

The Six Crises of Dick Gibson

"When Dick Gibson was a little boy he was not Dick Gibson." This is the first sentence of Stanley Elkin's third novel, *The Dick Gibson Show*.¹ By the end of the novel the little boy—whom we will never know—has become Dick Gibson legally and spiritually, but the implications of his growth into that chosen name are the implications of America's growth from the Great Depression to the Vietnam War. Dick Gibson is a one-man cultural history and a history of a particular kind of American consciousness which had learned its lessons by the end of World War II and brought those lessons into full vapid literalization in the fifties and early sixties. By the end of the novel, by the end of the sixties, Dick Gibson is forced to confront squarely the consequences of his own development. What he confronts is a manufactured self—sometimes called a self-made man—who has been fashioned from the media, from comic books, old tunes, and old movies; who has pursued some version of the American Dream by mistaking stereotype for archetype, cliché for myth; and who has devoted his life to routinizing the extraordinary. In the last moments of *Boswell*, the protagonist of that novel comes face to face with the product of his own ego. At the end of *A Bad Man*, the protagonist confronts the final workings of the self. At the end of *The Dick Gibson Show*, Dick Gibson confronts Dick Nixon.

But Dick Gibson isn't simply an allegorical representation of Dick Nixon. They are parallel lines that converge—they are parallel manifestations of the same consciousness. It is a consciousness that takes in a variety of human beings besides Dick Nixon, including any of us who were sometimes somewhere touched by the magic illusion of upwardly mobile aspirations, and who have felt on occasion an almost atmospheric promise that we are chosen for uniqueness. Chosen and not Elect; Elect is too easy; the chosen get to suffer for the choice. It is a consciousness broad enough in its implications to make us see something about the development of the American character that indicates Dick Nixon was no mere aberration in American history. No more an aberration than you or I or Art Linkletter and Norman Mailer—whom I saw recently together on a T.V. talk show, agreeing for different reasons that what Dick Nixon did in the Watergate Affair is normal business practice. Dick Gibson is Elkin's name for something about America that has turned into Dick Nixon. Gibson shares similarities with other Elkin protagonists—including Boswell, Feldman, and Alexander Main,

"The Bailbondsman" of *Searches and Seizures*—but he is the "good guy" of them all, in Elkin's sense of the word *good*. Although he is less drawn by the ego than Boswell or Feldman, he is also less drawn by mystery than Alexander Main, and he is much more in service to the world of the ordinary than all three.

Dick Gibson is an outsider who wants in. He wants to make his voice the perfect voice, the absolute American voice. In pursuing this he makes himself the absolute American. The name "Dick Gibson" comes to Elkin's unknown hero during an emergency early in his career, as he excitedly reassures his audience that no serious terror lies behind an interruption in transmitted programming. Small as the crisis is he savors its ritual words: "PLEASE STAND BY: ONE MOMENT PLEASE!" The name comes to him "from the air" at the end of a monologue of comforting clichés aimed at conveying the lesson "that help was available." Dick is excited by the sense of emergency, by the extraordinary event, but his excitement is not to be shared with his audience. They are to be kept calm: "In a way, it was what had attracted him to radio: the steady steady-as-she-goes pep talk of trouble shooters who routinized the extraordinary" (p. 5). Dick Gibson becomes an apprentice in search of his special destiny, but he never forgets the basic premise of his radio-birth. It is for him to experience the extraordinary, but through the medium of his voice it is his responsibility to bring that experience into the warm cozy circle of the ordinary—Dick Gibson is born a bureaucrat. He performs a function similar to the teacher, the writer, the critic, nearly everyone who at the kindling point of excitement feels the white heat of some unknown star—and who is then driven to explain it, make it known, put it in a song and rhyme it with *far* or *car*, classify it, reduce its distance and mystery: "Keep calm I said on that fabulous night when Orson Welles scared hell out of the country with his invasion from Mars" (p. 7).

So begins Dick's special sense of mission, his apprenticeship, his journey from the 1930s to 1969 through a variety of styles, always being tested, always waiting for the right moment to become a network man, convinced that he is on a mythic route, "auspicion's loved object." He learns tricks all of us have seen or heard in Nixon's speeches. He learns to "use sincerity to body-build his voice," avoiding detachment from his material not for the purposes of belief but for the illusion of believability. He flatters his listeners with sentimental larger-than-life images of themselves; he invents appetites in order to play to them, calling all the time on his endless knowledge of American clichés. He learns how to deal with time from Bob Hope. He carries with him that deadly dream which seems to promise the dreamer that he can climb from cliché to myth without leaving muddy tracks all over the extraordinary. Central to Dick Gibson's growth and to *The Dick Gibson Show's* image of America is the literalization of myth and the false

belief that the individual can somehow be extraordinary through an extraordinary embrace of the ordinary. Dick Gibson is literally born in emergency, and his character develops through crises. We can trace that development by examining the six crises of Dick Gibson.

In Dick Gibson's first crisis he confronts a family of the Elect—the Credenizas. They own the radio station he works for, and they own everything else within earshot of Dick's voice. His job is to entertain the various branches of the Credenza family audience with, among other things, the illusion of family myth. Dick finds this an easy task:

"I tell you, I embraced myth then—all myth, everybody's, anybody's. To this day I'm a sucker for all primal episode: Bruce Wayne losing his parents and vowing vengeance; Tonto teaming up with the Lone Ranger; Clark Kent chipped out of Kryptonite—whatever." (p. 22)

These are the myths of America's media youth—of radio and comic books. In embracing such myths Dick is like most of us who found a cozy combination of imagination, adventure, and safety in these early superstories. They are myths of the middle class, promising as Dick Gibson wanted to promise, that help is on the way, the streets will be safe for safety. And the heroes themselves were comforting—aliens from other planets whose powers were devoted to our welfare; rich millionaires pairing with little kids to do their duty to the dirty; Indians and Cowboys teaming up to clear the paths for the white man's ways. These are Dick Gibson's myths, victories for the normal, assurance that the irregular can be made to fit. In the confusion between stereotype and archetype, who missed the lost complexities of wisdom, justice, courage, and prudence? Who missed the sticky questions of right and wrong? There was so much power there, and it was so easy to use, and it always arrived *in time*. Dick's most important routinization of the mythic comes in *The Crisis of Shobuta and the Dodo*, but I am getting ahead of myself.

The Crisis of the Credenizas involves a lesson in values. The Credenza family is rich, powerful, and devoted to the welfare of only their own golden in-group. They are the Elect, but their moral, social, and cultural values epitomize middle America's middle brow blandness. When Dick wants to change the Credenza's radio programming, he is faced with a display of pure power that leads him to abandon his own position but to wish himself somehow closer to the inner circles of power. Dick's zany and extreme acts aimed at baiting the Credenizas have only the appearance of rebellion—they are the outsider's gyrations aimed at attracting the attention of the insiders. Dick does this consistently throughout Part I of the book; he gets weirder and wilder in direct proportion to his desire to be accepted

among the Elect. He is like the fool, the juggler, the tumbler standing outside the palace gates, performing trick after desperate trick hoping to be taken in past the palace walls to the warm fires of inner privilege. The inner world's mysteries usually attract Elkin's heroes, but Dick Gibson is a literalizer; for him the inner world is identified with wealth, power, and privilege. His apprenticeship means he has been chosen to go through trial and suffering in order to arrive at this very literal version of "the source of things."

Alexander Main in "The Bailbondsman" moves in the opposite direction.² At the peak of his fatigue, Alexander Main dreams of the terrible unseating of the old gods, of sneak-thieves in the vaults of the Pharaohs, and the effect of the dream is to restore his open-ended sense of mystery. The source of his energy is dependent on the existence of mystery and his ability to experience the non-ordinary. Dick Gibson seeks energy in the conversion of the non-ordinary into the ordinary and that is one reason why he is so tired at the end of the novel—the job has gotten out of hand; there are too many freaks and weirdos. The difference between Dick Gibson and Alexander Main is one version of the difference between the consciousness of America up until the mid-1960s and the emerging consciousness since that time. The contrast of the two men provides a paradigm for the central preoccupation of our culture in recent time: a redefinition of the source of energy. The redefinition is being pursued in a great many parallel realms of life: it is as much a redefinition of divinity as it is a search for new forms of fuel; it is equally a reexamination of Freud and a new look at the ethic that motivates our daily labor. If, for example, the undercurrent source of human energy is thought of as the desire to experience the non-ordinary rather than as sexual desire, the switch in metaphoric explanation of human energy would have extensive effects on our consciousness of what it is to be human. Sexuality, in that case, would only be one way to use or repress this energy. To describe our source of energy as sexual only is to limit our understanding of its workings and its possibilities. Elkin appears to understand the wider source of our energy as this strange and contradictory impulse to escape from the familiar world we have built for its comfort in order to experience the totally unfamiliar. From this perspective anyone who routinizes the extraordinary also dries up the source of energy. As more and more experience is brought into the realm of the ordinary, Dick Gibson's listeners are driven to more and more extremes in order to stay vital, to keep in touch with energy. Dick never understands this dynamic, nor does he understand his own responsibility in making it operate. Touching as he often is, he is never good at recognizing responsibility.

Alexander Main is revitalized by his dream because he pushes the old authorities from their throne in favor of mystery itself—he is changed by the dream, or, at least, he believes again that change is possible. Thus, in

rethinking his dream he denies the old conservative adage which itself is the backbone of routine:

The more things changed, it was said, the more they remained the same. That was bullshit, just one more justification and excuse, another good word put in for death. (*Searches and Seizures*, p. 109)

On the other hand, Dick Gibson in the final pages of *The Dick Gibson Show* denies change. He is the spokesman for the particular American consciousness which believes our source of energy is monolithic, explicable, and endlessly exploitable, which believes energy can only be created when the wild and unpredictable are *refined* to the normal and usable. In the service of normalcy, Dick Gibson fails to see the premium he creates on the existence of the non-normal—he fails to see how fast he is consuming energy. Instead, he makes the truly heart-breaking mistake of expecting to somehow, like superman, arrive *in time* at that literal inner world of the Credenzas where the ordinary will suddenly be raised to the divine. Thus, “he gave in to the Credenzas, putting for good and all their value on things.” In this way the American Dream is brought to its ultimate literalization—the way inward to the Kingdom of Heaven is through Main Street. “‘And,’” the apprentice American tells us, “‘that’s why I’m such a good radio man’”:

“Because I would throw myself into the melting pot while it’s at the very boil and would, if I had the power, pass a law to protect the typical. Because I honor the mass. Because I revere the regular. Because I consent to consensus. Because I would be decent, and decently blind to the differences between appearances and realities, and daily pray to keep down those qualities in myself that are suspect or insufficiently public-spirited or divergent from the ideal. Because I would have life like it is on the radio—all comfy and clean and everyone heavily brothered and rich as a Credenza.” (p. 27)

Having learned Credenza values and having lost his job, Dick Gibson confronts Crisis Two: The Crisis of the Big Lay-Off. This occurs, of course, during the Depression and up to 1943. It covers the time Dick spends with Miriam Desebour and with his own family, up until the time he is drafted. During this period Dick learns why everyone is so passionate to avoid passion, why normalcy is necessary. From the story of Miriam’s father and from the example of his own father, Dick learns that people connect the non-ordinary with bad news. And people can’t take bad news. Still in his youth, before Dick Gibson becomes Dick Gibson, he glories in his own ability to

absorb bad news, to censor it, to know it first, to control his listeners' access to it. Bad news is the business of his media, and he is surprised at other people's softness. He discovers that it is softness that makes them hard; it is their inability to take bad news that makes them hide behind the roles they play, the clichéd roles of radio and movies, and thereby dissipate the emotional content of their experience. He begins to see not only that people need normalcy, but that normalcy is defined by the media itself. The media is the mediator between the world of the exceptional and the world of the ordinary, and that is precisely where Dick wants to be—between worlds and in control.

Dick Gibson, unlike other Elkin protagonists, is not particularly bothered by the conflict between ego and detachment. His own central conflict is the conflict of the middleman, the mediator, the media man—feeling, on one hand, that “the point of life was the possibility it always held out for the exceptional” and performing, on the other hand, as if the only way to experience the exceptional was to convert it to the normal. Elkin's choice of a media man for his central character in the drama of the American/Nixon consciousness is both politically and symbolically brilliant, for the media man's conflict is easily solved by those who enjoy the power of such a position. At the same time, Elkin informs the reader of one more point of contact between his or her consciousness and that American consciousness which finds its most literal embodiment in Dick Nixon. All of us are media people of some sort. If we exist in the “civilized” world, then we both play roles and create roles. To do neither, according to Dick Gibson's experience, is to be uncivilized, to be “the brute.” Before Dick fully resolves his conflict and accepts his destiny as a media man, he experiences a loss of resolve. He has learned from his father that he must play his roles with no modesty, no embarrassment, and he has tried, traveling the country and becoming the voice of all American business, of railroad trains and race tracks. It doesn't seem to work, and by 1943 Dick “eschewed the idea of his apprenticeship and with it the idea of his destiny too.” But, then he is drafted and confronts crisis number three: *The Crisis of the Brute*.

Dick's experience with World War II thrusts him unprepared into incredible and relentless brutality: “There he experienced the total collapse of civilization.” But, Dick doesn't even go into battle; the brutes he discovers are the men of his own Army—men like Null and Laspooney, the grab-assers who haven't enough imagination to connect the pain they inflict with the pain they would feel were it inflicted on them. The total lack of grace among the men in basic training is one of the funniest touches in the book. But the overall effect of World War II is to teach Dick, the American, that the only alternative outside the roles of the routine world is the thoughtless non-role of the brute. The lesson ultimately rededicates Dick to his apprenticeship. But, first he has to discover that he himself is not a brute. He

begins acting the brute when he rebels against playing military muzak during a bombing raid—he has become an announcer on Armed Forces Radio. He is exhilarated by the sense of identification with “the rule of whim,” but even as he acts, his imagination converts his actions to middle-class fantasies drawn from radio and movie images of the brute. He can’t be the brute; he can only play it. He is too self-conscious to do anything but deal with the world as a role-player. It is all he ever learned from his family. We shouldn’t be too surprised, then, when he is magically saved from court martial by a famous general, who frees Dick in return for a moment in the past when he had heard Dick in Nebraska on the Credenza radio station, and had been saved from fatigue and icy roads by the incredible warmth of Dick’s voice, “the voice of wheat”:

Dick remembered how good he’d been, how he had thought even at the time that he was in a state of grace. His chest heaved, and he felt tears coming. Whatever the general might tell him now, he knew that it was over; his apprenticeship was truly finished, the last of all bases in the myth had been rounded, his was a special life, even a great life—a life, that is, touched and changed by cliché, by corn and archetype and the oldest principles of drama. (p. 105)

Dick is launched again on his special destiny, feeling for neither the first nor the last time that his apprenticeship is over. Most important his special destiny assures him that he is no brute. He is the chosen man again, genuinely rewarded for the one time in his life when he had *felt* in an actual state of grace. It is a literal reward and it is no wonder that Dick should feel chosen or that he should see no difference between myth and cliché. Discovering what the world outside the ordinary is really like, Dick—like many Americans in response to World War II—is reassured of the nearly virtuous necessity of his special destiny as a routinizer of the extraordinary. His earlier conflicts are quieted, and he is glad to resume his Credenza values and his quest for the perfect radio show—the perfect mediation. The exercise of power that will be required of him is now fully justified by his newly formed consciousness of reality: all that exists are the normal and those who make everything normal—anything outside of that is brutal and a part of the fall of civilization. On the personal level this is a truly poignant moment in the book, especially for anyone who has experienced the military world. It is no uncommon story to have come away from World War II in desperate pursuit of the very middle class set of alternatives that had earlier been abandoned—to come away from the military grateful that you *are* normal.

In The Crisis of Shobuta and the Dodo—Dick Gibson’s fourth crisis—

Dick performs the role of literal mediator between the magic of Shobuta's myth and the crass sentiment of Dick Nixon's clichéd version of the Emperor who saves his people. In the process Gibson learns the key lessons of the Dodo—that extinction can be a choice, that voicelessness can be extinction, and that technique is survival. Dick is on Mauritius, reporting on a special frequency to his famous general and the general's staff. The Japanese are on the island in search of the last Dodo to use as a magic symbol for saving Japan. A Japanese ornithologist tells Dick the story of how the Dodo came to be a magic creature. During the reign of Shobuta the Compassionate, Japan had been saved from war lords, villains, and internal disruption by two incidents where the Emperor's dodo actually flew in the face of an unbeatable enemy, allowing the Emperor to kill the enemy and save Japan. In response to his experiences with the Dodo, Shobuta—who cares little for himself and wants only to complete delicate negotiations that would preserve peace, having no Henry Kissinger to do it for him—goes through several changes. He alters from Shobuta the Compassionate to Shobuta the Jealous to Shobuta the Invincible. His enemies sum up his changes by calling him Shobuta the Showboat. But in the end Shobuta learns humility from the Dodo and returns to be Shobuta the Tender. The changes along with the magical agency of the Dodo touch the story—as funny as it is—with the magic of myth, with the pattern of withdrawal and return, and the miracle of Elected survival.

Dick Gibson soon finds himself playing Shobuta's part in the World War II version of the myth. He finds the sought-for Dodo and he finds himself and his superior officer, Collins, stuck with the Dodo in the middle of an army of Japanese. The Japanese think the bird is magical, Dick's officer thinks it is a valuable symbol, and Dick thinks it is a bird. He tries to tell everyone that the Dodo is just a bird, but Collins commands him to kill it, or he will kill Dick. Dick also realizes that with a dead bird in hand, all he will be is an American trapped by a Japanese army. He kills it, but magically the bird flies up and Dick is saved. It is a miracle and the army parts for Dick Gibson the Invincible. Dick has learned the American's version of magic, and in the process he reduces Shobuta's myth to a cliché of survival. "I tossed the bird," he tells us. "I flung him up myself. With my wrists. It's all in the wrists" (p. 133). In this marvelous moment at the end of Part I, Elkin sums up his fiction with a cliché from baseball—it's all in the wrists—and at the same time communicates the routinization of myth, the American replacement of technique for magic, and the key to post-war survival. The world will be safe for normalcy now that the American has learned how to routinize the extraordinary by mastery of technique and how to make the finished product retain the appearance of the special. Like Dodoes, we would choose extinction unless we use our voice to gain control of all the empire. Dick has learned to justify the pursuit of power; he has

learned to quiet his doubts about what I have called the conflict of the media man; he has learned how to maintain the illusion of his own sacred mission. He is ready to intrude his voice—as he did for the famous general—between dangerous death and awful sleep, guiding his listener, “preserving him on the treacherous road as art preserves, as God does working in mysterious ways” (p. 43).

Part II of the book provides Dick with his fifth crisis—The Crisis of the Word. The whole section is devoted to a panel discussion with Dick as moderator, with four panelists, and with special guest Behr-Bleibtreau—a psychologist who believes in mind over matter and who turns out to be a mysterious kind of occultist determined to seize control of Dick’s voice, to still him in the name of non-verbal mysteries. During the course of the program Behr-Bleibtreau apparently gains control of Dick’s panelists and leads each of them into a weird and marvelously funny confession. Each confession also contains a variation on the mind-body problem. The implications of this crisis demonstrate that Dick’s flight from the world of the brute becomes a flight from the body itself. He becomes more and more isolated as the book goes on—moving from contact with people to contact only with panelists inside his studio, and finally, in Part III of the book, to contact with people only through the telephone. Dick ultimately becomes an almost disembodied voice. In The Crisis of the Word, Dick learns by listening to his panelists as they struggle with their obsessions, with the crazy betrayals of the body and the wacky strategies of the mind. “I have no character,” Dick confesses only to himself, “I am what I think. And what I say on the radio. What I think and what I say. My *voice*” (p. 209). As media man between the worlds of the extraordinary and the ordinary, Dick associates himself with the Word itself. His confrontation with Behr-Bleibtreau is a struggle to survive, to keep his voice; and it is no accident that his antagonist represents the possibility of psychic non-verbal communication. Behr-Bleibtreau is the enemy of the Word. Dick’s battle with him begins as an attempt to preserve the middle way—affirming mind’s supremacy over the body but denying the power of pure mind. It ends with Dick feeling first that mind can only survive through the mediation of the word, and then that the media, the Word itself, is the only reality.

In an earlier experience in “The Dead Room” at the Institute for the Deaf, Dick had discovered that only the word survives death, only human noise is immortal. Thus, in The Crisis of the Word, he battles fiercely to maintain his connection to the Word. Dick, like Elkin’s other major protagonists, is the practitioner of a dying profession—a profession which has seen its better days, which has become a minor instrument of service and performance, no longer holding center stage. There are Boswell the weight-lifter, Feldman the department store owner holding out against suburban malls and branch stores, and Alexander Main the bailbondsman facing a

diminishment in his role as mediator between the mysterious world of crime and the ordinary world of punishment. And here is Dick Gibson, radio man in 1959—when *The Crisis of the Word* occurs—holding out for the absolute supremacy of the Word in a world where T.V. and the image has begun to corner the market on mediation. Dick is the only one of Elkin's major characters to hold so fiercely to the Word, and he is the only one who never successfully confronts death. He believes the voice is the sound of the soul, but his faith in the Word is primarily utilitarian; it is *his* instrument of life and power. (The parallels to Nixon are clear here.) He hasn't noticed his own participation in the decline of the Word's potency. He hasn't noticed how his own media manipulation of words has aided in dividing words from things, turned language into technique, into the technology of illusion.

As the book progresses, Dick's allegiance to the Word becomes more and more an allegiance to the past—he was “blessed by nostalgia as some are blessed with prescience”—and he grows more and more tired, more and more a voice not for mediation but for past conceptions of order and normalcy. He is drained of a great deal of energy in his battle with Behr-Bleibtreau, energy aimed at maintaining that the Word can survive as mediator in the widening gap between body and soul illustrated in his panelists' confessions. Pepper Steep's confessional tale of Arnold Menchman, for example, seems to indicate that once Menchman “learns his body” he experiences a diminishment in the powers of his incredible mind. His vision literally fails as a direct result, and he can no longer see well enough to register all detail on his “eidetic imagination.” He loses the opportunity to hold on to *everything*, “to have it all at once, easier than Atlas, bearing all the awful tonnage of impression—the juggler of the living world” (p. 172). Dick would avoid all loss, and so he beats Behr-Bleibtreau, becoming number one and releasing both Pepper Steep and himself from the spell of what has been confessed—releasing them from the mind-body problem itself. At enormous expense Dick has routinized the most bizarre event of his life—he has negated the power that would make him blab true, and in the end he has the microphone entirely to himself. But Dick's closing words demonstrate the cost of his victory—for him words are no longer just mediators. They are reality itself, and Dick believes himself the master of reality as he denies all other mysteries:

“Well, ladies and gentlemen,” he says, “there is no astrology, there's no black magic and no white, no ESP, no UFO's. Mars is uninhabited. The dead are dead and buried. Meat won't kill you and Krebiozen won't cure you and we'll all be out of the picture before the forests disappear or the water dries up. Your handwriting doesn't indicate your character

and there is no God. All there is . . . are the strange displacements of the ordinary." (p. 229)

He survives *The Crises of the Word* by denying his sense of mystery, and, therefore, without realizing he gives up any real opportunity to become exceptional. In the place of mystery he has developed a new dangerous ethic—the ethic of a male American in love with power: "The show must go on and I must be on it. I'm the show."

In contrast, Alexander Main, the bailbondsman, regains his sense of mystery after beginning his story tired and totally without any appetite, after believing he could only recover mystery or possibility with drugs. He is aware that his business is endangered by "history and natural selection." He is even more tired than Dick Gibson at the end of *The Dick Gibson Show*, but he does not lose sight of either the world of mystery or the world of things and so he does not either overrate or underrate his job as mediator. He restores his flagging energies after a dream, but he is able to do so partly because he is able to accept the reduced importance of mediation itself and of his kind of mediation in particular. He is able to question the importance of the Word, repeatedly pointing out its inadequacies for dealing with his endless sense of wonder. He is a wiser and humbler man than Dick Gibson, and he is clearly in touch with a wider sense of reality—as crazy as he is.

In Part III the focus of the novel moves further into the world of Dick's audience as Dick moves further into isolation. It is impossible for me to capture the skill and variety of this final section of the book, which reflects the sound of America in upheaval, doubt, and suffering. The people who call Dick on his new show—Dick Gibson's Night Letters—are obsessed. There are people who believe their lives have been shaped by pierced ears and telephone poles. There is dying Mrs. Dormer and Norman the Native; there is the man who only tells Dick his feet stink, and there is the woman obsessed with the buzzer in her 1969 Buick which is her "gadget for grief" and there are more, all of them complex, all of them wanting to remystify the ordinary, deal in their own way with bad news. We hear a world filled with restlessness, with tension, and with a multiplicity of imagination and experience that belittles any idea of order through normalcy. It is too much for Dick. He has grown tired, and he is no longer a reliable voice in any way. He is fed up with the obsessions he once loved, and he is overwhelmed by bad news and suffering; he thinks of his callers as solipsistic, and he has lost faith in the power of the Word. He needs a new stimulus to reassure him of his special destiny as he "pushes fifty." Thus, while the emphasis in Part III is on America's explosion of energy, Dick continues his same path, confronting his sixth crisis—*The Crisis of the Evasive Enemy*.

Dick is in Miami Beach, a network man at last—after losing his last job on

the evidence of his own tapes—he broadcasts to the entire South. He is, in fact, settled in a kind of Southern strategy; having taken the name Dick Gibson forever, he converges more rapidly toward Dick Nixon. He becomes the defender of order and authority, detecting a note of piety in his voice and liking it. He needs an enemy to revitalize his tired sense of specialness, and he sees the missing enemy as the incompletable part of his myth. His sense of being Chosen clearly turns into paranoia, and he begins to see enemies everywhere. He thinks it might be Behr-Bleibtreau, but he mistakenly believes that a number of his callers are the enemy in disguise. He not only begins to give standard and safe advice; he begins to genuinely harm people, like Henry Harper the nine-year-old self-sufficient orphan and philanthropist whom Dick bullies so that Henry turns himself over to authority, thereby falling into the hands of very selfish people, ruining his young life and ending the good he had been doing. Fatigue creeps over Dick as his ritual enemy evades him. He feels battered more and more by bad news, and one night he speaks out against the obsession he hears around him, calling for the return of all the old comforting clichés: “Where are my Mail Baggers, the ones who used to call with their good news and their recipes for Brunswick stew and their tips about speed traps between here and Chicago?” (p. 322). Dick has lost touch with his times, and he cannot recognize what is happening.

But he sees his opportunity at last when a woman calls him about a horrible advertisement for weapons appearing in the back of a comic book—weapons, for example, that bring the Vietnam war home, weapons like eye acid which “*Seeks out and destroys the optic nerve on contact.*” At first Dick’s response to her is very rigid, answering everything she says with an objection—we can’t, we’re not allowed to, the FCC won’t let us, and so on. But at last he sees the possibility of an act that could renew him—he sees an enemy at last:

His thought was that here at last was something he could do. There was too much suffering. Too much went wrong; victims were everywhere. *That* was your real population explosion. There was mindless obsession, concentration without point, offs and ups, long life’s niggling fractions, its Dow-Jones concern with itself. What had his own life been, his interminable apprenticeship which he saw now he could never end? And everyone blameless as himself, everyone doing his best but maddened at last, all, all zealous, all with explanations ready at hand and serving an ideal of truth or beauty or health or grace. Everyone—everyone. It did no good to change policy or fiddle with format. The world pressed in. It opened your windows. All one could hope for was to find his scapegoat. . . . (pp. 330-31)

Dick toys with a kind of existential gesture, hoping to be “delivered by gesture and redeemed by symbols,” but the gesture loses meaning for him before he gets to perform it. What he does perform, however, despite the pathos of his concern, is one more reduction of mythic complexity—the ritual enemy has become the scapegoat. Scapegoats, of course, negate the necessity of self-knowledge.

In that context Dick accepts the final call of *The Dick Gibson Show*, “Who’s there?” he asks:

“The President of the United States. Dick, Bebe Rebozo and I are terribly concerned about what’s been going on in Vietnam . . .” (p. 335)

This final moment can be interpreted in a number of ways: perhaps Dick will recognize himself in Dick Nixon and diverge in a new direction. Perhaps his true enemy has appeared, and Dick will climb from cliché to myth after all. Perhaps he will only listen to one more weird obsessive. Or, perhaps—most likely of all, given Dick’s disposition to save himself with scapegoats—he will have found in Dick Nixon the perfect scapegoat to help him prop up his old tired clichés.

Elkin seems almost prophetic in his demonstration of the American in confrontation with himself. The movement to make Nixon a simple scapegoat, to pretend he is the single source of America’s difficulties, seems to have taken over the media—for example, take a T.V. special shown in the Fall of 1975. In it detective Frank Cannon, the fat man, and detective Barnaby Jones, the daddy figure, teamed up to pursue the ultimate enemy, the man behind oil cartels, behind corruption and devilry of every sort. The program was done as if it were a comic book—the characters more distorted than usual, the camera taking single figure shots like comic book panels. Only this time the Dick Gibson in me suddenly saw not Batman and Robin but a frumpy, ridiculous, fat man in a Lincoln with an old moralizer by his side. It was as if the middle-class fantasies lying behind Dick Gibson’s heroes were suddenly revealed, tired and unlikely saviors. But that wasn’t the point; the point was to isolate the ultimate bad guy, to get the scapegoat, not to recognize the qualities that lead to devilry but to arrest the devil. In the final confrontation the two doddering detectives corner him, self-righteously without any real recognition, without any sense of shared responsibility, and guess who it turns out to be?

“Hang tough,” said Dick . . .

NOTES

¹ All quotations are taken from the Random House edition, and page numbers are included parenthetically in the text.

² All quotations taken from *Searches and Seizures* are taken from the paperback Random House edition, and page numbers are included parenthetically in the text.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JON ANDERSON's last book of poems, *In Sepia*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

PHILIP BOOTH's new book of poems, *Available Light*, has been published by Viking.

JEFFREY L. DUNCAN teaches English at Eastern Michigan University. He has published a book on Emerson and is at work on another dealing with the problem of language in nineteenth-century American literature.

STANLEY ELKIN's novel, *The Franchiser*, will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in the Spring.

NED FRENCH wrote his undergraduate thesis at Harvard on Malcolm Lowry and William H. Gass. He has taught at Brown University.

WILLIAM H. GASS's monograph-essay, *On Being Blue*, will be published later this year by Godine.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH is currently on the faculty at Cornell. His last volume of poems, *Jan. 31*, was nominated for a National Book Award. Doubleday will issue a new book, *Comings Back*, in the fall of 1976.

ALAN V. HEWAT has been a Red Sox fan since 1949. He has published fiction in *Esquire*, *The Massachusetts Review* and *Ascent*.

WILLIAM HEYEN's "A Visit to Belzec" will be included in *The Swastika Poems*, which will be published by Vanguard Press in early 1977.

PAUL HOOVER edits *OINK!* He is now teaching at Columbia College in Chicago.

RICHARD HUGO's latest book, *What Thou Lovest Well, Remains American*, was released in April, 1975, by Norton.

PHILIP LEVINE's next book of poems will be published in limited edition by Windhover Press. A larger edition will be available from Atheneum this fall.

WILLIAM MATTHEWS teaches at the University of Colorado. He is finishing work on a new book of poems.

DAVID McELROY's book of poems, *Making It Simple*, was published last