INVISIBLE MAN AND THE NUMBERS GAME

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PREFACE

The literary criticism on Ralph Ellison's _Invisible Man_ is voluminous; yet, only two critics have made the slightest comment on Ellison's use of numbers in the book. However, I believe that Ellison's use of numbers is symbolic of the illegal institution called the numbers game. My intention in this study is to show that the numerous incidents in _Invisible Man_ directly parallel the structure and workings of the numbers game and, in doing this, prove that Ellison's use of numbers demands special attention.

I take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the assistance and guidance given me by my major adviser, Dr. Jennifer Kidney, whose helpful comments were invaluable. Special thanks go to Carolyn Blakely, Lonnie Patrick, and Walter Shaw who gave me constant encouragement and active support during this study.

Because of their unwavering confidence in me, I zestfully dedicate this study to my children, Yvette and Byron.

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INVISIBLE MAN AND THE NUMBERS GAME

In the years since it was published, Invisible Man has been subjected to criticism of many kinds. Some critics have viewed Ralph Ellison's novel as a response to the plight of the black man in America; others have claimed that it is meaningful as a commentary on the shifting, elusive nature of appearance and reality, body and mind; a few have chosen to analyze it as a statement of problems of the individual versus the group; still others have viewed it as an exploration of the dilemma of modern man in a hostile environment. Two critics taking one or another of these views have made general comments on Ellison's use of numbers in the book. Roger Rosenblatt makes a passing mention of the numbers when criticizing Invisible Man,[1] while Robert Bone believes that "Ellison uses language evocative of the numbers game in order to freshen up his jaded diction."[2] However, the numbers in Invisible Man demand more serious attention. By giving his book the general texture of the numbers game, Ellison reflects various aspects of this illegal institution. The hero's metaphorical involvement in the numbers game forces him to find his identity, the object of his quest. The numbers in Ellison's Invisible Man are intentional and significant.

The numbers, also known as policy, the lottery, and the numbers game and/or racket, is the illicit institution organized around those forms of gambling in which players bet on numbers within a specified range--one of which is later selected in random fashion as a winner. Various artifacts are associated with attempts to secure good-luck in the numbers game.[3] Among the most widely known and used artifacts to secure the winning number is the "dream book," valuable for translating dreams into "gigs"--numbers. In the attempt to supernaturally divine the specific winning number, many players use the dream book not only for the interpretation of dreams, but also for the translation of personal experiences and public happenings into numerical expressions.

The player writes his numerical expressions on slips of paper with the hope that his number will "fall"--win. The player then gives the slips of paper with some money to the "runner" (also called a "bookie") and instructs the runner to play the bet in any of three ways: the "single action play" (any one number might appear in that day's winning gig), the "beleader action play" (the first two numbers of that day's winning gig), or the "whole number gig" (that day's winning number combination). The runner places all bets with his employer, "the controller" (also called "the banker") who "bankrolls" the financial aspect of his "book." Books (also called "pools") have distinct

names such as Bronx, Harlem, North, South, East, or West. The winning numbers for each book are printed on "drawings"/ "policy slips" in either one or two vertical rows of twelve numbers each. Slips containing one row of twelve numbers are called "one-legged books." The amount of money the player wins depends on the amount of money he bets with his specified play. Because the odds in the single action play are 8 to 1, the player would receive $8.00 if he were to bet $1.00 on that day's winning number. The odds in the beleader action are 40 to 1; thus, if he were to place a bet of $1.00 on the first two numbers of that day's winning number, then the player would receive $40.00. In this same manner, he would win $500.00 if he were to bet $1.00 on the day's whole number gig because its odds are 500 to 1.[4]

The numbers game, an Italian import of the nineteenth century, is illegal, but flourishes in spite of the law.[5] It flourishes because its central activity is literally a game--a game of chance, and according to Norton E. Long, man is a game-playing animal who "takes game-playing seriously because it is through games that he achieves a satisfactory sense of significance and a meaningful role."[6] But this game--the numbers game--seldom gives man a sense of significance because the odds of his winning--the odds that his "whole number gig" will "fall"--on any one-legged book are 76,076 to 1 against him.[7]

In the Prologue of Invisible Man, the hero speaks from his home, the coal cellar of a building rented strictly to whites in an area bordering Harlem. He realizes that he has been "lost in a dream world"[8]--just as the players of the numbers game are lost in their dream world. The hero reflects on the past events that have led to his present situation in which he resides in his rent-free, hole-in-the-ground section of a basement, with the added comfort of the electricity that is tapped from the Monopolated Light & Power Company. The 1,369 lights help to confirm the reality of the hero, who has learned he is invisible: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (p. 3). The fact that he is recognized only as a stereotype, as a Negro in a particular role--a "dupe" for the numbers game--induces him to be socially irresponsible as a means of revenge on the world that has wronged him. This present vengeful mood is indicated in a dream in which an old slave woman poisons her master for refusing to set her free despite his promise to do so.

The hero strikes back at his metaphorical involvement in the numbers game. He decides to make his home, not in Harlem --where the numbers are regularly played--but in a section bordering Harlem. His home is a hole that was abandoned and forgotten during the nineteenth century, which is the same time period that the numbers racket was introduced into New York. The numbers racket drained his race of the money

with which they could supply themselves with a necessity of life--electricity. Likewise, the hero is draining the Monopolated Light & Power Company of its electricity, denying it of a necessity with which it survives--money. The figure one (1) of the 1,369 lights with which the hero has wired his ceiling symbolizes the hero's play of the "one-legged book" in the "pool" of Harlem, whereas the 3 6 9 symbolizes his "fall"--his winning number, his identity. The hero's dream is symbolic of his refusing to continue being duped in the numbers game: "I . . . assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead . . . for I am in a state of hibernation" (p. 5). The hero continues to explain his present state with a definition: "A hibernation is a covert preparation for more overt action" (p. 11).

In the first section of Invisible Man the hero recounts his experiences as a student in the South. The first ordeal which he undergoes is the battle royal, an experience which is a prototype for his later experiences. After the battle royal, the hero receives a scholarship to the state college for Negroes, and this scholarship is the first slip of paper which introduces him to the numbers game. That night after receiving the scholarship the hero has a dream--a dream which he does not understand--which indicates that the scholarship he has been awarded is the first in a series of papers which are designed to "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (p. 26).

Ellison states that "the book is a series of reversals."[9] Understanding this fact establishes the hero's ignorance of his participation in the numbers game. When involved in the game, the numbers player gives slips of paper with the hopes that he might find his sense of significance--his fall. In Invisible Man the hero accepts slips of paper with the hopes that he might find his sense of significance--his identity. The information on the slip of paper belonging to the numbers player is selected and defined by himself,[10] whereas the information on the slip of paper belonging to the hero is selected and defined for him by others.[11] In both cases, the slips of paper symbolize a "fool's paradise"; the slips of paper belonging to the hero and to the player will "keep them running" toward the object of their quest, their sense of significance.

With his innocence (of being involved in the numbers game) still basically intact, the hero goes to college and begins to play the game, but he makes all the wrong plays. The hero is given the task of driving Mr. Norton, one of the school's rich benefactors, around the college campus. A ride to the back country where the poorest Blacks reside followed by a visit to the Golden Day, a notorious roadhouse that caters to Black inmates of a neighboring mental institution, forces Norton on his return to campus to report these "shocking" incidents to Dr. Bledsoe, the school's president. The hero is expelled from school and sent North

with some letters of recommendation from Bledsoe.

The "mad vet," one of the inmates, has observed the actions and mistakes that the hero has made while he was with Norton at the Golden Day. The mad vet knows then that the hero, making all the wrong moves, does not realize that he is being duped--in the numbers game. While both ride North on the bus, the mad vet approaches the hero and advises him to take certain precautions while in the "dream city, New York." He tells the hero to "play the game, but play it your own way--part of the time at least. Play the game . . . Learn how it operates, learn how you operate" (p. 188). If the hero had taken the advice of the mad vet seriously, he would have bought the "dream book" that he observes in a store window when he first arrives in New York. The hero would have been able to learn the operations of "the game"--the numbers game. He would have been able to interpret the past encounters and analyze the cause of his failures. But more important, the hero would have been able to see that the seven letters that Bledsoe had given him were unlucky. The dream book in the window, like _The Three Witches Combination Dream Dictionary_--the most widely used dream book in Harlem--would have shown the hero that 18, 50, and 51 are lucky numbers for a carrier of letters--not 7.

Although he is aware that Harlem, "the city-within-a-city," is a city "not of realities, but of dreams" (p. 122), the hero is still blind to his involvement in and the

operations of the game for dreamers--the numbers game. The hero unknowingly allows the numbers to work against him. He ignores the statement made about him--"You'd probably make a good runner" (p. 139)--and holds fast to his dream of securing employment from one of the "important people" to whom Bledsoe addressed the letters. His dream shatters when he discovers that the contents of the letters--the slips of paper--reinforces the old implications to "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

The hero assumes the task of finding employment for himself, secures a job with the Liberty Paint Company, and is assigned to work in building number 2. He is told to "open each bucket [of white paint] and put in ten drops of this stuff [black base] . . . then stir it 'til it disappears" (p. 152). The hero proceeds to follow the orders given to him until the black base runs out. He then goes to the tank room to refill his bucket with concentrated remover and continues with the mixing process. When the boss checks on the hero's progress, he discovers the "wrong stuff" being mixed with the famous Optic White paint. The hero explains: "I was trying to save time and took what I thought smelled like the right one" (p. 155). "Goddamit, don't you know that you can't smell <u>shit</u> [emphasis mine] around these fumes?" (p. 155), shouts the boss as he refills the bucket from a tank labeled with the numbers "3-69."

The numbers 3 6 9 are significant not only in communications among Harlem's "street people," but also in playing the

numbers game. For example, if a person were to approach another in the streets of Harlem, their conversation might proceed

"Hey man, what's goin' down?"

"Same ole 3 6 9."

One person asks if there have been any significant changes in the other's life; the other person replies that his life is "full of the same shit" and that nothing has changed. In the numbers game, certain bodily functions--urination, defecation, and fornication--are translated into numerical expressions which all players understand and accept. The numbers 3 6 9 symbolize "shit" in the numbers game. But because of his ignorance of the game, the hero overlooks these significant numbers. If the hero had learned to "play the game," if he had bought and referred to the dream book, if he had taken the advice of the mad vet seriously and learned about the game, then he would have observed the numbers "3-69" that labeled the correct tank. He would have understood that those numbers on the tank--3 6 9--symbolize his identity, his "fall" on the "one-legged book" in the numbers game.

The third episode of the hero's narrative directly parallels the structure and workings of the numbers game. The location of one of the largest numbers rackets in America is Harlem;[12] the setting of this episode is also Harlem. A well-structured organization always covers the illegal dealings of the numbers racket;[13] the well-structured

organization in this episode is the "Brotherhood." Each pool has its controller in the numbers racket;[14] the head of the Brotherhood is Brother Jack. The controller always employs "runners" to keep his pool prosperous;[15] Brother Tod Clifton, Brother Tarp, and Brother Westrum are only a few of the "runners" for the Brotherhood. The controller dictates the goals and roles and strategies to his runners;[16] Brother Jack dictates the goals and roles and strategies to the hero.

Initially, the hero is distrustful of Jack and the Brotherhood because he fears that he may again be used for someone else's advantage--victimized by the numbers. As he is on his way to the first meeting with the Brotherhood, the hero senses that he has somehow had this experience before, "feeling now, as [he] entered a sound-proof elevator and shot away at a mile a minute, that [he] had been through it all before" (pp. 227-28). The elevator ride gives the hero a feeling of repeating a previous experience because earlier in the novel he rides in an elevator before the battle royal. In the meeting with the Brotherhood the hero receives a slip of paper which gives him a new identity; after the battle royal the hero receives a slip of paper identifying him as a scholar. In both instances the slips of paper denote the same thing: "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

The hero accepts his new identity with great enthusiasm: "For the first time . . . I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. It was no dream, the

possibility existed. I had only to work and learn and strive in order to go to the top" (p. 268). In the same manner, the numbers player continues to hope and dream that each new number he plays will be his "fall." He assures himself that if he listens, watches, and observes the things around him, he will go to the top.[17]

The hero follows the orders of Brother Jack. He buys new clothes, moves to new living quarters, ceases all correspondence with his family, and studies the strategies and methods of organizing and "educating" the people of Harlem. The hero begins to suspect some underlying motives of the organization when Tod Clifton, an intelligent black member of the organization, is offended by the policies and turns to "hawking Sambo dolls" among white people of the city. The hero does not entirely abandon his belief in the Brotherhood as "savior of all mankind," though, until a curious incident occurs. In leaving a Brotherhood committee meeting the hero finds it necessary to disguise himself to escape Ras the Exhorter, a racist and symbol of the black man's past. The hero is immediately mistaken for a person called Rinehart.

> "I say pardon me, son, look like you trying to pass on by me tonight. What's the final figger?"
>
> "Figure? What Figure?"
>
> "Now you know what I mean . . . What's today's last number. Ain't you Rine the runner?"
>
> "Rine the runner?"

> "Yas, Rinehart the number man. Who you trying to fool?"
>
> "But that's not my name, madame . . . You've made a mistake" (p. 371).

Seconds later a police car drives up and the policemen make demands of the hero who they think is Rinehart. When the hero denies being Rinehart, the policemen threaten his life.

> "The hell you say; what're you trying to pull? Is this a hold out?"
>
> "You're making a mistake . . . I'm not Rinehart."
>
> "Well, you better be by morning and you better have our cut in the regular place. Who the hell you think you are?" (pp. 371-72).

After being approached as "Daddy Rinehart" and "Rever'n Rinehart," the hero begins to place Rinehart in the scheme of things. He sees that

> B. P. Rinehart ('the P. is for Proteus, the B. for Bliss') is a cunning man who wins the admiration of those who admire skulduggery and know-how, an American virtuoso of identity who thrives on chaos and swift change; he is greedy in that his masquerade is motivated by money as well as by the sheer bliss of impersonation; he is god-like in that he brings new techniques--electric guitars--to the service of God and in that there are many men in his role of 'lover'; as a numbers runner he is the

> bringer of manna and a worker of miracles, in that he transforms (for winners of course) pennies into dollars, and thus feeds (and feeds on) the poor.[18]

The hero now realizes that if Rinehart can fulfill several roles in the fluid world of Harlem, then invisibility exists and is taken advantage of: "He's [Rinehart] been around all the while, but I had been looking in another direction. He was around and others like him, but I had looked past him . . ." (p. 372).

When the hero is relieved of his duties and all connections with the Brotherhood because he organizes and participates in the banished Brother Clifton Todd's funeral, he realizes that he is not an individual, but a "dupe" who was hired not to think but to carry out orders. While sitting in the Jolly Dollar Bar, the hero sees a numbers runner pay off a bet and thinks, "This is one place the Brotherhood definitely penetrated" (p. 367). He is forced to compare the treachery of the organization with the deceit of Rinehart in his multiple impersonations. He accepts the fact that Brother Jack has been "running" him no less cynically than Bledsoe or Norton.

> They [Jack, Emerson, and Bledsoe] were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had

> switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same--except I now recognized my invisibility (p. 384).

He analyzes his past experience:

> Thus for one lone stretch of time I lived with the intensity displayed by those chronic numbers players who see clues to their fortune in the most minute and insignificant phenomena: in clouds, on passing trucks and subway cars, in dreams, comic strips, the shape of dog-luck fouled on the pavements. I was dominated by the all-embracing idea of Brotherhood. The organization had given the world a new shape, and me a vital role. We recognized no loose ends, everything could be controlled by our science. Life was all pattern and discipline; and the beauty of discipline is when it works. And it was working well (p. 288).

The hero wants to turn the tables and control--"play it his own way"--the game that has made his life an absurd joke; yet, he knows that "their [the Brotherhood's] real objectives were never revealed at committee meetings" and, thus, he devises a plan wherein he can "learn what actually guided their operations" (p. 386).

Before the hero has time to put his plan into action, Harlem explodes into a battlefield directed by Ras, who is

now the Destroyer. Everything that is owned by whites is the target of Ras and his ghetto troops. As the hero is walking down the street, Ras sees him and shouts, "That mahn is a paid stooge of the white enslaver!" (p. 363). Despite his argument to the contrary, the hero is unable to convince Ras that he is no longer a dupe of the Brotherhood--the numbers racket. In his flight from Ras, the hero falls through a manhole into a coal cellar where he lies in the darkness upon black heaps of coal and falls asleep. When he wakes, he is still in the dark. There is no way out, no ladder, no ray of light. The hero is forced to stop "running" and accept his "fall." Before attempting to escape from the hole, the hero burns every slip of paper that is connected with his past because he realizes that he cannot return to any part of his old life. It is there in the hole, while in utter darkness, that the hero begins to <u>see</u> and to understand.

Ellison states that "the hero's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightment: invisibility to visibility."[19] In the novel proper, the hero is ignorant of the various roles he plays in the numbers game; he is blind to the numbers game itself. In the Prologue and Epilogue, the hero acknowledges that he has been duped in the numbers game. He sees now that his pool has been Harlem, that his play has been the whole number gig on the Brotherhood's one-legged book, that his controller has been Brother Jack, and that he has been a runner. When

the hero's fall into utter darkness sheds light on his invisibility, he ends that part of his life, along with the novel proper, with the words: "The end was in the beginning" (p. 431); the end--his last play in the numbers game--was the beginning of his seeing he was a participant.

The hero "moves in three steps from purpose to passion to perception."[20] First, the hero is blind to his participation in the numbers game. After he receives slips of paper indicating his specific play, the hero fulfills the specified role because he thinks these slips of paper give purpose to his life. Next, the hero accepts with enthusiasm his status as runner in the numbers game: "I am what they think I am" (p. 286). Finally, he sees that he has been no more than shit--3 6 9--to the people around him: "That crude joke that kept me running made them happy [but] it made me sick" (pp. 432-33). These three steps--(1) purpose (2) to passion (3) to perception--when multiplied by the novel's 3 part division equals the hero's fall number. In this same manner, the hero's minor experiences (Ellison states that "the three major sections are made up of smaller units of three"[21]) can also be multiplied by 3 to get that same winning number--3 6 9.

Although the fall number belonging to the numbers player and the fall number belonging to the hero result in the object of their quest--their sense of significance, their procedures of finding such are reversed: the hero

receives slips of paper, the player gives slips of paper; the hero has no choice in selecting his whole number gig, the player selects his whole number gig from dream books; the hero wants to stop participating when he realizes he is a dupe in the numbers game, the player knows he is a dupe in the numbers game, yet continues to play; the hero discovers--by accident--his fall, the player is informed of his fall; the hero's fall results in insight--something abstract, the player's fall results in monetary gain--something concrete.

Ellison's series of reversals lead to maximum insight for the hero. Consistent with Black folklore's road to freedom, Ellison's hero migrates upward--from the South to the North--to find his freedom; yet, the hero finds his freedom not in an upward movement but in a fall downward. The hero's fall into utter darkness enables him to understand himself and to acknowledge the existence of the numbers game. His home, a coal cellar that was abandoned during the nineteenth century--the same time period that the numbers game was introduced into New York--is located in a white community that borders Harlem, a black community where the numbers are regularly played. The hero's 1,369 lights are a constant reminder of the whole number gig that led to his fall on the one-legged book in the numbers game. The hero sees that "the principles on which this country was built . . . [are] greater than the numbers [game]" (p. 433). This adjustment enhances his possibilities of

success when he emerges from his hole: "I've over stayed my hibernation . . . I must emerge" (p. 438-39).

NOTES

[1]Roger Rosenblatt, Black Fiction (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 194.

[2]Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (1958; rpt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 199.

[3]George J. McCall, "Symbiosis: The Case of Hoodoo & the Numbers Racket," in Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 421.

[4]The information in this section concerning the numbers game was secured in an interview with an inmate (name withheld at his request) at the United States Medical Center for Federal Prisoners, Springfield, Missouri, 14 March 1979.

[5]Dan Wakefield, "Harlem's Magic Numbers," The Reporter, 22 (1960), 25.

[6]Norton E. Long, "The Local Community as an Ecology of Games," American Journal of Sociology, 64 (1958), 251.

[7]St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1968), II, 472.

[8]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 11. Subsequent references to the novel will be indicated parenthetically by page number in the body of the paper.

[9]Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," in Shadow and Act (1953; rpt. New York: Random House, 1964), p. 179.

[10]Drake and Clayton, p. 471.

[11]"The Art of Fiction: An Interview," p. 177.

[12]Albert Q. Maisel, "Return of the Numbers Racket," Collier's, 15 Jan. 1944, p. 23.

[13]Wakefield, p. 22.

[14] Interview with inmate.

[15] Interview with inmate.

[16] Interview with inmate.

[17] Wakefield, p. 23.

[18] Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in _Shadow and Act_ (1953; rpt. New York: Random House, 1964), p. 56.

[19] "The Art of Fiction," p. 173.

[20] "The Art of Fiction," p. 177.

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