

**NO. 22. LOOKING AT A MAP: A POETIC AND VINDICATORY LOOK AT CATALONIA
IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

Commentary by Carme Montaner

In 1888 the poet Jacint Verdaguer (1845–1902) published “Davant d’un mapa” (Looking at a map) in his book *Pàtria*.¹ Verdaguer, who was a priest, is considered the most important literary figure writing in Catalan in the second half of the nineteenth century. He contributed decisively to the recovery of Catalan as a language of high literature — since the great medieval creations — within the literary and cultural movement known as *La Renaixença* (Catalan cultural renaissance).

In addition to being a writer, Verdaguer was an avid hiker, and his walks took him all over the Catalonian Pyrenees on both sides of the border with France. Verdaguer was a pioneer of the movement, then gathering momentum, to rediscover the culture and environment of Catalonia through hiking. He also traveled to North Africa, the Holy Land, Cuba, and Saint Petersburg, and all his excursions and journeys were a source of inspiration for his literary work, mainly poetry.² The most highly valued part of his work, especially in his book *Canigó* (1885),³ is his poetic and mythical description, in a late-Romantic aesthetic, of the landscapes he had traversed on foot. Verdaguer evoked the historical past and medieval epics, often in a nostalgic manner, from a futurist perspective that did not exclude the spell of progress, symbolized by electricity and the train. For example, in song IV of *Canigó*, “Lo Pirineu,” he gave an impressive description of half of the Pyrenees as if flying over them.

Verdaguer thus created a literary geography based on a profound knowledge of both the language and the territory of Catalonia, a geography to vindicate the country in tune with its cultural vindication through *La Renaixença*. The poem “Davant d’un mapa” exemplifies this perfectly: the contemplation of a map of Catalonia synthesizes the spirit of the entire work.

Verdaguer dedicated this poem to scholar and personal friend Marià Aguiló and, playing on a linguistic association with his friend’s surname, compared the shape of the map with the figure of an eagle (*àliga*) looking toward the Mediterranean, with its bill at Cap de Creus, its tail at Tortosa, its legs at Barcelona, and its heart at Montserrat (the Benedictine monastery and remarkable mountain of the same name that Verdaguer helped to situate as the spiritual center of Catalonia). The poem features a mixture of symbolic elements, including the four red stripes of the coat of arms and flag of Catalonia, and elements of modernity, such as the railway lines of the booming industrial city of Barcelona.

Which map could Verdaguer have been looking at? Cartographic production in Catalonia and Spain in the second half of the nineteenth century was critically undeveloped. It was not until the very end of the century that the project for a topographical map of Spain got underway, but it would not reach Catalonia until well after 1900. However, a number of Catalonian initiatives, many linked with the hiking associations and *La Renaixença*, prompted the publishing of general maps of the country. In particular, Eduard Brossa (1848–1924), a self-taught publisher and cartographer, combined existing cartography with his own data and observations and published various maps of Catalonia that enjoyed wide circulation. Brossa’s first

published map was *Cataluña, descripción geográfica de las cuatro provincias catalanas*, which appeared in 1883, with further editions in 1888, 1892, 1898, and 1900. This was a modern map, containing up-to-date information on the road network and settlements.⁴

It is highly likely that this was the map Verdaguer had in front of him when he wrote “Davant d’un mapa.” Although we have no documentary proof, Verdaguer and Brossa must have known each other as hikers and members of the *Associació Catalanista d’Excursions Científiques*. Indeed, an impression of this map survives that bears a hand-written dedication by Brossa to this association.⁵ Moreover, Brossa’s map shows the Catalonian coat of arms with the four stripes that Verdaguer mentions in his poem. Furthermore, Verdaguer must have written the poem between 1883 and 1884, just when Brossa published the first edition of his map.

Prior to this period, few Catalans considered that a map could stand as a symbol for Catalonia. Brossa’s map — and the several that followed — established the cartographic outline as a symbol of the country that *La Renaixença* sought to know and construct. Verdaguer, an untiring walker of his country, must have been aware of this new cartographic artifact, at once technical and sensorial, which made both the ancient and the future homeland visible to everyone.

¹ Jacint Verdaguer, *Pàtria* (Barcelona: Casals, 1888), 153–55.

² For more on Verdaguer’s life and works, see <http://www.verdaguer.cat/>, the website of the Fundació Jacint Verdaguer. Many of his other poems have been translated into English: *Selected Poems of Jacint Verdaguer: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. by Ronald Puppo, with an introduction by Ramon Pinyol i Torrents (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³ Jacint Verdaguer, *Canigó: Llegendes pirenayca del temps de la reconquesta* (Barcelona: Llibreria Catòlica, [1886]).

⁴ Carme Montaner i Garcia, *Mapes i cartògrafs a la Catalunya contemporània (1833–1941): Els inicis i la consolidació de la cartografia topogràfica* (Barcelona: Institut Cartogràfic de Catalunya, 2000), 70–73. Several of Brossa’s maps can be viewed online: <http://cartotecadigital.icc.cat>
⁵ The map is held by the Centre Excursionista de Catalunya (RC6834), and can be viewed online via Memòria Digital de Catalunya: <http://mdc.cbuc.cat/cdm/singleitem/collection/mapesCEC/id/161/rec/7>

The commentary was written by Carme Montaner, head of the Map Library of Catalonia, Institut Cartogràfic de Catalunya, Barcelona. We are grateful to her for suggesting “Davant d’un mapa.” Ronald Puppo, associate professor of Translation and English Studies at the University of Vic (Barcelona) and leading Verdaguer scholar, provided the excellent translation.

Eduard Brossa’s 1883 *Descripción geográfica de la cuatro provincias catalanas* is reproduced by permission of the Cartoteca de Catalunya (RM.164646) <http://cartotecadigital.icc.cat/cdm/singleitem/collection/catalunya/id/2361/rec/17>

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