

Of X and Y

18-44, by ETIENNE LEROUX
(Human and Rousseau).

- ETIENNE LEROUX must be chuckling every time his latest novel is released for critical and public consumption. And well he might.

The ambiguities, hidden parallelism, associations and assonances of his work are guaranteed to baffle the most discerning critic, let alone the average reader. This, of course, is only to be expected from the writer who sees in the novel more than just an hour or two of fleeting entertainment.

Much of Leroux's previous work is back in his latest book: a wealth of historical and mythological matter, symbolic detail, social satire, the Jungian exploration of other selves through a multiplicity of 'possibles,' archetypes, animas and egos, genesis and degeneration, references to initiations, orgies, third eyes, wise old men, the juxtaposition of audacity, pathos and humour, of poetry and vulgarity. 'New novel' features (elements of search, facelessness, objectification of emotion, etc.) too, reappear.

But this is no return to 'Welgevonden'. This novel is starker, more searching, more incisive, more mystic, more poetic than anything Leroux has written yet. Nothing would be easier than to present the book as a clinical picture of neurosis or psychosis. Nothing would be more wrong.

'18-44' is an ingenious telescoping of dates and ages into a symbolism of history, reality, 'psychic destinies' and fantasy.

The year 1844 is the historical and arithmetical starting point of a strange relationship, by letter and dream, between Y, a man of 44 (Leroux's age a year ago, although he denies that the first person is the author) and X, an 18-year-old 'nymph'—descendants of Kafka's Ks, Joyce's H.E.C.s, Robbe-Grillet's Xs and Ms.

The scene is set in an archetypal Gothic Park, a paradise of projected love menaced and eventually destroyed by the treacherous, ambivalent outside world

(the city, as with Dos Passos) of consciousness when X turns 19 and Y 45 in 1945 (a year of human tragedy).

The 'plot' develops along a system of references involving variously Germanic (and Greek) mythology, Biblical contexts, an allegorical Eden, a lost park, a quest for the Grail, the Lara theme, a 'psychic' pilgrimage in pursuit of a 'tussen-in wêreld' in compelling modern imagery, the drama and irony of existential anguish, original sin, tragic complicity, man's incommunicability (red blood turning black), evanescence, dread ('Vrees is 'n vrees is 'n vrees is 'n vrees').

It focuses on a religious, mystic yearning for the unconscious (the unattainable) below the layer of the subconscious on man's refusal to content himself with the part for the whole or being for Being, before the final resigned aspiration for a higher level of consciousness.

'18-44' impresses me as a 'formal' kaleidoscope of reflections, colours, objects, figures, faces, phrases, phases. This thematic formalism shapes into disturbing, suggestive, allusive pattern of life-and-death, truth-or-illusion, surface-and-depth, art-and-platitude contrasts, identifications, projections and incantations: 'my Swartlandse slagtersvader,' 'sy Walkure-dogter' (who is, also 'my dowe, manies-depressiewe vrou,' 'die sneeukoningin,' 'Brunhilde-Laura,' 'lentemaagd-van-verlange'), a loving, 'seningmaer tante,' 'my sagte Rus,' 'mei. X, Venus, luna, nimf en die ewige dogter,' unsubstantial, unknown (Laura?), 'vier strome na die meer van my droom . . . vierledige aspek . . . ware totaliteit' (one recalls the dream of 'Finnegan's Wake'), representative of the four female figures (states) dominating the psyche, spiders, mechanical monsters, a vase, a sword, a 'barok-kasteel' (for Breton one of the strongest surrealist images), blood and snow, black and white, the locomotive, 'Graalridder'—the cross motif (shades of Beckett and Robbe-Grillet), a mandala (representative, in the Jungian sense, of a profound psychic experience), Nazi carnage, completing significantly the Germanic chain of butchery, sterility and so on.

Scandal and 'perversion' hunters may feel sufficiently rewarded by one or two 'purple patches' of a religious, sexual and moral order.

EBEN MEIRING

● MISKIEN NOOIT, by Andre P. Brink (Human and Rousseau)
will be reviewed next week.