

Seven Days at the Silbersteins, by Etienne Leroux. Translated from the Afrikaans by Charles Eglinton (Houghton Mifflin: \$4.95). Reviewed by Andre Michalopoulos.

Etienne Leroux, whose name would indicate French Huguenot descent, is a South African who divides his time between developing his large ranch at Koffiefontein and writing novels. The bizarre, macabre, and very controversial fantasy under review is Mr. Leroux's fourth novel, the first to be translated into English (and also into Dutch), and the first in a trilogy of which the two sequels have already appeared in Afrikaans.

It would be hard to dispute the author's originality in producing a work full of strange, almost psychedelic explosions, black magic, sensitive descriptions of nature, visions of computerized viniculture, pithy discussions on good and evil, and an endless choreography of mostly dark-eyed maidens in swirling dresses.

From the very beginning the reader is bewildered by the weird phantasmagoria which is presented to him. If he exercises considerable good will and patience he may unravel a thread of sense running through the general madness, but then he will have some difficulty in putting up with the intentionally honest but very dim-witted hero, Henry van Eeden, who submits to all kinds of indignities with amazing placidity.

Of course, the story is an allegory in establishing which the author has drawn indirectly but quite obviously upon Pilgrim's Progress, Alice in Wonderland, Goethe's Faust, and possibly the Marquis de Sade.

The ingenuous Henry is taken by his worldly uncle J.J. to spend seven days at the fabulous ranch of the six-foot-seven, red-headed Jock Silberstein. A marriage has been arranged for him with Jock's reputedly glamorous daughter, Salome, whom he has never seen and whom he never sees during the seven days he is at the Silberstein ranch. During these seven days of festivities, shared by a multitude of guests in honor of Henry's engagement to his invisible bride, he is put through a kaleidoscopic and highly-compressed series of gruelling experiences aimed at corrupting his innocence and turning an insipid youth into a sophisticated roue. Like Faust, Henry succumbs to all the temptations of the flesh—orgies, deliciously idealized prostitutes picking spring flowers in the fields, a Black Sabbath, and so forth. And like Faust, he eventually emerges with his basic character unscathed.

There is great variety but little structural coordination in the presentation of the sensational details of this strange story. Jock Silberstein is obviously drunk with power and takes his future son-in-law through his domains proudly glorying in his modern equipment, his despotism over his employees, his adultery in a rustic setting with his chief scientist's wife, and his promiscuity, in which he invites Henry to share.

Meanwhile, J.J. is continually disappearing with Jock's slim, pretty wife, Jock's two spinster sisters titter and twitter inanely as wild parties are in spate, and in the background "the duchess" (cf. Alice in Wonderland), Jock's mother, a hideous woman with a hairy mole on her face, makes deliberately insulting remarks to everyone and particularly to Henry. There are many assorted characters all reflecting a general atmosphere of moral dissolution. Among them Judge O'Hara and Dr. Johns are the plump Tweedledum and Tweedledee of fatuous philosophy. Throughout the story they turn up behind Henry discussing in an amusingly vapid way various trite problems of good and evil, God and the Devil.

Apartheid is lightly touched upon. In Silberstein's bottling plant there are two rows of pretty girls handling bottles on two conveyor belts. One row is black in white dresses and the other white in brown dresses. Jack Jool, a Communist, is also at one of the orgiastic parties enjoying himself; it is suggested that subversive elements are at work and Jock's vast agricultural empire will soon be overthrown.

Anyhow Henry comes out of his nightmarish ordeal a mature man, no longer innocent. But Salome, who has been spying on him invisibly, is satisfied that he is suitable and that she loves him. In the last paragraph of the book a bevy of maidens advances in swaying white skirts, like a Hollywood chorus of ballerinas, on Henry standing bewildered and alone at the end of a great hall, and he suspects that the central figure is Salome.

Possibly the sequel will divulge what sort of marriage this unusual couple has.

There is no depth to the story. Its wildness is such that one reads on wondering: "What next?", and at the end one wonders: "What was this all about?"