Mariana Neț, Once Upon Two Cities. A Parallel Between New York City and Bucharest by 1900

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3. Roxana Oltean
4. The University of Bucharest

Anchored in the fruitful tradition of *nouvelle histoire*, and intersecting other scholarly fields such as imagology and sound studies, *Once Upon Two Cities. A Parallel between New York City and Bucharest by 1900* provides an excursion into late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New York and Bucharest, drawing on a wealth of information on urban development, as well as on primary documents pertaining to how the cities were perceived—diaries, memoirs—and to how the cities were presented—guidebooks, postcards, etiquette books, cookbooks (offering a “reconstruction of the immediate reality” and, at the same time, aiming to provide the latter with “a quasi-eternal dimension” [xvi]). In the spirit of a history of mentalities, sensibilities and ideals, the book aims to give a feeling of the two cities. The topics are thus organized by reference to
the senses, except that little or no reference is made to touch in the sources under consideration. As the author argues, not only was perception regulated by a Victorian mentality barring reference to intimacy, but city experience was about the public sphere, and emphasized common rather than personal preference.

The protagonist of this reconstruction of sensibilities is the middle class, to whom the conduct books for example are addressed, and for whom they act as ideological texts, strengthening identity while simultaneously shaping the imagination. The fact that this exploration of city life focuses on the emerging middle class and on the incipient sense of modernity implies, as Net points out, that many of the patterns gleaned from the reading of the primary materials indicate the norm, the regulatory experience as well as the aspirations of this increasingly pronounced segment of the urban population.

While the correlation between the modern sensibility and nineteenth-century urban development has been amply documented (for example by Thomas Bender, whose work Net also relies on), the suggestion of a comparison between New York and Bucharest may seem surprising, at the very least. At several points in her book, Net herself mentions the many ways in which the cities not only belong to different continents, but to what one might call different historical, geographical and demographical continuums. And yet, the book represents a strong argument for the possibility of a comparison, and for the way that comparison fleshes out the particularities of city development in the period under investigation. At the same time, the shared modernity of urban development is often regarded as overriding specific differences, in the spirit of Bender’s assertion that, when we refer to modernity, to refer to one city is to refer to all cities, an idea to which Net returns several times: “[t]o speak about a turn-of-the-century European or American city meant (and still means) to speak about any city, about all cities” (11). Significantly, a distinguishing feature of this modernity is the city’s self-reflexive look upon itself, as is its culture of impersonality, again drawing on Bender. Another key to the coherence of this comparative perspective is provided by the middle class itself, and Net argues that this solid—yet ever elusive—segment of the population is often conspicuously absent from accounts of and research into cities (11). It is around
In addition to this general positioning within the field of inquiry into modern sensibility and nineteenth-century city development, Neț also identifies elements of urban history that constitute points of comparison between New York and Bucharest: the relative newness of the cities (compared to ancient cities such as Rome, or to medieval ones such as Paris), the new impetus of urbanization in the mid-1860s (emulating Paris as an acme of cosmopolitanism), the isolation of the lower classes from the city’s elite, stemming from lack of access to the latter’s language (English in New York, which the immigrants did not speak, French in Bucharest, the marker of cultivation), ethnic variety, the extraneous origin of nineteenth-century city dwellers (immigrants or people of rural origin) linked to their cosmopolitan outlook, the import of modernity from outside (as the comparison between the biographies of Joseph Pulitzer and Frederic Darné shows), or the simultaneous introduction of "urban facilities" (Neț 8), with a case study on the use of the telephone.

The wider basis of the comparison is thus the emergence of a new type of city, typical of the nineteenth century, and the features of this new city are detailed and exemplified through the comparative perspective upon Bucharest and New York from the 1850s to the end of the long nineteenth century. Reflecting the homogenizing practices that accompany the emergence of the middle class (with aspects of city development such as streetcars or sidewalks), the period under consideration is marked by overlaps which complicate the history of urbanization. The view of an "intricate interplay between lingering patriarchal habits and modernity—either already installed or in the making" (xvi) which, Neț argues, determines the city soundscape, can be extrapolated to the wider picture of the two cities.

The book proceeds in what might be imagined as paired chapters, exploring a theme first for New York and then, in the subsequent chapter, for Bucharest. The structure of the chapters is similar, where history permits, making for contrasts and parallels in view of the afore-mentioned process of modernization. The starting point for this parallel history is constituted by guidebooks. In the case of New York guidebooks (chapter 2), what is striking is the early date of their appearance, their diversity, as well as their target audience: visitors but also locals. An overlap
with fiction is postulated in point of the manner in which both types of texts are places where identity is masqueraded. The account dwells not only on those aspects of city life highlighted at the time, but also on what appear to be blind spots (little or no attention afforded to the telephone and to electric street lighting, for example). The overview of Bucharest city guides (chapter 3) engages the clichéd contrast between Parisian and Oriental features (the latter both an object of nostalgia but also a cumbersome remnant from the past); a point worth insisting upon is that these cliché images emerge, Neț shows, from terms coined by foreigners and only later used and internalized by Romanians. For scholars of city history, but also for the wider comparison envisaged in this work, the comments Neț offers on the cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic nature of nineteenth-century Bucharest are especially relevant.

11 If guidebooks and yearbooks are propaganda texts and, at the same time, sources of information about reality, or rather about the norm, outdoor statues and sculptures (chapters 4 and 5) prove to be vocal loci of history and/as rhetoric. Neț details the manner in which statues and sculptures in both cities not only honor and monumentalize episodes of national history and culture, but adopt certain values so as to claim continuity with Europe, as attested for example by the statues of Italian patriots in New York, or the statues of Romanian historical figures dressed in Western style clothing—atypical for the protagonists’ epoch (see Neț 61). The research into New York statues dedicated to foreign personalities reveals a relative scarcity, as well as an apparent lack of selection and coordination, attributed to the fact that these statues were often gifts from allogeneous groups. A surprising feature of Bucharest is the relative lack of public statues until the mid-nineteenth century and the probably unique temporary monuments, designed to be demolished, such as the plaster construction honoring the visit of Emperor Franz Joseph to Bucharest in 1896 (58). The topic occasions compelling observations about the manner in which, on the city stage, the present is a projection of the past, and vice versa, while statues commemorating the very recent past, and almost contemporary personalities, point to an inscription of the present itself into a historical perspective. It is also around statues, one might argue, that key differences between Bucharest and New York are predicated, as are the key similarities, such as the preference for the present and for
the recent past, or the symbolic significance (with due regard to proportions) of gift statues (the Statue of Liberty in New York, the bronze copy of the *Lupa Capitolina* in Bucharest, offered by the city of Rome in 1906).

12 Chapters 6 and 7 bring together a host of media, from postcards to songs, to point to the vast variety of features through which inhabitants portray their city, but also to emerging patterns of perception which reflect, regulate and ultimately tame the shifting scene of the emerging modern city. Thus reflected and refracted in histories and fiction, in songs, cinema, painting, photography and postcards, in a language which actually often omits the middle class, New York seems to emerge as a Europeanized city, as a city of vibrant street life and as a space of transition, even anguish, as attested by the superposition of church spire and skyscraper (89-92). As for Bucharest, the overview of travel notes and monographs starts from the idea that a city reflecting upon itself is a mature city, even if a host of urban works still needed to be performed before Bucharest could be considered a truly modern city. Salient observations also emerge from the semiotic analysis of the ample production of postcards, where the art of photography is analyzed in view of its filmic qualities, while the theatricality exhibited in the arrangements is also read as a real life effect, given the Narcissist and performative aspect of city life at the turn of the century.

13 Chapter 8, foregrounding the noises of New York, can be correlated with the field of sound studies, which continues work done by researchers such as Alan Corbin, who focused on the aural thresholds of the nineteenth-century French countryside, or Mark Smith, who tuned into the complex braiding of pastoral and industrial in the nineteenth-century American landscape; this type of scholarship constitutes a gateway to a fresh understanding of the past and of processes of incremental change. A section of chapter 8 is also devoted to a variety of musical institutions, establishments, schools and buildings (ranging from symphonic music and opera to operetta and vaudeville). The topic of sound is continued in chapter 9, which dwells on Bucharest (with its urban, industrial noises, layered over the remnants of rural noises), as well as on the history of classical music institutions. Difference (to New York) is articulated around the presence of romances as a musical genre, but the reading can also slip into comparisons, as the above-mentioned genre extends into other types of music bearing close affinities to American vaudeville,
particularly as it is through music, Neț argues, that Bucharest constitutes a counterpart to other modern cities of the time.

Chapters 10 and 11 refer to cuisine, and the account of the motley gastronomical map of New York refers both to geographical givens (the abundance of oyster beds in mid-nineteenth-century New York) as well as to the demographics of the city. The survey of cookbooks (171-185) constitutes a veritable tour de force in the exploration of the mentalities and moeurs of their writers and intended readers, with cookbooks as expressions of experience but also as attempts at shaping and regulating experience, thus spilling over into housekeeping, health and lifestyle advice, all in view of an emerging sense of an American gastronomical identity. As for the discussion of Bucharest, the latter reveals a highly varied and cosmopolitan facet of the city, and the parallel excursus into Romanian cookbooks is extremely rewarding; observations about the changes in mentality evinced in cookbooks point to how the latter created a need, rather than responded to one (194), to the effect that the cosmopolitanism and simplicity advocated by these writings polished identity at a theoretical, rather than at a practical level (202).

Smell is the sense privileged in chapters 12 and 13, with references to the history of sanitation practices and infrastructures, to the theatricality of New York as reflected in conduct books. Negotiating a complex American identity between Old and New World, between genders and classes, conduct books are once again regarded as playing “an important part in fostering Americans’ awareness of their environment, of themselves and of the others” (213). As for Bucharest, a similar braiding of rural and modern is noted in the case of smells; the analysis is intertwined with the history of sanitation and street development, and is placed in a general life context developed around the concept of theatricality and articulated through the distinguishing feature of parks and flower gardens. Conduct manuals are inserted into a history of accelerated modernization, while features pertaining to cultural hybridity are identified in certain texts (222). Especially interesting is the fictional character of etiquette books read by those without access to the social events described, but who, through the act of reading, gained information, overcame complexes and became more assertive (Neț 224). This type of function, identified with Bovarism, ended around the close of the
century when, Neț argues, the firmly established urban middle class of Bucharest and of other towns needed real vademecums.

Space— and, to a lesser extent, time—constitute the next theme of the parallel. Bringing together previous elements as well as new ones, chapter 14 foregrounds a vision of New York as a multilayered city, focusing on skyscrapers, on means of transport, and relying on carefully orchestrated ciné-vérité sequences such as Edison’s Automobile parade (1900). Chapter 15 also treats the notion of space (more precisely, the exploration of adjacent spaces through tourism—including symbolic pilgrimages (238-239)—but also through aviation); a feature of this chapter is the treatment of time, as signified by the presence of public clocks in Bucharest. Contextualized by the “catching up” that Bucharest had to perform, passing from the beginning of a long nineteenth century (when the city was emerging out of a “belated Middle Ages”) to relative synchronicity in the early 1900s, public clocks are read as signaling the intention of “tuning [...] daily life and la petite histoire with European History” (237).

What Neț calls the “two books” contained in this work are drawn together in Chapter 16, in view of the “unprecedented modernization of cities” on both sides of the Atlantic, and of the consequent “redefinition of urban identities and urban lifestyles” (247). If differences lie in historical and geographical factors, as pointed out at the beginning, it is also worth remembering that the similarities are even less apparent now: as Neț argues, the Second World War obliterated the resemblances and put an end to the achievements, while communism can be regarded as responsible for many of the changes that Bucharest has undergone. And yet, one might add, the benefits of transatlantic comparison come to speak for themselves. While the book ends with the adage that “if you don’t leave Europe, you can’t understand it,” it ultimately substantiates the idea that understanding comes through comparison, looking beyond the discrepancies of the recent past to hint at the thrills of a shared history of urban modernization.

Works Cited


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**AUTHOR**

**ROXANA OLTEAN**

The University of Bucharest