texts written by those in power, as in the Crèvecoeur example, it is viewed as "symptom"; when found in works written by those victimized by social and historical conditions, it looks more like "strategy" (as in her discussion of Alcott, 123). Thus, by "parodying the gothic" in Cassy's "Authentic Ghost Story," "Stowe's narrative undercuts its relation to actual incidents"; thereby the "reader is exempted from the horrors of history" (144). But Douglass and Jacobs are said to succeed in avoiding a "dematerialization" of the "event" of slavery through the "factual" tone (139, 148) of their descriptions of horror, as though such a tone were not itself conventional. *Gothic America* has many moments of interpretive finesse, but in its unreadiness to be genuinely thrown off balance by the discursive production of history, it is certainly "enabled," but also somewhat "constrained," by the contemporary conventions of Americanist literary criticism.

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The Peculiarity of Literature: An Allegorical Approach to Poe's Fiction. **By Jeffrey DeShell. Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press. 1997. 176 pp. $32.50.**

This book uses the example of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction to argue that Poe's writing, and literature in general, is "peculiar"; that is, it defies the efforts of conventional methods of interpretation to make it meaningful in terms other than its own. Jeffrey DeShell grounds his defense of the subversive nature of literature in the writings of Walter Benjamin about the fallen nature of language and the impossibility of finding ideal truth or beauty there. The "allegorical approach" noted in DeShell's subtitle incorporates Benjamin's sense of allegory as a method that reads one text through another. To Benjamin (and to DeShell) the only appropriate use of allegory—or of criticism itself, for which it is the model—is to reveal fragments of "pure language" and ideas, not to arrive at truth.

Using the fiction of Poe to stand in for the subversiveness of all literature, DeShell describes three contemporary critical practices that support Benjamin's views and help preserve the strangeness of Poe's writing: Geoffrey Galt Harpham's theories of the grotesque, Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of the fantastic, and Paul de Man's rhetorical deconstruction. DeShell also critiques interpretations of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and other works by Poe that disallow the indeterminacy of Poe's fiction, and he places his own reading of "The Purloined Letter" in the context of the debate on this text between Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. He faults Lacan for violating his own model of the endless deferment of the Other by privileging the "truth" of Freud's writing over Poe's text in his analysis of the story. DeShell's own analysis argues convincingly that "The Purloined Letter" is a self-conscious exercise in using the detective story as an illustration of the "crime of fiction": "This site of the crime, which is a crime of framing, effacing, limiting, and

expanding, is a crime of fiction. . . . Dupin is, above all, a reader: he deciphers texts" (108). In the final chapter DeShell looks at several of Poe's stories that deal with the theme of death in the context of Maurice Blanchot's *Death Sentence*, which explores the relationship between language and death. DeShell draws a connection between translating, dying, and writing—familiar motifs in Poe. He shows, finally, that Poe's fiction is powerful because we see there "language constantly working to get beyond itself; it is speech constantly attempting to articulate the unspeakable and unimaginable" (144).

While Poe is clearly used as a vehicle for a larger argument in this study, DeShell offers both a carefully thought-out defense of Benjamin's approach towards language and an imaginative and convincing way to approach the work of Poe himself. This study is an important addition to the discussions of Poe's work that have had such high visibility in theory circles since the 1970s.

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What Thoreau Said: "Walden" and the Unsayable. **By William C. Johnson Jr. Moscow: Univ. of Idaho Press. 1991. xviii, 172 pp. $15.95.**

William C. Johnson Jr. interprets *Walden* not as the diary of "an aesthetic sensualist" interested in physical experience, nor as a practical guide to Emerson's transcendental doctrines, but as "a textual expression of a subject (author/reader) finding itself in its object (world/text)—a process Thoreau at one point calls 'holiness groping for expression'" (69). To support this phenomenological treatment of *Walden*, Johnson carefully outlines Thoreau's "fronting view" (35–45) as a nondualistic, relational seeing in which "components of human perception and factual essence merge" (43) to reveal that the material, scientific view and the spiritual view are complementary components of the knower's perceptual act. Johnson therefore argues that *Walden* is a hermeneutic text because it trains and strengthens the reader's perceptions as it is read and "incorporates the problem of interpretation into its very method and fabric," becoming "a book about interpretation, even as it interprets" (xii).

Thoreau's epigraph states that he wanted to "wake [his] neighbors up." For Johnson, that awakening, available to every reader of *Walden*, is from the slumber of literal perception and coarse sensuality to a recognition that perception incorporates imagination in "an active, habitually renewable, event" (55). Johnson contends that Thoreau based his phenomenology of perception on passages from Coleridge's *Theory of Life* that he had copied verbatim into a notebook. The passages concern polarity as a "generative power operative throughout nature and the human mind" that works through a "reciprocal interplay of mind and object" and an "interplay of fact and spirit" in the act of perception (58–59). Johnson bolsters his case with Owen Barfield's work on Coleridge to suggest that Thoreau, like Coleridge, developed a theory of the