CHAPTER FIVE

RAMON LLULL’S ARS BREVIS TRANSLATED INTO HEBREW:
PROBLEMS OF TERMINOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY

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The translation into Hebrew of Ramon Llull’s Ars brevis was completed in July or August 1474 in Senigallia, a coastal town on the shores of the Adriatic in the March of Ancona. There is no title to the work in the manuscript, but from the opening passage we can gather that the anonymous translator translated the Latin title as Ha-Melacha ha-Ketzara (The Brief Art), a pretty literal translation. The translation is extant in one manuscript, New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, 2312, which is a copy of a copy of the original translation. As the colophon indicates, the copyist of this manuscript worked together with the first copyist, and internal evidence suggests that it more or less follows the page divisions of that first copy. Prior to its being deposited at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the manuscript belonged to the famous bibliophile and scholar, Moritz Steinschneider, who acquired it from one Adolph Bernstein, about whom nothing else is known. Steinschneider identified the work and went through it making marginal notes and comparing it, in places, with the Latin original. He described the manuscript in his magisterial Die hebraeischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters und die Juden als Dolmetscher.1 In the first half of the sixteenth century, the manuscript belonged to one Shimshon ben Moses ha-Levi,2 who also owned another manuscript containing the Sefer Maharil (Book of the Maharil) now in Oxford.3

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1 Moritz Steinschneider, Die hebraeischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters und die Juden als Dolmetscher (Berlin: Kommissionsverlag des Bibliographischen Bureaus, 1893), 475–476.
2 New York, JTS, Ms. 2312, f. 41v.
3 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Mich. 249. Shimshon’s son inherited the book and he signs himself as Akiva ben Shimshon ha-Levi. On f. 142v, there is a list of the births, marriages and deaths in the owner’s family between the years 1508–1581. There is also a note that Akiva paid two ducats to rent a room for a Menashe ben Refael from Vugera (perhaps Butera?). The work in this manuscript is by the Maharil, which is the acronym for Yaa’kov ben Moshe Levi Moelin (1365–1427).
Ramon Llull finished writing the *Ars brevis* in Pisa in January 1308. The work is a much more concise and more easily digestible version of the much larger and more extensive *Ars generalis ultima* written between 1305–1308. Both works are the culmination of an over thirty-year process of continual revision and refining of the Art, divinely revealed, according to Llull’s account in the *Vita coaetanea*, in Mallorca around 1274. In effect, the Art was a language whose grammar and syntax were the dynamic structure of creation, true knowledge of which revealed the internal and eternal structure of the divine. Using general principles, conditions and rules acceptable to all three monotheistic faiths, the Artist—the practitioner of the Art—would be able to discover the inherent nature of the supreme being. According to Llull, the religion revealed to be truly compatible with this Art was Christianity. In other words, it is not that the other faiths are based on false premises, but that they do not understand totally the language of reality. Any disputation based on the framework of the Art would allow members of each faith to explore their own religious doctrines and those of the other faiths and by asking the right questions, reaching the necessary conclusions.

The first exposition of the “form and method” of the Art was the *Ars compendiosa inveniendi veritatem* (Brief Art of Finding Truth). This structure would be continually redacted, refined and improved upon over the next forty years with the last redaction being the *Ars generalis ultima* along with its shorter and popular companion, the *Ars brevis*. The former was actually completed in March 1308, a couple of months after Llull finished the latter, but is clearly its inspiration, as the *Ars brevis* has the same number of sections, and constantly refers the reader back to the larger companion work for a more detailed exposition and examples.

The identity of the translator of the Hebrew version of the *Ars brevis* is unknown though it is probable that Pinhas Zvi, the first copyist, made corrections to the original translation when making his copy. Another manuscript contains evidence of his knowledge of Latin and his translating

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