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Aphrodite on the Home Front: E.R. Eddison and World War II

Abstract

The centrality of service to the goddess of love in E.R. Eddison's conceptions of heroism and the properly lived life is the focus of this study of the Zimiamvia trilogy. Eddison considered his work an important response to World War II and a call for a more meaningful type of courage and way of living both during and after the war.

Additional Keywords

Aphrodite (mythological figure); Eddison, E.R.—Views on war; Eddison, E.R. Zimiamvian Trilogy; World War II in E.R. Eddison



PHRODITE ON THE HOME FRONT: E.R. EDDISON AND WORLD WAR II

JOE YOUNG

THE TWO DECADES LEADING UP TO THE FORMATION OF THE INKLINGS saw the publication of a number of important works of fantasy literature, with the likes of William Hope Hodgson, Lord Dunsany and David Lindsay all doing some of their finest work. Today, however, those writers are largely unknown to the general public, and are likely to remain so, at least in the short term. Most have also received only cursory scholarly attention, though some of these authors found uses for fantasy every bit as striking and original as those employed by more famous authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

Noteworthy among the fantasists to emerge in this period is Eric Rucker Eddison (1882-1945). Eddison's work deserves closer attention than it has so far received. His fantasy novels use allegory on a cosmic scale, a world predicated on a profound ontological shift, and a uniquely conceived theodicy revolving around the ultimate unreality of evil, and these techniques and devices make his use of fantasy every bit as challenging as that of his more famous colleagues. His use of such techniques is too complicated to be properly examined in the space of a single scholarly article; this paper will provide only the background required to explain the value he placed on his ideas, and why he saw them as valuable in the times he lived in. Fantasy, he claimed, was of great importance in overcoming the difficulties humanity faced in the real world, and this was especially the case when those difficulties were at their greatest heights. Eddison eventually found himself arguing, quite sincerely, that his novels should be read during World War II due to the contribution they made, in his mind, to the war effort.

The relative obscurity of Eddison's work is compounded by the fact that his books demand a great deal from the reader, offering few concessions to readability and only making complete sense as a dense, complicated, 1,500-page unit. Despite praise from contemporaries such as Lewis (*Collected Letters* 2.535-536, 558 et al) and Tolkien (*Collected Letters* 258), they have since been criticized as "anemic" (Manlove 154), "only partially successful" (Anderson 430) and "egregiously imperfect" (de Camp 130). Eddison's ornate, demanding prose style perhaps goes some way towards explaining the small size of his readership:

And Juss, for all his bitter pain and torment, and for all that he was well nigh stifled by the sore stink of the creature's breath and the stink of its blood and puddings blubbering about his face and breast, yet by his great strength wrestled with that great and filthy man-eater. And ever he thrust his right hand, armed with the hilt and stump of his broken sword, yet deeper into its belly until he searched out its heart and did his will upon it, slicing the heart asunder like a lemon and severing and tearing all the great vessels around the heart until the blood gushed about him like a spring. And like a caterpillar the beast curled up and straightened out in its death spasms, and it rolled and fell from that ledge, a great fall [...]. There it lay in its blood, gaping at the sky. (*The Worm Ouroboros* [WO] 206-207)

Such prose is obviously an acquired taste, and not everyone will go to the effort of acquiring it. Those who have paid Eddison academic attention tend towards the opinion that, spectacularly written or not, his work "lacks the fibre of reality" (Manlove 127), and therefore does not meaningfully intersect with human experience in the way that good literature should, fantastic or otherwise. Eddison is therefore generally regarded by scholars as a fairly marginal figure in the history of modern fantasy, seldom receiving more than brief acknowledgement in genre dictionaries or directories.

Perseverance in reading Eddison, combined with archival research, demonstrates that such relegation is unfair. Eddison's invented worlds in fact connect with reality in an intriguing way by interrogating the very concepts of value and morality, and the cosmic frameworks within which they operate. The episode quoted above (from his first novel, *The Worm Ouroboros*) is a case in point. It depicts Lord Juss, captain of Demonland, grappling with a mantichore. The episode seems like little more than a high-stakes lark, inserted into the plot for no better reason than to provide Juss with a compartmentalized opportunity to demonstrate his bravery and physical prowess during Demonland's war with its great rival, Witchland. By the end of *The Worm Ouroboros*, however, we have learned that this is what the novel is all about. Juss, his fellows, and their opponents fight not for any conventionally utilitarian purpose, but as a means of testing their courage, skill, and strength in action, gambling their lives and the fate of their kingdoms to ensure that tests of such noble qualities are undertaken with appropriately high stakes. To do great deeds is reward enough and, when faced with a meaningful, conclusive victory over Witchland, the Demons are confronted with a new, far more damaging enemy—their own boredom and irrelevance in an age of peace. They have, after all, robbed themselves of any excuse to perform the deeds they value, and therefore see their victory as an end to "the great age of the world." Says Juss,

We may well cast down our swords as a last offering on Witchland's grave. For now must they rust: seamanship and all high arts of war must wither: and, now that our great enemies are dead and gone, we that were lords of all the world must turn shepherds and hunters, lest we become mere montebanks and fops [...]. [W]e, that fought but for fighting's sake, have fought so well we may never fight more; unless it shall be in fratricidal rage each against each. And ere that should betide, may earth close over us and our memory perish. (502-503)

Eddison had longed to tell this story since childhood—several episodes from the novel are meticulously depicted in a notebook full of drawings dating from the 1890s (Bodleian Library, MS Eng. misc. d. 654)—and had clearly meditated at length on exactly why it gripped him so much. *The Worm Ouroboros* is therefore very consciously written as a celebration of heroism in and of itself rather than as a means to any particularly rational end.

Having written such a novel, Eddison went on to produce three more increasingly involved novels examining the ways and means by which this quality can be abetted, thwarted, measured, and celebrated. These books, the Zimiamvia cycle, “surpass *The Worm Ouroboros* in philosophical content” (Attebery 533) and they require an introduction in and of themselves. They tell the story of the life, death, and afterlife of the remarkable Cumbrian gentleman Edward Lessingham. Mountaineer, diplomat, historian, linguist, soldier and portrait artist, Edward Lessingham was, by all measures, an astonishing human being. Edward woos and, with some difficulty, wins the hand of the equally remarkable Mary Scarnside, paints numerous portraits of her, participates with great distinction in the World War I and has a stellar career as a civil servant with the Foreign Office, gallivanting wildly across Kashmir and Paraguay. Widowed in a train wreck in 1923, he burns down his house, destroying most of his possessions. He then amasses and inspires a private army to undertake a brilliantly decisive conquest of the Lofoten Islands in Norway, dying the day before the Norwegian air force carry out their threat to bomb his fortress. Thus he dies undefeated. During his lying in state, his bier is visited by a beautiful lady, revealed in due course to be Aphrodite. She promises her hero an afterlife of continuing excitement and challenge in a world that truly deserves him. The three novels skip backwards and forwards in time, interspersing episodes from Lessingham's earthly career with the ongoing political and military machinations of the glorious, balmy, idealistic world of Zimiamvia, in which he continues to account fabulously well for himself.

The books can be read as marvelous hedonistic joyrides, but Eddison intended Lessingham's life, death and afterlife to demonstrate a wholesale critique of moral philosophy. This critique was a project that Eddison cared very deeply about. He had been drawn to notions of heroic violence and adventure

from an early age. The Bodleian's collection of Eddison juvenilia includes a notebook of drawings (MS Eng. misc. b. 105) dating from his childhood, the contents of which demonstrates an ongoing fascination with battles between warriors and monsters, with attendant liberal use of red pencil. Heroic fantasy appears to have been the natural, intuitive home of Eddison's imagination, and the timbre and essential content of *The Worm Ouroboros* was clearly in place in Eddison's mind from an early age. Having indulged that fascination in his first novel, he was driven to apply himself to the question of a moral justification for all of this warfare and bloodshed.

Properly articulating his answer to this question would occupy his imagination for the last fifteen years of his life. He would find the answer itself, however, in 1931, by means of the interesting philosophical device of personifying goodness. "It is spiritual suicide," he insisted,

& a sin against the Holy Ghost, to think of the ult. reality as something unnatural; true religion must [Eddison's emphasis] be anthropomorphic. Since God is infinitely good, wise and beautiful, these qualities are the test of reality. An ascetic shrinking from these things (save as a mere matter of expediency) is blasphemous. (Leeds Central Library [LCL], SRQ 823.91 ED23)¹

Ethical good, Eddison reminds us, is subject to circumstance and expediency. It is an essentially utilitarian affair designed to improve a given set of circumstances. Such an undertaking certainly has its uses, but it is not fit for purpose as a philosophical principle. He used his novels to articulate a more sensible ethical framework. In *Zimiamvia*, ethical good is treated as a "mere matter of expediency," and nobody receives more than casual praise for adhering to it. Ongoing praise and celebrity is reserved for those whose actions serve a good that is desirable for its own sake, rather than a means to an end. Eddison rather optimistically called this good Beauty. To his mind there was no plurality of ultimate values—truth is only valuable if it serves some good, and good is only valuable per se (as opposed to as a means to an end) if it is beautiful. Consequently Beauty, the thing that can be loved for its own sake, is the only thing of true value, and any artwork or philosophical system worth its salt must strive to create or locate concrete examples of it. (*A Fish Dinner in Memison* [FD] 317-319; cf. Thomas, "Introduction" xxxviii ff.)

In the *Zimiamvian* novels, in keeping with his insistence that true religion must be anthropomorphic, he personifies Beauty in certain of the characters—pointedly all female—and then proceeds to reckon the activities of

¹ Archival material quoted in this paper is ©Anne Al-Shahi and used with her gracious permission.

the other characters as good or evil based on whether they aid, harm, amuse, or vex these women. Good, as determined by this measure, is universally celebrated, and evil universally hated and punished. This goes somewhat beyond what Flieger (29-32) identified as the allegorical use of female archetypes. The fabulously varied, indescribably lovely women of Zimiamvia do not personify mere pulchritude, and still less a wish-fulfilling catalogue of fair maidens, supportive wives, and sensuous mistresses. As manifestations of all value, they are in fact the meaning of life incarnate. In his working papers for the first Zimiamvian novel, *Mistress of Mistresses* (as preserved in Leeds Central Library) he took to using the name Aphrodite to refer to women who play this role. Zimiamvia is a world set up to please such figures; the role of the male characters is to capitalize on this perfect opportunity to do perfect service to the idea of perfect good. The very laws of physics bend in their honor; time and space expand or contract at their behest, and entire subsidiary universes may be created or destroyed to satisfy their curiosity (FD 530-536).

Other universes must be considered subsidiary in that Zimiamvia, according to this principle, is the perfect world, where true value is properly incarnated and given service, and where such service is accepted as the only yardstick of virtue or heroism. Earth, by comparison, is a "clockwork world, [a] mockshow operated by Time and the endless chain of cause and effect" (*Fish Dinner* 324). The mechanistic, impersonal natural laws that govern our universe serve their purpose, but they are strictly utilitarian provisions sure to eventually wind down to nothing. Love is the only fundamental, eternal truth, and since Earth is not motivated by that truth, Zimiamvians "find no great sweetness in it" (569). What Eddison was doing in the Zimiamvia cycle, therefore, was redefining the ultimate goals of morality and ontology, predicated on a quite warm-hearted assumption of the central importance of the individual pursuance of interpersonal affection, as precipitated, to his mind, by women. Consequently, our central responsibility as people is to Aphrodite, the classical goddess of love, who is invoked and incarnated on numerous occasions in the Zimiamvian novels.

This was an audacious proposition to make during World War II, which was underway while Eddison was trying to find a publisher for the second of these novels, *A Fish Dinner in Memison*. This war, it hardly needs to be said, had a defining influence on almost everything that coincided with it, including the creation and dissemination of fantasy literature (Croft 62-71 and passim). The difficulty, desperation, and inhumanity of the era surely need little introduction. Indeed, Eddison's own family had suffered during World War II. Eddison dedicated *A Fish Dinner in Memison* to "my son-in-law Flying Officer Kenneth Hesketh Higson, who in an air fight over Italy saved his four companions' lives at the cost of his own" (311). According to his daughter (whose assistance in

writing this article is gratefully acknowledged), Flying Officer Higson was a co-pilot who, by staying at the controls of his aircraft when it was hit, gave his four fellow crewmen a chance to parachute to safety. When the Italian authorities learned this story, he was accorded a full military funeral, with rifles at attention, a Union Jack covering the casket, and the four survivors—now prisoners of war—allowed to attend. Eddison's dedication of his book to Flying Officer Higson's memory, and its wording, demonstrate both the family's grief at his passing and their pride that his death had served such an obvious and noble purpose.

Not all families bereaved by the war had such a tale to tell. Eddison's friend J.M. Howard spoke for many when he wrote:

Today's wars are mechanical and ideological monstrosities, violations of conscience & betrayals of professed gods. Lies & counterlies sport with semantic superstitions; the imagination is paralysed by the marching of the actual horror; men die wonderingly, cynically or casually. There is no poetry; all is propaganda. (J.M. Howard to Eddison, 3/2/42; Bodleian Library [BL], MS Eng. lett. e. 231, 122)

Howard's remarks clearly communicate a feeling of bewilderment at the enormity and random inhumanity of the crisis of the 1940s. For all the bravery exhibited by men such as Flying Officer Higson, World War II presented serious challenges to the relevance of individual heroism. It was an era of Total War, in which entire nations, not just their armies, became targets for attack. It seemed that, quite unlike the war of *The Worm Ouroboros*, this one would be decided not by individual heroics but by the ability of nations to pull together as macroeconomic gestalts and undertake a long-term, mechanical, utilitarian struggle for survival. In such an environment, individual, romantic heroism of the sort Eddison seeks to celebrate was largely irrelevant.

Nevertheless, those few who read his work with attention and sympathy found points in Eddison's work applicable to the world situation. Among them was Eddison's American agent, Edward Niles, who wrote to him in 1944,

You have not yet shown us the Ghouls, but when on Dec 7, 1941, when the Japanese burst forth with unimagined ferocity I thought at once of your Chronology. Are you writing of them now? Have they enough soul—some in the mass—to make it worthwhile distinguishing between them? They haven't to our men in the Pacific. (E.A. Niles to Eddison, 12/11/44; BL, MS Eng. lett. c. 232, 284-285)

Niles refers here to a war mentioned in *The Worm Ouroboros*, in which the Demons, Witches and various "other polite nations" formed an alliance

against a race of monstrous barbarians known as the Ghouls, who “burst forth with unimagined ferocity” (515). This war, recently concluded at the outset of the novel, is quickly glossed over as unpleasant for all concerned. Given that the Demons take great delight in their seemingly dreadful war with the Witches, this would indicate that the wars against the Ghouls were terrible indeed. Here, it should be noted, Edward Niles not only perceives a parallel between the Ghouls’ viciousness and that of the Axis armies, but *directly quotes* Eddison’s description of the fictional war in describing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Elsewhere Eddison made the same comparison:

This is a war [...] against the Ghouls, a war of destruction: a heavy, inescapable, ugly job, having at its end & sanction the extirpation of things which, until by our strength & manhood we extirpate them, stand between mankind & the life which—if we are to remain men—is alone worth living.

In this we fight against ultimate Evil, which is a drab, dirty, ugly, unadmirable thing. (to J.M. Howard, 16/3/42; BL, MS Eng. lett. e. 231, 124-125)

Elsewhere Eddison suggested that the current state of affairs was “really a religious war” given that, unlike in 1914, those who surrendered to the Axis powers would “lose their souls” (letter to E.A. Niles, 7/7/40; BL, MS Eng lett c. 232, 13) to a tide of mechanistic nihilism which was, in accordance with Eddison’s view of morality, a fate worse than death. Such a utilitarian conflict, defending oneself from such inhumanity, was a matter of desperate, amoral expediency rather than of heroism.

Again, in such a situation, Eddisonian heroism would seem to be beside the point. The war that Lord Juss and his colleagues fight in *The Worm Ouroboros* is little more than a glorious adventure. Similarly, Horiux Parry, whose schemes to overthrow the Zimiamvian royal family and install himself as king make him the nominal villain of the Zimiamvia novels, exists as a character primarily because the hero, Lessingham, needs someone against whom to test his mettle. Accordingly, Lessingham bears this monstrous individual little ill will. After being imprisoned in the dungeons of Parry’s castle (*Mistress of Mistresses* [MM] 147-155) Lessingham continues their clash of wits with a conspicuous lack of malice, reproach or grievance. In that case as in the case of the Demons of Mercury, the competition is its own prize; faced with actual, permanent victory or defeat, Eddisonian heroes are at a loss. This glorification of military competition for its own sake is, on the face of it, completely inimical to the desperate, destructive, utilitarian conflicts of the twentieth century. William Schuyler, one of the few scholars to have paid any real attention to the philosophical ideas expressed in these novels, notes that “it is much harder to

maintain this position nowadays in view of the form that modern wars take" (15).

Eddison himself was only too well acquainted with the inhumanities of Total War. He remained adamant, however, that his heroes had something to teach the modern world, and that that something was not (as Schuyler suggests) merely that warfare was better in the "good old days." The very fact that Juss and Lessingham are both operating in fantasy worlds, *not* our own, demonstrates a crucially important qualification to Eddison's view of their exploits. His appreciation for heroic violence and invincible warriors might appear to cast him a romantic reactionary, but he actually had a very realistic perception of what any one human soul could accomplish in the real world. *A Fish Dinner in Memison* makes this point explicit. The sections of the novel set on Earth show Lessingham and his wife, Mary, conducting themselves in a typically full-blooded fashion better suited to Zimiamvia than Earth. Lessingham scales the Himalayas, writes a surpassingly incisive biography of Fredrick II, paints numerous portraits of his indescribably beautiful wife and serves with great distinction in the First World War, all while pursuing a stellar career with the British foreign office. Although he and Mary accomplish a great deal in this manner, they eventually come heartbreakingly unstuck when the laws of cause and effect, rather than romantic heroism, cause Mary's early death and Lessingham's consequent, catastrophic emotional collapse. This, in fact, is at the heart of Eddison's critique of reality. Revering Aphrodite before all else, these people have the right idea, and live fabulous lives as a result. But Earth is simply not set up on that principle. Thus their way of life, in service to absolute goodness, is thwarted by a system that does not allow such heroism its just rewards.

For individual courage, love, skill, and leadership to count as much as Eddison clearly felt they ought to, he required a universe set up specifically to test them. The fact that there are no guns in Eddison's novels was no accident; gunpowder and the internal combustion engine were, he said, distractions from human potential rather than testaments to human ingenuity (letter to Gerald Hayes, 4/3/44; BL, MS Eng. lett. e. 230/1, 66). Nor, as noted earlier, is Eddison simply complaining about modern industrialization, a process with which many twentieth-century fantasists, notably Tolkien, have issues. He stands accused of this charge (Schuyler 15; Wilson similarly quotes a contemporary reviewer at 13) but careful examination of his battle scenes demonstrate this was not his point. In his fight with the mantichore in *The Worm Ouroboros*, for example, it is noteworthy that Lord Juss is armed only with the *stump* of a sword. His sword, that great emblem of pre-industrial warfare, is broken early in the fight, proving itself an unreliable distraction to the competition at hand and necessitating the spectacularly gory wrestling match quoted earlier. All Juss can rely on is his own

will to win, and this proves enough. Juss defeats the mantichore not because he can afford to pay a good swordsmith, but because he, a true warrior, refuses to submit to the alternative. Eddison therefore attempts to get his characters competing not on the grounds of mechanical power, wealth, or even martial prowess, but through their humanity alone. They could not do so on Earth, he appreciated, where utilitarian laws, technological distractions, and moral uncertainties provided unavoidable hobbles to human potential. In Zimiamvia, as on Mercury, those problems could be removed, and Lessingham could be the true hero he really is. He defeats his foes through skill, daring, and bravery, not by having more or better tools, and is applauded for doing so because his actions in the service of Aphrodite are, *ipso facto*, the right thing to do. This is not escapism or idealism so much as humanism espoused to a level of purity that could only be maintained under the literary equivalent of laboratory conditions: the secondary world.

Thus Eddison was deeply concerned with isolating and portraying the kernels of humanity in an era when the loss of such notions seemed a very real prospect. For this reason, and despite continual rebuffs from pragmatists, he continued to push for a British edition of *A Fish Dinner in Memison* to be published during the war while it was, he said, still topical.

This may seem a curious claim to make, but Eddison's correspondence is full of discussions about how, during wartime, this was exactly the sort of material that people should be reading, "I feel," he wrote,

that books with a philosophy to them, & books which try to look over wider horizons than that of bombs & guns & this 'ghostly war' with 'the Prince of Evil's old prerogatives' which monopolises so much of our thought and action today, are just what should be read at this time; & indeed may help to stiffen our resolve against an enemy who would destroy, if he could, all that makes life worth living. (to Evelyn F. Heyward, 4/3/41; BL, MS Eng. lett., e. 231, 77)

At first glance this may seem slightly self-serving, or even mercenary, but Eddison was concerned less with his books being sold than with them being read. When a fan of *The Worm Ouroboros* wrote to him asking if he had written anything else, he replied, enclosing a copy of his historical novel *Styrbiorn the Strong* as a gift, apparently, to a complete stranger (BL MS Eng. Let. c. 230/1, 2). He had been securely pensioned by the civil service, and certainly did not write for the money.

Nor did he feel his books would provide mere welcome escape in wartime. For many readers and critics alike, fantasy literature is nothing more than escapism, and Zimiamvia, a sun-drenched, pre-industrial realm peopled by well-fed, fabulously dressed, incisively self-assured warriors fighting for the

thrill of competition, obviously bears little resemblance to England in 1941. Again, however, the vainglorious descriptive passages that leap out at uninitiated readers of Eddison are not central to the matter. The gloriousness of Zimiamvia is a compositional side-effect of the underlying moral and philosophical framework of the novels, and it was this framework that Eddison saw as topical during wartime.

“When the civilized world is agonised in a Ragnarok struggle between good and evil,” Eddison wrote, “& everything that can be shaken is shaken, & the only comfort for wise men is the certitude that things that cannot be shaken will stand, poets & artists are faced squarely with the question of whether they are doing any good by producing works of art” (to William H. Hillyer, 24/11/42; BL, MS Eng lett. e. 231, 112). To do any good, Eddison argued, a work of art must be principally concerned with the depiction of true value, that which can be loved for its own sake (*FD* 316-318). If Eddison’s definitions can be accepted, his books certainly serve this manifesto, being a depiction of a world where Beauty is objectively incarnated, loved without reservation, and defended against attack by individual human heroism. Such a model of the meaning of life was in no way served by a catastrophic war in which the central index of success was physical survival via mechanical wherewithal. “Rightly or wrongly,” he continued in his letter to Hillyer,

I am satisfied that by continuing to carry on what has become my job, I am making my best contribution to the cause which [we] are with so much blood & tears & sweat (& at last with so grandly dawning a promise of success) upholding against the greatest & most expert organization of evil the world has ever seen. As I conceive it, my writings are not wholly irrelevant to the ‘ghostly war’ which at this time issues in unexampled material violence to the world-wide summation of life & the means of life. It is well, when ideas & ‘ideologies’ are bandied about with noise & fury, to remember that, in life as in art, what matters is not the idea but the person. It is from personalities, individual living minds of men and women, that ideas take life, grow & form themselves & have their nourishment; & they gain power (in the long run) as organic parts of the mind of this and that living being that entertains them and makes them part of itself. A noble world is a world fitted for noble men and women; all else is machinery, & machinery (a truism bitterly brought home in recent generations) is neither good nor bad, progressive nor reactionary, but as its user makes it.

Because of its preoccupation with the mean facts of survival, World War II was, as Eddison saw it, a utilitarian effort. It was, to be sure, a vital undertaking, but it served only ethical good, and ethical goodness was “relative,

subject to convention & expediency," and was a means rather than an end in itself. The only truly noble undertaking was the service of enduring human affection. Eddison wanted to get a book discussing this idea published at a time when the English were in danger of becoming so preoccupied with the mechanical (and, therefore, ultimately ephemeral) means of victory that they might forget the precise human ends. He conceded that this might be called escapism, but only in the sense that it could give the English a chance to stop, draw breath and remember what they were really fighting for. That end was not simply victory over the Axis powers, vital though that may be, but the freedom to attend to things that were truly important—a point that, while crucial, could all too easily be overlooked in the tumult of Total War:

We live (in wartime) in an atmosphere of journalism & topical writings: but topical literature is surely often itself an "escape" from more important & (odd as it may seem today to say so) more permanent things in life—the flow of the world, its history, humanity, joie de vivre—seen as a whole. (Bod. MS Eng. lett. c. 232 165)

People needed reminding of this point, not so as to be encouraged to ignore the current situation, but to help them cope with it. The war was a dreadful, costly burden for all, as Eddison himself appreciated only too well, but life was not always going to be a dispassionate, pessimistic, utilitarian trudge through munitions factories and air-raids and form-letters of condolence. Life was, he firmly believed, a precious gift, and a wonderful thing. When—not if—the war ended, this point would become more evident. Until then, something needed to be done to keep the current crisis in perspective, lest people lose heart or feel that their lives had been permanently reduced to a mere mathematical exercise in survival. This was the purpose that Eddison insisted *A Fish Dinner in Memison* could serve. By providing a "general philosophy of life," rather than yet another update on the transitory travails of the war, he felt that Zimiamvia would be "Steadying and invigorating—champagne, not dope, nor emetic" (to Faber, 16/6/40; BL, MS Eng. lett c. 232, 8). Upon being reminded of the central importance of a prize, he believed, people would be more disposed to work towards it. Elsewhere he argued.

There is a growing public (more than ever, perhaps, in wartime) for books that offer a taste of new air, not so much irrelevant to our troubles as above them. Such air is champagne; not dope, but a tonic, & a foundation-rock for action and endurance. (to Richard Church, 22/4/41; BL, MS Eng. lett. c. 232, 173)

Eddison appreciated the potential difficulty of his ideas, and understood that the claims he made for the topicality of his work in wartime might have seemed faintly far-fetched (to F.T. Smith, 16/3/41; BL, MS Eng. lett c. 232 165). In light of the emotional impact of the very thing he was critiquing, however, the idea that a pause to draw breath and remind oneself of what one was fighting for might have some value is not especially out of keeping with broader official policies. The desperate, prolonged utilitarianism of the 1940s had obvious emotional effects on the civilian populations dragged into Total War, and generals quickly learned not to neglect that aspect of the war effort. Fifteen minutes spent in front of the History Channel will demonstrate that military planners on both sides spent months at a time frantically signing off on whatever initiative might grant them any advantage whatsoever. Psychological warfare, both in terms of demoralizing foes and emboldening friends, was often a crucial element of those equations. Croft (129) notes that the air raids of World War II had in fact proved only modestly successful at damaging military targets; they were continued by both sides in an effort to sap the will of enemy civilians. On the ground, planners sought ways to combat this. The call for London housewives to donate their saucepans to RAF munitions factories had less to do with sourcing additional iron than it did with fostering a sense of practical individual contribution to remedying a situation of terrifying and bewildering gravity.

Eddison understood this line of thinking well. As he noted in his letter to Hillyer, "It is from personalities, individual living minds of men and women, that ideas take life, grow & form themselves & have their nourishment." Among those ideas were those embodied by heroes like Lessingham and Juss, such keeping one's head in the face of terrible, monotonous danger. What Eddison offered, therefore, was a meditation on the true, timeless nature of heroism in an age when expediency ruled and the very concept of heroism, so crucial to life and morality, was in danger of being overlooked. He was absolutely sure that individual heroism still mattered—even had he not been so before, his son-in-law's death would have settled the matter—but was worried that the extent to which it mattered would be forgotten in the current world crisis. That he saw such an undertaking as valuable to a nation embroiled in World War II is hardly surprising; whether or not he was right is hardly the issue.

The fact that he saw such work as applicable to the situation at all is crucial. It exemplifies his desire to make sense of reality by taking a step back from it and his keen appreciation of the value of fantasy literature as a method of mounting such critiques. This, in turn, demonstrates a clear understanding of the partnership between fantasy and reality, and the fact that no resonant fantasy can afford to ignore the problems of reality. His aforementioned rejection of his work as being an emetic for the primary world is worth restating at this point. It

might also be noted that the final, incomplete Zimiamvian novel, *The Mezertian Gate*, was written during Eddison's less demanding shifts in the local Air Raid Precautions office, where he worked as a warden (BL, MS Eng. lett. c. 230/1 49-50). He took this position because he was too old to enlist in the army, and his doctor forbade him from fulfilling his desire to join the local Home Guard (to Gerald Hayes, not dated but apparently from 1943; BL, MS Eng lett. c. 230/1, 57). Eddison was undeniably concerned with current events and unquestionably pulled his weight during the war. At no point did he advocate a slackening of pace or a downing of tools in the battle against Fascism. He merely had eccentric, entirely sincere ideas about how he could best contribute to that effort.

Others saw Eddison's books as being topical in a less positive sense. Gerald Hayes, who drew the maps of Eddison's worlds and had encouraged him in his composition of further books, became increasingly nervous of the way in which the development of those books came to mirror that of the primary world. Hayes noted that the moral recalibration embodied by Eddison's characters amounted to "sheer, bloody Fascism," and wondered how excusable such ideas were in the current situation (Hayes to Eddison, 20/2/45; BL, MS Eng. lett., e. 230/1, 99). The accusation has more recently been echoed by L. Sprague de Camp, who describes the men of Zimiamvia as "cruel, arrogant bullies" adhering to a political philosophy "most recently revived by the European Fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s" (132-133). This is a serious charge, and was all the more so when Hayes made it in 1945. Eddison bristled at the accusation. Fascism was, he said,

a 20th-Century disease born of the mischiefs of an industrial civilization. It issues in tyranny, just as communism & all forms of collectivism issue in tyranny; & by tyranny I do not mean monarchy or oligarchy per se but the tyrannical rule of bad or foolish men—generally both bad and foolish. There is nothing in my books—because there is nothing in my mind—that has the smallest comfort for 'fascism', unless indeed you concentrate on Lessingham's perfectly natural passing remark (he makes it in 1923) expressing preference for the Italian tyranny rather than the Russian. At that date [Eddison's emphasis], most informed and impartial people would have agreed with him. (to Hayes, 24/2/45; BL, MS Eng. lett., e. 230/1, 102)

The term 'aristocratic' turns up frequently in commentary on Eddison. A faith in the concept has been cited as the central feature of his work (Stephens xi-xii), while Sawyer (15) and de Camp regard it as an unsettling flaw in Eddison's thinking. The quoted passage demonstrates that Eddison certainly subscribed to the principle of aristocracy, but interpreted the term literally, as rule by the best. Exactly how to measure who are the 'best' is, of course, the

central question of political science. In the letter to Hayes quoted above, Eddison noted that, in this literal sense “[a]ristocracy has never existed on any large scale or for any length of time” —because the primary world is set up on motivating principles that render this form of government largely impossible. He therefore used fantasy to show it in action, and to answer the political scientists—the best are those whose humanity is unencumbered by neurosis or technological distractions. Hitler, a soldier who was unable to accept his defeat in World War I and who had taken advantage of circumstances to gain a position where he could use technology to vent his frustrations upon millions, failed on both counts. Elsewhere Eddison coins the term “kakistocracy”—rule by the worst—to characterize such a regime. Like Hayes, neither Sawyer nor de Camp appear to have grasped the subtleties of Eddison’s point here; their adherence to conventional definitions of aristocracy has led them to be rather more critical of Eddison’s ideas than they should have been.

In his letter to Hayes, Eddison refers to an episode in the *Fish Dinner* that illustrates the point further. Set on Earth, it finds the recently widowed Lessingham sitting in his armory in Cumbria with his brother-in-law, discussing the political developments of the current year, 1923. Lessingham mentions “foxes in lion’s skins,” which Jim takes to mean Mussolini.

Lessingham answered with a shrug. “There is the better always, and there is the worse. But the mischief is more in the game than in the player. In mankind, not in particular men. The field, and the apparatus, are too much overgrown and sprawling.” (FD 543)

Here Eddison articulates almost the same idea as in his letter to Hayes; that the fascists were only able to extend their tyranny and depredations to others given the mechanical wherewithal of industrial civilization. Without his panzers and Luftwaffe, Eddison argues, Hitler would simply be an undistinguished artist sitting in a Munich bar babbling conspiracy theories, an inconsequentially tragic individual who had allowed the universe to get the better of him. This is, pointedly, close to the Eddisonian definition of evil. In Zimiamvia, evil characters are recognizable by their wont to complain about their lot in life. Good characters view the cut and thrust of war, love and diplomacy as an ongoing arena for service to the Goddess, and even when defeated, tend to accept that they have been bested by the better man or woman. In Zimiamvia, an expression of anything more than passing irritation at a defeat is simply an indication that one cannot handle the heat, and should get out of the kitchen. Lessingham’s sole concession to the unpleasantness of having been locked in Parry’s dungeon overnight is to order the clothes he was wearing at the

time burnt; afterward he continues to fight his corner of their dispute without evident complaint (*MM* 154).

Other characters lack this poise. One such man is the minor nobleman Morville, seen here confronting his wife over (wholly accurate) accusations that he has recently been cuckolded:

He struck her across the mouth with his glove, saying, in that extreme,
"Go your gait, then, you salt bitch."

Her face, all save the smouldering trail of that blow turned bloodless white. "This may be your death," she said. (*FD* 449)

So it eventually proves; in due course Morville is quietly murdered by one of his wife's retainers, and neither Eddison (as narrator) nor any of the characters who become aware of this murder blame his widow in the slightest. Striking one's lover, after all, is a foul affront to Aphrodite. Challenged to explain this by a friend, Eddison remarked, "Morville got what he deserved: went back to Limbo" (to George Hamilton, 10/8/40; LCI).

In Zimiamvia, therefore, the evil of frustration—the inability to accept and move beyond defeat—with which Eddison characterizes Hitler is easily and axiomatically done away with. Not so Earth, where, given the apparatus of mechanical civilization—which are, as he said to Hillyer, neither good nor evil—that evil could visit itself on millions. The problem, as Eddison saw it, was therefore not the evil but the organizing principle of the universe in which it dwelt. In Zimiamvia, focused as it is upon a very clear, universally accepted yardstick of individual heroism, a person such as Hitler would never have risen to a position where they would have command of an army. Eddison saw the fact that he had done so in the real world, and the fact that he was misusing that army, as a vindication of sorts for his critique of reality and its organizing principles. Consequently, he saw that critique as topical, and wanted it published during the war.

Again it should be emphasized that Eddison was not simply offering escapism from the war. He explicitly rejects the label; in a letter of thanks for a good review, he complements the reviewer for "knock[ing] a nail into that parrot-word of muddled thinking, 'escapist'" (BL; MS Eng lett e. 231 161). After all, he had not 'escaped' the war at all. Like many millions of civilians in the 1940s, he pulled his weight and suffered great personal loss in the battle against Fascism. In his introduction to a recent edition of the third, unfinished Zimiamvian novel, Paul Edmund Thomas discusses Eddison's wartime obligations and blames the strain of this work for his inability to complete the book (572-577). The fact that Eddison died of a heart attack while tending the vegetable garden with which the family supplemented their wartime food

rations (Thomas 579) stands as eloquent testimony to the amount of utilitarian labor the war required of him.

What Eddison was offering was a critique of the universe that had led England to this situation, something he saw as a unique and valuable contribution to the war effort. This man was not escaping reality but interrogating it and, having located what he believed to be a fault, seeking to promote his reasoning to a nation that stood, as he saw it, at a crossroads between glory and the flaccid, miserable extinction suffered by Morville. Hitler and Mussolini were evil, Eddison said, for the same reason Morville was evil; they could not cope with earlier defeats. The systemic imperfections of the primary world allowed them, *unlike* Morville, to attain positions where they could visit their frustrations on millions. Much like the bruise Morville inflicts on his wife, their apparent success was a fleeting consequence of their abuse of their utilitarian capacities, and would not endure against the activity of those who stayed mindful of their spiritual responsibilities—in other words, those who kept calm and carried on.

It is worth noting here the convergence of Eddison's ideas with more conventional moral arguments, as neither school of thought offers any excuse for the activities of the Axis armies. Indeed, Eddison's unsympathetic characterization of the fascist leaders dovetails neatly with some later critiques. In his exhaustive biography of Hitler, historian Ian Kershaw argues that, far from being the evil genius of popular mythology, he was in fact merely a frustrated, poorly-grounded man of no especial intelligence who browbeat his way into a position of power, for which he was manifestly ill-suited, and which he proceeded to recklessly abuse (xxv-xxvi). The emergence of such theory could be construed as further vindication of Eddison's ideas about the disastrous consequences of giving mass-produced battle-winning engines to "foxes in lion's skins" (FD 543). Eddison's work was idealistic, but it was in no way fascist, reactionary, or inapplicable to reality.

Zimiamvia had, in fact, done precisely what Eddison claimed it would do—granted its creator a very shrewd and revealing perspective on current events. This perspective allowed him not to escape his current situation—as an air raid warden, involuntary vegetable farmer, father of a war widow and grandfather to a now fatherless granddaughter—but to understand his responsibilities in it. Grasping the true nature of those responsibilities, he fulfilled them with dispatch, courage and success. Naturally he sought to promulgate this line of thinking to a wider audience. In identifying the value Eddison saw his work as possessing in wartime, it is important to remember Tolkien's admonition against confusing "the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter" ("On Fairy-Stories" 69).

Perhaps consequently, Eddison's view of the dangers and privations of the 1940s was steadfastly optimistic. With both sides equipped with mechanical forms of cheating, he seems to have believed that the side that kept mindful of its ultimate duty to Aphrodite was certainly going to triumph against those who forgot it. His extensive correspondence with American friends and colleagues is peppered with expressions of delight that America and Britain were "pulling the same boat" (BL MS Eng let. 3 231 69). There is nothing in his wartime correspondence to suggest that he ever entertained the possibility of defeat. He outlived Hitler by only a few months, and apparently none of his post-war correspondence survives. It would be fair to suggest, however, that he saw the eventual victory of those who were "on the side of the Gods" (BL MS Eng. lett. c. 232 280) as further vindication.

On the question of the wartime value of *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, Eddison was not so lucky. The American edition of the novel would be the last of his books that he lived to see in print; no British edition was published until after his death, and the third volume of the Zimiamvia cycle, *The Mezentian Gate*, did not reach bookstores until 1958. Consequently it is difficult to judge how the book would have been received in his homeland. E.A. Niles's quoting from *The Worm Ouroboros* to describe the Japanese air force, however, suggests that Eddison's hopes for the *Fish Dinner* were not entirely baseless. Whatever the case, it is clear that Eddison's claims were made entirely sincerely, and as a result of considerable thought. He saw World War II, dreadful and unavoidable as it was, as a means rather than an end, and felt that those lost in the complexity and desperation of those means would benefit from a momentary reminder of the ends that they were fighting for. One does not need to swallow Eddison's entire theory of the paramount importance of Beauty to find a certain merit in his argument here. In a time of Total War, the emotional solace and reassurance offered by Eddison's fantasy was entirely topical, a point that underlines his primary concern with depicting fundamental and eternal human ideas—the essence, surely, of mythopoeic literature. Eddison's work is simplification, to be sure, but of a cerebral, responsible kind that exists in a demonstrable relationship with the vicissitudes of the primary world. Eddison was not "a decadent who wills to escape our present century" (qtd. in Wilson 13). Still less did he encourage "avoidance of the harsh facts of pain, loss, ugliness and evil" (Manlove 154). Living in the times he did, he appreciated those facts, but sought to keep them in perspective, the better to overcome them. Britain had the Goddess on its side, of this he was sure, and the value of this assurance is demonstrated by his unflinching optimism about the war's outcome; he wanted to share it with others.



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