

The background of the cover features four rectangular pieces of blue paper with torn, deckled edges. These pieces are positioned in the corners: top-left, top-right, bottom-left, and bottom-right. The central area is white, providing a stark contrast for the black title text.

Jewish Soul-Writing: Emotion, Translation, Performance

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בשנת כי עת למנהג כי בא מועד לפ"ק

Jewish Soul-Writing:
Emotion, Translation,
Performance

Edited by

Ilaria Briata

and

Patrick Benjamin Koch

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Foreword

The present volume is the result of an atypical collaboration between scholars of Jewish studies and multidisciplinary artists. Such a collaboration has been made possible by the artist-in-residence program “Mus|ar|t,” initiated during the sixth and final year of the “Jewish Moralistic Writings of the Early Modern Period” Emmy Noether junior research group at the University of Hamburg, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), and hosted by the Center for Art and Urbanistics (ZK/U) in Berlin. Between October 2022 and March 2023, five artists-in-residence and one writer-in-residence have joined this experimental effort—Leor Grady, Boris Jöns, Estee Ellis, Tamar Nissim, Yonatan Kunda, and Dalia Wolfson.

During the residencies, the artists have worked on the subject at the center of the inquiry developed by the Emmy Noether junior research group, that is, *musar*. The Hebrew term *musar* defines the so-called Jewish moralistic literature, that is, an informal corpus of writings, in Hebrew and other Jewish languages such as Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish, produced by Jewish communities between the Middle Ages and the modern era as a means for cultivating practical and spiritual conduct in compliance with the tenets of Judaism. In this sense, *musar* literature can be seen as a Jewish form of soul-writing. Although apparently remote in time and sensibility, the performance-oriented and emotion-driven nature of the *musar* corpus allows for experimentation in the field of research-based arts. On the premise of such an unexpected compatibility, the Emmy Noether junior research group has created the Mus|ar|t residency program in order to explore the question of how the content of emotionally charged literature can be conveyed through non-textual forms of representation and, conversely, how research in the humanities can benefit and learn from these forms of expression.

This book collects the results of and reflections on the individual and collaborative efforts occasioned by the Mus|ar|t program. It documents the research process and resulting final artworks produced during the individual residencies and Openhouses at ZK/U in Berlin, as well as during the concluding workshop “Mus|ar|t: Art Meets

Scholarship” held at the Institute for Jewish Studies (University of Hamburg) and the Hochschule für bildende Künste (HfbK) in Hamburg on March 28–29, 2023. The first part of the volume comprises a series of essays on *musar* and its potential contamination with the arts. The introductory piece “Mus|ar|t—Art Meets Scholarship,” by the members of the Emmy Noether junior research group, presents the theoretical premises leading to the creation of the Mus|ar|t program. The article “*Musar*: Modes of Morality in Judaism” by Patrick B. Koch provides a broad historical introduction on Jewish moralistic literature. In “Embedding Knowledge While Voicing Shapes: Concentric Circles, Square Tables, and *Nequdot*,” Vanessa Paloma Elbaz revisits her keynote speech, delivered during the concluding workshop, elaborating on the intersections between graphic rendition, senses, and Jewish practice in manuscript transmission of *musar* from the Middle Ages to the 20th century. In “On Creation and Creating: Science and the Artist,” Ilaria Briata reflects on artistic creativity and the theological understanding of divine creation in relation to human responsibility towards nature or the cosmos.

The second and main part of the book is devoted to the six artworks developed during the Mus|ar|t program. Leor Grady’s graphic project *Marginalia* is inspired by the medieval *musar* classic *Hovot ha-Levavot* (“The Duties of the Heart”) and the materiality of its reception. The photographic reproduction of the artwork is accompanied by the essay “When Margins Take Center Stage: Thoughts on Leor Grady’s *Marginalia*” by Patrick B. Koch. In “A Soft Tongue Breaks the Bone,” Boris Jöns illustrates in depths the research process creating his multimedia installation, which translated early modern *musar* textual instruction into live commentary and sonic output during the Openhaus at ZK/U Berlin. In “*Mesillat Yesharim*: A Study in Comics,” Estee Ellis reflects on personal, cultural, and creative path undertaken when (re-)reading—and transforming into comics—an ethical manual composed by 18th-century rabbi Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto. The project “What Do You Really Think?” by Tamar Nissim features a multimedia work, including video-shorts and installations made of repurposed materials, based on the moralizing autobiography of Jewish businesswoman Glikl of Hameln. The contribution “The Tish” by Yonatan Kunda collects a series of multilingual poems, integrated by photo-

graphs taken during his residency in Berlin and interactive links to a music performance during the Openhaus at ZK/U. In “Tkhines,” Dalia Wolfson elaborates on the historical practice of compiling and publishing prayerbooks for Jewish women by re-writing her own devotional poems as bilingual—English and Yiddish—cut-up found texts. Following the artists’ contribution, an “Afterword” by Ilaria Briata encapsulates the challenges and inspirations regarding the academic engagement in knowledge transfer encountered through this collaboration. In order to help the readers navigating the unfamiliar world of *musar* and Jewish spiritual literature, the volume includes lexical entries for authors, works, and key concepts referenced to in the artists’ contributions.

Mus|ar|t—Art Meets Scholarship

The guiding question that dominated the the Mus|ar|t program was the extent to which the content of emotionally charged literature can be conveyed through artistic forms of representation and how, conversely, research in the humanities can benefit from these new insights. The encounter between art and scholarship that we, as scholars in the humanities, envisioned was the “translation” of academic knowledge into a “language” that makes it experienceable in new contexts and to establish an exchange between a highly specialized and widely unknown field of research and the realities of contemporary life.

As a point of departure, Mus|ar|t followed the observation of the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser, who in his essay “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object” remarks that

ever since the fifteenth century, Occidental civilization has suffered from the divorce into two cultures: science and its techniques—the “true” and the “good for something”—on the one hand; the arts—beauty—on the other. This is a pernicious distinction. [...] There is no basic distinction between scientific and artistic research: both are fictions in the quest of truth.¹

On this basis, the group attempted to challenge the chasm between scholarship and art and to illustrate how fruitful such a paradigm shift can be with regard to gaining new insights into the psychological, social, political, and aesthetic functions of *musar*.

The employment of art as an analytical category for engaging with scholarly results and the attempt to abstract and visualize such results through art still holds a potential that has not yet been seriously explored in Jewish studies. In fact, it is only recently that some pioneering ideas in this vein have been applied in the humanities—particularly in the fields of religious studies and Christian theology. One of the most articulate approaches was offered by the artists and

1) Vilém Flusser, “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs,” *Leonardo* 19 (1986): 329–32.

scholars Stephanie Springgay and Rita L. Irwin, who work with a method referred to as “a/r/tography”—a combination of artistic process, academic research, and knowledge communication that leads to a new type of practice-based qualitative research.² This “living inquiry”³ into textual material, which regards the communication of knowledge as an equally important part of the research process, can offer a practical framework for Flusser’s theoretical considerations.

From a historical perspective, scholars have persuasively argued that it would be inaccurate to reduce the function of art to that of the proverbial mirror of society. Rather, it appears to have always been a factor that has influenced and shaped society in a way that written media could not. In their exploration of the relationship between the artistic rendering of religious ideas and their diachronic evolution in the Christian tradition, Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona therefore describe art as a “mold” that actively shapes theological concepts rather than as merely a medium that translates these notions into visual language.⁴ This reciprocity points to the great benefits of interpreting less visually pronounced systems of thought against the background of contemporaneous artistic expressions. Attempts to consider the visual as a category of analysis are still very rare in the field of Jewish studies—an attitude that arguably stems from the ambivalence toward images associated with Judaism, influenced by the still dominant claim of aniconism articulated in Exod 20:3–6.

Art is still mainly used by practicing believers as a way to “experience” religious texts rather than being part of a qualitative research analysis. An exception to this rule is the scholar and advocate of the trans-denominational Jewish Renewal movement Chava Weissler, who suggests that the artistic interpretation of religious objects should be considered a form of *hiddur mitswah*; namely, a “beautification of a divine commandment” that goes beyond the requirements of the law.⁵ In the same manner, an artistic examination of religious texts could also be considered part of this category of *hiddur mitswah*. In this way, Bruce C. Birch, a Christian theologian and emeritus professor of Old Testament studies, employed art as a teaching method in the classroom, stating that it “can create openings for transformative impact that would not necessarily have been possible in more traditional forms of exegesis and biblical teaching.”⁶ Although conducted among

seminary students, Birch’s experiment still shows how any audience—“religious” or “secular”—can potentially benefit from non-textual renderings of emotionally charged literature and also how it can lead to an internalization and deeper understanding of the latter.

Musar and Art: Translation, Performativity, Emotion

Based on their research, we identified three potential fields of investigation in which an artistic engagement with *musar* seemed most promising: translation, performativity, and emotion. From the academic point of view, linguistic translation—from Hebrew or other Jewish languages into modern tongues such as English or German—represents a crucial instrument not only for understanding textual documents, but also for the communication of scholarly results. More interestingly, translation is an essential trait of *musar* literature itself, as a considerable portion of *musar* texts are translations of classic works from Hebrew into vernacular languages. The “Jewish Moralistic Writings of the Early Modern Period: 1600–1800” project entered into a thorough investigation of this phenomenon during the compilation of the EMMIP database, which, in addition to the Hebrew works, includes a considerable number of *musar* books in Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish (also including bilingual editions), as well as a few examples in Italian, French, Latin, and Portuguese. However, translation also surpasses linguistic barriers in cases where the semantic transfer is between different media—for example, from textual to visual or audible artefacts. As the scholar of Yiddish language and literature Jeremy Dauber has convincingly argued, images can not

- 2) Stephanie Springgay and Rita L. Irwin, “A/r/tography as Practice-Based Research,” in *Being with A/r/tography*, ed. Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, Carl Leggo, and Peter Gouzouasis (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008), 13–17.
- 3) Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, and Sylvia Wilson Kind, “A/r/tography as Living Inquiry through Art and Text,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 11 (2005): 897–912.
- 4) Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, eds., *Art as Religious Studies* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001).
- 5) Chava Weissler, “‘Art Is Spirituality!’ Practice, Play and Experiential Learning in the Jewish Renewal Movement,” *Material Religion* 3 (2007): 354–69.
- 6) Bruce C. Birch, “The Arts, Midrash and Biblical Teaching,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 8 (2005): 114–22.

only transmit and canonize “certain narratives and interpretive conventions”; they “can be similarly investigated both as carriers of semiotic information in their own right, [...], with conventions and repositories of relied upon knowledge decodable, and as interactive complements (and complications) to the textual materials they accompany.”⁷ What is more, the possibility of a direct encounter with a work of art—be it visual, haptic, or audible—offers the possibility of transcending the limits imposed by the medium of the written word and the accompanying requirement of reading skills, sensitivity in the deciphering of cultural codes, or familiarity with specific religiolects.⁸

Jewish moralistic texts are by and large intended for practice. Consequently, a critical aspect of *musar* entails its attitude to performativity. Performance can be seen either as the result of a literary prescription or as the event behind a narrative. Furthermore, *musar* literature exhibits a plenitude of performative features, as its authors use the text as a substitute for a medium that addresses the readers through the use of direct speech, instructing them to put the principles outlined in the book into action. In other words, they are prime examples of what the philosopher of language John L. Austin described as “performative utterances.”⁹ A similar experience is usually produced in art, where the performative act is not only that of the artist producing an artwork, but also that of the public coming into contact with the artistic production. This parallelism also surfaces in Jewish mystical literature, where the imaginative constitutes a primary part of the theosophical apparatus.¹⁰ *musar* represents a similar case, as often the imaginative prefigures the performative and is constantly activated by the author’s depiction of powerful images. Artistic interpretations can therefore constitute a suitable non-textual means of making the performative quality of *musar* accessible to a broader public.

Lastly, one of the most widespread rhetorical strategies adopted in *musar* is the triggering of negatively connoted emotions such as disgust, shame, and fear, but also positive ones such as hope and joy, with the intention of shaping the readers’ everyday conduct. This well-established literary mechanism is clearly paralleled in the psychological immediacy that the experience of an artwork can create. In this sense, art and *musar* can be regarded as “emotion machines” whose final purpose is to stimulate a spiritual-psychological transformation

of the observing subject. The idea of the “emotion machine” was coined by Ed Tan in the context of cinema studies.¹¹ It is easily applicable, however, to the interpretation of textual materials.¹² *Musar* literature stands as a productive example of such an approach, considering that academic enquiry into the perception, shaping, and transmission of emotions throughout Jewish history has also become a fruitful field in the last couple of decades.¹³ In fact, *musar* as a literary trend can be interpreted as psychological discourse: if ethics and morality represent problematic and limitative terms when referring to Jewish culture, particularly to the unanswered question of the essence of *musar* itself, then “psychology” as *logos* on/for the *psyché*—or discourse on/for the soul—appears highly appropriate for a literature aimed at spiritual refinement.¹⁴ Similarly to the medium of film, contemporary visual and performative arts are glaring examples of emotion machines whose principal instrument of communication can be non-verbal. By sharing their expressive mechanism, *musar* and art constitute a potentially fruitful intellectual partnership in the experiential translation via emotion.

The triad of translation, performativity, and emotion was chosen as it was considered most promising in offering a plenitude of possi-

- 7) Jeremy Dauber, *In the Demon’s Bedroom: Yiddish Literature and the Early Modern* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).
- 8) Benjamin Hary and Martin J. Wein, “Religiolinguistics: On Jewish-, Christian- and Muslim-Defined Languages,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 220 (2013): 85–108.
- 9) John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).
- 10) J.H. Chajes, “Imaginative Thinking with a Lurianic Diagram,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 110 (2020): 30–63.
- 11) Ed Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*, trans. Barbara Fasting (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 12) Helen Marshall, “‘Lothly Things Thai Weren Alle’: *Imagining Horror in the Late Middle Ages*,” in *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature: The Critical Influence of H.P. Lovecraft*, ed. Sean Moreland (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 101–26.
- 13) Joel Gereboff, “Judaism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, ed. John Corrigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 95–110; Françoise Mirguet, “The Study of Emotions in Early Jewish Texts: Review and Perspectives,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 50 (2019): 557–603.
- 14) Ilaria Briata, “Repentance through Fear: Cosmic and Body Horror in *Shevet Musar*,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 14 (2020): 264–84.

bilities for artistic interpretation. However, it was not our intention to approach these three realms as distinct and impenetrable monads that reflect monolithic aspects of *musar* as a cultural phenomenon. On the contrary, we understood these pivotal notions as being closely intertwined. Both *musar* and arts can be regarded as cultural factors in the process of conceptual and/or expressive translation that have the potential to connect authors/artists and the public via a bijective act of emotional performance. At large, the thematic areas of translation, performativity, and emotion should offer the opportunity to contribute to a broader acknowledgement of moral instruction and the formation of conscience as a universal aspect of the human experience.

The Artworks

The intersection of translation, performativity, and emotion transpires from the artworks created by the five artists-in-residence and the writer-in-residence involved in the Mus|ar|t program. In the first place, translation was an indispensable medium through which to approach *musar* materials, concepts, and practices via artistic means. In individual research-based creative processes, early modern sources were selected, investigated, and interpreted while taking into account the linguistic variety in which they were disseminated throughout the centuries—not only Hebrew, but also Judeo-Arabic and Yiddish, up to contemporary translations into English and German. In the second place, artistic renditions of *musar* themselves put forward an additional level of translation, both linguistic, when dealing with multilingual interplay, and intermedial, when converting early modern textual inputs into abstract painting, comics, sound installation, video performance, and spoken word. Alongside translation into currently relatable and relevant languages, this shift in media—from printed Hebrew word to image, sound, material object, and performative act—facilitated the communication of remote and unfamiliar concepts to the public, bypassing a lack of background knowledge of *musar* by means of emotional immediacy rather than informational didacticism.

The context for display provided by ZK/U played a major role in the knowledge transfer. On the one hand, the Openhaus format

allowed the artists to present not only their completed projects, but also the research and creation process behind them. On the other, the audience was invited not only to meet the artists and inquire about their work, but also to interact with the artworks, intervening in the installations and expressing their thoughts as part of the exhibition setting. In this sense, the intersection of art and *musar* became a collective transcultural and intermedial experience; in a way, *musar* was turned into performance, both educational and creative, accessible to different levels of interpretation and interaction.

Leor Grady's project *Marginalia* was inspired by one of the founding texts of *musar*, *Hovot ha-Levavot* [*The Duties of Hearts*] by Bahya ibn Paquda (Zaragoza, eleventh century). In fact, it would be better to say that the artistic rendition was prompted by a book rather than a text: that is, a volume retrieved from a used bookstore—leafed through, read, consulted, and contemplated by an anonymous reader, as evidenced by underlining and annotations in the body of the text and the four margins of the page. These marks traced over the printed pages were re-traced and overlaid on transparent sheets, chapter by chapter, so as to compose a compendium of the reading experience on the abstracted space of an anti-palimpsest. Along with its discursive content, the book itself, as an object and a medium of cultural transmission, uncovers the footprints of the material process of knowledge acquisition, which the artists further abstracted into blue-washed polygons acting as a blueprint for the multilayered architecture of textual interpretation.

The textual content and discursive value of early modern mystical *musar* was the focus of the multimedia installation created by Boris Jöns, *A Soft Tongue Breaks the Bone*. Two sets of wooden panes with quotations from the treatise *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah* [*Gate of Prayer*] written by the Lurianic kabbalist Hayyim Vital (1542–1620) and *Shevet Musar* by Elijah ha-Kohen Itamari (1640–1729) were arranged to form an ascending-descending ladder, which the audience was invited to climb in order to read and engage with the texts. Via an app accessible through a QR code, those present at the exhibition were able to express their reaction live, creating a collective commentary—a very “Jewish” and highly rabbinic format, as the Talmud confirms—which could be not only read projected onto the wall, but was