

# The Master Lullist

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This paper evaluates the impact of Robert Pring-Mill's work on Ramon Llull especially in his exploration of the relationship between Llull's Art and his narrative works.

Robert Pring-Mill's extraordinary range of knowledge and scholarship meant that he was equally at home in the literature of the Spanish Golden Age, the left-wing poetry of modern Latin America, and the thought and system of the medieval 'Catalan from Majorca', as Ramon Llull was known in the Middle Ages. What is extraordinary about this range is not only its spread, from the 1270s to the 1970s — with the Spanish Golden Age almost exactly halfway in between — but the degree of expertise achieved in such disparate fields. That is what I will try to explain today in the earliest of those three areas, that of the 'Catalan from Majorca'. And in this area, at least, his work had three qualities which made it outstanding: its pioneering nature, the fact that it is still usefully consulted, and his unusual ability to study the trees and never lose sight of the woods.

To truly appreciate what he accomplished, however, we should try to put ourselves back into the mid-1950s when Robert started working on Llull. In English-speaking countries the scene was still dominated by the writings of Allison Peers, which presented Llull as a visionary who combined poetry and mysticism with a burning desire to convert Muslims and Jews. This image of the typical romantic genius, who was saved by being able to recycle his mental imbalance towards noble ends, was filled out with the full panoply of legends that had accrued around Llull's figure. In Spain, and specifically in the Catalan-speaking area, this vision had been somewhat modified by the publication between 1906 and 1950 of the twenty-one volumes of Llull's Catalan writings, chiefly under the admirable editorship of Salvador Galmés, and by the two splendid volumes of the *Historia de la filosofía española de los siglos XIII a XV* by the brothers Carreras y Artau published in Madrid in the difficult years 1939–1943. In spite of this, however, Llull was still the brilliant but eccentric *pater patriae* of Catalan nationalism, somebody whose literary and mystic writings were of the highest level, but whose philosophical, theological and scientific works were at best mere curiosities. Elsewhere on the continent, in 1926 Ephrem Longpré had written a splendidly balanced and knowledgeable article on 'Raymond Lulle' for the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, and some decades before — in 1910 — the English translation of Johann Erdmann's *History of Philosophy* had appeared in London,

giving a quite acceptable presentation of Llull's system. But these were times when medieval thought was dominated on the one hand by neo-Thomism, and on the other by a view of history too often focused on the Great Figures, which meant that people not in either of these two categories could all too easily be considered as outside the pale and thus as marginal, and to be treated with a certain indulgence and caution. With Llull, things were made worse by the unusual nature of his system, which made him not really explainable within any of the parameters of the time. The situation, to be sure, had evolved from that of the nineteenth-century historian of logic, Karl Prantl, who maintained that the Majorcan thinker was 'half crazy' ('halb-narren'), but in the 1960s a competent and respected Catalan scholar could still refer to Llull as 'tocat de la bolla'.

The other hurdle that scholars had to overcome was the lack of editions of Llull's works. The great eighteenth-century Mainz edition had printed forty-eight works, and the Catalan edition of 1906–1950 we just mentioned published forty. Others had been printed here and there, but this scarcely made a dent in the total of 260 works Llull is known to have written, and which have been preserved in more than a thousand manuscripts. Lots of catalogues of these works had been published, but probably the best one was still that of Father Pasqual at the end of the eighteenth century.

This was the uninviting fray into which jumped three English scholars who managed finally to put a more or less permanent crimp on the idea that Llull was not really worth studying and to open the paths that future scholarship could take. They were Frances Yates, Robert Pring-Mill, and Jocelyn Hillgarth. The first was Yates with her ground-breaking article on the 'The Art of Ramon Lull: An Approach to it through Lull's Theory of the Elements' which appeared in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* in 1954 (Yates 1982). Pring-Mill followed only a year or so later with an article called 'The Trinitarian World Picture of Ramon Lull', published in the *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* of 1955–56 (A1). If the contributions of Yates and Pring-Mill dealt with the inner workings of Llull's system of thought as well as with his approach to science, Hillgarth's contribution, which began in 1959 with a description of the medieval library of the monastery of La Real (just outside Palma), dealt more with an outward aspect of Llull's endeavour, that of his historical and political role and his subsequent influence in France, all summed up in his fundamental book of 1971, *Ramon Lull and Lullism in Fourteenth-Century France*. There he effectively replaced the image of the starry-eyed utopian then in circulation, with one of a person quite capable of dealing with royal, papal, and university circles.

Pring-Mill's leap into this fray is remarkable in many ways. I never cease to be amazed how a scholar's first contribution to such a complicated field could have been made with such utter disregard of the pitfalls and difficulties awaiting him. The article, even today, reads like that of a person long conversant with a realm which he considered to be not only fascinating but also essentially unproblematic. Questions of detail are investigated in a new manner, and incorporated into a novel general view, all with consummate ease. The last half of the article deals with one of the most intricate mechanisms of Llull's system, that of the correlatives. By this is meant that, for Llull, God's goodness or *bonitas*, for instance, must necessarily be active, producing good. And he proposed that this activity operated in terms of three correlatives,

one from which the action emanates, the *bonificativum*, one to which it is directed, the *bonificabile*, and a third which is the act joining them, *bonificare*. This mechanism, moreover, acts at all levels of being. Our intellect, for instance, has an *intellectivum*, *intelligibile*, and *intelligere*; while fire has its *ignitivum*, *ignibile*, and *ignire*. Pring-Mill explains this with extraordinary mastery, ending with a chart of all the correlative mechanisms that has since become very familiar in Lull studies, but which made an enormous impression on me when I first came upon it. In addition, he explains the prehistory of the correlatives in earlier works of Lull, and shows how at the end he even abstracted them, referring simply to the *-tiva*, *-bilis*, and *-are*. On the general level, all this ties in with other ternary mechanisms to justify the title of ‘The Trinitarian World Picture’, and I think that this connection is of primary importance, and Pring-Mill was quite possibly one of the first to see and explain it.

His next essay, ‘Ramón Lull y el número primitivo de las dignidades en el *Arte general*’ (A2), takes off — this a bit in spite of the title — from where Frances Yates left off in her initial essay on Lull’s science: that is, with Lull’s astronomy, elemental theory, medicine, and geometry. Let me here make a brief digression once again to the theme of what Pring-Mill had to work with. Lull’s book on geometry, for instance, had been edited four years before by Millás-Vallicrosa, in an edition that is a model of how *not* to do it, based as it is on the editor’s conviction that Lull did not understand Euclidian geometry and hence got things all wrong. In fact, Pring-Mill wrote a review of it in which he said something that has been, for me at least, a sort of personal scholarly motto:

Me parece que habría que estudiarse la obra por lo que es, en lugar de pedir que fuese cosa bien distinta. (1958: 342)

This basic notion of studying Lull for what he was trying to do, instead of assuming that he was a simple soul for whom the recondite matters he was handling were really out of his reach, has been for me fundamental, because Lull is almost always doing things differently from his contemporaries. To assume that he had some reason for doing so, and that our task is to try to understand it, was one of Pring-Mill’s great contributions. But it was not easy: it involved uprooting preconceived notions, reading Lull with a fresh eye, and trying to reassemble the puzzle of his complicated proposals.

And the puzzle Pring-Mill reassembles in the ‘Número primitivo’ is impressive. He analyses the subjects we just mentioned — Lull’s astronomy, elemental theory, medicine, and geometry — and shows how they are related to one another and to fundamental aspects of the famous Lullian Art. In explaining these interrelations he brings out the role of metaphor, that is, of how aspects of one of these fields can symbolize those of another, a nexus absolutely fundamental in the works being studied here. Let me only add that in every one of these fields Lull introduces combinatorial methods that make his basic approach to them not only unusual but often difficult to understand or explain; these, however, are shoals through which Pring-Mill navigates with the most admirable calm and assurance.

But perhaps the most remarkable feat of calm and assurance in the face of Lullian complications came with a little volume published in 1961 (A5). The Majorcan philologist and publisher, Francesc de Borja Moll, asked him to do a popular

summary of Llull's thought for a small-format collection called the Biblioteca Raixa, which published literary works by Balearic writers or essays on local history, linguistics, etc. To do this for a completely unspecialized audience, one with almost no knowledge of medieval thought, and for whom Ramon Llull was a figure still more known and defined in Majorca by legends, was a daunting task. The resulting book, *El microcosmos lul·lià*, attacks the problem quite simply as if it did not exist. To be sure, everything is explained very carefully, both Llull and his medieval background, but never in a way that would make the reader feel he was being talked down to. And Pring-Mill does not avoid any of the trickiest material such as the list of sciences just mentioned, fundamental aspects of the Art, or the correlative theory. In fact, the book ends with three charts of these correlatives and their intertwining relations which could easily boggle the mind of most readers, but which he has introduced so patiently and carefully that they are understood without difficulty, and even, I would say, accepted as something quite normal.

That this book is still one of the best general introductions to the thought of Ramon Llull is borne out by the fact that, aside from its inclusion in the collection of *Estudis sobre Ramon Llull* (A20), it was recently reprinted in Majorca, it has been translated into German and Italian, and, with any sort of luck, a French translation done some time ago should be out in the near future.

In the introduction to the *Microcosmos*, Pring-Mill cites the all-important programmatic statement of Jordi Rubió (1985), who said how wrong it was to split Llull's production into two sectors critically isolated from one another, that of the thought and that of the form ('La paraula és inseparable de la idea que la informa i no pot hom explicar ni comprendre l'una sense l'altra': 249), or to put it another way, that of Llull's thought and system on the one hand, and his literary output on the other. Pring-Mill already applies this in his early article in *Estudis Romànics* (A8) on the *Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, one of the first studies to correct the masses of sloppy thinking to which that work has been subjected, and also in his 1966 paper on the *Liber de natura*, in which he uses as an instrument of analysis Dámaso Alonso's Saussurian criteria of 'significates' and 'significants'.

Similar to the *Microcosmos* in showing Pring-Mill's ability to present Llull's thought to a popular audience is his *Pregó de Setmana Santa* given at Felanitx in 1970 (A14). The word 'pregó' has, as far as I know, no proper translation into English. It is a speech, usually of a certain solemnity, given by a writer, well-known figure, or dignitary, on the occasion of the annual fiesta of a town. Felanitx is near the east coast of Majorca, and at that time had a population of some 12,000. One has to imagine an audience, in this instance in a church, of local people dressed in their Sunday best, with the streets outside festooned with strings of bulbs and filled with the stands typical of a village fair. Not what you usually imagine as a natural setting for an academic discourse. Pring-Mill constructs his talk like a sermon, taking as a text part of versicle 57 from the *Book of the Lover and the Beloved*:

The lover was asked, 'Who is your teacher?' He answered that it was the signs which created beings give of his beloved. (Bonner & Bonner 1993: 196)

From there Pring-Mill begins weaving an exposition of the ladder of being and how one step of that ladder can act as a 'significate' of another. He brings in — and explains — beautiful passages from some of Llull's Marian works and from the *Book*

of *Contemplation*, and even compares the *Cant de la Sibil·la*, a medieval song, based on the Apocalypse, performed in all the Majorcan churches at Christmas time and thus familiar to everybody in his audience, with a passage from Llull's *Doctrina pueril*. To show the unitary nature of Llull's worldview and the corollary of its Christo-centrism, he quotes one of the *Proverbs of Ramon*:

The whole world is created and proportioned to Jesus Christ.

He goes on to show how the ordering of the divine and created worlds are tied together by the doctrine of significance, and how this doctrine could provide one of the bases for his famous *raons necessàries*, that is the proofs which he used to try to persuade Muslims and Jews of Christian truths. Pring-Mill has thus managed to sum up most of Llull's central doctrines with extraordinary grace and elegance, in a way that would make them attractive to his audience of *felanitxers*.

Getting back to his more scholarly production, his study of 'The Analogical Structure of the Lullian Art' of 1972 (A15), was, curiously enough, one of his few articles in English, but, until its translation into Catalan in *Estudis sobre Ramon Llull*, was one very difficult to consult, appearing as it had in a rather obscure *Festschrift*. It does, however, treat a central doctrine of the first stage of Llull's Art, that of analogy, metaphor, or significance, which we have already mentioned, and it shows how elemental theory is at the base of the Art at this point in its development.

The next work I would like to comment on, 'Las relaciones entre el *Ars inveniendi veritatem* y los cuatro *Libri principiorum*' (1973), is a translation and adaptation of his 'Introductory Note' to the reprint of the *Quattuor libri principiorum* of 1969 (A13). The first work in which Llull set out his system was the *Ars compendiosa inveniendi veritatem*, which was followed not long afterwards by four works: a *Book of the Principles of Theology*, one on the *Principles of Philosophy*, one on *Law*, and one on *Medicine*, forming a group similar in format (except the last on medicine, which is somewhat different), and which Pring-Mill aptly baptized the *Quattuor libri principiorum*. They were written to show how the Art could be applied to these four fields, and more generally how it could be used to provide foundations for other areas of knowledge and science. They are thus very important for revealing how Llull proposed to make of his Art a general science, which Pring-Mill shows by explaining how these four works reuse basic concepts of the Art along with its combinatory mechanisms. He lays emphasis on the *Book of the Principles of Medicine*, because of its important use of elemental theory and its proposals for 'metaphoric' application, for example, to the other three fields.

Pring-Mill's last essay (A21) was for a congress on the *Tree of Science* held in Freiburg in 1997 on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Raimundus-Lullus-Institut of the University there. In this talk he summed up many of his previous proposals for number symbolism in Llull, proposals which until then had dealt mostly with the numbers sixteen (of the elemental square, and of Figure S of the acts of the powers of the soul) and nine (the number of all the components of the later Art). Here he goes into the much more complicated numerical structures of the *Tree of Science*. To explain his proposals in detail would require more space than I have, but the article does start with a programmatic statement based on a quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'A picture is a model of reality', on which Pring-Mill comments

that ‘Llull’s *Arbor scientiae* provides not just a complex “picture” of reality but also a striking “working model” of the universe *as seen by one specific observer* — conditioned by the historical-cum-geographic context in which he lived’ (A21: 36). I think this is an enormously important formulation of a primordial aspect of Llull’s program, and one that differentiates him sharply from his contemporaries. Scholastic technique tended to take a field such as theology, philosophy, or logic, and break it up into a series of ‘questions’ to be resolved; Llull tries to see it whole, and to derive the answers to specific questions from the ‘working model’. And this is the basic task performed in the *Tree of Science*. Note that he does not call the work the *Trees of Sciences*; both nouns are in the singular, and everything is made to derive from a single ‘working model’.

Pring-Mill’s contribution to this congress was not limited to the paper he gave. At one point, a discussion developed as to the relative importance of Llull’s mysticism versus his rationalism as exemplified in the Art. As it was becoming more and more heated, Pring-Mill raised his hand, causing a certain surprise because he had intervened little in previous exchanges. In his usual unemphatic, quiet voice, he pointed out that at the beginning of the *Art amativa* Llull had said that it was a work explaining *amància*, just as its companion work, the *Ars inventiva veritatis*, had expounded *ciència*, and that one could not properly function without the other. The correctness of the observation was so clear that it left everybody speechless, not a frequent occurrence with a rather large and somewhat over-excited scholarly audience.

I would like to end my remarks on Pring-Mill’s Llull scholarship by pointing out that, in a world where, as one academic said recently, the average shelf-life of a scholarly publication is eight years, his books and articles are still consulted, translated, reprinted, and cited after even half a century. The bibliography on Llull has grown exponentially (the list on the Ramon Llull Database at the University of Barcelona now has over 5,400 items), and I would guess that a large portion of it has been generated since the time when Pring-Mill began writing. Many of the works of his contemporaries have been forgotten, not necessarily because they were bad, but because they have been outdated by more recent formulations. This, happily, is not the case with his work, which specialists can only disregard at their own peril.

As a last observation on his publications on Llull, I must point out his two excellent encyclopaedia articles, one for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (A11) and one for the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (A16). They are worthy companions to Jocelyn Hillgarth’s article in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

I would like to end on a more personal note. We all know that Robert Pring-Mill spoke and wrote in three or four languages, but his Catalan perhaps deserves a bit of extra comment. I do not know if he learned to write it at the school of Montesión before the Civil War, but the fact of the matter is that few people of his generation in Majorca learned how to do so. What I found admirable, however, was the fact that after half a century absent from the island, he could return and still speak it fluently and correctly. Perhaps because in the intervening years his contacts had been more with standard Catalan, his speech had lost many of the dialectal traits it had undoubtedly had in his youth, but I can still remember one of the last talks he gave in the Universitat de les Illes Balears, where he spoke and fielded questions with extraordinary ease and fluency.

I would finally like to express my gratitude to Robert Pring-Mill for making this act of homage so easy. Usually on such an occasion, one has to do a good deal of scratching around inside the head to think of enough nice things to say to fill out a talk. For those of us so indebted to him, it really took no scratching at all. And for this, I can only say: thank you, Robert.

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En este artículo se considera la influencia del trabajo de Robert Pring-Mill en el campo de los estudios sobre Ramón Llull, especialmente sus investigaciones sobre la relación entre el Art luliano y sus obras narrativas.

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