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The American Triumph of the Egg:
Anderson’s “The Egg” and
Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby”

Several major writers of the nineteen twenties were attracted to the egg as an image of organic process. Perhaps because of the dispersion of psychoanalytic theory, perhaps because of the theosophical awareness of such influential figures as Yeats, Joyce, and Eliot, the egg—an important symbol in both areas—became a frequent and conscious emblem of human existence. Indeed, the egg became what Meyer Abrams in The Mirror and the Lamp has called a “conceptual model,” an “archetypal analogy” of wide literary reverberations in the twenties. 1 Although the egg lent itself readily to comic treatment, its symbolic implications were at times quite serious. In a work as minor as T. S. Eliot’s “The Cooking Egg,” the reductive title summarizes the poem’s ironic mockery of the world’s decay; in a work as monumental as Finnegans Wake the recurrent egg motif is a key term in the novel’s cyclical structure. The following discussion focuses on the American treatment of this figure in Sherwood Anderson’s “The Egg” and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, two major works of the early twenties which contain contrasting versions of the same egg image. A brief explanation of the archetypal pattern—of which the American egg is a parochial instance—will introduce a detailed comparison of the Anderson and Fitzgerald images. Examining the complementary use opens both stories to new perspectives and defines the peculiarly American form of this universal symbol.

The egg is a traditional symbol whose connotations transcend an American meaning. Jung, among others, has traced its archetypal movement through human mental history as one form of the recurring mandala, the circle, “the psychological expression of the totality of self.” 2 As cosmogonic symbol it became the Orphic Egg, the Greek token of the world’s beginning. In the Western medieval period it emerged as the philosophical egg of the natural philosophers, the con-

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tainer from which the homunculus—the spiritual, inner and complete man—stepped forth at the completion of the alchemical process; while in Chinese alchemy the "chen jen" ("literally perfect man") underwent a similar process before stepping forth from the egg purified of impurities. Perhaps in its use by Anderson and Fitzgerald the egg attains at times this broad archetypal reach to which the reader responds. Thus the young narrator of "The Egg" broods over the tale of his father's humbling by an egg in a coda which widens out into universal and unfathomable mystery:

I awoke at dawn and for a long time looked at the egg that lay on the table. I wondered why eggs had to be and why from the egg came the hen who again laid the egg. The question got into my blood. It has stayed there, I imagine, because I am the son of my father. At any rate, the problem remains unsolved in my mind. And that, I conclude, is but another evidence of the complete and final triumph of the egg—at least as far as my family is concerned.

But in choosing a local habitation for their universal eggs, both Anderson and Fitzgerald make peculiarly American points. By treating the same "American egg"—the apocryphal egg that Columbus is said to have stood on its head—these writers concern themselves concretely with the fulfillment of the American self and of this land's promise.

The classic American account of the Columbus egg story is Washington Irving's:

[Pedro Gonzalez de Mendoza, the Grand Cardinal of Spain] invited Columbus to a banquet where he assigned him the most honorable place at table, and had him served with the ceremonials which in those punctilious times were observed toward sovereigns. At this repast is said to have occurred the well-known anecdote of the egg. A shallow courtier present, impatient of the honors paid Columbus and meanly jealous of him as a foreigner, abruptly asked him whether he thought that in case he had not discovered the Indies, there were not other men in Spain who would have been capable of the enterprise? To this Columbus made no immediate reply, but taking an egg, invited the company to make it stand on one end.

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*Sherwood Anderson, The Triumph of the Egg* (New York, 1921), p. 63. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.
THE AMERICAN TRIUMPH OF THE EGG

Every one attempted it, but in vain; whereupon he struck it upon the table so as to break the end, and left it standing on the broken part; illustrating in this simple manner, that when he had once shown the way to the New World, nothing was easier than to follow it.  

Sherwood Anderson's tale comments bitterly on this first of all American success stories. The narrator's father, an incredibly luckless chicken farmer who had been badgered into this calling by his wife's ambition, has been twisted into an Anderson grotesque by his passionate identification with deformed embryos. The bizarre creatures that struggle unnaturally out of the eggs—the misfits with four legs, two pairs of wings, or two heads—arouse an inordinate preoccupation in the father who senses on some level of consciousness the similarity between their deformity and his own mangled fate. When the sad little chicken farm inevitably fails, it is these monstrous embryos, "his greatest treasure," that the farmer insists upon carrying on the way to Bidwell, the Ohio town near which the family tries to revive its damaged hopes for an American success. In an out-of-the-way coffee shop, he opens an absurd extension of the forlorn chicken farm, and the emphasis of the tale shifts from the chicken to the egg. For as the narrator, the melancholy offspring of tragic-comic parents, insists, "My tale does not primarily concern itself with the hen. If correctly told it will center on the egg."

The father, having opened his restaurant, decides to transform himself into a species of public entertainer, a "jolly innkeeper" whose deformed chickens and "bright conversation" will inspire the young people of Bidwell to gravitate towards his lively, if rather inaccessible, establishment. When after an unproductive period of time a young man from town does happen to wander into the dreary little shop, the father seizes his chance. In a garishly comic scene he tries trick after trick in a maddening attempt to "entertain" what is to be his first serious customer. His initial and most elaborate effort entails the reenactment of Columbus' egg trick. For the father, however, "That Columbus was a cheat... He talked of making an egg stand on its end. He talked, he did, and then he went and broke the end of the egg."

Enraged by the "duplicity" of Columbus who had "cheated at the critical moment," the father is determined to emulate the spurious "great man[']s" feat "without cheating." The agonies he suffers in

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trying to make the egg stand become the perfect correlative for his inept manipulation of his small and smothered life:

He rolled the egg between the palms of his hands. He smiled genially. He began to mumble words regarding the effect to be produced on an egg by the electricity that comes out of the human body. He declared that without breaking its shell and by virtue of rolling it back and forth in his hand he could stand the egg on its end. He explained that the warmth in his hands and the gentle rolling movement he gave the egg created a new center of gravity.... He stood the egg on the counter and it fell on its side. He tried the trick again and again, each time rolling the egg between the palms of his hands and saying the words regarding the wonders of electricity and the laws of gravity. When after a half hour's effort he did succeed in making the egg stand for a moment he looked up to find that his visitor was no longer watching. By the time he succeeded in calling Joe Kane's attention to the success of his effort, the egg had again rolled over and lay on its side. (p. 59)

After two additional failures to entertain involving the deformed chickens and the egg, the father, in despair when the egg finally breaks in his hand and spurts over his clothing, picks up another egg and in his humiliation throws it at the retreating customer.

While the father's defeat has broad human implications, at its most literal level of reference it characterizes American aspirations. Early in the story the narrator-son defines his family's ambition against the backdrop of the "American passion for getting ahead." In so doing he summons up the great American success stories of the past whose example his mother had set before a hitherto unambitious father and newborn son:

It may have been that mother was responsible. Being a schoolteacher she had no doubt read books and magazines. She had, I presume, read of how Garfield, Lincoln, and other Americans rose from poverty to fame and greatness and as I lay beside her—in the days of her lying-in—she may have dreamed that I would someday rule men and cities. (p. 46)

The first and most spectacular of such exempla was Columbus's discovery of the new world, the imaginative audacity of which the egg story has come to signify in the American imagination. But Columbus's point in performing the trick is that his triumphant boldness is unique: it is the inimitable orginal impulse that defines genius, not the me-
chanical imitation of the trick’s gestures once its secret has been revealed. Both for the father and the courtiers of the original anecdote, being “shown the way to the New World” represents the failure of not having discovered it oneself.

And yet the father’s criticism of Columbus contains a mad logic. The emphasis of the original story—Columbus’s attempt to defend the originality of his discovery—has been clouded (as have the lives of Lincoln and Garfield) until the delusory process of mythmaking has completely distorted the substance beneath the dream. The “American dream of getting ahead,” of which Columbus’s victory over the Spanish courtiers is a prototype in the popular imagination, thus depends upon a mere gimmick, an empty cleverness which cheapens the real achievement. The father consequently embodies the story’s critique of American mythopoiesis: he is the victim of his belief in the trick and he exposes the “cheating” involved in its performance.

Such hatred for public façades spills over from Anderson’s fiction into letters to his son, whom he frequently warns against the “fakery” of contemporary life: “Fake figures always being built up by publicity—in the arts—in government—everywhere”; “Everyone really knowing”; “Fake men being acclaimed everywhere, fake furniture in houses, fake house building, city building”; “Vast sums being acquired by men from fakiness”; “That doesn’t matter”; “You can’t fake raising corn in a field”; “Life comes back to the substance in the sod.” In “The Egg” the fake glitter with which the American mind has haloed its great men is satirically represented by Columbus’s seeming triumph over the law of gravity, an “unnatural” conquest if there ever was one. But the imperturbable, organic, non-fake processes of nature take their revenge: “You can’t fake raising corn in a field.” Just as an egg cannot be made to stand on its head or cannot be squeezed through a bottle, the father, a man “intended by nature” to be a cheerful, kindly” and unambitious farmhand cannot by a mere act of will transform himself into a successful chicken farmer or jolly innkeeper. His unwillingness to accept the limits that nature has placed upon him turns him into the grotesque that resembles his deformed embryos. The various unnatural transformations attempted upon the egg since Columbus’s time are for Anderson so paradigmatic of American experience that he called the 1921 volume in which “The Egg” appeared The Triumph of the Egg.


7 Ibid., p. 594.

* Italic mine.
When Fitzgerald came to write The Great Gatsby, it is at least conceivable that he used the egg imagery of this 1925 work in conscious imitation of a novelist he admired. Certainly it is a literary truism of the twenties that, as William Faulkner asserted, “He [Anderson] was the father of my generation of American writers and the tradition of American writing which our successors will carry on.”

Impressed by Anderson’s “brilliant and almost inimitable prose style,” Fitzgerald, a serious reader of his even before the two met, told both John Dos Passos and Edmund Wilson that he considered Anderson “a wonder.” Furthermore, after a first meeting in 1922 when the Fitzgerallds bought a house in Great Neck, the two writers became good friends.

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6 William Faulkner, Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York, 1958), p. 135. One might also discuss the “accidental egg,” the “simple egg” that the God of Faulkner’s The Bear used to discover to the settlers of this country “a new world where a nation of people could be founded in humility and pity and sufferance and pride to one another” (William Faulkner, Three Famous Short Novels [New York, 1953], p. 248). Ike’s experience with the land and the corruption of human possibilities in the McCaslin family history has certain clear parallels to the failures portrayed in “The Egg” and Gatsby. Ike’s vow to repudiate the sins of his forbears by relinquishing the McCaslin property and by refusing to produce an heir is thwarted by his wife’s insistence upon continuing the chain of nature—and presumably of human sin. Thus Ike too finds that the egg of existence is not quite susceptible to human will. Interestingly enough, in all three works either the initial urge for control or the destruction of the illusion of control is precipitated by a woman in some crucial way: the mother in “The Egg” has planted the ambition in her husband, and it is in her lap that he buries his head after his final defeat by the egg; the combination of Daisy’s ability to inspire Gatsby’s Platonic idealization and her inability to live up to his incredible conception dooms him; and it is Ike’s wife who finally draws him away from his ascetic urge to stop the McCaslin sin and to frustrate its prolongation.

Jung suggests (Symbols of Transformation [New York, 1956], p. 354) that the egg has traditionally—in Plato and the Vegas for instance—been associated with both the creative and the destructive urges of the omnipresent “mother,” the “cosmic birth-giver” as well as the terrible mother, the devourer. In the above examples the American woman combines both of these archetypal qualities. Faulkner’s allusion to the egg occurs twice during the crucial dialogue of The Bear’s fourth section where Ike comes as close as any character in a Faulkner novel does to enunciating Faulkner’s vision of man’s history in the world and his relation to God. Nevertheless, since the allusions appear in only two sentences in this long story they do not possess the centrality of reference that the image has in the Anderson story and, to a lesser extent, in the Fitzgerald novel.

10 Quoted in James Schevill, Sherwood Anderson: His Life and Work (Denver, 1951), p. xii.

11 Irving Howe, Sherwood Anderson (New York, 1951), p. 139.

12 Schevill, p. 175.
names Great Neck and Little Neck, Long Island, combined with the name of the fashionable Egg Harbor area, are probable sources of Gatsby's East Egg and West Egg. Although the double impact of Fitzgerald's association with Anderson at Great Neck and his admiration for Anderson's work may have inspired the novel's geography, it is more likely that both writers, exposed to Freudian and Jungian explorations of dream symbolism and archetypes, consciously and independently of each other incorporated this modish symbolism into their works.

While the egg as fact and symbol dominates the structure of "The Egg," it does not possess quite such a radical force in *Gatsby*. Still, references to the figure occur portentously enough for it to accumulate serious thematic weight. Since the action of the novel does take place on the twin peninsulas jutting north into Long Island Sound, several readers of the novel have felt it useful to explore in detail the exotic nomenclature, East and West Egg. Fitzgerald sketches in the outlandish geography of the Eggs early in the novel:

Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. They are not perfect ovals—*like the egg in the Columbus story*, they are both crushed flat at the contact end—but their physical resemblance must be a source of perpetual confusion to the gulls that fly overhead. To the wingless a more arresting phenomenon is their dissimilarity in every particular except shape and size.

Fitzgerald uses his egg imagery for the same purpose as Anderson—to lay bare the strengths and weaknesses of the American dream. In Anderson's critique the egg triumphs by not responding to the pressure of a man who cannot attain the freewheeling imagination Columbus's "trick" requires. Gatsby portrays the father's opposite, a latter

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13 See Robert F. McDonnell, "Eggs and Eyes in *The Great Gatsby*," *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring, 1961), VII, 32-6; and John Henry Raleigh, "Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*," *University of Kansas City Review* (Summer, 1957), XXIII, 283-91; (Autumn, 1957), XXIV, 57-8. McDonnell and Raleigh explore the way in which the Eggs recapitulate the geographical confrontation of East and West that constitutes a major theme in the novel, as well as the moral qualities and deficiencies involved in such a confrontation.

day American showman who magically performs the “unbroken series of successful gestures” by which James Gatz becomes Jay Gatsby. Gatsby’s trick works, if only for a brief time. He defies “for a transitory enchanted moment” that law of historical gravity which states that, like eggs, men and the civilizations they build must fall. The novel examines the “high price to be paid” for Gatsby’s romantic defiance of that law, for his indulgence in the illusory trick of crushing his and Daisy’s Eggs “flat at the contact end” so that they would never fall. But before that failure Gatsby has attained the fresh vision of Columbus, the sailor who touched the imaginative “green breast of the new world” even before the Dutch sailors of the novel’s conclusion.

Fitzgerald translates into the novel’s setting both Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope” and his incredible blindness. In Gatsby’s eyes—and the novel is full of significant optical imagery—the “physical resemblance” of East and West Egg obliterates the differences between Buchanan’s inherited wealth, grace, and physical beauty and Gatsby’s *nouveau riche* crudity and social awkwardness. By an act of willed hallucination Gatsby appreciates only the similarity of Daisy and himself, and his social equality with Tom. The union of the identical eggs implies that he can repeat the Louisville past with Daisy; that he can ignore all historical and class distinctions and accumulate the money and manner of the Buchanan circle.

But such a perception of similarity is an illusion nourished only by those who like Gatsby are “in flight” above the real world. “Like the gulls that fly overhead,” he is open to the “perpetual confusion” that the Eggs’s outward resemblance engenders, a tragic mistake that leads to the Icarian disaster of the novel’s climax. To the “wingless” characters, those who like Tom, Daisy, and Jordan are anchored to the “rock of the world” and who are therefore neither capable of nor seriously tormented by the confusion of flight, the two Eggs of the Gatsby and Buchanan style of life are wholly disparate, and it is indeed in the interest of the “wingless” to insist upon “their dissimilarity in every particular except shape or size.” The novel of course admits that there are degrees of winglessness. The opening tableau of the novel, Nick Carraway’s description of Daisy, Jordan and Tom as he first

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18 J. S. Westbrook, “Nature and Optics in The Great Gatsby,” *American Literature* (March, 1960), XXXII, 78-84. Westbrook examines the novel’s “optical adventures” of Carraway, although he does not deal with the quoted passage. Robert McDonnell (*op. cit.*) argues persuasively that the Eggs are linked throughout the novel with the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg and that the two images are elaborate puns on each other. Thus East Egg and West Egg in the form of Dr. Eckleburg’s eyes “hang over the entire world of the novel.”
sees them in the Buchanan house, establishes a clear hierarchy. Both women seem to be straining for imminent flight, a flight wherein the beauty and freshness of nature will infuse the fragile artifacts of civilization:

We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back after a short flight around the house. (p. 8)

This is perhaps as close as Daisy comes to Gatsby’s soaring. But while in this metaphor for the novel’s action Daisy and Jordan seem at least to desire flight, Tom is brutally contemptuous of the act. The rock against whose “hard malice” Gatsby’s “fairy wing” founders, he shatters the illusion of flight with characteristic harshness:

Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor. (p. 8)

From this passage it is clear how crucial Nick Carraway’s particular choice of metaphor becomes in widening the implications of a scene. Thus also in Nick’s fanciful evocation of the Eggs he defines himself as relevantly as he sketches in the novel’s setting. Nick’s shifting perspective provides the visual as well as the moral key to the novel. For instance, at McKee’s party he realizes that

high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was with him too, looking and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life. (p. 36)
Gerhard Joseph

Nick's language in describing the Eggs recapitulates this double vision which both for better and for worse characterizes his ethical stance: he can comprehend, though not fully participate in, both vantage points, that of those "in flight" and that of the "wingless" he more closely resembles.¹⁶

Both authors treat in their complementary protagonists the failure of man to shape the universal egg, that natural process whose arcane maturation is not particularly receptive to man's specifications. And the pessimistic irony that emerges from considering the works side by side is that once a character attempts to mold his destiny, he is damned into an American tragedy if he fails or if he succeeds. If "The Egg" describes the stunting of character that results from the inability to emulate Columbus's success, while *Gatsby* portrays the distortions attendant upon a repetition of Columbus's triumph, the question of which doomed alternative to pursue seems merely a further instance of "the complete and final triumph of the egg."

Yet the egg's victory is not total. The burden of both stories is finally that the attempt to manhandle the egg of one's destiny and to rediscover the New World is a worthy and noble feat. In the introductory fantasy to *Winesburg, Ohio*, "The Book of the Grotesque," Anderson has described the poignant legitimacy of the obsession which forces a human being to concentrate on one of the many "beautiful" truths of the world:

> It was the truths that made the people grotesques. . . .
> The moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced a falsehood.¹⁷

While Joe Kane, the young customer of "The Egg," condemns himself by his lack of imagination, the father is dignified by his humiliation. So too does the reader agree with Carraway's final judgment of Gatsby, perhaps a displaced spectre out of "The Book of the Grotesque," that "you're worth the whole bunch put together." Although Anderson and Fitzgerald decry the confusion of the gulls that hover over the Eggs, the drive that blinds and twists them they recognize as the substance of humanity.
