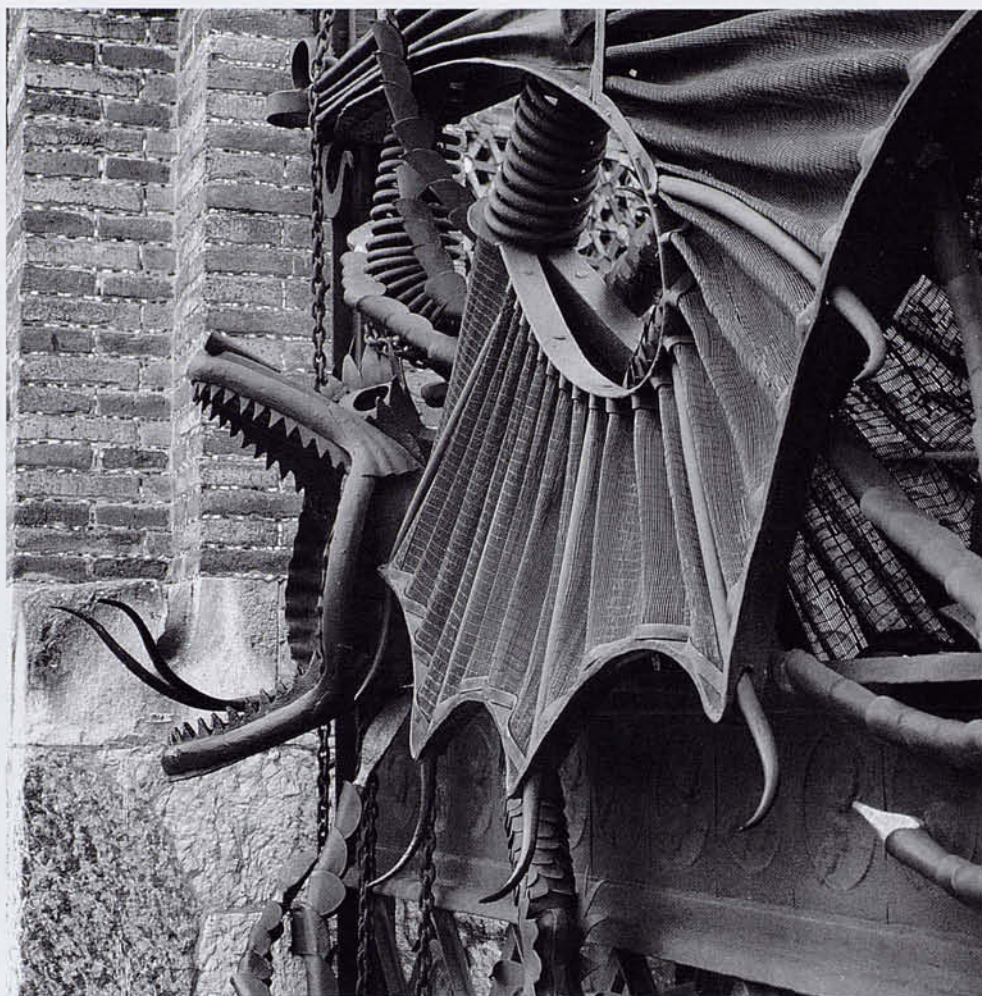


THE ROMANTIC VERDAGUER



© ELOI BONJOCH

ANTONI GAUDÍ. VERDAGUER SYMBOLS. GUARDIAN DRAGON OF THE GARDEN OF THE HESPERIDES. CÀTEDRA GAUDÍ, BARCELONA

PLUS ULTRA, AL CEL

*L'univers és infinit,
pertot acaba i comença,
i ençà, enllà, amunt i avall
la immensitat és oberta.*

Jacint Verdaguer

PLUS ULTRA, FROM AL CEL

*The universe is infinite,
its end and its beginning are everywhere,
and here, there, above and below
the immensity is open.*

RICARD TORRENTS DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIC
AND PRESIDENT OF THE ASSOCIACIÓ VERDAGUER



ANTONI GAUDÍ, ORANGE TREE IN THE GARDEN OF THE HESPERIDES.
CÀTEDRA GAUDÍ, BARCELONA

© ELOI BONJOCH

While the different foundries, aesthetic and otherwise, of Romanticism were crackling all over Europe, the ancient dormant nation of Catalonia was stirring with the movement of the *Renaixença*, the “Re-birth”. Catalan awareness was being revived by the tide of romanticism and a move began to reinstate the language, giving it a literature in Catalan on a level with the national literatures of Europe. This programme, which was adopted by important writers such as the poet Jacint Verdaguer, the playwright Àngel Guimerà and the novelist Narcís Oller, and which found sympathy with the critics and support amongst the bourgeois and working-class public, gave rise to modern Catalonia’s first cultural symbols. One of them was the poet and priest Jacint Verdaguer, “mossèn Cinto”, one of the most effective and lasting.

I Verdaguer’s life, which can be summed up in its three accepted periods: rise (1845-1877), fullness (1877-1893) and decline (1893-1902), contains elements that seem made to become symbols. When the twenty-year-old poet walked into Barcelona City Hall’s Saló de Cent dressed in mountain clothes, he was welcomed by the public with Rousseauian enthusiasm as the embodiment of Catalan virtues, the emblem of the *Renaixença*. When, under the impact of the Revolution of 1868, he was ordained as a priest and sang mass in 1878 between a dolmen and an altar, his sympathizers rushed to take up the life of poet-priests, presided by the lyre and the chalice. When, in 1877, consecrated by the success of *L’Atlàntida*, the protection of the Marquis of Comillas raised him higher on the social ladder, the public took pride and admired the

triumphant humility in the poet who had come from the lesser ranks and who knew how to interpret their intimate feelings of faith and country, landscape and tradition, love and longing, as well as stupefaction at geological cataclysms, the deeds of mythical heroes or of the figures from national history. When he fell from grace and rebelled, modernist circles saw in Verdaguer an artist misunderstood and rejected, while the people made him a victim of the powerful and welcomed him like a returning hero. Verdaguer once more bore the weight of symbolic representation in 1945, the centenary of his birth. Catalonia then was stifled by the Franco regime. The Catalans in exile made Verdaguer a symbol of unity and hope. Meanwhile, in Catalonia, the poet’s language could not be entirely smothered, because thanks to his verses the censor could not forbid a return to publishing



© ELOI BONJOCH

JOSEP LLIMONA. MONUMENT TO DR. ROBERT. PLAÇA DE TETUAN, BARCELONA. IN THE FOREGROUND, VERDAGUER SURROUNDED BY THE COMMON PEOPLE

in Catalan. In 1952, the fiftieth anniversary of his death, not only did the clandestine Institut d'Estudis Catalans pay homage to him, but the poet's works and biographies appeared in the bookshops while popular celebrations in his honour broke out in demands for freedom for the Catalan language.

II

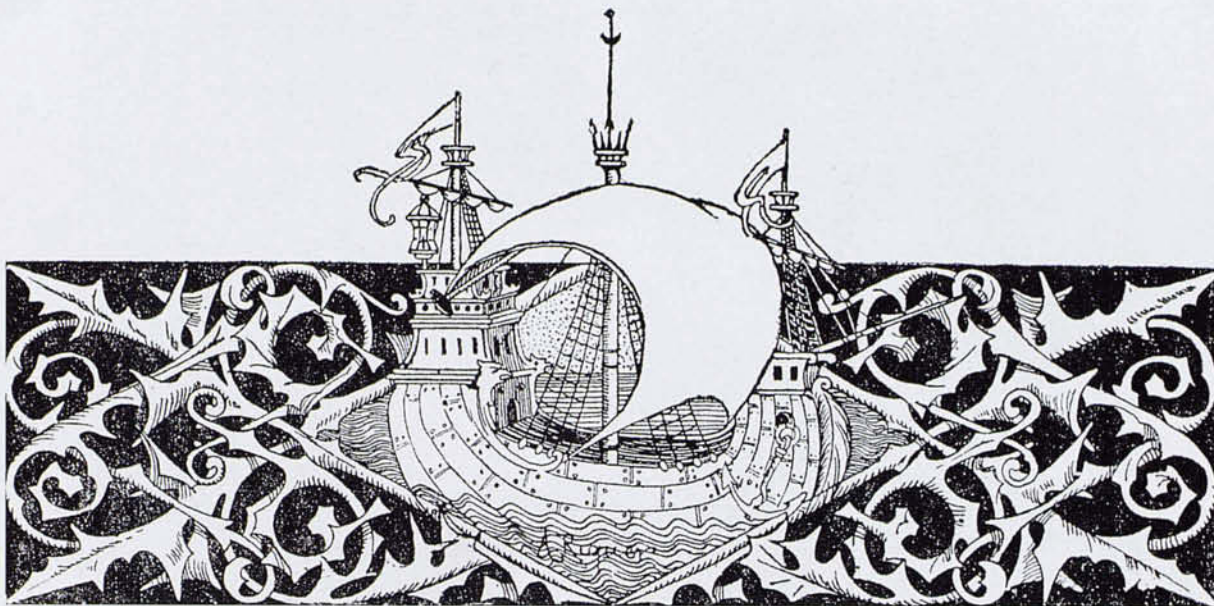
Verdaguer's literary work, more than forty books of verse, prose and translations, is charged with images that are symbolic to the Catalans. The mountains of Montserrat, the Montseny, the Pyrenees; historical people and places, especially King James I, the city of Barcelona, the monastery of Ripoll; the Catalan-language area, with the Balearic Isles, the País Valencià, the Roussillon; popular traditions, such as the sardana or the human towers of the *castellers*; the plant-life, the legends, place-names, saints, all have a constant, vibrant presence in the poetry of Verdaguer. In the accounts of his travels, his points of reference are Catalan, like on his visit to Russia in 1844 when he remarks that the rivers Llobregat and Ter are mere "jets from a *porró*" (a Catalan wine-jug) beside the massive Russian rivers, and yet no sooner are the former born than they move turbines, while the latter bleed into the sea without giving life to a single factory.

But it is Verdaguer's work as a whole which through its functional value is invested with symbolism. Verdaguer in fact was the founder of the modern Catalan literary movement in the same way that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Ramon Llull had founded ancient literary Catalan, a language which after a premature yet brilliant Renaissance with authors like Bernat Metge, Ausiàs Marc and Joanot Martorell was eclipsed during the Baroque and the Enlightenment by its Spanish, Italian and French neighbours. It was not until Verdaguer that Catalan regained the heights of art and functionality of the modern languages of culture. These had not suffered the same interruption; literary Catalan, on the other hand, reached the century of Romanticism with no great writers and no public, without critics or reliable immediate referents. Verdaguer's great virtue was that he gathered the language from the lips of the common people, and after injecting it with classical models, wrote in a credible language, as though Catalan had never undergone the ordeal of decadence. There is therefore a before and after to literary Catalan, which hinges on Verdaguer in much the same way that the before and after of literary German hinges on Luther's brilliant translation of the Bible. Modern Catalan, therefore, over and above literary

schools, aesthetic tastes and ideological preferences, has its classic –paradoxical though it may seem– in the Romantic Verdaguer.

To place Verdaguer, it is essential to remember that the literature of the Romantic writers emerged with the object of communicating with the infinitude of the universe whose "end and [whose] beginning are everywhere" as interpreted in the *Volksggeist* of each country. From Hölderlin to Keats, from Byron to Espronceda, from Manzoni to Pushkin, from Lamartine to Verdaguer, the romantic writers formed a species which arose in the eighteenth century, multiplied in the nineteenth century and, so far as one can see, has not died out in the twentieth century. Albert Camus, says the novelist Michel Butor, is the great French romantic writer of our century.

When Verdaguer was a young writer in the 1860s, the romantic school dominated catalan literature under the critical direction of Manuel Milà i Fontanals (1818-1884), a student of the literatures of Europe. It was he who guided Verdaguer in composing *L'Atlàntida*, an impressive poetic construction that goes on from the sinking of the mythical Atlantic continent to tell the story of the origins of Europe and the "completion" of the creation of the world's continents with the discovery of America. Milà i



PEN AND INK DRAWING. CANIGÓ, PUBLISHED 1886

Fontanals also wrote the prologue for Verdaguer's first book of poems, *Idil·lis i cants místics*, full of lyricism and mystic passion. The literary work that emerged from the young poet Verdaguer and the old critic Milà delighted the Catalans and earned the acknowledgement of neighbouring literatures. Poetry in Catalan rejoined an illustrious family: Virgil's *Aeneid*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Klopstock's *Der Messias*, Camoes's *Os Lusíadas*, Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, but also the family of Francis of Assisi's *I Fioretti*, Fray Luís de León's *Odas*, the Bible's *Song of Songs*, Lull's *Libre d'amic e Amat* or Lamartine's *La chute d'un ange* and Chateaubriand's *Le génie du christianisme*. Romantic by nature, Verdaguer's poetry allowed later Catalan poets to take the path of Western post-romantic poetry leading to the aesthetic adventures of Symbolism. The perception of the "open immensity" had struck a romantic note in Verdaguer and inspired the grandiloquent and intimist poems that so moved his contemporaries. Even today, they still move anyone who is open to the immensity.

III

Today you can find Verdaguer not only in university departments, where he is the subject of courses and doctoral theses, but in kitchens, on the pages of

calendars. You can find him in schoolbooks and bibliophile editions. His effigy has circulated on Spanish banknotes and stamps, on medals and posters, picture cards and pennants. In bronze or stone, on canvas or in marble, you can see Verdaguer honoured in the capital, at the crossroads of Passeig de Sant Joan and Diagonal (monument by Pericas-Borrell Nicolau) and of Passeig de Sant Joan and Avinguda de les Corts Catalanes (sculptural group by Llimona) and in the gallery of illustrious Catalans. You can see him on the Pica d'Estats, the highest peak in the Catalan Pyrenees, and in Blanes, on the Costa Brava; in gardens of private homes and in public parks. No other Catalan figure has as many monuments as he has and no other Catalan has so many streets, avenues and squares named after him. Even in America the colonies of Catalan émigrés remember him.

If everyone knows a few verses in their own language, the verses every Catalan knows are the ones they learnt to the tune of the *Virolai* from Montserrat, of the song of homesickness *L'emigrant* or of the cradle song *Lo noi de la mare*. His poetry has inspired opera in Manuel de Falla and songs by popular composers. His creations have taken shape in the hands of Antoni Gaudí or under the pens of anonymous writers.

Politicians quote him in their speeches and the ordinary people worship him as a saint. Verdaguer has two literary museums, one on Folgueroles where he was born and the other in Vallvidrera where he died. From his life and works have come records, recitals, stage plays, novels, *auques*, radio scripts, films and videos. No other Catalan author has been translated into as many languages. From Maragall to Riba, Carner to Pla, the great Catalan writers of the twentieth century have professed their admiration for him. Just as Lull and Cervantes have each given rise to their respective "isms", Verdaguer has two: one which is study and research, and one which is a cult and a popular following. For sure, if each people has its poet, the Catalan people has its poet in Verdaguer.

In 1995, in an end-of-century climate many see as neo-romantic, we Catalans shall remember that 150 years ago Jacint Verdaguer was born. The interest of scholars and writers in this classic romantic, far from fading, has surfaced once more in monographs and critical editions. His popularity also lives on amongst those levels of Catalan society that made him their symbol, a society that has changed profoundly during the twentieth century but that is still driven by new and ancient aspirations for rebirth. ■