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Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History by Eduardo Cadava

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Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History. By Eduardo Cadava. Princeton UP, 1997. 224 pages. 30 halftones. \$29.95.

"The true picture of the past flits by," Walter Benjamin writes in his "Theses on the Concept of History": "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." These are the words Eduardo Cadava situates as an epigraph to his remarkable new book, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*. With an eye to the thought and manner with which Cadava illuminates Benjamin's concept of history in relation to his "persistent recourse to the language of photography," we could also view this epigraph as the book's caption.

As Cadava shows, that recourse to photographic language reflects Benjamin's interest in the practice of photography as well as the historical implications of the image, a language evident most explicitly in essays such as "A Short History of Photography" and Benjamin's widely influential "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The thrust of Cadava's thesis, however, argues that Benjamin's practical and historical interest in photography is "inseparable from his more philosophical and political interests in the medium." For Benjamin, and in Benjamin, as Cadava shows, the language of photography, as in the picture of the past, also flashes up in a figurative register, a photography of language through which we can speak, write, and understand history. "Benjamin's use of the language of photography," Cadava argues, "in the *Theses* and elsewhere, coincides with his conviction that the image must be understood as historical, and also with his more radical suggestion that history be conceived as imagistic." The photographic history of the image, for Benjamin, thus corresponds with the imagistic nature of history, a relation that Cadava traces throughout Benjamin's writing and calls the photography of history.

It is Cadava's own more radical suggestion, and the most telling aspect of his book, to read Benjamin's suggestive language suggestively. If the true picture of Benjamin's concept of history is as fugitive as the image to which it relates—Cadava, for example, identifies Benjamin's fragmentary, thetic method of writing as a "photograph in prose"—then how best to seize it? Cadava's answer is this work's considerable invention. He confronts the concept of history Benjamin addresses by reproducing it in his reading; using the figure it also traces, *Words of Light* offers, as the author puts it in his preface, "a series of photographs, snapshots in prose of Benjamin's own words of light." The book is thus comprised of a series of twenty-eight brief chapters on concepts such as "History," "Reproducibility," "Reflections," and "Death." Within each we find piercing and reflective explorations of these concepts rather than comprehensive description. The language remains as fierce and intense as Benjamin's: "For Benjamin, history happens when something becomes present in passing away, when something lives in its death. . . . History happens with photography." One observes a similar approach at work in his other book, *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Stanford UP, 1997), in which Cadava

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 *Reflections*, 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 Intellectuals, 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