

Presentiments



Johanna Ortner's discovery of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's long-missing first collection of verse, published under her maiden name, "Watkins," invites us to reconsider much of what we thought we knew about her life and writing. Of course, we could easily proceed without rethinking much of anything. Historians have been aware of this volume at least since William Still mentioned it in his encyclopedic 1872 history *The Underground Railroad*. At this point, we could simply slot this volume into the hole left for it in the bibliographical record and treat it as a set of warm-up exercises for her later, celebrated career as an antislavery poet, lecturer, novelist, and reformer. However, the belated unearthing of these poems—long after the critical narratives through which we have come to value her writing have been formed—offers us a rare opportunity to reconsider the grounds and the shape of those narratives: to reexamine the material conditions of publication for free black writers in 1840s Baltimore, and to think anew about how the author's name organizes literary culture.

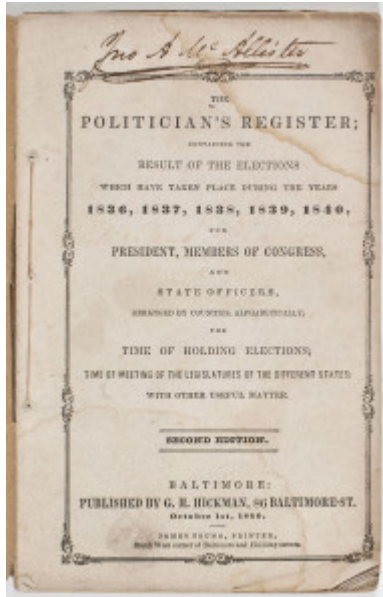


1. Title page, Frances Ellen Watkins, *Forest Leaves* (Baltimore, c. 1849). Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society [MP3.H294F]. Note the librarian's handwritten emendation: "Married a Mr. Harper."

It is not entirely clear why *Forest Leaves* was hidden in plain sight for so long in the Maryland Historical Society, but it is likely that catalogers failed to connect this antebellum collection of decorous verse to the well-known antislavery lecturer, poet, novelist, and women's rights activist Frances E.W. Harper, despite the fact that a meticulous librarian added the author's married name in pencil to both the paper wrappers and the title page (fig 1). Among other things, Ortner's discovery promises finally to clear up a misattribution that has stuck with remarkable tenacity to Harper's bibliography, despite conclusive evidence that it is erroneous. Reports of a missing volume of verse led someone, somewhere, to speculate that Harper was the author of [Eventide: A Series of Tales and Poems \(1854\)](#), published under the pseudonym "Effie Afton" (J.M. Harper registered the copyright for this volume, which may have been the source of the misattribution). [Bibliographies](#), [encyclopedias](#), and [Websites](#) have passed this error along, despite scholars' insistence that Afton's poetry, and [the riverboat](#) named after her, had nothing to do with Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

But Ortner's discovery promises to do more than put speculation about this missing volume to rest; for a while, at least, it ought to shake up our understanding of the early work of the author who was known as Frances Ellen Watkins for the first decade or more of her career as a poet and antislavery lecturer. Watkins was a name to conjure with. As Ortner notes, Frances' uncle, William Watkins, ran a prominent school for black youth in Baltimore. He helped shape William Lloyd Garrison's opposition to colonization during the years in which Garrison lived in Baltimore (Garrison moved south in 1829 to help edit Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*). William Watkins was also a frequent contributor to abolitionist periodicals under the pseudonym "[A Colored Baltimorean.](#)" Frances's cousin William J. Watkins, who moved to Boston in 1849, was also actively involved in abolitionist circles, both as a lecturer and as an editor and contributor to [Frederick Douglass's Paper](#). Though we have gathered up her early writing under the poetically appropriate name

“Harper”—the name she took when she married in 1860—it is the surname Watkins that likely opened doors for the young poet and antislavery activist.

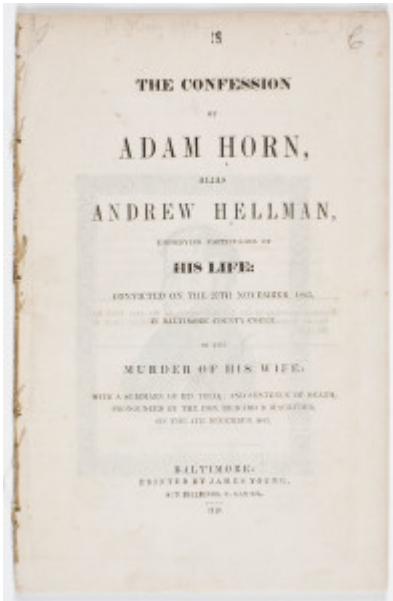


2. Title page, *The Politician's Register*, second edition, printed by James Young (Baltimore: G.H. Hickman, 1840). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Forest Leaves helps us place Frances Ellen Watkins in educated, free black Baltimore in the late 1840s at a formative time: before much of her adoptive family emigrated to Canada, before she tried her hand at teaching in Columbus, Ohio, and York, Pennsylvania, and before she settled in Philadelphia, intent on becoming a full-time antislavery activist. The printer of her slim pamphlet, James Young, published numerous titles in this inexpensive format (figs. 2, 3), mostly works commissioned by religious organizations such as the Universalist Society (*One hundred arguments in favor of Universalism*, 1841) and the Methodist Sunday School Society (*Speeches, dialogues, Scripture lessons and spiritual songs*, 1845), and by voluntary associations such as the Baltimore United Fire Department (*Charter, by-laws, rules and regulations*, 1842), the Sons of Temperance (*Proceedings of the Grand Division*, 1846), the Independent order of Odd Fellows (*General laws*, 1848), and the Baltimore Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (*Directory*, 1851).

While a collection of verse might seem unusual in this group of titles, publishing *belles lettres* in pamphlet format was more common in the antebellum United States than we have acknowledged, particularly for writers at the beginning of their careers. For instance, Edgar Allan Poe's first volume of verse, [*Tamerlane and Other Poems \(1827\)*](#)—known to collectors as one of the most valuable titles in American literature due to its rarity—was printed as a 40-page pamphlet. Poe paid a job printer, Calvin Thomas, to publish a mere 50 copies of this work. Like *Forest Leaves*, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* was deemed lost or non-existent until a copy was discovered a decade after Poe's death.

Similarly, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's first book, his travel narrative *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea* (1833-4), was published (by different printers) as a set of two pamphlets before being expanded and published in book form by Harper & Brothers in 1835. To be sure, James Young published significantly more charters, by-laws, memorials, and speeches than *belles lettres*, but he did publish at least one other volume of verse, Jennie Yates's *Fragments* (n.d.), also in pamphlet format.



3. Title page, *The Confession of Adam Horn, Alias Andrew Hellman*, printed by James Young (Baltimore, 1843). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Verse collections such as *Tamerlane* ("By a Bostonian") and *Forest Leaves* may seem to us to be sharply different from the workaday, ephemeral texts frequently published as pamphlets; we tend to let our perceptions about genre override or subsume the connotations produced by print formats. But these pamphlet collections of verse share many characteristics with the less-heralded works Young published for Baltimore religious and voluntary associations: they are informally financed, published for a commissioning society or author, and, while loosely connected to national cultural trends, they display a decidedly local or regional inflection. The relief cut of a cemetery scene (fig. 4) on the last page of *Forest Leaves* shows this shuttle between local and national culture at work. The image is probably a generic or stock illustration, but for Baltimoreans it would have invoked the relatively new [Green Mount Cemetery](#) (dedicated in 1839), a rural or garden cemetery modeled on Cambridge's Mt. Auburn. Like Watkins' *Forest Leaves*, Green Mount Cemetery was designed to awaken sensibilities and encourage contemplation. Both her verse collection and the image chosen to embellish it depend for their legibility on larger cultural trends while also pointing to the local field of their circulation. This restricted field is signaled textually by a poem such as "An Acrostic," which encodes a beloved friend's name (Adel Martin) within the conventional poetic

exercise, trading on the thrill of public intimacy. It is signaled materially by the limited print run and range of the inexpensively produced, privately printed pamphlet.

If *Forest Leaves* helps us locate the young poet Frances Ellen Watkins in time and space, the retrospective addition of these poems to her corpus unsettles the literary order in interesting and jarring ways. In his essay "What is an Author?" Michel Foucault famously distinguished between ordinary proper names and authors' names, arguing that the name of an author doesn't simply refer to a person but rather performs a "classificatory function," enabling critics to "group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others." The addition of ten "new" poems to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *oeuvre* doesn't just make her work more capacious, it changes the relationship between and among existing texts, altering the stories we tell about the nature and limits of her style, and how we use particular poems to make sense of others—what Foucault calls "reciprocal explanation." One of the more unsettling aspects of the late discovery of an early volume is its disruption of our sense of the poet's development. We suddenly have early versions of poems we have thought of as later productions, such as "Ruth and Naomi" (which appears in the extended 1857 edition of *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*) and "I Thirst," which we now know is not a new but a significantly revised poem, one recast as a dialogue between two voices for the 1872 *Sketches of Southern Life*. Stranger still, we now can identify a group of poems that the poet left behind as she placed some early poems in periodicals and gathered up and revised others for later collections. *Forest Leaves* provides an exaggerated instance of the general rule that a poet's juvenilia doesn't precede his or her major work but rather is produced as a back-projection once an author's name has been attached to a principle of style.

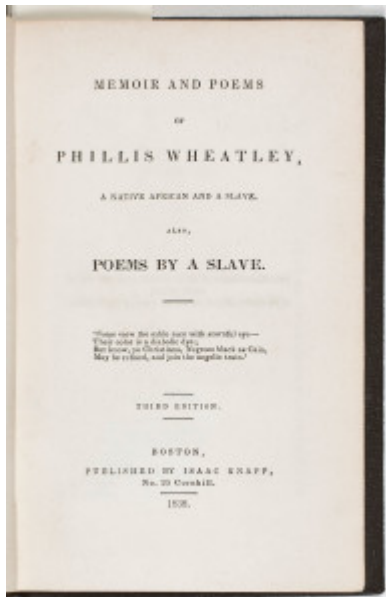


4. Graveyard image. Final page, Frances Ellen Watkins, *Forest Leaves* (Baltimore, c. 1849). Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society [MP3.H294F].

What does this reordering and resifting of poems by their history of publication tell us about the arc of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's career?

Only six of the poems from *Forest Leaves* make it into the 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, which suddenly seems less miscellaneous and more strategic, carefully designed to capitalize on the energies surrounding the ["Sisterhood of Reforms"](#): temperance, antipoverty, religious reform, and antislavery. Scholars have long noted that this second volume echoes the title of Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), but this reverberation seems more deliberate when compared to the new world pastoral invoked by *Forest Leaves*. (Interestingly, the 1838 abolitionist reprint of Wheatley's poems, bound together with those of enslaved poet George Moses Horton [fig. 5], refers to Wheatley's as "Miscellaneous Poems" on the intertitle that introduces her section of the volume [fig. 6]; this very well may have been the edition of Wheatley's poems read by the young Frances Ellen Watkins.) The "new" poems in *Forest Leaves*—that is, the poems that are new to us, those that the poet neither placed in periodicals nor included in later collections—may have been discarded because they were less easily yoked to reform purposes. For example, "Let Me Love Thee" seems to be a simple, conventional love poem, sharing with Watkins Harper's later verse little more than a characteristic mode of address—a fondness for apostrophe and the poetic fiat ("Oh! Let me love thee"). Although tantalizingly autobiographical, "Yearnings for Home" recalls the "eternal snow" of Felicia Hemans's or William Wordsworth's alpine landscapes more than it does any Maryland locale.

And yet the classificatory work of the author's name is a powerful thing; it is difficult to keep "reciprocal explanation" at bay. For example, if we read the love poem "Farewell, My Heart is Beating" alongside Watkins Harper's most frequently reprinted poem, "The Slave Mother," it seems to foreshadow some of the brilliant political strategies of the later antislavery verse. The scenario of reluctant parting and the weak counterfactual question that nags at the lovers in this early poem—"This heart the lone and trusting / Hath twin'd itself to thee; And now when almost bursting, / Say, must it sever'd be"—prefigures the scene of mother-child separation and underscores the kinship between love poetry and slavery that Joan Dayan detailed in her 1994 essay "Amorous Bondage." But it also shows the sophistication of the poet's revision of this scenario in the later poem, in which a child is forcibly torn from his mother's grasp ("Oh, Father! Must they part?"). Somewhere between the late 1840s and the early 1850s, the poetic lover's wistfulness has been transformed into a call for active intervention.

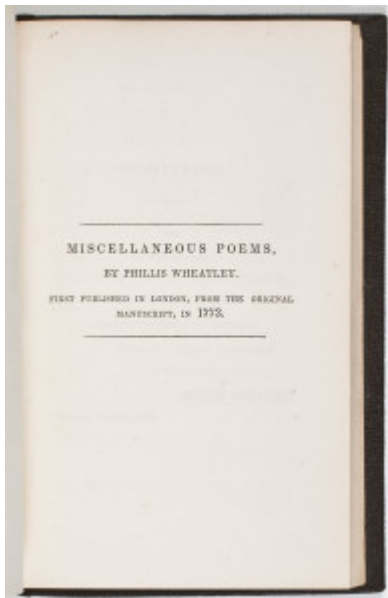


5. Title page, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, A Native African and a Slave. Also, Poems by a Slave*, third edition (Boston, 1838). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Recognizing characteristic poetic strategies in embryo in the early work and reading later poems as outgrowths of texts we now know to have preceded them can feel both powerful and irresistible. This is the author function busy at work: leveling out uneven stylistic and thematic terrain, producing conceptual or theoretical coherence across a diverse collection of texts, and extending an already established sense of value to newly authenticated texts. And yet there is an uneasiness that accompanies the experience of the author function in action, a shifting of the ground beneath the critic's feet as the messiness of the historical transmission of texts is subordinated to the orderly chronologies of literary time. Welcome as it is, the restoration of *Forest Leaves* to the historical record puts us in danger of forgetting the uncertainty that has attended the survival of nineteenth-century black writing, published (as most of it was) in ephemeral formats such as the pamphlet, the periodical, and the newspaper. Today, when the volume is still new to us, we can appreciate that fragility while also projecting a time in the very near future when Watkins Harper's corpus will be rewritten as if we have known these poems all along. Right now, however, we occupy a kind of odd middle space, one in which these previously unknown texts feel uncannily familiar, and under-motivated connections between and among newly restored and established texts are beginning to feel inevitable.

One of the most interesting poems in *Forest Leaves* takes a similar sort of temporal dislocation as its explicit subject, exploring the sheer strangeness of being on the verge of something without understanding the precise nature of what one perceives. "The Presentiment" unfolds as a riddle poem much like Emily Dickinson's "It was not Death, for I stood up" or "I felt a Funeral in my Brain," poems in which the speaker struggles to define a baffling internal state and ends up settling for evocative description. ["The Presentiment"](#)

toggles between the present tense of enunciation, in which “something strangely thrills my breast / . . . something which I scarce can tell,” and a set of declarative statements that, instead of delivering a more precise definition of this feeling, testify only to the speaker’s certainty that she has experienced this sensation in the past: “I felt it when. . . / I felt it when. . . / I felt it when. . . .” The reader’s experience of this poem, then, is one of being perpetually out of synch. Initially promising to explain a thrilling intuition—a feeling about or before feeling, a “pre”-sentiment—the poem offers not a vision of the future held tenuously in the present but rather a series of isolated instances from the past, disarticulated episodes that seem to recur without governing principle. The prophetic voice that speaks to the poet in “accents” and “whispers” repeatedly reminds her of the proximity of death, but the past tense of this reported speech gives the lie to its promises; the present tense of enunciation confirms that the imminent death it foretells has yet to arrive.



6. Intertitle page, “Miscellaneous Poems,” by Phillis Wheatley from *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, A Native African and a Slave. Also, Poems by a Slave*, third edition (Boston, 1838). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

It is tempting to read this poem allegorically, to fill this strangely thrilling space of mingled anticipation and recollection with one or more truisms about Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s life and writing. One might suggest, for instance, that this final poem in her first collection of verse speaks to the poet’s premonition of the great career that lay ahead of her, one that would require, however, that love poems and meditative verse about vexing internal states be attached to higher purposes. The poem also enables us to put Watkins Harper into dialogue with [William Wordsworth](#) and [Emily Dickinson](#), both of whom wrote poems about presentiments. At least for a little while, however, I’d like to linger with the poet’s dislocating sense of the presentiment,

holding off the sense-making clarity of literary criticism's orderly meta-narratives in favor of the uncanniness, the uncertainty, and the interpretive promise represented by a handful of texts that still feel out of time and out of place, internally contradictory, not yet successfully brought under the superintendence of the stories we tell about their author.

Further Reading

I discuss Harper's dual career as a poet and an antislavery lecturer in "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Circuits of Abolitionist Poetry," *Early African American Print Culture*, Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, eds. (Philadelphia, 2012): 53-74. Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" has been widely reprinted; it is perhaps most easily found in *The Essential Foucault*, Paul Rabinow and Nicholas S. Rose, eds. (New York, 2003). I discuss the curious translation and publication history of Foucault's essay in the introduction to [Taking Liberties with the Author](#) (2013). Joan Dayan's provocative essay "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves" was first published in *American Literature* 66:2 (June 1994): 239-273 and reprinted in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman, eds. (Baltimore, 1995). Joanna Brooks discusses the fragility of nineteenth-century black print in "The Unfortunates: What the Life spans of Early Black Books Tell Us About Book History," in Cohen and Stein, *Early African American Print Culture*, 40-52. Readers who are intrigued by the odd yoking of the poetry of "Effie Afton" to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's oeuvre might want to read the poems of *Forest Leaves* in the company of those published in *Eventide* (Boston, 1854). Readers who delight at going off on tangents can read all about the riverboat accident that has kept "Effie Afton" alive in historical memory in Larry A. Riney, *Hell Gate of the Mississippi: the Effie Afton Trial and Abraham Lincoln's Role In It* (Geneseo, Ill., 2007).

This article originally appeared in issue 16.2 (Winter, 2016).

Meredith L. McGill is associate professor of English at Rutgers University. She is the author of *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (2003), and editor of two collections of essays: *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange* (2008) and *Taking Liberties with the Author* (2013). In addition to essays on nineteenth-century poetry and poetics, she has published widely on intellectual property, authorship, and the history of the book.