

MONTSERRAT AND “SANT JORDI”: A PEOPLE’S REALITY AND LEGENDS



CATALONIA, A NATION WITH A THOUSAND YEARS OF HISTORY, HAS ITS OWN DIFFERENTIATED SIGNS OF IDENTITY. TWO OF THESE ARE OF SPECIAL INTEREST, THOUGH, AS REFERENCE POINTS IN THE LIFE AND SOCIETY OF CATALONIA: “SANT JORDI” (SAINT GEORGE) AND MONTSERRAT.

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Every nation on Earth has a differentiated internal contexture which distinguishes it from its neighbours. The peoples of the world have different identifying signs: language, history, legal system, customs, traditions, particular places, legends and religious and profane referents. Through these signs of identity, the members of each nation acquire a sense of living in and belonging to a particular group.

Catalonia, a nation with a thousand years of history behind it, also has its signs of identity. People normally tend to speak more of its language or legal

system than its traditions, places of interest or legends. This is why I want to look at two things that are of special interest as reference points in the life and society of Catalonia, that operate in the deepest layers of the Catalan's being and that can sometimes explain his external actions and reactions. I am referring to Montserrat and “Sant Jordi”.

Montserrat is a word with an enormous density of content. It designates a multi-form reality. Montserrat is the name of a rocky massif with an impressive presence, the result of geological movements which, in a first phase, left high,

parallelepipedal elevations which later, through erosion, became prisms and then cylinders crowned by cones. This is what the geologists say, but the words of the *Violai*, a song born of the inspiration of Jacint Verdaguer –the national poet of Catalonia– states that “with a saw of gold the angels cut down these hills” to make a palace for the Virgin of Montserrat. In all certainty, after cutting them down, the same angels filed the rough edges off the rocks. We needn't worry which of these –geology or poetry– is right. The two are equally suggestive.

As well as being a massif, Montserrat is

a monastery and a Christian sanctuary. Historians say it has existed as a small convent since 1025. Later it became consolidated as a monastery with the capacity for expansion. It annexed other monasteries and made foundations of its own which allowed it to extend its influence to Europe and America. The monastery's prestige was such that it became the guiding light of monastic observance in Portugal and directed its reform during the sixteenth century. By the middle of the seventeenth century it had established a Benedictine congregation in Austria and Bohemia and there were priories in Mexico and Peru. And it was in Montserrat that Ignatius of Loyola reaffirmed his intention to devote himself to the life of the spirit.

But as well as all this, since remote times, Montserrat has also been a centre for culture. It was the first Catalan monastery to have a printing press installed, between 1499 and 1500, entrusted to the German typographers Luschner and Rosembach, who also worked in Tarragona and Perpinyà. In spite of the unfavourable events of history –fires and wartime pillaging, especially–, Montserrat contains an important library, a valuable archive, a Biblical and Egyptological museum and a considerable art collection.

We mustn't forget Montserrat's incidence in literature and the arts: during the Middle Ages, with the *Llegenda de Fra Garí* and the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* by Alfons the Wise; during the Renaissance, Montserrat and its anchorites were the backdrop for many literary passages by Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Pérez de Montalbán and others. But it is the descriptions by pre-Romantic and Romantic authors that are the

high point of the process of idealization and transcendent signification. The German William of Humboldt made Montserrat a symbol of interior rediscovery and of spiritual peace, an interpretation taken up by Goethe and Schiller and which spread in German cultural circles. It entered French intellectual circles via Alexandre de Laborde, in his *Viatge pintoresc i històric per Espanya*. Finally, starting with the cultural movement we call the *Renaixença*, which arose at the peak of Romanticism, Catalonia's religious ideals and patriotic vibrations were centred on Montserrat. Whenever the homeland has suffered the ravages of totalitarianism –as under General Franco, for example, from 1938 to 1975–, Montserrat has acted as a refuge and a retreat where the flame has been preserved.

Today, in spite of the process of European secularization that has also affected Catalonia, Montserrat has not lost its capacity for spiritual and cultural reference. It is still Catalonia's national sanctuary, just as Czestokhova is Poland's. "Sant Jordi", the other centre of gravity of the life and society of Catalonia, comes closer to the realm of myth. That is to say, it contains those fabulous, fantastic and artistic elements that tend to oppose a reasoned or demonstrable explanation and that serve above all to express certain collective convictions, in this case sociological and political rather than religious.

In spite of being the patron saint of Catalonia, England and Russia, the lack of documentary and hagiographic sources give rise to doubts as to his existence. Nevertheless, from the fifth century on, a cult to a martyr called George spread throughout the East and by the seventh century he was also ve-

nerated in the West. In the Catalan-speaking lands the cult of Saint George was introduced with the Roman liturgy of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and by 1456 his feast day was celebrated throughout the Principality. German and Italian Gothic art show that Saint George was a centre for inspiration and a model in the battle against the forces of evil. In Catalonia in this period, there are frequent representations of Saint George on horseback sinking his spear into the dragon.

The history of Catalonia has brought Saint George to the present day. A century ago, the strength of Catalanism multiplied the incidence of Saint George in Catalan society. For the Catalans Saint George is the guardian, the hero and protector of the people in a nation that feels a little unsure of itself. A nation that has suffered several attempts at extinction, absorption or at least colonization by neighbouring nations. But the people know that Saint George always overcomes the dragon –that is, the evil one, the enemy, the powers that threaten the existence of our people. And that is why they have adopted him as their protector.

But contrary to what one might expect, when "Sant Jordi"'s day is celebrated in Catalonia there are no calls to violence, no reference to aggression. On the contrary, each year on 23 April the streets and squares of towns and villages throughout Catalonia are filled with flowers and books. The celebration is one of mass participation and is probably unique in the world. The men give roses to the woman they love, and everyone takes new books home. Written culture and amorous sensibility. Without them, our people may not have come to be millenarian. ●

