The Metropolis and the Oceanic Metaphor:  
E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Honors Thesis  
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Précis

Statement of Research Problem:

In the novels Howards End by E.M. Forster and Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf, the two authors illuminate their portrayal of early twentieth-century London and its rising modernity with oceanic metaphors. My research in history, cultural studies, literary criticism, and psychoanalytic theory aimed to discover why and to what end Forster and Woolf would choose this particular image for the metropolis itself and for social interactions within it.

Context of the Problem:

My interpretation of the oceanic metaphor in the novels stems from the views of particular theorists and writers in urban psychology and sociology (Anthony Vidler, Georg Simmel, Jack London) and in psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud, particularly in his correspondence with writer Romain Rolland). These scholars provide descriptions of the oceanic in varying manners, yet reflect the overall trend in the period to characterizing life experience, and particularly experiences in the city, through images and metaphors of the sea.

Methods and Procedures:

The research for this project entailed reading a wide range of historically-specific background regarding Forster, Woolf, the city of London, and the various academic areas listed above in order to frame my conclusions about the novels appropriately. Also, the Leonard and Virginia Woolf Library of the Special Collections at Holland Library provided a unique resource for primary materials about Woolf and Forster, including diary entries and correspondence.
Findings:

Through analyzing the texts in light of my research, I found that in *Howards End*, Forster portrays anxiety about both class interaction and the flux of modern life with his use of oceanic imagery, ultimately emphasizing disconnection and distance between individuals in the city. Woolf, on the other hand, uses images of the sea in *Mrs. Dalloway* to display the sense of community and connection to be found in an urban setting.

Conclusions:

The novels create telling reflections of urban experiences that continue to be illuminating in examining the city’s influence on larger social history, particularly regarding the endurance of rigid class divisions (*Howards End*) and perhaps the role of early twentieth century urban literature on later urban social movements (*Mrs. Dalloway*). In limiting this analysis to two novels, the project only covers a small portion of early twentieth-century and modernist works that use oceanic imagery in relation to the metropolis. To gain a broader view of the modernist use of the oceanic, further research would explore more fully the changing psychological reactions to the urban setting in this literary period with voice to more writers and artists.
Introduction: Forster, Woolf, and Imagery of the Sea

The sea has held a position as a consistent metaphor for life and death in literature—in the ebb and flow of the tide, for example—as well as an image and byway of adventure, particularly during the eras of exploration and discovery. Carmen Balzar accounts for such consistent symbolism, asserting that the sea, as part of nature, requires a response from mankind linguistically. She writes, “human life can only understand itself as having been thrown into the natural world,” and that such a phenomenon must be remarked upon by people living in this natural world (174). In line with this interpretation, writers across centuries and across nations, including John Milton, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Charles Baudelaire, Matthew Arnold and Kate Chopin, have illuminated their poetry and fiction with oceanic images. With the turn to modernism in the early twentieth century, the sea continued to be used as a metaphor in literature, though in a historically-specific way. In the two particular novels on which I will focus in this thesis, E.M. Forster’s Howards End and Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, oceanic imagery facilitates a larger discussion of the emerging modern city of London; this imagery supplies a means for both Forster and Woolf to express a range of internal and external responses to the growing metropolis and related aspects of early twentieth century culture, including anxiety about class relations and the characteristic flux of modern life.

Forster and Woolf, though close friends and critics of each other’s writing, were predominantly dissimilar writers (Hoffman and ter Harr). Howards End, a proto-modernist novel, confronts the future of English society through a struggle over who will inherit the
country home of the title: the Wilcoxes, rich, imperial, and unenlightened; the Schlegel sisters, Margaret and Helen, quasi-bohemian intellectuals and independently wealthy; or the Bast's, a couple from the emerging "clerk class" of London, poor and desperately uneducated. In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf departs from literary tradition to present a narrative in the form of stream-of-consciousness, a technique that passes easily between characters while focusing mostly on the upper-class society woman Clarissa Dalloway. The novel shifts seamlessly between the main action of a single day—Mrs. Dalloway preparing for and giving a party juxtaposed against the violent suicide of World War I veteran Septimus Smith—and the internal reflections and memories of many characters. Though these two novels have disparate structures and varying thematic concerns, both authors imagine the modern metropolis of London through the extended metaphor of the sea, or, as Freud and others would later call it, the oceanic.

The concept of the oceanic and the use of water imagery spread across a variety of disciplines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to literature, metaphors of the sea could be found in disciplines that aimed to describe the individual and collective condition of modern society, including sociology, urban studies and psychoanalysis. 2 General William Booth of the Salvation Army, in his work of urban ethnography, In Darkest England, and the Way Out, calls the poorest of London “the submerged tenth,” and claims they are among those “who go down inarticulate into the depths”(23; 42). Though a crude example, he also compares their lives to the sewage which flows “heavily up and down the basin of the Thames with the ebb and flow of the tide” (23). In Jack London's urban ethnography, The

2 A discipline within the sciences also utilized a water metaphor around the turn of the century: in quantum physics, a hydrodynamic model of gravitation "studied the motion of bodies in an infinite and incompressible fluid [ether]" (Kragh 5). Also of interest is the view of British theorist Joseph Lamar, who believed that life existed in a kind of "transcendent" ether; he wrote in 1900 that this fluid can "describe an inner reality not directly accessible to the senses" (Kragh 10). This psychological and/or spiritual definition prefigures the arguments of Freud in regard to the oceanic.
People of the Abyss, he writes about the “masses” as a fearsome sea (McLaughlin). Beyond these metaphors, the oceanic came to be articulated with greater clarity in the field of psychoanalysis, most significantly in Sigmund Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents. In this study, he explores the developmental and intrinsic qualities of the oceanic in several of his works; his ideas in this regard—the oceanic as a feeling of “oneness” with the world—will figure largely into my argument in this paper. I point out this range of disciplines with their emphasis on the oceanic and water first to demonstrate that Forster and Woolf’s contemporaries and scholarly predecessors were attempting to describe their experiences and existence in similar terms, but also to gesture toward the wider implications of this literary and cultural study. In examining the means by which the writers portray and react to the city with all its components, I believe that literary scholars as well as those interested in sociology, urban studies, and class issues in history can benefit from the particular perspective I will bring to Howards End and Mrs. Dalloway.

II. Research Methods: Discovering—and understanding—the oceanic and the city

My interest in examining the use of sea imagery in both Forster and Woolf’s novels arose from simply noticing the prevalent occurrences of it in my reading, and questioning to what end and in what variant manners the writers would choose the ocean as a metaphor. The general areas of my research covered Britain of the early twentieth century, encompassing culture and society, technological advancements, the growth and character of London, and urban psychology. I also searched the materials available in the Leonard and Virginia Woolf Library in the Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections division of Holland Library. The facsimile transcript of Mrs. Dalloway, as well as Virginia Woolf’s letters, diaries and essays available there all proved useful in constructing a more complete vision of the writer, as well as
her relationship with Forster and their reciprocal opinions of each other. These areas of biography and broad history were later substantiated by literary criticism specifically about Forster, Woolf, and their respective works. Throughout this range of reading, I found that while my particular interpretation of the novels reflected the fact that while both Howards End and Mrs. Dalloway feature the oceanic as a means to describe London and the urban experience, these novels represent contrasting reactions to this experience and its specific social-historical context.

Within the bounds of my research, I found that Forster, fitting with the narrative structure of his novel, focuses with sea imagery on the physical concerns of the encroachment of modern life and class interaction within London, ultimately conveying an anxiety about the flux of urbanism as contrasted with the pastoral life at Howards End. Mrs. Dalloway, on the other hand, a psychological and mostly internal novel, provides a glimpse into memory and relationships within the city in using an oceanic metaphor. The characters in the novel definitively identify their experience of London and relationships with others in the city using this image of the sea; Woolf, in fact, uses the universal quality of the oceanic, which as a metaphor points to fluidity and ubiquity, to emphasize the relational connections possible in an urban setting. Considering the variant yet highly psychological focuses in Howards End and Mrs. Dalloway within the context of the metropolis, my analysis explores the topics specifically relevant to each novel.

Of particular importance to my study were the critical backgrounds presented by Sigmund Freud—most notably in exchanges with the writer Romain Rolland, Georg Simmel, Anthony Vidler, and Joseph McLaughlin. While many other critics will be of assistance in asserting specific points that I make about the novels, these scholars have provided the overall
framework for my thesis. Freud, for his part, only writes about the oceanic in a small portion of his oeuvre, but it stands as a vital piece of his thought. The topic occupied much of his correspondence with a close friend, French writer and mystic Rolland, as well as occurring in several of his later works (Parsons 1). Rolland began discussing the oceanic with Freud in a letter late in 1927, in an attempt to textualize spiritual experiences apart from organized religion: it consists, he wrote, of “the simple and direct fact of the feeling of the ‘eternal’ (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were)” (Parsons 179). When Freud responded to Rolland, he told the Frenchman how much the oceanic had been occupying his thoughts since he had received the letter, and asked for (and received) Rolland’s permission to both use his ideas and add his own discourse to them in Civilization and Its Discontents. While he refused an absolute, analytical approach to understand the oceanic, believing it to be a too ill-defined and subjective experience, he did agree that “a psychoanalytic interpretation was possible if one seized its central ‘ideational’ content: ‘the indissoluble bond of being one with the external world as a whole’” (Parsons 39). Beginning within this paradigm of understanding, Freud’s further explanation—and Rolland’s response—applies both to psychoanalysis and literature.

In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud writes that an infant has a much more “unitary” sense of the world and its place in it: “An infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him” (qtd. in Parsons 42). Later, an adult ego-feeling exists in a shadow of the same form, accounting for the lifelong experience of the oceanic. Rolland, on the other hand, puts forth the oceanic as “an innate, religious feature of the psyche,” and though Freud respected his idea, he avoids at first a psychoanalytic interpretation in favor of his own more constant developmental
explanation. As William Parsons suggests, though, near the end of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud returns to the oceanic as an image for probing the depths of human emotions: "‘it is nevertheless vouchsafed to a few to salvage without effort from the whirlpool of their own feelings the deepest truths’" (qtd. in 47). Not only does Freud’s dichotomy of responses to the oceanic point to an unresolved position on his part, but it also opens an opportunity to view his ideas about the oceanic as they relate to literature.

Parsons asserts that Freud’s view on artists (including writers) stems from his latter, emotionally-based response to the oceanic. He elaborates that artists, “existing at the margins of culture, seemed to have an unusual access to the unconscious and the talent to represent unconscious processes in symbolic, experience-distant ways” (51). E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, as artists, often use the oceanic in their novels to represent the landscapes and social life of the city. For the purposes of this thesis, then, I will argue that *Howards End* and *Mrs. Dalloway* both use the oceanic as a ‘symbolic’ means of representing the unconscious within the geographical parameters of London.

Both Anthony Vidler and Joseph McLaughlin, in their respective works, use a more cultural lens through which to view the influence of the oceanic. Vidler, in his essay “Bodies in Space/Subjects in the City: Psychopathologies of Modern Urbanism,” asserts that the space of the psyche began to be projected into the experience one had of the city, a thoroughly modern space in the early twentieth century. Vidler’s particularly applicable argument here points to the same “oceanic” that was explained by Freud; he sees articulated in such examples as the writing of twentieth-century intellectuals Charles Jeanneret Le Corbusier and Ayn Rand the “ineffable space” of the oceanic working as “the instrument of suppression for everything they hated about the city” (39-40). The emotional experience of the oceanic—feeling “at one with
the universe"—within the metropolis created anxiety and hatred within individuals which were then transposed onto the landscape of the city. Though he does not mention the texts of Howards End or Mrs. Dalloway as interacting within this same context, their clear position as novels occurring in urban settings and possessing characters with internal and physical responses to the city qualifies them for such analysis.

Georg Simmel also presents a psychological perspective on the city in his study “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” written in 1903, though with a more congenial point of view. Simmel writes that within the city,

our psychic activity still responds to almost every impression of somebody else with a somewhat distinct feeling. The unconscious, fluid and changing character of this impression seems to result in a state of indifference... [However,] what appears in the metropolitan style of life directly as dissociation is in reality only one of its elemental forms of socialization. (53)

Essentially, the impression received in the psyche from the specifically urban crowd results in the outward actions of city-dwellers toward each other; these actions create a society of “the masses” wherein an individual can flourish and feel a sense of community within a common, shared urban space. Of particular significance in Simmel’s essay for my argument is the reference to the psychic impression in the city as fluid and mutable, terms which relate to both Mrs. Dalloway and Howards End in regard to their evocation of the sea.

Joseph McLaughlin, though focusing mostly on the evidence of British imperialism in the portrayal of the city in his book Writing the Urban Jungle also nods to the Freudian concept of the oceanic as significant. McLaughlin explains the oceanic in one of Virginia Woolf’s more experimental novels, The Waves, as “a metaphor by which the subject can transcend
individuality and participate in more collective, transindividual, or natural identities” (112). He points out Jack London’s urban ethnography, The People of the Abyss, as another example of an early twentieth century writer’s portrayal of the oceanic within the setting of the city. In one section, London, as a middle-class man, writes about his own fear of the impoverished “masses” within an urban setting: “for the first time in my life the fear of the crowd smote me. It was like the fear of the sea; and the miserable multitudes, street upon street, seemed so many waves of a vast and malodorous sea, lapping about me and threatening to well up and over me’” (qtd. in 112). McLaughlin evaluates London’s response to the crowd as consuming and endangering, and points out that, in London’s perspective, “Like the wilderness and the sea, the crowd threatens to . . . obliterate individuality and boundaries between people” (112). Though London’s work is an autobiographical study rather than fiction, his use of sea imagery to imagine his anxiety in the city helps to portray the widespread use of the oceanic across literary fields as well as other disciplines.

With these examples of writers from the early twentieth century (and their scholars) consistently portraying their urban experiences in terms of the sea, McLaughlin articulates his own perspective: “It is my belief that this modernist turn to the use of oceanic is related to the individual’s experience of and relationship to the urban crowd” (112). Both Forster and Woolf substantiate this claim; the former displays a certain anxiety about proximity to the urban crowd while the latter embraces the urban experience and the sense of community to be found in the crowd. Through my research of various theorists outlined above, my approach to Howards End and Mrs. Dalloway has grown into a specific cultural, urban, and literary-critical response. In the rest of my thesis, I will undertake a close examination of the texts in question
to gesture toward a more complex reading of both Forster’s and Woolf’s response to early twentieth century London.

III. Anxiety in/of the city: Howards End and the oceanic

Since its publication in 1910, E.M. Forster’s novel Howards End has held a position as a ‘condition of England’ novel, reflective of the Edwardian period and forecasting the nation’s future. The author explicitly presented it as such, asking the difficult question “Who shall inherit England?” Its inception also followed the widely-read cultural analysis The Condition of England by British sociologist Charles Masterman the previous year. Following this pattern, many critics of Howards End have focused on the ways in which the novel speaks to the political, social and intellectual future of England by examining the picture Forster paints of current class struggles and interactions. While I do not intend to depart entirely from the groundwork laid by these scholars, I believe that a more complex vision of Forster’s response to the ‘condition of England’ can be found within the author’s use of sea imagery in the novel. In particular, I will argue that Forster’s use of the oceanic in Howards End portrays a certain anxiety about class interactions and the infusion of modernity within the metropolis, and how this anxiety couched in sea-language gives voice to Forster’s conception of the future of British society.

From the beginning of the novel, the fine class gradations found in Howards End are initiated into the dialogue of the novel. Forster, himself independently wealthy and arguably limited by his middle-class perspective, allows his narrator glaring honesty with the audience before the lower class characters are properly introduced: “We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet. This story

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9 Lionel Trilling, E.M. Forster: A Study, and Peter Widdowson, E.M. Forster’s Howards End: Fiction as History, have presented the most in-depth study on the topic of the ‘condition of England’ in the novel.
deals with gentlefolk or with those who are obliged to pretend that they are gentlefolk” (36). As Alex Zwerdling asserts about both Forster and Woolf, neither can properly satirize or condemn the inequalities of the social system because of their own position in it: they have a “deep reluctance to reject a social system that—for all its gross inequalities and moral blindness—had nurtured each of these writers and was still sustaining them” (58). Forster’s use of the familiar “we” epitomizes this reluctance, for it establishes a rapport between the narrator and the audience, a common economic standpoint by which the narrative can be viewed without voice or witness from the “very poor.” This eagerness to confirm economic equality—or at least avoid any association with the poor—hints at the anxiety Forster exhibits regarding class interactions throughout his novel.

From the first interaction with clerk Leonard Bast, when Helen absentmindedly takes his umbrella from a concert they are both attending, the Schlegel sisters remain inexorably tied to his life. However, Forster makes it very clear through his description of their differences that despite any aspirations Leonard may have to better himself economically or culturally, he will remain essentially apart from the lifestyle of the Schlegels. In addition to Forster’s need to announce the Schlegels’ certain removal from the abyss of poverty in which Leonard exists, he also appears to give Margaret a prudent aspect to one of her speeches: “You [Mrs. Munt] and I and the Wilcoxes stand upon money as upon islands. . . . But Helen and I, we ought to remember, when we are tempted to criticize others, that we are standing on these islands, and that most of the others are down below the surface of the sea” (48-49). In regard to this passage, Sharon O’Dair points out that “what is more important are the effects of habitus, of being on islands, away from ‘the others’” (344). I would press this argument further, for though Forster presents a diplomatic perspective in regard to class, he even more clearly defines the
separation of the classes: land-dwellers versus sea-dwellers, pointing toward a distinction of an intrinsic, natural quality that will forever bar movement from one type of space to another. Margaret goes on to explain that “as fast as our pounds crumble away into the sea they are renewed—from the sea, yes from the sea” (49). Not only does inherent distinction halt the possibility for class mobility, but the mutual dependence established here also makes a more practical case for retaining the current class distinctions.

The anxiety displayed in Howards End toward class interactions—notice that it is the money moving between the land and sea in the latter example, not the people—pivots at least partially on the idea of resisting contact with the lower classes. Daniel Born asserts that Margaret’s marriage to Henry results from “the desire to find a safe, permanent home,” a desire which “exists, as well, in direct proportion to Margaret’s need to escape contact with the abyss” (153). He points out that when Leonard’s wife Jacky comes to Wickham Place, the Schlegel’s London home, Margaret feels “the urban blight of London has begun to invade [their] privacy” (153). This apprehension about contact with the poor of the city certainly existed before the early twentieth century, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White document in The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. They explain that middle- and upper-class citizens of Victorian Britain believed “contamination” occurred inevitably from slum-dwellers to the bourgeoisie by way of disease and nightly crime, and through visual influence and the close quarters of public space. Though Margaret’s reaction to Jackie is more internal than outward—her breeding does not allow for a lack of charity to the poor—the serious nature of Jackie’s influence remains: “her thoughts were poisoned” (91). Forster’s use of oceanic metaphor spreads across both definitions of class and fear of interaction between them, endowing the metaphor with much weight in Howards End.
Henry Wilcox works into Forster’s class framework as the representative of the imperial businessman at home, doing his part to sustain the grandeur of the British Empire—and making a significant amount of money at the same time. Clearly not a character with whom Forster identifies, Henry gives another perspective on a more easily identifiable aspect of the author’s class anxiety. Taking a walk with Margaret one evening, Henry responds to the ebbing of the Thames without any worry or lack of confidence: “it held no mysteries for him. He had helped to shorten its long tidal trough by taking shares in the lock at Teddington, and if he and other capitalists thought good, some day it could be shortened again . . . he felt his hands were on all the ropes of life” (104). Henry, with his wealth and capital beneath him, does not need to dwell solely on land or in the sea, but metaphorically occupies the sailor’s space apart from and between them: on a boat. Forster’s diction, specifically “all the ropes of life,” easily points to a sailing metaphor. Henry has mobility, power, and control in this class position; however, as Henry’s son will display at the novel’s end in causing Leonard’s death, the execution of this power can cost the ultimate price. Though Forster allows the Wilcoxes to confidently display their wealth, he realizes and confirms, among other things, the danger of allowing the power of their class to go unchecked. John Carey, in The Intellectuals and the Masses, argues that Forster also portrays in Leonard’s death the consequences of the masses seeking higher education or culture. When the clerk “symbolically” has a heart attack from the weight of a bookcase falling on him, “Such are the dangers of higher education, we gather, when it is pursued by the wrong people” (Carey 18-19). Though Forster certainly does not lack an amount of compassion for

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4 Forster uses this same phrase earlier in the novel, as Margaret reflects on the character of the Wilcoxes: “Once past the rocks of emotion, they knew so well what to do, whom to send for; their hands were on all the ropes, they had grit as well as grittiness, and she valued grit enormously” (8).
Leonard, the power garnered by such men as the Wilcoxes, displayed in sea imagery, clearly cannot be overcome or matched by men in his lower class.

Beyond these examples of Forster's class portrayal within London, he also uses the metaphor of the oceanic to describe the infusion of modernity within the city. In particular, the encroaching movement of the cheap housing for the lower classes working in London is a recurring concern in *Howards End*. Not only do these housing projects spur the owner of the Schlegel's flat to sell his property and thus render them homeless for a time, but it also, for Margaret, embodies the transience of modern life in London. When her family has the home at Wickham Place, the flux of the city does not cause conflict for her, "the city herself, emblematic of their lives, rose and fell in a continual flux, while her shallows washed more widely against the hills of Surrey and over the fields of Hertfordshire" (85). Later, in talking to her then-fiancé Henry about the possibility of moving to the fashionable (yet declining) Ducie Street home, she comments before he interrupts, "'I hate this continual flux of London. It is an epitome of us at our worst—eternal formlessness; all the qualities, good, bad, and indifferent, streaming away—streaming, streaming forever. That's why I dread it so. I mistrust rivers, even in scenery. Now, the sea—'" (144). A permanent home, for Margaret, establishes a certain rooted quality for her place in the world, and enables her to participate without anxiety in the flux of London. However, once that familial space has been lost, all distinctions between individual people seem to melt into a blank, eternal space—"formlessness," "all the qualities," "for ever"—and stability in the temporal disappears. Margaret's hatred of this "flux" evokes the argument of Vidler that the mutable space of the metropolis, as portrayed in the oceanic, creates a sense of hatred toward the city.
With Forster's obvious anxiety and disfavor in regard to London, it follows that a
countryside setting would be, in contrast, a space of peace and stability, and indeed he displays
this in the description and impression of Howards End (the home). Paul Delany distinguishes
the contrasting places by claiming that, "(s)patially, Forster opposes town to country," and that
the novel "ends with the triumph on one side of his opposed forces" (287). Helen's letters to
Margaret which open the novel describe the grounds, tree- and foliage-covered, and contain the
fixed, "nature-woman" figure of Mrs. Wilcox wandering over the landscape: "trail, trail, went
her long dress over the sopping grass, and she came back with her hands full of the hay that
was cut yesterday" (4). Mrs. Wilcox also represents for Forster the only one who knows from
the beginning the importance of a permanent, fixed home, particularly one outside of London.
When she hears of the Schlegels' upcoming removal from their home, she exclaims, "To be
parted from your house, your father's house—it oughtn't to be allowed. It is worse than dying"
(66). Margaret dismisses what she sees as overdramatization from the older woman, and just as
easily dismisses Mrs. Wilcox's subsequent, impulsive invitation to immediately go to Howards
End. Forster describes the silent scene following this interchange in grim terms: "The city
seemed Satanic, the narrower streets oppressing like galleries of a mine. . . . It was rather a
darkening of the spirit which fell back upon itself, to find a more grievous darkness within"
(67). Failure to acknowledge the importance of ancestral homes and permanent domestic space
projects a hellish atmosphere of the city; this description combines with the oceanic imagining
of London to more fully portray the urban anxiety and fear in the novel.

When Forster's narrator steps back from the specific locales of either the country or the
city midway through Howards End, the oceanic imagery points to an energizing flux of activity
in and of the nation. "England was alive," he writes, "throbbed through all her estuaries,
crying for joy through the mouths of all her gulls, and the north wind, with contrary motion, blew stronger against her rising seas” (139). He asks whether the ones who have made the nation great in the world are the ones who “own” her, or if she belongs instead to those who have “added nothing to her power, but have somehow seen her, seen the island whole at once, lying as a jewel in a silver sea, sailing as a ship of souls, with all the brave world’s fleet accompanying her towards eternity?” (139). The sense of grand destiny and rhetoric of imperial greatness comes in response to the personification of England in the surrounding natural world—predominantly the sea and river-tide of the Thames. Neither the city nor the country is singled out for exaltation or persecution in this passage, and though Forster clearly prefers the country landscape and lifestyle over life in the metropolis, he seems to acknowledge at the same time that an easy answer cannot be found for who is the most intrinsically “English” person, and who has the right to “own” and inherit the culture of his nation when the city so powerfully and fixedly controls life and wealth. In Literature of Crisis, 1910-1922, Anne Wright maintains that Howards End as a novel holds a mirror to society, fulfilling the criteria of a ‘condition of England’ novel, but it flows toward “an ending which cannot, in a sense, be achieved or finalized” (16).

Once outside the setting of the city at Howards End, Forster’s use of oceanic images declines sharply, indicating the importance of the oceanic metaphor for anxiety of the city and its modernity. One moment stands out at the close of the novel: when Henry’s children and their spouses come to hear the reading of his will and give up claim to the home in order that he might leave it to Margaret. As they depart, their farewells echo, “‘Good-bye’ . . . And again and again fell the word, like the ebb of a dying sea” (270). The Wilcoxes, men and women of the city, of distinctive wealth and modernity, decline ownership of the domestic space of their
C. As they leave the house, their chance for impact either by or on Howards End “dies” and ebbs away, condemning them to a modern life of flux and change in the metropolis.

IV. Lover of London: Woolf and the oceanic in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Forster’s novel is positioned firmly in the pre-war Edwardian period in England, one in which a diagnosis of the “condition of England” mattered because, as Samuel Hynes asserts, it was a “time of waiting, waiting for the death of the old world and the birth of the new” (14). Queen Victoria’s reign—the longest and most evoking of stability in England’s history—had ended with her death in 1901, and the societal characteristics associated with her had steadily declined without significant replacement. This shift was “liberating, perhaps, but with unknown consequences and therefore disturbing” (Hynes 15). The historical atmosphere in which Woolf wrote *Mrs. Dalloway* was similar in its shifting character, but ultimately had far more national and global repercussions: the later novel arose in the aftermath of World War I. Eric Hobsbawm describes the general devastation that resulted in post-WWI Europe, maintaining that “the great edifice of nineteenth-century civilization crumpled in the flames of world war, as its pillars collapsed” (22). Though certainly these are only broad historical sketches, they are important in their treatment of the historicity of the novels, and bestow on Forster and Woolf the task of finding order in different levels of social upheaval.

An essentially urban novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* personifies and exalts the character of London, a sharp departure from the portrayal of the city in *Howards End*. Virginia Woolf grew up in London, and as numerous scholars have noted, returned to the city continually and joyfully each time her health permitted the move from the country (Wilson). She began to write *Mrs. Dalloway* just after such a return in 1923 (Diary 286). Many Woolf scholars point out the pronounced relationship she has to London; two monographs, *Virginia Woolf’s London*
and Virginia Woolf and London, count among the scholarly works addressing the author’s view of the city in a range of her works. In Mrs. Dalloway, London is obviously the setting for the present portions of the novel; however, in the internal reflection of the characters, the “setting” ranges across both time and space. Though certainly the focus of the novel lies on Clarissa Dalloway, and the insights on the psychological aspects of city life predominantly come from her, Woolf also gives the more minor characters voice regarding the city. Within the internal musings on specific situations and varying responses to the city, and as a metaphor for outward relationships between people in the city, Woolf uses the oceanic to form a specifically urban metaphor for the experience of life.

In regard to one of Woolf’s more obviously oceanic novels, The Waves, Michael Hoffman and Anne ter Harr claim that “For Woolf, the sea’s voice is an objective, unchanging standard against which to measure the passage of time and human lives” (60). Another critic argues that “the shrunken and chopped-up globe of Virginia Woolf’s time permit the door of discovery to open only downward, toward the depths, not the breadth, of the sea” (Vlasopolos 75). Positioned between these two commentaries—the former more plot-based, the latter character-driven—Mrs. Dalloway permits Woolf to explore the ocean as an outward as well as an internal metaphor. In a more historical sense, the narrative as fluid and sea-like reflects the shifting from the Edwardian novel to the modernist: “the modern current seemed that of flux and flow, of the shifting, the discontinuous. It appeared to allow no hold to which the drifting self could cling... Yet this very sense of the fluid, the shifting, the fragmented in life was to become one of the main characteristics of fiction” (Richter 5-6). The city, with its popular perception as evoking this fragmentation and shifting in human life, proved the ideal locale in many ways for Woolf to explore the metaphor of the oceanic.
From the beginning of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf establishes the intermingling of the city with sea imagery: Clarissa reflects that “she had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very dangerous to live even one day” (8). Despite what may be perceived as a foreboding tone in these lines, Clarissa balances her thought with the outward exclamation that she loves walking in London more than in the country (4) and with another oceanic image. “(S)omehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was” (9). Far from being fearful of life in the city (the anticipation of danger, after all, *does not necessarily* lead to anxiety), Clarissa embraces the “oneness” to be found in the oceanic urban crowd as described by both Freud and Simmel.

Woolf moves outside of any specific character in one of the particularly modern city scenes of *Mrs. Dalloway*—one in which a car with a mysterious celebrity (the Queen? the Prime Minister?) passes through a crowded street, and the narrative moves through the disparate thoughts of various members of the crowd; soon afterwards, an aeroplane scrawling an advertisement in the sky evokes a similar narrative. Of particular significance here is the description Woolf gives in the paragraph just preceding these observations, and how her setup reflects on the narrative to follow. “The car had gone, but it had left a slight ripple which flowed through the glove shops and hat shops and tailors’ shops on both sides of Bond Street . . . the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound” (17-18). The portion of the novel involving the car and the aeroplane has been read as an example of the way that modernity, in its novelty, can create a false sense of community; after all, the members of the crowd each create a version of reality from individual perspective despite their
communal experience in the same location and their commodity-based interaction within the same urban space. However, I would argue that Woolf’s portrayal of this urban, oceanic space that encompasses both the consumers and their locale, with the “surface” moved by the car’s arrival, does indeed assert a sense of community in individual depths—“as it sunk it grazed something very profound.” Gillian Beer defends the latter portion of the scene as well, emphasizing that “The message [from the plane] does not matter; the communal act of sky-gazing does” (275). The fluid nature of the narrative in this section helps to create this picture of oceanic community and “oneness” within the city.

The oceanic in Mrs. Dalloway can also be found in regard to Clarissa’s memories of a summer past, which claim a certain urban flavor despite their setting away from the city. In a quiet, solitary moment, as she mends a dress for her evening party, Clarissa reflects:

So on a summer’s day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying ‘that is all’ more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. (Woolf 39-40)

In this passage, oceanic terms and rhythmic diction construct a dialogue based on emotions in memory, but it also echoes her experience as a consumer in the city. In echoing “fear no more,” the quote Clarissa had seen earlier in a shop window (9), Woolf surreptitiously ties together consumerism and the oceanic. Rather than a personal, domestic object triggering and helping to shape a memory of the past, which would link together the private sphere of home and the

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internal life of the character, a public, urban image of a book for sale in a window projects onto Clarissa’s consciousness to frame her thoughts. Marianne DeKoven endorses this view, writing that “in her [Mrs. Dalloway’s] remarkable boundaryless psychic connectedness, she contains, or recontains, the public spaces she passes through and the myriad human others she encounters within her private consciousness” (238). Memory, emotion, and a distinctively urban experience meld together in the sea-like sound and tone of this passage.

Septimus Smith, recognized as a counterpoint to Clarissa Dalloway throughout the narrative, commits suicide near the end of the novel, certainly devastating his wife, Rezia, who witnesses the aftermath. Her immediate, internal reflection as she attempts to recognize what the death of her husband may mean is couched in images of the sea. She finds both solace and seduction in the sea as it calls to her in these moments of mental retreat to a place far removed from present circumstances: “She put on her hat, and ran through cornfields—where could it have been?—on to some hill, somewhere near the sea, for there were ships, gulls, butterflies, they sat on a cliff. In London, too, there they sat, and, half dreaming, came to her through the bedroom door” (150). In this place, perhaps of a memory of herself and Septimus, Rezia hears “the caress of the sea, as it seemed to her, hollowing them in its arched shell and murmuring to her laid on shore” (150). The space of memory, commingled between a sea-cliff and London, provides the means for Rezia to gain calmness. The sense of community found in the oceanic, if Rezia follows the same pattern as Clarissa in perception of the city, arises here to bring the sea’s caress and care in a much-needed manner even as Rezia withdraws into her own consciousness.

Woolf, in her portrayal of Peter Walsh’s experience of the city, presents him as an example of a flâneur in rather adventurous oceanic metaphor. Differently from the “oneness”
displayed in the experience of other characters, Peter sees himself as an individual on the "sea" of London. Peter, in his own reflection, points to self-important, pirate-like qualities: "he was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring, indeed (as he had landed last night from India) a romantic buccaneer" (53). His desire to assert his manhood in the somewhat unfamiliar setting of London—he has been absent five years—results in his following a shapely young woman, asserting himself as a 'pirate' in the city, and defining his clear difference from women. Even as memories of a happier past cloud his present wanderings, Peter attributes it to "seeing Clarissa, perhaps; for women live much more in the past than we do, he thought. They attach themselves to places" (55). Peter’s desire to be masculine and supremely individual excludes him for the most part from the urban oceanic space, yet he does, as merely an intermittent city-dweller, have physical reason for being so excluded.

Despite this exclusionary view of Peter, in another section his reflections include a perspective on the oceanic: while pondering over a meal in a restaurant, he thinks, "For this is the truth about our soul, he thought, our self, who fish-like inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities" (Woolf 161). About his susceptibility to tides of emotion, Peter also reflects earlier that "(i)t was as if he were sucked up to some very high roof by that rush of emotion and the rest of him, like a white-shell sprinkled beach, left bare" (Woolf 152). Woolf, through Peter, portrays the soul and the emotional aspects of a person as inhabiting the depths of the sea, and the remainder, the physical body, left dwelling on the shore. By presenting this perspective about individuals and the oceanic metaphor, a division of the body and soul, Woolf provides a more complete picture of her view of the sea. Not only does the oceanic feeling create within an individual a distinct relationship to and perception of the outside world—in Mrs. Dalloway, the modern urban setting and the people therein—but it applies to the constitution of each
individual as well. In this manner, then, Woolf intimates an inclusive perspective: it is in the depths, the soul, of an individual that he or she can share a sense of community within the city. For Peter, and for Clarissa and Rezia, the external realm of the metropolis reflects inwardly to define their sense of individuality and community, respectively.

Conclusion

Literature, as the adage claims, is not composed in a vacuum, nor does it often fail to leave its mark on readers in some way. This study of the oceanic metaphor in two early-twentieth century novels has aimed towards identifying both the wide range of influences on these literary works as well as the authors’ perspectives. As a result, it may be possible to gesture towards the ways in which Forster and Woolf’s commentaries reflected into other works and disciplines. Perhaps Woolf’s fascination with and enthusiasm for the city helped inspire the Situationists of the late 1960s in their exploration of metropoles and invention of the dérive. The fluidity of her narrative certainly combined with the work of other modernists to establish the shift to highly subjective, difficult-to-read, and stylistically innovative work. On a more practical level, I believe, does Forster’s portrayal of anxiety in class interactions point outward to a larger historical issue.

In History and Class Consciousness, Georg Lukács declares, “What is crucial [for social systems to remain intact] is that reality as it seems to be should be thought of as something man cannot change and its unchangeability should have the force of a moral imperative” (191). Though a severe comparison, I cannot help but be reminded of Leonard Bast’s symbolically-loaded death in the country house under that which he hoped would bring him happiness and

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6 The dérive acted as one of the created “urban situations” of the Situationist Movement, it can be described as a wandering walk through cityscapes aimed at enjoying the urban space and creating an emotional relationship to the city despite the isolated, estranged space of cities in a culture of late capitalism (Hegglund)
fulfillment: books. Forster denies Leonard any ability to alter his position in society and
"punishes" him when he tries to do so. What is so important about Forster's class anxiety and
perhaps unconscious need to remove himself from interaction with lower classes is that he was
one of the more sympathetic members of the upper-middle-class in his time. He taught evening
education classes for working adults for several years, and, as Daniel Born points out, had the
sensibility to feel guilty over his unearned wealth and indirect reliance on the poverty-stricken
masses. If Forster can portray in such definitive terms the ramifications for attempting to rise
in class status, it becomes easier to recognize why class consciousness, division, and prejudice
still exist in such proliferation in the early twenty-first century, particularly in urban areas.
Though literature is subjective and can only attempt, not ultimately achieve, a reflection of
"real life," it certainly creates that reflection in memorable and provocatively telling ways, as
Forster, Woolf, and others confirm in their oceanic vision of the metropolis.
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