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Dear Dave,

I was about to write you a letter in some kind of half-assed attempt to make sense of the reaction to *Tangent* (my knowledge of which consists entirely of what I've waded through at COMICON.com and the *Comics Journal* website), when I got to Sky Woodruff's letter in *Cerebus* #222 and your follow-up reply in the same issue. I am realizing that once again, there's really not much to recommend in dredging it all up.

So after re-reading *Mothers & Daughters* in its entirety, I'd been going over the individual phonebook introductions and what was left of my collection of single issues (long story), when I came to the Moore/Sim dialog. The points concerning the preference for co-existing yet opposing belief systems without need of resorting to the torch, mobbing and stake-burning of one's ideological nemeses were well made. It's been an unfortunate recurrence in history that Authority often believes the problem with thinking people is that they are dangerously susceptible to being reasoned with, and thus possibly converted to the hated "other" side. Better to put the agitators to the sword before they muddy the waters, or so goes the logic.

I've been giving a great deal of thought to this story of yours as of late. I essentially read the *Mothers & Daughters* volumes (quite unintentionally) in reverse order, and so resisted the urge to continue back to the beginning of the series, where terrible analogies might have overwhelmed me with the notion that the Cirinists were actually *receding* from prominence; pious men who would heal wounds with ritual blades and fascinating strips of paper which accumulate in value and are inexplicably exchanged for (transmuted into?) worthless gold (which no one seems to be able to get rid of quickly enough) uncoiling in their wake. The vestigial associations between the slivers of story housed in individual issues and their *Aardvark Comment* counterparts winding an analogous, residual trail through the clumps of traumatized gray matter dangling loose in my cranium. I resisted the urge.

Instead, I looked over #266 again and started to mentally compose my "go figure" letter on *Tangent* reactions, which also ended up being doomed to reluctant abandonment. A less perceptive person might ignore such obviously symbolic false starts and continue on their present course despite increasingly numerous signs and warnings. Not so sure I'm that much different, in spite of my elaborately orchestrated self-regulatory measures.

I'm writing now, after almost ten years of silent monthly reflection, to relate a few salient points and ask a couple of spurious questions. They include:

- 1.) Under a considerable amount of duress (self-inflicted, I'm afraid), I begrudgingly surrendered my entire collection of *Cerebus* back issues (from #41 or so up, plus the odd earlier issue and one-shot special [including *AV-3D*]) to the redemption of my own sadly lacking moral character. You know, I used an entire longbox of AV publications to fulfill a karmic debt. Shades of the 'literature test' you once explained in *Aardvark Comment* ("If the book is heavy enough to stun a burglar..."). I owed money (and then some), and I paid it off with *Cerebus*. Being the only real comic book I still collect in any meaningful sense, it was somewhat difficult to whisk them out the door, knowingly ejecting a sizeable component of my comics reference library in the process. Then, a

year and change later, the idiot tried to give them back to me! He diplomatically abandoned them at a shop we both frequent, leaving instructions to turn them over to me when next I came

in. Not to be outwitted by the rightful legal possessor of my perfectly legitimate ethical overdraft, I in turn donated the entire collection to a mutual friend (co-owner of the shop in question, and in all honesty much more *my* friend than *his* passing acquaintance), who to this day may or may not have even attempted to *read* the damn things yet. Playing hot potato with two hundred issues of *Cerebus* did not quickly become a favorite sport. My internal jury has yet to render a verdict on whether or not I'll be allowed to restock my current meager holdings -- stretching back only to the beginning of *Going Home* -- sating the desire to cross-reference the *actual* contents of the late 1980's *Aardvark Comment* with what remains in the now time-altered vaults of my conscious memory. I only mention the incident here in the small hope that the affair's preservation in posterity will serve as a signpost for me to remember lessons learned. Using the book in this manner is fitting since the artifact of the comic book in its many other forms (i.e., non-*Cerebus*) has become considerably less precious to me in my old age, *Eddie Campbell's Bacchus* and *Promethea* to be excluded as pre-imminent exceptions. This has torn from me the last panacea of Comic Book As Object. Firmly sacrificing these collectibles being the price of actions entered into with full knowledge. I guess what I'm saying is that *Cerebus* has contributed to at least my own decisive ethical development. Perhaps not the sort of praise you're accustomed to receiving, but it is said that Utility is the better part of Valor, and who am I to argue with my own badly mangled corruption of famous mens' words?

2.) Explaining anything is useless. Wilde was onto something with his "When the critics disagree, the Artist is in accord with himself." How this squares with governing the Republic is echoed by the novel invention of the anonymous ballot. Voters in the polls aren't required to qualify their choices (at least not yet), and such is as it should be. The artistic voice selects raw materials in the same manner as a constituent half-hazardly aiming for pregnant chads. "And it harm none...", enlightened self-interest takes its rightful place subservient to internal dialog. It's important to make good choices, or at least ones you can live with. Reconciling your choices with the distinctive sensibilities of others isn't strictly desirable or even *possible* most of the time. This isn't such a sad fact. Give and take doesn't balance when the other end won't let go, and there's no reason to push anyone off the merry-go-round because they happen to be swinging *out* while you happen to be swinging *in*. There is a balance which overshadows individual acts and contains the entirety of human endeavor. Many attribute the label "God" to this awareness and then go about their business in ignoring its wisdom.

3.) Suenteus Po. Wisdom or Folly? Much of what was said in *Reads* seemed to point directly to the speech he gives Cirin, Cerebus and Astoria in the throne room. While he espouses non-interference and placid observation, here he stands, truly altering the (arguably) most significant event to take place in his lifetime with these carefully constructed sentences. On the one hand, his intervention contradicts its own purpose, but flip the coin over and one realizes that without this intervention, someone might well have been sentenced to death in the name of Truth. Again. There is something to be said for abandoning destructive behavior, even if that means a small breach in the comfortable routine. At the very least, his actions seem to have freed Cerebus of many

distracting and meddlesome influences (though this alone doesn't explain or excuse his own tampering with Cerebus's mind, which may well have been taking place even before Astoria and Cirin came on the scene. Just how long has Po been 'watching over' him, anyway?).

4.) If Suenteus Po has spent his entire life alone in a room, playing chess, how do Cirin and Astoria recognize him when he suddenly materializes in the throne room, telling them what's what? Wouldn't they be somewhat shocked to be confronted with another (sperm producing!) male aardvark? Instead, Cirin seems most impatient with this latest tete-nipping distraction elbowing in and disrupting her assured ascension. Or have they communicated telepathically 'off panel'? How aware are they of his continuous meddling in Cerebus's life?

5.) While 'poit' may not be your greatest contribution to comics literature, it has to at least rank somewhere near the top in the Great List Of Quality Innovations In Comic Book Sound Effects. The disappearance of life-giving oxygen into a cold, hard vacuum has seldom been depicted with greater flair, and certainly never so well with only two vowels and a couple of consonants. Unfortunately, it is much too soon to appropriate the effect wholesale into the mass of comic book hack work. Further study of the phenomenon is recommended and required.

6.) Thank you for *Guys*.

Inevitably (there's that word again), I'm including in this package some examples of what I've been up to since ending the free zine I used to force on the public, and deciding Egypt wasn't where I wanted to go (yet) with my storks. The 'real' comic is an example of the one thousand-some-odd copies of the issue that remain boxed in my upstairs art room. I'm about half way through a short story right now (issues #7-10; the mini-comics), which centers around an identity crisis focused through the character's connection to a particular comics narrative. The half-legal (sized) booklet is one of those things that just... happens. I'm sure you can relate (or not, feel free to hold it with only the tips of your fingers, disposing of the wretched thing if it lashes out at you).

It would have been fun to interview you (the offer still stands, by the way) for the final issue of my other zine, *FUCK(tm)*, but my fax software seems to be chasing its own tail and I'm not sure my original transmission to you couldn't have been worded with more clarity and/or panache.

Anyway. I have some reading to do. Then some drawing before my eyes slide over to the clock and it occurs to me that I've once again exceeded the bedtime allotted by my reliable old nine to five. At least the paycheck comes this week. I'm looking forward to *How To Be An Artist* and the collected *Form and Void*.

Break a leg,

Ray Earles

1.) *I'm sure that your karmic debt is in the distant past now in more ways than you, yourself, would care to enumerate. I can only hope that this late publication of your undated letter provides for you a level of retrospective contentment that would have been beyond your capabilities to perceive at the time of the events you document. If, however, its publication causes you to attain to any state to the nether side of "rueful" then I have missed my guess and so, apologize.*

2.) *Too true, however Jules Feiffer did entitle one of his strip collections The Explainers. In another eight months or so, I will find out if I am irretrievably a life member of this compulsive constituency or, as I hope, I will discover that it was just a major part of my former job description as the creator of Cerebus. I sincerely hope that it proves to be the latter case.*

*I. Am. So. Tired. Of. Explaining.*

3.) *The Watcher is the higher incarnation of the Explainer. A bit complicated to go into here, but try this on for size: the Watcher need only perceive accurately, whereas the Explainer tries to explicate accurately. Whether he is explaining things to others or to himself, he is locked within a duality, splitting his own awareness into "Explainer" and "Explainee" or doing the same thing externally with himself in the former role and an audience of whatever size in the latter role. I tried to portray Suenteus Po as having a level of bemused self-awareness about himself as he became absorbed in Cerebus' story. Try as he might to merely observe, Cerebus had the same effect on him that he has on everyone: the magnifier. Once he started Explaining, it was like eating salted nuts and even the facade of the Watcher fell away until he was a full participant and, therefore, subject to the karmic forces and repercussions which participation implies. Would Cirin and Cerebus have had their pitched battle no matter what Suenteus Po said to them, or did they have their pitched battle, at least partly because of what he said to them, or did they have their pitched battle because of what he failed to say to them? Successive states of being, descending from the passive narrator who has, at least, introduced some overarching ideas in to the proceedings before the inevitable mayhem takes place, to the active participant who contributed in a major or minor fashion to the possibly inevitable/possibly not inevitable mayhem (there is no control group), to the active participant who actively failed and whose failure brought about the mayhem made inevitable by his participation.*

*Does the Buddha represent the highest state of enlightenment or does scrupulous non-participation represent nothing more than a failure to perceive accurately the need for participation? Do you evade dichotomy by asserting "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him?" Or is it a given that the Buddha -- because he is never "on the road" -- if he is encountered on the road is a false Buddha? Is the Buddha's non-participation a guarantee of the happiest of all possible outcomes or is the Buddha's non-participation an implicit failure?*

*For me, all of these issues began with the basic creative problem of how to introduce a genuinely omniscient character into the storyline at the end of Church & State who could enunciate what was, at the time, my own best assessment of my own, at the time, largest worldview (note the self-canceling duality implied: if you are assessing your own largest worldview what you are assessing can't, by implication, be a "largest worldview" since*

*your assessment is external to it), the Judge. Even in a fictitious world omniscience is impossible to portray. It was only later when I read the Bible that I realized that God faced/faces/is facing/will face the same problem in the nearly (to human eyes, anyway) infinite realms inhabited by His creations. What character can He introduce into the world to tell people what's going on, given that this world no doubt differs from God's context about as much as this printed page differs from my physical being? It's one of the reasons that I've found reading scripture aloud to be efficacious. I understand very little of it -- my perceptions are tri-dimensional to such an extent that I don't even know how many dimensions there are to reality and I take it as a given that scripture documents people and events which resonate with dimensions beyond my ability to perceive accurately or otherwise -- but, I do believe my soul understands scripture implicitly and scripture allows my soul to persevere even as my soul finds itself mired in a hopeless and dramatically degraded circumstance (that is to say, in me). Read the Synoptic Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and try to explain to yourself what it is that he said. "Blessed the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Is this a good thing? Who wants to inherit a finite ball of dust and rock whose core is inhabited by God's adversary? What do you do with it when you inherit it? It is beyond explanation insofar as it has an infinite number of explanations. But read it aloud and your soul is improved by it.*

*4.) In my view (and I really created characters here who are beyond my own ability to describe accurately), both Cirin and Suenteus Po indeed had telepathic contact with Cerebus off-panel, as they would have ongoing telepathic contact with each other. They "contended" for Cerebus in the way that "higher beings" would feel obliged to: by scrupulously avoiding contact with him and leaving it to Cerebus to find them (the process which began in Mind Game). My own view is that they were lying to themselves in a very conventional and human fashion even as they used their higher states of being to persuade themselves they were doing nothing of the kind. Suenteus Po, as an example, had most of his followers call themselves Suenteus Po, thus casting the widest possible net of proxy participants and guaranteeing that Cerebus would become aware of him -- and himself took the name from a previous Suenteus Po so as to divert responsibility from himself.*

*One of the best treatments of telepathy (which was very much on my mind in coming up with Cirin and Suenteus Po) was the 1973 movie Zardoz, which is worth watching at the very least for that: how telepathic beings would interact (and how squishy-soft, feminine and yet brutally tyrannical such a world would be). There is an interesting borderland between persuasion and information and there are a lot of persuaders who consider themselves mere imparters of information. Much of the Cerebus storyline between issues 20 and 186 was concerned with that.*

*5.) Duly noted.*

*6.) My pleasure I assure you.*