# *MRS DALLOWAY'S PERFORMATIVE IDENTITY RENDERED THROUGH THE TECHNIQUE OF MONTAGE*

**Cristina-Alexandra DRĂGOI**[6]

***Abstract:*** *Throughout Virginia Woolf's* Mrs Dalloway, *the main character's identity is depicted as being in a continuous process of shaping and re-shaping, function of the sensations and perceptions that her mind receives and that are encompassed within her interior reality by means of free associations. Thus, far from being clearly delineated, this character's identity appears to be a fluid reflection of the chaotic existence that unfolds at the level of her consciousness. Mrs Dalloway's performative identity is reflected within the novel by means of montage, a technique which allows for a genuine representation of the free associations which mould the character's flexible identity.*

***Keywords:*** *performative identity; montage.*

## Turning solipsism into a narrative purpose

In novels such as *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf's narrative purpose is that of conveying an individual's consciousness, which she considers to be the only means of rendering life in a genuine manner. Attempting to seize life within a literary work by means of adopting a point of view exterior to the characters and of complying with the rigid principles of chronology and causality appears to be a vain endeavour for Virginia Woolf, who is of the opinion that, far from comprising logically ordered sequences noticeable from an objective perspective, life is "[…] a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf, 2002: 71). Therefore, an individual's genuine existence is confined to what unfolds at the level of his mind; hence, if a writer wishes to provide the reader with an account of a character's life, the writer should take as a reference point the character's interiority and "[…] record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall […]" (*ibidem*: 72), thus achieving discontinuous patterns which match the chaotic flow of the character's mind. In accordance with the beliefs she expresses within her essays, Virginia Woolf's novels are based on narrative techniques aiming at exploring the stream of consciousness of the characters. Novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* disregard the world that surrounds the characters and permeate their inner world, focusing on the intricate nexus of thoughts within their mind. By exploring what unfolds at the level of the characters' consciousness, such novels proclaim the lack of genuineness of the world exterior to the characters.

Thus, Virginia Woolf's novels can be perceived as a literary expression of the philosophical doctrine of solipsism (Lodge, 1993: 42), in virtue of which there is nothing genuinely real exterior to an individual and hence, the only real existence is that occurring within the individual's interiority. The narrative purpose which Virginia Woolf theorizes in her essays and attempts to put into practice in her novels appears to be based on a doctrine which can be traced back to Gorgias of Leontini, who advances the following three arguments: "[…] (1) that nothing

∗ PhD student at the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest, cristinadragoi91@yahoo.com



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has being; (2), that even if it did have being, no human being could apprehend it; (3) that even if it was apprehensible, still it could not be expressed or explained to our neighbour" (Waterfield, 2000: 232). In other words, according to this philosophical doctrine anything that exceeds the individual's interiority surpasses the boundaries of genuine existence, as nothing outside inner reality is irrefutably real.

And Virginia Woolf's novels seem to be based precisely on such a doctrine, as they represent an exploration of the mind perceived as comprising the real life of an individual: disregarding exterior reality as being utterly peripheral to an individual's genuine existence and focusing on the stream of consciousness through various narrative techniques are an illustration of the manner in which solipsism can be turned into a narrative purpose. However, novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* evince a powerful connection between the characters' inner world and the world surrounding them, as exterior reality is depicted as having a profound impact upon the flow of a character's mind. In other words, by taking as a reference point a character's interiority and by focusing on what occurs at the level of his mind, such novels do not assert the utter inexistence of a world outside the individual; rather than that, they assert the genuineness of an individual's inner world as it is delineated by the individual's appropriation of exterior reality. Exterior reality exists, but it does not have a definite form: it has innumerable facets which stem from individuals appropriating it and encompassing it within their inner world. And therefore, exterior reality bears little, if any significance in itself: what is truly relevant for the depiction of genuine existence is the individuals' inner world, which is, at least to a certain extent, determined by the surrounding world.

**Free associations generated by the appropriation of exterior reality**

In novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* the focus is, thus, put on what unfolds at the level of the individual's mind, as the stream of consciousness is considered to delineate an individual's genuine existence. The mind appears to be at the core of genuine life, while exterior reality seems peripheral to an individual's existence. Even though it is not a constitutive part of an individual's existence as genuine life is confined within the mind, exterior reality continues to bear considerable significance in what an individual's life is concerned, because what the individual experiences within the mind is in close connection with everything that surrounds the individual. In other words, external reality functions as a triggering factor which generates free associations within the individual's mind. Thus, far from being utterly unrelated to an individual's existence, exterior reality has a remarkable impact upon the unfolding of an individual's life as it functions as a permanent catalyzer which determines the flow of consciousness through the free associations it brings about. An individual's existence cannot be restricted to what surrounds the individual; in fact, exterior reality is not even a part of an individual's existence, as nothing outside an individual's consciousness is genuine: but the surrounding reality still influences an individual's interiority by means of free associations.

Free associations derive from "[…] the power of one thing to suggest another through an association of qualities in common or in contrast, wholly or partially" (Humphrey, 1962: 43). In other words, something pertaining to the



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exterior reality with which the individual comes in contact can determine the flow of the individual's consciousness by bringing about something else within his mind. Thus, free associations shape the manner in which the individual's mind leaps from one thing to another, which constitutes the core of the individual's existence in virtue of the belief that nothing is real except for what unfolds within the mind. Therefore, it can be said that arguing for the genuineness of inner world does not equate with proclaiming its uniqueness: both inner and outer worlds exist, but the latter exists as a triggering factor for the former, having no relevance to genuine existence in itself. The core of genuine existence is within the individual's interior reality, which is shaped by what occurs outside it.

The narrative purpose of the novel *Mrs Dalloway* appears to be precisely that of evincing the main character's genuine existence and therefore this work focuses on presenting Clarissa Dalloway's life taking as a reference point the character's interiority. Thus, the novel renders the free associations that emerge within her mind triggered by various elements pertaining to the surrounding world. For example, at the beginning of the novel, Mrs Dalloway is depicted as walking towards a florists' with the aim of buying flowers for the party she is throwing later on that evening. During her walk, Clarissa Dalloway bumps into an old acquaintance, Hugh Whitbread, with whom she engages in a short conversation. Their dialogue is rendered as it is perceived by Clarissa Dalloway, with emphasis being put on the highly subjective manner in which the character appropriates, at the level of her mind, what occurs at the level of exterior reality.[1]

Thus, instead of rendering the dialogue between the two characters by recording what each of them has stated, Virginia Woolf opts for providing an account of the dialogue as it is assimilated by one of the two characters involved. Without there being clear mentions regarding what each character has said, the reader is left to reconstruct the dialogue based on what can be deduced from the manner in which it has been filtered by one of the character's consciousness. At the end of the quoted fragment there is, however, a remark regarding the character who has uttered a particular sentence ("said Hugh"), but the character's words are not clearly delineated through inverted commas, as they would have been in a literary work aiming at recording a dialogue from a perspective exterior to the characters involved: instead, the words of the character alluded to are merged within the subjective rendition of the dialogue. The encounter between Clarissa Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread is not presented as an event pertaining to a definite, objective exterior reality; rather than that, it is depicted in the subjective manner in which it is assimilated by one of the two characters. Events that occur at the level of exterior reality are thus presented from the point of view of Mrs Dalloway's mind, because what is relevant to this character's existence is precisely the manner in which she incorporates these events within her consciousness.

Of great importance to Clarissa Dalloway's genuine existence is also what a particular event motions within her mind: thus, the novel emphasizes the fact that her encounter with Hugh Whitbread makes Clarissa Dalloway recollect other past happenings by means of free associations triggered by what her mind has

[1] "They had just come up – unfortunately – to see doctors. Other people come to see pictures; go to the opera; take their daughters out; the Whitbreads came 'to see doctors'. […] Was Evelyn ill again? Evelyn was a good deal out of sorts, said Hugh […]." (Woolf, 2012: 130)



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perceived at the level of exterior reality. In other words, the encounter between Clarissa Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread is presented from Clarissa's perspective, with prominence being given to how the event is assimilated by her at the level of her mind and to how the event moulds the flow of her consciousness by functioning as a triggering factor which generates a stream of thoughts linked through an intricate process of free associations. Thus, all of a sudden, another acquaintance comes to Mrs Dalloway's mind.[1] And from this point on, Clarissa Dalloway's mind is pervaded by thoughts related to Peter Walsh, to his conduct in particular past events which emerge within her consciousness triggered by her having run across Hugh Whitbread.

The encounter between Mrs Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread does not bear great significance in itself; what seems to be of great importance is what occurs within Mrs Dalloway's mind as a result of this encounter. Exterior reality does not constitute a genuine existence in itself; rather than that, an individual's life unfolds at the level of the mind and exterior reality determines, by means of free associations, the fragmentary and incoherent manner in which thoughts occur within an individual's consciousness. Therefore, capturing the free associations that emerge within an individual's inner reality equates with an accurate representation of the individual's life. The rendition of such instantaneous shifts within consciousness requires the use of certain narrative techniques through which the chaotic flow of an individual's mind can be truthfully conveyed. Hence, novels such as *Mrs Dalloway*, which have a narrative purpose traceable to the doctrine of solipsism, exhibit a discontinuous pattern which stems from the use of techniques such as montage and which matches the fragmentariness of the character's interiority.

**The technique of montage**

An individual's physical existence unfolds within the frame represented by exterior reality, characterized by definite temporal and spacial coordinates. But the existence itself is not the sum of happenings which can be recorded at the level of exterior reality; rather than that, an individual's genuine life comprises the flow of thoughts which constantly pervades his mind. However, outer and inner reality are not entirely disconnected, as outer reality shapes inner reality, on the one hand through the manner in which it is assimilated by an individual and, on the other hand, through its triggering function, as events that occur at the level of an individual's surrounding world have a tremendous impact upon the concatenation of thoughts emerging within the individual's mind. Thus, an event pertaining to exterior reality moulds the individual's stream of consciousness as it may precipitate the emergence, within the individual's mind, of a nexus of thoughts which seem unrelated but which have been linked together by means of a free association.

The defining trait of free associations seems to be their arbitrariness: an event such as the encounter between Clarissa Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread can bring about an infinite number of potential, latent thoughts within Mrs Dalloway's

[1] "She could remember scene after scene at Bourton – Peter furious; Hugh not, of course, his match in any way, but still not a positive imbecile as Peter made out […]." (Woolf, 2012: 131)



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mind; among all these, only a limited number become manifest in an arbitrary process in which a connection is established between them and the event functioning as a triggering factor. These thoughts that emerge within the character's mind as a result of free associations often revolve around temporal and spacial coordinates which differ from the ones that confine the character's physical being. Thus, even though the individual as a physical being is confined to a particular time and space, his mind evades such frontiers and is able to suppress temporal and spacial barriers through free associations which take the individual in a journey beyond conventional time and space.

The permanent fluctuation at the level of an individual's mind is often rendered in novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* through montage, a technique which is borrowed from the cinematic field and which allows for "[…] the freedom of shifting back and forth, of intermingling past, present and imagined future" (Humphrey, *op. cit.*: 50). Thus, this technique manages to capture the various leaps which an individual's mind exhibits as the result of free associations. Therefore, one manner of achieving the "psychic anatomy" (*ibidem*: 14) which such novels aim to convey is the use of montage as a technique exhibiting the capacity of evincing the intricate web of thoughts within a character's mind. Instead of attempting to establish order among what unfolds in the life of a character by employing narrative techniques such as omniscient description, Virginia Woolf opts for preserving the lack of order within the characters' mind and, therefore, novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* exhibit a disrupted pattern which stems from the massive use of techniques such as montage and which harmonizes with the disjointed flow of the mind that they aim to convey.

Function of the relation that is established between the fixed and the variable, two distinct types of montage can be identified: on the one hand, the time-montage, in which the individual remains stuck in space and his mind moves in time and, on the other hand, the space-montage, in which the individual remains stuck in time and his mind moves in space (*ibidem*: 50). In both cases, one coordinate remains fixed, while the other fluctuates, causing the individual's mind to move suddenly either in time, or in space. It is to be noticed that the dichotomy time-montage/space-montage is rooted in the premise that one coordinate, either time or space, is always stable; there is, thus, a certain rigidity given by the fixity of one of the two dimensions. Hence, judging by the classification of montage into two distinct types - each of them revolving around a fixed dimension, this technique appears to exhibit the capacity of partially conveying what unfolds within a character's mind, as it seems to have the limited potential of rendering a unilateral shift of the mind.

However, when taking into consideration the above quoted fragments from Virginia Woolf's novel, it can be noticed that the associations that occur at the level of Clarissa Dalloway's mind after her having encountered an old acquaintance determine a sudden movement of the mind both in time, and in space. Thus, it can be said that, in an attempt to convey the genuine flow of the character's consciousness, the author manages to create a mixture of the two distinct types of montage as, when thinking of events related to Peter Walsh as a result of her encounter with Hugh Whitbread, Mrs Dalloway's mind moves both in time and in space. The movement in time is given by the fact that she recollects some past events; there is, therefore, a shift from the present in which events pertaining to exterior reality happen and the past which is recollected by means of



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free associations. The movement in space is given by the fact that the events she recollects have occurred in a different place than the place where she is when remembering them. Both time and space become fluid and, by means of a free association triggered by an exterior event, the character's mind manages to suppress temporal, as well as spacial barriers.

Through this type of mixed montage in which the movement in time is doubled by a movement in space all the boundaries that confine the individual's physical existence are annihilated and a representation of the absolute freedom of the mind is achieved. Thus, it can be said that the mixed montage manages to capture the genuine leaps that occur within an individual's mind, as the mind can move in time and space simultaneously.

**Mrs Dalloway, a performative identity**

The entire novel focuses upon exposing Clarissa Dalloway's mind, the narrative purpose of this literary work being that of conveying its main character's genuine existence, understood as unfolding at the level of the character's inner world. Thus, the novel focuses upon rendering the continuous flow of the character's mind, conveying the various sudden shifts in time and space that occur within her interior reality. The rendition of the permanent flow of the character's consciousness is inextricably connected to the configuration of a processual identity of the character. In other words, Mrs Dalloway's identity seems to be in a constant process of shaping and re-shaping, in accordance with the perpetual shifts which occur at the level of her mind as a result of free associations triggered by her coming in contact with exterior reality. Clarissa Dalloway's life is conveyed as a ceaseless merge of experiences which fuse within her mind, where they transcend conventional temporal and spacial barriers. Therefore, the character is not presented as having a definite, clearly delineated identity which remains stable from the beginning to the end of the novel; instead, she is depicted as being embedded in a process of constant becoming. In other words, it can be said that the novel brings to the fore a character whose identity is permanently achieved (Lawler, 2008: 1-10).

The intricate process which moulds the character's identity is in immediate connection with the character's flow of consciousness, as what unfolds within her mind impacts upon the constant construction of her identity. However, Mrs Dalloway's identity should not be perceived as a "black box" (*ibidem*: 6), confined to her interiority, as exterior reality has a considerable influence on the process through which her identity is shaped. An individual's identity, although undeniably linked to the individual's inner world, cannot be limited to the individual himself and should be perceived as being influenced by the relation the individual establishes with exterior reality (*ibidem*: 7).

By turning solipsism into a narrative purpose and attempting to give prominence to the character's interiority and to expose the character's flow of consciousness, it may seem that Virginia Woolf provides her readers with characters who are entirely confined to themselves and to whom the surrounding world bears no relevance or significance. However, the technique of montage, which captures the movement in time and space of the character's mind, manages to seize the connection between inner and outer world, as, most often than not, it renders the shifts occurring within the mind as a result of the individual coming in



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contact with exterior reality. In other words, by exposing the free associations which emerge at the level of a character's consciousness as a consequence of the character having appropriated an event pertaining to exterior reality, the technique of montage reveals the bridge between the character's interiority and the surrounding world. Exposing the triggering function of exterior reality by foregrounding the free associations it brings about within an individual's mind, this technique discloses the impact exterior reality has upon the flow of an individual's consciousness and, hence, upon the individual's identity.

The novel *Mrs Dalloway* focuses on depicting the main character's flow of consciousness, thus presenting her as being in a constant process of becoming and of achieving her identity, as every shift of her mind contributes to the shaping of who she is. However, the powerful link with exterior reality is not left unexplored, as techniques such as montage unveil the manner in which the surrounding world determines the sudden leaps of the character's mind. In other words, Clarissa Dalloway's processual identity, which is encapsulated within her interiority without being confined to it, is depicted as being determined, at least to a certain degree, by her coming in contact with the surrounding world and appropriating in a highly subjective manner happenings pertaining to exterior reality. The novel configures a fluid identity of the main character, as the continuous movement of the mind, oscillating between various moments and places, has a tremendous impact upon the manner in which the character's identity is constructed. Thus, rather than being a fixed construct, Clarissa Dalloway's identity appears to be constantly shaped, function of what unfolds at the level of her mind as a result of numerous processes of free associations.

The continuous process of moulding determined by the fluidity of the mind endows identity with a certain performativity. Thus, alongside with being highly processual, Clarissa Dalloway's identity appears to be performative, precisely because of its complete lack of stability and of its permanent redefining. "Performative utterances make something happen […]" (Lawler, *op. cit.*: 113); thus, performativity leads to an alteration of a certain state of affairs. In other words, something that does not exist before a performative utterance comes into being concomitant with the utterance itself, the utterance determining its existence. In a similar way, free associations determine an individual's identity: identity does not exist as a fixed, immutable construct; it is formed through a ceaseless process, taking a different shape after each free association that occurs at the level of an individual's mind. The processual character of identity determines its performativity because an individual's identity takes a distinct form and hence comes into being in every stage of the process through which it is shaped by the free associations that determine the flow of the individual's mind. Thus, free associations delineate the stages of the process which leads to the shaping of identity; but every juncture of this process generates a different facet of an individual's identity and, therefore, it can be said that identity is not only processual, but also performative.

Thus, given the fact that the novel focuses on rendering the character's stream of consciousness, Mrs Dalloway appears to be a representative illustration of the continuous process through which an identity is shaped: she does not have a fixed identity; rather than that, she becomes herself through each free association which moulds her mind and which is rendered by means of montage. It can be said, therefore, that the use of the technique of montage leads to the configuration



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of a processual and, therefore, performative identity of the character presented in the novel, this technique exposing the permanent shifts in time and space that occur within the character's mind and that shape the character's identity.

**Conclusions**

Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, focuses on depicting the character's interiority with the aim of rendering her existence as it unfolds at the level of her mind. Conveying the chaotic flow of the character's consciousness leads to the achievement of a narrative purpose rooted in the doctrine of solipsism, according to which nothing is genuinely real outside an individual's inner world.

The character's stream of consciousness is rendered as being discontinuous and fragmentary, as it is permanently shaped by free associations which occur most often than not triggered by various events pertaining to exterior reality: the events as such bear little significance, as what seems to be essential is their impact upon the character's mind. In other words, events from the world surrounding the individual determine, aside from a highly subjective manner of appropriation within the individual's inner world, the emergence of certain thoughts which exist within the individual's mind in a latent form until they become manifest as a result of the occurrence of a free association. By means of such free associations, one element pertaining to exterior reality triggers, in an arbitrary manner, a stream of thoughts which are not necessarily related to the temporal and spacial frame in which the exterior event has occurred. There is, therefore, a ceaseless journey that the mind embarks upon and hence an individual's mind disobeys the temporal and spacial barriers which confine the individual as a physical being.

Achieving the narrative purpose of exposing a character's interiority requires the use of narrative techniques through which the disconnected flow of the mind can be seized. Thus, the free associations which occur within Clarissa Dalloway's mind are often conveyed through the technique of montage, which allows for the possibility of suppressing temporal and spacial borders and is thus able to capture the continuous flow of the mind. Virginia Woolf manages to fuse time-montage and space-montage and render the absolute freedom of the mind, which moves both in time, and in space simultaneously. The use of mixed montage allows for the rendition of the complex dynamics of the character's mind, at the level of which concomitant temporal and spacial shifts occur as a result of free associations.

The permanent movement of the mind leads to a permanent shaping of the character's identity, as the connections the character makes determine who she is; or rather, who she is constantly becoming. Thus, the emphasis being put on the lack of fixity of her mind, Clarissa Dalloway is depicted as being in a permanent process of defining herself and of achieving her identity. Every free association that occurs within her mind contributes to the ceaseless process through which her identity is constructed, thus bringing about a new facet of her identity. Therefore, far from being a stable construct, Mrs Dalloway's processual identity is rendered as being endowed with a certain performativity. It can be said that the technique of montage, which captures the free associations that determine the existence of each of the facets of Clarissa Dalloway's identity, seizes not only the processual, but also the performative dimension of the character's identity.



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