

# Llull's *A Contemporary Life: Narratio vera* or Auto-hagiographic Account?

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**Summary:** The *Vita coetanea* is a mesmerizing autobiographical account of Ramon Llull's life dictated by himself to a monk at the monastery of Vauvert in Paris in 1311. The philosopher was then 79 years old and was making preparations to attend the Council of Vienne that same year. Throughout the *Vita* Llull imagines himself as a combination of sinner, pilgrim, hermit, teacher, preacher and spiritual knight (*miles Christi*). The *Vita* closely follows the model of hagiographic accounts and has as its point of departure Llull's so-called conversion to penitence. Llull's ulterior life is understood by him as an act of self-effacement and love for Christ and his neighbor. In a previous book, the *Book of the Order of Chivalry*, written decades before, Llull had defended a new moral definition of knights as embodiments of man's effort in his attempt to achieve everlasting rest with his Creator, a mission that has spiritual as well as temporal connotations. The two works, separated by some thirty-five years, insist on the need to reach the Muslim population through a crusading effort which is both military and spiritual. The *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* gives way in the *Vita* to an autobiography conceived of as an exemplum of the chivalric endeavors which the first book extolls and calls for.

**Keywords:** Ramon Llull, *Vita coetanea*, autobiography, *Miles Christi*, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* ■

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The *Vita coetanea* (or *Vita Beati Raimundi Lullii*) is a mesmerizing autobiographical account of Ramon Llull's life dictated by himself to a monk at the monastery of Vauvert in Paris in 1311. The philosopher was then 79 years old (78 if we follow some opinions) and was making preparations to attend the Council of Vienne that same year. To this Council he wished to go to make the following proposals:

Primum quidem ut locus constitueretur sufficiens in quo uiri deuoti et intellectu uigentes ponerentur, studentes in diuersis linguarum generibus quod omni creaturae scirent doctrinam euangelicam praedicare. Secundum uero ut de cunctis religiosi militibus christianis fieret unus ordo qui ultra mare contra Saracenos usque ad recuperationem Terrae Sanctae bella continua retinerent. Tertium autem ut contra opiniones Auerrois, qui in multis peruersor extitit ueritatis, dominus papa celeriter



ordinaret remedium, quod per uiros intelligentes catholicos, non intendentes ad sui gloriam sed Christi honorem, obiceretur praedictis opinionibus et eas tenentibus, quae obuiare uidentur ueritati et sapientiae increatae, Filio Dei Patris. (§44)

First, that there should be established adequate places where devout men of vigorous minds were gathered to study different kinds of languages that they know how to preach the Gospel to every creature. Second, that of all the Christian military religious orders be made only one that waged permanent war against the Saracens until the Holy Land is reconquered. Third, that in opposition to the opinions of Averroes – who in many things was a perverter of the truth – the pope ordered as soon as possible a remedy, that intelligent Catholic men, concerned not with their honor but with the honor of Christ, should object to the said [erroneous] opinions and to those who defended them, which seemed to stand in the way of the truth and the uncreated wisdom, the Son of God the Father. (*my translation*)

Having these three purposes or intentions into consideration, Lull's narrative as dictated to the Parisian monk has to be somewhat suspect. And not because the data contained in it lack veracity, but rather due to the fact that the structure and discursive *dispositio* of the information included in the account could maybe invite us to see in it more than a simple autobiographical narrative.

Although the book can be divided into several parts, as critics have done, we believe that chapter VI occupies a central position in a volume totaling XI chapters (or 45 subsections according to the critical edition by Harada). The chapters that immediately precede number VI offer some sort of crisis, as Bonner (2007) has interpreted them (the Genoa temptation and his expulsion from Tunis).

The structure of the book is reinforced by some parallelisms. Thus, the entire narrative revolves around the act of verbal utterance and the act of writing. In §1 the *Vita* presents us with an image of Lull-the-character devoted to writing and composing *vana cantilena et carmina*. In the last paragraph of the work (§45), Lull is writing with the same frantic zeal, although he is now purposely compared to the prophet David (Psal. 44: 2) in his composition of worthy *libri* as if signaling his complete transformation:

“My heart hath uttered a good word: I speak my works to the king. My tongue is the pen of a scrivener that writeth swiftly” [Psal. 45:1]. Truly his tongue was the pen of that uncreator scrivener, to wit, the Holy Ghost, who gives “the word to them that preach good tidings with great power” [Psal. 68:11] [and] of which the Saviour spoke to the Apostles, saying: “For it is not you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you” [Mat. 10:20].

Throughout the *Vita* Llull imagines himself as a combination of sinner, pilgrim, hermit, teacher, preacher and spiritual knight. The *Vita*, rewritten by a narrator/author from its original format (that is, the words spoken directly by Llull himself), closely follows the model of hagiographic accounts (see Batllori [1998] for a dissenting opinion), as can be seen in the Catalan version (*Vida coetànea*) from the 15th century which terms Llull *reuerend mestra*, while he had been referred to with a simple Raimundus in the Latin text. The narrative point of departure (the book starts *in medias res*) is the so-called Llull's conversion to penitence (*conversio ad poenitentiam*, a sentence with clear Franciscan overtones). Llull experiences a miraculous series of visions that point to his identification with Christ crucified and agonizing on the cross. His meditation on this fact concludes with his decision to preach the gospel (good news) *urbi et orbe*, the true purpose for the justification of his life as disseminator or preacher of God's word. The reality of Majorcan demographics makes it clear to him that he must begin by focusing on the Muslim population at large, the so-called unbelievers or infidels, who surround Christendom on all sides. But language becomes an important issue, as he is not able to reach many of these Arab speakers. He then purchases a slave and learns from him the Arabic language. At the same time he undergoes a process of intellectual formation and preparation in the disciplines of his day, with a focus on logic and philosophy, theology, law, and medicine. Preaching, thus, is a matter of will as much as of intellectual preparation. For Llull clearly sees that he must convince the learned among the Muslims before he can have access to the population of infidels at large:

The Saracens are in such a state that the wise among them do not believe in Mohammed by force of arguments and despise the Koran because he lived a dishonest life. So if one could conduct a long discussion with them and demonstrate the faith through the force of arguments, they would be converted at once. And once converted, they would convert the people. To learn their language does not take much time. (XXVIII; Vega, 2003: 215)

This period of nine years (like the nine months of gestation in a maternal womb) produces a reborn Llull ready to spread the good news of the Christian message everywhere. To be able to realize his way, Llull had to understand first his sinful nature and become a humble pilgrim and a self-effacing hermit. In addition, he had to abase himself and adopt a meek and submissive attitude when he realized his ignorance. As a consequence, he underwent a difficult learning process. It is representative of this phase of

humiliation and debasement the fact that he had to seek knowledge precisely from those whom he tried to convert. Thus the death of his slave signals the moment of detachment from his previous ties, his breaking loose from the past after his long *rite de passage*, when he is ready to plunge himself into a life of service and action. In this nine-year period, he goes from infancy to maturity, born anew to a life of sacrifice dedicated to his Lord.

Llull envisions his work as an act of self-effacement and love for Christ and his neighbor. In his *Desconhort*, which can also be analyzed in the context of medieval hagiographic literature (Abrámova, 1998), the Hermit accuses Llull of pride and vainglory, for he doubts God's work and wishes to revert predetermination, attempting to save those that have been condemned by God. Llull responds by affirming his love for Christ, which is a love for humankind:

Since I wish to see Him honored and loved above everything that exists, I complain and lament and am [plunged] in sadness. As you do not know whence my pain comes, you fail to console me or to be of any help. [...] Thanks to you, sinners get no better. You show them no charity, whereas God pardons them magnanimously. [...] Judging and pardoning are equally present in God, according to the ordering of his virtues. He allows nothing that would diminish his justice. This is why the sinner should be greatly afraid, and why I weep that God is not revered. (XLI–XLIII; Vega, 2003: 218, 219)

The model that Llull has in mind is clearly that of a *miles Christi*, which had been previously defined by him in his *Llibre de l'ordre de cavalleria*. We can remember here that the events recounted by Llull (his visions took place in 1263 when he was over thirty years old) occurred, according to tradition, on January 25, the day when the conversion of St Paul is celebrated (Pasqual I, 33). Llull sees himself as a convert modeled after the greatest Christian conversus, that is St Paul, the same one who envisions his life in the Gospels as a *certamen*, a sort of armed struggle against himself and the enemies of the Lord. In one of his first works, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*,<sup>1</sup> Llull clearly suggests this by remaking the image of the medie-

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1 The *Book of the Order of Chivalry* was written in Catalan by Ramon Llull between 1274 and 1276 and is one of the author's earliest works. After his death, it achieved a wide dissemination throughout Europe in part because it was considered the theoretical manual on knighthood par excellence. The book was written in Catalan for knights who might not have a knowledge of Latin. Llull intended this book to be an agent of reform and change. As Fallows points out, it "emerged out of the climate of spiritual optimism that the monastery [of Miramar] represented, and from beneath the dark cloud of mili-

val knight into a spiritual force intent on defending and spreading the Christian message. The events of the *Vita* can be summarized as representative of the defense of godly justice (righteousness) operated by Lull throughout his life. Like an armed and wandering knight, he travels in search of adventures in which to prove his and Christ's worth. These adventures involve his preaching, understood as a deed that involves peril and possibly death. In addition, his jousting is of an intellectual nature (although jousting nonetheless), be it with potentates and prelates, or with learned Muslims in intellectual *disputationes*. In sum, Lull depicts himself in the *Vita* as pilgrim, traveler, preacher, etc., and all those types find an ultimate superior meaning in the image/symbol of the knight. In this regard, the mentions in his narrative to the order of the Knights Templar and Jacques de Molay (IX), or his request to the community of Pisa to found an order of knights to go to the Holy Land, fit well with this general intention of extolling spiritual and temporal knighthood in the *Vita* (§42). This is even reinforced by the three final requests that he plans to submit to the Council of Vienne (§44; see *supra*).

The image of the old knight who retires to a forest in *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* to reflect upon the world has obvious autobiographical tones that can be compared with the image of Lull-the-old-man of his *Vita*:

It came to happen that in a certain country a wise knight – who had upheld his Order of Chivalry for a long time with the nobility and strength of his great courage and whose knowledge and good fortune had preserved him in the honor of Chivalry through wars, tournaments, assaults and battles – decided to lead an eremitic life once he realized that his days were numbered and that because of old age he lacked natural strength to wield arms [any longer]. Thus he took leave of his possessions, which he bequeathed to his children, and made his abode in a great forest, abundant in water and fruit, forsaking this world, so that his body, frail because of old age, would not be an

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turistic and chivalric malaise that had cast its gloomy shadow over the failures of the recent crusade [III Crusade] in the East and hung ominously over the hiatus in the Reconquista in the West” (Lull / Fallows, 2013: 2). Johnston (1996) conceives of the *Llibre de l'orde de cavalleria* as a spiritual allegory intended to reform the Order of Chivalry as well as the knights themselves, assigning symbolic meaning to armour and weaponry. A similar point of view is adopted by Fallows, although he also strives to place the work within the political and religious context surrounding the II and III Crusades and the Reconquista. See my edition and translation of the *Llibre de l'ordre de cavalleria* (Lull / Cortijo Ocaña, 2015), as well as my edition and translation of Lull's *Vita coetania* (Lull / Cortijo Ocaña, 2017) for an abridged version of some of the notes contained in this article.

occasion for dishonoring him in those things where his wisdom and good fortune had brought him honor for so long. And so the knight reflected upon death and upon the transit from this world to the next, and he understood the everlasting sentence that he would [eventually] come to. (2)

The knight is visited by a novel squire who wants to be dubbed a knight. As the two engage in conversation, the knight-hermit lets his young companion know that he has a book that explains all things necessary to understand the Order of Chivalry, the first step that must be taken before devoting one's life to knighthood:

—My good friend – said the knight – the Rule and the Order of chivalry is contained in this book which I sometimes read so that it will make me remember the gracious mercy that the Lord has shown me in this world, for I have honored and upheld the Order of Chivalry with all my might. For just as Chivalry offers the knight all that pertains to him, so the knight must also give all his strength to honor Chivalry. (Prologue 9)

It is not difficult to envision here a Lull who imagines himself as a knight of Christ, *miles Christi*. As he explains to the novel knight in the aforementioned book, the lack of charity, loyalty, justice, and truth in the world prompted the creation of a group of people intent on restoring them:

Charity, loyalty, justice and truth were once lacking in the world. Enmity, disloyalty and falsehood came into being and as a result error and confusion were born amongst the people of God, who were created so that the Lord be loved, known, honored, served and feared by man. In the beginning, when contempt for justice had come into the world because of the weakening of charity, it became necessary that justice be restored again to its honor by means of fear. The people were divided into groups of a thousand and one man was chosen and selected from every thousand – the most kind, wise, loyal, strong, with the noblest soul, the most knowledgeable and with the best manners of them all. (I, 1–2)

The second element to consider in analyzing *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* is the many references that appear in it to the conversion of the infidels. We must bear in mind that the *conversio ad poenitentiam* which signaled Lull's renunciation of his former self is paralleled by the divine call experience during his visions which prompted him towards procuring this same conversion in others (the infidels), thus giving meaning within a coherent narrative to his proselytizing endeavors. For Lull, knighthood consists of defending the Catholic Faith and conquering the infidels who are intent upon destroying the Church. Because the noblest offices in the

world are those of cleric and knight, there should be the greatest friendship between them, as well as respect and love among all the Orders.

Thus, just as God our Lord has chosen clerics to defend the Holy Faith through the Sacred Scriptures and Reason, preaching the faith to the infidels with such great charity that they are willing to die for it, likewise the God of glory has chosen the knights to defeat and subject heathens by the strength of their arms, for they contrive every day to destroy the Holy Church. Therefore, God honors knights in this world and in the one to come, for they are defenders and upholders of the office of God and of the faith by which we will attain salvation. (II, 2)

The *Book of the Order of Chivalry* seems to be an *amplification* of chapter 112 of the *Book of Contemplation in God* from which it borrows verbatim several passages and expressions. Although the latter seems to focus on the criticism of evil knights, in the final paragraph Lull clearly identifies the value of real chivalry as a profession that protects man from the world, the flesh and the devil by arming him with the weapons of virtue. Lull devotes his little treatise or doctrinal handbook to the definition of the duties of a perfect knight, that is the religious and moral values that one should ascribe to the practice of knighthood. In addition, he is also interested in delving into the religious and moral aspects of chivalry as well as in trying to reform this institution (Carreras y Artau, 1934; Costa, 1997). His intention is to join together the concepts of Church and Chivalry and to construct a personal ethics based on the Christian faith. The book, didactic and moral in nature, examines the origin and nobility of chivalry and the ethical foundation of the knight's profession, which ultimately lies in the defense of the Christian faith. Knighthood, as Lull defines it (VII, 1), is an honorable profession and essential for the government of the world.

Ramon Lull proposes a moral reform of chivalry (fidelity to the monarchy, the defense of the faith, and respect towards the lower estates of society) which can be seen from his contemporary writings on this matter, thus compensating for the scant enthusiasm towards the military estate presented in Chapter 112 of the *Book of Contemplation*, devoted to the comparison of 'celestial chivalry', which was open to the works of the spirit, with 'earthly chivalry', which was busy with political, military and social tasks. (*Centre de Documentació Ramon Lull*)

For Lull chivalry is an all-encompassing term that does not refer exclusively to the militaristic activity involved in defending society. In John of Salisbury's words (1120–1180), the *bellatores* had a duty "to protect the Church, to attack infidelity, to reverence the priesthood, to protect the

poor, to keep the peace, to shed one's blood, and, if necessary, to lay down one's life for one's brethren" (*Policraticus* II, 23). In this society organized for war, as Powers (1988) and Lourie (1966) have called this period of time, the knight not only had a defensive but an exemplary function. According to Llull, the Order of Chivalry had the moral obligation of maintaining unity within its ranks and against the religious enemy, preserving a form of communal concordia for Christian medieval society. The essence of knighthood was based on a concept of struggle and war that implied total dedication to the military effort. The knight's unremitting perseverance in his *militia*, that is his defense of the Christian faith and of the meek and invalid, was paralleled by his tenaciousness when fighting vice within himself. The *Book of the Order of Chivalry* in fact defines the office of the knight as an ideal struggle between the virtues, envisioned as the knight's weapons, against the vices on the road to salvation. The knight's *militia*, then, is to be exercised inwardly as much as outwardly, in the spiritual and temporal spheres. In this the knight is not different from clerics, who in fact were usually referred to as *milites Christi* (Christ's soldiers). Both the attitude of the religious person and that of a knight were in turn based on a concept of life as a military exercise. As Serés (1991) and Cortijo (in Llull / Cortijo, 2015) have pointed out, the concept of *militia vitae* (militant/-ary life) has both a philosophical and a biblical origin. Seneca tells Lucilium that "vivere militare est" (to live is to fight) (Epist. XCVI). Job reminds us that "militia est vita hominis super terram" (man's life on earth is nothing but fighting) (8:1). St Paul refers to his life of struggle, both spiritually and physically, as "bonum certamen certavi, cursum consummavi, fidem servavi" (I fought the good fight, I finished the race, I kept my faith) (2 Timoth. 4:7). Underlying this concept, man's life is conceived as a metaphoric *palaestra* (Greek wrestling school) where he is trained as an athlete. Man's militant attitude and *athleticism* must be both spiritual and temporal, as remarked upon by Llull when affirming that the office of the cleric is in accord with the office of the knight:

Everything that the priest has donned in order to sing mass carries a meaning appropriate to his office, and since the office of the cleric and that of the knight are in accord with each other, for this reason the Order of Chivalry requires that everything that the knight requires in order to practice his office has some meaning that manifests the nobility of the Order of Chivalry. (IV.1)

Man's life as struggle or *militia* must be regulated by two complementary virtues, just wrath and love (two of man's passions), which in turn

must always act respectively in conjunction with justice and reason. Just wrath is a virtue that prompts men to strive in their exercise of *militia*. When allied with prudence and reason, it helps men in their dealings with Fortune. This means, as pointed out by Serés (1991: 47–48),

the defense of the individual's capability – by using all his faculties, virtues, and human virtues (theological, cardinal, and natural or “organic”, including the *irascibilis*) to face the undetermined; [it also means] the defense of free will, which, together with a virtuous behavior and endowed with the necessary means, must not fear Fortune's upheavals and must even deny its very existence.

As Lull defines this concept in II.35 et ss., chivalry assumes the fact that peace and justice must ultimately concord with each other:

If justice and peace were opposites, then Chivalry, which concords with justice, would be the opposite of peace. And if this is so, then those knights who are the enemies of peace and love war and its calamities are [true] knights, and those who pacify the people and avoid calamities are unjust and against Chivalry.

In fact, he had also made a similar point in ch. 112.2 and 5 of his *Book of Contemplation* in God when he expressed that it behooves knights to love peace more than war. This complementary relationship between those two apparently-opposite virtues brings about *concordia*, a proportionate harmony that becomes the ultimate goal of moral virtue and rejects in equal proportion excess and deficiency. In the same way as love and war (*bellum* and *amor*) are sides of the same coin, the knight and the cleric must constantly strive for this balancing equilibrium that can be jeopardized if knights develop warring tendencies:

For just as in the beginning the office of the knight consisted of making peace among men with the force of arms, consequently if the knights of today, who are prone to warring and are unjust, are not in the Order of Chivalry nor profess properly the office of the knight, where is then Chivalry and who and how many are those who are in its Order?

Love and just wrath are intertwined in this conceptualization of the ultimate goal of society and the individual and highlight an ultimate desire for peace and rest (*quies*). This ideal must be achieved though the exercise of perseverance, constancy, sacrifice, valor, and persistence. *Rest* is achieved through the final vanquishing of sin, that is through the internal and external enemies of man himself. For this purpose,

the knight is given a sword made in the shape of a cross to signify that just as our Lord Jesus Christ defeated on the Cross the death into which we had fallen because of our father Adam's sin, in the same way the knight must defeat and destroy with his sword the enemies of the Cross. And just as the sword cuts with both edges, and in like manner Chivalry exists in order to defend justice, which consists of giving to each one its right, therefore the knight's sword signifies that he should uphold Chivalry and justice with the sword. (V.2)

The knight represents the embodiment of man's effort in his attempt to achieve everlasting rest with his Creator, a mission that has spiritual as well as temporal connotations. Man must battle with himself and with the world. In doing so, he remains in a state of permanent *certamen* (struggle) or constant state of anxiety as he strives to overcome his moral infirmity. In addition, the Pentecostal feast which marks the pivotal point in Llull's conversion, when he is sick and doubtful in Genoa and experiences a new vision that points him in the direction of *perseverance* and *persistence*, is a constant reminder throughout the text of the *Vita* for the insightful and careful reader. The high prelates and priests that will attend the Council of Vienne could have clearly identified the main message of Llull's narrative: in the same way that Llull strove to continue his struggle on the path of *faith* and *persistence*, they must have confidence in God and in God's servant, Llull himself, by showing him all the support he requires.

The time span between the writing of *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* and the *Vita* represents nearly the entirety of Llull's life span. The two works, separated by some thirty-five years, insist on the need to reach the Muslim population through a crusading effort which is both military and spiritual. The sermon *ad extra* which is *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* gives way in the *Vita* to an autobiography conceived of as an exemplum of the chivalric endeavors which the first book extolls and calls for. Like St Paul says in the Bible, this vital process is nothing but an arduous *certamen*, a struggle against the outside enemies of the faith and against oneself. The *Vita* as hagiographic discourse represents the embodiment of an ideal: to defend the Tower of Faith as represented in Miniatures V and VI of the *Breviculum*. During the Pentecostal episode which represents the central point of the narrative (chapters V and VI), Llull hears the hymn *Veni Creator*. At the end of the *Vita* we seem to remain in rapture listening to the last echoes of the verses of this hymn where the poet expresses his confidence in God to strengthen his faith, to guide his mind with his light and to inflame his heart with love:

Accende lumen sensibus,  
 Infunde amorem cordibus,  
 Infirma nostri corporis  
 Virtute firmans perpeti. ■

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