

A Portrait of Bucharest as a Mature City

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Abstract

The paper will belong to the semiotics of cities. It will expand upon the relationship between city signs and urban identities, while analyzing typical urban phenomena, e.g. public transportation, communication systems, department stores, financial districts, household commodities at the turn of the 19th century.

19th Century cities are different from those of the past. They are characterized by typically *urban* phenomena, like public transportation, new communication means (the telephone), electric lighting, department stores, running water and sewerage systems, sidewalks and (different) street paving, etc.

All these changes took place very speedily. They accelerated in the latter half of the 19th century, and by 1900 they were quite complete and assimilated, conferring cities a new identity.

As a sign of maturity, cities now began to point at themselves. They became antonymic, self-referential, self-reflexive. They started writing about themselves and their citizens, they were painted, photographed, filmed. They built their *image* and promoted it to themselves and to others.

I give the concept of *image* the meaning it has in the now 30 year old dictionary *Sémiotique* [1] viz. «unité de manifestation autosuffisante, [...] effet de signification véridictoire, relative à une culture donnée, qui juge certains signes plus «réels» que d'autres, et qui conduit [...] le producteur de l'image à se soumettre aux règles de connotation d'un 'faire-semblant culturel'.»

The present paper will refer to this antonymic process of self-reflection, as a sign of maturity of the city of Bucharest in the 1866-1914 span, i.e. during the reign of Carol I.

In the case of Bucharest, the process of self-reflection is perhaps more important than it is for many other European cities, because during this epoch Bucharest was practically re-invented, and conferred an entirely new identity. From a little more than a late medieval borough, Bucharest became a European city in full swing of development.

For obvious reasons, the urbanisation process proper will not be referred to here, nor will the process of self-reflection as a whole. From among the various types of *images* promoting the city of Bucharest in the above-mentioned span, the present survey will only deal with a synecdoche, viz. with *statues* of Bucharest dwellers.

The embellishment of Bucharest with statues during the reign of Carol I is extremely interesting. A bird's eye view of *whom* the statues represented and *when* they were erected will reveal a few significant characteristics of the *urban imaginaries* of those times.

FROM THE «ZERO DEGREE» TO THE CONVENTIONAL

The first fact to be emphasized is that until mid-nineteenth century the city of Bucharest had had no statues at all.

The first statue ever to be seen in Bucharest was unveiled in 1869; it was dedicated to *spatharus* Mihail Cantacuzino (1640-1716). The statue was placed in front of the hospital this philanthropist nobleman had founded.

From among the 20-odd statues made and unveiled during the 1866-1914 span, there is only one other, representing Princess Bălașa (who had lived in mid-eighteenth century),

[1] A.-J. Greimas, Joseph Courtès, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*. Paris: Hachette, 1979

dedicated to a personality of times past. The statue was unveiled in 1881 and placed in the courtyard of the church the princess had founded.

The statue of Gheorghe Lazăr (1779-1828), one of the founders of modern Romanian education, was unveiled in 1886. Apparently, it belongs to the same category as the previous two. However, to raise a statue to this very distinguished scholar had been an event postponed ever since the 1848 Revolution. Therefore, the statue is both a tribute paid to a personality of times past and the accomplishment of a dream cherished by predecessors. It signified viewing the present as an extension of the past.

THE STATUE AS A LANDMARK AND AS A SIGN OF PRESENT ASPIRATIONS

The statue of the reigning Prince Michael the Brave (1593-1601) stands in a category by itself. In 1600, Michael the Brave, a champion of Romanian Independence, had unified the three historic Romanian Principalities for a very short time. This is why he had become a symbol. His equestrian statue was erected in 1874, fifteen years after the unification of two of the historic Romanian Principalities, at a time when the idea of Romanian Independence (to be proclaimed and conquered three years later) was already in the air.

Thus the symbolism of Prince Michael the Brave was strengthened, while his statue (placed in downtown Bucharest, facing the newly built University) became a landmark and was to stay so to this day.

STATUES OF CONTEMPORARIES, STATUES OF THE PRESENT

However, it is the other statues dedicated to Romanian personalities, raised and inaugurated during the 1866-1914 span, which are most interesting from a semiotic point of view. All the other statues fall into a category apart, and they represent a *unique* phenomenon. Because the statues were erected barely a couple of years after the death of the personalities they represent, and this fact is extremely relevant in itself.

The series was inaugurated in 1880 by the statue of Ion Heliade Rădulescu (1802-1872) a scholar, poet and politician.

The year 1890 is known (among other events) for the unveiling of a statue dedicated to Ana Davila (1840-1884), a philanthropist lady who had spent the last twenty years of her life as a director of «Elena Doamna» alms-house for girls, which she had founded in 1864 together with Princess Elena Cuza.

The statue of Emanoil Protopopescu-Pache (1845-1893), one of the most outstanding and definitely the most revered of Bucharest mayors (1888-1891) was unveiled in 1899, only six years after his death.

It was also in 1903 that a few other statues were completed and unveiled, viz. C.A. Rosetti (1816-1885), an outstanding journalist, revolutionary figure and political leader; Ion C. Brătianu (1821-1891), former Prime-Minister; (the bust of) A.T. Laurian (1810-1881), a scholar, journalist and politician.

The year 1904 is known for a bust of Dipl.Eng. Gogu C. Cantacuzino (1845-1898), former Minister of Finance, while in 1907 the statue was unveiled representing Lascăr Catargiu (1823-1899), four times Prime Minister of Romania.

A STATUE OF PAST AND PRESENT

The last statue to be briefly considered here was unveiled in 1908. It represents Dinicu Golescu (1777-1830), a well-known writer and philanthropist aristocrat, surrounded by his four sons, viz. Ștefan (1809-1874), Nicolae (1810-1877), Radu (1814-1872) and Alexandru (1818-1873), all of which had been remarkable revolutionary figures and had contributed to a considerable extent to the development of the country. This statuary group is meant to signify the continuity of revolutionary ideas and ideals in Romanian families.

CONCLUSIONS

As we can see, none of the personalities whose statues were erected around 1900 is a figure of the past. City officials did not pick up princes, warriors, intellectuals or philanthropists of times past; instead, they chose to erect statues to *contemporary* personalities. This option is even more significant in the context of the absolute *void* of statues which had characterized the city of Bucharest until very recently, when the «natural» and definitely easiest, option might have been to represent ready-made symbols from the rich gallery of historical and cultural personalities. Instead of this, Bucharest city officials chose to «immortalize» outstanding figures from among their contemporaries, i.e. their acquaintances, their colleagues, their friends, their adversaries. Thus the symbols of the city, of the country, of the epoch were completely changed. So was their imaginary.

In this way, the *present* gains precedence over the *past*. More important still, the city of Bucharest is endowed with a new, contemporary «mythology»,^[2] which participates both to the «present» era (because the represented personalities had died only a very short while before) and to the «past» one (because they were dead, nevertheless). It might be called, oxymoronically, a «realistic mythology».

Consequently, the city of Bucharest (and the country for which it stood) became endowed with a special kind of «past», very close to the present. Once dead, outstanding personalities froze into statues and became historical landmarks. Thus, the recent past seems more remote.

Paradoxically, by the same process, the posterity of these statues and their ideas is also ensured. Past, present, and future are almost undistinguishable.

[2] See also the allegorical figures and symbols included in many of these statues or statuary groups. For lack of space, they have not been discussed here.