

REREADING EDDISON

“The greatest high fantasy of them all,” is what I called it when I was asked for a comment to be used on a British reprint edition in 2000, and—though I anticipate grumblings from the partisans of Messrs. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis and, perhaps, George R.R. Martin—I still feel that way, after my latest rereading of it. I’m talking about E.R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros*, that strange, profound, and inimitable novel of magic and adventure on an imaginary world that its author preferred to call Mercury.

It’s a book that I’ve been reading, on and off, since 1952, when I was a freshman at Columbia. I had plenty of other things to read that freshman year—Homer, Sophocles, Dante, and that was for just *one* of my many courses—but despite the rigors of college life I was at the same time an avid reader of SF and fantasy, and *The Worm Ouroboros*, of which I had heard a great deal, was deemed a legendary classic of its genre by those in a position to know. The book was impossibly, fabulously rare, of course, but when a new edition of it appeared I hastily scraped up five dollars for it, I know not how, that amount being the equivalent of about seventy-five dollars in today’s money, and read it in one long gasping burst of astonishment and enthusiasm. There is, I still think, nothing like it in all of literature: it is not only a fantasy epic but an epic fantasy, a book of gigantic scale and overwhelming power.

All I know about Eric Rucker Eddison is that he was born in Yorkshire in 1882, entered the British civil service after his schooling, and eventually ascended to the post of deputy comptroller-general of the Department of Overseas Trade. We can imagine him reporting to his office five days a week and dutifully filing reports

and memoranda; but somehow, in his free time, he was able to turn his remarkable mind to vast and soaring fantasies set in worlds far removed from the dreary precincts of bureaucracy.

The first of them, which apparently took him five years to finish, was *The Worm Ouroboros*, published in London in 1922 and in the United States four years later. (The “worm” of the title is no worm at all, but the gigantic mythic serpent, first encountered in ancient Egyptian legend, that encircles the world with its tail in its mouth, and that serpent plays no part in the novel at all. The title is strictly metaphorical, referring to the circular structure of the plot, which doubles back on itself like the Ouroboros serpent so that the last sentence of the book returns the story to its starting point.)

The Worm Ouroboros had only modest commercial success, but those few who read it loved it greatly, which accounts for the great repute that the book had achieved by the time of its 1952 American reissue. Eddison followed it in 1926 with *Styrbiorn the Strong*, a novel written in imitation of the Icelandic sagas—like Tolkien and Lewis he was fascinated by “the Northern thing,” the saga literature of medieval Europe—and then, in 1935, with *Mistress of Mistresses*, a fantasy that is tangentially linked to *The Worm* but is not at all like it in tone. He retired from the civil service in 1937 to devote himself to his next novel, *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (a sequel to *Mistress*), and was still at work on the third book in that sequence, *The Mezentian Gate*, when he died in 1945. (It was published posthumously, incomplete as it was, in 1958.) Those three books, the Zimiamvian trilogy, as they are known, are fine and fascinating works, subtle and sophisticated,

but too rarefied in tone and concept to reach any but the smallest of readerships. *The Worm* stands apart from them: also not an easily accessible novel, but one, which once the reader has entered it, grips one with inexorable force.

It starts quietly, and, I have always thought, with a miscalculation of narrative design:

There was a man named Lessingham dwelt in an old low house in Wastdale, set in a gray old garden where yew-trees flourished that had seen Vikings in Copeland in their seedling time. Lily and rose and larkspur bloomed in their borders, and begonias with blossoms big as saucers, red and white and pink and lemon-colour. . . .

And so on for quite a bit of pleasant bucolic descriptive prose. Lessingham and his lady enjoy a summer evening together; she reads to him from *The Saga of Burnt Njal*, one of the Icelandic masterpieces; bedtime comes, and they disagree amiably about which of the bedrooms of their house to sleep in, so that ultimately Lessingham goes off alone to a room called the Lotus Room, whose occupants sometimes are subject to strange dreams. During the night he is awakened by a bird that summons him to the planet Mercury, promising to show him "the forests, plains, and ancient mountains, cities and palaces of this world." Once there, she tells him that they are in a land called Demonland, and points out some of its great lords and captains. Very swiftly we are among them—three puissant brothers, the Lords Juss, Spitfire, Goldry Bluszco, and their cousin Brandoch Daha—and Lessingham disappears, never to return again in the book. The entire prologue is elegantly handled, drawing us gently into Lessingham's dream of far-off Mercury, but the book could have begun just as effectively if it had plunged us down at once among Juss and Spitfire and their companions.

Mercury, of course, has no forests and plains, and Eddison quickly forgets that

his book is taking place there. (It does not take place on Earth, either. It takes place in a self-contained world of Eddison's imagination, original and unique, as a pure work of fantasy should.) Nor are the warring nations of that world—the Witches, the Demons, the Ghouls, the Goblins—in any way the witches and demons of our own mythology. In *The Worm* they are simply the names of warring nations, quite human in nature.

An ambassador from Witchland arrives at the court of Demonland, demanding that the Demons recognize King Gorice XI as their master. The Demon lords reply that they will submit only if the king can best Lord Goldry Bluszco in wrestling. The match is held; Goldry Bluszco, we are told, "heaved the King over his head, hurling him as one hurleth a ponderous spear, head-foremost to the earth. And the King smote the ground with his head, and the bones of his head and his spine were driven together and smashed, and blood flowed from his ears and nose." The Witches gather up the corpse of the king and withdraw; their new king, Gorice XII, employs his court sorcerer to seize Goldry Bluszco by magical means and carry him off to a mountain prison—the war is on, and away we go.

As the passage I have just quoted should indicate, *The Worm's* style is majestic and archaic, a style concocted out of the Norse Eddas and the Elizabethan dramatists and the rhythms of the seventeenth-century essayist Sir Thomas Browne, a tour de force of singing, soaring prose that is sustained from the first page to the last. To appreciate it, of course, one needs a tolerance for archaisms ("She said in his ear softly, 'I see that thou art too masterful. I see thou art one who will be denied nothing, in whatsoever thine heart is set. Come.'") and for great swathes of vivid description. ("Cloud and mist abode ever in the south, and only the foothills showed of the great ranges beyond Bhavinan. But on the evening of the sixth day before Yule, it being the nineteenth of Decem-

ber when Betelgeuze stands at midnight on the meridian, a wind blew out of the north-west with changing fits of sleet and sunshine. Day was fading as they stood above the cliff. All the forest land was blue with shades of approaching night: the river was dull silver: the wooded heights afar mingled their outlines with the towers of turbulent blue vapour that hurtled in ceaseless passage through the upper air . . .” I could quote for pages and pages. (“The rift ran wider, eastward and westward, opening on more peaks and sunset-kindled snows. And a rainbow leaning to the south was like a sword of glory across the vision.”) I could quote all 440 pages, if only I had the space. But those who prefer the clipped manner of modern storytelling had better stay away.

It is a land of absolute values. The four lords of Demonland are grandly heroic in every way. The villains of Witchland (the sorcerer Gorice XII, the warriors Corund and Corinius, and the slippery counsellor Lord Gro) are the blackest of villains. The battles are bloody ones; the challenges that face the protagonists in their quest to free Goldry Bluszco from his prison are titanic, and those challenges are met; great crimes are committed, great loves are pledged, great magics are unleashed.

There is very little to compare with the scope of that magic in the rest of fantasy literature. A good example is the fourth chapter, “Conjuring in the Iron Tower,” in which King Gorice (“his nose hooked as the eagle’s beak, his cropped hair . . . his high cheek-bones and cruel heavy jaw. . .”), aided by Lord Gro, calls up visions of the war to come. (“Fumes of a faint purple hue came from the neck of

the retort, and the King gathered them in a flask. . . . The King muttered an incantation, and the powder moved and heaved, and was like a crawling mass of cheesemites in an overripe cheese.”) And so on until the earth quakes and whirlwinds rage with the force of their spells. (The power of the scene is matched in Chapter 32, “The Latter End of All the Lords of Witchland,” which culminates in a cataclysm of Shakespearean force. But then, too, there is the conquest of the unclimbable flame-encircled mountain Zora Rach, and the crossing of the torrential Bhavinan River on the back of a friendly crocodile, and Lord Juss’s flight aboard the hippogriff, and much, much more.)

I loved it all when I read it in 1952, and I love it still, and if you have any taste for this sort of fantasy you will love it also. *The Worm Ouroboros* is no longer protected by copyright, and many editions of it are now available, including Kindle versions. Some of them are exact reprints of the original edition, some are not; and I recommend you choose carefully, because the original edition had wondrous illustrations by Keith Henderson that are as much a part of the experience of reading *The Worm Ouroboros* as Tenniel’s illustrations are for *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Seek them out.

Indeed, there is nothing else like this book. James Stephens said in his introduction to it—and you should try to find an edition that reprints the Stephens introduction—“As a story or as prose it is wonderful. . . . From whatever heaven Mr. Eddison comes, he has added a masterpiece to English literature.” ○

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