correspondents at large
BUCHAREST

Bucharest at the Crossroads

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WHEN, AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, BUCHAREST WAS CALLED "LITTLE PARIS," THE NICKNAME IMPLICITLY MEASURED THE distance that Romania had covered on the road to modernization and westernization. The process was slow, because there were huge discrepancies between the efforts of a minority elite pushing for the entrance of the country "into Europe" and the indifference of a majority population with minimal standards of living. Despite important events favorable to the country's development—the union of the Romanian principalities (Moldavia and Walachia) in 1859 and its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878—Romania was, for most of the nineteenth century, still a province of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1869 Ulysse de Marsillac, a French journalist who lived in Bucharest for more than twenty years, asked rhetorically, "What is Romania? . . . A name that does not appear in any dictionary or on any map" (27).[1] The same question could be asked about Bucharest, Romania's capital. Although the city's formal existence dates from 1459, when Vlad the Impaler, the ruling prince of Walachia, granted it a charter, reference to history does not make a reading of the city any more coherent. Throughout the city's history, French travelers seem to have had trouble reading Bucharest on its own terms. Their strategy has been to match what they see in Bucharest with what they know of Paris, the ultimate model.

From this perspective, Bucharest is typically depicted by outsiders through a discourse that expresses a more-or-less-successful search for Little Paris rather than an encounter with the actual city. Orientalism, as an imaginary discourse made by the West about the Orient (Said), is being thus revised when applied to eastern Europe—in this case, to the Romanian capital—as an "intellectual project of demi-Orientalization," as Larry Wolff calls it (7), that aptly illustrates the "paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe" (Antohi, *Exercitiul* 312). Even if Bucharest constituted itself from the inside and was constituted from the outside as Little Paris, this designation is a veneer only. As I will show here, the

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accounts of French travelers past and present suggest that Little Paris may be no more than a short-lived dream and that we should see Bucharest as a city at the crossroads, looking both east and west.

Before the inauguration of the Orient Express in 1883 put Bucharest and the whole country on the European map, travelers to Romania and its capital city had limited help from maps, guides, or other conventional markers. Travel literature from this period considered Romania at most a *lieu de passage* en route to Moscow, Constantinople, or Jerusalem. Travel to the "other" Europe constituted a trip to an orientalized "Barbaria" figured by clichés about disorder, Turkish tyranny, and Christian victimhood, which fail to acknowledge any positive aspects of the region's culture.

Like their predecessors, nineteenth-century French travelers visiting Bucharest questioned its status: "Is Bucharest a village or a city?" "Where is the city's center?" But Bucharest could not be understood in the same terms as Paris, since historically the Romanian city was formed as a gathering of several villages, while Paris's urban existence, like that of other Western capitals, started at the center of the medieval city and then expanded concentrically. The absence of a center translates into a long list of observations about disorder—lack of systematic arrangement, messiness, and disruption—that betrays the travelers' inability to shift mentally from Paris to Bucharest. In 1875 Count Charles de Moüy, passing through the city, noted in his travelogue that if one were to wake up in Bucharest it would be difficult to know where one was, so big were the contrasts—crooked streets neighboring a Champs-Élysées-like avenue, luxurious and ox-drawn carriages on the same streets, elegant people and peasants, decrepit shops and fine boutiques, mansions close to huts inhabited by Gypsies (9–15).

If one adds other unappealing elements, such as the mud and the dust (Blowitz 45), it becomes clear why walking in the city was a dangerous enterprise even for the most daring of flâneurs. The flâneur of the nineteenth century, a figure of Parisian modernity aptly theorized by Walter Benjamin, is a philosopher of the city who decodes signs and makes connections between present and past. In Bucharest, if not drowning in mud, the flâneur would risk being engulfed by the crowds of passersby or by the gatherings that filled the city on any occasion, religious or secular. Bucharest's counterpart to the Parisian flâneur has to be a collective figure, actively participating in the life of the city. The emphasis shifts from the solitary observer to a self-sufficient and unruly crowd that takes part in the city's spectacle—in the colorful bazaars, in the markets, gardens, cafés, and restaurants—according to a logic more or less unreadable for outsiders.

Marsillac observed that crowds were organized by class: the rich paraded in the alleys of Baneasa and Herastrau—a Romanian variant of the bois de Boulogne—and the poor gathered in the Cismigiu, a garden in the middle of the city. He also noticed the ethnic layering that enriched street life, such that one could sense the throb of the Balkans—which he calls "the Orient of our dreams" (99)—emanating from those who wore Western attire. And while Marsillac correctly notices the merry carpe diem attitude of the Romanians, which was meant to ease the everyday misery of life, he often endorses the point of view of the Frenchman who misses home. Marsillac warns the French traveler coming to Romania about culture shock: "When you come from France and land in Giurgiu [a port on the Danube], the first impression is painful." He adds that travelers should arrive at night so that the dark hides their tears (66, 70).

If Bucharest were at the same time a world and a book, as Benjamin characterized Paris (464), many of its pages would be blank. Indeed, observed through a limited French lens, the Romanian city slowly becomes invisible. Looking for familiar traces of the Oc-

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cident, travelers find by default an unfamiliar, Babel-like zone or an imaginary Ruritania, like Anthony Hope's land in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), impossible to comprehend or to locate on a readable map.

This perspective does not change much over the following century, despite the visible effort of the capital toward modernization and hence toward synchronic cultural alignment with the Western world. The avenues were widened, and imposing buildings, mostly modeled on French predecessors, were erected. This is when Bucharest began to be called Little Paris. Yet, in his 1935 book *Bucarest*, Paul Morand refuses to validate this appellation, because, he says, too many cities in the world would aspire to it: "D'ailleurs, comment reconnaître Paris dans tous les « petits Paris » qu'on m'a montrés à la surface du globe?" ("In fact, how do I recognize Paris in all these 'little Parises' I have been shown on the surface of the globe?"; 171). Does this question demonstrate the superiority of the French person who evaluates the world from the heights of the Eiffel Tower or the jaded wisdom of a cosmopolitan traveler?

After he dismisses Bucharest's status as Little Paris, Morand explains, "Bucharest is Bucharest, and I would recognize it among hundreds of capitals . . ." (171). In this way, he emphasizes that the main intention of his book is to identify such signs of recognition. His "pictures" of the capital are taken from the world of the francophone and francophile Romanian elite, which he knew well. When Morand writes about the past, he revives the ancestors of his Romanian friends—the Brancovan, Bibesco, or Soutzo—that he frequented in Paris in discriminating intellectual and fashionable circles. When he writes about the present, he produces a lively *carnet mondain* about parties, visits, and conversations with the royal couple or with Romanian aristocrats. But when he gets out in the streets, Morand is taken aback by ox-drawn carts and colorful and disorderly people. And while he acknowledges that Bucharest is a "marvelous crossroad of races, figures, customs, and adventures" (284), he focuses mainly on non-Western aspects, as a rich source for picturesque tableaux and great stories (the chapters' titles are particularly telling—"Bucharest, ce Pérou des Phanariotes," "La mahalla," "Tziganes," "L'école des mossafiri"). Despite many successful stylistic tours de force, Morand falls subject to the nineteenth-century travelers' dilemma about Bucharest's urban status. Bucharest is "a village," he states, and Calea Victoriei, the main artery of the city, is at the same time "the main street of this village" (125) and "the most famous artery of the Near Orient" (153). Away from the center, in the "mahala," where Gypsies, Jews, and the homeless live like troglodytes (135), "the European city disappears and Asia starts" (129). The colors in which he describes these sordid places fade away, degraded to white, the color of invisibility (129). It is not surprising that he questions the city's status as a capital: Bucharest appears to him a patched-up city built without a plan (146) that is more of a "meeting place" than a capital (289). Toward the end of the book, Morand defines the city in terms of what it is not: it is not a beautiful old city with a strategic geographic position or a vital international node or even the embodiment of the whole country. Obviously, his negative definition suggests his native Paris by opposition.

Morand concludes that, despite an adverse history, Bucharest remains "gay" and its inhabitants have good humor (285). One thinks of Raymond Poincaré's famous words: "Que voulez-vous, nous sommes ici aux portes de l'Orient, où tout est pris à la légère . . ." ("What do you want, we are here at the gates of the Orient, where everything is taken lightly . . .").[2] Morand's examination of the city is also done "lightly," and he confesses that he intends only to take rapid snapshots of the city: "Dans un livre qui vise à être l'instantané d'une ville, je dois me limiter aux aspects extérieurs, à ce qui frappe la vue, plutôt qu'à ce qui intéresse

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l'esprit . . ." ("In a book that tries to be a snapshot of a city, I must limit myself to exterior aspects, to that which strikes the gaze, rather than to that which interests the mind . . ."; 210). His snapshots belong to a visitor who appreciates the city in terms of occidental standards, and so the "zone" depicted by past travelogues, with its implicit East-West antinomy (disorder/order, backwardness/civilization), pierces the narrative again, like Roland Barthes's *punctum*, which damages the shiny surface of the photograph (Verona 164–65). These "wounds" on the capital's body will have the same effect on the Romanians' own cultural discourse, reinforcing their consciousness of their cultural marginality, which Émile Cioran expressed so poignantly when talking about the tragedy of small cultures and their "mediocre destiny" (45).

Any effort to modernize the capital came to a halt during the communist regime, when the status of the city was subjected to brutal political decisions. Buildings in the Soviet style of the 1950s—such as Casa Scânteii (House of the Spark), a replica of Moscow's Lomonosov University—were erected throughout the city, along with cheap constructions in the newly built suburbs that enabled the regime to relocate massive populations from the countryside, creating a new working class. In the 1980s one-fifth of the city was razed, victim to Nicolae Ceauşescu's megalomaniac urban project: historic buildings, markets, and old churches had to be torn down to make room for the Civic Center, whose main avenue had to be wider and longer than the Champs-Élysées. Here Paris does become the model to be surpassed. In his journey along the Danube in 1986, Claudio Magris derisively calls Bucharest the "Paris of the Balkans"—one more ironic twist of Little Paris (365).

In the 1990s Dominique Fernandez in *Rhapsodie roumaine* ("Romanian Rhapsody") attested to the "unfortunate reputation" of the city (11)—and of the country for that matter—and his findings are difficult to dismiss. But the author is ever determined to take a fresh look at both, away from any preconceived political or aesthetic ideas. In his chapter about Bucharest, Fernandez demonstrates one successful way of seeing the city without prejudice. His "pictures" of Bucharest—both textual and visual (the many photographs that accompany the text are taken by Ferrante Ferranti)—institute a dialogue about the real and the imaginary city, about those who look at the city and those who are looked at. The succession of tableaux—oriental, occidental, communist, and postcommunist—melt into one narrative, without any hierarchical discrimination. The carousel of simultaneous urban encounters still surprises the reader who recalls Morand's book, but Fernandez depicts buildings and people in the vivid colors of a mosaic that excludes any trace of a picturesque and orientalizing discourse.

Here the Manuc's Inn, built at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which suggests the lively bazaar life of old Bucharest, stands together with the present crowds on the neighboring Lipscani Street and its numerous little shops, close to a Parisian *passage*, to the House of Savings, built in 1900 by the French architect Paul Gottereau, and to the imposing Military Circle, built in 1912 across from Capsha, a famous restaurant frequented by the Bucharest intelligentsia and high society. The photographs, as an extension of the text, represent people and buildings, alternating the old and the new and emphasizing the multiethnic hybrid mixtures and cultural crossings—houses and gardens from the old Bucharest, the French Cultural Institute's elegant salon, Belu Cemetery, the Lipscani Market, a Gypsy girl, a newspaper vendor, the Ceauşescu "palace."

At every corner Fernandez finds, with no interruption or transition, Little Paris together with "Little Istanbul" and "Little Moscow," although it should be noted that there are no photographs or comments about the communist suburbs made during the sovietization of the city in the 1950s. This part of Bucharest,

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like similar parts of other eastern European cities, still represents a black hole of history that no one wants to see or to remember.

Nevertheless, by celebrating the multiple cities in one, Fernandez's book becomes a model and a tool for reading and interpreting the city today. Fernandez's visual and textual montage answers many of the questions asked by past travelers. First, it shows that the mixture of architectural quotations from the old and new city are not part of any preservation enterprise; they just exist, saved miraculously from natural calamities (a third of the center disappeared during the 1977 earthquake) and from brutal urban politics—not all due to the communist regime (Pippidi 7–12). Second, their coexistence, recalling the multiple layers of the past and of many cultural discourses, demands a reconsideration of the "zone," which is in fact a zone of contact in which people meet and interact now as they did in the past (Pratt 6–7). Bucharest was and still is a crossroads at the margins of Europe, where people and ideas from all parts of the continent and beyond circulate.

There are indeed many cities in Bucharest, and it is not surprising to see the name of the city sometimes used in the plural (Bucurestii). Jean Cuisinier, a French ethnographer, calls it "les Bucarest" when he speaks about the secret, the public, the triumphal, the intimate, and the nostalgic faces of the city (23). The enumeration should continue with the old, the bereft, the new, the French, the Balkan, the oriental, the communist, and the postcommunist Bucharest. The several cultural discourses, local and foreign, that mirrored these many cities in the city and historically zigzagged from one to another—embracing some, rejecting others—could then coalesce into one rich cultural discourse that would restore Bucharest's visibility.

In the end, revisiting French travelers' literature about Bucharest suggests the need to replace the old single lens with a multiple one, such as Fernandez's, that would allow us to see the city through a cultural discourse no longer trapped in a never-ending Occident-Orient opposition but instead participating in a continuous dialogue anchored in hybrid cultural territories, where frenchification, (semi)orientalization, sovietization, and, more recently, americanization interfere, overlap, and get creative.

Notes

1. Unattributed English translations are mine.

2. This statement by Poincaré, a French lawyer and statesman and president of France (1913–20), made at the beginning of the twentieth century in Bucharest when he went there for a trial, became the motto of Mateiu Caragiale's novel *Craii de Curtea-Veche* (1929) and the symbolic premise of the oppositional encounter between the Westerner and the native. The metaphor of Romania's position at the "gates of the Orient" has been adopted by various discourses on literature, politics, and tourism. Antohi calls it "the single most important discursive locus of Romania's symbolic geography" ("Romania").

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