PAN LITERATURE GUIDES

An introduction to 50 EUROPEAN NOVELS

Martin Seymour-Smith

An Introduction to Fifty European Novels

Martin Seymour-Smith has written, compiled or edited more than thirty books, including two volumes of his own poetry. He has taught in Britain and the United States (as visiting Professor of English at Wisconsin University), but is now a full-time writer living on the Sussex coast. His four-volume *Guide to Modern World Literature* received considerable critical acclaim for its erudition, clarity and originality ('astounding and outstanding' – Cyril Connolly, *Sunday Times*; 'indispensable' – Philip Toynbee, *Observer*; 'a critical classic' – Robert Nye, *Spectator*), and it is these qualities which characterize *An Introduction to Fifty European Novels*.

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o Charles and Nora Sisson

vho don't need any part of this but do have my
ratitude for the many years of their friendship
ınd generosity

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Introduction

The selection of novels in this book is the result of consultation between Andrew Mylett, the General Editor of this series, some teachers of foreign literatures at universities, the publishers, and myself. The selection does not represent the *best* European novels, or my favourite European novels (or, probably, anyone else's), though most of the best are included. The exercise is in the main historical; our aim is to provide, by the means of dealing with fifty individual titles, an outline of the development of the novel in Europe since Rabelais.

Movements, topics, important and influential critics, and writers who could not be represented individually are included in the index, which is fully cross-referenced. The reader should thus be able, with the minimum of fuss, to discover information about such movements as naturalism; such concepts as phenomenology, 'the superfluous man', or Jansenism; such novelists as Rousseau; such philosophers as Husserl; such critics as Conor Cruise O'Brien.

The full plots or stories of some novels cannot be given in the space allowed: in these cases an outline has been given. The reader may therefore be curious to know why so much space has been allotted to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. The reason is practical: people will read and enjoy much of Rabelais, nearly all of Cervantes, much of Proust. I doubt if they will read *Wilhelm Meister*,

although they will undoubtedly try. Though flawed, the book is extremely important: Goethe anticipated all the themes of modern fiction, and this novel is highly relevant to almost all the German novels which followed it, and to some others too.

The method usually followed in this *Literature Guide* has been to devote one section to the author's biography seen against the historical background; a second to an outline of the novel or novels; and a third to exegesis. I have varied this approach when appropriate: it would have been unwise, for example, to consider *Cousine Bette* or *Germinal* outside literary contexts – the larger enterprises of which they form part.

In writing a book on European Literature, titles prove something of a problem. It seemed best, for this book, to use the form by which the novel is most popularly known in English.

The chapter bibliographies are skeletal: further reading can be pursued through the general books (and through the bibliographies supplied in them) listed in the General Bibliography (p. 515).

I am grateful to Miranda Britt, Bernadino Ochino, and my wife for their invaluable assistance and advice; and to the publishers, many of whose staff studied my initial selections and sensibly amended them.

François Rabelais

Rabelais was famous in his lifetime, but modern scholarship has unearthed only enough facts to give an outline of his career. He was born about 1494 at a small farm, La Devinière, near Tours. His father was a lawyer. Nothing is known of his childhood education, but in his youth he became a Franciscan friar at Fontenay-le-Comte, Bas-Poitou. He had humanist connections and before long joined the less strict Benedictine Order. He remained, however, indebted to his strict Franciscan training: both to the sermons he studied and to the notion of original sin so stressed by the Franciscans.

In 1527 he abandoned the cloister, and in 1536 was able, by a technicality, to become a lay priest; by that time he had become famous not only as a writer but also as a man of wide learning: Greek, architecture, warfare, equitation, theology – he was a true Renaissance Man. He qualified in medicine in 1530 at Montpellier, and received his doctorate in 1537. There are stories of his skill as a demonstrative anatomist and even as a 'miraculous' healer. He published *Pantagruel* in 1532 under the anagram (of his own name) of Maître Alcofribas Nasier; *Gargantua*, the First Book of the complete work, followed in 1534 after a visit to his home.

By this time Rabelais had gained the attention of wealthy and influential patrons, particularly Cardinal Jean du Bellay; he was able to use them to protect him

from prison or the stake for the rest of his life. In 1546 he was able to publish a work (the Third Book) under his own name; but despite his protectors, trouble was to attend him until almost the end of his life. This, it must be emphasized, was in no sense unusual for a curious and open-minded public man in the France of his era.

Rabelais probably had one or even two bastard children; these were legitimized in the usual fashion of the time. There is no evidence of his having been more or less promiscuous than any other of his contemporaries. From the time he became famous, in the early 1530s, his most relentless enemies were the ferocious Catholic orthodoxists of the Sorbonne whose aim was to root out any hint of heresy. For his part, Rabelais was happy to remain within the fold of the Roman Catholic Church – even though on what would today be called its left wing. All his books (Third Book, 1546; Fourth Book, 1548, completed 1552) were condemned with monotonous regularity by the Sorbonne, but he was only in serious danger when the Court, for reasons of its own, happened to be out of sympathy with his reformist position. Thus, during the 1540s he had to go into exile at Metz, where he perhaps lived in the Jewish quarter and practised as a doctor, and to go to Rome with his protector du Bellay. But he seems to have been fairly safe from 1549, and was installed as the curate of Saint-Martin-de-Meudon, near Paris, and at another benefice, Saint-Christophe-de-Jambet. Probably these were sinecures. Tradition has it that he died in Paris in the April of 1553.

Rabelais was the author, compiler or editor of many books: popular almanacs, editions of medical textbooks by such as Galen and Hippocrates, and probably some stage farces and revisions of popular works. There is a disputed Fifth Book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, issued (1564) after Rabelais' death: the first sixteen chapters appeared in 1562 as *L'Isle sonante* [*The Ringing Island*]. Certainly it is based on Rabelais, and Rabelais

experts consider it to be 'essentially authentic'. But it contains some editorial additions, and is imaginatively inferior.

Gargantua and Pantagruel

[Gargantua, Pantagruel, Tiers Livre, Quart Livre]

SUMMARY Only an outline of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* can be provided: so full is it of characters and exotic details. The Second Book, *Pantagruel*, the first to be written, got its title from the summer drought of 1532: Pantagruel was the 'little demon' of thirst of the fifteenth-century mystery plays (particularly of Simon Grébon's *Actes des Apôtres*) who put salt down drunkards' throats. Thus Pantagruel, only to be seriously developed in the Third and Fourth Books, becomes a character who induces thirst: thirst for everything – death, drink, illusorily deathless lust – that life can offer. This Second Book is the slightest section of the work which none the less originated in it. It is probable that a visit Rabelais made to his home at La Devinière around 1532–3 prompted him to take up a theme then much in the air at Lyons – the legend of Gargantua – and to combine it with his tale of Pantagruel. When he arrived, there was a row going on over river rights between aristocrats and their well-to-do neighbours, who were headed by his own father. The details of this row he slotted (as the Picrocholine episode) into his adaptation of the Gargantua legend, a full version of which had appeared in Lyons in 1532 as the *Grandes Chroniques*. Rabelais might possibly have had a hand in the revision of this anonymous popular book, but he certainly did not write it.

The First Book (written second) tells the story of Pantagruel's father, Gargantua. It is more deliberately naturalized than the rest of the work. This is so in spite of Gargantua's giantism, a feature that is largely dropped

in Books Three and Four. The giant Gargantua – born after an eleven-month period of gestation from his mother Gargamelle's ear shouting 'Give me a drink! Give me a drink! Give me a drink!' – shows his genius early: for example, he discovers that the softest lavatory paper is a goose's neck. He is educated in an old-fashioned and pedantic manner, which is learnedly satirized – as are the Sorbonne reactionaries. Incorporated into the account of Gargantua's education is much satire on contemporary university life in Paris. Later follows Gargantua's invaluable help to his father, Grandgousier, in defence of his lands against Picrochole; and the eventual foundation of the Abbey of Thélème where the rule is *Do what thou wilt* – but whose programme is subtler and less purely vitalistic than used to be assumed, particularly by readers of Urquhart's version of Rabelais.

In Book Two, Pantagruel, born in the terrible drought that has been mentioned, is introduced as the son of Gargantua and Badebec ('open-mouthed'). This is somewhat more conventional and strictly topical, though it lays the foundations for the Third and Fourth Books. It recounts the gigantic Pantagruel's incredible childhood feats, and introduces Panurge, who is originally based on some of the Greek writer Lucian's studies of rogues but (in Book Two) is none the less nearer to a *picaresque* rascal whose crooked eloquence and high intellectual capacity usually disguise his profound psychological disturbance. In the succeeding Books, Panurge is transformed into Rabelais' most subtle and puzzling creation. The narrative of Book Two is concerned with another war: this time against the Dipsodes in Far Eastern Utopia (Rabelais borrowed the word from More, whose work influenced him profoundly). There are further satirical descriptions of university life.

With Book Three, the most self-contained of the four, an entirely new note is introduced. Pantagruel's hugeness is more or less dropped, and the substance becomes