

# “A spirt of my own seminal wet”: Spermatoid Design in Walt Whitman’s 1860 *Leaves of Grass*

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**ABSTRACT** Walt Whitman’s 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* contains elements of design that enhance the poet’s use of spermatropic tropes in his poetry. Ed Folsom investigates the ways in which the typeface on the cover and title page, as well as the ornamental decorations throughout the volume, create representations of sperm, underscoring Whitman’s radical notion that the act of reading was an act of spermatropic words taking hold in the nurturant ground of the reader’s mind, producing the unexpected offspring of a more democratic citizenry. He also examines the sources of Whitman’s conceptions of sperm and the reactions of publishers, reviewers, and even the poet’s friends to Whitman’s violation of the taboo of imaging spermatropic ejaculation in his poetry. **KEYWORDS:** reception of *Leaves of Grass*; representations of spermatozoa and ejaculation; nineteenth-century typography; visual emblems and decorations in *Leaves of Grass*; Elizabeth Osgood Goodrich Willard

~ IN A BRILLIANT ESSAY, “Walt Whitman: The Spermatropic Imagination” (1984), Harold Aspiz applied his exhaustive reading of the various medical texts that Whitman encountered to an examination of the way the poet “fashioned a trope in which the persona’s sexual arousal and visionary fervor lead him to an inspired vocalism which accompanies, or acts as a surrogate for, orgasm.” I would like to build on Aspiz’s analysis of Whitman’s remarkable “spermatropic utterance” by suggesting how the poet’s spermatropic trope structures his work, not only through the verbal play that Aspiz traced but also in the very design of the books themselves.<sup>1</sup> We not only hear Whitman’s evocation of ejaculation in the words of his poetry—the release “from the pent up rivers of myself”<sup>2</sup>—but we also encounter the visual imagery of sperm in, on, and between the

1. Harold Aspiz, “Walt Whitman: The Spermatropic Imagination,” in *On Whitman: The Best from American Literature*, ed. Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd (Durham, N.C., 1987), 273–89 at 273, 283.

2. *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 288.

printed words on the physical page. And nowhere is this visual encounter more apparent than in his third edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Perhaps the most striking of the many notable features of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* are its cover and title page. While the 1855 (first) edition features a cover with the title in floriated letters, with roots and leaves growing out of the type and with the period at the end of the title transformed into a germinating seed, his third edition clearly upped the ante. On the cover and spine, instead of floriated letters, we find plain letters, graceful and flowing but with odd flourishes—a long spiraling tail extending from the base of the “L,” sweeping under the rest of the word “Leaves”; an odd spiral at the top of the “G” that makes the letter look like a swimming worm with an arrowhead pointing to the “R” that itself sports a long tail descending under the “A.” The more closely we examine the letters on the cover, the more a number of them resemble spirochetes, as if they are wriggling and swimming and have been momentarily captured in some tentative sequence—the penultimate “S” in “GRASS” with its little spirochete tail, undulating so that its body forms the letter, even though its active undulation makes it differ in proportion to the swimming “S” next to it, forming a smaller bottom half of the letter, as if the letter is upside down (fig. 1).

The full impact of this swimming group of worm-letters is not apparent until we open the book to the title page, where we are startled to see that the letters now sport tails like spermatozoa, and the period at the end of the title is no longer the germinating seed of the 1855 cover but rather another kind of seed: a clear representation of a sperm cell, swimming into place from beneath the final “S” to take its place at the conclusion of the title. A large spirochete arcs over the title, and what initially appears as a script “Leaves” turns out to be more curling, swimming, wriggling creatures, one contorting into the “L,” and one particularly long one contorting into the “eaves,” with the end of the “s” forming another whipping spiral, and even the “and” connecting the publishers’ names—“Thayer and Eldridge”—has a long encircling tail with a final spiral flourish. It is what Whitman does with the word “GRASS,” though, that is most striking, for here he employs what we might call a spermatoid typeface. Where the letters on the cover were the spiraling creatures themselves, here the sperm have swum onto the letters, as if fertilizing the ova-types, attaching themselves in some originating moment of union, two sperm cells forming the ends of the “G,” two forming the post of the “R,” two forming the descending post of the “A,” and two forming each end of the wriggling “S’s.” On closer examination, we can see that one sperm has fully penetrated the descender of the “R” (figs. 2 and 3).

While the type on the cover might invite us to imagine Whitman playing with the possibilities of *Leaves of Grass* as an infectious disease, the tiny spirochetes invading the readers’ brains and creating a fever that might lead to a hallucination that would result in their seeing the world in an entirely new way, spirochetes were in fact not known in 1860. Only after the Civil War were they observed and not until 1875 were the microscopic worms designated “spirochetes” by German botanist Ferdinand Julius Cohn.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Whitman was representing spermatozoa, working with then-current

3. See K. Codell Carter, *The Rise of Causal Concepts of Disease: Case Histories* (Aldershot, U.K., 2003), 93–95. Otto Obermeier, studying relapsing fever, first noted the tiny thread-like wriggling

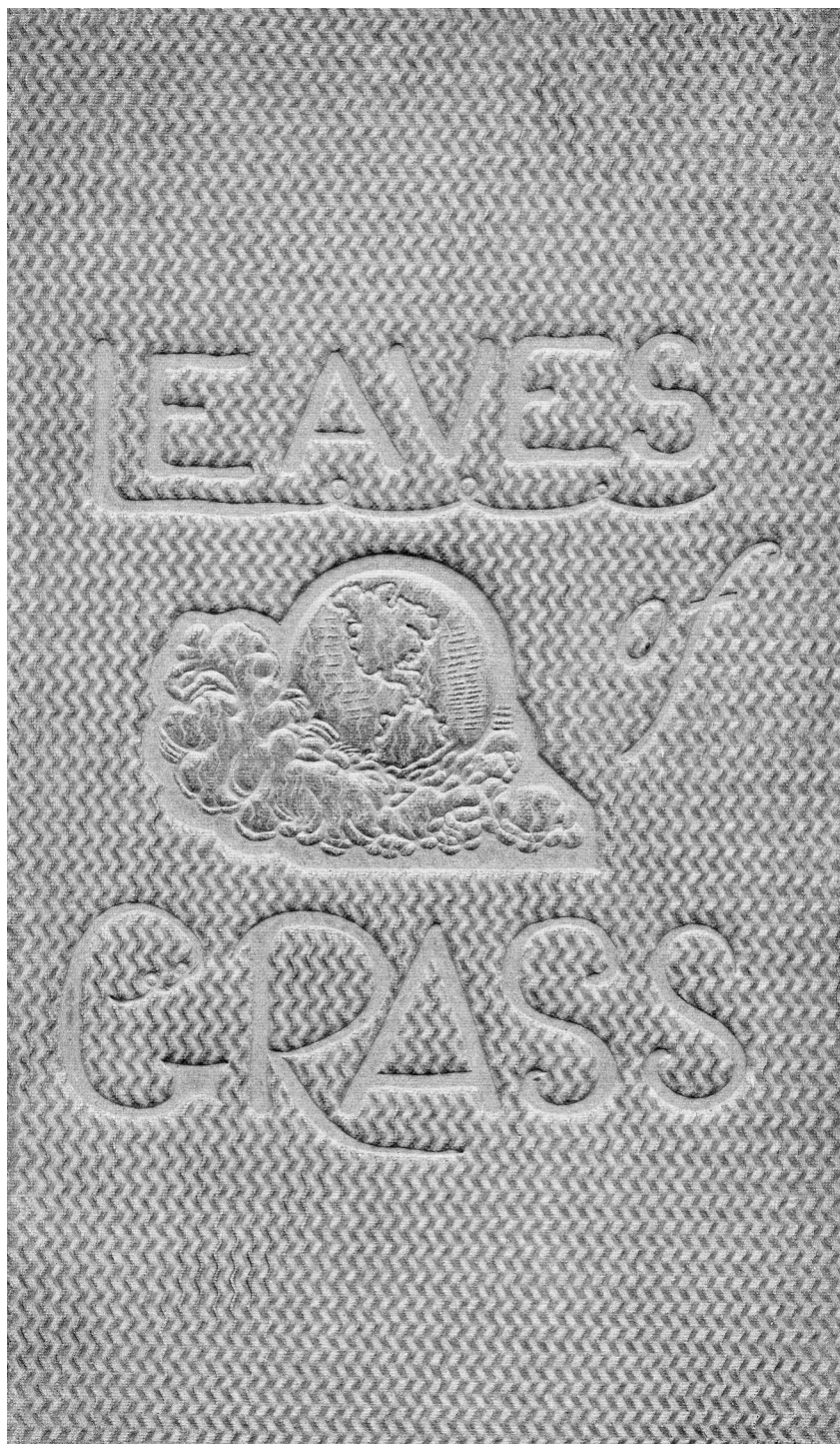


FIGURE 1. Front cover of the 1860 edition.

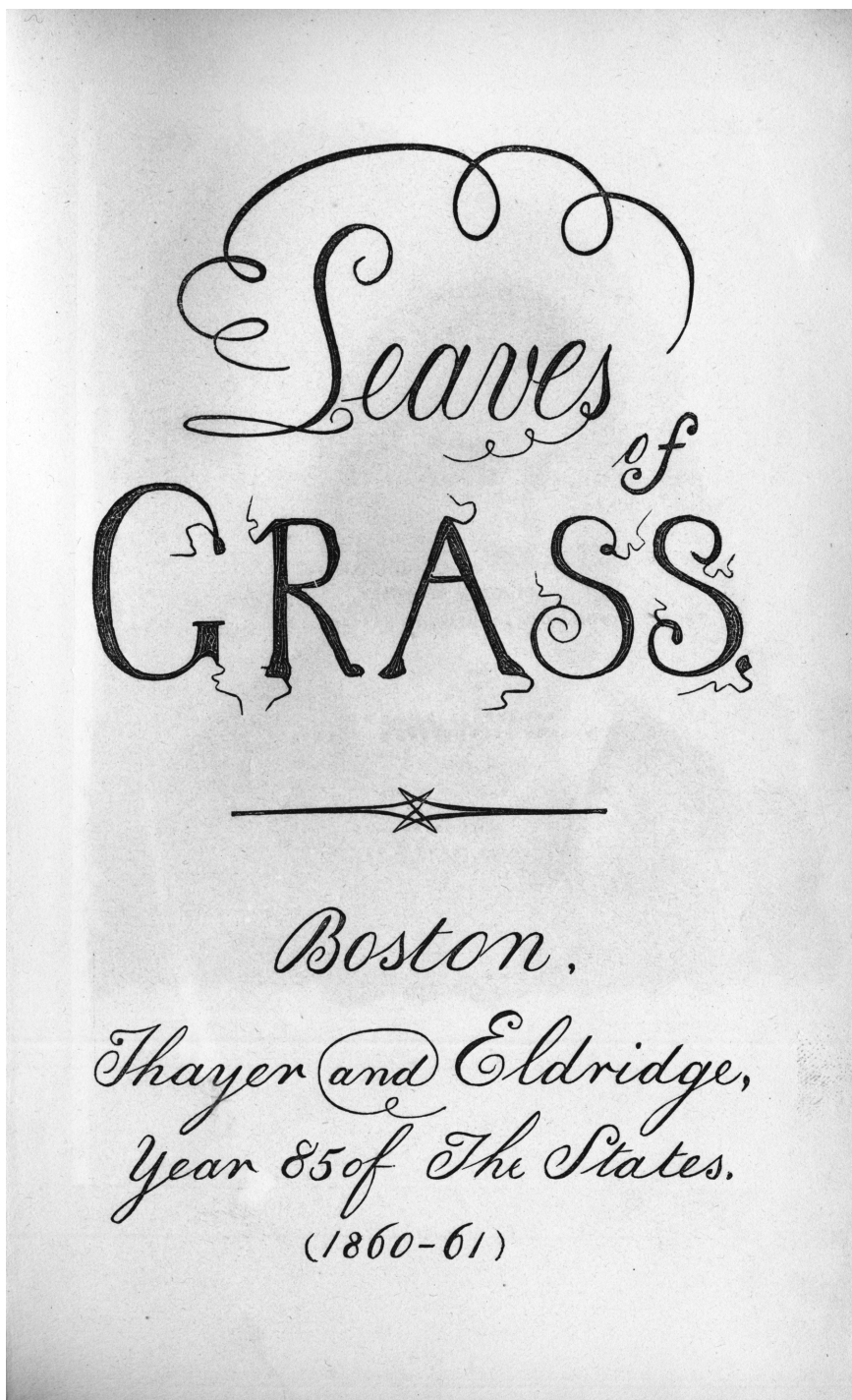


FIGURE 2. Title page of the 1860 edition.





FIGURE 3. Detail of the title page of the 1860 edition.

conceptions of what sperm looked like. Scientists had observed sperm with tails swimming in seminal fluid ever since Antony van Leeuwenhoek, the Dutch scientist who refined the compound microscope in the late seventeenth century, and one of his students became the first to observe spermatozoa in 1677. Leeuwenhoek's famous drawings of sperm were the standard representation in medical textbooks well into the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Whitman would have been familiar with illustrations in the various medical books he read, especially when he was working for the phrenological firm Fowler and Wells, which published the 1856 *Leaves* and which issued countless medical and sexual self-help books.<sup>5</sup> The elder Fowler brother, Orson, wrote a number of such

structures in the blood of those infected in 1864. Obermeier died of cholera while doing further research, and his work was carried on in the 1870s by Cohn.

4. Leeuwenhoek first studied human sperm of others, but he began using his own, famously explaining that "what I am observing" emerged naturally, "not by sinfully defiling myself, but as a natural consequence of conjugal coitus." Quoted in Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago, 2007), 88.

5. Leeuwenhoek's drawings were adapted and supplemented as scientists studied sperm more closely under improved microscopes in the early nineteenth century. German anatomist and physiologist Rudolph Wagner (1805–1864) recorded detailed experiments with sperm in the 1830s, and his physiology textbook, translated into English by Robert Willis as *Elements of Physiology, for the Use of Students, and with Especial Reference to the Wants of Practitioners* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, & Piper, 1841), contained sketches of sperm cells of humans and various animals, and recorded experiments that set out to determine whether spermatozoa had "any character of volition" and any "independent animal nature" (17). A surprising number of nineteenth-century physiological textbooks simply did not deal with sperm, but the ones that did inevitably reproduced either Leeuwenhoek's drawings or those of Wagner. See, for example, Johann Müller, *Elements of Physiology* (London: Taylor

books and eventually combined them in his massive tome, *Sexual Science* (1870), which contained a section on “Semen: Its Constituents, Office, &c.” There semen is defined as “the material messenger of life,” and spermatozoa as “infinitesimal life-germs, . . . each consist[ing] of a body, and a long, tapering tail, which, lashing back and forth, propels it forward in this [oleagenous liquor], by which means alone it impregnates.” Fowler offers a close-up illustration of a spermatozoa (“after Prouchet”) and rhapsodizes about its wonders (fig. 4):

Please think what one of these animalcules achieves! The whole after man or woman lies embodied in it! All the rudiments of all the organs of the body are there; so are all the faculties of the mind! Nothing is superadded after their creation. That Faculty of reason, which is to sway senates and mould nations, is there; as is that element which fights battles, remembers, imagines, loves, worships, indeed embracing everything it is possible for the future human being to feel or accomplish! Nothing is now requisite for it to attain all man can achieve but to be *fed*. . . . Great God, what wonders hast Thou wrought by means of this infinitesimal entity! . . . Is not the manufacture of this life-germ, embodying all the elements of human life, the greatest production of Infinite Wisdom?<sup>6</sup>

Whitman, who late in his life acknowledged that he never really got beyond his phrenology stage, very much embraced Fowler’s sperm-worship, with all the attendant faith in the ability of tiny, fragile things (like words on a page) to be the seeds of great and vast futures. When he wrote, in the poem that he would later entitle “A Woman Waits for Me,” that “I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for These States—I press with slow rude muscle, / . . . I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated within me” (*LG* 1860, 303–4), he was of course describing sexual intercourse and, like Fowler, anticipating the progeny that would arise from the semen that was ejaculated, but he was also vivifying the act of writing, another act that involves using muscles to press a pencil to paper, to work the letterpresses he was so familiar with, the press that would deposit on the page the “stuff” he had poured from his imagination through his muscles onto paper. As Aspiz noted, “the sexual climax is transformed into vocalism: the phallic utterance of the persona’s semen becomes the seminal utterance of the poet’s words.”<sup>7</sup> Whitman’s imagery simultaneously describes the act of ejaculating and depositing semen, *and* of composing and printing words, as he addresses at once sexual partner and reader:

and Walton, 1839–43), 1472–73; Thomas Blizard Curling, *A Practical Treatise on the Diseases of the Testis* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1843), 62; and, late in the century, R. V. Pierce, *The People’s Common Sense Medical Adviser in Plain English; or, Medicine Simplified* (Buffalo, N.Y.: World’s Dispensary Printing Office, 1895), 13.

6. O[rson] S[quire] Fowler, *Sexual Science; including Manhood, Womanhood, and Their Mutual Interrelations; Love Its Laws, Power Etc.* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1870), 711–13.

7. Aspiz, “Spermatic Imagination,” 280.



FIGURE 4. Illustration of spermatozoa in O[rson] S[quire] Fowler, *Sexual Science; including Manhood, Womanhood, and Their Mutual Interrelations; Love Its Laws, Power Etc.* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1870).

Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself,  
 In you I wrap a thousand onward years,  
 On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of me and of America,  
 The drops I distil upon you are to beget babes in their turn,  
 I shall demand perfect men and women out of my love-spendings,  
 I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others, as I and you  
     interpenetrate now,  
 I shall count on the fruits of the gushing showers of them, as I count on  
     the fruits of the gushing showers I give now,  
 I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life, death, immortality,  
 I plant so lovingly now.

(LG 1860, 304)

The interpenetration he demands and expects here has everything to do with his radical concept of democratic reading. His sexual imagery was integral to the act of reading he was proposing. He believed his *words* were the seeds for new ideas, a new nation, a new conception of democracy, but, to have an effect, his words would need to penetrate readers and fertilize their imaginations. All the curling tails and tendrils extending from the letters on his cover and title page are there to make the words move, attach, and cling, find nurturant ground so they can fertilize and grow into something new. Whitman imaged, then, the very act of reading as a sexual act, an act of fertilizing, inseminating. The “process of reading,” Whitman wrote in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), is “an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle,” and the democratic reader “must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work,” because what is needed for democracy to flourish is “a nation of supple and athletic minds.”<sup>8</sup> His words were the seeds, but the womb in which the seed would grow and form was the reader’s mind, and the ovum belonged to the reader, too: the poet’s job was to cajole, seduce the reader until the seminal ideas could flow into a receptive mind and join with the reader to construct a future unexpected and strong, deriving its strength and character from the reader as much as from the poet. When he wrote poems evoking the sexual joining of the poet

8. *Democratic Vistas: The Original Edition in Facsimile*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City, 2010), 76.

with the female reader, then, or the affectionate physical contact of the poet to the male reader, his explicit imagery was always in the service of an erotics of reading. He evoked the process in "Calamus 13":

Love-buds, put before you and within you, whoever you are,  
 Buds to be unfolded on the old terms,  
 If you bring the warmth of the sun to them, they will open, and bring  
     form, color, perfume, to you,  
 If you become the aliment and the wet, they will become flowers, fruits,  
     tall branches and trees,

. . . . .  
 They have come slowly up out of the earth and me, and are to come  
     slowly up out of you.

(LG 1860, 359–60)

This was part of the physicality of the book for Whitman: it had a body, a spine, a face, folds, and it received a reader's actual physical touch, just as the reader was touched by the book (in physical and emotional ways). "O how your fingers drowse me" (LG 1860, 455): Whitman's words speak from the face of the page into the reader's face, as the reader's fingers trace the lines, caressing the face, perhaps mouthing the words. Whether he imagined the book astride the reader's hips or nestled against the reader's breast ("thrusting me beneath your clothing, / Where I may feel the throbs of your heart, or rest upon your hip" [LG 1860, 346]), Whitman wanted his reader to be aware that he (and, metonymically, his book—we carry our "Whitman" with us in book form) was intimately close to "whoever you are, holding me now in hand" (LG 1860, 344). There's an anonymous intimacy, a democratic, ever-shifting intimacy, as one reader puts the book down and another picks it up, a cruising intimacy that makes us keenly aware that the "you" Whitman so privately addresses is at once no one but you and yet also everyone who ever has read or is now reading or will read his book. The book is inexhaustible in its potential for intimacy, and its seminal fluid is there on the title page of the 1860 edition for every reader to see as the book waits patiently yet urgently to plant its seed.

Yet, while Whitman was not simply trying to be sensational or controversial with his portrayal of scenes of male ejaculation, his spermatic title page and ejaculatory imagery nonetheless caused all kinds of problems, though of course propriety forbade anyone from talking explicitly about it in print. Still, in the years following the release of the 1860 edition, people clearly were talking about it outside of print. Whitman's friend John Trowbridge, working in vain to get a respected publisher for a new fourth edition of *Leaves*, wrote to William Douglas O'Connor on March 24, 1867: "the chief objection raised by everyone I talked with was on account of the too seminal element everywhere jetting out from the 'Leaves.'"<sup>9</sup> The seminal element, of course, was,

9. See Rufus A. Coleman, "Trowbridge and O'Connor: Unpublished Correspondence, with Special Reference to Walt Whitman," *American Literature* 23 (1951): 326.

as we have seen, literally jetting out from the “Leaves” on the cover and title page, in fact jetting out quite visibly all over the title leaf. The seminal element was also jetting out frequently in the imagery of Whitman’s poetry, imagery that had already caused problems for him and would continue to do so for the rest of his career.

From the beginning, Whitman knew that his representations of the ejaculation of seminal fluid and sperm, a taboo subject, would get him in deep trouble. The 1855 *Leaves of Grass* was already full of such imagery. In the poem later called “Song of Myself,” he coined the word “fatherstuff” as a synonym for semen, and he imagined it as one of the “many long dumb voices” of generation that spoke through him, voices “of wombs, and of the fatherstuff.”<sup>10</sup> That word and its variations were precisely what William Michael Rossetti simply could not allow to appear in his 1868 British edition of Whitman’s poems, from which he expurgated all poems with any mention of seminal fluid and made a handful of changes in the 1855 Preface, eliminating the phrase “always of their fatherstuff must be begotten the sinewy races of bards.”<sup>11</sup>

“Fatherstuff” stained a number of Whitman’s poems, as when he announced that “On women fit for conception I start bigger and nimbler babes, / This day I am jetting the stuff of far more arrogant republics” (LG 1855, 45). A few lines later he would be “Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters”—the gods of the past and the priests of those gods, who explained the mysteries of the universe—because “The most they offer for mankind and eternity [is] less than a spirt of my own seminal wet” (LG 1855, 45). By 1871, Whitman had tucked the “jetting the stuff” line into parentheses, and the 1860 edition would be the final one to contain “spirt of my own seminal wet” line. But the line that seemed the most flagrant violation of the taboo appeared in the poem later known as “I Sing the Body Electric,” where he records how “the female form . . . attracts” the speaker “with fierce undeniable attraction,” the female’s “Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands—all diffused,” until, “loveflesh swelling and deliciously aching, / Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous . . . quivering jelly of love . . . white-blow and delirious juice” ejaculate in the “Bridegroom-night of love” as the couple is seen “Undulating into the willing and yielding day” (LG 1855, 79). Whitman would stubbornly maintain this “limpid jets of love” line, even though it is the passage singled out (though decorum prevented it from being quoted) by the anonymous reviewer for *The Critic* in April 1856:

The depth of Whitman’s indecencies will be the grave of his fame, or ought to be if all proper feeling is not extinct. The very nature of this man’s compositions excludes us from proving by extracts the truth of our remarks; but we, who are not prudish, emphatically declare that the man

10. *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1855), 29.

11. See *Poems of Walt Whitman*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868). Whitman had told Rossetti, via Moncure Conway, that he had “no objection to his substituting other words—leaving it all to his own tact, &c.—for ‘onanist,’ ‘fatherstuff’ &c.” (*The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller, 6 vols. [New York, 1961–77], 1:347). This edition cited as *Correspondence* in the text below. Vol. 7 of the correspondence has since appeared, edited by Ted Genoways (Iowa City, 2004).

who wrote page 79 of the *Leaves of Grass* deserves nothing so richly as the public executioner's whip. Walt Whitman libels the highest type of humanity, and calls his free speech the true utterance of *a man*: we, who may have been misdirected by civilisation, call it the expression of *a beast*.<sup>12</sup>

These ejaculatory images are in fact what a number of the early reviewers of *Leaves* had in mind when they found the book obscene, as the *New York Times* critic did when he reviewed the 1860 edition: "Mr. Whitman sees nothing vulgar in that which is regarded as the grossest obscenity; rejects the laws of conventionality so completely as to become repulsive."<sup>13</sup> Certain things, this reviewer argued, if they need to be said at all, "should be said as delicately as possible." Whitman, in "Walt Whitman" (later "Song of Myself"), had already made his views about delicacy clear: "I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart, / Copulation is no more rank to me than death is" (*LG* 1860, 55).

And in 1882, at the tail end of his career, when the new James Osgood edition of *Leaves* was banned in Boston for obscenity, Whitman initially agreed to make some cuts for Osgood: "I mail you with this a copy of *L of G*, with the not numerous but fully effective changes and cancellations I thought of making: See pages 84 88 89 90. All lines and passages marked in pencil to come out and their places to be exactly filled with other matter—so that the pages will superficially present the same appearance as now. The whole thing would not involve an expense of more than 5 to \$10."<sup>14</sup> Whitman had sent a copy of the book with the passages marked for Osgood, and he proposed substituting lines that would fit exactly, thus minimizing the expense of altering the plates. The marked copy has been lost, but what those four pages have in common is that each contains an explicit seminal and ejaculatory image: page 84—"Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice"; page 88—"Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking"; page 89—"I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States, I press with slow rude muscle," "Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself, / . . . The drips I distil upon you shall grow fierce and athletic girls, new artists, musicians, and singers"; and page 90—"Love-thoughts, love-juice, love-odor, love-yielding, love-climbers, and the climbing sap," "The limpid liquid within the young man."<sup>15</sup> It is no accident that Whitman immediately identified for Osgood the four passages of ejaculation that he knew were the most objectionable.

As edgy as Whitman's ejaculatory image was, he was not alone in imagining poetic words as sperm. He must have been pleased, or at least amused, to see that by the 1870s even Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had cautioned Whitman about publishing what he considered to be the too-explicit "Enfans d'Adam" poems in 1860, was talking about how he found "certain books vital and spermatic, not leaving the reader what he

12. *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kenneth M. Price (New York, 1996), 44.

13. *Ibid.*, 82.

14. *Correspondence*, 3:270.

15. *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: James Osgood, 1881).

was: he shuts the book a richer man.”<sup>16</sup> “What is best in literature is the affirming, prophesying, spermatic words of men-making poets,” Emerson wrote in an essay published in 1876, “Only that is poetry which cleanses and mans me.”<sup>17</sup> In his journals, he confided that readers were like “great bands of female souls who only receive the spermatic aura” in the form of “male words.”<sup>18</sup> Emerson was musing in his journal about the ways reading and sexual union were intricately and figuratively joined only months before he was warning Whitman about the dangers of his sexually explicit poems that were demonstrating precisely the same point.

Beyond Emerson, though, there were many lesser-known writers who developed theories of spermatic words, some quite explicitly. Illinois reformist Elizabeth Osgood Goodrich Willard (?–1872), for example, offered her theory of the origin of letters in *Sexology as the Philosophy of Life*, which appeared seven years after the 1860 *Leaves*. Willard built upon the familiar theory that the modern alphabet “has taken the place of the hieroglyphic method[;] nevertheless the alphabet is itself symbolic, because it is derived from the old hieroglyphic.” Thus “O” is “the symbol of the sun” and signifies “wonder, fullness, and eternity” as well as, indirectly, “all central powers, as the soul, love, magnetism.” “O” is thus “most emphatically a feminine letter.” “A,” on the other hand, is the “masculine letter” because, in the lower case, it is “a bent comma with a half circle attached” and thus “bears a distinct resemblance” to “the seminal animalculae or sperm cell of the male”: “the letter A is derived from O, that is, it is a broken part of the circle, just as the sperm cell is derived from the germ cell of the female.” That is why, Willard argues, A is the “fundamental letter” of the word “man,” while “woman” has “two fundamental letters, A and O.” Willard’s theory extends far beyond this, discovering in the forms of various letters virtually all parts of the body, but what is pertinent to note here is that, in mid-nineteenth-century America, such ideas were in the air, and Whitman’s extension of those ideas onto his cover and title page in 1860 would have been seen by some readers in the context of the familiar discussion of letters as images of natural things, as his letters sprouted spermatozoan tails and became inseminated with sperm cells. Willard’s interpretation of the letter “S” could in fact serve as an explication of the double “S” in “GRASS” on Whitman’s cover and title page: “S,” she argues, “signifies passion” and thus “has the form of two seminal animalculae, united in the middle and bent each way.”<sup>19</sup>

In some key ways, then, Whitman’s creative typography simply extends and underscores what some in the nineteenth century took to be those letters’ natural and originary meanings. Whitman could have drawn inspiration for his spermatoid letter forms from any number of sources, but he must have been especially pleased to have

16. Emerson, *Society and Solitude: Twelve Chapters* (1870; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 197.

17. Emerson, *Letters and Social Aims* (1876; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 294.

18. Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson with Annotations*, 1856–1863, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 198.

19. *Sexology as the Philosophy of Life* (Chicago: J. R. Walsh, 1867), 19, 21–22, 24.

See *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: Against an Aristocracy of Sex, 1866 to 1873*, ed. Ann Dexter Gordon (New Brunswick, N.J., 2000), 379n, for information on Willard.



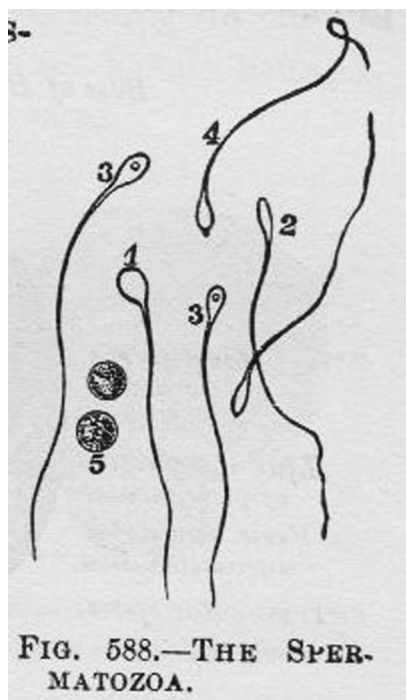


FIGURE 5. Illustration from Dr. S[eth] Pancoast, *The Ladies' Medical Guide: A Complete Instructor and Counsellor* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Bros., 1870), "The Origin of Spermatazoa."

found that his new publishers for the 1860 edition, Thayer and Eldridge, distributed a book by Pennsylvania physician Seth Pancoast (1823–1890) called *Ladies' Medical Guide and Marriage Friend* (1858), which contained numerous illustrations of sperm, including one plate that might have served as the inspiration for Whitman's title page, with its depiction of numerous sperm swimming in different directions, their bent tails indicating their motion.<sup>20</sup> If I could just join those energetic sperm to the very letters of my poems, Whitman must have thought, we will literally see Emerson's "spermatic words" in an actual physical representation, a representation that must have appalled his on-again, off-again "master" when he saw the finished book (fig. 5).

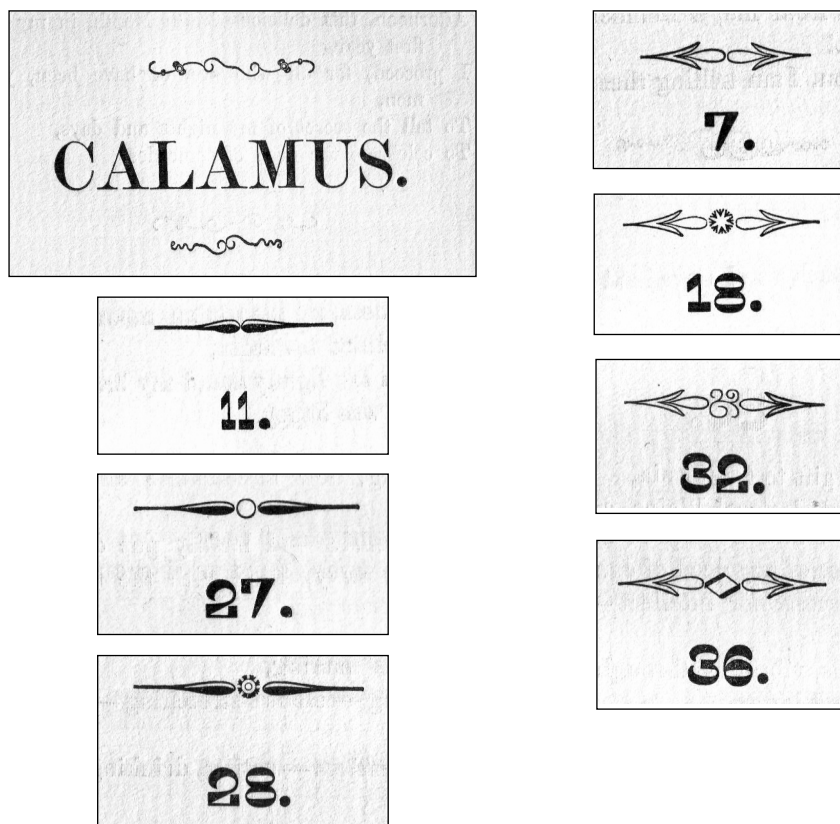
Once we are aware of how the letters of the cover and title page work figuratively to evoke sperm, we can see how Whitman's careful choice of decorations throughout the 1860 edition continues to echo the sperm imagery, strikingly creating a motif of two sperm cells coming together at the head and joining: not sperm fertilizing ovum but rather, impossibly, sperm fertilizing each other (not unlike Willard's description of the letter "S" as "two seminal animaculae, united in the middle and bent each way"). The striking new addition to the 1860 *Leaves*, of course, is the "Calamus" sequence, about male-male affection, about the need for males to be open and guiltless in displaying their affections for each other in physical ways. The book is published on the

20. The illustrations here are from the 1870 edition: Dr. S[eth] Pancoast, "The Origin of Spermatazoa," *The Ladies' Medical Guide: A Complete Instructor and Counsellor* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Bros., 1870), 126–33.

edge of civil war, when brothers would fight brothers; fathers, sons. Whitman dates his book “1860–61,” his hyphenated date straddling what would become the final year of uneasy peace and the first year of increasingly devastating war. Whitman offers the 1860 *Leaves* as a book that might prevent the war if its message of male-male affection could impregnate a large enough male readership. Just as he is working to create a new diction of male-male love, he is working to create a new emblem of that love: live oak, with moss, was his first symbol, then the calamus grass, with its phallic erect spadix, which makes its debut in this edition. But in the 1860 *Leaves*, he also creates a visual decorative male-male motif, sperm joining sperm, a decoration he first uses right after the spermatic title “Leaves of Grass” on the title page and then develops as a visual motif between each of his “Calamus” poems, including several schematized sperm decorations that appear *only* in “Calamus” (figs. 6–13).

But those decorations between the “Calamus” poems could just as easily be representations of two sperm at loggerheads, as if their heads are butting rather than joining. Everything about this edition of *Leaves* is tensed and ambivalent, perhaps suggestive of a new unified beginning or of a new divisive ending: the book mirrors the feelings of the nation in 1860, capturing the tensions between the two years (1860–61), one antebellum and the other bellum, of the book’s publication date. The decorations dividing (or joining) the various poems vary from images of sperm intertwining to more schematized images of sperm shapes with arrows repelling them from each other. But every decoration is a perfectly tensed image: two equal forces, mirroring each other, at once united and separate, like North and South.

Whitman worked hard with the George C. Rand and Avery compositors on designing the 1860 *Leaves* and on creating the array of visual decorations and typefaces that give this book its flourish. When he went to Boston in March 1860 to oversee the production of his book at his radical young publishers Thayer and Eldridge, he was delighted that they “took me to the stereotype foundry, and [gave] orders to follow my directions” (*Correspondence*, 1:49). He was convinced Thayer and Eldridge wanted “to make a good spec. out of my book,” and he told his brother Jeff in May that “the typographical appearance of the book has been just as I directed it, in every respect. The printers and foremen thought I was crazy, and there were all sorts of supercilious squints (about the typography I ordered, I mean)—but since it has run through the press, they have simmered down. Yesterday the foreman of the press-room . . . pronounced it, in plain terms, the freshest and handsomest piece of typography that had ever passed through his mill” (*Correspondence*, 1:51–52). These statements hardly indicate just how demanding Whitman’s requests were to create what he finally deemed a “quite ‘odd’” physical artifact (*Correspondence*, 1:52). An examination of the type ornaments in *Specimens of Printing Types, Plain and Ornamental . . . from the Factory of L. Johnson & Co.* (Philadelphia, 1859) indicates that Whitman created his ornamental flourishes in this edition using at least twenty-four different border elements and six different small pica dashes, employing for each image as few as two and as many as twelve of the elements to construct his colliding or cohering sperm icons. The ornaments may cue some otherwise hidden relationships between poems in the volume,

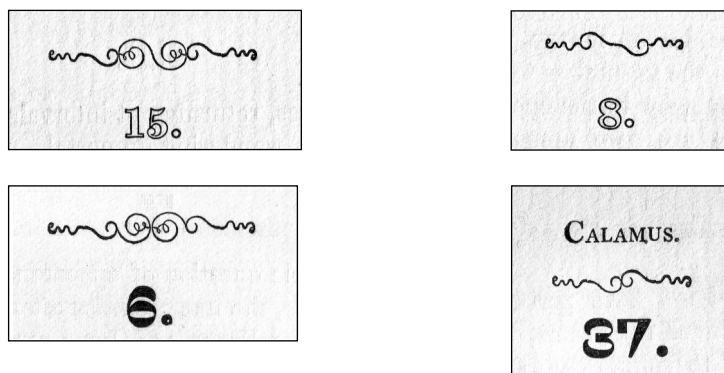


FIGURES 6–13. Visual motifs between the “Calamus” poems.

since, for example, “Enfans d’Adam 5” and “Calamus 5” are both introduced with border decorations that employ the same series of elements from Johnson’s “new combination border series 26,” but they look different from one another because the two central elements are positioned differently, so that in the “Enfans d’Adam” poem there is a singular flow of the joining line, while in the “Calamus” poem the middle two elements clash head-on. This pattern—the same elements with a different aligning of the central elements so as to create a sense of flowing together in “Enfans d’Adam” and a sense of clashing in “Calamus”—is repeated in various pairs of poems—“Adam 15” and “Calamus 6,” for example, or “Adam 8” and “Calamus 37” (figs. 14–17).<sup>21</sup>

Sperm shapes were not the only visual emblems Whitman chose for this volume. On the front cover the title “Leaves of Grass” appears blind-stamped around a blind-stamped globe, revealing the Western Hemisphere, floating in clouds. On the spine, “Leaves of Grass” is gold stamped, and at the bottom of the spine is the name “Walt Whitman,” blind-stamped as if to suggest that the poet still had some reticence

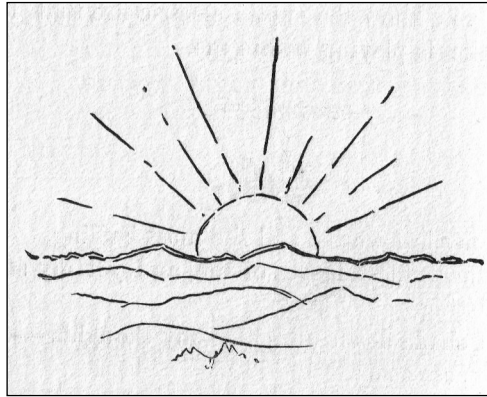
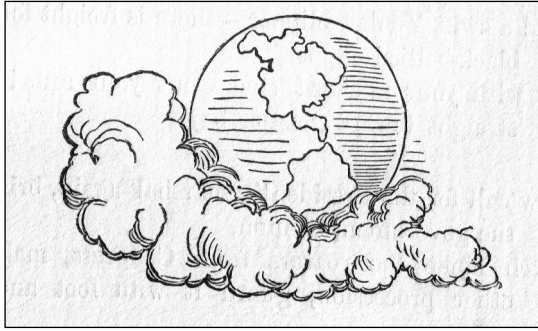
21. I am indebted to my research assistant, Eric Conrad, for his careful work tracking the design elements Whitman used and the patterns of echoes and repetitions.



FIGURES 14–17. Elements in pairs of poems.

about trumpeting his individual identity (his name, as in the first two editions, would still not appear on the title page). Above the name is a blind-stamped hand with a butterfly perched on a pointing finger; this emblem, in one sense a manicule (a familiar sign in books and especially in advertising to draw attention to particular words or phrases), also suggests the union of man and nature, of the body and the soul, and it reappears several times in the book. (Some years later Whitman brought the figure to life by posing for a photograph with a cardboard butterfly perched on his thumb.) On the back cover is an image of the sun, but it could be either rising or setting over the ocean. Whitman bound the first copies of the 1860 edition in the green of his first and second edition covers, the green of the leaves of grass. But then he quickly altered the cover to a reddish orange or reddish purple. Is the red of the cover the first light of a new dawn or the last light before darkness? The autumnal colors of America's fall into violence, into the bloodshed that increasingly seemed inevitable?

In the fateful year of 1860, the future of the United States was unclear, and no one knew whether it would emerge from its internecine conflict stronger than before or utterly destroyed. Was the American hemisphere rising out of the clouds, harbinger of a newly unified world, an international democracy, or was it descending into the clouds, harbinger of a continuing fragmentation and division that would destroy the hopes of national and international unity? The emblems on the cover are repeated throughout the book, where their ambiguity only increases as they punctuate Whitman's poetry that tries desperately to hold North and South together, and where, in the "Calamus" poems, he offers up a vision of men loving men to counter the horror of fratricide that threatened the nation at this pivotal moment in its history. So it is fitting that the earth-in-clouds emblem opens the "Calamus" sequence, while the sunrise-sunset emblem closes it, enclosing the images of sperm—the male seeds—coming together to clash or to merge. Everything about Whitman's ambivalent imagery suggests that he was unsure of the results. All he could do was to plant his seeds—the semen of unity—in the minds of America's readers and hope they would find nurturant ground to grow into a



FIGURES 18–19. Earth-in-clouds emblem that opens the “Calamus” sequence, and sunrise-sunset emblem that closes the “Calamus” sequence.

nation worthy of the massive death it was about to experience. The 1860 *Leaves of Grass* appeared at a fateful hour in America’s history, a moment when the decisions the country was about to make would change it forever. “Every hour,” Whitman knew, was “the semen of centuries” (*LG* 1860, 226), and America’s hour was now at hand (figs. 18 and 19).

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