

Eating Icons

I'm indebted to a man who steamed and hissed and roared at the sight of an egg, a gift from a woman. This wasn't an ill-cooked coddled egg; rather, it was a drawing of an egg lying gently on its side. Much to the woman's surprise, the egg-on-paper appeared to this then beloved man to be sharpened and pointed in his direction—a dangerous feminist egg. In other words, a threat to his manhood.

I too was astonished at this man's—let's call him Humpty—eggophobia, for whence a person, if not from an egg?

But eggs, like women, were once barred from seagoing vessels as portents of ill winds and bad luck. In fact, the utterance of the very name of the workaday product of the hen was, in some places, taboo at sea.

The egg in the drawing turned out to be a portent after all; the relationship between the man and my friend ended soon after. Humpty's roaring displeasure has, well, egged me on to reconsider the power of the egg on the plate and in the cultural imagination.

“The quickest relation between an egg and a man is when both are raw,” writes M. F. K. Fisher, “the first perforce and the second from fatigue, weakness, or other hazards.” A hen's egg is, after all, a promise of breakfast, or, if one is patient, a good roasted chicken at Sunday dinner. On the other hand, the egg is enclosed, private, and mysterious. In the iconography of many of the world's spiritual traditions, the egg is the symbol of the universe and of the fertility required to perpetuate the same.

The egg is emblematic of, in the writer Margaret Visser's phrase, “pure and undifferentiated power,” the very thing that most likely troubled Humpty. Eggs of the mind, then, and those (if we're lucky) fresh from the hen will permit us lowly beings, should our cholesterol levels allow it, to eat icons for breakfast.

Egg of the world is said to have given birth to the universe and the gods; and stories of eggs combine and recombine in many of the great cosmologies. Ptah, the Egyptian god of truth, emerged from a serpent's egg. The Greek goddess of all things brought forth the universal egg and bade the great serpent to coil around it seven times. He did as he was told. The egg cracked in two, and out tumbled all that is.

Night, with her dark wings, gave birth to the wind egg: That's how the glorious and dangerous Eros entered our lives. In alchemy, the egg contains matter and thought, the philosopher's egg.

Our lovely storytelling minds may think of the egg as our original container, complete in itself. Yet no matter how godly the egg, part of all that exists is dinner, and dinner is always problematic for those who must reliably produce it.

The Romans transformed the egg from magical object to food. Not everyone bought into this idea at the same time, for in the nineteenth century, a traveling European in Africa is said to have lost his life for consuming a sacred egg. According to Visser, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, the egg is a delicacy when it has incubated "visibly and palpably into a chicken foetus." An egg is considered sexy in some quarters, however, and therefore inappropriate for a woman to eat.

"You'll never starve if there are eggs in the house," said one of my Serbian grandmothers, for whom eggs weren't sexy at all, but instead critical elements of the larder. In the last century or so, hundreds, if not thousands, of cookbooks have been written on the preparation of the egg. Properly soft-boiling an egg is not as easy as it sounds, and determining an egg's freshness requires patience and some skill.

But to actually boil an egg: Should it be dropped (carefully) into boiling water or started in cold? Then eating it, however fresh or well cooked, is a challenge in itself. Visser says cracking the delicate eggshell was once a small royal performance, like meat carving. That grand personage, Louis XIV, she writes, "would slice the top off his boiled egg with a panache that excited admiration in the watching crowd."

So much for courtly entertainment. But the perfect omelet is not to be taken lightly, either. The charming Brillat-Savarin, whose *Physiology of Taste* appeared in 1825, suggests a tunny omelet as a fit meal for the curé, should he come to dine. Brillat-Savarin's recipe calls for two soft carps' roes, a piece of fresh tunny the "size of a hen's egg," a small shallot, and a piece of the "best butter," along with parsley and chives and a dozen eggs. The omelet should be "long, thick, and soft, turned smartly in a proper dish, and served without an instant's delay. This is a dish to be served for those who . . . eat deliberately; if it be washed down with old wine, there will be marvels seen."

Almost as delightful as eggs on the plate seems to be the comfort of eggs in the tomb. Clay eggs were found in prehistoric burial sites in Russia and Sweden, presumably as symbols of immortality and perhaps as magical sustenance for the journey ahead. Persians might have been the first egg exchangers: Eggs, tinted red, were given and received at the vernal equinox. Ritual eggs were eaten or painted or juggled by celebrants in the world's numerous sun cults. This was a long, long time ago.

In a leisurely stroll across history, eggs were Christianized. Saint Augustine claimed them as symbols of the Resurrection. By the eleventh century, European children at the end of Lent skipped from house to house collecting eggs. Slavs painted eggs before the Christian era—witness the Ukrainian *pysanky*—but their traditional motifs folded nicely into the idea of the Easter egg.

On the Passover table, a roasted egg symbolizes the roasted lamb during the time of the Temple, when sacrifice was part of Jewish piety.

From sacred object to the common currency of folk wisdom and superstition, the egg, real and symbolic, survives. One shouldn't count chickens before they've hatched, nor should all of one's eggs be stored in a single basket. Nest eggs are critical to a secure future, and it would be short-sighted to dispatch the goose that laid the golden egg. Avoid, at all costs, emerging from an encounter with egg on one's face.

In Russia and elsewhere, eggs have been served for centuries at weddings as fertility insurance, and placed on graves to secure immortality. (I wonder: hardboiled?) In Serbia, red eggs were buried in vineyards to ensure a rich autumnal harvest. Eggs laid by obliging hens on holy days were said to cure all ills.

A fresh egg can be dropped into water from a fresh-running stream to divine the future, if there are any springs left in the world. As with eggs on board a ship, procuring eggs or bringing them into the house after sunset is a recipe for disaster. Bad luck will befall anyone cracking an egg at the small end, and if eggshells are burned, hens will not lay. Small yolkless eggs must never be brought into the house, nor eaten. Children in England and Ireland were urged to break their breakfast eggshells, lest witches use them to sail over tempestuous seas. (A friend gives her chickens feed spiked with their own cracked shells. So far, she's had nothing but good luck.)

Great nests of eggs are found in children's literature: talking eggs, flying eggs, green eggs, and square, dragon, and dinosaur eggs. Eggs in fairy tales magically appear to feed a hungry heroine, but watch out, for they are code for you-know-what. Of course there's Humpty Dumpty, that other egg-man, who in Lewis Carroll's imaginative hands reached his evolutionary pinnacle as the erudite annotator of "Jabberwocky"—how else would Alice have learned the meaning of the poem?

Horace wrote about eggs, as did Plutarch and Pliny. Shakespeare served up the occasional sardonic egg, this one from *Love's Labour's Lost*: "Thou half-penny purse of wit, thou pigeon-egg of discretion." Literary eggs have been cosmic, fleshy, and fatal. *Milk and Eggs: An Entirely Original and Largely Vegetarian Comic Opera in Two Acts* played in London, in 1903.

Dream eggs are thought to be inauspicious; yet if the first egg of a white pullet is tucked under one's pillow, a dream of one's future spouse is sure to follow.

Good luck with that one.