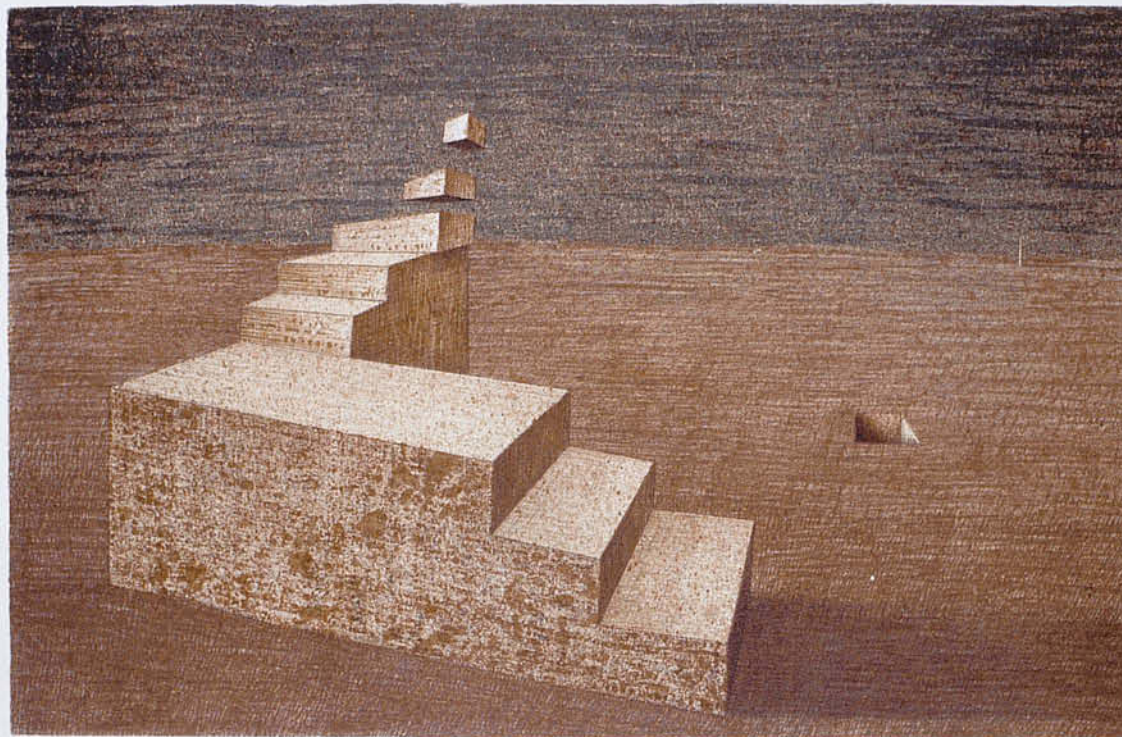


AN EXAMPLE OF SAVAGE MYSTICISM



© JOSEP M. SUBIRACHS

L'ESCALA DE RAMON LLULL, 1990 [LITHOGRAPH]

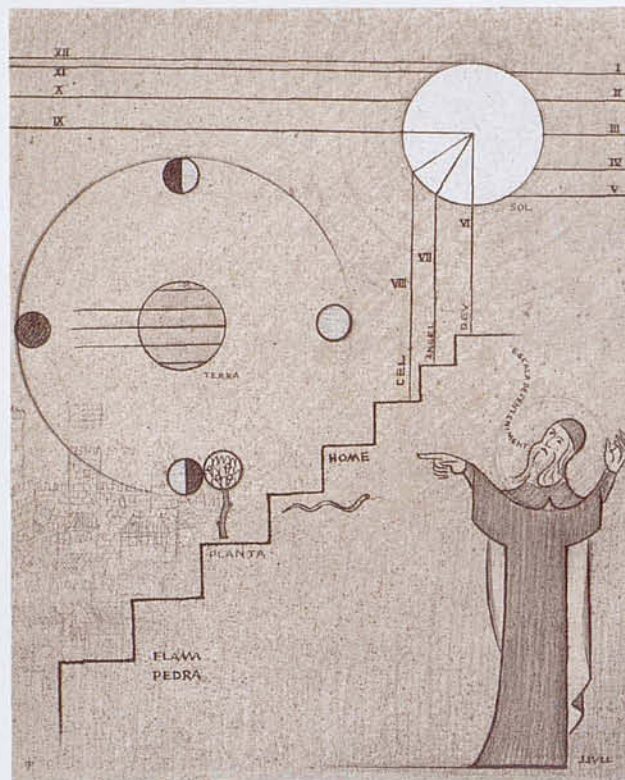
AMADOR VEGA ESQUERRA. PHILOSOPHER AND PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY, POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY, BARCELONA

One of the most striking things about the medieval world is the infinite and at the same time harmonious character of the elements making it up. The idea of nature that lies at the root of its thinking is related to the idea of the myth, but without the naive notion that sometimes surrounds the primitive world. The sense of having recovered firm ground, following a fall recounted in the holy scriptures (*hierohistory*), is enormously reassuring to man, who once more feels he forms part of important events. The idea of medieval man shrinking before the work of an all-powerful creator God is wrong. As happened in other traditional societies, man had never had a better understanding of the reason for a hierarchy on which his dignity depended so completely. His freedom and will are real, because they

coincide with those of God. Although nature is conceived as a path (*scala creaturarum*) by which man reaches the "other world", where he discovers his true archetypal essence, it has to be understood as the place where salvation and the return to unity are forged. In very general terms, mysticism, or mystical knowledge, gives a description of this path back to God marked by a twofold epistemological and soteriological intention.

Christian mysticism at the end of the Middle Ages (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries) –the time of Ramon Llull– is heir to the great tradition of Neoplatonic philosophy of the Greek Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa, of the Irish monk John Scotus Erigena, the School of Chartres, Bonaventura and to a considerable part of Arab thinking through Avicenna (Ibn

Sina). But this rich history gives rise to various models. For example, Franciscans and Dominicans each understand this path to God in their own way, as love or intellect respectively. Many studies have been written on the influences Ramon Llull received in his immense spiritual work, but though it is true that historical studies are crucial for a proper understanding of the intellectual atmosphere of an age, as regards the mystical experience in Ramon Llull it is far more profitable to try and penetrate the figure's psychology by reading the large quantities of writings he left. This is not only because of the autobiographical nature of much of the material, but because the particular exercise of writing he develops is probably the only source that can throw any light on the great project of love of God which it conceals.



RAMON LLULL, 1985. (LITHOGRAPH)

Mysticism is the experiential knowledge of God (*cognitio Dei experimentalis*) and in Llull the exercise (*ascesis*) in which the experience of God –as Logos– develops is exclusively the experience of language. The formula of the sacrifice (*do ut des*) responds to Llull’s plan. As in Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, the invocatory nature of writing, which is offered as a prayer, prepares the conditions for the coming of God’s word, which is his Son (*Logos*). In this way, infinite writing, repeating itself like a rosary of prayers, challenges the conditions of space and time typical of the profane world. In the *Libre de contemplació en Déu* there is not the slightest trace of the notion of progress –or, of course, of deductive thinking–, because there is no intention of leaving oneself, as there is in some ecstatic mysticism. The *Libre de contemplació en Déu* is a temple in which the writing uses examples (*exempla*) to reproduce the many beings of creation and the other orders, including the celestial orders with the angels, since the soul of the mystic once again absorbs the whole universe, like the drop of dew ab-

sorbed by the ocean, in an image typical of Vedic thinking. In both cases, moreover, the mystic’s oceanic sensation, through the ebb and flow of the whole of creation, defines what has sometimes been described as the “savage” nature of this experience.

Ramon Llull spent half his life, after his conversion, writing, and his attitude comes closer to the “Communities of the Book” (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) who have received the revelation through the Word. One of the methods of meditation he uses in his work is the combination of figures representing the names of God (*Dignitates Dei*). These names are the power and the creative activity of God in the world (*activitas ad extra*). Thus, for example, the “goodness” and the “beauty” of God are imprinted on the works of nature and it is thanks to their contemplation in perceptible objects (trees, stones, etc.) that we can understand God in his most abstract and intelligible aspect. For this reason, reflection on the names, which are reduced to the single name (“Ego sum qui sum”), is the basis of his contemplative “system” and the

writing becomes the place of meditation. Each book, each chapter, each line he writes is progress towards unity with the Word. All the books are the same book and there is no room for an alternative discourse; the obsession with the love of God shows itself in this compulsive nature of the writing, so common to inspired authors.

The differences from and similarities with Christian, Jewish and Muslim spiritual authorities are too numerous to be important in an overall assessment of Llull’s mysticism, but over and above doctrinal differences, if there is one thing Llull conveys it is the community of meaning that is created around the value of the word. This fascination with the word-language-writing led Ramon Llull to try to create a “Lingua universalis” which would be common to all men, as an ecumenical mystic body. The absorption of the world in the soul, the reduction of all names to one Name and of all men of religion to a single man –here lies the language of this mystic, savage in his forms and compulsive in his faith, who wanted to die on “the high sea of love”.