

BOOK REVIEWS



Love from the Mirror: About sex and
 identity
 coord. Tatiana Niculescu

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Cover illustration by: Egon Schiele, *Women hugging*
 (detail)

Book review by Paul-Daniel Golban

The anthology *Love from the Mirror: About Sex and Identity* represents a singularity in the Romanian literary landscape and it was published in 2017 by one of the most well-known publishing houses, Humanitas. The volume reunites articles about sexuality and sexual identity that have various topics of discussion, ranging from historical views, literary interpretations, biblical explanations, personal accounts and legislative examples. We can notice that one pro-LGBT article is followed by an anti-LGBT piece, bringing in this way objectivity for the readers that get to know opposing viewpoints on the theme of homosexuality. It is very fair to do so because the reader is exposed time and time again to ideas of authors from both parts of this debate. This way of alternating the articles instills the act of reading with a feeling of impartiality: you are all the time questioning each idea and therefore you find a mandatory need for reflection and inner-search. The volume has only to gain from this choice of moving between various perspectives.

The book is coordinated by the journalist Tatiana Niculescu-Bran. She mentions in a short foreword that the idea for this volume started from an epistolary dialogue between two writers, both defending their way of being: Andrei Pleșu and George Bălan. She adds that this book is for all audiences, both heterosexuals and homosexuals, because we, as humans, have an universal and innate need to love and be loved. The general statement that the anthology tries to bring front and center is that we should put all our differences aside when it comes to the right to love whom you want.

It is relevant to mention that out of the 17 collaborators for this anthology only two are women: Domnica Petrovai and Florentina Ionescu. This disproportion broaches a key question: are women discredited when it comes to the literary field? It is no doubt that misogyny is a problem in Romania, where fewer women are published than men. We believe this anthology could have benefited from the inclusion of more female authors and feminist points of view.

The anthology comes at a time when the whole country finds itself at a debate regarding the referendum proposed by the *Coalition For Family* to redefine marriage in the *Romanian Constitution* (art. 48) as the union between a man and a woman. The movement started earlier in 2006 or 2007 with “Alianța Familiilor din România” (AFR) / “The Romanian Family Alliance”, but what we know now as the so-called *Coalition for Family and Constitution* appeared in 2013¹. Since then, the ultraconservative group (formed by Orthodox, Catholic and Neoprottestant churches) has fought for a ban on gay marriage or civil partnerships, as well as a ban on sexual education and abortion. For this purpose, the *Coalition for Family* has raised nearly 3 million signatures (2.698.477 to be more exact) for their referendum but not all of them legally, as shown in the play “3 millions” by Adina Lazăr. The dialogue on the referendum is still on-going and the President of Romania Klaus Johannis has sent and resent the referendum law to the Constitutional Court. However, the possibility of a referendum still exists.

The anthology could have touched more upon the Romanian context and how the people belonging to the LGBT community are perceived or affected by the inexistence of laws which protect them. After the publishing of this book, a message of hope was sent to them: the Justice Court of the European Union ruled on 5th of June 2018 in the Coman Case that “The term ‘spouse’ within the meaning of the provisions of EU law on freedom of residence for EU citizens and their family members includes spouses of the same sex”². This means that the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) had to recognise the right of residence for Relu Adrian Coman’s partner, Robert Clabourn Hamilton (July 18th, 2018)³.

The first text starts with a dialogue between George Bălan and Andrei Pleșu called “Mărul otrăvit/The Poisoned Apple”, the first author writing about the refusal of a series of articles called

¹ Viski, Vlad (2018). «“Istoria *Coaliției pentru Familie*”/ “The History of the *Coalition for Family*” ». *Adevărul.ro*. Accessed: 14.06.2018. URL: https://adevarul.ro/news/societate/istoria-coalitie-familie-1_5b225235df52022f75248c0a/index.html.

² Read more here: <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2018-06/cp180080en.pdf>.

³ <https://www.ccr.ro/noutati/COMUNICAT-DE-PRES-319>.

The Other Eros by “Dilema veche”, a magazine that the latter writer founded. Responding that he does not have a say in the magazine anymore, Pleșu makes a statement that appears to be off base, saying that it is disgusting to be considered at fault because he is not homosexual and that he does not apologize for that. It is indeed a very sensitive issue, but it is obvious that Pleșu does not reflect profoundly or in essence about the topic or what sort of obstacles people from the LGBT community have to go through in their day to day lifes.

The second article by Martin S. Martin called “Ieșirea la lumină/Coming to the Light” reviews more the beliefs of the American society regarding homosexuality than the Romanian reality which is not well represented throughout the anthology as we said before. Some important concepts discussed here talk about ‘homonormality’ and homofobia as a disease. Homonormality refers to social normality, like marriage, monogamy, raising children adequately, social productivity and creativity and impeccable social behaviour with valuable contributions for community (page 26). Homofobia is viewed not as a reaction of refusal of religious and moral deviations as before, but as an anxiety mechanism kept by repressed homosexual inclinations (page 28).

Other articles can be grouped in such a way that they create a thematic unity. One is based on individual narratives. For example, we can read a personal account on finding out about the other (“Cum am aflat ce e un homosexual/How I Found Out What is A Homosexual” by Gabriel Liiceanu), an intimate story about the tribulation of accepting yourself (“Autoportret gay/Gay Autoportrait” by Victor Bărbulescu), a personal take on the pride of being oneself - a homosexual - or, more or less, about the notion of gay pride (“Mândria de a fi homosexual?/The Pride of Being Homosexual?” by George Bălan), an Orthodox priest’s personal beliefs (“Vine timpul ca oamenii să-și piardă mințile?/It comes the time for people to lose their minds?” by Constantin Necula), a therapist’s story about a lesbian couple in Romania and their son accepting them as mothers and another about a gay man’s difficulty to and have a monogamous relationship (“Nebun(ă), ciudat(ă), defect(ă), bolnav(ă) psihic.../Mad, Weird, Flawed, Psychically Sick” by Domnica Petrovai) and the experience of a pro-LGBT activist from ACCEPT (the first non-for-profit organisation in Romania that fights for LGBT individuals) organising the first gay pride in Bucharest and the violence that occurred, but also about the struggle to accept herself (“Soție, mamă, iubită – povestea unei regăsiri/Wife, Mother, Lover – The Story of Remeeting” by Florentina Ionescu).

Another theme refers to biblical illustrations of homosexuality. One article underlines the importance of *paid-erastia* in Platon's "Symposium" ("Banchetul lui Platon și pederastia antică/Platon's Symposium and Ancient Pederasty" by Petru Creția); another discusses the relationship between David and Jonathan with illustrations from the Bible ("Prietenii, sau mai mult decât atât?/Friends, or more than that?" by Michael Fieger); one explains the tie between a man and a woman in the book of "Genesis" and introduces the significant second representation of creation ("Adam – bărbat și femeie. Poemul celor șapte zile/Adam – man and woman. The poem of the Seven Days" by Tarciziu Șerban Adam); and another tackles the theological aspect of homosexuality and homosexual celibacy ("De la Sodoma la Gomora la apostolul Pavel/From Sodom to Gomorrah at Paul the Apostle" by Emanuel Conțac).

Another thematic line that unites some of the texts refers to contemporary society. For instance, one essay introduces arguments from both sides of the discussion, whether it is religious or not ("Libertatea sexuală între Biserică și Stat/Sexual Freedom Between Church and State" by Teodor Baconschi), and another one shows the history of accepting the LGBT community in Romania and offers a clear-sighted analysis of the anti-LGBT organisation *Coalition for Family* ("Familia ca utopie iconografică/Family as iconographic utopia" by Florin Buhuceanu). One article undertakes the problem of accepting gay priests in Catholic churches ("Preoții gay – virtute și discreție/Gay Priests – Virtue and Discretion" by Wilhelm Tauwinkl), and another one offers a narrow view on the sensitive topic of adoption ("Experimental înfierii/The Adoption Experiment" by Andrei Șerban).

Cristi Danileț's well-researched article "Familia și legea/ The Family and The Law" concludes the anthology and offers insight into the Romanian legislation system with examples from international law. The author clearly explains how family legislation has suffered mutations through time. Danileț states:

"the clasical family is not threatened by nobody. It suffocates itself from the interior because of some unacceptable unwritten laws that relate to abuses Romanian society is not prepared to discuss. Any debate about marriage and sexuality is not, essentially, a discussion about family, but about values. [...] It is not even about the marriage of a couple, but about the human rights as an individual" (page 215).

In relation to the referendum proposed by the *Coalition For Family* to specifically redefine marriage as the union between a man and a woman, Cristi Danileț reasons that CCR already has affirmed in the decision nr. 580/2016, paragraph 42, that marriage is exclusively understood as the

union between „a man and a woman“ (footnote 2, page 211). In the judge’s opinion, the referendum is unnecessary.

All in all, the anthology *Love from the Mirror: About Sex and Identity* offers different answers to contemporary questions through the perspective of contributors from different cultural backgrounds. Most of the articles can be reunited under specific themes, whether it is personal accounts on intimate topics, academic views on biblical interpretations, or sociology and legislation. Thus, the book can be an enjoyable read for both students and scholars, but also for anyone who is interested in the development of ideas regarding sensitive topics such as homosexuality and sexual identity.