

Poe and Antebellum Writers

Presiding: Amy Branam Armiento, Frostburg State Univ.

1. "Dancing with Cholera: Poe and Nathaniel Parker Willis," Sarah Schuetze, Univ. of Wisconsin-Green Bay
2. "Poe, Hawthorne, and Detective Fiction as Mediated through Borges," Emron Esplin, Brigham Young Univ., UT
3. "'Poor Poe, You Know, Was a Bohemian': Whitman, Poe, and the Bohemians of Antebellum New York," Edward Whitley, Lehigh Univ.

Respondent: Barbara Cantalupo, Penn State Univ., Lehigh Valley

Abstracts

Dancing with Cholera: Poe and Nathaniel Parker Willis

Upon reaching the U.S. 1832, cholera seemed to step directly onto the pages of American serial publications as a sensationalized, fear-inducing character in the popular press. Cholera's movement, particularly its ability to cross the Atlantic after devastating Europe, inspired numerous imaginative representations of the disease as a supernatural creature, able to permeate a fortified structure, assume human form, and vanish only after first exposing all to its poison—a representation that Poe's reinvented with his figure of the walking pestilence in the "Masque of the Red Death." Poe wrote four stories that relate to cholera and seem to invoke the same dread mixed with delight that could be found in cholera writing in popular periodicals in 1832. Accounts, poems, warnings, reports, advice, and stories written in the voice of cholera proliferated during those epidemic months. One publication, the *New York Mirror*, published a column written by Nathaniel Parker Willis entitled "First Impressions of Europe," which gave first-hand accounts of cholera in Paris. In this essay, I look at Willis's influence on Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" as an example of Poe's engagement with the many authors of 1832-cholera writing, one of the peak years in Poe's short story production. I argue that like Willis and other cholera authors, Poe dabbled with a particularly provocative form of fear in writing fearsome stories about cholera because fear was believed to actually initiate a cholera infection. Thus, these captivating stories were believed to threaten readers' bodies even as it delighted them.

Poe, Hawthorne, and Detective Fiction as Mediated Through Borges

In his praise for Edgar Allan Poe as the father of modern detective fiction, Ellery Queen looks back to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe" as a precursor to the genre and cites Vincent Starrett, who argues that Hawthorne's tale "comes close to being a detective story in the purest sense." To bolster Starrett's claim, Queen then cites Poe's second review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in which Poe applauds this story. However, what Queen implies—that Poe's praise for this tale somehow connects it to detective fiction—Poe's review does not even suggest. Poe did not, in fact, could not, see the seeds of the detective genre in "Higginbotham" because the genre did not yet exist, not even in the mind of its inventor who had already published "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and who was writing "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" at the very time he published this review of Hawthorne. Twentieth-century readers, not Hawthorne's contemporaries, see the germ of detective fiction in "Higginbotham"—an otherwise somewhat failed attempt at local color, vernacular, and humor—because they have been trained in the genre from the very time they learned to read.

One of the most important readers to find detective elements in "Higginbotham" is the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges who anthologized a translation of the story as "La muerte repetida" in a now famous book he co-edited with Adolfo Bioy Casares in 1943. In this paper, I analyze how Borges's decision to anthologize "Higginbotham" as the lead story in *Los mejores cuentos policiales* turns Poe's contemporary into his precursor and writes Hawthorne into the history of modern-day literature's most ubiquitous genre.

"Poor Poe, you know, was a Bohemian":

Whitman, Poe, and the Bohemians of Antebellum New York

In the 1855 short story "The Bohemian," the Irish American fiction writer Fitz-James O'Brien has one of his characters lament the poverty-stricken career of "poor Poe, you know, who was a Bohemian." During Poe's lifetime, the bohemianism of Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851) had not yet made its way to the United States, meaning that his poverty, alcoholism, conflicts with the marketplace, and commitment to literary art were not seen as part of a larger effort to bring Parisian counter-culture across the Atlantic. For O'Brien and many of the other writers who gathered at Charles Pfaff's Manhattan beer cellar, however, Poe was considered the original American bohemian. Walt Whitman was a regular at Pfaff's during the late 1850s and early 1860s, and his enduring relationship with the life and legacy of Poe was intimately connected to the New York bohemian scene. As Eliza Richards has recently demonstrated, Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (1860) emerged from the bohemians' frequent improvisations on Poe's "The Raven" (see "Poe's Lyrical Media: The Raven's Returns," in *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture*, Louisiana State UP, 2012).

But Whitman's complex relationship with Poe and the bohemians continued well into the 1870s and 80s as the aging Whitman regularly returned to Poe at a number of pivotal moments that he saw as crucial to defining his place in American literary history. This presentation will consider Whitman's attendance at the 1875 dedication of the Poe Memorial in Baltimore, as well as his spirited defense of Poe during the late 1880s. In both instances, Whitman's former bohemian

comrades (William Winter and Richard Henry Stoddard, respectively) had attempted to claim for themselves the right to assume the title either of Poe's lineal heir or of his most accomplished interpreter. Whitman's responses reveal not only Poe's enduring presence in his life, but what Poe meant as an American bohemian *avant la lettre* to Whitman's understanding of quintessentially bohemian concerns: the sacredness of art, the artist's relationship to the marketplace, and the fickle nature of fame.