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## **Art at the Biomedical Interface: Trans/ sculptural Discourses in Guillem Viladot's Ruth**

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### **Abstract**

The short epistolary novel *Ruth* by Guillem Viladot was published posthumously in 2000 and received only brief press mention, in spite of its singular treatment of the subject of transsexuality which set it apart within the Catalan and Spanish literary panorama of the time. The portrayal of the psychological and emotional struggle experienced by the artist and sculptor Ruth before and after surgery, is heavily inflected by Viladot's interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and runs in parallel with a discourse on the process of artistic creation. This article examines the way in which art functions as a metaphor for an alternative end-point (or at least outcome) of transitioning, which is ultimately more optimistic than the reality confronted by Ruth as she slides into psychosis. Drawing on the recent work of psychoanalyst Oren Gozlan which seeks to understand transsexuality as a creative act, the article argues that Viladot is prescient in seeing the possibilities in aesthetic discourse for our understanding of sexual difference and identity. At the same time, and with reference to Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* (2002) and its criticism, it underscores the contemporary relevance of the novel in questioning the still dominant sex/gender binary and cultural backwardness characteristic of debates around transsexuality.

**KEYWORDS:** Guillem Viladot; *Ruth*; transsexuality; psychoanalysis; art; Catalan literature

### **Resumen**

Ruth, novela epistolar póstuma del polifacético autor catalán Guillem Viladot, se publicó en el año 2000 y pasó casi sin mención crítica, a pesar de un tratamiento original del tema de la transexualidad que la hace destacar en el panorama literario catalán y español del momento. La representación de la lucha interna y emocional experimentada por la artista y escultora Ruth, antes y después de someterse a una intervención quirúrgica, atestigua el interés de Viladot por la psicoanálisis de orientación lacaniana. Paralelamente a este discurso psicoanalítico el autor presenta otro discurso sobre el proceso de creación artística. El presente artículo explora cómo el arte funciona metafóricamente para designar un final (o al menos un resultado) que el proceso de transición no prevé. Este final o resultado es más optimista que la realidad a la que se enfrenta Ruth, que acaba sucumbiendo a una psicosis. Basándose en la obra reciente del psicoanalista Oren Gozlan que intenta entender la transexualidad como un acto creador, el artículo argumenta que Viladot es muy perspicaz al darse cuenta de las posibilidades que proporciona el discurso estético para ampliar nuestra comprensión de la diferencia sexual y las cuestiones de identidad. Al mismo tiempo, refiriéndose a *Middlesex* (2002) de Jeffrey Eugenides y la crítica correspondiente, subraya la relevancia contemporánea de Ruth, su interrogación sobre el modelo binario sexo/género, y la cultura rancia que aún hoy día suele caracterizar los debates en torno a la transexualidad.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Guillem Viladot; Ruth; transsexuality; psychoanalysis; art; Catalan literature

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Tota jo era una geografia il·luminada de fosca,  
d'un passat sense memòria, d'una història degollada

Ruth

In June 1976, seven months after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco, Guillem Viladot (1922–1999) began to contribute a regular column to *El Correo Catalán*, entitled ‘La finestra induïda’.<sup>1</sup> Over a period of three years, the newspaper published more than eighty articles, reflecting variously Viladot’s engagement with post-Regime social mores; contemporary literature and arts in Spain and across the world (the Soviet Union, Brazil, France...); the advantages of being outside the cultural nucleus of Barcelona; and an embryonic interest in psychoanalysis and what he termed the ‘self’ which was to become increasingly insistent (Lacan is his principal referent). The period immediately post-Franco also supposed something of a dilemma: Viladot saw with absolute clarity, as few others did at the time, that the new ‘freedom’ afforded by a less repressive system might be no such thing. Thus in ‘El nostre cos de cada dia’ (4 August 1977; in Viladot 1983, 66–69), he recognized that ‘[l]a sortida de la dictadura ha consistit, entre moltes altres coses, en una exaltació del cos, un cos comercialitzat, ofert com a mercaderia consumista’ (1983, 68). A reference to the ubiquity of pornography led to a carefully modulated observation on the demands of women to reclaim the right to their own bodies, ‘[el dret] d’usar del seu cos lliurement’, and their desire that ‘es derogui la societat masclista i hom pugui viure no pas en una societat feminista, sinó en una societat absolutament decent’ (1983, 68). While this double-coded caution against radical feminism on the one hand, and against treating women’s rights movements as anti-male on the other, speaks to the complexity of the discourses on the body at the time (and reveals Viladot’s sensitivity to these), more interesting is the writer’s comment on the recent Gay

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<sup>1</sup> Collected in a volume under the same title in 1981.

Pride march in Barcelona, in which he hopes fervently that the gay body will not also end up being ‘trafficked’ in the way that the heterosexual body, and sex, have been:

Tots sabíem que, en aquest procés de llibertat, en un moment o altre s’arribarien a fer públiques unes reivindicacions dirigides a establir el dret d’uns cossos que, per una colla de raons, serven una veritat orgànica diferenciada, una veritat que, de si, no és pecadora ni delinqüent ni infamant. Infamant i deteriorada és l’heterosexualitat comercialitzada o clandestina, la sexualitat que, sota la protecció de ‘natural’, aconsegueix nivells tràgics de perversió. Els mateixos nivells que pot assolir l’homofília si no és atesa degudament en la seva realitat objectiva, abans que no sigui corrompuda pels traficants. (1983, 69)

‘El cos de cada dia’ therefore offers significant insight relatively early in a post-Franco creative trajectory that places the body and desire, sex and identity, at the centre of different written and visual media from the novel *Ricard* (1977) onwards (and probably even before this),<sup>2</sup> and is marked by a considerable degree of transgression. As Josep Vallverdú reminds us, ‘[n]o és estrany que la seva escriptura, amb el pas del temps, amb l’assaonament de les pròpies conviccions i amb l’obertura política, es vagi fent més rebel i contrària a tot allò que sigui encotillament’ (2004, 99). At the same time, it is notable that Viladot’s caution with regard to the merchandising and public exhibition of the body sets him apart from the camp, drag and exhibitionist dissidence of, say, José Pérez Ocaña, subject of Ventura Pons’s 1978

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<sup>2</sup> Male homosexuality is a theme of *Ricard*, and Viladot’s public support for gay rights in 1978 is not itself surprising. However, it is worth bearing in mind that the first such march had only taken place (on the Barcelona ‘Rambles’) in 1977 and was broken up by the police firing rubber bullets. See Rodrigo Carretero, ‘Así han cambiado las marchas del Orgullo Gay en España desde 1977’, *Huffington Post*, 5 July 2014. Carretero cites Empar Pineda, an activist present on the march, who recalls: ‘Y quienes se enfrentaron a la policía de una manera muy firme fueron los transexuales, cuya presencia en la primera fila había sido puesta en cuestión por la imagen que podría dar a la marcha’. This is indicative of the ‘othering’ of trans people by Gay Pride at the time, and which continues to be an issue in some quarters.

acclaimed documentary film *Ocaña*, retrat intermitent, as well as of other writers, artists and performers of the Transition (see Fernández 2004).

In a slightly later column, ‘Fills sense mare’ (9 September 1978), Viladot considers developments in the biosciences and reflects on the implications for psychoanalysis of, for example, the non-existence of the mother.<sup>3</sup> In an apparently throw-away comment, he writes: ‘Des dels laboratoris ens arriben notícies que anuncien que els infants seran madurs quan es vulgui, que les degradacions senils podran frenar-se, que es podran provocar mutacions a voluntat, que es podrà canviar de sexe... I moltes més banalitats per l’estil, com el lector ben informat sap’ (my emphasis; 1983, 175). Viladot might be referring (misleadingly) here to gender selection via a procedure such as what we know now as pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), rather than to sex reassignment, which had almost half a century of history at the date of the article and was not therefore ‘new’. Or he might be expressing scepticism as to the possibility of effective sex reassignment surgery at the time (under Spanish law, sex ‘change’ operations were considered ‘castration crimes’ until 1983; see Soley-Beltran 2007, para.3.3.). There is nevertheless a demonstrable commitment at this pivotal stage in Guillem Viladot’s creative and intellectual career to the human consequences of scientific and medical advances, and to psychoanalysis as a filter in his fictional dramatizations of their interaction. In this article I analyse Viladot’s late work *Ruth*, published posthumously in 2000, as a highly suggestive exploration of how questions of gender identity and artistic expression are brought together to propose an alternative conceptualization of the ‘impossibility of wholeness’ or certainty implied by sex reassignment surgery, while confronted by an unstable sexual identity and unpredictable desire. In *Transsexuality and the Art of Transitioning: A Lacanian Approach* (2015), Oren Gozlan has approached gender through an aesthetic framework (Anish Kapoor, Louise Bourgeois, Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex*, Michel Foucault’s

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<sup>3</sup> Scientists from the University of Bath were widely reported in the media to have created motherless mice only in 2016.

Herculine Barbin), and from the perspective of psychoanalytic practice, he elaborates those connections between art and gender that Viladot intuitively finds in his own work:

Similar to the effect that the enigmatic art object has on the viewer, the transsexual body unsettles the viewer's very concept of gender as known, recognizable and whole. As we get closer to an enigmatic object we experience the need to make meaning, to 'figure it out', but the object remains opaque and inexhaustible, and its meaning, incomplete and fractured. The transsexual body [...] opens the certainty of gender to its enigma and confronts us with the riddle of sexuation by breaking the symbolic equation between sex and gender. (Gozlan 2015, loc.2019)

I hope to show that Gozlan's vision of the 'enigmatic object' helps us to understand Ruth's own viewing of herself, through correlation with her art work and sculpture, as enigmatic, as a canvas in progress, albeit one that she unconsciously rejects or cannot grasp. Gozlan remarks that '[r]arely a moment of resolution, sex reassignment surgery may paradoxically signal the beginning of transitioning, the creation of a ground for self-authorship and imaginative recreation' (loc.2399). This optimistic vision, I suggest, is glimpsed by but ultimately unavailable to Ruth.

In the context of Spanish and Catalan creative engagement with the trans subject, Ruth stands out both chronologically and in its questioning of the binary and telos that structures even now much thinking about the trans experience. Thus, Ruth is published in 2000, the year following the release of Pedro Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), and the same year as the international release of *Boys Don't Cry* (dir. Kimberley Peirce). It differs from common representations of the transsexual in that it does not advocate "sex change" as a symbol of cultural transformation [and run] the risk of erasing the referent' (Garlinger cited

by Pérez-Sánchez 2007, 97), and the protagonist's self-exhibition is more low-key than 'els interessants retrats de les trans almodovarianes' (Missé 2012, 19) that have tended to monopolize our visual imaginaries, and there is little if any sense of playfulness in her display. Ruth predates the surge in trans studies in Spain from roughly the beginning of the twenty-first century onwards,<sup>4</sup> and is particularly unusual in explicitly juxtaposing medical and aesthetic discourses which may not always be antithetical. In its foreshadowing of the 'enigmatic' psychoanalytic-aesthetic discourse proposed by Gozlan (2015), and looking forward to the concerns of, for example, sociologist and trans activist Miquel Missé about the harm effected by the hegemonic metaphor of the 'cos equivocats' (2012, 53),<sup>5</sup> Viladot's unjustly neglected work has much to contribute to current debates.

Viladot's active interest in trans subjects is evident in a sympathetic review he wrote of the autobiographical trans narrative *El salt de l'àngel* by Maud Marin (Catalan translation from the French by Noemi Espinàs), published in *Avui* newspaper (Viladot 1989). The blurb of the Catalan version testifies to the impact of the work in a context of intolerance and minimal opportunity: 'Aquest llibre, *El salt de l'àngel*, m'ha savat. Si no fos per ell, qui sap si, per desesperació o per sobreviure, no hauria tornat a la prostitució'. Ruth seems to have been written up to a decade after the review, since Viladot's acclaimed 1998 sculpture series 'SELF' receives mention,<sup>6</sup> and there is reference to oral sex as 'fer el clinton',<sup>7</sup> an allusion to the former US President's affair with intern Monica Lewinsky, news of which also broke in 1998. The novel is epistolary in form, with the exception of a short 'Preludi' by an unnamed

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<sup>4</sup> In recent years Bellaterra and UOC have led the way in publishing such studies in Catalan. Even so, Missé comments in 2012 that '[h]i ha molt poca biografia sobre transsexualitat que no sigui mèdica i que parli des d'algun altre lloc. Encara menys [...] publicada en castellà (en català, ja ho he apuntat, directament no n'hi ha)' (2012, 42–43).

<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it is crucial to remember that such ideas and concerns are not new, but they are in constant need of reiteration, because the medical establishment, culture and society in general still insist in 2018 on what Catherine Millot reported in 1983 as a 'bipolarización' 'cuya violencia sufren los transsexuales' (117; the Spanish translation is from 1984).

<sup>6</sup> 'SELF' was also given the title 'Teoria lacaniana dels miralls' (Garcia 2007, 123).

<sup>7</sup> 'A quant fas el clinton?' (Viladot 2000, 35). All subsequent references in the text are to the 2000 Columna edition and will be cited Ruth plus page number.

first-person narrator who is indirectly identified as the writer and artist, Guillem Viladot. In the Prelude, the narrator recalls a visit to the launch of a Joan Hernández Pijuan Exhibition at the Espai Guinovart, Agramunt, where he encounters an artist friend named Ivars, accompanied by his wife and the young ‘Ruth’, whom Ivars introduces as ‘la nostra filla’ (Ruth, 8). The narrator fails to recognize her, and Ivars is obliged to clarify: ‘És que quan tu la vas conèixer era el nostre fill... [...] Abans era en Raül, i encara ho és, però ara vol ser la Ruth, que per això va vestida de dona. És que som en procés de canvi’ (Ruth, 8). While Ivars explains, his wife sobs. Ruth, a Fine Arts student in Barcelona, accompanies the narrator around the exhibits, listening to his commentary and imparting elliptical confidences about her ability to love herself; she adds in telling contrast that she hates her mother, and promises to write to him (Ruth, 11).

The Prelude thus functions as pretext for the thirty-seven letters without reply that follow and establishes a complex, hybrid text in which the author voices both the self-identified first narrator, and subsequently the second narrator-protagonist Ruth, both before and following her sex reassignment surgery. Since the dominant mode of Ruth, with important exceptions, is realism, the ventriloquizing of Ruth as she struggles to reconcile her aspirations before surgery with the psychosis-inducing reality that follows, requires an indulgent reader. Olivia Banner has argued of Jeffrey Eugenides’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex* (2002), that ‘due to its aesthetic accessibility — that is, its use of a familiar mainstream form for its evocation of a marginalized identity — [the novel] helped ease the medical profession’s transition from a policy of immediate surgical intervention to the acceptance of ambiguous genitalia’ (2010, 843), and moreover ‘influenced pediatric endocrinologists to look at intersexed babies from a new standpoint’ (2010, 845). *Middlesex*’s narrative voice has been perceived as inauthentic, because it is not derived from an intersexed narrator (Banner 2010,

861–862),<sup>8</sup> but, the author asks, ‘[d]oes such authenticity matter [...] if the novel promotes acceptance of intersex?’ (862). Narrative voice is not the only difficulty posed by *Middlesex* however, as Banner has noted, for although the protagonist Cal forgoes surgical intervention, the novel ‘fails to challenge the dual-sex system that subtends these [biomedical approaches]’ (2010, 844), and according to Rachel Carroll is governed by a ‘heteronormative imperative’, being only ‘nominally transgressive’ (2010, 187). Banner’s suspicion of the ‘judgment levied by the ideological critique practised by cultural studies’ (2010, 863–864), because it tends to militate against ‘usefulness’, is anticipated and validated in turn by Debra Shostak:

The potential challenge uncovered by the exploration of the intersexed body echoes a problem that recurs in such political criticisms as feminism: the act of description, with its concomitant act of theorizing, does not necessarily support activism in the world, a politics of social change that might alter the lives of those who live on the margins.  
(2008, 383)

Thus, the heightened imperative for author, reader and critic to communicate ‘authenticity’ in the case of such (fictional) lived experiences seems from this liberal humanist perspective to override any rhetorical shortcomings or conservative underpinnings of the work in question. Can we therefore make a case for this kind of compensatory utility (Banner prefers to call it ‘awkward surplus’) in Viladot’s *Ruth*?<sup>9</sup> Banner’s impassioned conclusion suggests that we

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<sup>8</sup> Eugenides, however, explains his decision to respect the accuracy of the biological facts as far as possible in the Guardian Book Club (2011).

<sup>9</sup> Banner refers to *Middlesex* as a space of ‘awkward surplus’, a work ‘whose effect in the material realm overcomes its limitations in the rhetorical (how cultural texts can be made useful for activist efforts to change biomedical practice)’ (2010, 864).

must: Middlesex, she writes, ‘points to the work that lies ahead for everyone engaged in theorizing the human’s field of infinite variation’ (2010, 864).<sup>10</sup>

A further aim of this article is to begin to explore the tension between the rhetorical (or poetic) and the biomedical in this little-known Catalan novel, whilst also attempting to juggle the explicitly Lacanian structuring of Ruth’s drama of transitioning,<sup>11</sup> with references to autobiographical accounts of Male-to-Female (MTF) transsexuality as examined by Dan O’Connor in his 2005 essay ‘Potential Space, Potential Sex: The Value of the Vagina in Transsexual Autobiography’. At the same time, Gozlan suggests a parallel between the ‘confrontation with an ambiguous object of art’ and ‘the concept of transsexuality [that] confronts us with anxieties over not knowing and with a demand to know’ (2015, loc.139). This Lacanian perspective ‘locates transsexuality in the intermediate space between the clinic and culture’ (2015, loc. 184). Gozlan considers transsexuality as ‘a metaphor for the aporia of gender, as a challenge to fixed and totalized understandings of masculinity and femininity’ (loc.178), and reflects on the difficulty arising from ‘transsexual choices’ which are also those of the fictional Ruth, in that they ‘often position individuals within medical discourses and apparatuses dominated by concerns over normalization and pathology’ (loc.192): ‘In turning to art, we may be able to neutralize the history of medicalization of sexuality and to see transsexuality through a new lens: the aesthetics of the emotional world’ (2015, loc.192).

If Gozlan is a psychoanalyst who sees clearly the potential of art and literature to afford a lateral perspective on clinical practice, Viladot was a novelist, poet, and sculptor whose work had been informed by a keen interest in mainstream and less orthodox psychoanalysis for at least a quarter of a century by the time Ruth was composed (see Johnson 2012): both utilise medicalizing and aesthetic discourses, and in Ruth, Viladot ‘turns to art’ in a similar

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<sup>10</sup> Zachary Sifuentes has written similarly that ‘in terms of research on identity and sexuality, the importance of Middlesex, even as a work of fiction, cannot be overstated’ (2006, 146; my emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> See Joan Rendé i Masdeu’s interview (1982) with Viladot, and the latter’s comments about the psychoanalytic structuring of Ricard and *L’amo*.

manner. The story of Ruth can be read as a critique of conventional psychoanalytic discourses and their limitations in line with Gozlan, and as a graphic acknowledgement that ‘transitioning does not begin nor end with surgery’ (Gozlan 2015, loc.2546). Ruth’s transsexuality interrupts her ‘imaginary certainty of gender’ and, ultimately, she fails to overcome ‘the fetishistic phantasy of phallic monism (non-castrated / castrated)’ (2015, locs.399, 423), apparently unable to accept ‘the real of the sexed body’ (2015, loc.496). However, Ruth’s artistic shift post-surgery into abstract sculptural creations in recycled metals, offers a different, parallel set of possibilities which, I would argue, function as a metaphor for a way of looking at transsexuality away from bodily attributions such as ‘wrong’ and ‘warzone’ (Ruth, 17). And yet this alternative remains, perversely, beyond Ruth’s reach. What I am suggesting is that Ruth articulates through her art, without fully realising its implications, something very close to what Gozlan proposes of our experience of visual art objects (as well as of literature):

these enigmatic art objects — not unlike transsexuality — shatter the imaginary container that is gender, of its intelligibility. Thinking of the transsexual body through the enigmatic, pleasurable, erotic and destabilizing effects of such art objects, and thinking of art, conversely, as a metaphor for the unpredictable course of embodiment, moves us closer to the enigmatic nature of desire that does not know its object but finds truth in its beauty. (2015, loc.576)

Dan O’Connor’s discussion of MTF life writing provides a similarly illuminating indirect commentary on Viladot’s first-person ‘cross-gendered’ narration (see Kim and Westall 2012). His critical engagement with the ‘constant struggle within the autobiographies to suppress precisely the structural dynamics which would reveal the author as the “wrong”

sex' (O'Connor 2005, 162), proves that in one respect at least, narrating trans is always and already fraught with difficulty, even for the trans subject. I want to show that the tension between the rhetorical and scientific is more productive than those familiar with Viladot's intensely lyrical and often quite oblique style might expect. At the same time and fundamentally, no work — authentic, poetic, mythical, realist or autobiographical — matters, if it is not read (and written/ talked about). This is not as trite a statement as it might appear: Ruth's reality, expressed through the paradox of a geography illuminated by darkness (see epigraph, above), relates also to the experience of the novel, as its limited reception indicates. In the Prelude, at the Espai Guinovart, Viladot qua narrator cites Hernández Pijuan on the contingency of the work of art in progress, and on the work as public exhibit; his words foreshadow the problem of locating closure for Ruth, and securing an open-minded reading public for the author:

Mentre aquests quadres, aquests papers, el treball últim sigui aquí, al taller, quan encara no se l'han emportat, sempre es correrà el risc d'una nova intervenció perquè la presència d'aquesta imatge pot sempre crear-me nous dubtes, noves provocacions. Després, en exposar-se, adquirirà aquesta 'altra' realitat en canviar de context, en sortir del taller on aquestes obres han estat realitzades i d'alguna forma condicionades. Deixaran de ser objectes del meu ús personal i, en l'espai neutre d'exposició, obert a les mirades, hauran d'assumir la seva pròpia realitat. Hauran de convertir-se en objecte de reflexió per a la comunitat. *L'exhibició serà l'acompliment de la seva finalitat.* (Ruth, 7; my emphasis)

Through this metacommentary, and specifically in its final line, Viladot instates a telos, an end point for the work of art, and has it stand metonymically for Ruth's transitioning:

exhibition figures the cutting of the umbilical cord; inauguration, publication, rebirth. But crucially, exhibition or showing can only ever fall short for Ruth, because although her transition is received positively by many, the completion of her self-image is constantly disrupted by the haunting, now ‘other’ Ruth she sees in the mirror, male genitalia still intact.

Jeffrey Eugenides (2011) has spoken at length about his intentions for *Middlesex*, reiterating a desire to move away from fantasy or mythical models of the transsexual, such as Tiresias. We can have no such input from Viladot, of course, although Josep Vallverdú recalls that Ruth ‘és una novel·la de la qual parlava l’autor amb passió’ (2004, 35). The novel’s critical reception does little to remedy this deficit, seeming reluctant to engage with the complexity of the subject matter: Julià Guillamon (2000) is more insightful, but problematically affirms of the pre-op Ruth that she is ‘in reality’ a boy, and later refers to her mistakenly as Raquel. Notably however, in criticizing the protagonist’s lack of credibility, Guillamon points to the problem of authenticity already alluded to: ‘la historia está sólo apuntada y resulta algo precipitada e inverosímil, el personaje es casi increíble y en su excepcionalidad poco representativo de la revolucionada sexualidad de hoy en día’. Along similar lines, an anonymous online review published by *La Xarxa* remarks that the novel’s style is ‘potser massa poètic per tractar-se d’un tema complicat com és un canvi de sexe’ (‘Ruth, els sentiments no tenen sexe’, 24 July 2000). Pau Joan Hernández in turn considers that Ruth ‘[r]eduït a la simplificació màxima [...] és una recreació de la història de Tirèsies i el seu doble canvi de gènere’ (2000, xvi). These responses — critiquing a lack of realism on the one hand, and the unimaginative recourse to myth as an interpretative tool — suggest a readiness to dismiss the novel, or render it unobjectionable, and by extension unremarkable. Is Ruth, then, too poetic to be useful?

Unlike Cal, the protagonist of *Middlesex*, Ruth — formerly Raül Ivars Comelles — tells us little of her early development and upbringing, and Viladot eschews any kind of

chromosomal origin story. The title of the novel itself foregrounds the female, the apparently consolidated identity, and seems unambiguous; it signals neither inter, nor trans, nor in-betweenness, as *Middlesex* does. Most obviously, it evokes the Old Testament Book of Ruth, in which Ruth marries a Jewish exile in her home land of Moab and later, widowed, accompanies her mother-in-law Naomi when she returns to Judea. Ruth insists on making her life away from her own land and bears a son (by Boaz) who will become the grandfather of King David. It is Ruth's part in this bloodline that secures her inclusion in sacred scripture; for as J. Hillis Miller says, '[w]ithout Ruth, the alien, the Moabitess, there would have been no David and no Jesus, so her story must be told' (1995, 329). Hillis Miller sees Ruth in translational terms, as a story of border crossings and assimilation, and there is something to be said for considering Viladot's Ruth as a subject who exemplifies a theory of impossible translation, or rather impossible univocal meaning, as Gozlan says (loc.2505). Julia Kristeva on the other hand views the Book of Ruth as a narrative of foreignness and acceptance, and here perhaps there is greater potential for a reading that increases the resonance of Ruth's trajectory both within and beyond the confines of fiction. As we will go on to see, the legacy or figurative offspring of Viladot's Ruth is her queer hallucinatory fantasy, replete with possibilities for others, but denied to herself as, in effect, it kills her, post-partum: as she glimpses the promised land of a life with an adoring partner, Moses-like she is refused entry. 'Acceptance' is displaced: Ruth is rejected by her mother and struggles psychically to accept herself, only belatedly entertaining, in her hallucinatory state, 'the acceptance of radical otherness, the recognition of a foreignness that one might have tended at the very first to consider the most degraded' (Kristeva 1994, 75). The 'degraded foreignness' confronting Ruth appears to be homosexuality, which we return to below.

From what we know of Ruth's family history, there was already a daughter in the Ivars household, and the second pregnancy was not planned. After a difficult labour, the birth of a

baby boy (rather than girl) is a saving grace for the mother. Echoing Lacan, but also Karen Horney's reworking of Freud,<sup>12</sup> the nameless mother gives vent to her phallus envy when Ruth visits following her reassignment surgery: 'Jo volia un nen, jo tenia un nen, jo volia un home [...] vull un fill que em tanqui la porta de la ferida, cicatriu d'ivori que tu has obert per sempre més amb empentes de sang' (Ruth, 91–92). Ruth's sex reassignment has castrated the phallic mother and banished her to a subordinate position in relation to her placid and complaisant husband, for whom there seems to be unspoken contempt. The character of the mother, however, in spite of her symbolic importance, is under-written in the letters, hysterical and monstrous; she is the source of Ruth's vagina envy and therefore, according to the psychoanalyst, the obstacle to the pre-operative Ruth's autoerotic fulfilment. This realization leads Ruth to question momentarily whether she wishes to proceed with surgery. At this point, in what will be one of many warnings from disparate sources, the psychoanalyst attempts to dismantle Ruth's guiding fiction concerning her biological identity (or anatomy) and her sexual orientation: 'De la mateixa manera que el seu cos no és igual, vull dir que és diferent, la seva sexualitat també és diferenciada. I la seva energia vital, això que en diem esperit, psique o ànima tampoc no és igual' (Ruth, 48–49). Ruth has, with a consistency interrupted only occasionally by prescient self-questioning, fixed her sex, gender, and sexual orientation within a strict and conservatively heteronormative frame: woman is signified through vaginal penetration by a man. As O'Connor remarks of Caroline Cossey's 1991 autobiography, '[t]his criterion for success seems inexorably to bring the penis back to center stage' (2005, 168), and underlines a persistent characteristic of the MTF autobiographies that O'Connor explores, namely 'the phallogocentric discourse of sexual difference' whereby 'it is the absence of the penis, not the presence of a vagina, which is taken to indicate the female body' (2005, 164). At birth, Ruth's genitalia are recognisably male, but there nevertheless

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<sup>12</sup> Viladot mentions Horney, Klein, Lacan, Freud, Foucault, Bataille, Millet and others in the poem 'He bastit' from *Amor físic*. See Garcia 2007, 112.

follow numerous childhood visits to the doctor for verification, episodes of dressing in her sister's clothes in front of the mirror imagining an admiring (and validating) male audience, and urinating 'the way girls do'. Ruth recalls a meeting with a psychoanalyst as she seeks to arrange exemption from military service, and is told that she is only the second case known to him of intersexuality (Ruth, 31). And while shortly afterwards Ruth herself says '[s]egons sembla sóc una intersexual o transsexual' (Ruth, 36), the discourse of identity remains imprecise and slippery, and there is no further mention of intersex. Instead, confronted with her arrested penile development and lack of testes, Ruth resorts to conventional similes of monstrosity and freakishness to describe herself: '[E]m sentia com una mena de minotaure, que en comptes de ser meitat home i meitat brau, era noia i nen al cinquanta per cent. No: al noranta per cent era dona, i la resta, infant' (Ruth, 31).

There are competing discourses here: one constructs Ruth as an intersex subject (incorporating such designations as 'androgynous' and 'hermaphroditic'), and the other describes Ruth's personal quest to be considered a woman based on 'phallogocentric conceptions of vaginal function' (O'Connor 2005, 169), or what Gozlan refers to as phallic monism (cited above). O'Connor points out that such conceptions, common in autobiographical writing 'before the "sexual revolution" of the late 1960s and early 1970s, [...] should be historicized as such' (2005, 169).<sup>13</sup> Thus this second discourse, anchored chronologically in the late 1990s, seems to be a throw-back, although as O'Connor rightly reminds us, 'discourses are not so easily altered'. Signifying female is validated in a number of ways for Ruth, crucially by her sister's description of the female orgasm (or rather, of her own which is then taken as representative), and Ruth's belief that she has approximated this experience with a casual sexual partner called (curiously), Raül. Ruth has periodic, almost quixotic moments of self-awareness, in which she questions the authority of the male-female

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Cleminson and Vázquez García (2009, 238–239), who give an overview of medical and other attitudes towards transsexualism and intersex in post-Transition Spain at the end of their study into the history of hermaphroditism up to the end of Franco's dictatorship.

binary polarity and the established social order (her ‘script’), but nevertheless pushes for surgery: ‘[S]i un cop operada no aconsegueixo ser la dona que vull ser? Sé que ho seré: seré l’esmena d’un cos errat més la voluntat de millorar-lo’ (Ruth, 39). Such moments become increasingly frequent, as one discourse threatens to overwhelm the other, but Ruth resists the intersex narrative, even though the reality of what she insists she is seems destabilized by the presence of a will and a desire to become what she already considers herself to be: ‘Vull ser dona. Sóc una dona’ (Ruth, 43). The omnipresent spectre of choice which Ruth herself had voiced in the Prelude is reinforced by medical professionals who seem remarkably reluctant, at least in comparison with Middlesex, to rush to surgery. I read this as a somewhat enlightened index of attitudes towards intersex, as her sexologist not only underscores the value of ambiguity, but tables a redefinition of what it means to be a woman, attempting to steer Ruth away from her reduction of womanhood to the vagina: ‘I per què no acceptes ser el que ja ets? [...] [S]i tu t’has sentit i et sents dona abans de tenir vagina, vol dir que la condició femenina pot existir sense vagina. Aleshores, per què necessites una vagina? [...] Des de quan l’ànima d’una dona és subsidiària d’una vagina?’ (Ruth, 63, 64). Ruth’s perception of herself and of her motivation shifts and stumbles through both the obligatory stages of transitioning, and in less orthodox encounters (with a psychoanalyst, sexologist, endocrinologist, and surgeon; with a sculptor friend of Ruth’s father who has her model for him naked; with a clairvoyant or ‘bruixot’; and post-op in strangely oneiric scenes with a mysterious ‘afrancesat’). This search, or quest narrative, proposes a much more radical, queer vision of the possibilities for the transsexual or intersex subject than, paradoxically, Ruth will allow herself.

Ruth’s pre-operative social interactions are relatively benign, with the exception of the reactions of her mother, and to differing degrees, of military, civil, and Church authorities (she seeks optimistically to have the baptismal record changed). Ruth is afforded a level of

respect which is articulated as superiority to, or difference from other transsexuals, who have found themselves drawn to prostitution or public sex spectacles (both of which might also be seen as forms of validation).<sup>14</sup> Post-surgery, as Ruth attempts intercourse with Raül, it transpires that her neo-vagina is not, after all, to be a seminal receptacle. She feels herself ‘invaded’: ‘No vull cap penis a la meva vida. Si he renunciat al que m’era propi, abdicó de tots els penis del món’ (Ruth, 108, 111). The anatomical complementarity on which she had constructed her ideal of wholeness, or ‘plenitud’ as a woman (and which rhetorically is already suspect, since Raül through the symmetry of names, also forms part of the specular scheme), disintegrates, and is replaced instead by ‘un amor simètric’ ‘de dona a dona [...] de mirall a mirall’ (Ruth, 111), in the person of a young female sculptor, a former University classmate who seduces her and whom Ruth had fallen for some time before her meeting with Raül.

We might argue that the diversion from the expected telos had already been foreshadowed by the sexologist. Similarly, the sculptor friend of Ruth’s father, in his exaltation of her pre-operative other-worldliness — she is variously described as ‘un home-dona... un efebus perfecte’, ‘filla dels déus’ (Ruth, 52, 53) — is seduced precisely by her forms which are ‘suggerides, insinuants, proposades’ (53). This vision apparently draws on his own artistic eclecticism, which swings from figurative expressionism to striking abstraction, and provokes Ruth to wonder how two such different ways of understanding art can be brought together in the work of the same artist (51). In this meta-reflection on her own uniting of binary sex-gender elements, and of two narratives, certainty and ambiguity / the enigmatic, Ruth is faced again with an implicit alternative to her chosen path, for she is convinced of the relationship between art and her own journey: ‘l’art acoblat a la meva

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<sup>14</sup> In the context of ‘El cos de cada dia’, it is interesting that Viladot chooses not to have Ruth commercialize and ‘corrupt’ her difference in the sex industry.

destinació' (54).<sup>15</sup> In a similar fashion but in a less flattering frame, the clairvoyant she consults in uptown Barcelona calls her a mutation, a stage in the evolutionary process towards hermaphroditism and the banishing of sex difference (67). In other people's positive affirmations of intersex (which come unusually from both artistic and medical fields), and in Ruth's re-valuing of the neo-vagina literally without input from the penis, a crucial step towards self-realization seems to have been taken, which is also discursively distanced from the uncomfortably persistent Galenic 'one-sex' model discussed by Thomas Laqueur (O'Connor 2005, 172). In the context of both fictional and autobiographical accounts of transsexuality, Ruth the novel seems to present a challenge to the inevitability of binary sexual categorization. Yet for Ruth, such transgressive questioning is itself a challenge, and reveals the strength of the underlying teleological structure which has, as Rachel Carroll observes of Cal and Middlesex, a 'before' and 'after', 'as departing from an origin to arrive at a given destination, as crossing a border upheld by a binary logic' (2010, 192). Ruth's tortured interrogation of her own stubbornness in this regard evokes the monstrous mother, whom we recall was identified by the psychoanalyst as the reason for Ruth's lack of sexual self-fulfilment: 'Per què cultivo tan obcecament un únic model d'identificació, el model més tòpic, o sigui el més acceptat per la majoria de la societat?' (Ruth, 103).

The story of Ruth as intersex subject is undermined, deliberately or otherwise, by a combination of poetic structure and thematic coincidence that arises from the complete omission in the novel of awareness or mention of the trauma of vaginoplasty and convalescence. O'Connor, for example, refers to the 'harrowing' and 'wince-inducing accounts of the pain of post-operative recovery' to be found in the autobiographies he studies (2005, 168, 167). The second part of Ruth, 'Situació adquirida', opens with the pre-operative

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<sup>15</sup> Gozlan writes: 'There is an idea that the self is dependent on the Other's recognition and that the self can only begin there. Analysis helps make space for a more abstract notion of the self, similar to the difference between representational and abstract painting' (2015, loc.1637). Thus, Ruth's abstract art stands as a metaphorical notion of what her 'self' could become but does not (in the diegesis).

preparations and different stages of anaesthesia, and within the space of a paragraph break, Ruth begins to come round from surgery ‘amb una certa agilitat’ (Ruth, 84). The procedure has been filmed, and with Ruth’s consent, will be shown — ‘exhibited’ — at conferences, in yet another apparent act of validation. ‘Higiene. Sucs de fruita. Aliments passats pel túrmix. Tinc ganes d’orinar. M’assisteix una de les infermeres que ja conec. És la primera micció de dona. No sento cap molèstia’ (85): in this description, it is almost as though, and I say this advisedly, nothing has happened: a simple disappearing trick. Most important, given the centrality of penetration to Ruth’s sense of her own identity, there is no reference to vaginal stents (the wadding used to give the neo-vagina its initial shape and depth), nor to the subsequent use of dilators. The reader’s reaction to this lack of realism — perhaps *lapsus* would be a better word —, and the linking of it to sexual penetration, might appear paradoxically to insist on a discourse that attributes value to the vagina in these specific terms. Viladot’s approach here could also be seen as moving away from what O’Connor identifies in his life-writing examples as a ‘masculinist discourse of sexual difference’ in which the female body ‘is signified not by “has a vagina” but by “has no penis”’, because the exhibitionist Ruth is happy to display her neo-vulva and vagina. However, this too is problematic, because the spectral penis returns, and the defining reality for Ruth is not ‘I have a vagina’, nor even ‘I have no penis’, but ‘I still have a penis’, and this marks her definitive descent into hallucinations and psychosis.

Is this omission deliberate or an incredibly signifying *lapsus*? It is more likely the latter because in the context of so much self-reflexivity, the reader might expect it otherwise to be thematised. This does of course also lend support to Guillamon’s view of the novel’s pacing as rushed. In an earlier omission within the diegesis, Ruth had neglected to tell, or perhaps been afraid to tell, the sculptor friend of her father that she was about to undergo surgery. When she returns to model for him, she is confronted by the sculpted image of herself with a

damp cloth obscuring the groin area: ‘Sóc jo, sóc jo... era jo!’ she exclaims, emphasizing the temporal, linear dimension of her history which seems increasingly precarious. As she undresses, the sculptor is aghast at her physical transformation, the destruction of what he considered to be her perfect ambiguity, and dismisses her, resigned to completing the work from memory.

The catalyst for Ruth’s mental decline, although not marked as such, seems to be the dream-like recognition scene which takes place in a restaurant after an alcohol-fuelled dinner. Ruth and her lover dance, drawing in the women of the restaurant to a heady and fluid free-for-all. One participant performs a striptease, pausing only as she reaches her underwear. When in response to the urging of the rest of the crowd, she moves to undress completely, Ruth almost collapses as the impromptu stripper is revealed as possessing male genitalia: ‘Com si hagués estat un somni, el vaig desar en la desmemòria enterrant-lo en el rebost de les deixalles humanes. Amb clau i forrellat. [...] Es diria que em veia a mi mateixa exhibint-me davant del pare, la mare, els militars, els amics’ (Ruth, 121, 122). The incident leads Ruth to ask how long the ‘ghost’ of her previous self will inhabit her as she finds her libido muted. She finally manages to ‘purify’ herself through orgasm with her companion, an objective and ultimate validation amongst some transsexuals recognised as well by O’Connor, who explains:

Some of the books include references to a further measure of success-pleasure.

Penetration was all well and good, but orgasm, the great cause célèbre of twentieth-century female sexuality, was the real prize. Townsend wrote baldly that ‘[w]hen I finally did orgasm, it came in a wave of rapture as my body undulated against this. For that brief flash of time I felt whole’. This metonymic conception of the female body, in

which vaginal penetration-to-orgasm signifies the ‘whole’ woman is repeated in other MTF autobiographies. (Townsend 2002, 98, cited by O’Connor 2005, 170)

The verb ‘netejar’ had already been deployed to describe Ruth’s urgency to proceed with surgery, and later in the aftermath of allowing Raül to ejaculate inside her, as revenge on her promiscuous friend; here, the adjective ‘neta’ confirms temporarily her new reality (Ruth, 41, 139, 124). In this sense, authenticity, however configured, equates to cleanliness and purity.

The intersex discourse gradually overwhelms the linear, transition discourse through a series of rapid hallucinatory episodes, the true nature of which is not revealed until Ruth’s final collapse. Viladot’s withholding of this information means that the reader’s experience replicates the narrator’s unknowing slide into psychosis, culminating in the lyrical incoherence (or free association) of the final letter. The ‘afrancesat’ who takes her home is a hallucinatory projection, the promise of an alternative reality in which Ruth will encounter a kind of utopian symmetry and complementarity: the ‘afrancesat’ to Ruth’s surprise and delight is also a post-operative female. An unknown buyer purchases the whole of Ruth’s exhibited work. She is handed cash to purchase her own workshop-studio. At the new workspace, Ruth and the ‘afrancesat’ undress and stand side by side in front of the mirror: ‘Som dos homes!!! A través del mirall, els nostres sexes de dona s’han convertit en sexes d’home. I ell? Com si endevinés el meu pensament, fa: — Jo també’ (155). The anonymous companion has resolved to live in public as a male:

Qui som tu i jo? Perquè allò que volem ser no té res a veure amb allò que no podem deixar de ser. Hem deixat de ser homes incomplets, però som dones acabades? A mi em plau vestir-me d’home perquè sé que fins a cert punt mai no en deixaré de ser del tot. Tu quedes molt bé vestida de dona. Així, fem una parella exquisida. (155)

The ‘afrancesat’, we might say, represents a vision of surgery ‘as a possibility of representing oneself comfortably in the world’, as ‘like the encounter with an enigmatic object, surgery is a new beginning — we do not know what will happen afterwards and what possibilities will be opened or foreclosed’ (Gozlan 2015, locs.2537, 2546). Ruth rejects the proposal, deciding that her future lies with her sculptor girlfriend. But when she discovers that her works have not in fact been sold, she tries without success to make her way back to the new studio, and by extension, to a relationship with the ‘afrancesat’ which we could understand with Yanoula Athanassakis, as a ‘quarrying of what “straight” has thus far signified’ (2011, 227); or as a ‘queer heterosexuality’ (Sifuentes 2006). Here we return to Kristeva’s observation that the ‘divine revelation often requires a lapse, the acceptance of radical otherness, the recognition of a foreignness that one might have tended at the very first to consider the most degraded’ (1994, 75): this relates not merely (if at all) to the putative idyll of the two trans women, but rather to Ruth’s stated resistance pre-op to male homosexual sex, and to a queer or enigmatic solution that involves the spectral presence of both penises.

This hallucinatory response to a problem of intersex is not an attainable reality. Ruth fails to locate the workshop because it never existed. Instead, once again in the company of her girlfriend, she witnesses herself with penis in front of the mirror, even though she is able to verify manually her female anatomy. Ruth breaks down and is hospitalised. In the final letter of the novel, now at her parents’ home and reunited with the mother, the first, omnipotent Other, the full extent of Ruth’s vulnerability becomes clear, expressed as a definitive and delirious experiencing of the abject:

Em pesen els ulls, i el batec del meu cor s’ha afeblit tant que gairebé és inaudible. Tot el meu cos em pesa avall com si hagués de recórrer la terra mogut per la seva força

centrípeta. Sóc al balcó. Tothom trepitja la niesa [sic] de la Història: ebrietat de les clarors cegues, infinita nit de les mortalles emmidonades. Sóc al balcó i de tant en tant camino en saltirons per la barana. Darrere, còpies infinites del meu penis brollen pel passamà del desig. Qui ha escombrat el meu sexe de dona? Ho reconec: no hi ha res més brut que l'angoixa del mar. Sóc al balcó. Els canelobres dels ossos renunciem als llavis mentre les vagines entomen les marxés metropolitanes de l'orfenesa. Crida'm, amic meu; entoma la imatge que està a punt de dissoldre's en l'orfenesa del lliurament. Un cop apagats els fanals de la ciutat, balcó avall m'apagaré en les cendres de tots els cementiris..., desert de mi, desnonament mai habitat, niu impossible, fermentació inútil... Mentre l'alba guarneixi el repòs el temps servirà memòria de ningú.

Que siguis feliç. Adéu. (Ruth, 161)

The transitional space, the queer relational identification which for a short time seemed attractive and within reach, has given way to an impossible balancing act. The tolling refrain 'Sóc al balcó' is an expression of liminality, a position statement from the subject at the edge of the abyss, a cry for help and a premonition of the inevitable. The near-breakdown of language, of rational connections, mirrors the breakdown of the narrator, the death of optimism. Can we speak with Grosz in Lacanian terms of Ruth being 'haunt[ed] by part objects derived from earlier, more primitive experiences', and of an 'imaginary anatomy' whose 'reorganization or decomposition witnesses psychotic breakdown' (1994, 44)? Viladot does not explore Lacan programmatically through fiction, but the novel undoubtedly exploits the figurative and creative potential of key concepts.

If Ruth's ending seems beyond doubt, its linguistic expression seems rather to operate as a *deus ex machina* in the context of the dominant realist mode.<sup>16</sup> O'Connor's insight into transsexual life writing shows that Ruth is, in comparison, surprisingly and queerly resistant to 'masculinist notions of sexual difference' which the life writing tended to adopt in order to be 'culturally convincing' (2005, 173). Where plausibility buckles is in the representation of the medical reality of convalescence, but even here we could argue that this is aesthetically and rhetorically justified by the return of the spectral and specular penis to haunt the space that the narrator left unspoken. In its depiction of a more open, humanistic biomedical complex, Ruth encourages rather than castigates. Although its queerly glimpsed vision of a 'utopian life beyond gender' (Butler cited in Sifuentes 2006, 149) remains a no-place in Ruth's intimate geography, and although Ruth is unable to live her predicament creatively (Gozlan 2015, loc.1136), in spite of appearing to articulate this very possibility through her art, its very imagining makes the transsexual voice, the voice in transition, a little louder, and this is also the usefulness of Ruth.

### **Notes on contributor**

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<sup>16</sup> The most significant precedent in the novel is the mother's furious rant when Ruth visits after surgery (Ruth, 91–92).

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