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Ramon Llull: An Introduction **Manuel Duran**

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RAMON LLULL: AN INTRODUCTION

MANUEL DURAN

Ramon Llull, Raiumundus Lullus, Raimundo Lulio, Raimund Lull: a writer with so many names is obviously a writer that has found readers in many countries. A legend in his own time, he is still for us today, so many centuries after his death, a model, a guide, an intellectual hero: a man who knew how to harmonize wisdom and passion, intelligence and sensitivity, contemplation and heroic action.

Perhaps the best approach to his works and his personality would be to compare him to other outstanding heroes of the mind and the heart such as the Italian Saint Francis of Assisi and the French Blaise Pascal. Saint Francis and Llull have much in common: the gift of poetic language, a passionate love of God and God's creatures, a burning desire to change the world. They are both Quixotic *avant la lettre*, generous to a fault with their time and their energy, willing to give all for a cause, willing to risk the wrath of the powerful and to renounce all earthly possessions when the goal of a better world is in sight. The world is a book of wonders written by God: with God's help, men can understand it and by doing so come closer to God. No price is too high to pay if their noble cause can be advanced. Often misunderstood by bureaucrats, courtiers, Church dignitaries, and University theologians, Llull and Saint Francis never gave up their efforts: criticism only reinforced their will to succeed. A crucial experience brings them together: both Llull and Saint Francis led, as young men, a life of leisure: the search for pleasure was their only goal. Suddenly a deep inner change took place in them, an earthquake of the soul that bared a new dimension of their inner and outer worlds. Their existence had to be reorganized totally in totally new directions. The expression «born again»,

much abused nowadays and almost meaningless, acquires its true meaning when applied to Lull and Saint Francis.

Lull and Pascal also have much in common. For both the love of God went hand in hand with the love and respect for the world created by God — and the hope that the myriad aspects of the physical world and the inner world of the mind could be properly related. If the stream of sensations that reaches us incessantly, day and night, has to be tamed and put to good use, then we, as observers, cannot remain passive and uninvolved. Phenomena have to be sorted out, analyzed, related to each other — and to the observer. We call this the scientific spirit, the scientific attitude. Pascal worked in an era, the late Renaissance of the 17th. century, in which human knowledge had made considerable progress. His tools would be mathematics, physics, mechanics; his century was to witness a veritable explosion in the physical and mathematical sciences: Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Leibniz, Descartes, Viète, and many other great scientists (Kepler among them) were bringing order out of chaos. Lull belongs to an earlier era, the second half of the 13th. century and the beginning of the 14th., one in which the scientific attitude in Western Europe was struggling to be born. His role in the scientific field had to be the role of a pioneer, struggling against great odds to establish principles that later on would be partly accepted and partly rejected, refined upon time and time again until they became a part of the modern world. What cannot be doubted, in any case, is the scientific vocation of Lull. Yet in an era when scientific laboratories as we know them were unthinkable, alchemy and astrology being prominent among the «sciences», Lull concentrated his best efforts in deciphering and rearranging the relationship between the human mind, the external world, and God: logic, a special kind of logic that he created for this purpose, was his tool. It has been said that for many Renaissance minds the world was a book written by God in the language of mathematics: for Lull it was a divine book written in the language of logic, Lullian logic.

Llull and Pascal share the same destiny that brings Llull's life close to the life of Saint Francis of Assisi: a pleasureseeking adolescence and early manhood, then a sudden revelation and a complete change. Of the two, Llull was by far the most restless and also the most prolific: his bibliography encompasses 243 books and numerous other publications have been attributed to him.

We are fortunate to have Llull's autobiography, dictated by him around 1311. He was then residing in the charterhouse of Vauvert, near Paris, and the monks who had invited him to spend some time with them begged him insistently to write down his life, a life so dynamic, so full of anecdotes and adventure, that more than a few legends had begun to spread about Llull's supernatural intelligence and magic powers.

Ramon Llull's father, a Catalan knight, had taken part in the conquest of the island of Majorca, occupied by the Moors, and established his home in the island in 1231. At the age of fourteen the young Ramon became a page in the court of James I and received the training and education that befitted a young gentleman. He soon gave proof of great talent and wit and was appointed tutor to the young prince James, who soon after his coronation as James II, King of Majorca, appointed him seneschal of the royal house. Life was easy and pleasant. Young Ramon married a lady of the court, Blanca Picany. He continued writing love poetry in the style of the troubadours and flirting with the young ladies of the court.

Young Llull, who had been born in 1232 or 33, was now thirty years old when an unforeseen event changed his life. He was immersed in the writing of a lascivious poem inspired by a lady he was intent on seducing when the clear image of Christ on the cross appeared before his eyes not once but five times. He took it as a warning from Heaven to forsake his frivolous life. As Saint Francis had done Llull decided to change his life completely. He sold of gave away all his earthly possessions except what was needed to provide for his wife and children and retired from

the court. Long pilgrimages to Rocamadour and Saint James of Galicia followed.

Llull's goals were lofty. He wanted not only to change his life but to change the world around him. In order to convert the infidels he had to communicate with them, which meant he had to learn languages, especially Arabic, and he had to learn theology and logic. An appeal to the rational side of all human beings meant the development of a whole system of rational thought organized around the idea of God and His attributes. Learning Arabic was relatively easy. The island of Majorca was still populated by many unassimilated Moors. Llull bought a Moorish slave, probably a cultivated man, who would teach him the Arabic language. The relationship between master and slave was a stormy one. At a given moment the Moor cursed Jesus, Llull punished him severely, the slave plotted his master's assassination, finally committed suicide. Llull has given us many details about his life during the tense years that followed his conversion in his biography, of which we have two versions, one in Latin, another one in Catalan. Llull's conversion did not lead him into a serene life of contemplation, but into a restless, dynamic, even frenzied effort to understand the world as fully as possible in order to change it. For nine years he studied languages, philosophy, theology. Finally he felt ready.

The book he wrote, first in Latin, later in Catalan, has a long title which could be translated as «A System to Find Truth». It was supposed to solve all kinds of problems and to help in convincing the infidels about the truth of Christian doctrine. We must remember that during this period many great minds were intent upon writing such a definitive book, a book to end all books as it would contain all truth. Saint Thomas Aquinas tried very hard along such lines. In many ways Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the poetic version of Aquinas' and Llull's books. Llull would organize all the «facts» into certain categories, nine of which were absolute and were aspects of God's Being, the other

nine being relative and described the world as seen by man; between the first and the second a complex system of circles and rectangles, letters and colors, established bridges and relationships. The system, as explained in his fundamental book *Ars Magna*, was rather complex and cumbersome; Llull refined and simplified it all along his life. Llull's mind was both theoretical and practical. Hardly had he finished the *Ars Magna* when he started organizing a monastery-college-library at Miramar in Majorca where missionaries could learn Oriental languages and thus create a bridge between the Christian West and the Oriental and African countries:

Llull was forty years old. A period of intense activity was to follow, with numerous trips abroad, from 1287 until his death (c. 1315). Llull was looking for help from Kings and Popes but seldom received much except a few words of encouragement. In 1288 he received a title of Master of Arts from the University of Paris and gave a public reading of his *Ars Magna*. The reception was on the whole not enthusiastic, and Llull undertook a simplification of his method.

Once more Llull, not satisfied with pure theory, wanted to test his ideas in a practical way. After another fruitless interview in 1290 with Pope Nicolas IV he went to Genoa looking for a ship that would take him to Moorish lands where he would test his method in public discussion with Muslim theologians. A period of anguish and self-doubt followed. Was he ready for martyrdom? He finally overcame his fears and embarked for Tunis, where he initiated a debate with several learned Muslims. However, the local King put an end to the debate by jailing, first, then expelling Llull.

The year 1300 finds Llull in Majorca, after many years of absence, but not for long: a journey to Cyprus, then to Armenia, follow. Then back to Majorca, and from there to Genoa and Montpellier. 1307 finds him preaching once more in North Africa; jail and expulsion follow once more. Going back to Genoa,

his vessel is lost in a storm, and he loses his luggage and papers. Having landed in Pisa, he writes there his last version of *Ars Magna*, with the title *Ars generalis ultima*. Then Montpellier, Avignon, for an audience with Pope Clement V, then Paris for two years, then in 1311 he takes part in the Council of Vienne, France, after which he returns to Majorca where he writes his last will. In 1313 he is a guest at the court of Frederic King of Sicily where he stays for a year. Llull is now over eighty years old yet as active mentally and physically as ever before: he feels the urge to embark for Africa once again. This time he carries a letter of recommendation from the King of Aragon addressed to the King of Tunisia. In North Africa he engages in a debate with several Moorish scholars and continues writing several short books and essays, three of which carry the date 1315.

Then suddenly no more is heard from him. According to a tradition that has been accepted for a long time he dies in North Africa a martyr's death. Most modern researchers, however, think Llull managed to return to Majorca and died soon afterwards. In any case Llull lived a full, heroic life, one of almost superhuman effort.

His vast production of books and opuscles was guided by a single principle: the goals of the human soul are and must always be knowledge and love; moreover, knowledge is worthless without love, love cannot fully develop without knowledge. Hence literature, in the shape of novels, poetry, essays, becomes a vehicle for his ideas. Some of Llull's titles indicate clearly the goals of his mind: *The Art of Loving*, *The Tree of Love's Philosophy*, *Leaves of Love*, *Accidents of Love*. Some of his novels, such as *Blanquerana*, and *Felix of Wonders*, are also expressions of Llull's love of mankind and his concern for social problems. In them Llull creates a Utopian universe in which society is regenerated through Christian values.

Llull wrote some of his books in Arabic first, then in Catalan. Others were written in Latin. Many were written in Catalan.

Llull became thus the most important Catalan author of the Medieval period, his production surpassing in quantity and in quality that of any other writer in the Catalan language. His use of a modern language for scientific and philosophical treatises proved that Latin was not the only vehicle for such lofty subjects and made his ideas accessible to many readers for whom Latin would have proved an obstacle.

Llull's thirst for knowledge made him explore other cultures to a degree seldom reached in Medieval western Europe. He acknowledged his indebtedness to Sufi poetry for some of his ideas about love and the mystical union with God. He was familiar with the basic ideas of the Kabbalah. He may even have known some of the principles of Oriental alchemy. Alchemy was for him a hobby but soon after his death many legends attributed to Llull the power to transmute base metals into gold. His fame as an alchemist grew with the passing of time and many opuscles about alchemy were attributed to Llull in the 14th. and 15th. centuries.

In his *New Rhetoric* Llull explained his ideas about literature: words are to be used to create or evoke beauty, yet beauty is only a means to make ideas more persuasive; beauty in words depends on their meaning. The higher the meaning the more beautiful the word, thus the word «God» contains more beauty than the word «Man» and in turn this last word embodies more beauty than the words «Bird» or «Flower».

The impact of Llull's works upon Renaissance thought was considerable. Pico della Mirandola, the great Italian humanist, attempted to harmonize the Lullian Art with the Kabbalah. Giordano Bruno and Nicolas of Cusa were also influenced by Llull, Philip II of Spain was an admirer of Llull. Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros (1436-1517), archbishop of Toledo and then regent of Castile, was an ardent Lullist and when he founded the University of Alcalá de Henares in 1508 he instituted a chair of Lullian philosophy and theology. Another Lullist was the German Jesuit

Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680), scientist, mathematician, and student of Egyptian hieroglyphics, who tried to continue and perfect Lull's Art and published in Amsterdam in 1669 his *Ars magna sciendi*. Kircher in turn influenced the Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whose *Primero Sueño* is a vision of the human soul trying to contemplate the whole cosmos during a dream. Another attempt to continue and perfect Lull can be found in Leibniz's *Dissertatio de arte combinatoria*, published in 1666 when he was only twenty. He acknowledged his debt to Lull as the first to have proposed a universal logic. Although both Francis Bacon and René Descartes rejected Lull's ideas, they seem to have had an indirect knowledge of Lull's texts: what they were criticising was more the Renaissance misuse of Lullism as an art of discourse than Lull's Art itself.

Finally, Lull's method has a place in the development of symbolic logic and mathematics. Like certain logical diagrams, such as flow charts, Lull's alphabet and figures are a way of organizing thoughts, relationships, facts, in accordance with prescribed rules to find out whether certain conclusions are valid or invalid. They offer a kind of symbolic computation and are a step towards modern computer science and information theory.

Yet Lull the logician is perhaps less interesting to our modern minds than Lull the mystic, the poet, the novelist, the social critic and the writer of fables. And above all Lull the man, a man in love with the whole cosmos, a wise man, a hero, is and always will be a model for modern man to follow, an example of a human being striving towards perfection.

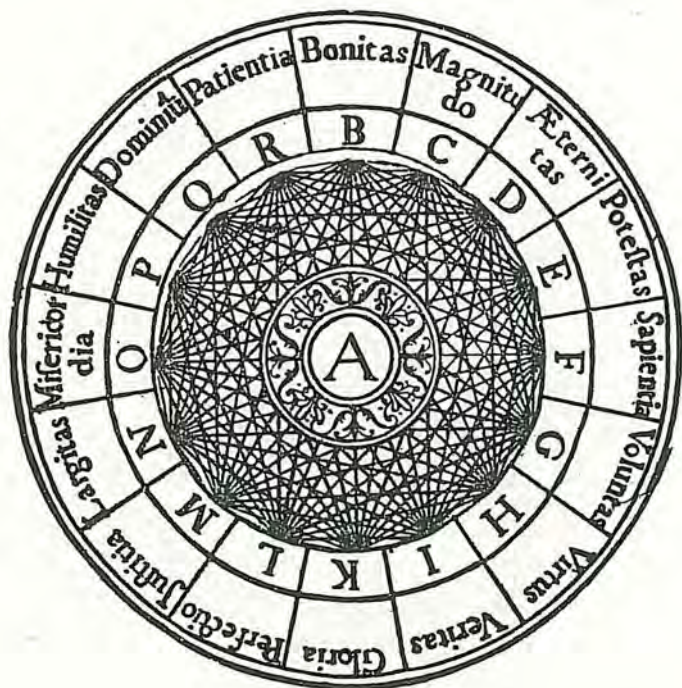
This issue of the *Catalan Review* gathers texts from some of the best Lull scholars from both sides of the Atlantic. I cannot end this brief Introduction without thanking the many collaborators that have made this issue possible. My special thanks go to Anthony Bonner, whose excellent advice and guidance have made my work easier.



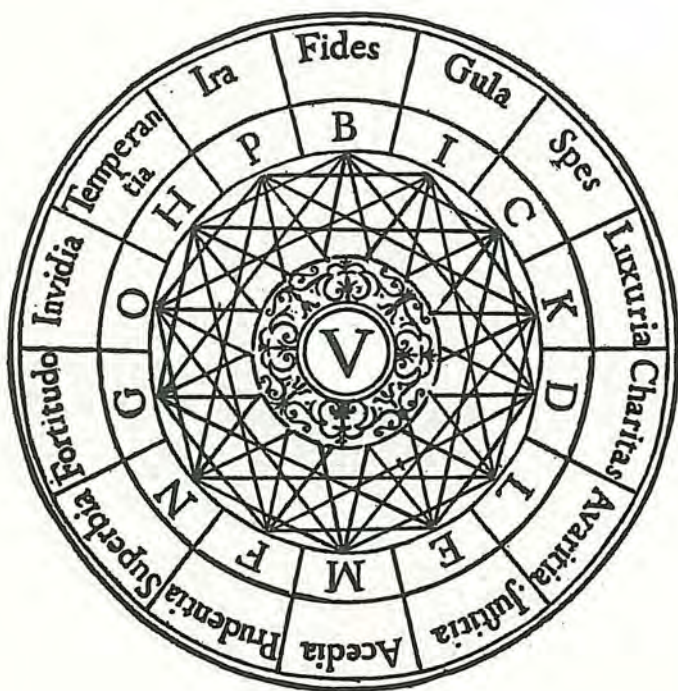
An idealized portrait of Ramon Llull.
From Joaquim Xirau, *Vida y obra de Ramon Llull* (México, 1947).



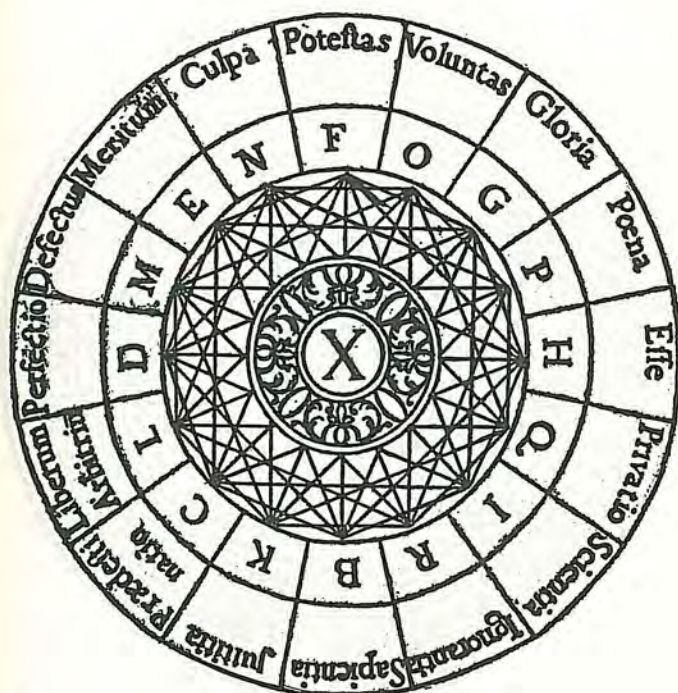
The Tree of Science. Miniature, 15th century.



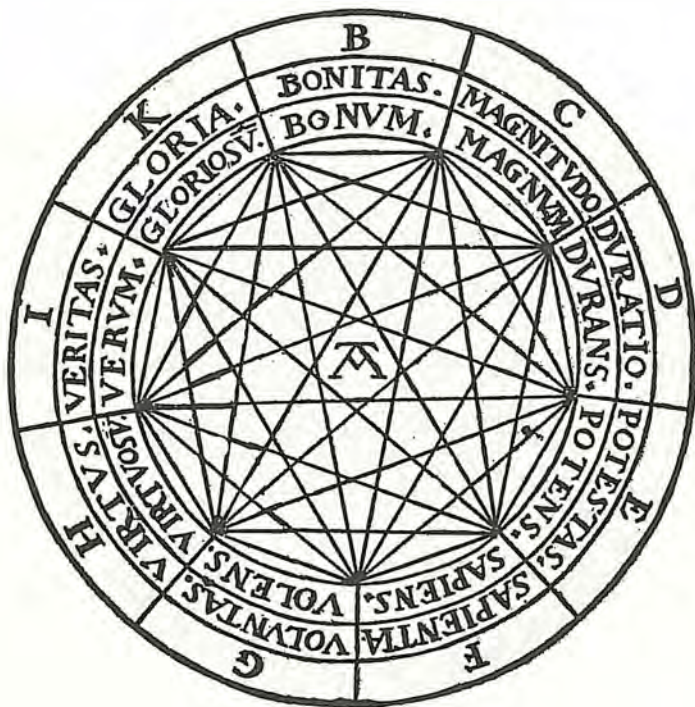
On God and the Divine Virtues.
 From a 16th century edition of *Ars Generalis Ultima*.



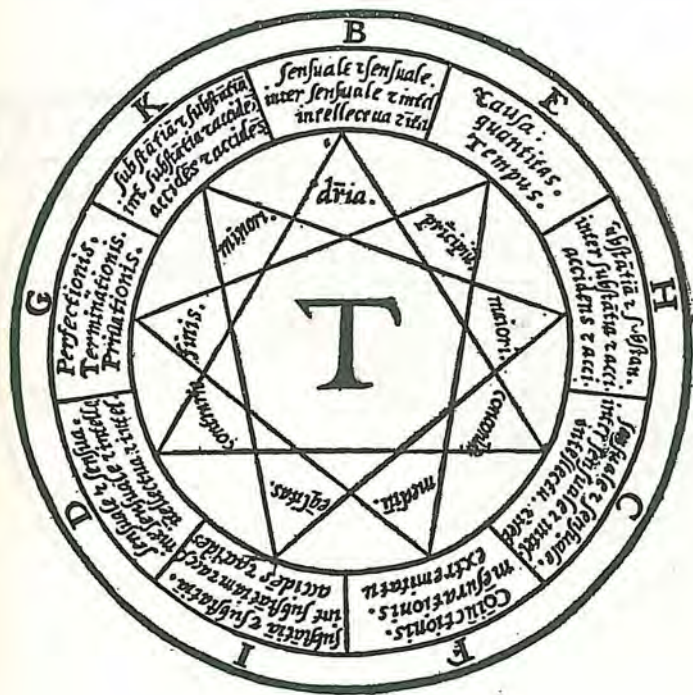
Virtues and Vices.



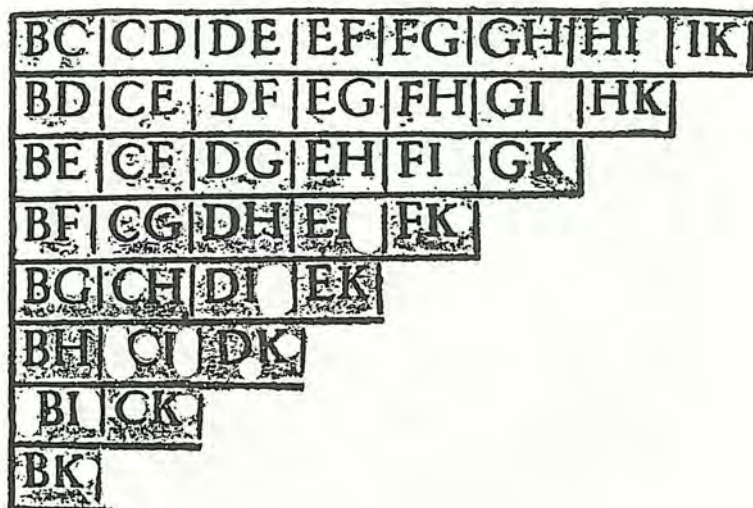
Opposing Forces and Destiny.



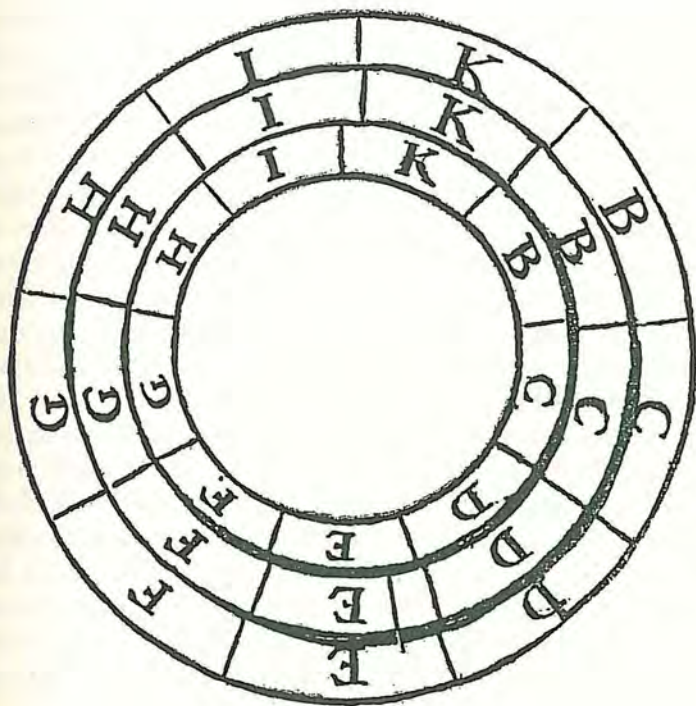
First illustration from *Ars Generalis Ultima*.



Second illustration from *Ars Generalis Ultima*.



Third illustration from *Ars Generalis Ultima*.



Fourth illustration from *Ars Generalis Ultima*.