

two fictions  
(With a tip of the hat to borges)



BY

RIKKI DUCORNET



OBSCURE  
PUBLICATIONS

Two  
Fictions

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*Wild Geraniums* (1975)

*Weird Sisters* (1976)

*Knife Notebook* (1977)

*The Illustrated Universe* (1979)

*The Cult of Seizure* (1989)

### **F i c t i o n**

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*Entering Fire* (1986)

*The Fountains of Neptune* (1989)

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*The Complete Butcher's Tales* (1994)

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*The Word 'Desire'* (1997)

*The Fan-Maker's Inquisition: A Novel of the Marquis de Sade* (1999)

*Gazelle* (2003)

### **N o n - F i c t i o n**

*The Monstrous and the Marvelous* (1999)

For Catherine Kaspar  
and Amy England



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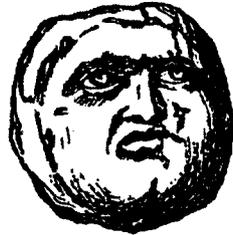
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## ALLEGORY OF THE PAST

Time and time again, antiquarians have noticed a stunning similarity associating the Medusa of the Greeks and the Blue Sigvald Ape of Old Ubar—that, very rarely now, astonishes travelers in the wooded regions of Abraxas and the temples of Old Tlön. Conspicuous on the blue coins of the region, the ape's head, badly worn away, is—to name but two of the finer examples—both a mirror image of the Medusa of the Villa Ludovisi in Rome and the mysterious face stamped upon a small silver medal visible in the foreground of Hendrik Van Der Borch's painting titled 'Allegory of the Past.'

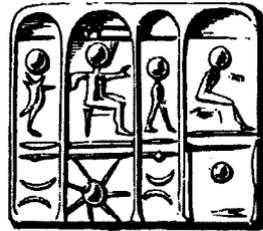


If travelers of ancient times perceived the ape from afar or even—and this, considering the creature's frank inquisitiveness, is possible—came upon one face to face, he would carry back the tale of a handsome creature, fearsome above all because of its size, its blue color and head extravagantly maned in thick

locks of indigo that, animated by the perpetual breeze, surely appeared to thrash about.

. . .

Throughout Ubar the Sigvald Ape is called *blörlö*; this is its 'moon-name.' That the ape is kin to the moon in this region should not come as a surprise, for its tusks, of the best ivory, ascend from the upper jaw in the shape of two crescents. And if the word *blörlö* evokes



*Lunar Notation  
of Old Ubar*

both the ape and its sacred function as moon-messenger, today the word's meaning has changed; it means 'moon-mad' or, more simply put, designates a lunatic. So that in the late night cafés one might hear the phrase: "As mad as an ape." Delirium, in the psychotic wards, is called 'Sigvald Syndrome'—and this despite the fact that the ape is a model of benevolent rectitude. Clearly it is man's incapacity to confront the extraordinary with composure that has blackened the ape's reputation.

The notion that a 'moonish' visage has the power to turn the one who sees it to stone appears again and again in the local poetic tradition:

Her unveiled beauty struck me dumb, as dumb as stones.

—Mandonius



*"a face as  
perfect as  
the moon"*

Staring at the face of the woman he loves, "a face as perfect as the moon, her eyes as black as the moon eclipsed, her breasts, her buttocks moons, his heart's stone quickens like lava.

—Manda

• • •

It is with dismay the ape's discoverer, Sigvald Festschrift, describes what took place in the instants following the first European encounter with the *hlörlö* of Old Ubar:





*Sigvald Festschrift*

gazed upon us with such tenderness—my heart was flooded with sweetness. Hans Hiller who had paid for the expedition and who had from the start proved to be odious, had the creature seized and immobilized with the heavy black rope he carried for such eventual brutalities—despite the cries of the infant whom I attempted to soothe, all the while cursing Hiller and Horich. For if the purpose of the expedition was said to be scientific, Hiller and Horich wished only to pillage the country of curiosities both unalive and living. But then, just as Hiller came towards me with the intention of breaking the infant's

We had come upon a curious sundial made of pegs and so knew the lands were inhabited. Indeed, throughout this region the word for shadow and the word for time is one and the same; the circle of the year is called: 'the wheel of shadows.' Soon after making our discovery, and just as the kings of Sindu and Sibor had described her centuries before, we saw her approaching.

She walked with the grace of a dancer and held in her arms a pale azure infant who

skull in order to roast the brains for dinner—or so I believe, for I had come to know the man's infamy all too well—our guide whose name I never knew, dispatched him and Horich too, with a very swift knife.

Doing our best to assure the apess by our soothing tones and gentle behavior that she would not be harmed after all, nor would her little one, we set her free. As soon as she was unbound, she took up her infant and vanished. Later in the day, having abandoned Hiller and Horich beneath a pile of leaves, knowing the tigers, the mushrooms and ants would take far better care of their remains than any grave, we came upon an exquisite temple painted blue and delicately carved with—curious coincidence!—that cluster of stars in the constellation of Pereus known as the 'Medusa's Head.' Approaching with care, we peered within and to our astonishment saw the apess nursing her infant in a bower of freshly cut flowers.

. . .

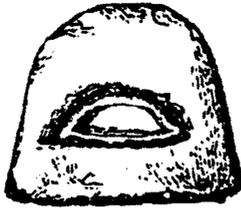
The silver crescent still visible on the bodies of the women of Tlön does not represent the moon so much as the *hlörlö* and her mothering qualities. Further, to give weight to this supposition, a similar object hung by wire in fruit trees and among sheaves of wheat is said to assure fruitfulness. The fresh loaves of Ubar are always baked in the



*A Woman of Tlön*

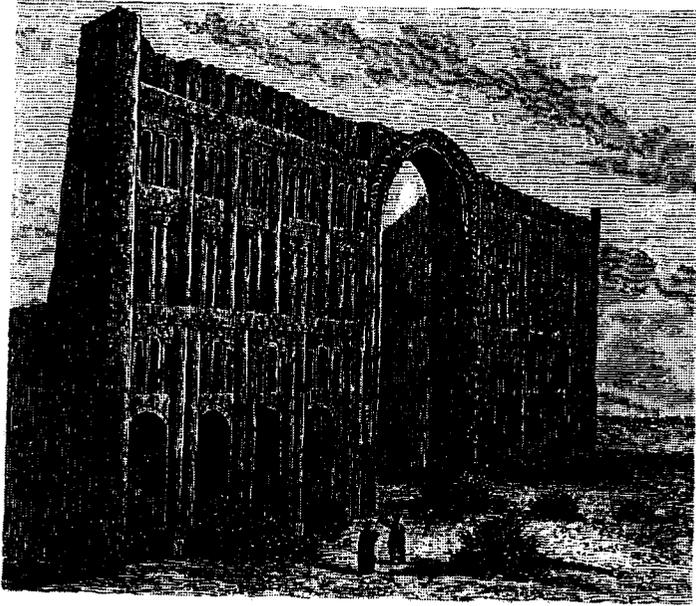
form of the crescent moon; Manda in Book Five describes the *blörlö* thus:

... Blue apes the color of the Ether that roam the highlands of Ubar ... are equal in number and in natural goodness to the angels of God who move the immortal, the incorruptible stars.



*Loaf in the Form  
of a Crescent Moon,  
from an Abandoned Bakery*





*The Crimson Library*

# THE CRIMSON LIBRARY

The Crimson Library contains books bound in red leather, red cloth or grey butcher's paper impressed with red ink. Some volumes have additional color—a décor of green vine leaves and purple grapes, perhaps, or a gold dragonfly, a yellow bee. A precious edition of Mani's *Mirror of Fortune and Deceit* has gauffré edges stained blue; *The Pancátantra*, decorated with corner plates of blue enamel, is marked with an owl of white bone and a green leather crow.



*Travellers Approaching the Crimson Library*

During the odious Inquisitional Raking of 1516, a vast number of books were seized, examined and condemned by the Inquisition. So great was the number of books destroyed, the entire country lay submerged in smoke: the Imperial gardens were black with soot, as was the surface of the sea. Even the face of the sun was obscured, as were, night after night, the stars, the Milky Way and the moon. Only the books in the Crimson Library were spared, and this because of the Grand Inquisitor's superstitious terror of the color red—a color exalted, or so he believed, by Divine Attraction.



*Storage Catacombs  
in the Crimson Library*

Here the story begins:

Mokhrani the librarian, notorious for his wanton love of contradiction and aware that he was himself under suspicion having agreed in public that the angels could not possibly be rational, serving as they did an irrational god, had during the decade of his tenure secretly acquired books of the most subversive character and bound them in red calfskin. Mysteriously, during those darkest of nights, numerous works condemned for their lawlessness were brought to Mokhrani who, because his funds were extinguished, bound them in grey butcher's paper

and with a seal dipped in red ink, marked each with the obstinate name of God.

Unable to touch the Crimson Library because of the Inquisitorial taboo, Wölfflin, the Inquisition's most trusted thug, set out to destroy the librarian. Wearing the robes of a cardinal that he had stolen from the closet of a corpse — Wölfflin had many such disguises — he mounted a swift horse and racing from the capital, surprised Mokhrani at sundown picking pomegranates in his little garden. Pulling Mokhrani



*Mokhrani the Librarian*

down from his ladder, Wölfflin grabbed his ears and broke his neck. Then he pillaged the librarian's private chamber. There he found that most heretical of books: *The Son of Man Standing* in which Adam scolds Yahweh for his rage against mankind. The volume was still in its original binding of black, orange and yellow leather.

This necessary book which has now vanished from the world, was taken to the Inquisitor and burned without ceremony; Mokhrani's body was butchered and fed to the crows

beneath the Inquisitor's window. But the Crimson Library, its doors locked and sealed with the gold and black wax of the Inquisition, was not molested, and in time was forgotten. A thick wood grew up around it and within a century no one could say where it was or even if it had ever existed. (Today it is said that if Time could be stopped and given a shape, that shape would be the Crimson Library and that Time would be the Golden Age.)

Later, in our more favoring century, a wood-cutter chanced upon the astonishing place, buttressed by the roots of trees, its stone roof webbed with leaves, mute as a tomb and yet containing a thousand-thousand unpredictable voices. The library was windowless, but its great double portal, groaning beneath a granite lintel, was eager to be pushed open. The sun of late afternoon saturated the first chamber with a golden light and the red books, as fresh as the day of their binding, seemed to float like ripe fruit in the shadows.

Thanks to Mokhrani's thoroughness and to a recent publishing venture, the great books of Old Ubar and Antique Tlön, and their wildly subversive messages, are available to us. Inexpensive volumes bound in red paper may be seen today all over Orbis Tertius—held by housewives on the train, students in the coffee houses; they are seen in the hands of youthful laborers and elderly scholars, on the shelves of girls dreaming by their open windows, and lying open beside the sleeping faces of youths who in their dreams and unknowingly, grapple with the persistent shadows of Beauty and Truth.



## *Biographical Note*

Rikki Ducornet's seventh novel, *Gazelle*, will be published by Knopf in July of 2003. She is currently working on a series of paintings inspired by alchemy and collections cabinets, and writing a screenplay for Lavinia Currier.



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