

Practical Past and re-enactment vs. edification in the Romanian trauma of communism

Abstract: Starting from Oakeshott's separation of the three attitudes towards the world, and trying to attribute them to the idea of history and the idea of past, I acknowledge that Oakeshott's project misses something: the aesthetical history, in connection with the practical past, but completing his critique of Collingwood's idea of re-enactment. The aesthetical history is a virgin field that no one has talked of. Not even Hayden White who remains to a superfluous idea of historically relative narrative. Besides words, I am interested in facts. But purely historical facts are an illusion since we may reconstruct the historical reality in a multitude of ways. The idea of practical past is very important because it addresses questions such as how can I lead a better life in the present, dealing with my past historical trauma. But it doesn't offer a solution. Changing the self, edification is the only solution that I can think of, and it can be obtained through authentic historical aesthetics. I offer the example of a play directed by the Romanian directress Gianina Carbuariu. Although the play is an excellent illustration of how re-enactment works, it is not relevant for the case of edification.

Keywords: Practical Past, Michael Oakeshott, Hayden White, Edification, Historical Aesthetics, Gianina Carbuariu.

1. Three Ways of Understanding the World: Michael Oakeshott

In his essay on „The Activity of Being an Historian” (1958), Michael Oakeshott distinguishes three attitudes or responses towards the world: 1. The practical attitude, 2. The scientific attitude, and 3. The attitude of contemplation, namely the aesthetical response. These are the main modes of interpretation by which we perceive and understand the world. I will review them in a short description of Oakeshott's ideas.

The first and perhaps most elementary response toward the world is given by the practical attitude. Within this way of understanding the world, our relations to the environmental surroundings and happenings are of primordial importance. We reveal ourselves as willing, active creatures, under the good or bad fortunes of our times. We are interested in feeling as

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comfortable and safe in the world as possible. And we recognize the world in terms of its *habitableness*, a term by which Oakeshott understands the „friendliness or hostility [of the world] to our desires and enterprises”¹.

Within the practical world we make use of our sense of anticipation. Not only do we distinguish an event that takes place in the world of practice as being friendly or hostile, but we also anticipate other events to follow as effects of the former event, takes as their cause. And we do not anticipate only events, but also their possible impact upon ourselves. For instance, if we understand an event as being friendly, it also means that we expect it to be followed by other future friendly events.

The practical attitude bears in Michael Oakeshott’s view the mark of the moral realm: we judge the world and its things/events/situations, and the others in terms of our approving or disapproving with them. Within the practical response, we formulate judgements in terms of *moral appraisals* and *imputations*, by using the categories of good/bad, right/wrong, just/unjust etc. Within the world of practical discourse, we create our images of *hero* and *villain*, by condemning or applauding actual human conduct, and by expressing our consent or disapproval of human character. Given shape in fairy tales and myths, such images of good and evil in human character and conduct are also historically employed.

The second response towards the world, namely the scientific, is considered by Oakeshott merely a *partner* and an *alternative* to the practical attitude. The scientific attitude strives at objectivity. The world and its happenings are interpreted in their purity within the scientific attitude. This meaning that things/events are not to be considered from the perspective of their relation to ourselves and our interests, but independently. The relationship between cause and effect is employed in the scientific attitude as it was in the practical one, but starting from different premises: we no longer anticipate moral consequences of events, but establish necessary and sufficient conditions for hypothetical situations. Oakeshott makes use of an example so that he may explain the differences between the practical and the scientific attitudes. He observes that within the practical discourse we talk of seeing and hearing, when we say, for instance, that „It is a greater handicap to be blind than to be deaf”, so that we may express the common view that seeing is more important than hearing. Whereas within the scientific attitude, we speak of speed and sound, as in a relation of independence to ourselves, we say that „the speed of light is greater than the speed of sound”².

¹ “The Activity of Being a Historian”, in *What is History? and other essays*, Imprint Academic, 2004, p. 158.

² *Ibidem*, p. 160.

Oakeshott's example, though handy in making the point that he has in mind, is not a very happy one. His mentioning that we notice that seeing puts things at a greater distance from us than hearing doesn't ring the bell to me. The common view that the handicap of not seeing is greater than that of not hearing is indeed most common. Nowadays, multimodal art theories and experiences, especially the cases of art beyond sight show us not only that blindness is not a greater handicap than any other handicap, e.g. hearing, but also that it is no longer a handicap when it comes to the art of painting.

When one sense is missing, all the other senses are proved to develop considerably, so that they cover the missing sense. It is the case of the painter John Bramblitt³. John Bramblitt lost his sight in his early twenties. The fact that he can no longer see hasn't prevented him from painting. Instead of pencils or oils, he uses puffy paint, a special type of paint that leaves a thin raised line that he can follow by touch with his left hand, while he is painting with his right. He can also tell the difference among the colours of the paint that he uses, by feeling the difference of texture among them. He uses his other senses, especially touch so that he may compensate for his lost visual sense. Touching something stirs in him mental images. His well-developed sense of touch supplies the gap of not being able to see. He uses his memory, too. He retains in memory what he has already put in the painting. He also recollects visual images that he had until the age of 25, while he could longer see. He can tell when a painting is ready, and when it corresponds to the mental image that he has made of it, because he just „feels” it.

However, the third and final attitude that Oakeshott discusses in the essay I am referring to is the contemplative or aesthetical response towards the world. Oakeshott distinguishes the attitude of contemplation from both the practical and the scientific attitudes. The world as it is revealed within the aesthetical attitude is a *world of mere images* that are object of *delight* and *contemplation*⁴. The distinction between fact and non-fact images that apply to the other two realms (practice and science) do not have anything to say here. Therefore, the categories that seem correct when speaking of objects in practice or science, such as possibility, probability, cause-effect, means-ends, reality, or truth are irrelevant to aesthetics. The only characteristic that artistic images possess is their being present, and they stir our contemplating with delight, but do not lead to any argumentation or inquiry. Under the sole category of the present, they have no history, they are impermanent and unique. In conversation with practice, poetry often finds

³ <http://bramblitt.net/>

⁴ Michael Oakeshott “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind”, in *What is History? and other essays*, Imprint Academic, 2004, p. 217.

disagreement as the image in contemplation can never be pleasurable or painful, and it cannot be morally judged⁵.

2. Three Possible Ways of Understanding History

I wonder what is the place of history in the conversation of the human world, a conversation made up of let us say just the three responses reviewed up here (the practical, the scientific, and the aesthetical attitudes).

Michael Oakeshott's answer to my question above would be that there is a *specifically historical attitude*. And its distinctiveness is given by the fact that it is concerned with the past. The historian is interested in the world around him (**present**) as *evidence* for a world that is no longer present (**past**). His job is to inquire into the past and make statements about it. Since not only historians inquire into the past, but men of science as well as men in the world of practice may also inquire into the past. Then the subject-matter of history, Oakeshott notices, cannot be distinctive and characteristic of the historical attitude. His preoccupation focuses on differentiating what distinguishes history from practice or science⁶.

Oakeshott suggests that we can ask different kinds of questions about the past: „What must have happened?“ (practical past), „What might have happened?“ (hypothetical past), „What did happen?“ (historical past)⁷. In his opinion, history *proper* and the historian are concerned with answering this third question, and finding out what actually happened, what really took place in the past. It is assumed that there is an objective past, and history's main concern is with the past, and with finding out what really happened there. This view makes an independent manner of understanding out of history, which is seen as standing upon its own feet. From this perspective, there is an autonomous historical inquiry, employing its own concepts, formulating specific statements, reaching at its own conclusions, and a specific activity of the historian within this mode of understanding⁸.

Out of Oakeshott's intention to defend the autonomy of the historical mode of understanding emerges a view upon the past that can be believed to plead against positivism and empiricism employed within the historical inquiry in an almost postmodernist way. While, on the contrary, far from being an authentic constructionist and a narrativist in his opinions about historical past, Oakeshott is just the opposite: a defender of the idea of past

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 218.

⁶ „The Activity of Being a Historian“, in *What is History? and other essays*, Imprint Academic, 2004, p. 153.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

in its own sake⁹. This confusion may appear because Oakeshott addresses his claims in terms of defining the past as „a construction we make for themselves out of the events which take place before our eyes”¹⁰. Just as the future comes into existence as we understand the present events as evidence for what is about to happen, to Oakeshott, *the past appears when we understand present happenings as evidence for what has already happened*¹¹. The past exists, Oakeshott tells us, only as a reading or an understanding of the present. And what we have in the present (a book, a building, a painting, a document etc.) is but *evidence* to the past that we construct by means of and starting from the particular pieces of evidence.

However, I completely endorse Oakeshott’s idea that our reading of the past can be done from several perspectives, given by three different attitudes towards the past. The three different attitudes are exactly the three attitudes reviewed here, but this time throwing light on the idea of history and our possible ways of understanding the past: the practical, the scientific, and the contemplative perspectives. No more. No less.

Consequently, three types of past and three attitudes towards history can be differentiated: 1. The practical past, and the practical attitude towards history; 2. The scientific past, and the scientific attitude towards history; and 3. The contemplative (aesthetical) past, and the aesthetical attitude towards history. If the past is understood in relation to the present, to our present interests, desires, and activities, then we are dealing with an understanding of the past from the practical standpoint. If our interest is with the past for its own sake, and in independence to our interests, then we are dealing with the past from the standpoint of scientific/pure/autonomous history. And, finally, if the past is considered neither a practical, nor a scientific fact, but a *storehouse of mere images*, we embrace the attitude of contemplation towards the past¹². Oakeshott’s tendency is to leave behind the *reading of the past backwards* from the standpoint of the present interests with the past, and to focus on the scientific attitude towards the past, aiming at saving the autonomy of the history from being assimilated to either practice or aesthetics.

To me history seems a little a topical in the conversation of the human world when facing Oakehsott’s view. In *Experience and its Modes* history was one of the independent modes of thinking, together with science and practice. But now there is no special place for history among the other

⁹ For the contradiction between what can be found in Oakeshott and what he really states, see Efraim Podoksik, *In Defence of Modernity. Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott*, Imprint Academic, 2003, p. 102.

¹⁰ “The Activity of Being a Historian”, in *What is History? and other essays*, Imprint Academic, 2004, p. 161.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 162-165.

voices in conversation since the historical mode is distributed among the three attitudes of practice, science, and contemplation.

Therefore, Oakeshott's early strong pretensions are left behind if not left to fall altogether. He even meets with two objections of his own the claim of the autonomy of history as an historical attitude. His first objection warns us against the positivistic understanding of history in case we understand the meaning of the term `science` too strictly. In this case, history becomes a scientific approach with a scientific method of its own, explaining events causally, and by subsuming them to general laws¹³. Oakeshott's second objection, taking the term `science` in an even more restrictive sense, denies the possibility of a scientifically historical attitude towards the past as the world created in the scientifically historical perspective is not real, made of actual events but of hypothetical timeless situations¹⁴. Only if we take the term `science` and `scientific` in a general and leisurely manner, as meaning to study the past for its own sake, without having any subjective interest or relation to the past events that we reveal, a scientific attitude towards the past becomes possible in Oakeshott's opinion.

It didn't even occur to Oakeshott that even more serious objections to his theory of the autonomy of scientific historical attitude are possible, starting from the premises that both the idea of the past as such and the idea of the past studied for its own sake are deeply rotten. In this sense, I find Hayden White's criticism of the cliché of the past for its own sake most relevant: „Who studies the past for its own sake is either an antiquarian, fleeing from the problems of the present into a purely personal past or a kind of a cultural necrophile, one who finds in the dead and dying a value he can never find in the living”¹⁵.

3. The Triplicity of the Past

In Michael Oakeshott's opinion, the past is only a reading of the present. But not only one interpretation of the present (evidence) is possible, but, naturally, three (as many as the attitudes towards history and the past): 1. The past from the standpoint of practice (the *practical past*); 2. The past from the standpoint of scientific history (the *historical past*), and 3. The past from the standpoint of aesthetics (the past of *contemplation* and edification).

My present question is: What happens to the idea of the past in each of the three distinct attitudes? How is it defined from the three distinct

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Hayden White, “The Burden of History”, in *History and Theory*, vol. 5, no. 2, Blackwell Publishing, 1966, p. 125.

perspectives? Moreover, how are the past, the present, and the future to be understood within each of the three attitudes upon history: the practical, the scientific, and the aesthetic?

In the first essay published in *On History*, „Present, Future, and Past” (1979), which is a lecture that Oakeshott delivered in the seminar on the history of political thought at LSE, he shares the same preoccupation of his earlier writings with establishing the autonomy of history, and consequently is eager to dissociate the historical past from the practical past, but has nothing to say regarding a third possible type of past, that of contemplation.

Each type of past is defined in Oakeshott’s incomplete theory by its relation to a certain type of present. And pure historical past depends upon being evoked starting from the evidence we have in the present (documents, historical objects etc.). But if the past is called upon the necessities of the present, meaning that we do not start from present evidence so that we discover the past, but look for solutions to our present problems and dilemmas into the past, then, in Oakeshott’s view, the past becomes tainted by practice; this is the negative side of Oakeshott’s idea of practical past, in favouring the pure historical past or the past in itself and for its own sake as the object of the historical study.

The marks of the historical past in Oakeshott are non-surviving (the historical past is a dead past), and uselessness for present purposes. While the practical past is exactly the opposite: it is made of artefacts and utterances that survived from the past, and which are useful for our present engagements. To Oakeshott the practical past is not even a past at all, but „the present contents of a vast storehouse into which time continuously empties the lives, the utterances, the achievements, and the suffering of mankind”¹⁶. And there are three processes („detachment”, „shrinkage”, and „desiccation”), by which the contents of the practical past are turned into iconic situations and characters.

However, when it comes to the disentangle ling of the idea of the practical past into a countable and describable multitude of types of (practical) past, I am not sure if Oakeshott is aware of the truly positive sense that this idea of practical past gets. Especially if the different sorts of (practical) past there enumerated and metaphorically explored are not thought of as types, but as levels of the practical past. The practical past is not unique, but various¹⁷, and what is more important, I would add, it unravels itself progressively by its multiple neither kinds, nor degrees, but better said levels.

First, Oakeshott identifies the *encapsulated past*¹⁸. The past leaves physical and emotional traces in people (the trauma). It is in Oakeshott’s view the

¹⁶ Michael Oakeshott, *On History And Other Essays*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p. 39.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

level of practical past where traces and residues of all that has happened to us and all that we have suffered are (both physical and psychological scars). But also remains of what we used to think, imagine, believe, feel, hope, as well as of habits, practices, skills, are part of this first layer of practical past.

What we are is but a shadow of what has happened to us: „Real isn't how you were made, it's the thing that happens to you” (The Night Listener). The encapsulated past is itself made of multiple layers that come one over the other, most of the time beyond recall, but never in the position of being erased. Oakeshott names this first level of the practical past encapsulated, because this term expresses the fact that the past is locked within the present, and most probably never to be unlocked. But I think that its marks upon us are real, our actions are guided in accordance to it, and it actually defines who we are and where we are heading at.

The second level of the practical past is called the *remembered past*¹⁹. This time we are speaking of the past that can be recollected in memory. Memory awards us the awareness of the past together with our self-awareness. We become conscious of our own identity, a line that links our past actions to actual consequences, and we recognize ourselves in terms of the decisions that we take and the engagements that we make²⁰.

The third level of the practical past is named by Oakeshott *recollected or consulted past*²¹. The difference between the second and the third levels is that the third is no longer a personally remembered past, but it consists of itemized experiences that are recollected or consulted because they represent useful pieces of information for our present²². We access past experience to find advice for our present decisions to be made and it is not just for us individually but for the society they we are part of.

The fourth level of the practical past is a *deposit of voices from the past*, survivals from the past, that speak to us about our current situation²³. In Oakeshott's opinion, the fourth level of past is made of models, exemplar stories and exemplar characters. This fourth level is the core of the practical past. It is the „*living past*”, survivals from the past that carry ‚messages in a bottle’ for the present. Oakeshott speaks of the „living past” as peculiar voice in the conversation of mankind: „These message-bearing survivals may speak to us artlessly, in parables or in riddles; their voices may be clear, ambiguous or discrepant. They may purport to communicate useful information, advice or an effective image in which to express what we wish to say or wish to do. We may attribute authority to them or merely sagacity.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

They may be listened to, consulted, used, neglected or ignored”²⁴. The practical past in its fourth level is not a voice of its own, but collections of exemplarities (exemplar persons and situations) that can be interpreted: „what they mean to us is whatever they may be made to mean”. Every society disposes of such an archive, an inheritance of survivals from the past taken over into its common vocabulary of practical discourse, and used for the benefit of the present.

The symbolic vocabulary of practical discourse is a construction in accordance to a certain *approved* practical present. Oakeshott speaks of extreme situations when the practical past may be considered to contain worthless or injurious items, and these items are removed from the practical past of a certain society. The symbolic vocabulary of practical discourse is emptied of icons that are considered useless for the present or which are incommoding.

It makes me wonder. Who does these operations? Those who repeatedly write and rewrite history? Who decides on the value of the collection of symbols contained by the practical past? Who pronounces the desirability or non-desirability of the exemplarities of the practical past for our present practical engagements? Whose work is the editing of the symbolic vocabulary of practical discourse within a given society?

Hayden White proposes the following desideratum on the activity of the historian today: „The contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as an end in itself, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time”²⁵. Though it is a good replica to Oakeshott’s ideal of the historian interested in the past for its own sake, it doesn’t address any of my questions and they are doomed, I am afraid, to remain rhetorical. In between the complete positivisation of the idea of the practical past as the messenger from the past addressing present problems, and the narrativisation of history, Hayden White avoids asking the question: If history is a story, who is the narrator? May it be the historian himself? Or is it someone else?

4. „History is a fable”

All I did for my present essay was to read Oakeshott backwards instead of chronologically. Starting with „The activity of Being an Historian” (1958) and *On History* (1979), and continuing with „History is a fable”, an essay that he wrote at a very early age, in 1923. And I cannot help the remark: how

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

²⁵ Hayden White, “The Burden of History”, in *History and Theory*, vol. 5, no. 2, Blackwell Publishing, 1966, p. 125.

strangely can Oakeshott be read in post-modern terms when read backwards, only when arriving at this early essay.

History is a construction of the historian. He constructs the line of events in time, after recollecting them in his own mind, starting from the records found in the present, and turning events into historical events²⁶. So far I do not see many differences between what Oakeshott says and Collingwood's theory of re-actualization. The historical understanding means to Collingwood the (re)construction of the historical fact in imagination, starting from the interpretation of the available historical sources. We can understand re-enactment in a psychological and empathical way (Schleiermacher) or in a more elaborate way, as a fusion of the horizons of past and present (Gadamer).

Oakeshott didn't agree with the first interpretation of the theory of re-enactment as a reconstruction of the past thoughts, intentions and motives of the historical actors. As he considered that to speak of the past in terms of intentions is but a present interference of the historian's own thinking in history, from the standpoint of his present preoccupations and needs of interpretation. To him historical sentences such as „The king died too soon” or „The Pope's intervention changed the course of events” represent but an illicit interposing of the realm of practice in the historical field. Neither moral considerations formulated from the standpoint of practice nor causal relations created in the present for the facts of the past are accepted by Oakeshott to ever construct an historical inquiry.

There is nothing more ambiguous in Collingwood's *The Idea of History* than his pages on how re-enactment operates and what it means²⁷. If not the actual thought of the historical agent/author is re-enacted, but the logics of the thought, then I wonder what is there to be understood? Do we get access through history to the initial thought? Or is it just a representation of the former thought? Could two persons from two completely different historical times reconstruct the same thought? Do the historical actor/author and the historian think the same thought or is it just a resemblance that unites two distinct thoughts?

Against the representational theory, Collingwood doesn't seem to accept the hypothesis of resemblance. He seems to accept instead the identity

²⁶ Michael Oakeshott, “History is a fable”, in *What is History and other essays*, Imprint Academic, 2004, p. 32.

²⁷ See R. G. Collingwood, „History as Re-enactment of Past Thought” (1936), pp. 282-302 din IH, cât și alte referințe la doctrina în discuție din „Lectures on the Philosophy of History” (1926), p. 406 și din „Outlines of a Philosophy of History” (1928), pp. 440-441 și 447, published in the expanded edition of *The Idea of History*, revised edition with “Lectures 1926-1928”, edited with an Introduction by Jan Van Der Dussen, Oxford University Press, 1994.

between the re-actualized thought and the initial thought²⁸. Yet, the two thoughts aren't completely identical, there is a difference between the two, a difference of context, and it is this difference in context that we cannot ignore²⁹. The context is created by the particular set of questions and answers within two different universes of discourse: of the historical agent/author, and of the historian. It may be that the same thought is re-enacted, but the whole context is different. So it isn't exactly the same thought! The context confers the standpoint from which the historian understands the past. It is Collingwood's idea that thinking can be placed into different contexts without losing its identity, but isn't it the context itself what gives thinking its identity? And to place a piece of thinking in the past within a different context in the present isn't it to radically change it? Here is the main idea that separates Oakeshott from Collingwood. The reconstruction of the past is in fact a recreation of the past. And we are not allowed to jungle with past thoughts within the practical context of the present if we are historians. But if we are not, we can use and abuse history, not as we please, but as the current practical necessities and needs dictate us to. However, this is no longer history, but politics.

Once more the logic of question and answer got a pivotal role in Collingwood, this time not for the metaphysics of presuppositions, but for the philosophy of historical re-enactment. The past is deduced; I would better say diged, through a process of successive questions and answers, out of the historical evidence. Not the individual actual process of thinking is re-enacted, but the past thought which is in fact encapsulated in the present. Collingwood's theory of encapsulation, different from Oakeshott's, sustains that the traces left by the past in the present hide and may reveal by reconstruction some initial thinking. Collingwood's encapsulated past³⁰ travels beyond time, and it is eternally present in the same universal way as Hegel's spirit through the spirals of its manifestation and dematerializing.

It is better to say that history is being written, than that past historical thinking is revealed in the present that contains the past. And that the multiplicity of historical reconstructions is relative to the finite number of historians and interpreters of the past, relevant for certain historical periods. Oakeshott will describe the practical attitude towards history as it follows: *we only look at the past through the spectacles of the present*. The historian looks at evidence, examines documents, and orders historical facts from the standpoint of his present. Therefore historiography is but a succession of

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 284.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 108, 245, 248, 297, 301, 303.

³⁰ For Oakeshott's critique to Collingwood, though Collingwood's name is not mentioned, see, for instance, *On History*, cited edition, p. 10.

writings and rewritings of stories, and the philosophy of history is but a critical review of all these stories. Practical history is a fable.

5. Aesthetical history and edification

In his early essay, „History is a fable”, Oakeshott mentions *edification* in a completely limited and unsatisfactory way. He distinguishes two main orientations of history. On the one hand, writing history can be directed towards searching for solutions to present problems. And this is practical history. On the other hand, history can be studied for its own sake, in search for *edification*. By edification Oakeshott means disinterested knowledge (of the past). But scientific history is dismissed by Oakeshott in this early essay. He reaches at very post-modern conclusions: „There can never be a science of history”. In history we are dealing with theories, and not with facts. There are no historical facts to be captured in history because as we proceed to (re)construct the historical fact, the actual historical fact is nowhere to be found³¹.

Oakeshott considers that the idea of re-enactment isn't going to help our better understanding of the past. What counts from Oakeshott's point of view are not the intentions of the historical actors, but the events themselves³². What matters is that something did happen, even if we cannot determine what exactly did happen. But what Oakeshott really misses is the valorification of edification as changing of the self within an aesthetical history. If history is recreated (instead of re-enacted) artistically, then it is possible for the public to attain edification.

„How is it possible to survive the monstrous traumas of the past?” is the key question that Hayden White asks. Such traumas are Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and communism. It is most imperative today to address the same question. How can we lead a normal life, followed by the shadows of the past, carrying our traumas within ourselves? How can we be and what should we do so that to avoid in a morally responsible way that the past may ever repeat itself, and that horrors as those in scripted in our traumas of our mind may never occur again? Adept of a liberal and liberating historiography, Hayden White believes that it is possible to free from the „unsolicited heritages, false traditions, and repressive ‚burdens of history””, and the struggle is attributed to the practical past, or the past approached in the right way, as a real source of „meaning, inspiration, and direction” for the present.

³¹ See Michael Oakeshott, “History is a fable”, in *What is History and other essays*, Imprint Academic, 2004, p. 30.

³² Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, Liberty Fund, 1991, p. 179.

I think the solution may come only from an aesthetical project aiming at edification here and now, that is the concrete equivalent of the Christian redemption. Through art we can reconstruct the past creatively, giving it a multitude of shapes, and we can hope to change ourselves. I mean change should come from the inside and not from the outside. It is not a cathartically emptying of the soul by purification, but a changing of the mind. We simply become different, better in character. And we become those who would never repeat the mistakes of our semblables in the past.

6. Re-enactment of the Romanian trauma of communism

As a case study and application I will consider the case of theatrical performance and the play „x mm out of y km”, done by the Romanian director Gianina Carbuariu, an independent project of *Colectiv A* Association, in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, performed by four actors (Madalina Ghitecu, Paula Gherge, Rolando Matzangos, Toma Danila), who continuously change the characters they perform (Dorin Tudoran, the main character, dissident during the communist regime, Dorin Radu Popescu, President of the Writers’ Union in Romania, Nicolae Croitoru, in charge of the propaganda sector of The Municipal Committee of The Romanian Communist Party in Bucharest, and the character TO, who is filming and transmitting live on two screens, representing the awoken eye of the Security)³³.

The play was never written, because it doesn’t have a script. We are told this explicitly at the beginning of the performance. It doesn’t have an author either. Just three characters, who pick their roles randomly and change them with just two words: “Cut and again”. The only available historical sources are the security files, the most important of which the writer Dorin Tudoran published in his book *Eu, fiul lor. Dosar de securitate (I Am Their Son: Security File)*, Polirom, Iasi, 2010. The volume is a selection of more than five hundred out of the ten thousand pages found in the archives of the Security about Dorin Tudoran. The play of Gianina Carbuariu focuses on just one document of the presented evidence. Out of the five hundred pages of security files about Dorin Tudoran, the directress picks a transcript of a discussion that took place in March 1985, in which the three characters are involved, concerning Dorin Tudoran’s situation in communist Romania, and trying to convince him into giving up his plans and beliefs.

The main events around which the play gravitates are: Dorin Tudoran resigned from the Communist Party in 1982, and asked in 1984 to emigrate to the USA. Denied a response, on the 1st of August 1984 he wrote a letter

³³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol2cEMtFQTM>.

to Nicolae Ceausescu. After threatenings with legal repercussions to be taken against him, on the 25th of April 1985, Dorin Tudoran started a hunger strike, asking for an appointment with an official of The American Embassy in Bucharest. The hunger strike lasted for 42 days. Thanks to pleas from human rights' groups and the intervention of the American officials, he was permitted to leave the country on the 24th of July, 1985.

In an explaining article about her show, Gianina Carbuariu, identifies several questions searching answers regarding the relationship between document and fact, between our present trauma and the past, also regarding the possibility of knowing historically a recent past, that is still alive in our trauma left by the communism: "Are the Security files documents that may help us understand the past?", "How do we relate today to this burden of the past?", "How present is this recent past?"³⁴.

As the directress confesses, the aim of the play was not to attain pure historical knowledge of the recent past in question here, not to reach the fact in the past, as it really happened, but to reconstruct the past through the instruments provided by drama. Gianina Carbuariu's theatrical inquiry is not made from the standpoint of the scientific attitude towards history and the past, but from the practical one and, as I will show, contributes to aesthetical edification.

The inquiry has to do with the idea of the practical past because it has to do with the problems of the present: the trauma left by communism and how it affects our lives and our decisions today, 23 years after The Romania Revolution against communism in 1989. Also, it may be considered to aim at ameliorating, if not dissolving this trauma through the means of art. And it is certainly directed towards the changing of ourselves. By the communist trauma I identify negative emotions, bad reactions and attitudes, wrong decisions. Among the negative emotions part of the trauma of the communism are those felt by Dorin Tudoran during the discussion and the preceding months, and that are emanated by the arid, but not dry enough, pages of the security files, such as: fear, frightening, nightmare, anxiety, indecision, anxiety, insomnia, despair etc.

Technically, he play intends to construct several multiple historical realities by repeating over and over again the same scenario. Cut and reload is the principle of the organizing of the play, just as cut and update was the principle by which the security files were written, while following "the objective Tudoran". In this way, the directress gives shape to plural historical realities, because the main sources that she has, the transcript of the security files, indicate this approach. As she confesses in her article

³⁴ <http://www.revistascena.ro/performing-arts/eseu/x-mm-din-y-km-despre-o-posibilarhiva-performativa>.

about the play, the text of the security files suffered multiple corrections and changes of the so called facts. The security files are ambiguous technically as well as in their content. Among the examples offered by Gianina Carbuariu I enumerate: the use different verbs for the very same action, so that the tone and actual expression could never be reproduced; real facts are recorded into inverted commas, and erroneous indications are made, a letter that is a fact that was sent is spoken of as the “so called letter” etc. As a consequence, the actors perform the same but changing the meanings of the situations they construct through their performance. Their voices become higher or lower in pronouncing the same words, they whisper or shout the same thing, their intonation vary from one episode to another, they facial expression. And what is most important: not only one actor plays Dorin Tudoran, but all of the in turns leave their role with the line: “That’s enough. I cannot go any further”, and pick up another character and so on.

I think that the repetition is used for the purpose of provoking a certain reaction in the audience. It looks like boredom, but it isn’t it. It is a feeling of satiability that translates an irritation. The public gets irritated, enervated, in the sense that re-enactment produces. The trauma of the communism is awoken in the spectator. And the first step towards any healing is to find the disease. If we can admit that there is something wrong with us, then maybe we may have a chance to change ourselves.

7. Practical past and edification

Evidently, the re-enactment I am talking of is in psychological in not in logical terms. Is it a return to Scheleiermacher or Dilthey? If the past is still present within us, it is useless to stress upon its being present in the shape of an abstract thinking traveling through the contextual cloaks from one time to another. Moreover, it is the case of the recent past, and Collingwood would not even think of attributing his theory of re-enactment to recent past³⁵. Still, with or without Collingwood’s approval to award the theoretical context of the re-enactment to the play, it is an excellent example of how words become facts, a true and relevant performative act, in various repetitions, that are meant to re-enact the trauma of the communism into the Romanian public. And the trauma of the communism is mostly emotional affecting our present decisions. There is no question of guaranteeing a proper historical fact. The play is a multiple reconstruction of the past, from the standpoint of the practical past. But as an artistic experience it can aspire to be more, it can aim at edifying the public.

³⁵ If we are to give credit to what Oakeshott says in “The Activity of Being a Historian”, in *What is History? and other essays*, Imprint Academic, 2004, p. 155.

At the end everyone is invited to complete a sentence written in white chalk on the wall: "I admit and I am sorry that I collaborated with the security...". All the characters involved in the play are alive. But the sentence doesn't address them; it addresses us. We all collaborated in a way or another, and our trauma is our witness. In the present we make wrong political decisions. It is a consequence of this trauma of the communism. To free from it would mean to become able to take morally responsible and correct decisions involving our society and our semblables. But the question how we can heal this trauma remains open. At the end of the performance re-enactment of the recent past is stirred. Still, I am uncertain any edification produces. Did the spectators went home and felt that their life needed a change? Will they be different tomorrow? Will they live the present in a way to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past? Are they changed in any way? The only art I can believe in is an art capable of changing ourselves and the world. Not as a social weapon, but as the transubstantiating power that turns dust into gold and the tax man into a writer of history, who heals the suffering, and makes the blind see again. I believe in an historical aesthetics, empowered in this way by either God or the Devil.