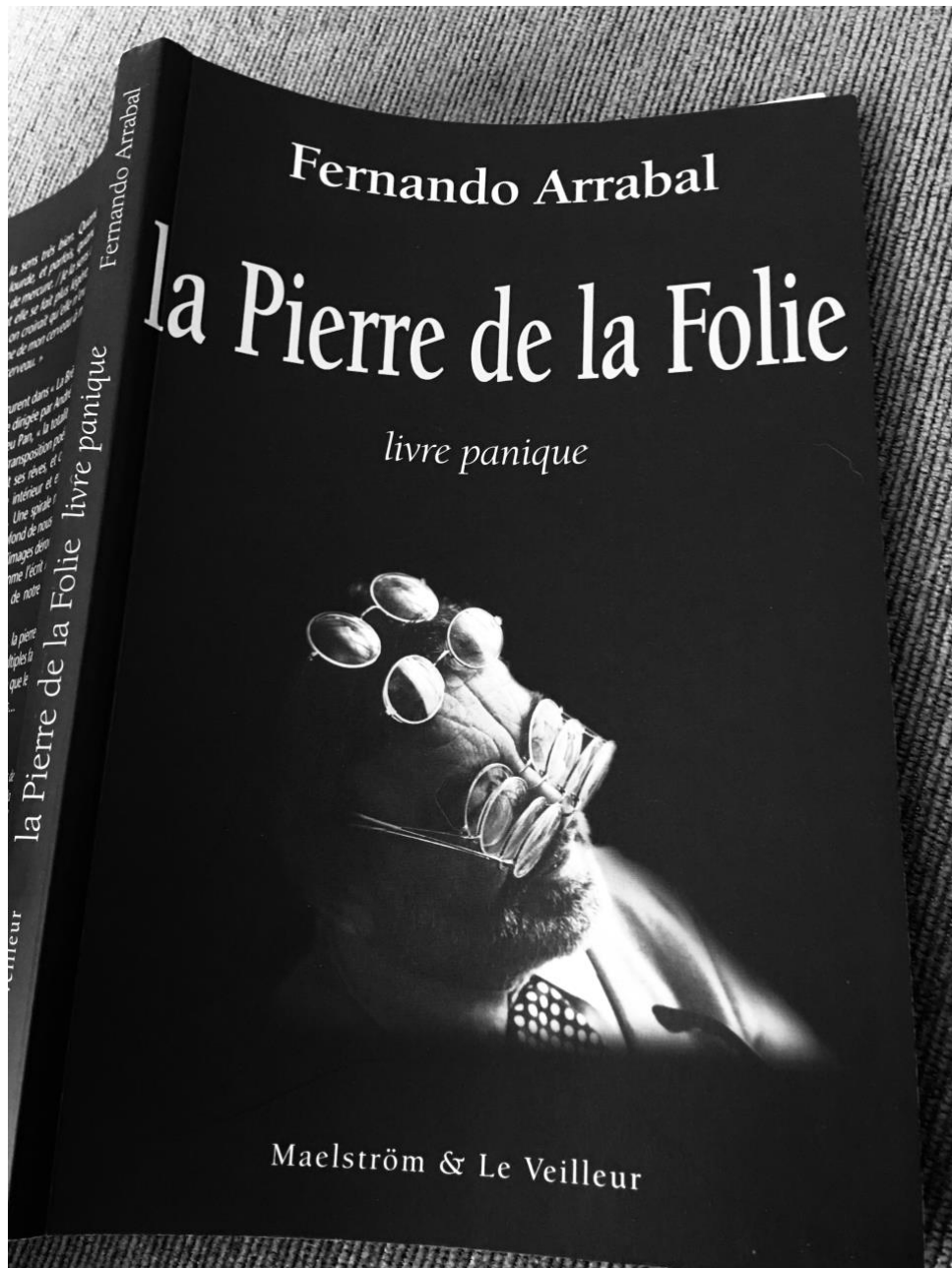


Fernando Arrabal's
La Pierre de la Folie
A Panic Text by James Knight



Panic 1

The bearded man was saying something to me in a language I did not understand. I tried addressing him in Spanish, French and English. His companions laughed at me. I heard a door open behind me and then I was dragged backwards by claws that dug into my shoulders and made me bleed.

Foreign object

En entrant dans le labyrinthe je remarquai qu'il n'y avait qu'une porte.

The book is called *La Pierre de la Folie*. In English, it means *The Stone of Madness* or perhaps *The Stone of Folly* or *The Folly Stone* or even *The Stone of Crazyness*. Best not to try to translate, though; *La Pierre de la Folie* means *La Pierre de la Folie*. Pierre is also a boy's name. The modernist poet Pierre Reverdy had an interesting name. *Pierre* means *stone* (as we have established). A *reverdie* is a genre of poetry in Old French, in which the arrival of spring is celebrated. The literal meaning of *reverdie* is *re-greening* (remember the litany of colours intoned during French lessons: *rouge, bleu(e), jaune, vert(e)*, etc.) And a *rêve* is a dream. So the poet is a stone dreaming of life.

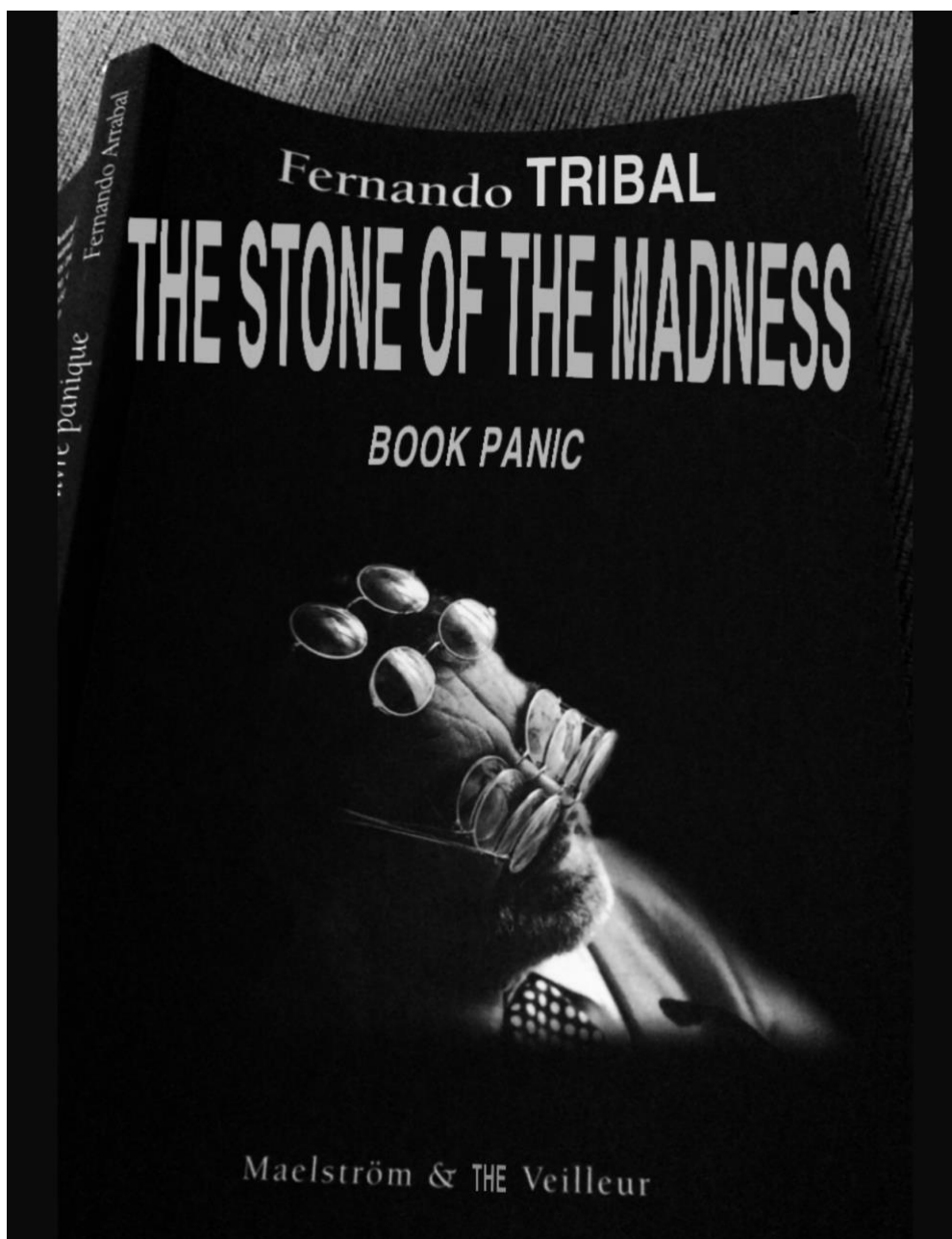
The stone in Fernando Arrabal's book of disquieting prose poems *is* life, in its wildest aspects. It is the stone of madness: creativity, desire, irrationality, subversion. The authorities are frightened of it. The priests and the surgeons cannot allow it to remain where it is, lodged in Arrabal's neck.

Le curé est venu voir ma mère et il lui a dit que j'étais fou.

Alors ma mère m'a attaché à ma chaise. Le curé m'a fait un trou dans la nuque avec un bistouri et il m'a extrait la pierre de la folie.

Puis ils m'ont porté, pieds et poings liés, jusqu'à la nef des fous.

Traditionally, the stone of madness took residence in its host's brain, not his neck. Paintings from the 15th and 16th centuries depict quacks trepanning hapless imbeciles, removing the troublesome stone from puckered head wounds.



Panic 2

She told me my mouth was in the wrong part of my body. I asked her where it should be and she laughed. Then the police turned up, with a surgeon. The police strapped me to a hospital bed while the surgeon said a prayer. When I protested, all my teeth came loose and my mouth bled.

Untranslated

Everyone detests me: they say I have a persecution complex. Oui, toute le monde me déteste: on dit que j'ai la manie de la persécution.

Dreamwork

In his 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton writes:

A story is told according to which Saint-Pol-Roux, in times gone by, used to have a notice on the door of his manor house in Camaret, every evening before he went to sleep, which read: THE POET IS WORKING.

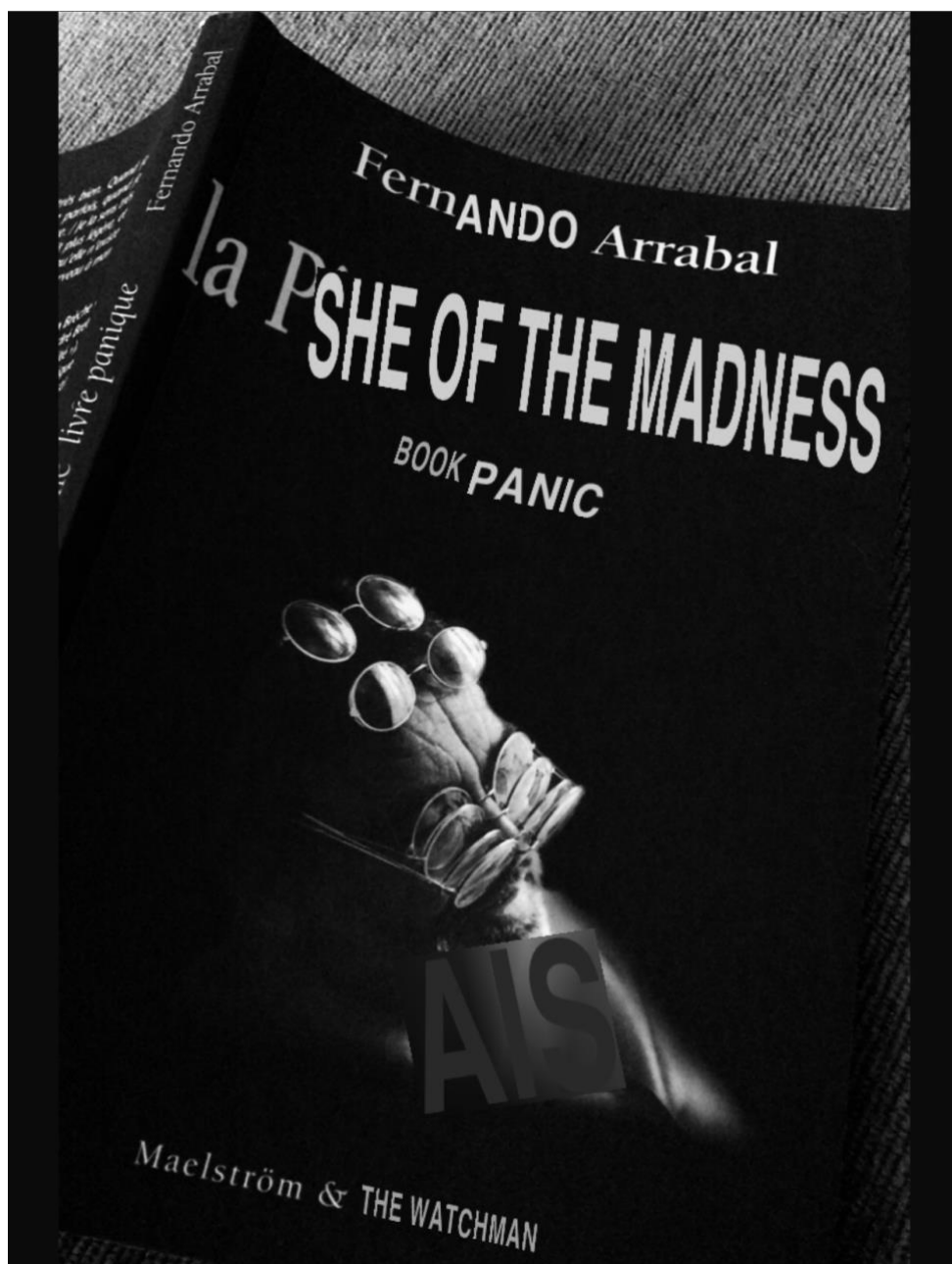
Panikipedia

Born in Melilla, Spain in 1932, Fernando Arrabal's mother tongue was Spanish. Settling in Paris in 1955, he swiftly created a significant body of work in his second language, French. In the English-speaking world he is best known for his plays (many of which have been translated), which explore the themes of confusion, chance, memory, desire and violence in a surrealist synthesis of banality and ritual. In 1962, he co-founded the Panique (Panic) (anti-)movement with Alejandro Jodorowsky and Roland Topor. In a 1963 essay entitled *L'Homme panique*, Arrabal writes:

ANTI-DEFINITION: Panic (noun) is a "way of being" governed by confusion, humour, terror, chance and euphoria.

Eschewing the strictures and prohibitions of Surrealism, Arrabal and his collaborators jettisoned canonicity by embracing cultural phenomena categorised both as high art and as pop culture. Comic books, rock music and striptease were treated with the same enthusiasm as poetry and fine art. Topor made a name for himself not only as a brilliant writer of grotesque fiction and plays, but also as an illustrator, employing traditional line-drawing techniques in the manner of illustrations of popular fiction, but depicting disturbingly bizarre scenes characterised by black humour and a spirit of provocation. Jodorowsky has been responsible for a remarkably diverse output, including films, comics, fiction, paintings, music and writings on spirituality. The word *Panique* derives from the Roman god Pan (half goat, wild boy, sexual adventurer), whose name, when used as a prefix, means (as Arrabal points out at another point in *L'Homme panique*) *everything*. Everything is included in the Panique universe. Heterogeneity is its lifeblood. Stasis, order and canonicity (in all its forms, including avant-garde attempts to redefine the canon) are its enemies. Life is a mess. Panique is a celebration of that mess. We are invited to get drunk on toasts to Pan and run amok, dizzy with joy. If we end up vomiting into the gutter, that's just part of the festivities.

1962 saw both the birth of Panique and the publication of *La Pierre de la Folie*, categorised by its author as a *livre panique*. Excerpts were published by André Breton in *La Brèche - Action Surréaliste*. As the Surrealist movement approached the end of its life, Panique was taking up its spirit of revolt and riotous imagination.



Panic 3

The spy hole showed me a small room with red walls. Fernando Arrabal's mother and father sat opposite each other at a wooden table, playing chess. They were in their prime, eyes fierce with youth and love for each other. Each move was executed with robotic swiftness. "Checkmate!" laughed Fernando Arrabal's mother, slamming her Black Queen onto a square near the White King. At this, her husband slumped forward, his head striking the board. He may have fainted or died. I wanted to ask Fernando Arrabal if this was some sort of Oedipal fantasy, but when I turned around he had disappeared.

Translated: undecipherable

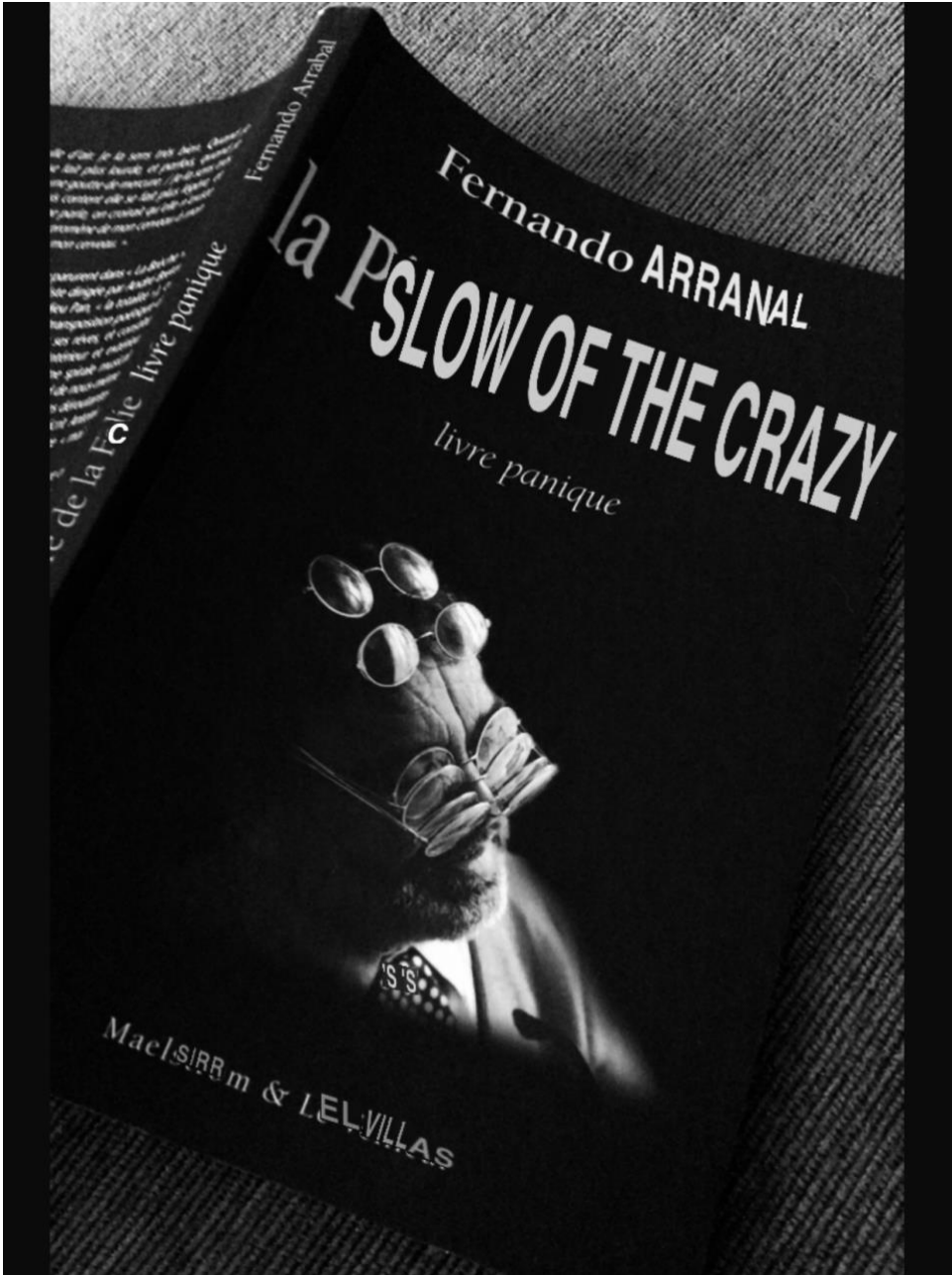
From time to time I see words written in her eyes, but from the spot where I've found myself I can't decipher them.

How to create a Panic text

Have a book to hand. Download the Google Translate app to your smartphone. Select the languages you want it to translate from and to. Tap the camera icon. When you align a chunk of text with your camera, the app will set to work, transforming what you see on the screen from an accurate image of the page into one in which the original text has disappeared, to be replaced by a quivering word-for-word (hence, largely ungrammatical) BLOCK CAPS translation. The tiniest movement of the phone makes a subtle change to the angle and distance between camera and page, which causes the app to hesitate, flicker, change its mind about how to translate the words, with the result that the French word *pierre*, relatively stable in its rendering as STONE, might become, very briefly, FATHER (Père) or CLOWN (Pierrot). The app, possessed by the spirit of Pan, delights in confusion, destabilising the text, playing with words, making nonsense out of sense. To halt the text's violent metamorphoses, it is necessary to press the app's pause button (which gives you a snapshot of whatever collection of words the app had decided to display at that moment) or hold the phone and the book completely still. A second act of translation is then required of you, as you mentally construct meaningful sentences out of the stream-of-machine-consciousness entropy.

Panic 4

The corridors were written in a different language from my own, and although I knew what all of the words meant, I could not always see how they connected or where they led. The unplastered walls' rough Braille was no help. I kept walking, pausing frequently to think. The light was intermittent, and I often found myself in a black spot, unable at first to discern the way forward. The noises followed me, never close but never far: yowling cats, a laughing Mr Punch, the sea. Mr Punch may have been a seagull, but it was impossible to know.



Reading, dreaming

Reading is like sleeping, which is why the former so readily becomes the latter when you're in bed with a book. The world you read is your dream. When you wake up, you may have forgotten much of the story, but its emotional significance will stay with you and trouble you while you get on with your life, as will powerful moments, whose images continue to smoulder in your mind.

Desire, translated

Sometimes when she kisses my hand I feel a strange heat. When she lifts her lips from my skin, the word dream appears on my palm.

Waking up 1

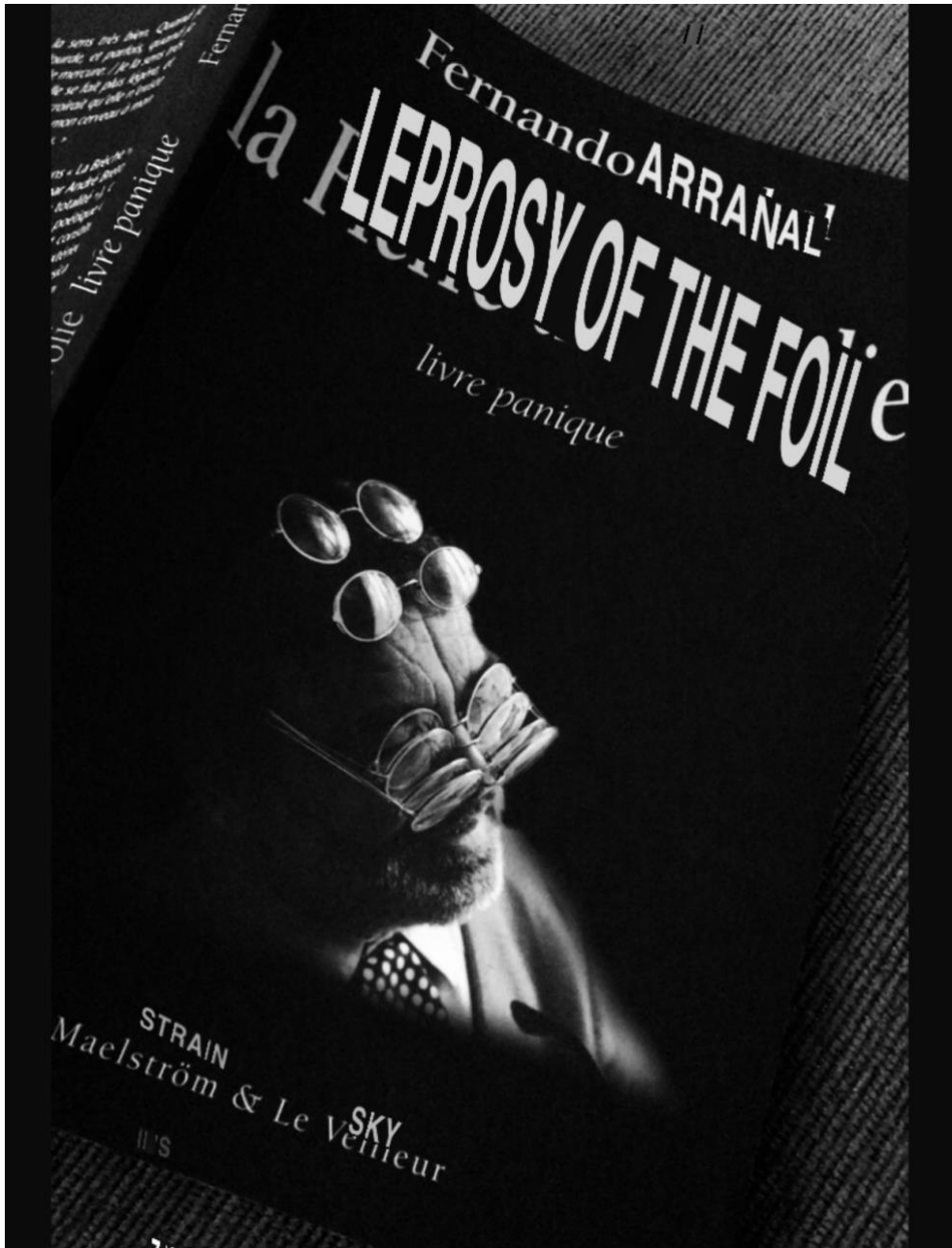
You wake up. You remember little about the dream, except the vague sensation of running and isolated images that bear no obvious relation to one another: a scalpel; a lightbulb radiating darkness; a horse trapped in the branches of a tree. You feel as if you have been crying.

Panic 5

The passages were written in a different language from my own, and although I knew what all of the words meant, I could not always see how they connected or where they led. Re-reading was no help. I read slowly, pausing frequently to think. There seemed to be gaps in the text, glitches in the narrative, and I often found myself in a black spot, unable to see how one image had led to another. Some or all of the images may have been metaphors, but it was impossible to tell.

Book of dreams

The prose poems in *La Pierre de la Folie* are accounts of Arrabal's dreams. The narrator, often presented as a victim, passive spectator or child, is Arrabal himself. There is an interesting comparison to be made with Michel Leiris's dream diary, *Nuits sans nuits et quelques jours sans jour* (translated by Richard Sieburth as *Nights as Days, Days as Night*). Where Leiris's book provides a chronological series of dream accounts, narrated matter-of-factly and with no overtly literary embellishments, Arrabal's book is more artful, gnominically expressed and musical: motifs such as lions, women, wounds, blood, laughter and cats are developed across the cycle, harmonising with each other or generating dissonances. There is repetition, with variations. The book is a *symphonie panique*, in which silence sounds out the essential mysteries. Each brief prose poem is structured around silences: full stops, paragraph breaks, narrative ellipses, semantic gaps, incomprehension (Arrabal's and ours), the ineffable. And after the last note, there is another silence, that of the blank space occupying the rest of the page. Until the next piece, the next word.



Panic 6

It is my christening, or perhaps my funeral. The priest explains to the small group of people shivering in the church that I deserve their scorn because I am ugly and naked. He smirks as he describes my bald head. A crow lands on his shoulder and shrieks "LIFE" over and over, until everyone is deaf.

Get lost

A good book is a labyrinth in which we happily lose ourselves. One woman's labyrinth is another woman's Hell. The author is your Virgil or trail of breadcrumbs or Ariadne's thread, leading you through uncannily familiar spaces (where light and dark play out their ancient duel) to the last page, the denouement, the end of the story, the end of the book, the end of the word. You are never really lost; that is just an illusion. A barking dog or a Twitter notification or an aberrant train of thought will transport you out of the book (if you were ever really in it) and into another world, where another set of rules prevails.

The labyrinth is familiar. Though you have never read these words before, never felt your way along this passage before, you recognise everything around you. That is because you're making it exist. You are the creator, the poet. The words inspire you. Someone left behind a series of black marks, characters representing sounds, and you constructed from their sharp clangs and sinuous whispers a girl riding a horse, a bishop holding a whip, a broken story, a confession.

Panic 7

I'm trying to write about an obscure book of prose poems, but every time I tap a word on the keyboard, autocorrect turns it into something else, something absurd, bearing no relation to the word I was trying to type. Eventually, I give up and throw both the book and my iPad on a bonfire.

Monoglot

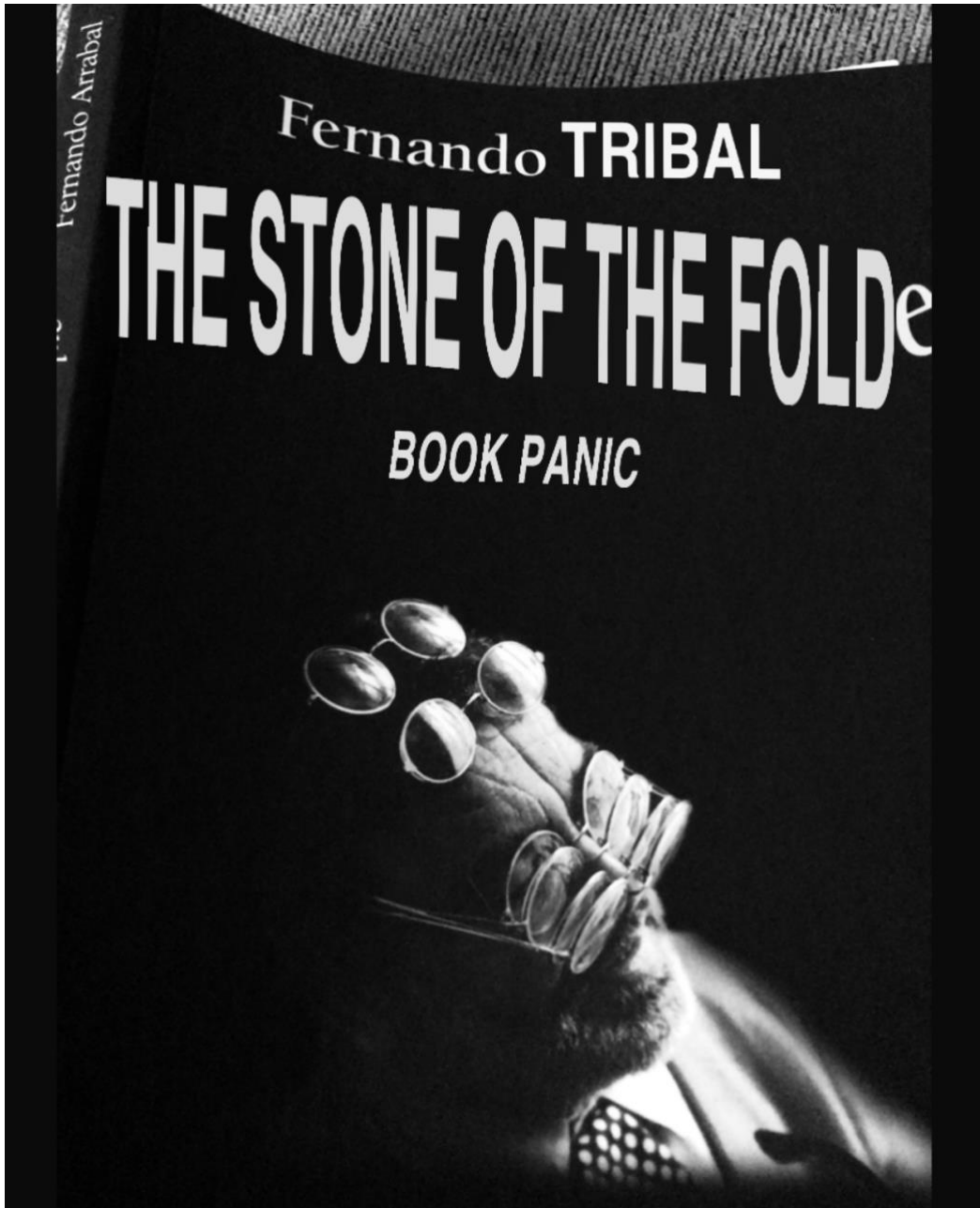
You don't need to be fluent in French to read *La Pierre de la Folie*. I'm not. I taught myself the language using the Michel Thomas CD course about thirteen years ago, chiefly so I could read my favourite French authors without having to rely on translations. Thomas's final piece of advice on his Advanced course is to read French writing as often as possible and resist the temptation to look up every word you don't know; better to make an educated guess about the meaning of a word than to constantly disrupt the flow of reading by picking up your French-English dictionary. Having completed the course of CDs, I gorged myself on books in French by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Michel Butor, Eugène Ionesco, Emmanuel Carrère, Joyce Mansour, Marie Darrieussecq, Roland Topor, Jacques Sternberg. For several months, I wouldn't read a book unless it was in French. Writers of a more linguistically baroque bent like André Breton and André Pieryre de Mandiargues presented at times insurmountable difficulties, but I persisted. I was determined to master the language. I never did, of course. Over a decade later I am, at best, a reasonably competent reader of French who knows most but not all the words he reads.

Panic 8

She stands with her back to us, in a cracked mirror. Fernando Arrabal is ashamed of wanting her. He knows that God and Freud are watching.

Waking up 2

You read other books. Weeks pass. One morning, tidying up your coffee table, you happen upon *La Pierre de la Folie*. You remember little about the book now, except the vague sensation of running and isolated images that bear no obvious relation to one another: a scalpel; a lightbulb radiating darkness; a horse trapped in the branches of a tree. You feel somehow mocked, as if Fernando Arrabal intended the book to be a joke at your expense. You flip back through the slim volume, cursorily reacquainting yourself with some of its episodes. You encounter the vampiric mother who preys on her son; pointing fingers and derisive laughter; the green lion devouring the sun; men inhabiting eggs; weird Zodiacs and words in block capitals: PANIQUE, MOI, PEUR, RIEN, PAN. There is no consistent plot or thesis. Neither is there anything that you consider poetry in this sequence of prose poems: no moments of beauty or rapture or transcendence. Nothing uplifting. The book's enigmatic vignettes revel in horror, shame and humiliation. *La Pierre de la Folie* is a nightmare inflicted on the reader.



Correspondences

In 1968 (six years after publication of *La Pierre de la Folie*), Alejandra Pizarnik published a collection of poems entitled *Extracción de la piedra de locura* (*Extracting the Stone of Madness*, in most translations). For the innovative Argentine poet, the act of extraction was a theatrical gesture, a show-and-tell. Her stone of madness was her uncompromisingly personal, hallucinatory poetry. Thanks to some recent translations, readers of English can now marvel at Pizarnik's unique word-world. I hope that the same will happen with Arrabal's poetry. Translated excerpts from *La Pierre de la Folie* appeared in J. H. Matthews's anthology, *The Custom-House of Desire* and Mary Ann Caws's impressive *Surrealist Painters and Poets: an Anthology*, but otherwise the English-speaking world has not yet had the opportunity to experience the full cycle of prose poems.

Panic 9

She was saying something to me in a language I did not understand. I tried addressing her in English, French and Spanish. Her fractured companions laughed at me. A trapdoor opened at my feet and I fell asleep.

Fin

I got myself mixed up with Fernando Arrabal.

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All translations of excerpts from Fernando Arrabal's work (given in italics) are by James Knight.

James Knight is an experimental writer and digital artist whose work explores the themes of perception, memory, identity, dreams and the monstrous. As @badbadpoet he uses Twitter as a creative medium, and is a member of Jeff Noon's collaborative Twitter project, @echovirus12. Much of his work can be found at www.thebirdking.com.