

# *Cerebus*: From aardvark to Vanaheim, reaching for creative heaven in Dave Sim's hellish world

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**Résumé:** *Tim Blackmore analyse la dimension intertextuelle des bandes dessinées de Dave Slim: à la fois évidentes et complexes, les allusions au cinéma, à la peinture, aux genres littéraires et paralittéraires permettent de mieux préciser la frontière souvent incertaine entre la littérature réservée à la jeunesse et la littérature destinée aux adultes.*

Working from Kitchener, Ontario, Dave Sim writes, draws, and markets *Cerebus*, a highly successful black and white comic about an ambitious aardvark. When he began it in 1977, the comics world had dire warnings for him and for his then wife Deni Loubert (*Cerebus*'s publisher): "We were told that we couldn't make it if we didn't go to New York" (Wawanash 31: 22). The overt threat implies that creative activity can only be successful in approved geographical, financial and artistic surroundings. But Sim refused to accept that idea; as Gary Groth, editor of *The comics journal*, noted recently, "if Dave Sim at times seemingly operates out of an ivory tower, it should be remembered that he built it himself" (Groth, "Repentant" 80).

## **Discorporate Cerebus**

Sim's isolation is a key factor in the development of *Cerebus*. Remote from even the meagre support offered by the comics community, away from the corporate lap of above-ground American comics (Marvel and DC), away from underground comix (*Zap*, *Weirdo*), and even from ground-level comics publishers (Fantagraphics, Dark Horse, Tundra), Sim is one working in opposition to many. In 1984 he wrote, "You have to understand that doing a comic book for seven years with no one else assisting in the direction of it becomes a very intense kind of self-therapy" (*Swords* 6: 30). Sim's cloister has performed the double function of setting him apart and keeping him safe.

The positioning of the individual against those around him is *Cerebus*'s leitmotif. When Groth observed that Sim "struck [Groth] as being an outsider even in the *WAP!* [*WAP!*: an acronym for words and pictures, was a forum for comics' creators] milieu," Sim replied, "I'm an outsider everywhere" (Groth, "Repentant" 107). *Cerebus* is also a stubborn loner, and he is warned by another of Sim's characters, Weisshaupt, a quiet authoritarian, that "you've chosen a

difficult and perilous course without allies. Without structure .... There is a real danger that you will be consumed by your own power" (*Church and state* 501). What follows is an attempt to navigate between intentional and affective fallacies to understand the way the text and its author respond to each other; how Sim can produce his world which produces *Cerebus*, and yet *Cerebus* produces Sim's world.

Sim's response to the threats of corporate America is uniform: "This is mine. *Cerebus* is mine. I'm the guy you negotiate with for *Cerebus*. There's no Jenette Kahn [Marvel Comics], or Dick Giordano [DC], or Diana Schutz [Comico]" (Groth, "Repentant" 87). Sim's black and white funny animal comic does not even seem to fit the genre as defined by Walt Kelly's *Pogo*.

Free to decide what he wanted to do when not doing commercial art, Sim began a parody of the popular 1977 comic *Conan the Barbarian*. *Cerebus* (the Barbarian) was a happy misspelling of Cerberus. Sim settled on a 6000-page work of 300 issues that would be complete in 2004. The work would see *Cerebus* from his early days as a sword-carrying mercenary, through his time as prime minister and pope, his journey to the moon in search of heaven (Vanaheim), to his death. Sim promised that there would be no break in continuity, no late delivery, rarities in a field notorious for both. As of this writing, Sim has moved well past the half-way mark. Six of his self-published graphic novels (from his own press Aardvark-Vanaheim, Inc.) are in print, collecting *Cerebus* from issues 1 through 150.

Sim's steady success with *Cerebus* has hardened his dislike of corporate publishing, particularly its recent enforcement of "work-for-hire" schemes, where salaried creators who develop characters and ideas for the corporation forfeit all rights to their creative work. In a 1982 interview, Kim Thompson discusses these matters with Sim:

**Thompson:** So you're one of the highest-paid comics artists in the industry?

**Sim:** Oh yes .... In the medium. I'm not in the industry. The industry is here in the city [New York]. The City—The Industry.

**Thompson:** I think of all the publishers forming "The Industry."

**Sim:** Yeah. I hate the term for it, though. It really brings across the idea of an assembly line of poorly paid workers who are supporting a hierarchy of businessmen.

**Deni Sim:** But it is.

**Sim:** Well it is, yes, on the whole. (Thompson 82: 75)

Sim hopes that the creator will not become a cog in The Industry. Meditating on the baser aspects of power in *High Society*, the graphic novel in which *Cerebus* becomes prime minister, Sim examines the situation where "the prime minister—your thumb—is united with the bureaucracy—your fingers—great works can be accomplished. The lifting of spirits. The grasping of ideas: we hold the future between us .... If, however, the prime minister and his bureaucracy are *not* united ... like SO!" pain will result (395) (figure 1.)



Figure 1 ©1993 Dave Sim

Sim's experience has shown him the lengths the world of corporate comics would go to in order to have the "fingers" of production "Swear complete and everlasting loyalty to my thumb!"

The reader, like the disinterested worker, looks on at Cerebus's doings, the line of the table splitting the panels so that Cerebus appears to be talking in the lower panels, acting in the upper ones. But as Cerebus goes to work on the bureaucrat's right hand, the focus of the page shifts to the top, to the bureaucrat's agony as he realizes the price of "Anarchy! Revolution!" The design of the page leads us with inexorable and increasing speed to the framed inset panel of the bureaucrat on his knees. Sim comments, "if you sign a contract with an entity larger than yourself—as an example, me signing with DC—they have a team of 50 lawyers that will tell you what the contract says. They can tie me up in court for 15 years until I agree with their version" (Groth, "Repentant" 90). The greater force produces the interpretation it wants. The "50 lawyers" have the power to abolish the creator as a privileged interpreter.

Sim's determination to interpret his world has resulted in an expansion of what comics as a genre is and can be. He sees the superhero genre as "an immense line that snakes around in very bizarre directions ... and aside from that snake there's nothing but empty territory" (Thompson 83: 60). The predator attempts to govern the medium. Sim, who has constantly avoided being swallowed by the snake, relies on creative power which "is tapped in *the story*; whatever *the story* is. There's only one story out there, and all of them are just permutations of that story. You're a caretaker of it" (Groth, "Repentant" 123). The artist's duty is to protect and disseminate the story. When Oscar Wilde appears in the fifth graphic

novel, *Jaka's story*, he is confronted by the forces of religious totalitarianism which demand "a permit;" but this is "not a permit to publish" but "a permit to write" (350). Wilde is sentenced to hard labour for possessing "no artistic license."

Sim's aloofness is part of his power. Playing wickets with The Regency Elf, a charming character who only Cerebus really sees, Cerebus notes, "Insanity is a virtually impregnable gambit" when one falls into power relations, "but you have to lay the groundwork early in the game" (*High Society* 87) (figure 2).

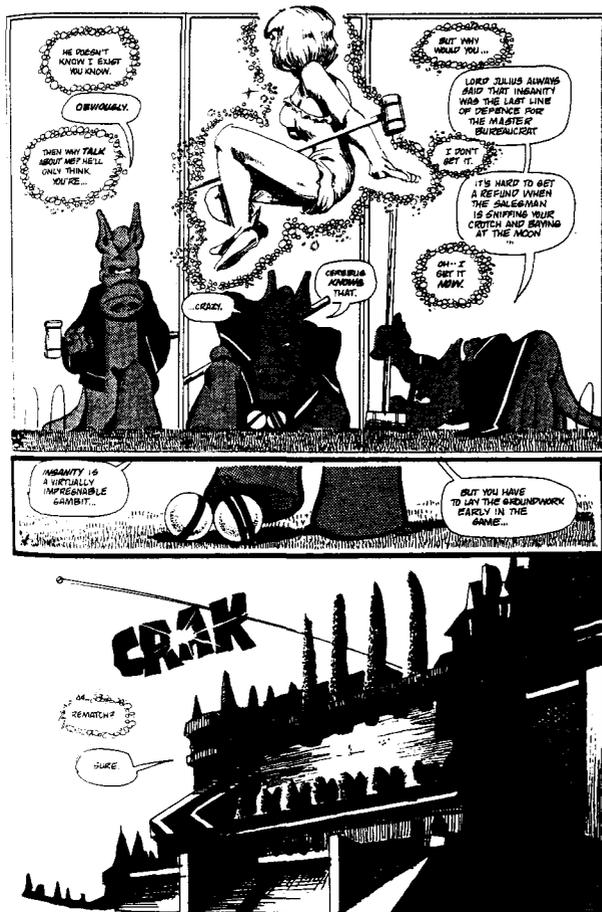


Figure 2 © Dave Sim

Here the power relationship is best signified by the central strip panel where the two croquet balls have touched. One of the balls will not remain in the game: winning consists of not missing any chances and remaining untouched.

The games of creation and power are dangerous: Cerebus is warned by a character based on Jules Feiffer that Cerebus will "live only a few more years. You die alone. Unmourned, and unloved. Suffering ... suffering you'll have no trouble doing" (*Church and state* 1212). Ironically, around Sim's book there has grown up a fiercely

loyal group of fans, a group which forms an interpretive community.

In 1977 *Cerebus's* audience was largely composed of young teenage boys who enjoyed the *Conan* parody. As the creation grew up, so did the readership: Sim now thinks about the book as "tailored to 30-year-olds" (Canadian Press).

It is possible that those 30-year-olds are the same readers who first read the book. Sim has an uneasy relationship with his fans. He attacks them for being too insular and narrow in their concerns, but remains sympathetic to them on “their unhappy road well-travelled” (*Jaka’s story* 8). He charges that “Comics fans are basically followers, ardent followers, but you have to lead them someplace” (Thompson 83: 60). Like any group of followers, they have their eyes on the leader. Now that he is more than half way to his goal, Sim has relaxed enough to recall that during the completion of his first 50-issue graphic novel, he felt the fans were watching someone “committing slow suicide” (Bissette 11). Sim’s distant affection for the fan community is paradigmatic of his relations with the comics world.

Sim has constructed a world of others. The corporate world and its worker drones, the underground and ground level world of comics: Sim is none of these. Neither is he a fan, or a believer in being a follower.

At the heart of Sim’s isolation there is an obsession with modes of production and commodification. He is upset by the perception that comics as a genre is either a sign system to be disposed of (the main stream), or possessed and hoarded (the fan world). In every interview—and every interviewer can’t fail to note parenthetically how incredible the 300-issue story is—Sim points to the size of the project. He asks “[Why not] be the first one to do it? Why not be the first one to do 300 issues of a comic book that all makes sense in one large context?” (Thompson 83: 60). Sim puts quantitative distances between himself and others: he is distant from them in philosophy and time. He will be the first to do the long story with context, the “300-issue story, which is a 6000-page story, which is now nearing the 1000-page mark” (Thompson 83: 74).

Just as I began this paper, Sim had prepared a recitation of the length of the book’s run, the amount now completed, the dates it will be finished. The numbers provide stability and legitimacy in a world which has neither. And Sim has his eye on the potential “smart asshole” who is “going to come along ... and he’ll do the longest story” (Thompson 83: 74). Until then, Sim will maintain or increase his distance from his comic neighbours. Even Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira* can be discounted, because teams of artists work on the book, whereas Sim has only one assistant (a man simply named Gerhard).

The control Sim exerts over *Cerebus* extends beyond its book publication. Marketing the so-called “phone-books” (huge collections of the comic, similar to Japanese *manga*) by mail and phone order, bypassing the usual venue of the comic shops, Sim withstood howls of outrage from store owners, declaring:

“I’ve taken eleven years to produce four books; I’m not going to put those out as if it’s just another collection of ‘dead Robin’ stories” (a reference to DC’s publicity stunt of having Batman’s sidekick Robin killed off by a reader phone-in poll) (Groth, “Repentant” 83). Sim’s books take up considerable shelf space, they are undeniable physical artifacts. But again he has focused not so much on their content as on the “eleven years” of labour (ultimately 26) and the “four

books” (now six) he has produced. His claustration has had these results: Sim can say, My books are solid, I meet my promised schedules, and I’m the first to do so on this scale in comics.

### Kinematic Kerebus

Because control is so important to Sim, it is no surprise that power is *Cerebus*’s focus. Sim’s concern with methods of production has made him sensitive to formalist issues: the devices he uses to provoke the reader and the relationship between form and function in the text. As early as issue 11 (1978), Sim began to shift the emphasis of the art away from single pictures to “the layout of the story. From cosmetic technique to narrative flow” (*Swords 2*: 79). Narrative flow led to what look like animation pose-to-pose drawings. Sim’s fondness for scrims, overlays and backgrounds turned *Cerebus* into a sort of two-dimensional



Figure 3 ©1993 Dave Sim

theatre. The marriage of film and theatre is much discussed by a major influence on Sim, Will Eisner, creator of *The spirit*. Following Eisner’s lead, Sim began to see “each drawing as a connecting fragment. It was like a dormant time-sense had leaped into my head from nowhere” (*Swords 2*: 79). The “dormant time sense” gives Sim an unerring feel for pace: the film counter in his head ticks off the units required to proceed through a scene, guiding the reader to Sim’s destination.

Having seen a miracle, *Cerebus* backs away from the event, scrambling up bags of gold (*Church*

and state 435) (figure 3).

Sim's composition of the page forces us into a reader-response situation: first we scan for action, and then, with that in mind, reread, assessing the images and text in context. One final pass lets us seize the whole. Sim begins by throwing the viewer into the centre, not the top, panel. Because the centre panel, darkest and most saturated, occludes the others, our eye jumps to it. The figure's gestures and the strong diagonal of the white robe against the grey ground, direct us up to the right corner of the page. Cerebus's ears also indicate his movement: first they lie back as he reacts to what he sees below him, then they tilt forward as he recoils from the view. His mindless scramble up from the events on the floor is stopped by Cerebus's slamming his head on the ceiling (even the panels lose their tops and are compressed, as is Cerebus, whose ears, eyes and nose are flattened by the impact), and we drop to the smallest panel in the centre of the page. The eye follows the tumbling Cerebus as he falls out of the foreground onto

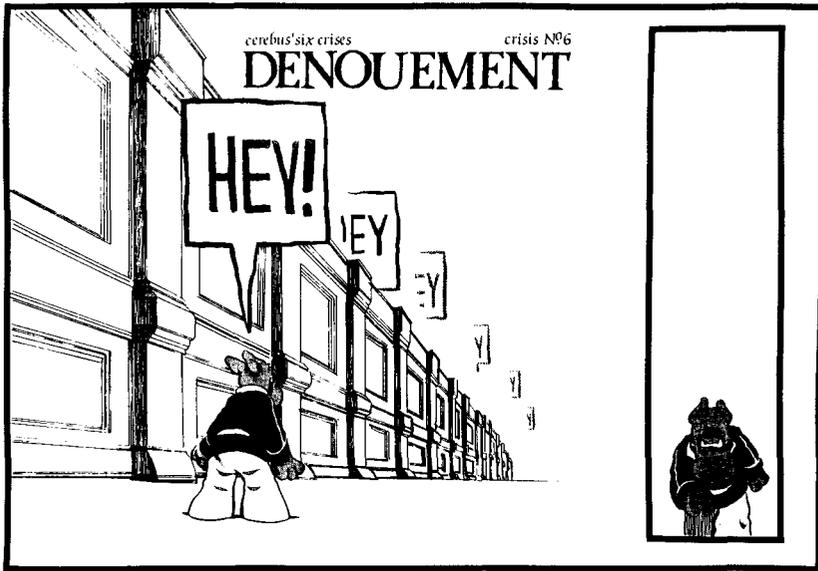


Figure 4 ©1993 Dave Sim

the floor. The gap between panels provides a pause in the text, and a shaky Cerebus staggers to his feet, the panel distortion reflecting Cerebus's disorientation. The open right side of the panel leads the eye over to the next page.

Figure 3 is a splash page that sets the tone for the rest of a remarkably animated issue. Sim gradually slows down the frenetic pace and returns Cerebus to his usual taciturn demeanour. Sim notes with pleasure that he has finally "come up with a series of figures to animate a motion .... I've taken the camera to such an extreme worm's eye view" that the bounds of the comic page have been bent outward, if not broken entirely (*Swords* 3: 100). In other sequences the reader

is forced to physically turn the book through a full circle, in order to follow Cerebus clinging to a huge spinning tower. Sim knows he is dictating the reader's viewing speed and comprehension, confounding those who have dieted on a standard six-panel grid format. He notes about writing in dialect that when "the previous phrase is repeated your eye makes a funny motion while you read it .... fool-the-reader is what it is" (Thompson 83: 66). The "funny motion" the eye makes is the reader responding to and revising the text. Sim's willingness to frustrate and "fool" the reader has lead him deeper into design territory opened by Will Eisner, Harvey Kurtzman and Milton Caniff.

Sim wants his texts to be open to readers unfamiliar with the sign systems comics usually employ, but he refuses to bore his veteran readers. In some issues he uses type in order that "people who are not educated to the medium ... will understand implicitly what's being done" (Wawanash 31: 22). The echo in figure 4 (*High society* 493) is an example of an implicit sign. But while the fading type (shot using a screen to provide us with a progressively lighter half-tone) and the perspective of the hotel hall read immediately as an echo, much else happens here. The openness of the page is in direct contrast to the tight box enclosing a determined Cerebus striding towards us on the right. The great expanse of white reinforces the sense that Cerebus, on the point of losing all his power, has been deserted. Our eye follows the "Hey!" down the hall, leading us into the centre of the page. The camera engages in a shot reverse and we are now in front of the aardvark, looking up from the direction the echo (and our eye) has travelled.

Experimentation led Sim to conclude that "the whole world opens up because so few interesting approaches have been done. Thick panel borders. Enormous panel borders. I want to do a thing in a while where I have a frame around each page" (Thompson 83: 78). And frame the pages he did, with ornate scroll work and decadent Beardsleyan filigree. Nodelman comments about frames that they may intensify "the sense that we are looking through the border into the world beyond it, so that the flatness of the page on which the words are printed does in fact make sense as being a flat surface positioned in front of the scene depicted" (57). What Nodelman describes and Sim often alludes to is the theatre technique of hanging a near-transparent scrim in front of or inside the perspective box, giving the illusion of depth of field, while solving the problem of displaying large blocks of commentary in the playing area (an idea similar to animation's multiplane camera).

About scrimms, overlays, montage and animation, Sim argues that "there's absolutely nothing wrong with conscious trickery. If you can do a panel that is one inch going into a panel that is five inches by an inch ... that's real conscious trickery, where people look at it and go, 'That's clever just by virtue of the fact that it shouldn't work but it does anyway'" (Thompson 83: 76). Sim's willingness to push grid systems to their maximum, to distort or multiply the frame, began relatively early in *Cerebus*. These are not games he plays out of boredom: "That sense of design is what I'm striving for," he notes, "It doesn't intrude, it

just guides you through” (Thompson 83: 75). Sim is more a film and theatre director than flat-shape designer. In some issues the reader acts as a sort of steady-cam, moving at an even pace through the halls of power, with doors opening magically and events occurring before the camera eye.

In addition to the shot reverse (or shot counter-shot) pattern, Sim uses extreme close-ups, pans, zooms and intercutting. At times characters appear to talk to a fixed camera, as if being interviewed. Sim also slices up the page into long vertical strips:

showing an action scene between Cerebus and a giant being named Thrunk, Sim divides the page into as many as seven full length vertical panels, some of which are no more than a centimetre wide, as he cuts back and forth between the combatants. It requires the tightest drawing and editing to make such a complex page (or series of pages) read. Sim educates the reader to graphic literacy in part by his use of filmic techniques, concluding that the cartoonist falls into “more or less the same sort of role as the film director, in that you’re not doing a major part of the story



Figure 5 ©1993 Dave Sim

that day .... but the idea’s to make whatever limited frame you’re working on at the time carry forward ... and trim down the amount of artwork in the frame so that it doesn’t restrict the movement of the eye” (Wawanash 31: 22).

Sim expects his readers will respond and write their own texts, but he would prefer that they follow the gross path he paves, even if they do not stop at the precise scenic points he indicates. Part of Sim’s control comes out of his mixture

of animated, kinetic pages and quiet, static ones. Sim subdues page after page with stable six- or eight-panel grids, where motionless characters engage only in verbal or mental action. Sim notes that “my viewpoint is so static, a conscious effort being made to keep the layouts interesting but at the same time bland, in order not to get in the way of the story. I don’t like people turning on to a page and going ‘Oooooohh’ unless it’s a good transition page” (Thompson 83: 75). Nodelman suggests that “We take it for granted that, unlike wallpaper or the sky, a picture is particularly worth looking at” (49). In Sim’s case, the wallpaper sometimes *is* the picture, the reduced play of the signifiers is the sign system. The viewer faced with repeated images becomes sensitive to the tiniest changes in the pattern, changes that provide “specific visual information” that “an artist has chosen to offer us” (Nodelman 49). Figure 5 (*Church and state* 165) shows us a swatch of Sim’s moving wallpaper.

Another eight-panel page precedes this one (*Church and state* 164-165), as the impatient aardvark waits to sign the next paper. In figure 5, only the third panel breaks the rhythm of the regular movement of the hand followed by the signature, hand and signature. The pattern is resolved when Cerebus provides the visual and philosophical punch line that it is “much faster this way, don’t you think”: Sim seals off the issue with a cloverleaf at the lower right hand corner of the page. Cerebus seems to be reading the story as we are, and he grows impatient with the repetition, as we do. The implied meta-comic discussion between Cerebus, his creator and the creator’s audience is crucial for Sim: “the fact that I have verbal humor in [the book] ... written humor, plays on words, overlapping dialogue, means if the artwork is fighting against that, it isn’t going to come across quite as well” (Thompson 83: 75). Often the most animated scenes are silent, while the more static pages carry more philosophy.

Whether he is writing about political (*High society*), religious (*Church and state*), or personal power (*Jaka’s story*), or the loss of power over the self (*Melmoth*), Sim is most drawn to the serial as a genre. Tolstoy’s novels, soap opera, and situation comedy are all forms Sim has thought about. In his early writings about *Cerebus*, Sim half sarcastically remembers watching *Hogans’ heroes* and *Bewitched* for inspiration. “Good situation comedies are invaluable,” he told one interviewer, “because they involve you, they entertain you, they make you laugh out loud in 25 minutes, and make you want to come back next week” (Thompson 83: 78). The world evoked by the situation comedy, whether it is a mock German POW camp or a bar in Boston, is a useful typology for Sim.

A serial more closely related to the comic book is the daily comic strip. Sim began his cartooning career with a comic strip, looking to comic book and strip veteran Gil Kane for guidance. Kane advised the younger artist that “political cartoons, humor strips in newspapers are written in an infinitely more adult way [than comics] .... they’re written for adults by adults with humor. They’re really clever, and they represent adult values and that’s why adults read them .... They’re

dealing with adult frames of reference. And comic books don't have those frames of reference" (*Swords* 2: 10). Kane's implicit exhortation is that Sim create something new, be unafraid to break open a given form. The result is that Sim and his characters are on fresh comics ground. "There is a quality," he notes, "to doing an extended story like that, in terms of getting to know the characters, the story sort of writing itself and amazing things coming out .... It's an attraction/repulsion thing" (Bissette 19).

The extended story has begun to write itself in other ways. Sim's unflagging production of the comic has changed his view of the forces operating in the market. The more he is aware of commodification, the more his art changes; the more the art changes, the more the market reacts to the book. Refusing all outside controls, Sim has produced and commodified his own work. Such a curious contradiction is not lost on Sim, who has simultaneously educated himself and his aardvark, producing a rising level of discourse both inside and outside the comic.

### **Educating the Aardvark**

Sim moved the comic from its basic parodic stance of its first two-dozen issues to discussions of political power. New characters based on Groucho and Chico Marx, Rodney Dangerfield, Mick Jagger and most recently, Oscar Wilde, raised the book's level of discourse. It is Sim's desire to "take in my new-found interest in the real world's larger issues and themes," concluding, "There's no reason I can't do it in a comic book. It's just words and pictures together. The only question is how good are the words and how good are the pictures" (Mietkiewicz). Sim's demands were not limited to his own abilities. He attacks the comics community's insularity:

I try to make [the comic] look difficult for that very reason. I try to make parts of it difficult to conceive or to follow, strictly because I figure you should be able to reach when you're reading comics. You should be able to try for something that's a little beyond you. A lot of people say, well, do any 14-year olds read this? And I'll say well, sure. They read it; they don't understand it. But I didn't understand *Popeye* cartoons when I was a kid. (Wawanash 32: 10)

Sim's refusal to condescend to his readers, his wish to slow them down and quell their responses (at least on the initial reading), to place himself as the most powerful interpreter in his own community (that bounded by *Cerebus*), has made him a pariah in some comics circles. Yet many fans rose to the new heights the book demanded.

*Cerebus*'s subtlety is unfamiliar to comics. For readers geared to action, quiet pages are puzzling ones. In figure 6 (*Jaka's story* 222), Oscar Wilde contemplates his prose, smoking quietly as he rewrites a line of his book describing the dancer's "slim, gilt soul."

The reader's eye tends to skip through the six panels looking for action, or

at least change, and finds none, at least not on the gross level. Forced to return, we are attracted to the motion of the smoke trail left by the cigarette. But that is misdirection from Sim: the real event takes place as in the fourth panel, as the right hand picks up the knife and scrapes off the comma, changing the phrase to “slim gilt soul.” Now the slight lift in Melmoth’s eyebrow is understood, and



Figure 6 ©1993 Dave Sim

betelady we see the tiny “scrape scrape scrape” in that panel. The action of such an animated and yet apparently static page is the artisan’s discipline in writing: the tremendous weight given to each word and comma. This page demands patience both of Sim as an artist, and of his readers as respondents.

Sim recalls that in 1978 he had been “striving to understand the myriad levels of meaning in all great and intended-to-be-great works of art. When I failed that ... I began to see that what was intended was not nearly as important as what I perceived—I now looked at works for

their impact on me, no longer for whatever ‘right interpretation’ might theoretically exist” (*Swords* 5: 92). The reader, once submissive, becomes the actor, interpreter and creator of valid texts. Security in the reader’s responses makes the changes in *Cerebus* and *Cerebus* explicable. Sim writes to all his readers as equally valid interpreters; however (and ironically) Sim, the authority in his community, will prevent an avalanche of artistic relativism. He must also deal with the problem of being buried by other, more powerful interpretative voices. After spending two years researching and working with Wilde as a character,

Sim recognized that, "Even as I write about Wilde; in this introduction; in the earlier 'summing up'; I am not using my natural voice." He had fallen, like other Wilde fans, into the habit of mimicking "his graceful turns of phrase" (*Melmoth* 7). The rising discourse simultaneously threatens to drown the creator and raise the tone of the creation to pretentious heights.

*Cerebus* is a battleground between high and low culture. Thompson points out the "distinct change in tone between the first few issues of *Cerebus* and the later ones," where *Cerebus*, initially "extremely unlikeable and blunt, and quite shallow," evolves into "this new, intricate, subtle character" (Thompson 83: 59). Sim is aware of his developing style and the points at which he breaks the choke hold of his artistic influences.

But Sim's signifying has become complex and layered, provoking the criticism that *Cerebus*, now hovering between issues 160 and 170, is inaccessible to the new reader. Sim disagrees; but the new reader must face the prospect of working into a sign system of visual and thematic codes that runs across a hundred issues. It is a daunting task for the reader when the artist pursues a complex cross-section of genres doing "a few pages [that] are straight *roman à clef*, and then ... an allegory, and then ... a parody ... and jump[s] back and forth" between them all (Wawanash 32: 10).

The danger of such a post-modern free-for-all is that the audience that signed on for the story will weary of the games. Sim maintains that his roots are in low cultures which have been marginalized, and identifies himself more with his character Jaka, a pub dancer, than with Oscar Wilde. Sim sees the dancer and the comics artist as both "toiling in fields of endeavour damned by faint praise, overlooked and almost universally dismissed by the doctrinaire in favor of the third-rate and the merely lucrative" (*Jaka's story* 8).

Sim's reach for great themes has taken him into stories of death and transfiguration. *Melmoth's* dedication is to both fellow artist P. Craig Russell, who has adapted Wilde's work for comics, and "my cousin Ron, AIDS victim." It is difficult to read the following story about Wilde's protracted death as being anything but a discussion of AIDS. When he has leaned too far, Sim falls into a deadly seriousness, where prisoners are shown writing about Liberty on dungeon walls (*High society* 512). Such images are a far cry from the early heady days of *Cerebus* punching people with his nose, or unsentimentally stabbing them when they are down.

The progression from low to high culture, from colloquial to high discourse, mirrors a change in the texts from a cheery to a brutal tone. In order to discuss such difficult issues as rape, murder, ecological damage, and Machiavellian politics, Sim has abandoned his earlier more natural voice. In the first introductions to his own work, Sim describes the internal process of "the Writer" being handed the job of saving the comic by "the Artist," with the result that "the Writer panicked when he realized he was going to have to come up with some more ha-ha. The Writer wasn't really enthusiastic about getting stuck with a job that

entailed making up twenty-two pages of ha-ha every other month” (*Swords* 1: 26). Here is the colloquial and easy Sim, looking affectionately at his younger self. Some ten years after the above piece, Sim wrote his introduction to *Jaka’s story* that “Wilde proved to be an infuriating and exhilarating plot element and companion .... First, last, and always (to me) he is an Artist and the tragedy which befell Wilde, I can’t view in any other context than ‘Society vs. the Artist’” (8).

The elaborate nature of the second piece, the intricate hypotactic writing complete with concern for the Artist is something Sim of 1981 would have rejected. Sim’s language is ironically like the bureaucracies he hates: tangled, complicated, opaque. Early in *High Society* (17) Sim makes loving reference to the tootsie fruitsie ice cream scene in *A day at the races*, where Chico bilks Groucho of all his money. Three novels later, Sim literally replays the trial of Jesus before Pilate, with Cerebus washing his hands of the murder of a religious foe (*Church and state* 983).

But Sim has monitored his own progress as carefully as any critic. He points out that some characters are given the job of lightening the book’s tone, providing what the Dave Sim of 1981 would have called “ha-ha.” The Regency Elf (figure 2)—a “lovely, light ... bright and glimmering individual that just rambles and bubbles and talks about whatever comes into her head ... sort of Tinkerbell writ large”—is one such “counterpoint” to Astoria, a “cynical manipulator, very cold-blooded, very calculating, all business” (Thompson 83: 69). The Elf is indeed charming and funny, a hit with *Cerebus’s* readership.

One of Sim’s greatest power-mongers tells Cerebus “You represent a triumph of the mundane over the sublime .... Like some great masterwork of the theatre ... some timeless drama which suddenly transforms itself into a Punch & Judy show” (*Church and state* 507). Sim is excellent at running a Punch and Judy show. He enjoys the slapstick inherent in some of his creations.

One of the most fruitful characters is British cartoonist Giles’s menacing Granny, who Sim happily appropriates to play Cerebus’s mother-in-law. Their fight at the dinner table is sophisticated slapstick (figure 7) (*Church and state* 133).

The blanks between each frame freeze the action. The camera gives us a panorama and then provides reaction shots. The action speeds toward mayhem as Granny begins a slow burn mid-age: Cerebus needs no time to respond to the knife which buries itself in his chair. The ensuing fight happens off camera except for the sounds of gleeful combat (*Church and state* 134). Sim maintains that he knows how and why his characters operate; even if he is not privy to their immediate acts, he knows what they will do in the long run. He distinguishes between Astoria, one of the most wily Machiavels in the text, and Cerebus. Sim classes Astoria as a “real-real person ... Cerebus as fantasy-fantasy, Elrod [a spoof of Michael Moorcock’s Elric] as fantasy-real, Lord Julius as real-fantasy, Filgate as real-fantasy [both are based on actual people], the Moon Roach [a parody of the Moon Knight, another comics character] as fantasy-real” (*Swords* 5: 47). The characters’ label seems to determine their actions: only Cerebus and

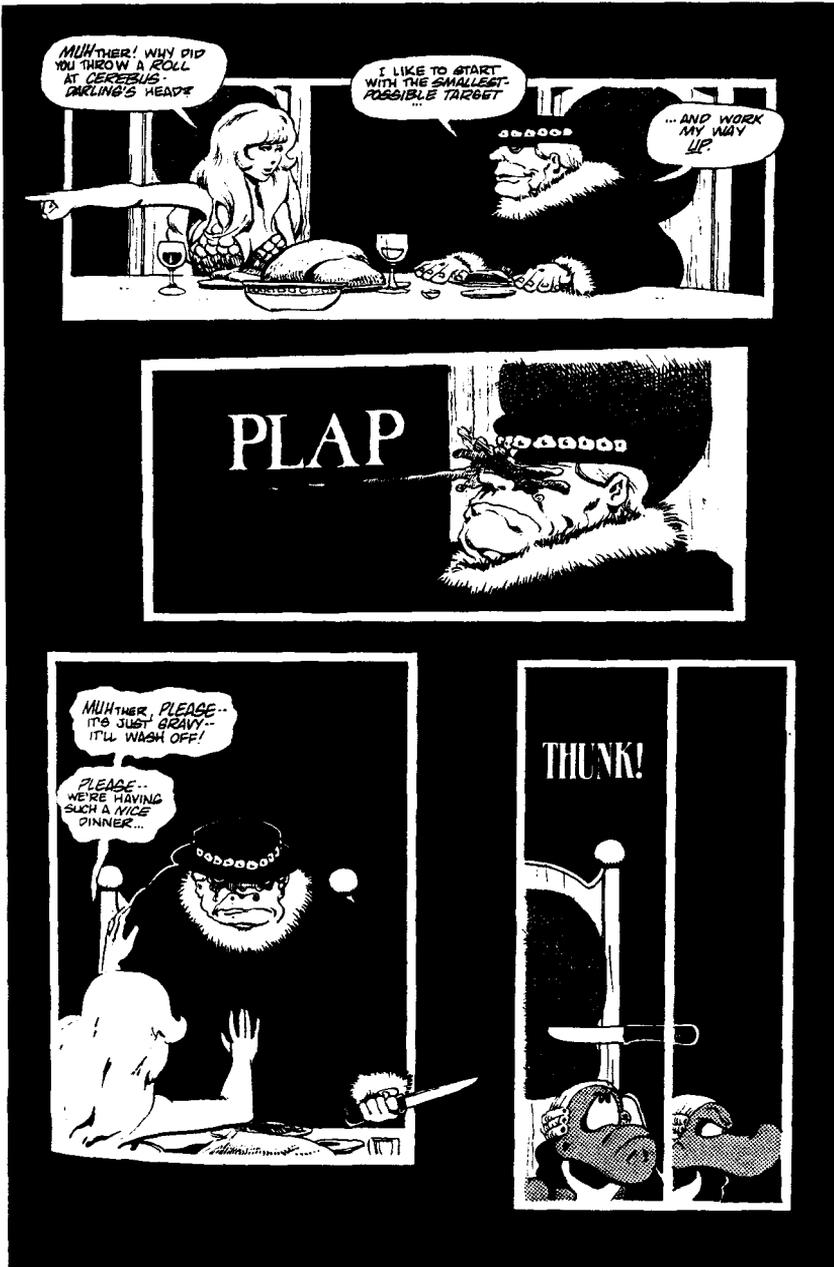


Figure 7 ©1993 Dave Sim

Astoria get into real trouble, while the “fantasy-real” characters usually provide the visual humor. Sim discovered early that “characters who are based on other characters in *Cerebus* tend to be the easiest to write” (*Swords* 1: 72).

Sim creates out of an intertextual stream. He blends people he knows, other creators’ characters, people from public life, synthesizing them all into his own work. Those beings he has pulled out of an intertextual space provide him with the smoothest writing: he ponders three of his different types of characters and notes, “Someday I’m going to do a story with *Cerebus*, Elrod and Lord Julius



Figure 8 ©1993 Dave Sim

locked in a closet. It’ll write itself” (*Swords* 1: 72). *Cerebus* has been called a pastiche, but it is really an intertextual stage where players from other works, fictional or not, wander into Sim’s theatre and he adapts them without losing their basic identities. Lord Julius is always Groucho, but somehow he seems to have agreed to come and work for Sim. Sim creates text where there were only other texts (The Marx Brothers, Moorcock’s Elric [whom Sim merges with Chuck Jones’s Foghorn Leghorn, already a carom off Fred Allen’s Senator Claghorn], the pantheon of caped superheroes, Oscar Wilde, Margaret Thatcher, Jules Feiffer, Giles’s Granny) hovering. Ultimately the text returns to *Cerebus*, who has his own ways of entertaining (figure 8) (*Church & state* 296).

*Cerebus* as Pope teaches the villagers a lesson about humility and grace. It is Sim’s mastery of technique, his delicate drawing of the squalling child and the

humorous sudden silence of the third panel, where the baby seems to know what is about to happen, that make this slapstick impeccable. Like so many of the pages in *Cerebus*, this one is strongly author controlled. Once we are directed off the left-hand side of the page (what a disaster this page would be if Cerebus were throwing toward the book's gutter), we as Western readers, naturally drop back into the left section of the bottom panel and pan right across the crowd. Nodelman comments that "cartooning simplifies to convey the *right* information; it is static representation of the body in motion. It offers illustrators the chance to depict both the individuality of people and the movement of things" a chance which Sim rarely misses (97). Some critics have denigrated Sim's leaning towards burlesque over satire (Groth, "Two" 4), but it is the cheerful quality of the burlesque which saves the text from being crushed under its own weight of high seriousness. The underlying text is bleak, but the humour reduces and thins the mixture, making the whole palatable.

### **Cerebus: Control: Closure**

The book has always been dark, but the proportion of farce to seriousness has changed. Sim decided as early as issue five that "Cerebus existed as an unwitting, but key figure in a number of wide-ranging conspiracies and as a nexus point for a number of disparate belief systems. I mean he was also the self-centred, hot tempered, loathsome little drunkard he appeared to be on the surface, but he was also something different" (*Swords* 6: 3). When Cerebus moves into the Regency Hotel in *High society*, he takes off his barbarian gear, his sword and medallions, and dresses in a tie and tails.

Cerebus's move uptown was the first of many shocks to the fan community which had cheered on the grouchy little killer aardvark. When Cerebus is thrown out of High Society, Sim recalls "I had a letter ... somebody else saying, 'Finally you're back to slapstick'" (Thompson 83: 61). But the barbarian is gone. Still mournful, angry and power-hungry, Cerebus is caught up in a higher-stakes game than before. Where Cerebus had been unthinkingly assured as a barbarian, he is now pushed in and out of power by forces beyond his control. Where less is certain, more danger looms.

We might expect a *bildungsroman* to follow when a character has been forced to leave home and go wandering. But what Cerebus sees rarely affects him. Sim adds, "Cerebus seems to luck onto situations that help him to never have to face himself" (Thompson 83: 70). For a long time Sim argued that Cerebus never learned or changed. After further thought, Sim agreed more recently, "So he *does* change. As you say, it's not really like he learns his lessons very well, like he's really grown. But he certainly has changed" (Sacks 39).

The line between change and growth seems very thin. Sim notes rather nervously that "Cerebus really doesn't learn from [disaster]. I mean I try to learn from it" (Thompson 83: 66). Sim has found that he must, more than ever, do

things his own way. The book is a sort of moving still: while it has kinetic passages, there are long periods where nothing appears to happen and the events themselves seem static (the now-completed Melmoth storyline concerns the protracted death of one character). Sim is engaged in a 300-issue process of revealing his thoughts, which are always already inscribed in the text. Like Lewis Carroll's Red Queen, he must expend all his energy just to maintain his place in time and art. Sim has shifted Cerebus's character partly by raising the level of discourse from the colloquial of the late '70s to the high of the early '90s, but while Cerebus's language and methods have changed, his nature and worldview remain bleak.

Parody, buffoonery and satire are finally burned off by the bleakness in *Cerebus*. What remains is a skeletal world where the individual must learn to govern the self (temper, fate, future), without outside assistance. Due to his adventures in publishing and public life, Sim has fallen into a belief in an Ayn Randian democracy: too much personal power is eroded by others, especially corporate forces (which may be units as small as the family). He argues we must "limit bureaucracies as well" until there is "virtually no bureaucracy, each creator [will have] one or two-person business operations" (Groth, "Repentant" 113).

Sim's approach to life has earned him the epithet of being "the Babbit of comics" (Groth "Two" 5). Yet Sinclair Lewis's Babbit is not an unsympathetic character. Like Babbit, Sim sees and cannot grasp the democracy around him. Sim recognizes in the "comics environment, books, shops, dealers, artists, fans ... one of the purest and most enduring repositories of FDR's New Deal and JFK's New Frontier" (MacDonald 148). In each local unit (comics shops) there exists a cross section of people: unwitting dupes, political naifs, power seekers—few villains. Astoria, one of *Cerebus*'s main players, is "not there to make you laugh, she's not a villain, she's not a good guy, she's an ordinary person in search of power" (Thompson 83: 67). Pragmatism marks the survivor: while the practical characters are occasionally emotional, the rule is to rule, to govern the self. Groth addresses this matter in an interview with Sim.

**Groth:** Do you think everything is defined by self-interest?

**Sim:** I think [that it is] for the most part. I think what isn't self-interest is usually rationalized self-interest.

**Groth:** Are you an Ayn Rand-ite?

**Sim:** Yeah, if you want to put it that way. Ok. (Groth, "Repentant" 116)

Sim's conclusion is no surprise. He notes that what intrigued him about Cerebus's "insidious seduction into the game of power" was that it brought him to "the saddest of all possible points; where there was something to lose" (*Swords* 3: 4). It is unclear whether Sim means, as Thoreau suggests, that once the individual wants material things, that person suffers all the terrors and jealousies of possession; or that Cerebus has given hostages to fortune and is no

longer free. Either way the streak of individualism is powerful.

Sim's democracy is based on philosophical and moral relativism. All people must learn to interpret for themselves. The powerful individual is someone who can contest an interpretation by an entity larger than the self. The entity's most ubiquitous incarnation is the corporation. Comic veteran Dick Giordano gained Sim's respect when Giordano effectively said to various comics companies, "I'm going to pick up my marbles, go back to Stamford ... and draw the occasional book." Sim concludes: "that then becomes an invulnerable personality. That becomes a person you can't intimidate, you can't shake them down, you can't assert your authority" (Thompson 82: 83). The last part of *Jaka's story* is a depiction of the Orwellian state (under the apparently benign rule of Margaret Thatcher), as it sends victim after victim to Room 101, this time for the love of Big Mother.

Sim is concerned by the state's wish to act as the arbiter between the philosophically and artistically desirable and undesirable. For Sim, the state's delusions of its own morality sanction the most grievous wrongs against the individual. Jaka's life and world are ended when one of the orthodox churches breaks down the door, splintering the lives of those connected to Cerebus (figure 9) (*Jaka's story* 336).

The shattered type indicates the violence of the break-in; Jaka is partly eclipsed by the noise of the approaching disaster, while Pud Withers is nearly obliterated, proleptic of his death a few panels later. Sim, an ardent supporter of publishing rights, has mounted and funded

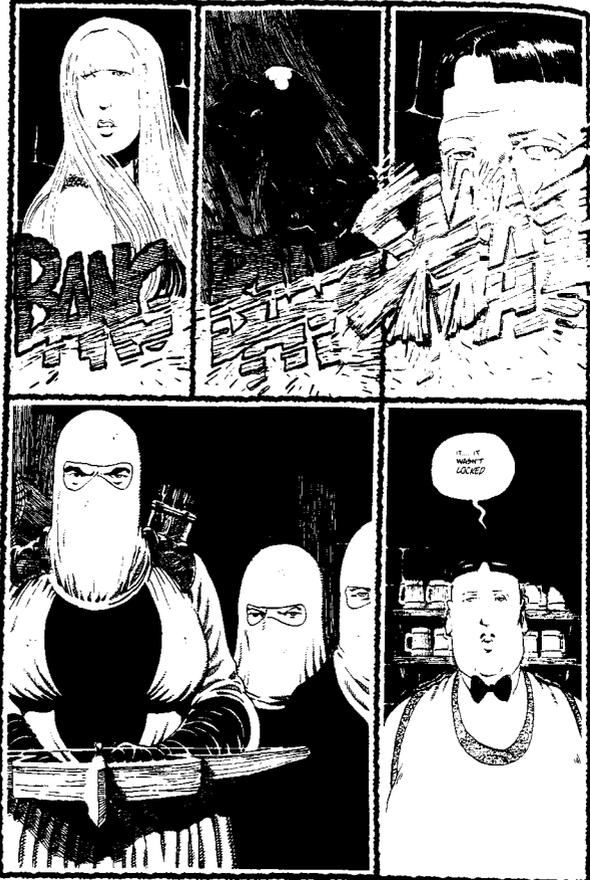


Figure 9 ©1993 Dave Sim

the Comic Books Legal Defense Fund, dedicated to helping those who run afoul of censors. Sim notes bitterly that “If you take a mother and a police officer in tandem, they can virtually take away anybody’s civil rights ... We are one police officer and one parent away from a bust at any given point” (Sacks 38-39).

As pope, Cerebus hands down the unpleasant realities about the world to an attentive crowd:

Most Holy would like to say a few words. Many of you have been told since you were small that Tarim [one of the gods] loves you .... This is *not* true ... Tarim loves rich people! That is why he gives them so much money ... Tarim loves strong people ... That is why he gives them enough strength to beat everyone up ... Tarim *hates* poor people which is why they don’t have any money. (*Church and state* 289)

Cerebus’s delivery is funny, but his words connect with Sim’s beliefs that we must learn to stop asking “who the good guy is and who the bad guy is. There

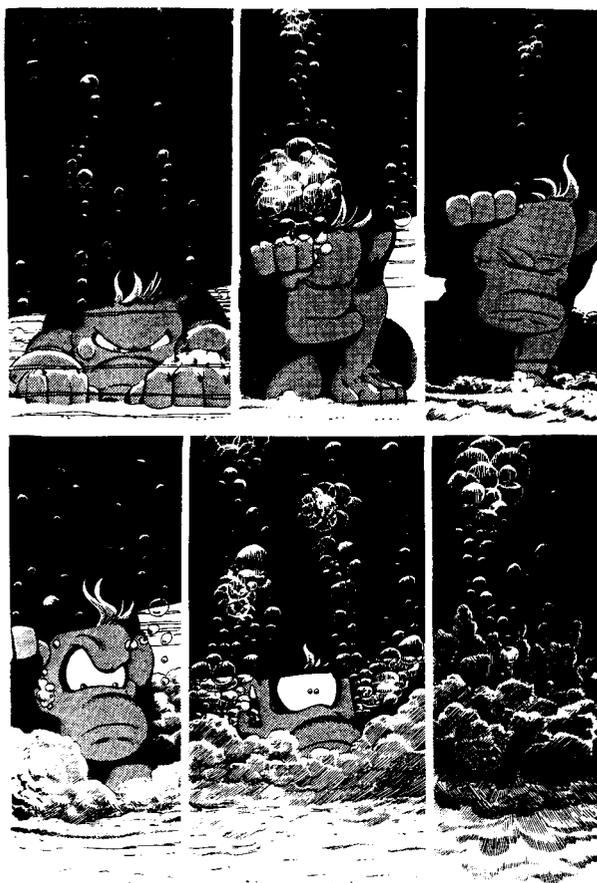


Figure 10 ©1993 Dave Sim

are no good guys. There are no bad guys” (Sacks 33). The laughter in *Cerebus* is of an ironic kind, diagnostic of the bleak and friendless state of human affairs. Going beyond simple polarities of good and bad, Sim approaches a kind of solipsism where “there is no reality. There is no truth. There is no barometer. There is no yardstick. Everything does exist in a purely relativistic situation .... I have a great deal of trouble with anybody who says they believe *anything*. To what depth and how far into your conscious mind do you be-

lieve?" (Groth, "Repentant" 125). It is another way of asking how long the individual can withstand Room 101.

The same darkness underlies Groucho Marx's comedy, that acerbic, ultimately unfriendly humour. Sim thinks of Groucho's character in *Duck soup*: "'Whatever it is, I'm against it!' Firefly sings to the assembled people .... Sung to the bureaucracy, you could keep a thousand lawyers employed full-time trying to find a way around the purity of the nonsense" (*Swords* 4: 40). Sim operates the same kind of game with his readers. He keeps them hoping for closure, but it is not to be. Thompson asks Sim about this in an interview.

**Thompson:** Will we know for sure by [issue] 300 ... or even then maybe not?

**Sim:** Even then, probably not. I think that ambivalence is probably one of the best qualities that you can have in any kind of art. If somebody looks at it and they're certain of what they're seeing, you should be able over the course of time [to] show them that they were putting too much of themselves into their interpretation. (Thompson 83: 74)

It is ironic that Sim, who wants to refuse narrative closure, also wants to guide his readers' responses to his texts. Sim notes, "It was with a great deal of satisfaction that I took Cerebus and the readers on a roller coaster ride of hope for his future and then drew the tracks straight into a brick wall" (*Swords* 3: 4). Disappointments are no surprise to Cerebus because "inside, he *knows*, 'We're not making any real progress here, are we?'" (Bissette 39).

The burden of such an existence is depicted in one of Cerebus's dreams, a vision of drowning, of being borne under by a load of huge chains (figure 10) (*Church and state* 881).

This remarkable sequence is paradigmatic of the book: there is a rise as the character struggles against an oppressive weight, but despite enormous strength of effort, there is an inevitability about the fall and agony of drowning. Existence is a battle and death is terribly painful, as Sim's further meditations in *Melmoth* reveal. Death is the ultimate invasion of the self, of the one, by outside forces. In 1989, Groth questioned Sim about the darkness enveloping the *Cerebus* story line:

**Groth:** Are you optimistic about things?

**Sim:** I'm optimistic about *Cerebus*. (Groth "Repentant" 97)  
It is the one thing Sim believes he can control.

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