

Cultural Encounters: Glimpses of the United States in Late Twentieth-Century Romanian Travel Narratives

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Abstract

Travel narratives are complex accounts that include a significant layer of factual information – related to the geography, history, and/or the culture of a particular place or country – and a more personal layer, comprising the author’s unique perceptions and rendering of the travel experience. In the last thirty years of transition from a communist to a democratic society, the Romanians have been free to travel to any country they choose; however, during the communist period, especially during the 1980s, travelling to Western, capitalist countries, such as France, Great Britain, Canada, or the United States, was rather limited and fraught with complex issues. Still, Romanian travelers during that time managed to visit the United States, on diplomatic- or business-related exchanges, and published interesting travel stories of their experiences there. Therefore, this essay sets out to capture, from a comparative perspective, the impressions and encounters depicted by Radu Enescu in *Between Two Oceans* (1986), Ion Dinu in *Traveler through America* (1991) and Viorel Sălăgean in *Hello America!* (1992), with a view to analyzing how their descriptions and perceptions of two major urban spaces, New York City and San Francisco, reflect the complexity of the American social and cultural landscape in the late 1970s and mid-1980s.

Keywords: Romanian travel narratives, perceptions of the United States, cultural encounters, American urban spaces, late twentieth century, New York City, San Francisco

At the beginning of a new millennium, researchers have turned their attention to travelers from the Balkans in such studies as Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis' *Under Eastern Eyes: A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe* (2008) and *Balkan Departures: Travel Writing from Southeastern Europe* (2009), and more specifically to Romanian travelers, as examined by Mircea Anghelescu in *Călători români și călătoriile lor în secolul al XIX-lea/ Romanian Travelers and Their Travels in the 19th Century* (2018) and Dorian Branea in *Statele Unite ale românilor: Cărțile călătoriilor românești în America în secolul XX/ The United States of the Romanians: Books of Romanian Travels to America in the 20th Century* (2017).¹ Thirty years ago, in 1989, the fall of communism brought about significant changes in the Romanian political, social, economic, and cultural areas, giving back its citizens, among other important rights, the much sought-after freedom to travel all over the world. During the four decades of communism in Romania, between 1948 and 1989, as a consequence of the different political and ideological systems at the time, travel to Western European countries or to the United States, was fraught with complex issues. In *The Traditions of Invention* (2013), Alex Drace-Francis mentions several studies which claim that “the success of Ceaușescu’s² personality cult depended heavily on the idea that under his leadership the country had found a place in the world order and its topography and culture were comparable to the traditionally ‘great’ civilizations” (257). However, while the decade of the 1970s was characterized by numerous diplomatic, cultural, and academic exchanges between Romania and the United States, possibly to uphold the image of Nicolae Ceaușescu as an open-minded communist leader, things changed to a great extent in the 1980s, during the final decade of communism. As Branea points out, in the context of Romanian-American relationships, “after the efferescence of the previous

years,” these relationships “deteriorate[d] implacably” during “the final phase of Romanian communism,” as a result of the “antiliberal and autarchic stasis in which Romania fixate[d] itself in the 1980’s” (142-143). This essay focuses on three travelogues authored by Radu Enescu, Romanian essayist, literary critic, and journalist, Ion Dinu, Romanian professor and researcher, and Viorel Sălăgean, Romanian journalist, writer, and politician, who depicted their travels across the United States in the late 1970s or mid-1980s.³ In the Romanian context of the time, it is important to note that Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean were intellectuals, because having a higher education, they could uphold not only the image of an open-minded communist leader but, to a certain extent, also that of the enlightened and well-traveled, “multilaterally-developed Romanian intellectual” of the communist era. In this context, Drace-Francis states that “As many of the authors of such texts [travelogues] were professional academics abroad on more or less formalised exchange schemes, ... the fact of travelling both provides the opportunity for the summing of empirical evidence and confirms the success of the intellectual in having ‘arrived’ somewhere” (259).⁴

Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean visited the United States during the last decade of communism, mainly for diplomatic or business reasons, and, for the most part, they traveled to the same areas and places. Thus, in *Between Two Oceans* (1986),⁵ Enescu describes his cultural encounters in Virginia and the District of Columbia, then in Georgia, Louisiana, Arizona and Nevada, California, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Illinois, and finally in New York City. Dinu’s travel account in *Traveler through America* (1991) starts with his impressions of New York City, followed by those of Washington D. C., Kansas and down the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans, then of California, Hawaii, and finally of Montreal, Canada. In *Hello America!* (1992), Sălăgean invites his readers to enjoy his adventures and experiences in New York City, Washington D.C., Chicago, at Niagara Falls, in California, and along the Mississippi River, to New Orleans, San Francisco and back in Washington D.C. Examined together, Enescu’s, Dinu’s and Sălăgean’s accounts represent a multilayered collage of information

and impressions, of narrative travel snapshots that, at the time of their publication, were meant to offer Romanian readers a more comprehensive image of the “New World” based on first-hand experience.⁶ Their extensive descriptions suggest that they were fascinated not only with the vastness of the American landscape and its nature, but also with the urban spaces. In the context of explaining the essence of several American cities, John Flower stated in a 1979 article in *The New York Times* that “Somehow the great cities of America have taken their places in a mythology that shapes their destiny: Money lives in New York. Power sits in Washington. Freedom sips cappuccino in a sidewalk café in San Francisco” (23). Consequently, as the urban spaces appear more often in the popular images of the United States,⁷ it is interesting to compare these writers’ accounts in terms of the unique, albeit sometimes similar perceptions of the social, political, historical, and cultural aspects of the American cities they visited. This essay, then, sets out to capture, from a comparative perspective, the impressions and encounters depicted by Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean in their travel accounts, with a view to analyzing how their descriptions and perceptions of two major urban spaces, New York City and San Francisco, reflect the complexity of the American social and cultural landscape in the late 1970s and mid-1980s.

The United States – “Geographies” of Travel

Travel narratives are multifaceted accounts that include two distinct layers: a more objective one that includes the layers of factual information, referring to the geography, history, and the culture of a particular place or country, and a more personal, subjective layer, that comprises the author’s unique perception and rendering of the travel experience and of the cultural encounters, as s/he attempts to paint a realistic and accurate picture of the places described. Consequently, as Carl Thompson points out, “... all travel writers find themselves having to negotiate two subtly different, and potentially conflicting, roles: that of reporter, as they seek to relay

accurately the information acquired through travel, and that of story-teller, as they seek to maintain the reader's interest in that information, and to present it in an enjoyable, or at least easily digestible way" (*Travel Writing* 27). In pointing to the contradictions in the American society, often stemming from the extremely varied and diverse ways of living in different parts of the country, Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean have contextualized each description in terms of geographical data and historical facts, while also offering extensive explanations about the American way of life as they perceived or experienced it individually in the regions they visited.

In the chapter on "Imagined Geographies – North America/USA" in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, Susan L. Roberson claims that "America, in a sense, is already 'imagined' for many travel writers by the myths, tales, literature, film, and even music that they carry with them in their travels ... Thus, the idea of America as a land of plenty has been shaped by travel writers from the beginning of European contact" (351). She further argues that "In addition to the tales and propaganda that shaped a geographic imaginary of economic well-being" (351), travel writers create "their own ... metaphors for describing America and their travels around this vast country" (352).⁸ She goes on to enumerate a number of "key 'geographies' or metaphors" that have appeared in travel narratives about the United States, such as the "*Commodified Geographies* that cast an economic, imperializing eye on the land and its people;" in terms of the vastness and beauty of the landscape, she discusses the two metaphors of "*Geographies of Hardship* and *Geographies of Awe and Wonder*," then the "*Geographies of Character*" that relate to the people travel writers "meet, interview, and interact with" and then draw conclusions regarding "the American character," and finally, as the travel writers "search for 'democracy' in America," they "find instead *Paradoxical Geographies of Social and Political America*" (352, emphasis added).⁹ In the case of the Romanian travelogues, the "geographies of character" and "place," I would add, and "the paradoxical geographies of social and political

America” are highlighted through Enescu’s, Dinu’s, and Sălăgean’s observations of the specificities of the areas and urban spaces they visited.

Moreover, the three travel writers constantly emphasize the fact that their texts are truthful renderings of the American way of life, as this is often quite different from the media image of the United States. For instance, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Romanians were much influenced by the popular culture and media images of the United States, as represented in glamorous Hollywood movies or TV shows, particularly in the TV series *Dallas*, a very popular show at the time. Perhaps, in an attempt to dispel certain popular Romanian perceptions of the United States, Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean have repeatedly stressed that their first-hand experiences in America represent the best way to render a picture of the “real” United States, experienced “at home,” on its continent. To this end, they have also tried to frame and explain the American lifestyle and spaces in terms of familiar images or places known to their Romanian audience, thereby facilitating a more in-depth understanding of those spaces, or of specific American customs, traditions, etc. Combining the writers’ perceptions about the United States before their journeys, and/or their initial perceptions upon arrival there, with the social and cultural reality they discovered as they traveled across the country, a complex picture of the country emerges, with its positive and negative aspects, as a country to which the phrase “unity in diversity” seems to apply best.

“The America of the Americans”

“America is so vast that almost everything said about it is likely to be true, and the opposite is probably equally true” (Farrell qtd. in Richmond 153).

In his book *Hello America!* (1992), Sălăgean claims that most travel literature written in Romania about another country before 1989 was about the United States (14), a claim sustained by Branea’s extensive study. In Sălăgean’s opinion, the reason might

have been the vastness and uniqueness of the American landscape and the sense of adventure, or perhaps the desire to experience “the American Dream,” even if only as a tourist. As expected, the introductions, prefaces, or early chapters of Enescu’s, Dinu’s, and Sălăgean’s travel accounts focus on the purposes for writing these books and include their expectations of the United States upon their arrival. Enescu, who visited the U.S. in 1978, points out that his aim was “to render the continuity of this vital, constructive and generous people and to try to capture the physiognomy of the North-American soul, as well as the essential features of the transatlantic spirituality” from a Romanian perspective (6), with a view to “writ[ing] some travel notes that would be both instructive and agreeable” to his Romanian readers (6). As the work of “a fine and sophisticated observer” (Branea 243), whose travel account comprises “inspired descriptions and impeccable information” (Branea 244), Enescu’s account emphasizes the significance of architecture, landscape and history in the regions he traveled to. Branea calls Dinu’s travelogue a “typical book for the 1980s in Romania,” because of its recurring “touches of patriotism and pastoral musings” specific to the time period; however, he points out that Dinu’s observations “on the American customs and manners at the end of the twentieth century and the new political polarities are not only correct, but also worth remembering” (293). Dinu’s purpose was, similar to Enescu’s, “to write down facts and impressions” for his friends at home in order to tell them “about his experience in this world both captivating and bizarre,” as a modest contribution to more in-depth knowledge of the people, places, and events that he was lucky enough to experience “at their home” in the United States (6). He calls the United States “the Promised Land” that has attracted and “will always fascinate thousands of people looking for adventure, riches, freedom, and innovation” (5-6), emphasizing the fact that one can best understand the American way of life only after visiting the country.

Finally, Branea praises the first edition of Sălăgean’s book (*The Mississippi Meridian*, published in 1985) because his own informed observations on America are complemented by extensive

“interviews with personalities from different fields,” thus giving his travel narrative “an unexpected American perspective,” rarely found in Romanian travelogues to the United States (268). However, unlike Enescu and Dinu, Sălăgean chooses to start his second, revised edition, *Hello America!*, on a more personal note, by sharing a story about his grandfather who had been to “America” many years before, including his grandfather’s advice to him (when the author was about six years old) to visit the United States, a dream that Sălăgean managed to achieve many years later. In his preface, Sălăgean describes America as “a captivating and bizarre world, fascinating and whimsical, hospitable and hostile at the same time” (8). He also remarks that he was never before so surprised to discover that there was such a huge difference between his own expectations of the United States and the actual reality he encountered upon arrival. His first impression was that everything was exactly the opposite of what he had expected: “less agitated streets than anywhere else, no fancy limos, cowboys, drug dealers and prostitutes everywhere in the streets, not the Hollywood image of America” (9). The America he experienced was “distinct, unpredictable, and unique,” perhaps the way his grandfather had described it to him: “America is America!” (9). Sălăgean goes on to point out that there is an “America of the Americans,” fully conscious “both of its strengths and charm, and, at the same time, of its limitations, which tones down its overflowing enthusiasm” (11).

The phrase “America of the Americans” comes up several times in his travelogue in order not only to suggest the way the Americans themselves perceive their country, but also to emphasize the idea that “real” America is very different from what people imagine it to be before visiting it. At the same time, Sălăgean draws attention to some typical American features, such as the complex notion of change: “something that is valid today, might not be true tomorrow, but also something that was valid a century ago, may still be valid today too” (11), and he also refers to the fact that the United States appears to be always in motion, which leads to the perception that it is “a country of a tiring, though always efficient

pragmatism” (11). “It is a country with an exciting existence that you cannot discover in movies, books, or stories,” Sălăgean advises his readers, “a country you have to discover on your own, step by step” (11), pointing again to the discrepancy between the media image of the United States and the reality one might experience as a visitor there.

“The America of the Romanians”: New York City and San Francisco

New York: A Modern Babylon

“New York is a world at the end of the world.”
(Sălăgean 19)

The popular culture image of New York City is that of a busy place, with a continuous hustle and bustle on its crowded streets, lined with sleek skyscrapers. While sightseeing through the city, Dinu, Enescu, and Sălăgean visited many of the same landmarks of the metropolis; consequently, the factual information they offered is similar, but their personal stories in the spaces they visited carry their individual flavors. Dinu starts his American journey in New York City, and as he slowly discovers the city, he remarks that “New York is the largest American city, a conglomerate of architectural styles, professions, languages, lifestyles, nationalities, religions ...” (12). Among others, he mentions visits to museums (the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum) and various cultural landmarks and symbols, such as the Statue of Liberty and the building of the United Nations; he walks down famous boulevards such as Broadway and Fifth Avenue, but also describes the bazaar-like atmosphere of the little ethnic shops on Orchard Street. At the same time, while roaming the busy streets, he offers his readers information on some of the main cultural events that take place in the city every year, such as the celebration of New Year’s Eve in *Times Square*, Saint Patrick’s Day, Thanksgiving, and Halloween.

Sălăgean also starts his American visit in New York, and while walking along its famous streets, he wonders whether it is “a paradise or an inferno,” adding that “New York is a world at the end of the world. It is a bizarre world, with an enormous zest for life, always wanting to do something and be in action. It is an enchanted gate through which ‘the Old World’ enters ‘the New World’ full of hope” (19). To him, New York City is “America’s anteroom” (20), “a huge and tumultuous bazaar” (24). Like Dinu, Sălăgean is also interested in an array of issues related to New York culture, so the description of a women’s march for equal rights (pay, etc.) leads to a discussion about surrogate mothers, while a visit to Harlem leads to a discussion about racism. In addition, as he walks on Bowery Street and encounters a Greek-American homeless man, Sălăgean ponders about the less fortunate inhabitants of the metropolis. Towards the end of the book, Sălăgean mentions New York again, as if bringing the narrative full circle, with chapters on the American print media, newspapers and magazines, and ends his recollections of New York with stories from Broadway, including his impressions after watching a play by Neil Simon and an interview with Anthony Quinn, interview which might have brought much delight to the Romanian readers at the time, given the actor’s international fame because of his role in *Zorba the Greek*.

Enescu, on the other hand, visited New York City at the end of his journey, and his impressions of the city are less impressive, a result, perhaps, as Branea suggests, of the traveler’s fatigue after visiting so many places all over the country. Enescu claims that, unlike other American cities, New York did not surprise him at all: “everything was the way I had imagined it. New York looked just like in the movies ... predictable and familiar, as if I had known it forever” (276-277). He further states that although it is “a typical American city,” New York City “does not represent America”; it is “a metropolis at the crossroads, a frontier citadel between the old and the new continent,” “the city of contrasts and of discrepancies which it manages to melt in its devouring and tentacular unity” (277). New York City is “too big” for Enescu, a city that “fills you

with anxiety and makes you tired” (277). He mentions, however, one thing that truly surprised him during his visit, a strike of the typographers that left the metropolis without any newspapers, a strange occurrence for a foreigner, in particular, as the city was famous for such important newspapers as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, etc., and numerous other newspapers published daily. Enescu also highlights the fact that such a strike posed a huge problem to the readers as well, as, at the time, the late 1970s, the newspapers were still one of the most important means of information. He further describes how, as a substitute for the lack of newspapers, the New Yorkers used plenty of leaflets to advertise for different events and situations. Similar to Dinu and Sălăgean, the walks around the city give Enescu the opportunity to comment, sometimes upon seeing various thematic leaflets, on alcoholism and temperance, or on drug use. He also comments on the architecture of the buildings on 42nd Street, such as the *Rockefeller Center* and the *Public Library*, and mentions the fact that *Times Square* did not impress him too much; moreover, while Broadway feels too “ostentatious,” Enescu concedes that one can also watch “excellent movies” and “serious, often classical plays” on Broadway, too (278).

As a tourist, one of the first things that stands out in the American urban landscape is the architecture, and Eastern-European travelers to New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s were still fascinated with the shiny steel and glass skyscrapers. In this context, Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean offer well-researched information on the history of the skyscraper, as an American hallmark of urban architecture, with Dinu and Sălăgean using the same source for this, Paul Goldberger’s 1982 book *The City Observed: New York*. In comparing different architectural styles, Dinu, for instance, uses this opportunity to point to the similarities and differences between the Empire State Building and the building of the World Trade Center, concluding that the Empire State Building is “a monument,” while the World Trade Center is “an ambition, a whim” (30). On the other hand, in the context of the modern architecture of skyward-looking skyscrapers, Enescu

feels that there is a great discrepancy between the city and its inhabitants, and, in his opinion, the metropolis “crushes its inhabitants with its rhythm of inflexible steel” (278). Nevertheless, both Sălăgean and Enescu express their fascination at the breathtaking view of the city from the terrace of the Empire State Building. On a more personal note, Sălăgean claims that watching the city from the 102nd-floor terrace is similar to watching a show at the Metropolitan Opera or a theatre performance on Broadway, while for Enescu looking at the city from the Empire State Building provides the opportunity to offer his readers some factual information on the famous bridges (for instance, the Verazzano Bridge) and on the historical significance of various cathedrals and churches (*St. John the Divine* and *St. Patrick’s Cathedral*).

Another feature, among others, observed and discussed by the three writers refers to the ethnic and racial diversity of the city. During his visit to the Big Apple, Dinu recalls the “mixture of ethnicities and races” (12), and he mentions an episode about homeless people in the streets, which functioned “as a wake-up call” for him, particularly as the Romanian popular belief about the United States at the time was that of “a very rich country” (16). Enescu also includes episodes that depict the harsher realities of the city, and, for instance, expresses his dismay “at the mix of mute resignation and explosive hostility” beneath the “picturesque façade, with an exotic flavor” of Harlem (287). Furthermore, a ride on the subway provides Enescu and Sălăgean with the opportunity to discuss both the diversity of the city and the fact that it seems to be in continuous motion all the time. Enescu voices his complete dislike of the New York subway, which he describes as “a plunge into the inferno,” claiming that the New York subway left him with “a feeling of diffuse fear” (281). Sălăgean experienced similar feelings of discomfort particularly because of the unexpected silence (in complete contrast to the noisy streets), while also being puzzled by the tired and worried faces of the subway passengers. He completes the chapter on the subway ride with some statistics about the crime rate on the New York subway for his readers at home, and, at the end of the ride, he wonders, on a disappointed

tone: “Is the ride on the subway in New York a real adventure?,” then concluding: “Not in my personal experience” (33).

As expected, the visit to New York City, made Dinu, Enescu and Sălăgean think about Romania and home. During the first part of his travel encounters in the city, Sălăgean mentions how the uncomfortable adventure of the ride on the subway made him think about the newly-opened subway in Bucharest¹⁰ at the time, a comforting thought that “our stylish underground winding line is still welcoming and does not offer any shocking surprises ... yet” (33). Towards the end of the book, during the final chapters dedicated to the cultural encounters in the metropolis, he includes a discussion with the editor-in-chief of “Business Week” and is pleased when the editor admits that although he had never visited Romania, he believed it to be “a country that appreciates freedom and trusts its future” (268-69), a comment that may have boosted Sălăgean’s feelings of national pride. He is even more pleased and very proud, when, during the interview with Anthony Quinn, the renowned actor said about Romania “it’s a wonderful country, it really is! Take my word for it ...” (281). These two comments may have been so important to Sălăgean because they were not simply his own opinions about his home country, but they came from Americans who had heard about Romania, thus conferring the statements a higher degree of objectivity and functioning as a badge of Western acknowledgement for the Eastern-European country, such a significant fact during communism, as mentioned previously.

On the other hand, their visit to the metropolis triggered numerous associations with places from home both for Enescu and for Dinu. Enescu starts his narrative on New York with a visit to different museums, and first of all, mentions the fact that having the same nationality as Constantin Brâncuși,¹¹ he felt great pride at seeing his famous sculptures displayed in such an important cultural space as the *Museum of Modern Art* (276). Furthermore, a visit to the *Romanian Library* triggers feelings of home: “although far away, I had the feeling that I was among my own, at home, protected from all the real or presumed dangers, surrounded by the

affection of my fellow countrymen” (280). Then, when he discussed the architecture of *St. Patrick’s Cathedral*, Enescu framed it in such a way that the Romanian readers would understand its immense size, remarking that it “is twice as big as the Black Church in Brașov¹²” (281). Towards the end of his visit, and the book, Enescu finds himself in the middle of nature, on an open meadow in Queens, and lying peacefully in the grass, away from the hustle-and-bustle of the city, he remembers the Romanian landscape, “so intimately tied to nature and the universe,” and, he claims wistfully, “I felt as if I were in Lancrem, [Lucian Blaga’s birth place¹³], not in Flushing Meadows” (290-291).

Of the three writers, the visit to New York City triggers the most comparisons and associations with Romania for Dinu. At first, he is pleasantly surprised at meeting Romanian-speaking Americans - first a taxi driver, then a shop owner, and a sales assistant in the shops on Orchard Street (20-21). Later on, when mentioning the building of the United Nations, he proudly reminds his Romanian readers that flags of all the member countries are flying in front of the building day and night, “among them – *to our great pride* – our three-colored [red, yellow, and blue] flag” (21, emphasis added), interpreted perhaps as an acknowledgement of the fact that Romania, as a member of the United Nations, also played a part in the global political arena. He is then reminded of Romania when listening to a “weekly cultural broadcast dedicated to other parts of the world,” which “always started with a few musical chords from George Enescu’s *Second Rhapsody*” (23-24). On a different note, the constant noise of the sirens of police cars, fire engines or ambulances, warning of potential danger during Dinu’s late-night strolls through the city with friends, trigger feelings of longing for walks along “the quiet streets of Bucharest, in the Cotroceni area, or in the Herăstrău Park or in my beloved district, Drumul Taberei [in Bucharest],” as he nostalgically reminisces (28). Furthermore, as Dinu enters Central Park, the horse-drawn carriages remind him of his youth and of Pitești, Iași, Ploiești, Craiova, Cluj, Constanța, places in Romania where such carriages rolled along their streets back in the day (38-39). At the same time,

he compares his stroll at leisure through Central Park, as the last image of his account of New York City, to a walk in Herăstrău Park, one of the famous parks in Bucharest: “There, far away in Central Park in New York, I felt, with all my heart and soul, as if I were in all the parks of my country. I felt the warmth of their sky embracing me tenderly, and I felt caressed by the imaginary breeze that gently touched my face” (41). Finally, similar to Enescu, Dinu is proud to discover that the masterpieces of “our great Brâncuși” filled an entire room in the *Museum of Modern Art*: “One must specify, with a feeling of true pride, which I fully experienced, that, when I visited the *Museum of Modern Art* of New York, only Matisse, Picasso, and Brâncuși had special rooms” (37-38), an acknowledgment of the significant contribution brought by Romania, through Brâncuși’s sculptures, to the American- and the world culture.

The images of New York City depicted in the three travelogues uncover the complexities and idiosyncrasies of a unique city, as Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean experienced the city’s atmosphere in different ways. While, for the most part, Enescu perceives New York as an “infinite, artificial and sophisticated” metropolis (290), Dinu defines it as “a modern Babylon,” “a constant surprise, a conglomerate of contrasts” (21), albeit “the biggest and most captivating city” (42). Moreover, although Dinu agrees with Americans that “New York is not America,” he believes that a true image of America is inconceivable without New York, without “its dimensions and features of a mega-metropolis of the twentieth century” (42). Sălăgean does not offer a clear-cut conclusion to his visit in the metropolis, but one might consider a statement he included at the beginning of his visit as a possible conclusion: “If *something* can happen in the world, *anything* can happen in New York” (18, emphasis added).

San Francisco: The Metropolis of Harmonious Contrasts

“I was surprised by the familiar air exuded by this city,
 ... the people on the streets ... are surprisingly friendly.”
 (Sălăgean 55-56)

On the other side of the country, by the Pacific Ocean, Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean experience a different world from the one in New York City. Enescu, whose stories about California are recounted half-way through his book, recalls his initial encounter with the city as not very pleasant: after an agitated flight, he decides to walk around the city with his Romanian friends, and, mistaking the streets, they find themselves by accident in a less desirable neighborhood, where they become “acquainted” with the seedy world of prostitutes and crime. Nevertheless, in spite of this “deplorable” first impression (204), after a few days, Enescu states that “If I were asked which is, in my opinion, the most beautiful and charming city in the U.S., I would answer without any hesitation San Francisco” (204), adding that “this pearl of the Pacific is like a woman that conquers you through that undefinable quality, that special *something*” (206, emphasis added). This impossibility to define why San Francisco is so special to him, leads Enescu to remark that cities are gendered. He believes that some cities are male because they can be associated with masculine traits, such as Chicago, “a man that is too rational, organized and intrepid ... an engineer”; New York, “an old-fashioned banker or an industrialist who made his fortune overnight”; Boston, that looks “like old Benjamin Franklin, massive and wise, walking slowly with his young colleagues among progressive ideals,” and Dallas, “like an upstart cowboy who became the king of petroleum” (207). On the other hand, while Atlanta represents “energetic Scarlett O’Hara,” Las Vegas “a former bejeweled celebrity, now retired,” New Orleans, “the foreign-looking Creole who wears a fake aristocratic origin with distinction and style, often given away by an exuberant charm and outbursts of lust,” San Francisco “is the *real* woman, that has stayed beautiful and still smiles fascinatingly, against all odds” (207, emphasis added). “In San Francisco,” Enescu further claims, “you find everything you want”; it is a place where you can find “all the races/ethnicities of the world” on “its large streets and gently-sloping hills”; however, “it has nothing to do with the Babylon-like atmosphere around the building of the

United Nations in New York” (207). San Francisco is an “eclectic and multicultural” place, where “all the races live in a synthesis of a natural and unique charm” (207-208), so, in terms of the harmony of contrasts in the city, Enescu compares the metropolis to ancient Alexandria.

He is fascinated with the city’s architecture, the harmonious mixture of races and ethnicities, and also with the food, eclectic and exotic like the city. At the time of his visit, he claims that there were “2515 restaurants” to choose from, offering a great variety of cuisines from all over the world, including “Japanese, Italian, English, Chinese, Swedish, Mexican, Polynesian, Greek, or Armenian dishes” (208), to locals and tourists alike. “The metropolis of harmonious contrasts” (209), as Enescu calls it, spreads out on forty-two hills, and walks around the city take him to *Nob Hill*, *Telegraph Hill* where he admires the panorama of the city from the 100-meter high *Coit Tower*, to Union Square and *El Presidio*, the former Spanish garrison from 1776, to the harbor and *The Embarcadero*, to *Fishermen’s Wharf* and the place where Levy Strauss created the blue jeans, as well as to the museum of the former Alcatraz prison, where he visits the cell where Al Capone, the famous gangster, died. In terms of architecture, while watching the city from San Saulito, on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge, Enescu remarks both how much he likes the familiar, cheerful houses of medium height, and how much he dislikes the few tall buildings that, in his opinion, disrupt the architectural harmony of the city, such as the building of the *Holiday Inn* hotel, or those of the *Bank of America* and *Transamerica* companies (212), buildings he feels would fit in better in Chicago or New York City than in San Francisco. Further roaming the streets, Enescu also offers the readers a brief history of the hippy movement that has its roots in the city. In San Francisco, Enescu’s trip in the San Francisco area ends with a visit to Palo Alto, Stanford University, and in a chapter entitled “Upon Retirement, the Cannons Move to the Museums,” he includes a comprehensive history of Fort Point, close to San Francisco, explaining its role up to and during the American Civil War (1861-1865).

Enescu suggests that he perceived San Francisco as such a familiar place, more than any other American cities, because it reminded him very often of his home country. For instance, he sees Mircea Eliade's¹⁴ books on the shelves of many bookstores and finds many appreciative articles about Romania in the local newspapers (he mentions it was summer, around August 23).¹⁵ Moreover, he enjoys discovering a great amount of goods made in Romania (shoes, suits, wines, and LPs with Romanian folk music, among others). At the same time, he is pleased to have an interesting conversation with a Romanian-American lady who missed home and spends a few entertaining hours talking about a Romanian football team with an American friend who had studied in Bucharest. Enescu felt that such opportunities to reminisce about Romania with Romanian-Americans or Americans who had spent some time in Romania brought him closer to home. In addition, he claims that "the agreeable feeling of riding on [the iconic cable car], up-and-down the hilly streets, in pleasant sway," made him feel as if at home, on Blaga's realm (214), referencing the Romanian poet, like Dinu in New York City. Overall, the fact that he had the chance to discover Romanian products in the stores and that he talked to people about Romanian culture (218-219) added to Enescu's perception of San Francisco as a cozy place, leaving him with a feeling of almost a home away from home.

Dinu starts his chapter "San Francisco and Its Problems" by informing his readers that the city is best known for the "Golden Gate [Bridge], the gold rush, the whistle of boats in the harbour, and the sound of the bells of the old/historic cable cars," being "one of the most interesting cities in the U.S." (142-143). However, although he describes it as "one of the most beautiful cities in the world" (143), in spite of "its beauty and charm," as Enescu had also characterized it, Dinu points out that, at the time, San Francisco had the highest rate of suicides in the United States. In this context, he mentions the famous Golden Gate Bridge as a landmark that, one might argue, encapsulated two contrasting aspects of the city, although not "harmonious contrasts," to use Enescu's term: on the one hand, the Golden Gate is a great example of functional

architecture; on the other hand, it is also the place where most of the suicides take place (143-145). After this rather somber introduction to the city, during his sightseeing tours, Dinu offers brief remarks on architecture while walking down *Market Street*, one of the main streets of the city; like Enescu, he visits Chinatown and describes its impressive Oriental architecture, mentions the historic cable car, pointing out the fact that “the past is well-preserved in the city,” for instance through the maintenance of its historic buildings, such as the building of the opera house (146-147). While roaming around the city and its surroundings, Dinu emphasizes the significance of tourism for the city and highlights San Francisco’s eclectic and feminine character, pointing to its ethnic diversity, particularly the Asian Americans (151). Dinu’s account of San Francisco appears more factual than Enescu’s and perhaps more emotionally distant than his own account of New York City, possibly also because he chooses not to mention any comparisons with Romania, like Enescu, or as he had done in his recollections of the Big Apple.

In his chapter on San Francisco, entitled “Memories and Fascination,” Sălăgean claims that “for most Americans, San Francisco represents the miraculous symbol of the ideal city, with which you fall in love instantaneously” (55). First of all, he was surprised to discover the familiar air of the city created by the friendly and kind people he met there, but he was also somewhat surprised by the “human mosaic, predominantly Asian and Spanish” (55), that he encountered during his walks. While recounting his personal impressions, Sălăgean also inserts significant information on the gold rush and offers an extensive history of the destructive earthquake of 1906, two important historical moments that have marked and shaped the development of the city. Given the fact that Romania is also a country prone to earthquakes, and perhaps keeping in mind the tragic and devastating consequences of the 1977 earthquake in his home country, Sălăgean was perhaps trying to create an implicit parallel between the two situations and places (San Francisco and Bucharest), hoping that his Romanian readers would find the

detailed information about the San Andreas fault line, also mentioned by Dinu, and about the importance of the early detection of earthquakes, interesting and helpful. Next, his relaxed tours around San Francisco include sightseeing in the center, around *Union Square*, a ride on the iconic cable car, a visit to Chinatown, while a walk on the beach of the Pacific Ocean triggers a story about the natural habitat of walrus. After a pleasant visit, Sălăgean looks at the city through the lenses of his American interlocutors and concludes that “while the inhabitants of other cities, such as New York, Chicago or Buffalo criticize their home cities rather harshly, in San Francisco, every word about the city is uttered with good will and affection” (65). He concludes by pointing out that “the spirit of tolerance is the fantastic ‘modus vivendi’ that has molded the motley population of the Californian metropolis into a community which knows how to enhance its pleasure to live” (65).

While Enescu displayed a rather matter-of-fact attitude during his visit to New York City, the detailed and enthusiastic account he offered about San Francisco illustrates his almost unconditional admiration for the city. “How can you not feel at home in San Francisco and its surroundings ...? Wherever you go, from boots to wines, from folklore to literature for the refined minds, from sports to politics, you always find something that bears the pleasant label: *Made in Romania!*” (219), he concludes on a proud note. Sălăgean also seems enthusiastic about San Francisco, although perhaps in a more moderate way than Enescu; still, he is excited about his walks through the city, enjoying the balmy weather, the enchanting display of lights at night, and the hilly and breathtaking landscape during the day, as well as the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the “relaxing, stylish, and hospitable city” (65). Of the three writers, Dinu seems to take the most objective stance regarding San Francisco, choosing to offer mostly factual information about the most important sites and buildings, ending his account about the city with: “many say that San Francisco might be the most feminine city in the world” (similar to Enescu and Sălăgean), however he does not exemplify this statement, choosing

instead to end with an image of Golden Gate as a staunch symbol of the city, and with a rather poetic description of the city at night: “When night falls over San Francisco and the lights come up, up in the sky, among thousands of stars, you can hear the tired quacking of the flocks of Canadian geese heading south, towards the golden country” (151).

Conclusion: A Dream Fulfilled

The journeys on the North-American continent have allowed the three writers to acquire valuable memories and first-hand information about and insights into the social and cultural aspects of the real American society, at home. Enescu’s book starts with a description of Washington D.C. and ends by depicting the most important monuments and museums in New York City. He concludes by stating that America is definitely a beautiful place, and many of its inhabitants are generous, hospitable, and of a charming naivety” (290), remarking that “it is agreeable to travel around America, but it seems impossible for me to live there. I have grown to like America, but I have always felt I cannot adhere to its values” (291), perhaps pointing to the contrast between the ideals of freedom and democracy and the reality, sometimes harsh, which he encountered in some of the urban spaces. Dinu’s last chapter contains an assortment of facts about the American way of life: brief narrative snapshots of visits to farms and colleges around Urbana-Champaign, some information about American food and the preference for plenty of ice in drinks, etc., the “drive-in cinemas,” about homeless people, and curiosities about the American life that he thought Romanian readers might be interested in at the time, all of these explained from the comparative perspective of the Romanian lifestyle (clothes, sports, attitude towards smoking, non-conformism, work ethics, etc.). While striving to maintain an objective, perhaps factual tone, he points out that “in spite of all the difficulties and contradictions, America is still a big country, prosperous, powerful, blessed by nature, with a

hardworking and vigorous people, that tends towards national unity and understanding and international collaboration” (199).

Sălăgean starts his book with New York City and ends the more objective part of his account with a visit to the *Smithsonian Institute* in Washington D. C. and a meeting with Brâncuși’s sculptures, an opportunity to include a comprehensive account of Brâncuși’s life and his visits to the United States in the early twentieth century. His concluding statements, “To Romanians, Brâncuși will always remain the greatest sculptor. For Europe and the entire world, Brâncuși will always be a trailblazer in the art of sculpture” (298), express Sălăgean’s profound admiration and national pride at the worldwide recognition of the work of the Romanian sculptor. Sălăgean’s book ends on the same personal note as it started, this time with the story of a Romanian-American suitor who proposed to his mother and whom she refused to marry in order to stay with her family in her beloved country. Pondering on his mother’s choice, Sălăgean seems to have fulfilled his grandfather’s, perhaps also his mother’s unspoken dream, and certainly his own, of visiting “the America of the Americans.” By subtly suggesting that his mother’s decision was the right one, to stay in Romania with her family rather than emigrate and live a life among strangers, Sălăgean might have experienced the same feelings as Enescu, that it is pleasant to visit America, but one should certainly return home because there is no better place than home, arguably an expected ending for a Romanian traveler to the West at the time, at least in theory. Moreover, Tudor Arghezi’s¹⁶ quotation “always a fiancée, never a wife” (291), which Enescu included at the end of his travel account, might also be valid for Sălăgean.

In the last almost forty years since Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean wrote their travelogues, significant changes have taken place in the American society. For instance, the 9/11 tragedy that the inhabitants of New York City went through in 2001 has left deep scars that are healing very slowly. Still, one might argue that travelers to the United States today find that many of these writers’ observations about the American character and lifestyle are still

valid, among them the spirit of independence, freedom, and democracy. Today, these travel narratives offer an informed glimpse of how the United States was perceived through the lenses of travelers from the eastern part of Europe during an ideologically- and politically fraught time period, thus facilitating a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of such a vast, unique and diverse country. Therefore, reading these narratives as cultural testimonies that reflect the complex decade of the 1980s in both countries might provide valuable insights from a double perspective, Romanian and American, which could be employed in order to understand the subsequent changes in both countries and possibly function as a starting point for comparisons with travel accounts written today. Finally, one might also argue that, thirty years after the fall of communism, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, from the Romanian perspective, the United States has been and will probably remain “the Promised Land,” a country where one might still experience “the American Dream,” and perhaps, as Sălăgean suggests in one of the quotations on the cover of his book, “we carry America in our hearts like a liberating chimera of our hopes.”

Notes:

¹ As the books are written in Romanian, the translations of the titles and other quotations are mine.

² Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918-1981) was one of the most controversial leaders of the Romanian Communist Party, president of the Socialist Republic of Romania between 1965 and 1989.

³ Although the volumes by Dinu and Sălăgean were published at later dates (Dinu’s in 1991 and Sălăgean’s in 1992 – his is a second, revised edition of *The Mississippi Meridian*, published in 1985) their narratives also reflect the mid- and late 1980s (the period of late communism).

⁴ For more on Romanian travel writing during that time period, see the chapter on “Paradoxes of Occidentalism: On Travel and Travel Writing” in Ceaușescu’s Romania” in Drace-Francis’ *The Tradition of Invention* (2013).

⁵ As the books by Enescu, Dinu, and Sălăgean are written in Romanian, all the translations (of titles and quotations) are mine.

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- ⁶ For travel writing as cultural history, see Huggan (2016).
- ⁷ For an in-depth study of the American city in popular culture, see Zecker (2008).
- ⁸ For more on the connections between travel writing and the United States as an “imagined community,” “American identity,” and “Americanness,” see Bendixen and Hamera (2009).
- ⁹ For a brief history of travel writing, see Hulme and Youngs (2002), Thompson (2016); for extensive theoretical approaches to travel writing, see Campbell (2002) and Kuehn and Smethurst (2015), and for ways of reading travel writing, see Duncan and Gregory (1999).
- ¹⁰ Bucharest is the capital of Romania.
- ¹¹ Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957) was a famous Romanian sculptor, painter, and photographer.
- ¹² Brașov is a city in Romania, well-known for the Saxon-German architecture of its historical center. The *Black Church* is an imposing Gothic edifice, perhaps the most significant and visited cultural landmark of Brașov.
- ¹³ Lucian Blaga (1895-1961), famous Romanian philosopher, playwright, and poet. In the context of the connection between the Romanian soul and the peaceful natural landscape in the Romanian villages, Enescu might be referring to Blaga’s famous statement: “I believe eternity originated in the countryside.”
- ¹⁴ Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) was a famous philosopher, historian of religion, and fiction writer. Eliade was professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School for almost thirty years.
- ¹⁵ The 23rd of August was the Romanian national day during communism.
- ¹⁶ Tudor Arghezi (1880-1967) was a famous Romanian poet and writer.

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