

TIMES LITERARY
SUPPLEMENT

WAKING UP

ETIENNE LEROUX: *Seven Days at the Silbersteins*. Translated by Charles Eglington. 174pp. W. H. Allen. 21s.

Etienne Leroux is a leader of the Afrikaans literary group known as the "Sestigers" (writers of the Sixties), which also includes the novelists Jan Rabie and Breyten Breytenbach. *Seven Days at the Silbersteins* aroused much controversy when it first appeared in South Africa; it is the first of Leroux's novels to be translated into English.

The Silbersteins of the title are a Jewish family of considerable wealth and social importance, who own a vast wine estate called Welgevonden, in the Cape Province. A marriage is arranged between their daughter Salome and the scion of a local Afrikaans family, Henry van Eden. Henry, a young man with soul as blankly innocent as Siralahad's, comes to Welgevonden to meet his prospective bride, and in a course of a seven-day visit he undergoes a kind of ritual initiation to the mysteries of good and evil; is also graced with an awakening to faith, love and truth.

The novel is a comedy of the conventional nightmarish topsy-turvy, which also makes heavy use of allegory and metaphysics. The mode is a la Carroll, Kafka, Ionesco.

Aldous Huxley and other influences. Typical are the recurring joke about Henry's clothes (he invariably dresses in such a way as to make himself the odd man out at the Silbersteins' parties), and his baffled search for the mysterious Salome. He comes face to face with her for the first time only in the last scene of the novel: the joke is that no one thinks of introducing him to her, though he is several times criticized for not paying her enough attention.

The fresh and interesting parts of the novel derive from its South African setting, and Mr. Leroux is good at caricaturing the way of life enjoyed by the Whites in that country. At the parties thrown by the Silbersteins to celebrate their daughter's coming marriage, we are shown a bizarre collection of representative South African types—farmers, journalists, intellectuals, artists, liberal do-gooders, and the rich—and Mr. Leroux's sour apprehension of them is enjoyable. But too often the enjoyment is blurred by a facetious artificiality of style which makes an African servant a "blackamoor", and can describe the romps of Afrikaans farmers' daughters at a dance as "ellin-like" (the fault could, of course, be the translator's).