

But are these the dominant strains of our political or philosophical moment? Reading this one thinks of Nick Bostrom, the Oxford advocate of “transhumanism”—a philosopher, if ever there was one, who believes that an “increase in human mental and technological abilities will inevitably produce a society of happier, freer individuals” (p. 32). But Bostrom has also speculated that the human race has at least a 25% chance of being extinguished before the end of the twenty-first century; even our greatest optimists, it seems, have their pessimistic side. Dienstag himself emphasizes optimism’s “Platonic form” and “enlightenment form” (p. 32)—a grouping justified on the grounds that on a certain view “rationalism *is* optimism” (p. 270). But in postmodernism’s wake, one wonders whether rationalism is the view that requires redress.

Next, is pessimism the best route to the insights it affords? Nobody likes a Pollyanna, and few will disagree that “it is surely better to live with a clear view of the world than to remain optimistic by averting one’s gaze from its fearful and terrible moments” (p. xii). Yet one worries that the pessimist’s insights are bought at the cost of blindness to much else. In particular, given his fixation on the “constant presence of death in our lives” (p. 22), there seems little room in the pessimist’s worldview (or the book’s index) for a range of experiences—virtue, friendship, love, beauty, wonder—that one suspects are hardly the exclusive province of hopelessly blinkered optimists, but daily realities of great numbers. Schopenhauer worries that “life is a business that does not cover the costs” (p. 116), but pessimism may well suffer from a similar accounting problem.

Finally, how will pessimism help us meet the challenges of our present political moment? Dienstag usefully defends pessimism as a route to self-awareness. But what happens when psychology is transformed into political philosophy? We are cautioned not to confuse pessimism with cynicism, skepticism, or nihilism (p. 4). But if it requires a belief in the futility and meaningless of the world, it is hard to imagine that those who act on this belief will act toward others in ways different from nihilists. Dienstag’s hope is that the rejection of an “overarching Meaning of Life” will lead us to realize that we can create meaning for ourselves (p. 182). But there are good reasons to be pessimistic about what may happen if this doctrine emerges from the study and into the streets.

Dienstag’s study of Don Quixote concludes with the observation that “to be unique is to be different from all the rest, and to follow one’s own law is necessarily to run afoul of the laws of the community” (p. 223). The observation is apt. Dienstag’s own book is not just a study in political theory but a challenge to its contemporary practice, and for this he deserves our gratitude. His resuscitation of the aphorism, his recovery of philosophy as a way of life, his reorientation of the trajectory of modern polit-

ical thought—all of this is bold, original, and admirable. In light of such achievements, one hesitates to say he should have done more. But as it stands, the cost of entry to the normative argument is an acceptance of several propositions that will strike some as self-evidently true and others as self-evidently false, including the beliefs that the world offers only “disappointment and boredom” (p. 58); that “the condition of unsatisfied desire is the true constant in our lives” (p. 96); that life is characterized by “the agony of ordinary human existence and the inescapability of it” (p. 133); that strength is a capacity “to tolerate the meaninglessness of life” (p. 178); that sexuality is at its core a “violation of the self” (p. 189); and that “the prospect of a world of constant flux and chaos” should be welcomed (p. 197). *Pessimism* masterfully demonstrates the centrality of these claims to a diverse range of thinkers, but a different sort of book would be necessary to convince the skeptic that such postulates are preferable to hope.

Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge. By Roxanne L. Euben.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 330p. \$29.95.

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— Susan McWilliams, *Pomona College*

Travel narratives, as Mikhail Bakhtin once noted, have a dialogic quality. Putting the unfamiliar into conversation with the familiar, they have the capacity to deepen our understanding of each. Travelers themselves have a third voice in this exchange, at times standing in each culture but never becoming located completely in either. At their best, then, travel narratives reflect multiple positions, connect multiple traditions, and speak to multiple audiences. They transgress the boundaries that most people take as given or fixed, and in the resulting blur of borders, they open new conceptual and imaginative spaces.

In those ways, Roxanne Euben’s book exemplifies the highest virtues of the travel-narrative form. For hers is not only an investigation into the intellectual linkages between travel and knowledge but also an example of the ways in which those linkages operate; she both discusses and practices theorizing through comparison. Each of the three central chapters couples a text regarded as canonical to Western political thought with a text from the Arabic literary genre of *rihla* (books that recount travels, particularly those undertaken in the pursuit of knowledge). Within and around these striking comparisons, Euben develops a series of arguments that speak across many of the conventional boundaries—or, rather, conceits—of contemporary academic and political life.

The strongest and most arresting of these comparative analyses is in the book’s fourth chapter, which sets Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi next to Alexis de Tocqueville. At first it seems that al-Tahtawi, a young man appointed *imam* for an Egyptian student mission to Paris in 1826, shares little

with Tocqueville. Their works differ in “background, genre, discipline, and reception,” acknowledges Euben. But they share a stake in claiming the authority of pedagogical *theoria*, she contends, the notion that one may travel to far-away places “in search of political wisdom to bring home” (p. 91).

From there, Euben employs al-Tahtawi and Tocqueville in a project of mutual enrichment. It becomes clear that together, they both reflect a world slowly transforming “by an increasing *awareness* of regions and peoples separated by vast oceans and thousands of miles” (p. 97). Both men, as such, are concerned not merely with changes across space but also with changes across time. They share ambivalences about what they view, being at once skeptical and appreciative of the possibilities that a changing world might offer—though they do not ever express skepticism about their own mode of seeing.

In the book’s fifth chapter, Euben extends her own view to include questions of gender in the travel genre. Here the comparison is between Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* and Sayyida Salme’s *Memoirs*, and the claim is that both texts confound “the coding of travel and travel writing as heroic, masculine, Western, and scientific” (pp. 16–17). Moreover, both challenge the notion that only certain genres, like philosophical treatises, “count” as political theory, whereas other genres, like novels and memoirs, do not.

These are compelling claims, and Euben’s defense of them tends toward the masterful. But while she devotes an extensive portion of this chapter to Salme’s exilic experiences of nostalgia, dislocation, and permanent homesickness, she relegates to a footnote the fact that Montesquieu’s character Usbek also suffers the pains of exile. (Early in the *Letters*, Usbek confides to a friend that the “real reason” for his journey is self-preservative; surrounded by political enemies, he told the king that he wanted to instruct himself in Western knowledge as a pretext for getting out of town.) In Euben’s telling, Usbek is a man who sets off on a “heroic adventure, an ennobling quest” whose ultimate despair is occasioned primarily by his wives’ revolt (p. 146). This contrasts with the book’s picture of Salme as haunted by her “life of permanent fragmentation and dislocation” (p. 159). If, though, we read Usbek and Salme as victims of the same exilic blade, they may complicate more than associations of travel and gender. For they suggest, in line with Euben’s broader analysis, that one cannot separate a world in which long-distance travel is possible from a world in which exile—both forced and self-imposed—is frequent. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between a seeker and a flier, if there is a distinct difference between the two in the first place.

Both of these chapters—and a prior juxtaposition of Herodotus with the fourteenth-century Maghribi traveler Ibn Battuta—fall between a sweeping analysis of present-day scholarly and political concerns. Euben begins both

her first and final chapters by speaking about globalization, and reminds us that this process has a long history and is “not merely the product of the spread of Western cultural and economic power throughout the globe” (p. 175). In that light, current debates about cosmopolitanism seem dangerously ahistoric and provincial, emphasizing as they do dominant Western ideals while ignoring the disenfranchisements and power inequalities that are an inextricable part of the package. This observation overlaps with another of Euben’s insights into the narrowness of contemporary political understandings, which take a view of Islam as both a singular and insular entity or which suppose an easy dichotomy of “Islam versus the West” (p. 5).

Strikingly, Euben does not fall into the trap of limiting these critiques to “ordinary” citizens or political practitioners. She connects them to the failings of political theorists who, too confident in their own mode of vision—its increasing specializations, its canons, its favored forms—neglect to see its limitations. They are thus kin to Tocqueville and al-Tahtawi, quick to see the privileges of a traveler’s position but quicker to ignore its weaknesses and exclusions. To pull all of these strands together is to arrive at an astonishing place: If political theory rests on comparison, and if comparison depends upon translation, and translation has necessary imperfections, then theory, like the travel narrative, is “transformative if inevitably flawed” (p. 15).

In this book, Euben offers the rare pleasure of seeing a political theorist practice as she preaches. By blurring so many familiar edges and thus opening so many new possibilities for thought, she takes us on what can only be called an enlightening journey.

Naming Evil, Judging Evil. Edited by Ruth W. Grant. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 232p. \$35.00.
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Interdisciplinarity is much praised and rarely practiced. Too often, it boils down to a sociologist adding a few anthropological works to a bibliography, or a geographer applying for a political science grant. The ideal of learning from and engaging with other intellectual traditions and conceptualizations is easily lost.

Ruth Grant’s collection, *Naming Evil, Judging Evil*, however, demonstrates what interdisciplinarity can achieve when done for its own sake. In bringing together a variety of scholars from Duke University, Grant encourages an extensive discussion of a central concept in political theory. This results in a reflective and engaged discourse, one that is never undisciplined but that productively strains across the various interlocutors’ backgrounds.

The concept is that of evil—for many moderns a troublesome if not potentially archaic concept. More than one essay mentions the difficulty of coming to terms with