



A Fish Dinner in Memison

E.R. Eddison

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In this second book of the Zimiamvian Trilogy, the royal guests at *A Fish Dinner in Memison* amuse themselves with the creation of a sadly flawed world ... and in an instant spend a lifetime in it.

A Fish Dinner in Memison Details

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Michael says

I'm only so far as the prefatory letter Eddison wrote in explanation of the philosophy which underlies his Zimiamvian trilogy, but having read Mistress of Mistresses: A Vision of Zimiamvia a few times, I see (possibly indistinctly) where he's coming from, although I'm not sure if I agree.

He says that the universe is built upon a dualistic male-female axis, the male pole (no pun intended) being Truth, which creates, sustains and is sustained and enchanted (he actually says 'enslaved') by the feminine pole of Beauty. Any similarity to the Taoist principles of yin and yang is, I think, a chance one, or, at least, one that does not bear up under scrutiny. The Taoist conception is more of a conceptual model to aid understanding, without any pretence to being actually how the universe is ordered (one of the Taoist masters having said that if a student asks the sage to explain the Tao, and if the sage does so, neither of them is talking about the true Tao), whereas Eddison appears to be putting his conception forward as an actual truth underlying the whole of reality.

What I don't like about it is the utter lack of agency accorded the female principle of Beauty, whose power is predicated solely on the regard in which it is held by the male principle of Truth. I think Eddison is displaying his classical education (it feels like there is something of Hesiod's Theogony about this) and also his cultural values with regard to gender roles (though it's possible, if not probable, that I'm doing the same), which includes the image of the aristocratic *femme fatale* who is the object of male worship, but denied any real personality in her own right.

Given such food for thought in the opening few pages before the story proper begins, I'm looking forward to this read!

Update: I caught myself smiling at and re-reading a passage simply because of Eddison's exquisite use of language.

James says

Though this book has the rich and beautiful prose that I have come to expect from Eddison, it is easily my least favorite of his Zimiamvian trilogy. Eddison often spends large amounts of space describing a scene or having his characters go into long metaphysical dialogues. But this book spends way too much time with these things, particularly with the latter. I enjoy some of these discussions concerning mystical philosophy. But the former books in this trilogy also had battles and political intrigue. But there is very little of that sort of excitement in *Fish Dinner*.

Nevertheless, I recommend this book to the Eddison completist. His rich prose are truly a thing to slowly read and savor.

Matthu Stull says

i really loved "The Worm Ouroboros", so I'm hoping this will be slightly close to similary groovy! not nearly as good, hmmm, i think maybe the introduction was the best part

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in June 2002.

The second of Eddison's Zimianian trilogy is the most difficult of his novels to read, though it is well worth the effort. It has much more to do with the aims of his writing than *Mistress of Mistresses*, where the hints about what is being done can easily be ignored, and the unfinished and in many parts skeletal nature of *The Mezentian Gate* make the underlying ideas far more obvious. The trilogy as a whole has an extremely unusual and rather disconcerting structure, in that it is more or less in reverse chronological order, with much overlap between the events in the second and third novel (the central event which provides the title here also occurs in *The Mezentian Gate*).

The fact that the opening chapter contains phrases in French, Italian, Greek and Latin might put a fair number of readers off, but more difficult in actuality is not so much Eddison's theme (time and eternity) as what he wants to say about it. (Eternity is also the theme of Eddison's less obviously related and most famous novel, *The Worm Ouroboros*, as the worm is a symbol for the concept.) The philosophical introduction won't clarify matters for anyone who hasn't read at least one of the novels in the trilogy already. Eddison could have written an allegorical fantasy, which would have been more familiar as a form to many readers of the genre, but he felt that it would be too easy to do this and would diminish his subject; instead of personifying eternity, he wanted to use all his characters to hint at different aspects of his ideas about time, in the same way that he felt that real world individuals did.

Eddison conveys his ideas as well through the parallels he makes between the real world and Zimiamvia, and by making several of his characters incarnations of gods and goddesses (or, perhaps more accurately speaking, of the ideas behind the characteristics of Zeus and Aphrodite). These ideas, present in the other two novels, appear here in more complicated forms which are explained in less detail, as the earthly story is intertwined intimately with the Zimiamvian, as Lessingham's courtship of Lade Mary Scarnside parallels Duke Barganax's of Fioranda. Then there is the "fish supper" itself, where discussion of how the gods create worlds for their own amusement leads to the act itself, as our "real" world is exhibited as a fantasy of a dinner party in Memison.

The structure is a bit confusing, at least on first reading, but *A Fish Dinner in Memison* contains much which is inventive and still fresh (especially the idea of our world being a temporary diversion, one which has recently been re-used in *The Science of Discworld* as a way to explain scientific ideas through Terry Pratchett's popular fantasy series). It is a philosophical and, like all of Eddison's writing, a poetic novel - the language of the chapter "Night Piece: Appassionato" in particular seemed to me to invoke the eternal. Recommended to anyone with an interest in the more philosophical fantasy novel.

David says

While Eddison's earlier works demonstrate his skill with language and story telling, they lack the depth that makes this story so compelling. In this book, the author turns his attention to bigger themes - time, deity and

personality among others - and presents a fantasy that sheds light on reality. I disagree with a number of his views but Eddison has clearly thought deeply and presents a compelling tale that never descends into allegory and retains the integrity of the tale. It's rare that I've read a book that invokes as much admiration and pleasure simultaneously.

The Worm Ouroboros is a skillfully told adventure story. Mistress of Mistresses begins to probe important issues. But Fish Dinner in Memison is Eddison's magnum opus and deserves to rank among the best books to have graced the fantasy genre.

Edward Butler says

Eddison's trademark "ouroboros" narrative structure works better here than in Mistress of Mistresses, and the philosophical reflections in it are more mature, even if the theological reflections remain a bit puerile. Eddison's characters are never robust enough to hold up the formal structure of his books, though. Lessingham, his alter ego, comes off here as the worst sort of Mary Sue: great painter, great diplomat, mountaineer, most interesting man in the world. He also spouts off at one point like the worst sort of Tory toff (I know that he claims at one point to be a Whig, but this is presumably in the 18th century sense). All females, as usual, are The Dark Continent. Still, if you're interested in the history of fantasy literature in the 20th century, Eddison is significant, and if you can appreciate his cultural references and manage his language, his work is worthwhile.

Jeff says

Dense reading, but if you enjoy Eddison's style, keep at it.

Peter Haslehurst says

There's a horrendous superman philosophy at the heart of this book – those lucky few who are rich and beautiful and powerful are incarnations of God or Aphrodite, and the rest of us are toys for their amusement. So this is pretty repellent, especially as it goes with some conservative or downright fascistic politics. Also, the swooning descriptions of women's outfits, hairdo's, jewellery, and mockingly curling lips began to get weary after a while. And yet.... no-one can describe a mountain sunset like Eddison. And there are some great moments, like the King's confrontation with The Vicar of Rerek in chapter 7 ("Seven against the King").

Paul says

Incredibly stylish, detailed and complex, I'll need to reread to fully understand the relationships between the two parallel worlds, but I'm looking forward to it. Great!

Joseph says

OK, this gets a bit ... complicated ...

The previous book in the series, *Mistress of Mistresses*, opened in our own world with the funeral of Lessingham, an older gentleman who'd apparently done great things in his youth. The scene then shifted to Zimiamvia where the death of King Mezentius and, in fairly short order, his son King Styllis has set off a dynastic struggle between Mezentius' bastard son Barganax (basically a decent guy) and Mezentius' daughter, the reigning Queen Antiope (supported by the very not-nice Vicar of Rerek, Horius Parry, and Parry's supremely competent cousin-german Lessingham (the same? different? who can say?), whose family ties oblige him to support his rat-bastard of a cousin). Oh, and he's also extremely sweet on the young Queen, and those affections are most definitely reciprocated. So we had all manner of battles and intrigues and betrayals and romances, with a soupçon of magic, told in Eddison's inimitable prose.

The events of *Fish Dinner* take place before *Mistress of Mistresses*, although I'm going to studiously avoid (as would, I believe, Eddison) using the word "prequel" to describe it. We actually have two parallel stories – in our own world, we follow the meeting, courtship and marriage of Lessingham and Lady Mary Scarnside; in Zimiamvia, we're back with King Mezentius, his son Barganax, Barganax' mother Amalie, the redoubtable Vicar and various others who'll cause and/or become embroiled in the events of *Mistress of Mistresses*.

Having said that, this is not a book of action; it's primarily a book in which the various characters, in various combinations and permutations, have lengthy discussions about the nature and purpose of existence and of Love (yes, capital L), especially at the eponymous fish dinner. It's also at least hinted that Zimiamvia has been created so that Lessingham and Mary (in various incarnations) have an opportunity to spend more time together.

Seth says

(review of the full series in *Zimiamvia: A Trilogy*)
