

# Ramon Llull: The Art of Inventing Truth

**Amador Vega.** Professor of Aesthetics, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona

Five years before his death and well into his eighties, Ramon Llull (Majorca, 1232-1316) dictated the most remarkable events of his existence to the monks of the Carthusian Monastery of Vauvert. Those conversations, halfway between confession and the dictation of his final will, resulted in his most important text: the *Vita coetanea* (1311). Although Llull is a writer of passages of great beauty and profound emotiveness, this uneven book had a well-defined dual purpose in its author's mind: to review his own life and leave a testimony of it. At the end of the book, Llull included a list of the titles of the 124 works written by him, and suggested that nothing in them could finally be understood without having first read about the events of his life, although all these moments of life would be meaningless without his writings. The *Vita coetanea* is a beautiful example of the clear relationship between life and written work. Certainly, the need to understand the experience of life in the light of the experience of writing is a feature that shows what today we would call the clear hermeneutic consciousness of this 14th century man.

Readers have not always approached Llull's books in the same way: Nicholas of Cusa collected a large number of his manuscripts in his wonderful library, read, annotated and commented on them, and saw in them the paths of the dialogue between cultures; Giordano Bruno was impressed by the possibilities of Llull's Art as a memory technique; Leibniz wrote his doctoral thesis on Lullian combinatorics; positively or negatively, Descartes, Hegel and Bloch talked

about him; the Christian Kabbalists, the alchemists and André Breton, in the 20th century, saw in him the ideal of the universal wise man. Moreover, Ramon Llull's writings are known today as the predecessor of modern computing languages. However, these receptions of Llull's works should be reconsidered from our world.

Let us put it this way: the passion that Llull awakens, beyond the strictly erudite world, lies in his passion to find truth. This is the fundamental trait of our author. This makes him universal beyond his unquestionable interest for Catalan literature studies, beyond theology and beyond the logic and doctrine of science. Passion to discover or invent truth, as stated in the title of his first work written after the illumination on the mountain of Randa, on his island of Majorca: *Ars compendiosa inveniendi veritatem* or *Abridged Art for Finding Truth* (1274). It was not very abridged because he had to shorten it many times throughout his life so that it was accepted by the academics in Paris. What did the truth sought by Llull consist of, a truth that had to be at once rigorous (science) and amorous (*amància* [the art of loving])? His life will explain it to us.

The *Vita coetanea* tells us how one day Ramon was writing some verses to his beloved when he saw Christ crucified. Llull was around 30 years old and from that moment on he was driven only by the desire to understand the paths that emerged from those visionary images. Rather than the religious or ecclesiastical discourse, the perspective adopted for this "autobiography" is that of the discourse

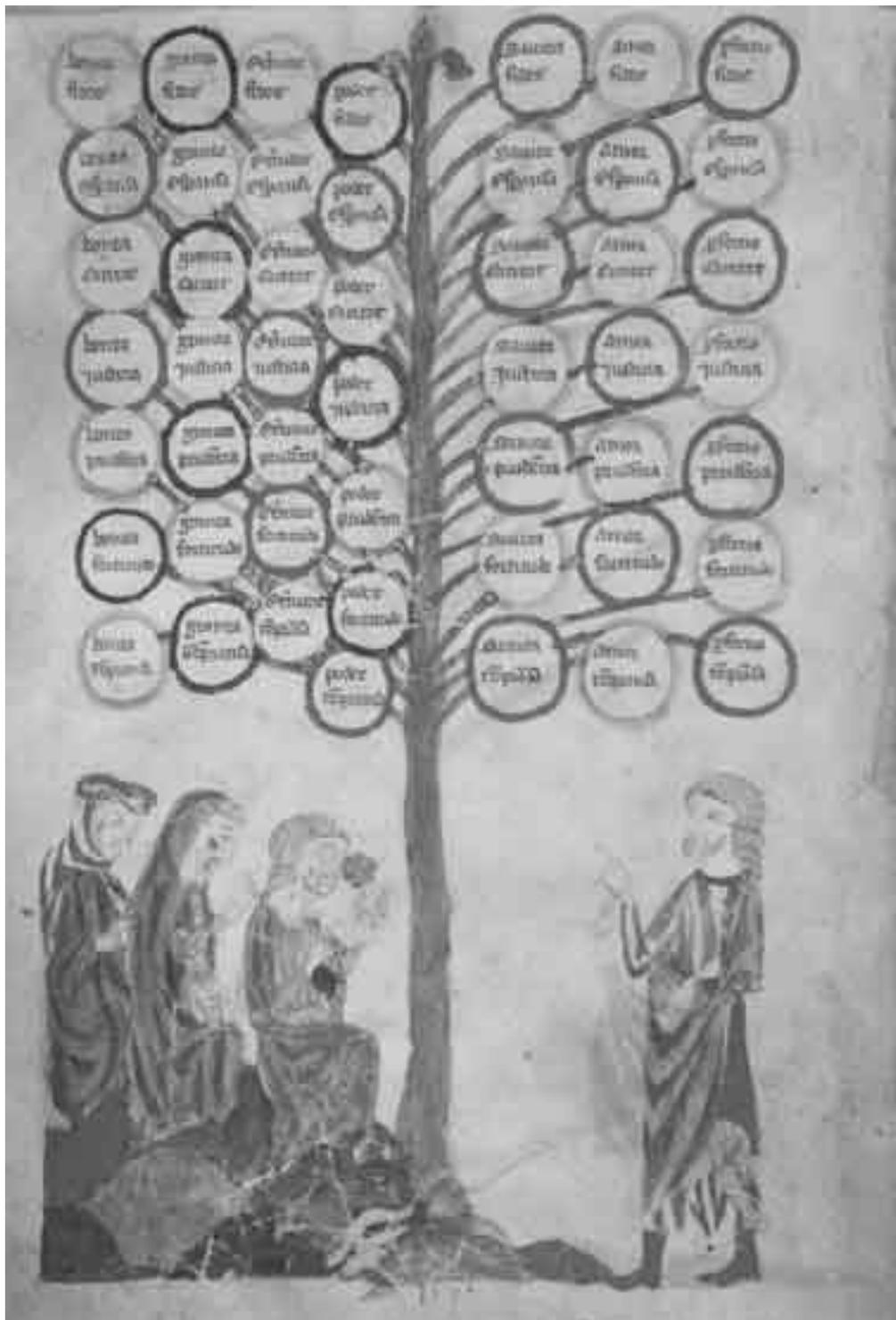


of confession, which calls for the awakening of self-consciousness. Thus, the extraordinary experience of the Cross visions is presented as a new beginning after which the rest of life will only be a mere continuation. Llull must search for what he has already found. There is a truth that interrupts life but life itself lacks the elements to understand it. Once he abandons the mundane life, Llull points out three pillars on the path to communicate the new truth: to write the best book for those who have not yet found it (the infidels); to die for it if necessary (martyrdom); and to promote the learning of the languages required for the dissemination of truth (schools of eastern languages). After his pilgrimages to Santa Maria de Rocamadour and to Santiago de Compostela, Llull returned to Majorca. All we know of those years is that, apart from learning Arabic, he wrote the *Book of Contemplation* (around one million words)

which is, from the point of view of the contents, his greatest work. In this book we have one of the most wonderful moments of his thought: the whole first chapter is a chant of joy; joy for the fact of being, being God, being me, being the others. Very rarely have I found lines of a more profound ontological emotion. Llull's thought, undoubtedly philosophical, is rooted in the contemplative act. His capacity to receive the reality of the world is privileged. It is his profound perception that leads him to the production of a spiritual anthropology that modern thought cannot ignore. In that same year of 1274 he experienced the illumination of Randa, where he conceived the sensitive figures or symbols (mainly the wheel and the staircase) as a method to transmit that truth represented by the Cross. Those wheels that turned like celestial bodies would help him to compose a universal language that all wise men, whether

Jewish, Christian or Muslim, would share. This gave birth to the *Ars compendiosa inveniendi veritatem* and the *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*. The tendency to summarise this book as a reference of what is currently called the dialogue of religions is well-known. But in Llull's world, and not only in his Majorca, rather than speaking of tolerance we should do so in terms of forced coexistence. Certainly, in the *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men* we find a utopian project of brotherhood between the three religions of the Book but, as can be seen in the last books he wrote on the imperative of the military crusade to rescue the Holy Land (*Liber de fine*), rather than theological issues Llull relied on the capacity of the wise men to understand the truth. In this sense, Llull is already fighting for a non-exclusively theological religious truth which can be preached by laics. Later came the journeys to Rome, Paris, Genoa, Naples, Montpellier, Cyprus, Armenia, Jerusalem and Pisa in order to convince kings and popes about the need to apply his Art. It is also the time of the major works: *Felix or the Book of Wonders* (1287-89), the *Tree of Science* (1295-96) and *Ars generalis ultima* (1308). And faced with the lack of interest in his books, Llull sought the experience of martyrdom, at

least in the first two of the three journeys to North Africa (1293, 1307 and 1315). However, the staging of his methods before the Muslim wise men was not well received. Then, having failed in the attempt to devote his life, he relied again on the strength of the science he had found years before: the combinatorics Art; that is, a way of finding and seeking truth, whose model is indeed visionary and contemplative and allows us to change the place of these elements of reality in order to achieve new perspectives. This is what excited the philosophers of the Renaissance as much as the modern poets, for whom, as for the cabalists, language makes and unmakes the order of things. This practice or asceticism of the spirit makes any meeting place the beginning of a new search. This is why Llull insisted on the meeting places for combining, converting and transforming the (religious, scientific, political) reality, given that from this always new vision of reality a single truth could be achieved. Llull probably died in Majorca in 1316. Since then, his most read and translated book has been the *Book of the Lover and the Beloved* (1283), the best example of how to search for the truth of life itself, while inventing new paths of reality.



*Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men (Biblioteca Diocesana de Mallorca).*