reevaluates Emerson's relation to history by closely reading, in the shifting movement of his language, an attempt to remain faithful to the fugacity of historical existence.

And as with Emerson and Benjamin, these words of light are no easy read. The conceptual comprehensiveness that one must forego in reading this work, however, is redeemed by the comprehension of Benjamin's problematization of conceptualizations of history, language, thought. Tracing the "physiognomy" of Benjamin's imagistic thought, Cadava faithfully attends to the difficult engagement of Benjamin's theory with history. With Benjamin, this kind of critical translation offers a reader the best approach to his writing, as Peter Demetz argues in the introduction to Reflectio*ns*, one of the standard collections of Benjamin's essays. "It is not a matter of reducing distances," he suggests, "but of keeping them, and in confronting Benjamin we should not try to diminish or explain away what is strange, difficult, and a productive provocation." Cadava's reading is productive but no less difficult, providing an appropriate lens with which to view this provocative thinker.

Benjamin's critical influence is sure only to increase with Harvard University Press' current publication of a projected four volume series of nearly all of his work translated into English, much of it for the first time. It is in view of Benjamin's interdisciplinary appeal to cultural, literary, and philosophical studies that Words of Light makes its most considerable contribution. Cadava offers readers insight into a certain history of Benjamin's thought that links the representational technologies of word and image, as well as a theory of how that thought, like a photographic negative, might be reproduced. Cadava's compelling "theses on the photography of history" provide the image *of* and *in* Benjamin's ideas that will remain crucial to such investigations.

Sean Meehan

Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy. By Marianna Torgovnick. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. 270 pages. $26.00.

As I sat in a favorite cafe the other day perusing Marianna Torgovnick's new work, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy*, a waiter—not mine—stopped to examine the cover and ask me about the book's contents. It seems the cover itself, as eroticized as the book's title, immediately demands an audience. Does the book measure up to its cover? Yes and no. Certainly Torgovnick furnishes sufficient credentials. A professor of English at Duke University and author of *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* and *Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian American Daughter*, she has established authorial authority.

Her latest work undertakes an examination of our attraction to what

Torgovnick labels the "primitive," a word now suspect and overly determined (but no fault of Torgovnick's), and our unabated desire to merge with it. Torgovnick explains that, traditionally, "the primitive" has represented a more intimate relationship with nature, a more amorphous and inclusive sexuality (here termed the "oceanic"), and a deep-seated link to the life force, Eros vs. Thanatos. Torgovnick also believes that it is "the sign and symbol of desires the West has sought to repress," which further "functions today as a medium for spiritual expression." According to her, we turn toward the primitive when conventional religious institutions have failed us because it offers "a channel for spirituality outside of organized religion...one route in a quest for ecstatic contact with the essence of life." But "[t]he heart of this book," she informs us, "is the phenomenon of merging, as it plays itself out through primitivism in contemporary culture."

She begins with the self-evident assertion that men and women respond differently to the primitive, citing writers (D.H. Lawrence, Andrew Gide, Isak Dinesen, Beryl Markham, Kiki Gallmann), psychoanalysts (Freud and Jung), anthropologists (Dian Fossey, Jane Goodell,) artists (Georgia O'Keeffe), and explorers (Mary Kingsley). The female principle often coded "primitive" and historically associated with women allows them, it would appear, to remain more comfortable with their "primitive" side. Torgovnick is no essentialist, however. Women are not more drawn to the ecstatic because of any biological imperative, she argues, but because Western society has privileged ownership, civilization, individuality (masculinity) at the expense of community and spontaneity (femininity).

For men, Torgovnick asserts, the primitive both attracts and repels. The surrendering of self–the merge into the "oceanic" means loss of power and control and can be both deeply intoxicating and profoundly threatening. Jung and Gide were fascinated by the African landscape, its peoples and their sexual openness, but they were also deeply unsettled by them. Women, on the other hand, are more inclined to celebrate the primitive. Even–or perhaps especially–female orgasm, which "occurs as an overflow, a dissolution of boundaries–an oceanic experience" corresponds intimately with it. What makes men squirm, women embrace. In one section, in keeping with women's willing acceptance of the primitive, Torgovnick rereads the Freudian death wish as an almost heroic acceptance of isolation in order to achieve intimacy. This may or may not be the case. But putting a positive spin on Freud's explanation of female sexuality is always welcome.

One of the most interesting, and yet most problematic sections, is devoted to Dian Fossey, the late anthropologist who studied the great apes of Rwanda. So profoundly moved did Fossey become by the gorillas' plight, so sympathetic was she to the gorillas' culture, that she shamanistically "became" the animal. In doing so, she reduced or eliminated the scientific "masculine" insistence upon objectivity and non-intervention and went "primitive." When Torgovnick attempts to understand Fossey's tragic and murderous end, however, through a somewhat questionable psychological reading of the scientist's ill-fated attraction to the primitive, she treads on shaky academic ground.

Torgovnick herself admits that her representation of Fossey is flawed by a psychological bias and dubious sources, and so it is. But her reading of the anthropologist is still compelling, if for no other reason then it elicits controversy.

In her explanation of the primitive, Torgovnick explores places that have been generally associated with it–Africa, Asia, the South Pacific, the American Southwest–and moves us right into the '90s to examine the way in which the accouterments of modern society have diminished it. She contends that the men's mythopoetic movement, New Agers, and genital piercing all contain within them the desire to recapture the primitive, denied us by Western society. The chapter on genital piercing is perhaps the most provocative, as Torgovnick produces a blow-by-blow account of the self-inflicted, video-recorded penile piercing performance artist Monte Cazazza. Her chapter on New Agers, however, seems somehow insubstantial, but perhaps that is the very essence of New Ageism itself. On the other hand, her reading of movies such as Dances with Wolves and The Last of the Mohicans, which exemplify the manner in which the primitive has seeped into popular culture, is evenly balanced and generously non-dismissive of our cultural longings, however foolishly they are sometimes played out. Indeed, Torgovnick never denounces our quest to rediscover the primitive, although she does argue, rightly so, that the Western appropriation of Native American traditions, which has arisen because of our desire to recapture the ecstatic, misrepresents these multitudinous cultures and does nothing to help us better understand them.

What makes *Primitive Passions* so absorbing is that it can be easily enjoyed outside the academy. If nothing more, it's a great conversation starter. That waiter returned later to ask more about the book and show me a magic trick done with a quarter. Amusing. But I didn't invite him to my table. Marianna Torgovnick, on the other hand, I'd love to lunch with. An appetizer of female orgasm and the primitive over soup and coffee. Now, there's something I'd like to give myself up to.

Lezlie Hall

Jane Austen: A Life. By David Nokes. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997. 578 pages. $35.00.

For contemporary biographers, Jane Austen presents a considerable challenge. Personal papers and letters illuminate portions of her life, but her successful efforts to efface evidence from some of the more eventful (and no doubt intriguing) years in her life results in gaping voids–holes which biographers have traditionally filled by relying on Austen's revisionary familial biographers, who created the mythical 'Aunt Jane' persona. In the new Jane Austen: A Life, David Nokes clearly follows the lead of Austen scholar Deborah Kaplan