to expand dramatically. The narrator’s remarks about the “suddenness and severity that then marked the English climate” alert us to an intentional double meaning whereby “English climate” refers both to the prevailing weather and to the prevailing mood of the country. For Orlando to be “representative” of this historical moment, the character must transmit the inscrutable but totalizing concept of “climate” through attitudes, opinions, and actions. His biographer makes this idea explicit when analyzing a specific act: the moment that Orlando arouses the fury of his mistress, Queen Elizabeth, by kissing a “brazen hussy.”

It was Orlando’s fault perhaps; yet, after all, are we to blame Orlando? The age was the Elizabethan; their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables even. Everything was different. The weather itself, the heat and cold of summer and winter, was, we may believe, of another temper altogether. . . . Thus, if Orlando followed the leading of the climate, of the poets, of the age itself . . . we can scarcely bring ourselves to blame him. (20–21)

Orlando’s biographer suggests that to understand and perhaps to rationalize the young nobleman’s rash behavior we must look at his situation climatologically. At such an early point in the novel this suggestion seems entirely disproportionate, since it involves interpreting the isolated action of an individual not only from the historical distance of the English court in the late sixteenth century but also from the immense perspective of its radically different weather. To make the case, Woolf’s narrator-biographer
must perform a reverse-translation that shifts across seemingly incommensurable scales, proceeding as follows: the weather was much harsher at that time, and divided into extremes; the poets of the age (arbiters of Mannheim’s “aesthetic sphere”) “translated” the weather’s severity into stark aesthetic forms that emphasized life’s ephemerality and the motto, *carpe diem*; “what the poets said in rhyme, the young translated into practice,” and as a member of this generation, Orlando “followed the leading of the climate, of the poets, of the age itself” by recklessly kissing a girl in view of his lover, Queen Elizabeth. This passage’s comic tone reminds the reader that attempting to reconcile the disparate scales of the climatological and the personal can lead to a strange form of determinism: Are we to absolve Orlando because the Elizabethan climate was ultimately responsible for his “transgression?” We must perform vast leaps of logic to reach this conclusion (climate informs culture, culture informs generational customs, generational customs inform individual behavior). And while the scales of the climatological and the personal ultimately seem only tangentially connected in this case, *Orlando* raises the more serious possibility that the aesthetic sphere is the cyclical middle ground where climate is “translated” into literary form.

Deploying a wide variety of genres, *Orlando* utilizes their formal affordances to gain a purchase on different levels of historical knowledge. But the novel goes further by tracing history through the cycles of predominant literary forms. Orlando himself is the barometer of this change. By the age of sixteen he is a “fluent” but “abstract” Elizabethan poet, capable of dexterously recruiting “Vice, Crime, Misery” as the “personages of his drama,” alongside “Kings and Queens of impossible territories” (13). Romance and “noble sentiments” come easily to Orlando in verse, precisely because they do not occur in “nature” (13). Whenever Orlando attempts to describe the “thing itself,” he comes up short: “in order to match the shade of green precisely he looked . . . at the thing itself, which happened to be a laurel bush growing beneath the window. After that, of course, he could write no more” (13–14). His efforts to copy the color fail, he realizes, because “Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces” (14). The novel thus dwells on the insufficiency of language – its inability to “match” nature mimetically, without transformation. Yet those linguistic transformations or translations are revealing in themselves, because they record the ways in which cultural habits and attitudes respond to changes in the actual world.
By relating changes of flora, diet, and architecture – all of which are conditioned by a changing climate, to Orlando’s stylistic shift from poetry to prose – his biographer grafts natural and national history onto literary history. Indeed, Orlando pursues a variety of literary projects over the succeeding centuries, abandoning them as they become outmoded. Only one, “The Oak Tree,” survives to the novel’s conclusion on midnight, 11 October 1928. A symbol of Orlando’s capacity to grow slowly over the longue durée, the poem records overall variations in cultural and environmental “climate” by encapsulating the changing history of English literature. The critic and arbiter of this text, Sir Nicholas Greene (whose name recalls Orlando’s failed attempt to represent “green”) is the only other character who seems to share Orlando’s unnatural longevity. Whereas Greene excoriates the young Orlando’s work, he praises it when they ultimately meet again, centuries later. Greene, by then “was a Knight; he was a Litt.D.; he was a Professor . . . the most influential critic of the Victorian age” (203–4). A personification of changing critical standards, Greene laments that it has become “an age . . . marked by precious conceits and wild experiments – none of which the Elizabethans would have tolerated for an instant” (205). Again, this literary shift from the “errant,” elemental, and “abrupt” to Greene’s brand of domestic, gossipy prattle is described in terms of climate change. While the Elizabethan era had been marked by severe, polar extremes, the Victorian world is characterized by what Gillian Beer calls a “lush and menacing superfecundity,” a soft and pillowy atmosphere that casts a Turneresque blur over the contours and contrasts of daily life:

The great cloud which hung, not only over London, but over the whole of the British Isles on the first day of the nineteenth century stayed, or rather, did not stay, for it was buffeted about constantly by blustering gales, long enough to have extraordinary consequences upon those who lived beneath its shadow. A change seemed to have come over the climate of England. (166)

This change in the climate alters the aesthetic qualities of the age itself, casting everything in literally a different light: “Under this bruised and sullen canopy the green of the cabbages was less intense, and the white of the snow was muddied” (166). The pervasive, Ruskinian cloud cover makes colors “crepuscular,” rather than vibrantly intense, “But what was worse, damp now began to make its way into every house . . . Thus, stealthily and imperceptibly, none marking the exact day or hour of the change, the constitution of England was altered and nobody knew it. Everywhere the effects were felt” (167). In a tour de force series of scalar leaps, the narrator describes how the changing climate of the Victorian period unfolded
progressively, from the weather to the culture to the rituals and texture of lived experience:

[A] change of diet became essential. The muffin was invented and the crumpet. Coffee supplanted the after-dinner port, and, as coffee led to a drawing-room in which to drink it, and a drawing-room to glass cases, and glass cases to artificial flowers, and artificial flowers to mantelpieces, and mantelpieces to pianofortes, and pianofortes to drawing-room ballads, and drawing-room ballads (skipping a stage or two) to innumerable little dogs, mats, and china ornaments, the home – which had become extremely important – was completely altered. (167)

Scaling out from the domestic to the sociological, the narrator connects the vegetation that “rioted in the damp earth outside” to the fertility indoors. “The life of the average woman was a succession of childbirths. She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty; for twins abounded” (168). The idea that this hyperproductive generation had overgrown its own habitat leads directly to the proposition that the British Empire itself was developed as a means of accommodating the nation’s surplus population. This fecundity, the biographer explains, had parallel effects on literature: “sentences swelled, adjectives multiplied, lyrics became epics, and little trifles that had been essays a column long were now encyclopaedias in ten or twenty volumes” (168). Taylor observes that this passage becomes “doubly satiric, in that it employs an outdated, determinist conceptualization of the relationship between climate and culture” first promulgated by Victorian historians, “just as her exhaustive list of domestic trinkets recalls the very abundance of material detail she is satirizing in the Victorians’ swollen inkpots.”

But what would it mean to take Orlando’s deterministic conceptualization of climate history seriously? In spite of its fictionalizations and exaggerations, we can read Orlando as deeply engaged with climate as a narrative agent that supersedes and to varying degrees informs the actual historical events the novel depicts. Beginning with the Great Frost of 1608–9, Orlando relies on archival records that attest to the widespread social changes produced by the catastrophic arrival of a period in European history known as the “Little Ice Age.” Moreover, its plot as a whole follows a trajectory that aligns with the period of global cooling that lasted “about 330 years (c.1570–1900) when Northern Hemisphere summer temperatures (land areas north of 20°N) fell significantly below the AD 1961–1990 mean.” Orlando’s description of the Great Frost makes use of poetic license, but its setting of an ice festival on the frozen Thames is both accurate and historically significant. Woolf’s
major source for the episode was a tract published in January 1608, entitled “The Great Frost. Cold doings in London, except it be at the Lottery.” This is essentially a news story that relates the terrible effects of that famous winter in a dialogue between a citizen of London and a visitor from the English countryside, with both parties seeking information about the state of their respective environs. The citizen of London describes “winter castles of ice” that lay piled “against the arches of the Bridge”; he notes that the river Thames, having frozen solid, has become a highway upon which Londoners freely cross from the north to south banks “while others play at football” (82, 84). This jovial mood and merriment belies the hardships of a city “cut off from all commerce,” beset by an “unconscionable and unmerciful raising of the prices of fuel” and “the victail itself brought into a scarcity” (87). Meanwhile, the countryman relates that “It goes as hard with us as it doth with you.” You cry out here, you are undone for coals; and we complain, we shall die for want of wood. All your care is to provide for your wives, children and servants in this time of sadness; but we go beyond you in cares ... we grieve as much to behold the misery of our poor cattle. (88)

These local details, recorded in and recovered from the literary archive, sketch the outlines of much larger events – events that have only recently (and decades after Woolf’s writing) begun to disclose the true scale of their causes and effects. In England, the unexpected arrival of the Little Ice Age led to year upon year of crop failures; massive food shortages led to starvation, which in turn led to political unrest. Uprisings such as “The Midland Revolt” of 1607 might, in this sense, be interpreted at evidence of the social impacts of severe climate change. In his book *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change, and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*, Geoffrey Parker dramatically extends the range of these impacts. He links the Little Ice Age to what historians call the “General Crisis,” a series of major revolts and revolutions that occurred across Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa between 1635 and 1666, including the Scottish Revolution in 1637 and the English “Great Rebellion” in 1642. In this extreme historical context, Woolf’s conflation of climate and national identity in *Orlando* takes on a wider resonance. The freezing and thawing of England – and by extension, the planet – emerges as its framing event. The novel’s chronology is by no means arbitrary, since the Great Frost can be viewed not just as a direct cause of Britain’s political change over the centuries but also as a key factor in its industrialization. Fending off the severity of winters during the Little Ice Age increased the demand for coal, which increased
demand for faster ways of transporting it to towns and cities, which led, of course, to the steam engine.

Yet this climatological backstory can be traced even further into the past. According to climate scientists Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, the Little Ice Age itself may have had anthropogenic causes. Proponents of the “Orbis Hypothesis,” they argue that the year 1610 should be considered a plausible “golden spike” for dating the new geologic present because it represents a significant dip in global levels of atmospheric CO₂. The cause, they suggest, is a startling one: “The arrival of Europeans in the Caribbean in 1492” and the colonization of the Western Hemisphere, which “led to the largest human population replacement in the past 13,000 years.”44 Besides “permanently and dramatically altering the diet of almost all of humanity,” the conquest of the Americas produced a sudden population collapse “via exposure to diseases carried by Europeans, plus war, enslavement and famine.”45 Their evidence indicates that as much as 90 percent of the human inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere died within about 150 years, and that the resulting reforestation of those emptied continents was sufficient to drop the temperature of the planet for a period that lasted “about 330 years.” To describe this world-historical event in familiar terms like “the discovery of the New World” or “The Columbian Exchange,” as Kathryn Yusoff reminds us, is to “[cover] over the friction of a less smooth, more corporeal set of racialized violences,” and that by using “the language of exchange, it might be assumed that something was given rather than just taken,” when in truth, all that was given was new diseases, suffering, and death.46 Orlando can thus be read not just as a novel about climate change but also as one that records the indelible link between climate change and colonial violence. From its opening scene of the boy nobleman slicing at the severed head of a Moor to its lavish depictions of Frost Fairs on the Thames to its sweeping visions of Britain’s industrialization, the novel testifies to the charge that Europe’s colonial regimes were directly responsible for shaping the severe weather events that punctuated English history, and its literature, from the Early Modern period to the mid-twentieth century.

An Outline of History: Between the Acts

We have observed how Woolf’s self-reflexive attention to the evolution of forms provided a means of experimenting with their affordances and limitations within a unified genre system, and within a single novel. Orlando tracks the cyclical progress of historical time through shifts of
genre while simultaneously deploying and synthesizing them to achieve a new chimeric form. Perry Anderson identifies Orlando neither as a romance nor as a biography, but as “perhaps the only work” that qualifies as a “modernist historical novel.”\(^47\) So idiosyncratic are its “metamorphoses of time and gender, breaking with every realist norm,” Anderson claims, that Orlando can be said to “occupy a niche in the development of the genre comparable, in its proleptic isolation, to Michael Kohlhaas on the eve of its classical form.”\(^48\) The classic historical novel, as Lukács influentially defined it, took the form of a secular epic in which representative human characters served as archetypes. Characters were allegorical: metonyms for large-scale social forces whose significance lay not in their personal impact on actual historical events (in their individual capacity, say, to end a war or begin a revolution) but rather in how the fluctuating circumstances of their daily lives mediated much greater historical trends. Orlando takes a more radical approach to its historical content, however, by introducing fantasy; in doing so it anticipates an explosion in the production of historical novels “which may freely mix times, combining or interweaving past and present; parade the author within the narrative; take leading historical figures as central rather than marginal characters; propose counterfactuals; strew anachronisms; multiply alternative endings; traffic with apocalyptics.”\(^49\) Orlando marks an important step toward a new method of narrating historical consciousness, one that proceeds by “throwing verisimilitude to the winds, fabricating periods and outraging probabilities” in a “desperate attempt to waken us to history, in a time when any real sense of it has gone dead.”\(^50\) Fredric Jameson makes a similar assessment: “in the light of present-day enfeeblement of historical consciousness and a sense of the past,” the resurgence of historical fiction must be read, he argues, both “as symptom and as symbolic compensation.”\(^51\) Yet these arguments concern formal responses to a present-day “enfeeblement of historical consciousness,” and do not speak directly to the precarious uncertainty, what Paul Saint-Amour calls the “perpetual suspense,” that haunts Woolf’s historical fiction in the interwar period.\(^52\) For Woolf, that sense of uncertainty lay in concerns about the immediate future; in her belief that she was living in a period of intermezzo. Through her late writing we apprehend how, as Davis puts it, “the anticipation of disaster makes the experience of the present the experience of becoming historical.”\(^53\) In other words, how a sense of historicity arises from a future-anterior position, from imagining one’s life as shadowed by what Wells described as “the shape of things to come.”\(^54\)
Near the end of her life, Woolf’s perspective changed: her generation no longer seemed “alienated from the past,” since the violent shift of scale that had cleaved it from an earlier history seemed to be on the verge of repeating. Temporal repetition is thematized explicitly in *Between the Acts*, completed shortly before Woolf’s suicide and published posthumously in 1941, whose title of course references the interstice of two periods of calamitous change. The novel is marked by an anticipatory dread of war’s repetition that Saint-Amour identifies as “anxiety-in-common,” a feeling shared among “people living in the shadow of the raised whip of the world.” Woolf recognizes this impending danger as a collective threat — spreading across nations, races, genders, and social classes — as kind of *commons*, a negative ground of shared experience. Moreover, her efforts to juxtapose the “doom of sudden death hanging over us” with the most mundane aspects of everyday life might be interpreted as a mode of resistance that seeks to widen the scale of collective risk, far beyond the scenes of armed conflict, and to allow her “common reader” to discern “new forms of responsibility and connection” afforded in and by daily life itself. Connection, in this sense, is future-oriented, insofar as it works to establish mutual sympathies in the present that may lead to acts of intervention, and which may prevent disastrous outcomes that have not yet occurred. Yet Woolf’s interwar novels seem paradoxically to be concerned with establishing connections with the past, and not just with the immediate past but with prehistory — a span of deep time which, as I argued in Chapter 1, attenuates the kinds of sympathetic extensions and attachments associated with mimetic techniques.

Having strenuously labored to produce *The Years*, Woolf was eager to write a sequel that would not attempt to reconcile each infinitesimal detail. Her first journal entry regarding what would become *Between the Acts* reads, “d’ont [sic], I implore, lay down a scheme; call in all the cosmic immensities; & force my tired & diffident brain to embrace another whole – all parts contributing – not yet awhile.” Woolf chose instead to “amuse [her]self” by gathering thematic “immensities” — deep time, national identity, literary history — into a slim volume, condensing them unstably into a single day in mid-June 1939, at punctual spot: “Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all liter[ature] discussed.” (Poyntzet Hall would eventually be condensed to “Pointz Hall,” a rhyming pun on “all points.”) Literary history would be discussed here by a collective “‘We’ . . . composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs & strays – a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole.” Woolf’s plans imagine a novel that sketches broad historical content over a loose formal structure, never fully schematized.
This contrast between thematic immensity and provisional form becomes a running motif in *Between the Acts*, emphasized in moments when Lucy Swithin reads “an Outline of History.” Given the vehemence with which Woolf ridiculed Wells’s grandiose visions earlier in her career, it is surprising that in her final novel we find a character avidly reading, and being emotionally moved by, Wells’s most capacious project. The first of these moments occurs early in the novel when the elderly Mrs. Swithin, staying at Pointz Hall for the summer, is awakened before dawn by the rattle of birdsong.

Forced to listen, she had stretched for her favourite reading – an Outline of History – and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend. (8)

The migrating swallows “attacking the dawn” with their song are richly symbolic in the novel, and their ability to cross the English Channel to invade the morning’s silence will later be compared to German air raids. Yet Lucy also sees in them a vision of deep time: “‘Swallows,’ said Lucy, holding her cup, looking at the birds. Excited by the company they were flitting from rafter to rafter. Across Africa, across France they had come to nest here” (66). Their periodic returns extend through and beyond human histories, through different climates. “Year after year they came. Before there was a channel, when the earth, upon which the Windsor chair was planted, was a riot of rhododendrons, and hummingbirds quivered at the mouths of scarlet trumpets, as she had read that morning in her Outline of History, they had come” (66). By imagining familiar places like Piccadilly covered in primeval “rhododendron forests,” Lucy habitually engages in the sort of mental voyage through deep time that Wells’s Time Traveller witnesses in the transformation of Richmond Hill. But the more obvious referent of Lucy’s “favorite reading,” Wells’s *The Outline of History* (1920) (alternately subtitled “The Whole Story of Man” or “Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind”), is a nonfictional, encyclopedic narrative of human origins and destiny that stretches from *The Origins of the Earth* (chapter 1) to *The Great War* (Chapter 39), and beyond: *The Next Stage of History* (chapter 40). More extensive than his distilled version, *A Short History of the World* (1922), which Wells claimed was “meant to be read straightforwardly almost as a novel is
read . . . to meet the needs of the busy general reader . . . who wishes to refresh and repair his faded or fragmentary conceptions of the great adventure of mankind,” its title nevertheless acknowledges the severe limitations of any attempt to survey all of world history in forty chapters. Like *The Time Machine*, it, too, offers a limit case for representing the scale of the historical imagination.

*Outline of History* is a sketch of the past, rather than a fully-rendered portrait, and when Lucy Swithin reads it before daybreak, her imaginings, too, become sketchy. Humans are not, after all, biologically descended from any of the “barking monsters” she names. However, the narrator’s repetition of qualifying phrases – “she understood”; “she supposed”; “presumably, she thought” – can be read as an acknowledgment that the thrill of thinking about such astonishing information does not depend on understanding it accurately. These qualifications might also be read as subtle gestures intended to parody a character who represents what Jed Esty calls “the aging spirit of domesticity.” This sentiment seems to be confirmed later in the novel when Isa, Lucy’s niece, regards Mrs. Swithin “as if she had been a dinosaur, a very diminutive mammoth. Extinct she must be, since she had lived during the reign of Queen Victoria” (104). Despite Isa’s droll subversion of Mrs. Swithin’s vivid mode of prehistoric “thinking,” the literary influence of time machines seems to persist in the novel, independently of Lucy herself – “Tick, tick, tick, went the machine in the bushes,” Woolf’s narrator interjects (104).

Lucy continually reflects on Britain’s “descent,” not in purely biological and geological terms, but from a holistic perspective that blends these expansive epistemologies into a totalizing mode of surveying. She takes in a sweep of landscape in “a circular tour of the imagination – one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves – all are one. If discordant, producing harmony – if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head” (104). While her scalar exaggerations of the human form are decidedly comic, the novel’s interwar context makes Lucy’s exercises in “one-making” seem like sincere attempts to develop common connection at a time of geopolitical fragmentation, in which a menacing “future shadowed their present” (70). From Lucy’s perspective, the cyclical progress of history is one of evolutionary descent from common ancestors, a story recorded in the survival or extinction of living forms. The other agent of one-making to which *Between the Acts* alludes, total war, overshadows her deep-time speculations with its temporal immanence, calling the survival of the species into question, and raising the specter of a mass extinction.
Cultural survival likewise depends on the intergenerational reproduction of rituals and forms, a theme *Between the Acts* conveys in both the performance and the content of its village pageant. The play annually restages English history in the barn at Pointz Hall, proceeding—*mise en abyme*—in four scenes: “Elizabethan tragedy, Restoration comedy, Victorian melodrama, and present day.”

“For seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nail; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was—one or the other” (16). While the play’s repetition seems more reliable, year after year, than the weather, this local cycle of cultural reproduction is likewise threatened by the spreading possibility of extinction—personal, cultural, and biological—that menaces the novel’s present day.

Lucy’s visions in *Between the Acts*—in which the past and future are collapsed into an endless present—seems in some ways aesthetically opposed to Woolf’s earlier injunctions to record human life on small scales. Yet this vision is not the only, or even the predominant, temporal scale of the novel. The prosaic, quotidian routines of village life, such as serving tea and exchanging gossip, are essential to *Between the Acts*. The novel expresses concerns about how this form of life can possibly survive alongside a “vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes” (34). When the characters admire the pristine view of the village, virtually unchanged from its description in “Figgis’s Guide Book,” the narrator remarks that the “Guide Book still told the truth. 1833 was true in 1939” (34). Yet this historic vista is imperiled by the possibility that “at any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly” (34). The dissociative image of a timeless village, studiously maintained, facing its erasure is paralleled with memories of struggle and survival from the past, such as “the famous story of the great eighteenth-century winter; when for a whole month the house had been blocked by snow” (8). *Between the Acts* concludes at day’s end with a symbolic conflict, and the possibility of survival, as Giles and Isa quarrel bitterly before embracing. “From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight . . . in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night” (129). The hope that the curtain might rise again on new life, and a new generation, however, is made tenuous when the novel’s final paragraphs return again to Lucy, reading her copy of *The Outline of History* before she goes to bed.

She turned the pages looking at pictures—mammoths, mastadons, prehistoric birds. . . . “England,” she was reading, “was then a swamp.
Thick forests covered the land.” . . . “Prehistoric man,” she read, “half-man, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones.” (129)

Even after Lucy sets the book aside, her aroused thoughts permeate the narrator’s closing observations. “The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among the rocks” (129–30). Imagining a future anterior moment when Pointz “house had lost its shelter” portends an event not seen since a time “before roads were made, or houses,” and one that might return humanity itself to the Stone Age.

We might infer that the novel’s allusions to Hardy, Conrad, and Wells – all of whom Woolf associated, in different ways, with the decline of a literary generation – represent the next group to take the stage in the pageant of the past. Yet these authors, whose novels, as we have seen, consistently portray the incursion of the deep time into the temporality of daily life, seem especially pertinent to the way that Between the Acts imagines an alien future whose connection to the past has been severed. Like Wells’s Eloi – a population dwelling among ruined monuments whose ritual function and symbolic meaning have been long forgotten – sheltering in the decaying splendor of an advanced civilization, the imagined, unborn generation described in the closing lines of Between the Acts are figured as “cave-dwellers,” inhabiting “a future that is also prehistory.”70 In the final year of her own life, anticipating how the devastation of a second world war would radically alter the experience of future generations, Woolf might have recognized even Wells as her contemporary.