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Author

Connor, Laura F

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Bilingualism, Desdoblamiento, and Dissociative Identity in Juan Marsé's *El amante bilingüe*

Laura F. Connor
Harvard University

ABSTRACT: The Barcelonese author Juan Marsé has remarked of his 1990 novel, *El amante bilingüe*, that it is intended to represent the “schizophrenic” nature of Barcelona, referring to what Marsé views as the fundamental cultural and linguistic division of the officially bilingual city’s inhabitants into two national identities: Spanish-speaking “Castilians” and Catalan-speaking “Catalans.” In Marsé’s novel, the plight of the book’s protagonist, an individual who functions in both spheres of Barcelonese society while fully identifying with neither, supports the theory that bilingualism and biculturalism may lead to self-destruction. Forced to choose between his two “identities,” Marsé’s main character irreparably splits himself into two irreconcilable psychological entities: the Catalan Juan/Joan Marsé and the Spanish Juan Faneca. This paper explores the rhetorical tools Marsé uses to depict the binarism of Catalan society and the adverse effects this “split personality” can have on its inhabitants as well as examining the questions it raises about the possibilities (or lack thereof) for national identity in contemporary Barcelona.

KEYWORDS: Juan Marsé, bilingualism, Catalan, Spanish, Catalonia, Barcelona, language, cultural identity, Spanish literature, Catalan literature

In a 1995 interview, Juan Marsé said of his novel *El amante bilingüe* (1990) that it was intended to represent “esa esquizofrenia cultural y lingüística que sufre Barcelona, una ciudad bilingüe desde mucho antes del franquismo” (cited in Gutiérrez Pérez, 37).¹ Marsé here suggests that the existence of more than one language and cultural identity in Barcelona, rather than a positive force, is actually pathological, and can lead to mental illness in its inhabitants. Throughout

the novel, Marsé emphasizes the dualistic, dichotomic nature of Barcelonese society, in which one is forced to choose between two diametrically opposed cultural and linguistic affiliations: one is either Catalan or Castilian, and no allowance is made for a hybrid or intermediate identity. The following pages will explore the rhetorical tools Marsé uses to depict the binarism of Catalan society and the adverse effects this “split personality” can have on its inhabitants.

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY BARCELONA: WHO IS CATALAN AND WHO IS NOT?

In a study conducted in the late 1980s, a period that roughly corresponds with the timeline of Marsé's novel, sociologist Kathryn Woolard notes the various ways in which identity is assigned in Barcelona, a city that, since the Spanish Civil War, has been a primary destination for thousands of immigrants seeking to escape the poverty of southern Spain. In 1989, nearly half the population of Catalonia's capital city was composed of these immigrants and their children, many of whom arrived in Catalonia speaking only Castilian (Woolard 3). This contributed to an already tense linguistic situation in a part of Spain that had fought for centuries to be able to express itself in Catalan, a position that now complicated communication between “old” Catalans and newly arrived immigrant families. Despite the Catalan government's official position on who can claim a Catalan identity—legally, anyone who resides in Catalonia is Catalan (37), and a major slogan of the 1980s assured that all who lived and worked in Catalonia were Catalan (36)—among the population of Barcelona, a Catalan is defined as one who “uses Catalan in a native-like way as a first, home, and/or habitual language” (38). The opposite of “Catalan” is understood to be “Castilian,” one whose primary language is Spanish (42); accordingly, some individuals born and raised in Catalonia often identify themselves as Castilian (38).

These linguistic terms, Catalan and Castilian, are also charged with social significance: “The socioeconomic difference between native Catalans and immigrants, who are almost all of Castilian-speaking origin, is striking . . . native Catalans are heavily concentrated in the highest [both in terms of pay and prestige] occupations, and immigrants are concentrated in the lowest levels of manual labor” (30-31). Consequently, “Catalan” has become roughly synonymous with “bourgeois,” while “Castilian” or “immigrant” often designates a

member of the working classes (30-33).² Assignment of identity on the basis of language to the exclusion of factors such as birth, residence, descent, or multiple others, and the correlation between language and social class has led to a conceptual dichotomization in Barcelona between the “Catalan” bourgeoisie and the “Castilian” working class, even though the actual situation may be more complex (43). Juan/Joan Marés, the protagonist of Marsé’s novel, like Marsé himself, describes Barcelona as “una ciudad esquizofrénica” (Marsé 84) in which the subject, particularly the marginalized Castilian subject who seeks to be linguistically, culturally, and economically Catalan, risks losing, forgetting, or splitting his identity.

The precise details of Marés’ cultural and linguistic origins are never unambiguously stated in the novel, but we are given various clues that suggest he was born in Catalonia to immigrant parents. Writing in his journals, Marés asserts that, as a ten-year-old child, he felt himself to be Catalan (128). Given the various definitions of “Catalan” outlined by Woolard, what exactly Marés’ self-identification as Catalan means is uncertain.³ Marés was most likely born in Catalonia; as Woolard indicates, even Castilian-speaking teenagers born in Catalonia will initially identify themselves as Catalan based on birthplace, though they tend to distinguish themselves as Castilians in contrast to the Catalan-speaking population (Woolard 38). Marés distinguishes between himself, a “catalán,” and his friends from the same working-class neighborhood, whom he identifies as “charnegos” (Marsé 128), a pejorative term for “immigrants,” suggesting that he is not one. Marés further differentiates himself from his friends on a linguistic basis: he speaks with them “en su lengua” (128), suggesting that this (Castilian) language is not his own. Furthermore, the Castilian Marés speaks appears to conform to a more standard Spanish vocabulary and pronunciation than that of his friends from southern Spain: his friend Faneca in particular speaks with such a heavy Andalusian accent that “no se le entendía” (128), indicating that this way of speaking was nearly as foreign to Marés as to a non-Castilian speaker.

Though Marés suggests that Catalan is his own language, it is unclear what his mother tongue is, if indeed he has only one. He indicates that he swears in Castilian; it has often been said that one only curses in his or her native tongue. Curses, reactions to pain or surprise, are such spontaneous, reflexive utterances that they usually draw on native, more deeply-ingrained vocabularies, rather than

second languages. On the other hand, upon discovering his wife's lover in their bed at the beginning of the novel, he wonders aloud to himself in Catalan how he should react: "Hosti, tú [sic] . . . I ara qué?" This interjection, another candid reaction to a painful and unexpected situation, "identifies Marés as a Catalan, even if he changes immediately to Castilian and continues to speak in this language throughout the novel" (Resina 93). He also seems to have spoken Castilian in his familial environment. Though his mother, Rita Benítez, is never explicitly identified as an immigrant, she is a zarzuela singer, and the zarzuela is a form of musical theatre most commonly performed in other areas of Spain. Though variants are performed in Catalonia, the sardana is the form of music and dance most emblematic of this region of Spain. As the allegorical nature of *El amante bilingüe* sometimes resorts to schematization of Catalan and non-Catalan identities and affiliation, the zarzuela may well be intended as an index of Rita's outsider status in Catalonia. Her surname is also Castilian, further evidence of her foreignness. Though his father, Rafael Amat, has a Catalan last name, he appears to have been a limited presence in Marés' life.⁴ In any case, Marés appears to have spoken exclusively Spanish with his family, in contrast to the Catalan he periodically directs to himself (12), to his ex-wife Norma (32), or surreptitiously to Norma's lover, the Catalan sociolinguist, Jordi Valls Verdú (32). The name of Norma's paramour is significant, as "Jordi" is the name of Catalonia's patron saint, thereby representing Catalanness itself and Norma's devotion to this cultural identity. Yet despite the novel's apparent tendency to simplify matters of national and cultural affiliation, Marés' deliberately obscured origins may be interpreted as a certain resistance to the Manichean terms typically used to distinguish between "Catalans" and "Spaniards." Critic Joan Ramón Resina perspicaciously argues that "whereas for [sociolinguists] Ninyoles and Vallverdú social and cultural origins are fairly unproblematic, Marsé questions the certainty of elementary identifications" (96), suggesting that one can have more than one cultural identity or that it is not static, but rather changes over time.

Though from childhood Marés has possessed a command of two languages and two cultural identities, he expresses a desire to abandon his working-class "Castilian" background, represented largely by his mother and her profession, to become wholly Catalan: "Desde muy niño soñaba con irme lejos, lejos del barrio y de mi casa, del ruido de

la Singer que pedaleaba mi madre y de sus rancias canciones zarzueleras, de sus borracheras y de sus astrosos amigos de la farándula. Lo conseguí con Norma. Y ahora sé que todo lo he perdido” (19). As the literary critic Stewart King suggests, Marés’ ex-wife may be said to represent Catalonia (117). Perhaps more accurately, given her name and her post at the Plan de Normalización Lingüística, she may represent the normalized Catalan language, the attainment of which could help a native Castilian speaker become linguistically and culturally Catalan. Marés’ belief that he has achieved “Catalanness” by marrying Norma, however, also implicates questions of class as well. Norma is from a wealthy family who appears to have been established in Catalonia for several generations. As Woolard indicates, linguistic and cultural identity is intimately tied to social and economic class (30-31). Marsé, by positing Norma as the Catalan language, suggests that being able to speak Catalan opens doors to opportunities and social mobility to which monolingual Castilian speakers do not have access. King astutely indicates that “Norma, como la lengua catalana, es un puente, una forma de acceder plenamente a Cataluña” (118), enabling Marés to leave behind his marginalized existence as the son of a Castilian-speaking immigrant.

As Resina indicates, architectural spaces play a significant symbolic role in the novel. The apartment building in which Norma and Marés live, Walden 7, designed by Ricard Bofill in the 1960s and named after B.F. Skinner’s utopian project, was to promote community among its residents. As the place where Norma and Marés shared a home, it also represents an environment that fosters interaction and communication between Catalans and Castilians. Norma and Marés each have roots in radically different social environments—Norma grew up on her family’s villa, while Marés was raised in Gràcia, then a working-class neighborhood, where his friends were “los golfos sin escuela” (14—yet they “harmoniously” cohabitated for a number of years in Walden 7. Bofill’s construction, however, did not achieve the desired results. In addition to being a highly unstable, dangerous construction (Resina 94), it also afforded its occupants little privacy. Like Bofill’s social project, Marés and Norma’s marriage ultimately fails, and Marés finds himself increasingly unable to remain in the apartment as the Catalan and Castilian elements of his personality become more alienated from one another. The presence of the building throughout the novel thus serves as a reminder of the impossibility of reconciling deeply-entrenched national and linguistic identities.

Marsé further underlines the polarization between “old” Catalans and “new” Catalans who may be Catalan-born Castilian-speakers or immigrants by highlighting the prejudices and resentment harbored by each group towards the other. Marés/Faneca continually refers to Norma, her friends, and Valls Verdú as *catalanufos* (e.g. Marsé 57, 75, etc.), while Valls Verdú refers to Faneca, who makes his Andalusian background clear through his exaggerated accent, as a *xarnego llefiscós* (206) (“disgusting immigrant”). Norma herself speaks condescendingly to Marés when he calls the Assessorament linguistic posing as “Juan Tena Amores,” an Andalusian, Castilian-speaking shopkeeper. She asks him to speak in Catalan, and when “Tena” replies that he cannot, she brusquely disparages his southern accent: “Entonces procure hablar sin ese acento, porque no le entiendo” (63).⁵ Even Marés, when speaking to his alter ego, refers to him as a “charnego de mierda” (81). By continually repeating these two epithets, Marsé seems to exaggerate the dichotomization of Barcelonese society: one belongs either to the privileged class of old Catalan families or to the working immigrant class. An individual who straddles these two identities, as Marés does, may find himself being destructively pulled between the two extremes.

MARÉS’ DOUBLE OR SPLIT PERSONALITY: CATALAN OR CASTILIAN?

Throughout *El amante bilingüe*, Marsé continually evokes the progressive split of Marés into two separate psychological entities, one the self-identified “Catalan” Marés, the other the rather caricatured figure of the Andalusian Juan Faneca. This split, as King suggests (118), is largely precipitated by Marés’ abrupt separation from Norma, who leaves him after he discovers her infidelity. The date on which she leaves him, “una tarde lluviosa del mes de noviembre de 1975” (9), is important as it may well be intended to represent the day of Franco’s death (Resina 93), symbolizing at the same time the possibility of the normalization of Catalan and the concomitant distinction between Catalans and Spaniards as the public use of Catalan became once again acceptable and indeed encouraged. This abandonment might be understood metaphorically as a rejection by the country of which he has long sought to become a part, as well as the loss of the social and cultural identity affiliated with the lost nationality. Having lost the linguistic and cultural “bridge” that Norma represents, joining Marés

and Catalonia, the protagonist suffers an identity crisis. His remarks about his marriage to Norma affording him an escape from his past and his fears that in losing Norma he has also lost the distance he put between him and his youth suggest that Marés feels he has regressed to his former identity as the child of a working-class immigrant.

Even before Norma leaves him, the reader is given clues that suggest that Marés has long possessed a sort of “double consciousness” or double identity. The novel opens with Marés catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror and seeing himself as an other: “Recuerdo que al abrir la puerta del dormitorio, lo primero que vi fue a mí mismo abriendo la puerta del dormitorio . . . aquel viejo fantasma que labró mi ruina: un hombre empapado por la lluvia en el umbral de su inmediata destrucción” (9). Here Marés describes his own image as though speaking of another person, putting distance between himself and “that” man. This is reminiscent of Lacan’s assertion that the infant’s first sight of himself in the mirror alienates him from himself: the wholeness of the image contrasts with the feeling of inhabiting an uncoordinated and thus fragmented body, causing the infant to simultaneously recognize himself in the image and yet feel distant from it (75-77). The idea that Marés is “en el umbral” refers not only to the fact that Marés is about to discover that he has been cuckolded, but also suggests that Marés occupies an interstitial space in Barcelonese society: married to a member of an “old” Catalan family but of immigrant stock himself, he is not entirely a Catalan but not, or at least no longer, a Castilian. Alternatively, he could be described as being both at the same time—Castilian because of his family’s background, but also Catalan by marriage and, at least in part, linguistic and cultural affiliation. The severance of his relationship with Norma also severs his ties with the sector of Catalan society of which he was part for the eight years he was married to Norma, precipitating uncertainty of whether he belongs to this group or whether he has returned to the Castilian working class of his youth.

The manifestation of this “Castilian” alter ego, in the guise of Marés’ childhood friend Faneca, who was not Catalan-speaking, first manifests himself in a dream. In an episode that recalls Marés’ earlier sighting of the mirror, he realizes that the person he is speaking with is himself, but a nearly unrecognizable version of himself because of his behavior, speech, and altered physical appearance—he appears with the green eyes, sideburns, and black hair that Marés will later use to

transform himself into Faneca during his waking hours (Marsé 50). The idea that Faneca and Marés share the same body is underlined by the fact that when, in his dream, Marés throws an alarm clock at Faneca's head to make him leave, Marés' own head later bears the mark of Faneca's injury (58). The initial blurring of the boundaries between "dream" and "reality" is taken up again when Faneca once more appears to Marés in a dream, telling him that "[a]hora, Marés, yo salgo de tu sueño y entro en el mío" (83), indicating that Faneca's life occurs while Marés dreams and vice versa, and accordingly that Marés is as much as product of Faneca's dreams as Faneca is "dreamed up" by Marés. This points to the progressive separation of Faneca as an entity separate from his "creator." The fact that such conversations between the Catalan and the Castilian "sides" of Marés' personality take place in an oniric setting underlines the constructed, illusory nature of these binarily-opposed cultural identities.

Another metaphor for Marés' dual identities is his face. After his separation from Norma, Marés was injured by a Molotov cocktail thrown during a "catalanista" protest, burning off his eyebrows and leaving smooth scar tissue that erased the signs of age from his face (21-22). The face is a major locus of identity; having distinguishing features eliminated or obscured evokes a partial erasure of identity. (It should also be noted that Marés' hands were also burned [22], erasing his finger prints, another index of personal uniqueness.) The fact that a clash between Catalans and Castilians caused the damage serves as a metaphor for a loss of identity born of a confrontation between Catalan and Castilian aspects of Marés' ego: not knowing where to assign his loyalty, Marés identifies with neither and consequently suffers an identity crisis. The partial erasure also calls to mind a palimpsest, a surface from which "writing" in the form of facial features that spell out identity has been incompletely erased and on which new "texts" can be overlaid. This is precisely what Marés does: with masks, wigs, fake sideburns, eyepatches, drawn-in eyebrows and a green contact lens, Marés "writes" the facial identity of Faneca over the remains of his own, again evoking Marés' duplicity by suggesting that two faces and therefore two identities coexist in one physical body. Marsé hints at this further when he suggests that Marés's face itself is, and always has been, a mask. Marés remembers an episode from his childhood when, upon startling his mother by wearing a mask, he takes it off, admitting that "Debajo llevo otro idéntico" (39). As Resina asserts (96), this incident

recalls one of the novel's epigraphs, a quote by Machado ("Lo esencial carnavalesco no es ponerse careta, sino quitarse la cara" [Marsé 7]), and underlines the fundamental instability of identity: a true, "essential" self does not exist, but instead one is always "wearing" a persona imposed by social and cultural affiliations.

The narrative voice of the novel, which alternates between the first-person in Marés' notebooks, in which he reflects on particular moments in his life, and the third-person narration of the rest of the book, also evokes Marés' double consciousness, as though Marés in some moments—or perhaps much of the time, given the predominant use of the third person—sees himself as an other, and imagines his life as viewed from a distance. The form of the novel thus underlines its central theme.

Not only does Marsé aggressively emphasize the dichotomization of Barcelonese culture, he also highlights the potentially destructive effect this can have on individuals who identify neither with the Catalan bourgeois nor with the immigrant working class. Marés' increasing loss of control over his alter ego escalates as he spends less time in Walden 7 and more in Faneca's humble residence in the Pensión Ynes (190-91), begins to wear elements of his Faneca disguise even at home and while sleeping (171), and starts to think of himself as another person, often in disparaging terms. He refers to himself as "ese cabrón de Marés" (170), for example, again putting distance between himself and the thought of himself with the word "ese." As King indicates, Marés and Faneca also begin to communicate using written notes, no longer able to "speak" to one another (King, 120), which suggests that Marés and Faneca no longer occupy the same body, or at least not at the same time. Marés and Faneca appear to have become ontologically separate when Faneca sees Marés wandering the streets, weak, sick, drunk, and virtually unable to speak (Marsé 213-14). The fact that Faneca expresses surprise on seeing Marés indicates that Faneca not only no longer sees himself as part of or related to Marés physically or psychologically, but no longer even considers him a friend, wishing to be entirely rid of him: "Vete," he says, "ya acabó todo" (214). Marés later disappears (219), suggesting that his split with Faneca has caused his death. Faneca does not appear to fare much better, however, as he ends up as a street performer, speaking a hybrid language that no one understands. His assertion that "me guta el mestizaje" (220) rings ironic, as "mestizaje," the coexistence of two languages, cultures, and identities in one body

has led to Marés/Faneca's destruction and produced Faneca's incomprehensibility. Marsé thus suggests that in contemporary Barcelona, there is no way to successfully combine two cultural identities or to somehow occupy a space between two polarized opposites. Instead, individuals, to maintain their linguistic and psychological coherence, are forced to choose between the two.

In *El amante bilingüe*, Marsé effectively demonstrates his vision of the dual nature of Barcelonese society—or, perhaps more accurately, the experience its citizens might have. The experience Marsé evokes might be said to be more common of immigrants from Castilian speaking Spain and their children, many of whom identify Castilian as their primary language and who may be more likely to be aware of their “minority” status in a city and region whose privileged civic and symbolic language is Catalan. In any case, Marsé suggests that one must swear an allegiance to one linguistic identity or another: one must either be Catalan or Castilian. No intermediate space exists; indeed those who, like Marés, fall into this liminal area end up destroying themselves. The reader is left wondering, after reading Marsé's text, if his vision of Barcelona is as reductive as he believes Barcelonese society to be, and whether or not the social situation of Barcelona is not more nuanced, inviting and allowing different identities and ways of being Catalan than Marsé implies.

Notes

1. Given his emphasis on the dual nature of Barcelonese society, precipitated in large part by its bilingualism, it is likely that Marsé has confused the terms “schizophrenia” with “dissociative identity disorder” or multiple personality disorder. Outside of professional psychiatry, these two illnesses are often elided, and in popular culture schizophrenia is frequently associated with the idea of two identities or personalities inhabiting the same physical body.

2. It is important to reiterate that Woolard's study analyzes the linguistic and social situation in Catalonia in the 1980s. More than 20 years later, the situation has changed to some degree, due in large part to the policy of teaching Catalan to all children in public schools. Since the majority of monolingual Castilian-speakers in Catalonia are, however, immigrants from Latin America or from outside the Spanish-speaking world, many of whom provide manual or unskilled labor, Castilian does continue to be associated to some degree with the working classes.

3. In popular definitions of identity, “there are basically four alternate criteria: birthplace, descent, sentiment/behavior, and language. Though each of these may be invoked and accepted in certain restricted context, it is the criterion of language that is both most commonly used and the most powerful” (Woolard 38).

4. It seems, for example, that Amat did not live with Marés and his mother. In a scene where Amat appears at a party at Rita Benítez’s home, Marés asks him if he won’t stay for a few days (44). Amat declines, to which Marés responds: “Siempre dices lo mismo” (44), suggesting that Amat is rarely in Marés’ home for long periods of time.

5. Norma, however, in addition to allowing herself to be seduced by the Andalusian Faneca, committed the infidelity that ruptured her marriage to Marés with another immigrant “con acento charnego” (10). At the beginning of the novel, Marés admits that he had long suspected Norma’s adultery, though he imagined her to be cuckolding him with Catalans, “Eudald Ribas o . . . cualquier otro señorito guaperas de su selecto círculo de amistades, pero no tardé en descubrir que su debilidad eran los murcianos de piel oscura y sólida dentadura. Charnegos de todas clases” (11). Her undeniable sexual “debilidad por los charnegos” (Kim 359), coupled with her disparaging remarks to Tena Amores and Faneca as well as her commitment to the normalization of the Catalan language suggests a simultaneous contempt of and irresistible attraction to he who embodies “exotic” Spain. This may be interpreted as a kind of Catalan orientalism. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one of the ways in which Catalonia promoted itself as a “modern nation” was to distinguish itself from “backwards” central and particularly southern Spain by characterizing these regions as entirely foreign, distant cultures. It was often suggested, in both political and artistic discourse, that southern Spain was part of “barbarous” Africa, while Catalonia belonged to “modern, progressive” Europe. Examples of such rhetoric can be found in the work of Joan Maragall, Marià Fortuny, and Santiago Rusiñol, to name but a few. Here, though, rather than the “feminized” orient typically portrayed in orientalist works, southern Spain appears typified by the “macho” male stereotype, a trope mocked and rejected by more “civilized” Catalan authors and artists. Alternatively, Norma may be trying to recuperate a “Castilian” part of herself that she has lost via her strict self-identification as Catalan. Resina indicates that “Polarizing the subject into self and Other results in loss. The part that is expelled becomes a distressing and, at the same time, infinitely desirable object” (98). Norma’s intense attraction to southern immigrants may thus be seen as an indication, in Marsé’s view, that self-identified Catalans must yet acknowledge their ties to the rest of Spain in order to fully understand, accept, and appreciate what such an identity entails.

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