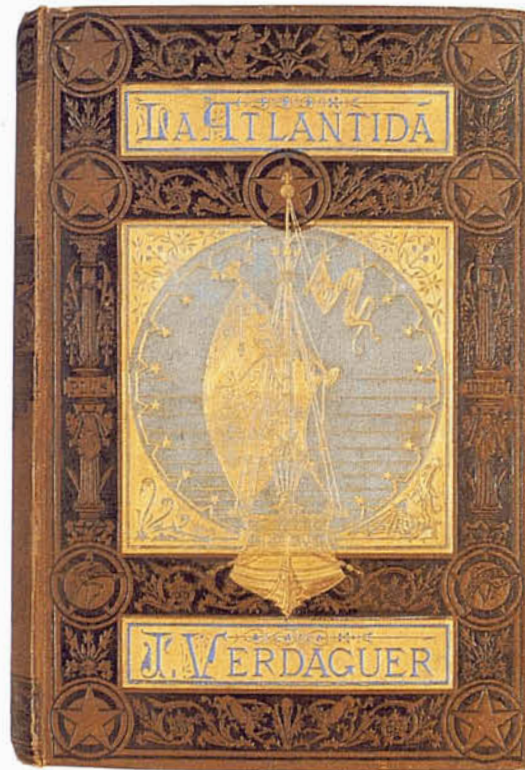


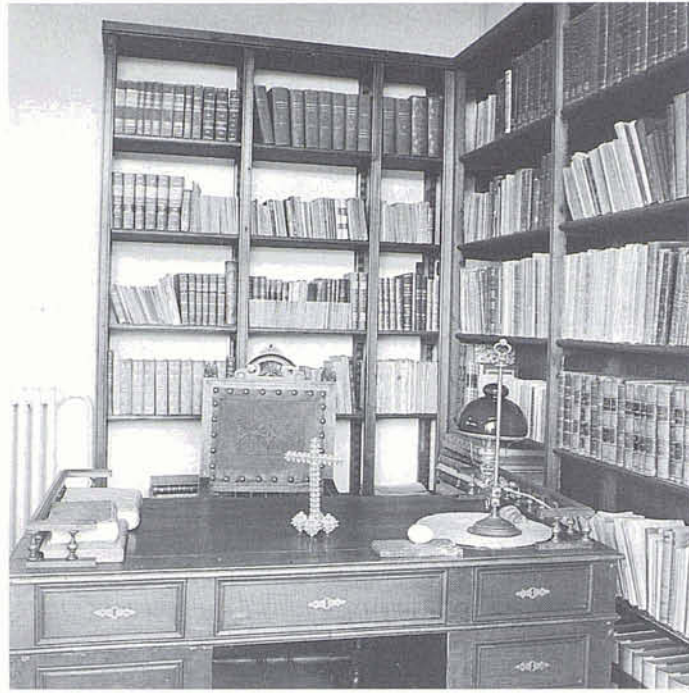
JACINT VERDAGUER, THE POET OF THE “RENAIXENÇA”



TITLE PAGE OF L'ATLANTIDA OF MOSSÉN CINTO VERDAGUER.

JACINT VERDAGUER IS 19TH CENTURY CATALAN LITERATURE'S CENTRAL FIGURE, THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THE *RENAIXENÇA* WRITERS AND THE POET WHO GAVE THE CATALAN LANGUAGE THE DRIVE IT NEEDED TO RISE FROM THE ASHES AND RETURN TO ITS ANCIENT SPLENDOUR.

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Jacint Verdaguer (1845-1902) is 19th century Catalan literature's central figure, the most important of the *Renaixença* writers and the poet who gave the Catalan language the drive it needed to rise from the ashes and return to its ancient splendour. The term *Renaixença* is applied to the years of cultural and political revival in Catalonia during the 19th century, approximately between 1833 and 1885. It is therefore not surprising that Verdaguer should often have been thought of as the personification of the essential hero of contemporary Catalan literature, or that Joan Maragall, on the occasion of his death, should have attempted to sum up the writer's genius with these words: "The Catalan poet came down from the mountain and our language became alive and whole again, at once popular and learned. He came just at the moment he had to come, because like all heroes, it was he who created the moment and this is his glory. That was the hero in him: to have created a reality; that was the poet in him: to have spoken out for all the people of his country".

Although the events of the poet's lifetime are of great interest, I think a brief introduction such as this should concentrate on the most important characteristics of his work and outline the part

played by Verdaguer at a moment of threefold importance. Firstly, we have Verdaguer as the father of modern literary Catalan. Secondly, as the poet of a renascent culture in the context of specific historical circumstances: at the centre of a literature which was roused and brought back to life by Romanticism, which grew up in the shadow of the "Jocs Florals", and which reached maturity as a modern language in the last decades of the 19th century. The "Jocs Florals" were a traditional Provençal literary festival established in Barcelona in 1393. Their restoration in 1859 was one of the milestones of the literary *Renaixença*. Finally, Verdaguer has to be seen as a priest committed to the service of a Catalan church which was also being reborn.

But for a complete picture of the poet's singular character and personality, we have to remember the difficulties of a troubled biography, one which is red-hot to the touch. Even today, a hundred years after what is known as the tragedy of Reverend Cinto, there are still a lot of questions unanswered about the last years of his life, between 1893 and 1902—the exorcisms, the Duran family, his departure from the home of the Marquès de Comillas, his confinement in la Gleva, his defiance of Bishop Morgades, and his suspension *a divinis*. Be-

cause of all this, Verdaguer is often spoken of with some mistrust, with doubts and misgivings, or else he is raised to the condition of indisputable classic, while the real scope and dimension of his work remains unknown.

In the shadow of the "Jocs Florals" and a renascent church

Verdaguer was born in 1845 in Folgueroles, Osona, into a simple but well-educated farming family. He studied at the seminary in Vic from 1856 until 1870, when he was ordained as a priest. At that time, Vic was the capital of a conservative farming region, marked by the religious and cultural life of the seminary which, at the end of the century, became the most active focus of conservative Catalanism.

In 1859, the town of Vic was looking forward to the restoration of the "Jocs Florals", and heard Víctor Balaguer's invitation to the youth of Catalonia, calling for a poet who would provide the young language and literature with consistency and with a future: "Perhaps amongst you is hidden the Virgil of tomorrow", he said in his speech. Verdaguer was then a seminarist who was beginning to struggle with the muses, with words and poetry. And it was, precisely, in the shadow of the "Jocs Florals" that



he grew up and developed as a poet. We need only remember that at the peak of all this process, in 1877, when *L'Atlàntida* was published, the work was not only received with massive enthusiasm inside Catalonia, it was also an unprecedented international success. *L'Atlàntida* was translated into Castilian, French, English, Italian, German, Czech, Swedish, Portuguese, Occitanian, Latin and Esperanto. Mercè Rodoreda's *La Plaça del Diamant* (The Time of the Doves) is probably the only other work in the whole of Catalan literary history to have had such success abroad.

But although the "Jocs Florals" were essential as the framework for the young poet's development, another point of vital importance was that Verdaguer served as a priest in a church which, following the Bourbon Restoration, was recovering from the crisis of the first half of the century. Also, in Catalonia, this religious revival was an emphatic reaffirmation of its specifically Catalan nature. This led to the appearance of a religious regionalism exemplified by Jaume Collell, Torres i Bages and the "Veü de Montserrat", the group closest to Verdaguer. For this reason, the other great poem, *Canigó* (1885), which is more coherent and more representative than *L'Atlàntida*,

can only be understood in the context of a church which became the mouthpiece of conservative Catalanism and which had defined the nation as the possession of the land by divine right. With this outlook, halfway between history and legend, *Canigó* is a poem which sings the origins of the nation, with the notion that Catalonia is born when it becomes Christian:

*...since God drives you, oh Catalonia!
—forward.*

*Forward: o'er mountains, land and
oceans, cease not,
your Pyrenean throne grows small,
to become great today you woke
in the shadow of the Cross.*

Certainly, *Canigó* is the culmination of Verdaguer's patriotic providentialism, but it has to be taken as the last step in an evolutionary process which started very early with patriotic poems of exalted romanticism. Later on, the poet's initial vehemence felt the seduction of the legendary side of history, and was strengthened, especially, by the conviction that: "who casts down or raises nations, is God who has created them". It is therefore a lengthy process which the reader can follow in the poems collected in *Montserrat* (1880) and *Pàtria* (1888).

But while Verdaguer gave poetic expres-

sion to this patriotic providentialism (perfectly at one with the "La Veü del Montserrat" group), he also played an active part in the support and promotion of the Catalan church of the second half of the 19th century. He merged the two roles of poet and priest—the harp and the chalice—and devoted himself to composing mystic poetry, *goigs*, hymns and poems of a hagiographic nature. Tools for the encouragement of piety and religious practices. Works such as *Idil·lis i Cants místics* (1879), *Caritat* (1884), *Veus del Bon Pastor* (1894), *Roser de tot l'any* (1894), *Sant Francesc* (1895) and *Flors del Calvari* (1896) are examples of the work which made Verdaguer a poet in the service of the church and the person responsible for renewing religious song in Catalonia. Sometime around 1890, unable perhaps to keep abreast of the developments taking place in society, the priest and poet suffered a period of personal crisis, of interior anxiety and of dissatisfaction with himself. He turned to the exercise of charity beyond all caution and to spiritual practices of which the church authorities disapproved. Things finally came to a head with an extremely violent discussion (the so-called "Verdaguer tragedy") which convulsed the Catalan society of the end of the century. But that's another story. ■