

temptation against which American critics, in particular, do not sufficiently caution their readers.

All in all, this is a truly excellent thesis which offers convincing evidence of Dr. Weiss's considerable abilities as a literary scholar, and the present reviewer has no significant reservations about any aspect of her argument. He does, however, have a few questions and suggestions. As pointed out above, she does justice to the various aspects of Klepfisz's identity as a writer: her place in the women's movement, her lesbianism, her Jewishness, her status as an American, Polish-born Holocaust survivor, and as a bilingual writer with a creative command of both English and Yiddish. However, she does not truly examine how these dimensions of her work interact with one another, as it is most likely that they do. For instance, in her analysis of the heartbreaking poem about the death of the *rebitsin* (the rabbi's wife), she focuses on the fact that the text "omits any direct references to romantic relationships about women" even though it narrates the simultaneous murders of two Holocaust victims in the voice of one woman caring for, and seeking to protect, another (pp. 50-1). This is a valid point; but the present reviewer is equally struck by another peculiarity of this text, namely the fact that it offers an impossible narrative, one which no living/surviving person could conceivably make (since the narrator turns out to have died at the same time as the *rebitsin*). In *The Differend* (*Le Différend*, 1983), Jean-François Lyotard examines the central paradox of all testimony about the Holocaust, namely that those who experienced its full horrors were also destroyed by it, and that survivors' accounts inevitably narrate the events from a distance as they were somehow – sometimes just barely – shielded from its worst paroxysms. How does Klepfisz's text imaginatively deal with this devastating paradox? And does its handling of it have anything to do with its treatment of caring, loving (albeit not obviously erotic) relationships between women? These are questions with which Dr. Weiss does not grapple, probably because the general structure of her argument does not permit her to do so. Thus, the real question probably has more of a bearing on Dr. Weiss's conceptual apparatus than on her reading of this particular poem; and the present reviewer wonders why she never tries to adopt an intersectional perspective, as this would have enabled her to examine how issues of antisemitism, homophobia, and sexism interact in poems that seek to deal with them simultaneously. As a Jewish, lesbian, bicultural feminist, Klepfisz would

contentious topics as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are mentioned, as they inevitably are in discussions of the context in which Klepfisz wrote her most significant works. Dr. Weiss unfailingly manages to deal with these issues without discounting the seriousness of the underlying issues, yet without ever taking a partisan tack or resorting to undue simplifications. This is particularly commendable as it shows that Dr. Weiss is able to establish and maintain the right degree of critical distance, one which allows her to take the full measure of complex subjects while seeing it as her primary duty to shed light on her writer's own views and put them in the correct historical perspective. In this respect, her work is truly exemplary, and less experienced scholars could greatly benefit from her expert guidance.

In addition, Dr. Weiss shows that she is fully aware of the literary dimension of Klepfisz's work. This is brilliantly demonstrated by a succession of close textual analyses which logically culminates in Section III, where Dr. Weiss discusses Klepfisz's interest in, and creative use of, Yiddish. The present reviewer views this as an especially important point and wishes to make it clear that this is, in his opinion, one of the greatest qualities of this thesis. Considering that Klepfisz has been actively involved throughout her life in political and ideological debates of great complexity and interest, a less sensitive reader might have been tempted to approach her work exclusively from the standpoint of intellectual history and to foreground Klepfisz's ideas at the expense of the writing in which she expresses them poetically. Dr. Weiss rightly shies away from such a dangerously reductive approach; instead, she shows with great clarity that language itself, the material properties of words, their emotional associations, and questions of translation and transliteration are the true focus of Klepfisz's attention. Equally at home in, and alienated from, her two main languages – English and Yiddish – Klepfisz occupies the uneasy position of the translator whose task consists in establishing avenues of communication between various traditions and modes of expression, and who understands that the true site of literary creativity lies in the distance between languages – the gap opened up, or perhaps merely revealed, by the inaccuracies noted by Dr. Weiss as she fascinatingly compares Klepfisz's renderings of Yiddish phrases with the originals. The detailed reading of the poem entitled "Royal Pearl" (pp. 122-4) is another excellent example of Dr. Weiss's beautifully sensitive handling of textual detail. Again, her work is exemplary in this respect, as she resists a

responsibility to rise to the challenge posed by her multilayered, multidimensional writings. Dr. Weiss is fully aware of this difficulty, as shown by the general structure of her thesis. Section I focuses on the manner Klepfisz positioned herself as a lesbian, Jewish feminist at a time (the 1970s) when the rise of Black feminism called into question “the universalist politics of the women’s movement” (p. 13), Jewish women denounced the antisemitism present within it, and lesbians had to contend with the homophobia evident in the writings and public utterances of major feminists such as Betty Friedan. In Section II, “Inhospitable Soils: Geography and History,” Dr. Weiss studies Klepfisz’s contribution to Holocaust literature, showing how the poet’s position as a “1.5 generation” Holocaust survivor – one who was alive at the time of the Holocaust, but who was “too young to have an adult understanding of what was happening” (p. 85) – sheds light on her ability to convey the horror of the genocide in terms that neither trivialize it nor allow the American reader to feel falsely remote from it (p. 83). Finally, Section III, “Language as a Metaphorical Homeland,” examines the question of multilingualism in Klepfisz’s writings, simultaneously echoing Hana Wirth-Nesher’s contention that Yiddish serves as a “homeland” for American Jews (p. 130), and emphasizing that Klepfisz only started using it actively after she emigrated to the United States in 1949: when she realized that Jewish culture had been destroyed in her native Poland, she decided to “shelter in [her] what was left,” hence her bilingual approach to poetry (p. 138). Overall, the thesis more than rises to the challenge; it deftly paints a rich and complex picture of a writer who does not sharply distinguish aesthetics from ethics and who views her work as a form of *tikkun olam*, ie. as a way of repairing the world, a central concern of Judaism.

Throughout, Dr. Weiss displays her excellent command of history, literature, and literary criticism; she also demonstrates how useful these disciplines are, thus expertly handled, in shedding light on Klepfisz’s suggestive, elliptical writing. Dr. Weiss’s ability to draw extensively on numerous sources from several different fields and her awareness of the tensions arising from Klepfisz’s sometimes paradoxical position at various difficult intersections are elegantly reflected in her nuanced and subtle argument, which invariably manages to handle sensitive questions with remarkable clarity and tact. The history of American feminism has been marked by a succession of heated debates, and the temptation to polemicize is always present whenever such

**REPORT ON THE HABILITATION THESIS
 SUBMITTED BY DR. MICHAELA WEISS**

Prof. Mathieu DUPLAY
 Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7
 France

The Habilitation thesis submitted by Dr. Michaela Weiss has a lot to recommend it.

The first, and most obvious, of its qualities is the choice of subject. Dr. Weiss has chosen to focus on Irena Klepfisz (b. 1941), a Polish-born, American lesbian poet and Yiddishist whose bilingual writings are often concerned with Holocaust-related issues. Despite its remarkable elegance and depth, Klepfisz's verse has not so far received the attention it deserves from academic critics, and Dr. Weiss's thesis is therefore a very welcome contribution to a hitherto neglected area of American literary scholarship. As far as the present reviewer knows, Dr. Weiss's monograph on Klepfisz is the first of its kind, and it therefore deserves to be hailed as truly ground-breaking; it fulfills one of the primary duties of research as it draws attention to a poorly known author, intelligently engages with some of the crucially important issues she raises throughout her works, and thereby assists in the production of new, valuable knowledge. It is to be hoped that other scholars will follow in Dr. Weiss's footsteps and further explore a poetic *oeuvre* whose centrality and influence may have been severely underestimated until now, at least in the opinion of the present reviewer.

Klepfisz's importance as a writer is largely accounted for by her position at the crossroads where otherwise diverse literary, political, cultural, and linguistic traditions come together. This raises the stakes for the scholar who must therefore adopt an interdisciplinary approach and combine very different methodologies without relying for help on the writer herself, who is not interested in such matters. As Dr. Weiss points out at the beginning of her thesis, Klepfisz "does not pay attention to theoretical discussions" (p. 1). The complexity of her work is the complexity of life itself, and she therefore feels no need to explain, let alone justify on theoretical grounds, the various strands of her identity or the richness of her poetic voice; on the contrary, it is theory's

appear to be a prime subject for such a study, and it would be fascinating to see what fresh insights could result from it. On another level, it is necessary to point out that the thesis is written in clear, readable English, but that it sometimes fails to sound completely idiomatic. Thus, a careful revision would be in order before it is published, as it fully deserves to be.

To sum up, this is an excellent thesis, and although the present reviewer has a few comments and suggestions, he has no significant objection to any aspect of Dr. Weiss's cogent and illuminating argument. He is therefore very strongly in favor of awarding her the Habilitation for which she has applied.

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