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# The Gnostic Journey of Cincinnatus in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*

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**Abstract**: This paper explores and analyzes the Gnostic themes that are present throughout Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*. Although other scholars have recognized the Gnostic elements in the novel, previous analyses present a limited understanding of the Gnostic religion, and, therefore, have narrow interpretations of the extent to which Nabokov includes Gnostic ideas. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the beliefs of Gnostic Christians, their texts and how Nabokov incorporated these elements in *Invitation to a Beheading*.

Gnostic themes run through many of Vladimir Nabokov's novels, stories and even some of his lectures, sometimes subtly, sometimes more overtly.[1] Although there is no evidence to suggest nor any compelling reason to think that Nabokov was a Gnostic himself, the idea of Gnosticism, as a mirror to Christianity, obviously fascinated him for one reason or another. In his lifetime Nabokov never admitted any particular attachment to Gnosticism, but his wife, Vera, came closest to revealing his secret when she wrote, in the foreword of *Stikhi*, that the major theme of Nabokov's works is "'потусторонность,' как он сам ее назвал в своем последнем стихотворении 'Влюбленность'" ("'the beyond,' as he himself called it in his last poem, 'Love'") (Predislovie, *Stikhi*). She goes on to say that Nabokov goes into detail on this theme in the poem, "Glory," and describes it "как тайну, которую носит в душе и выдать которую не должен и не может" ("as a secret which is in the soul and which you cannot and should not give away") (Predislovie, *Stikhi*). Although one could search the full extent of Nabokov's repertoire and quite possibly find several hundred references to the secrets of the Gnostic soul, in none are those secrets so plainly and consciously laid out as in *Invitation to a Beheading*. As the novel that he held in the "greatest esteem" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 92), one could argue that *Invitation* was Nabokov's homage to the soul that dwells within us and the gnosis that Man strives to attain.

In order to interpret *Invitation* in Gnostic terms, it is important to first understand what Gnosticism is, both in a historical and religious context, and to understand some of the fundamental elements which define Gnosticism and differentiate it from Orthodox Christianity. In the very simplest of terms, gnosis means "knowledge," a Gnostic is one who aspires to attain gnosis, and Gnosticism is the term associated with the belief system of the Gnostics. Karen L.

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[1] Gnostic themes have been recognized and explored by scholars in *The Defense*, *Bend Sinister*, *The Gift*, *Cloud, Castle, Lake* and, as Vera points out, several of his early poems such as "Glory" and "Love."

King contends there was never an organized religion called Gnosticism but some general term had to "account for all the ideas, writings, persons, and practices described by ancient polemicists, not to mention the texts found at Nag Hammadi and elsewhere" (2). It was considered by the Orthodox Church of the early centuries CE (100-200 CE) to be a heresy of Christianity because of the way in which Gnostic followers reinterpreted the Bible and other Christian beliefs. There were several different belief systems or sects within the Gnostic religion which all varied slightly in their interpretations of the Scriptures, but all were based on the idea that gnosis was the ultimate attainment and the goal for which all of mankind should strive.

Gnosticism is considered to be based on early Greek philosophies as well as containing elements of Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. The earliest Gnostics conflicted with the Orthodox Church on many levels, including the Gnostic interpretation of the Scriptures. Gnostics generally considered elements and stories in the Scriptures to be symbolic rather than literal as Orthodox Christians believed. Gnostics also interpreted faith differently than the Christians. Traditional Christianity professes that one must have faith in what is unknown. This faith that a higher being, who created us and guides us, unequivocally exists, comes from believing secondhand sources such as the Bible rather than having firsthand knowledge. The Gnostic, on the other hand, "aspires to, and eventually attains, not faith but a certain interior knowledge that liberates one from unconsciousness and eventually transports one beyond the bounds of manifest existence itself" (Hoeller 5). Faith, therefore, to the Gnostic, means being faithful to the knowledge and the path one takes to attain this knowledge, or gnosis.

One of the issues that incensed the Christians about the Gnostic interpretation of the Scriptures was their ideas about the Creation, and it is easy to see why. Everything the Christians believed about their God, the creation of this world, and Adam and Eve was turned around by the

Gnostics. According to the Gnostics, the creation of the world began with the fall of Sophia, the youngest of the transcendental beings who occupy the Fullness. Sophia, wanting "to bring a likeness out of herself without the consent of the Spirit — he had not approved — and without her consort" brings forth from herself an imperfect and monstrous being, a "lion-faced serpent" (Pearson 110-111). This being, who was conceived and aborted unnaturally without the aid of a male partner, becomes the creator of our world. The demon offspring of Sophia, known to Gnostics as the Demiurge and alternately referred to by the names of Yaldabaoth, Samael (ignorance) and Saclas (blind fool), organizes the lower spatiotemporal cosmos (our universe) without the consent of the transcendental beings above him and against the wishes of his mother and produces twelve other archons and seven rulers over the seven heavens. In his ignorance, pride and egotism, he proclaims to his archons, "'I am a jealous God and there is no other God beside me,' essentially admitting that there are other Gods who exist besides him" (Pearson 65). The Demiurge then is the God of the Jews, who is credited with creating this world and the people who inhabit it. The Gnostics viewed the "creation of the material world as a bad thing, the result of a fall of the feminine aspect of God" (Pearson 30). Sophia herself is eventually redeemed and restored to her rightful place with the other transcendental beings, proving that "not only does the exiled soul long for the Fullness, but Heaven is not complete until the exile has returned from the far country; until then, the Fullness is not truly full, the Wholeness is not truly whole" (Hoeller 42-43). Just as the soul longs for the gnosis which will free it from its earthly shackles, so too does the transcendental being long for the return of the souls.

The Gnostics also interpreted the story of Adam and Eve much differently than the Christians. Yaldabaoth, with the help of his seven archons, creates Adam and Eve separately. Some Gnostic sources posit that as he breathes life into them, Sophia sends Yaldabaoth's divine

spark into them so they may stand erect, casting the virtually powerless Yaldabaoth into the lower echelons forever. Although Gnostic sources are split on the origins and role of the serpent in the scriptures, some sources claim that Sophia, who is also known as wisdom, comes to Eve disguised as a serpent and encourages her to eat from the Tree of Knowledge from which Yaldabaoth has tried to keep them in order to keep them ignorant. In this way, the serpent becomes a positive character in the story of Adam and Eve, contributing not to the fall of Eve and mankind but to the attainment of gnosis for both of them. Some Gnostic sources even link the serpent with Christ who is considered to have lived among the transcendental beings before coming down to the physical world in the guise of Jesus. As a result of the Gnostic interpretation of the Creation, "the world did not fall; rather, it was imperfect from the start" (Hoeller 16).

One of the defining characteristics of Gnosticism is a dualistic belief system which is essentially a radical reinterpretation of Platonist dualism. Platonist dualism asserts that "material things of this world are basically copies of eternal, immaterial forms in the realm of being" (Pearson 15). Gnostics as well as Platonists believe in the duality of God, man and the cosmos. In this dualistic belief system, the body hides the true soul, the material world is an illusion which hides the true cosmos, and the Demiurge, creator of this world, hides the unknowable transcendental being, all of which combine together to keep the soul from knowing the truth and transcending this world. Therefore, the Gnostics believe that the material aspects of this world are responsible for imprisoning the divine spark and keeping it ignorant.

Nabokov weaves the complex story of Cincinnatus and his fate through a series of Gnostic themes and parallels as he chronicles the journey of the soul toward the ultimate goal of knowledge and reunion with the unknown and forgotten father. In a futuristic and nonsensical world, Cincinnatus is thrown in prison and sentenced to execution by beheading for the obscure

crime of "gnostical turpitude." During his last days in prison, the reader is introduced to several characters of this fictitious world: Rodion, the prison director; Roman, his lawyer; Rodrig, the jailer; Marthe, his wife, Emmy, the director's daughter; and Pierre, his executioner. As he awaits his fate, he spends his time reflecting on his life, writing a memoir of sorts, interacting with the various odd characters of the prison and trying to prepare himself to die. His executioner, Pierre, is eventually put in the cell next to him where he pretends to be an inmate in order to forge a bond with Cincinnatus. Pierre plays an important role in the novel, both as an example of the superficiality of the world and as Cincinnatus' "fate-mate," who will eventually help Cincinnatus reach "the beyond." There are several things about Cincinnatus that differentiate him from the other superficial characters in the story. For example, he has a double, an additional Cincinnatus who does all of the things that the physical Cincinnatus cannot or will not do. This is Cincinnatus' Gnostic soul. By the end of the novel, Cincinnatus realizes that his death is merely the end of his physical existence in a false world but that his soul will transcend the physical world and return to its rightful place.

There have been a few other scholars who have recognized the Gnostic themes in *Invitation*, most notably Sergey Davydov and Vladimir Alexandrov. Other scholars have alternately interpreted *Invitation* as Nabokov's commentary against political oppression, but the Gnostic themes are hard to ignore, even within this context.[2] Even the Gnostic interpretations, while valid and mostly correct, lack the in-depth research and study of Gnosticism that is required to truly grasp all of the Gnostic subtexts contained in the novel.

[2] Brian Boyd, for example, stays far away from the Gnostic themes and interprets *Invitation* as an attack on "a state of mind possible under any regime," in which citizens "accept the transparent truth of the commonplace" (412). His interpretation, however, falls far short of being a thorough examination of the different themes and subtexts within the novel.

Alexandrov includes the Gnostic themes of *Invitation* within the larger context of "the individual's relation to a metaphysical reality" (84). He claims that there is much more to the novel than the author's commentary on political themes or freedom of imagination and that "the novel simply cannot be understood without placing the otherworld at the center of its concerns" (84). Although he recognizes within the novel the Gnostic themes and parallels of "man trapped in an evil material world," Gnostic symbols, the Gnostic myth of creation, and the "division of mankind into spiritual and fleshly individuals, he argues against a purely Gnostic reading of *Invitation*, insisting, instead, that "although Nabokov may have used Gnostic motifs when it suited him, he did not follow the archaic religious doctrine slavishly" (88). For example, he goes into detail on the theme of duality found throughout the novel. His claim is that the narrator of the story is a "transcendent," who is "author(ing) the mundane world," and Cincinnatus is his creation, which he says does not fit in with the Gnostic belief that the transcendent beings are not "manifested in the material realm in any way other than through the divine spark contained in some select individuals' souls" (88). He also contends that both Cincinnatus and the narrator "have grasped that matter is an imperfect copy, or a lesser image of a spiritual reality," which is also, he says, at odds with Gnostic beliefs (106). However, his limited interpretation of Gnosticism in *Invitation* leaves many holes, some of which are filled in by Davydov.

Davydov's analysis of the Gnostic themes in *Invitation* is much more in depth and thorough than that of Alexandrov, who was more concerned with fitting the Gnostic elements within other metaphysical aspects of the book. In contrast to Alexandrov, Davydov interprets the narrator as a manifestation of the Demiurge, not a transcendental being. This Demiurge, rather than aiding Cincinnatus as Alexandrov suggests, "immured his hero within the walls of the invented cell, invited him to a beheading, and mocked him all the way to the scaffold" (197).

Davydov draws many comparisons between Gnostic texts and Nabokov's interpretation of them through the character of Cincinnatus. Particularly he compares the Naasene Psalm[3] and Cincinnatus' imprisonment in a fortress "built like a Gnostic labyrinth… where any corridor leads him back to his cell" (192). He also refers to the Hymn of the Pearl[4] in his description of Cincinnatus' divestment of his limbs and his comparison of himself to a "pearl ring embedded in a shark's gory fat" (Davydov 192; Nabokov, *Invitation*, 90). Both Alexandrov and Davydov recognize Cincinnatus' mother as an enlightened messenger or more advanced Gnostic whose role is to help Cincinnatus on his journey toward the unknowable father (Alexandrov 103; Davydov 195). Davydov concludes that, in typical Gnostic fashion, "Vladimir Nabokov the Demiurge demolishes his universe and executes the Gnostic who peered through the cover of the book and refused to believe in its reality," but then "rescues his hero from the novel's cataclysm because Cincinnatus has passed the author's test" (200).

Nabokov was admittedly not a particularly religious person, at least not in any mainstream kind of way, choosing instead to follow his own path of spirituality. His aversion to organized religion began at a very young age when he told his father on the way back from a service that he "found it boring" and was henceforth excused from going (Boyd 72). Brian Boyd points out that, throughout his life, Nabokov "remained completely aloof from 'Christianism,' as he called it, utterly indifferent 'to organized mysticism, to religion, to the church, any church'" (72). Some of his ideas about religion may stem from his own mother's beliefs about religion. While his father took the Nabokov children quite often to church, his mother, who was of Old

[3] The Naasene Psalm, or Naasene Song, will be discussed in detail in another portion of this paper as part of the nightmare parable.
[4] A more detailed explanation of the Hymn of the Pearl, or the Song of the Pearl, will also be described in a later portion of this paper.

Believer stock (but not really an Old Believer herself), possessed a certain aversion to organized religion:

> Her intense and pure religiousness took the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life. All one could do was glimpse, amid the haze and the chimeras, something real ahead, just as persons endowed with an unusual persistence of diurnal celebration are able to perceive in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour (Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 39).

This description of his mother's spirituality is very reminiscent of the Gnostics' attitude toward religion and spirituality: perceiving the world as a nightmare in which the soul sleeps until awakened to another world which is entirely impossible to comprehend in this life. With his mother acting as a huge influence in his life, Nabokov seemed to adopt her way of looking at spirituality, making it a prominent theme in several novels.[5]

Despite his disdain for organized religion, Nabokov never denies the existence of a God although he does seem to question the role of God in both the creation of the world and in people's lives. In an interview with Alfred Toffler which appeared in *Playboy* in January 1964, he professed his ignorance about man's origins: "We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 20). However much as he professes that we shall never the origin of life, he does seem to lean more toward Darwinism and the scientific theories rather than religious mysticism as he points out in one of his lectures, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense":

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[5] His mother's religious views were so progressive that, as Boyd notes, she turns to Christian Science later in her life (Boyd, 354).

"…Let us bless the freak, for in the natural evolution of things, the ape would perhaps never have become man had not a freak appeared in the family." (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 372). While Nabokov may not be sure of the role God has played in the creation of man, he certainly seems to have retained some belief in some higher being or power even if he is not sure what exactly it is: "Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark, whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap." (Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 25) At the end of the *Playboy* interview, Toffler asks Nabokov point-blank whether he believes in God to which Nabokov mysteriously answers: "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed had I not known more" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 45). Davydov passes this off as a "quibbling Gnostic answer" (201), but it seems to be Nabokov's acknowledgement of an ineffable God who transcends words and explanation, much like the Gnostic description of the unknowable God.

There are several reasons why Gnostic Christianity may have appealed to Nabokov more than other more traditional religions. The Gnostics were a group of people who followed their own path, interpreted the Scriptures in their own way, survived persecution and saw knowledge rather than Heaven as the ultimate goal. Having fled Russia with his family from the Bolsheviks and survived persecution himself, he may have seen something of himself in some of the ideals and beliefs for which they struggled. Although it would be a stretch to assume Nabokov was a Gnostic himself or completely subscribed to the religion, there was an emphasis in Gnosticism on the soul and an inner divinity existing within the human form that, likewise, appeared in many of Nabokov's works. The Gnostics interpreted the Bible symbolically as a group of stories which

showed people how to live their lives in a moral way rather than a literal historical chronicle of God's hand in creation and the world thereafter, as the Orthodox Christians interpret it. Although there doesn't seem to be any hard evidence that Nabokov ever studied Gnosticism in depth, it seems likely that at some point in his life he may have put some serious time into studies of the Gnostics, considering the depth and detail with which he incorporates Gnostic beliefs and elements in *Invitation* as well as allusions in other novels, stories and poems to Gnostic elements, even noting at one point that "a creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 32). Disregarding the obvious and very Nabokovian egoism of referring to himself as a rival of God, this statement does seem to allude to some sort of study or research into the Bible or other such works. Just as God has allegedly created this world, so does Nabokov create worlds for his characters.

Although Nabokov does not necessarily subscribe to the traditional Christian God, he does put a lot of stock in the soul, spirituality and transcending the material world, all elements which can be found within the Gnostic religion. His works deal heavily with themes of the soul, human consciousness, man's place within the cosmos and what lies beyond this world. Vera states that he interweaves this element, almost unconsciously, throughout his works (Predislovie, *Stikhi*). Nabokov himself made several references during lectures and interviews to the secrets of the soul: "That human life is but a first installment of the serial soul and that one's individual secret is not lost in the process of earthly dissolution, becomes something more than an optimistic conjecture, and even more than a matter of religious faith, when we remember that only commonsense rules immortality out" (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 377).

By placing the setting of *Invitation* in a prison, Nabokov immediately introduces the dualistic Gnostic elements of the novel. It perfectly parallels the Gnostic idea of the imprisonment of the divine spark in the material body and illusory world and the idea that the soul and body are two separate entities, dependent on each other only until the soul attains gnosis. The world in which Cincinnatus resides is a fake world that is often described as if it is the setting of a play with pieces being removed, dismantled or brought in as needed. Additionally, the characters surrounding Cincinnatus, namely Rodrig, the prison director; Rodion, the jailer; and Roman, the lawyer, are often interchangeable and play several different roles. There seems to be an unknown puppet master guiding these characters who often makes mistakes. Sometimes the characters are switched. Furniture which had, a moment before, been moveable suddenly becomes immoveable. Scenes are begun and then wiped away and started again as if they hadn't gone the way the invisible narrator had wanted such as when the director comes in to speak to Cincinnatus, vanishes and comes in through the door again to start the scene over again (Nabokov, *Invitation*, 15). The whole situation jolts the reader out of the constructed reality of the novel and reminds him that this is not reality; reality is hiding behind the illusion that has been created by the Demiurge, or creator and narrator of this material world.

Gnostic symbolism also plays into the descriptions of this illusory world. For example, Davydov points out that the prop moon which the invisible hand keeps removing and reattaching in the novel is a "Gnostic symbol representing one of the seven Archons who keep watch over the gates to the planetary spheres" (192). Additionally, he points out that the guard "wearing a doglike mask" (Nabokov, *Invitation*, 13) and the guard "with the face of a borzoi "(Nabokov, *Invitation*, 212-213) are also representative of the "guards of the planetary spheres called Archons, who are often depicted as wearing animal masks in Gnostic myths" (Davydov 192).

Similarly, Alexandrov also discusses Gnostic symbolism, pointing out both the guards in doglike masks and the serpentine path leading to the prison as Gnostic symbols of evil. However, his logic is flawed in that he describes the serpent as a symbol of evil (85). In reality, in most Gnostic sects, including the Sethians[6] and Valentinians,[7] the serpent is a positive symbol of knowledge and wisdom since it is the serpent who led Eve to the Tree of Knowledge which allowed her to attain gnosis. There may have been a few sects such as the Manichaens,[8] who portrayed the serpent as evil in some myths and songs, but to say that the overarching meaning of the serpent symbol is that of evil is at worst incorrect and at best an overgeneralization. Therefore, when Nabokov describes the road to the prison as winding "around its rocky base and disappear(ing) under the gate like a snake in a crevice" (11), we can interpret this not as a road that is leading Cincinnatus to an evil fate but rather a road that will ultimately lead him to knowledge and transcendence.

Taking this symbolism a step further, Cincinnatus' soul is briefly able to escape the confines of the prison when, after speaking with Rodrig in his cell, there is a sudden shift in which Cincinnatus goes out of the cell, leaving Rodrig writing at the table in the cell. Cincinnatus passes a guard who, "сняв свою форменную маску, утирал рукавом лицо" (207) ("had taken off his uniform mask and was wiping his face on his sleeve" (18) and finds himself "в небольшом дворе, полном разных частей разобранной луны" (208) ("in a small courtyard, filled with various parts of the dismantled moon" (18)). The moon and guards in dog masks have momentarily let their guard down, allowing Cincinnatus' soul a brief respite out of the prison of

[6] Sethian Gnostics recognized themselves as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve through Seth, their third son, through whom they inherit their divine light. The first two sons, Cain and Abel, were said to be fathered by the Demiurge with Seth representing a new beginning for humanity as the son of Adam (*The Gnostic Bible*, 109-110).
[7] Valentinos was a great Gnostic teacher of the second century. Valentinian Gnostic literature is based on earlier gnostic texts (such as Sethian literature) as well as incorporating elements of Greek philosophy, particularly Platonism (*The Gnostic Bible*, 114).
[8] Manichaen literature is based on the third-century prophet, Mani, who created a universal world religion based on Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Christian sources, including several Gnostic texts (*The Gnostic Bible*, 7).

the body and world. Furthermore, Cincinnatus knows that "пароль в эту ночь было молчание, – и солдат у ворот отозвался молчанием на молчание Цинцинната, пропуская его, и у всех прочих ворот было тоже" (208) ("this night the password was silence, and the soldier at the gate responded with silence to Cincinnatus' silence and let him pass; likewise at all the other gates" (18)). The idea of the magic password is also a Gnostic reference. Carl Raschke describes the process of attaining gnosis as one which may require a person to rely on "deceit and subterfuge when necessary" and to "outwit the agents of fate, who stand as sentinels before the highest heavens, through the utterance of a magic password" (38-39). However, although Cincinnatus has made it past the sentinels and his soul takes flight, he soon finds himself back at the prison, not yet ready to leave a body he has come to know so well: "'А я ведь сработан так тщательно,' – думал Цинциннат, плача во мраке. – 'Изгиб моего позвоночника высчитан так хорошо, так таинственно. Я чувствую в икрах так много туго накрученных верст, которые мог бы в жзини еще пробежать. Моя голова так удобна...'" (210) ("'And yet I have been fashioned so painstakingly,' thought Cincinnatus as he wept in the darkness. 'The curvature of my spine has been calculated so well, so mysteriously. I fell, tightly rolled up in my calves, so many miles that I could yet run in my lifetime. My head is so comfortable…'" (21-22)). He has not yet reached the point where he is prepared to truly transcend the illusory world.

Cincinnatus's situation is a direct parallel to the nightmare parable which is described in the Gnostic Gospel of Truth. Achieving gnosis is a long, difficult, solitary process, the first step of which is when "a person experiences the 'anguish and terror' of the human condition, as if lost in a fog or haunted in sleep by terrifying nightmares" (Pagels 144). The Gospel of Truth describes the experience of the ignorant person waking up to gnosis as if it is a disturbing dream in which they are being beaten, pursued, falling from high places, killing or being killed (*The*

*Gnostic Bible* 269). The nightmare continues until the person is awakened as if from a deep sleep at which point he or she has attained gnosis. Because the process of attaining gnosis is full of terror and pain, there is an inner resistance to gnosis that occurs wherein the person desires to remain "drunk" or "unconscious" (Pagels 126). This is the point at which Cincinnatus finds himself and can be further explained in the second stanza of the Naasene Song. The Naasenes were second-century Gnostics, and the Naasene Song tells the story of Sophia's fall and her attempts to return to the father, according to the Naasenes' interpretation. The second stanza describes the nightmare parable:

> Sometimes she gains mastery and glimpses light,
> or she plunges into evil misery and weeps.
> Sometimes she is mourned and is happy,
> or she weeps and is condemned.
> Then she is judged and finally dies.
> Sometimes she is misled down a labyrinth of evils, trapped in a corner with no way out (*The Gnostic Bible* 513).

All souls with the divine spark recreate Sophia's journey back to the father. As Cincinnatus enters the prison, he enters the labyrinth which he must rise above in order for his soul to gain gnosis. As described in the previous passage, Cincinnatus' soul briefly "gains mastery and glimpses light," but immediately plunges back down "into evil misery and weeps." He is on the path but he must endure these trials to truly rise above the illusory world and return to the transcendental beings as Sophia did before him. He laments his misery of living this nightmare to Roman:

> Я окружен какими-то убогими призраками, а не людьми. Меня они терзают, как могут терзать только бессмысленные видения, дурные сны, отбросы бреда, шваль кошмаров -- и все то, что сходит у нас за жизнь. В теории -- хотелось бы проснуться. Но проснуться Я не могу без посторонней помощи, а этой номощи безумно боюсь, да и душа моя обленилась, привыкла к своим тесным пеленам (218).
>
> (I am surrounded by some sort of wretched specters, not by people. They torment me as can torment only senseless visions, bad dreams, dregs of delirium, the drivel of nightmares and everything that passes down here for real life. In theory one would wish to wake up. But wake up I cannot without outside help, and yet I fear this help terribly, and my very soul has grown lazy and accustomed to its snug swaddling clothes (36)).

He recognizes the nightmare in which he dwells and the desire of his soul to remain drunk and comfortable in the protective state of the body. He calls upon outside help, which will appear to him in a most unlikely form.

The Gnostics' radical reinterpretation of the Scriptures turned many ideas of the Orthodox Christians on their heads. For example, the God of the Jews becomes the Demiurge, essentially an evil lower demon who created this world without permission and was punished for it, and the serpent who leads Eve to the Tree of Knowledge becomes the good guy. In some ways, one can see the same parallels in *Invitation*, whether Nabokov did it intentionally or not. Although Davydov quite correctly defines Pierre, the executioner, as an example of "poshlost'," or "self-satisfied vulgarity" (193), he is also Cincinnatus' "fate-mate." However much as he might be repulsive to Cincinnatus and epitomizes the shallowness and falsity of the material

world, he ultimately is the one who helps Cincinnatus most toward his goal of attaining gnosis and transcendence. Because Pierre is such a ridiculous character, it is easy to dismiss the things he says as utter nonsense. However, the most important clue that Nabokov gives the reader to Pierre's purpose comes from Pierre himself when Cincinnatus questions him about why he is in prison: "Меня обвинили в попытке... Ах, неблагодарный, недоверчивый друг... Меня обвинили в попытке помочь вам бежать отсюда" (263) ("I was accused of attempting to… Oh ungrateful, untrustful friend… I was accused of attempting to help you escape from here" (110), and then later saying, "Я никогда не лгу " (263) ("I never lie" (110)). On the other side is the director's child, Emmy, who Cincinnatus thinks is going to be his savior and his way out of the labyrinth prison. However, she turns out to be just as false as the world around him. She promises to rescue him, but when the opportunity arises, she leads him back to her father and he is once again at the mercy of the prison, not to be given another opportunity to escape. Emmy only provides another trap which is meant to keep Cincinnatus in ignorance and darkness.
It is Pierre who is essentially the one who does and, in fact, must help Cincinnatus toward his attainment of gnosis.

Despite the little bit of help that Cincinnatus receives on his journey toward gnosis, the Gnostics believe the process of attaining gnosis is mostly a solitary one. Hoeller explains that gnosis can happen in a variety of ways – in solitude, in the presence of other people, with the help of music, incense, writing, reading, ritual, etc: "In all instances, there occurs a significant altering of consciousness that transports the knower beyond the limitations of consciousness and, indeed, beyond the limitations of the very world we live in" (6). Cincinnatus chooses writing as his instrument. In his writing, he is able to express all of his forbidden thoughts and speak of his soul and the way in which he perceives the world. It is only when he writes that we see the true

Cincinnatus, the one with the divine spark who sees through the falsity of his surroundings and longs to transcend to a higher plane to be reunited with the transcendental beings to which all souls long to return. In his writing, the reader sees several instances where Cincinnatus plainly acknowledges what he is and what he possesses that those around him do not have: “Я не простой... я тот, который жив среди вас... Не только мои глаза другие, и слух, и вкус, -- не только обоняние, как у оленя, а осязание, как у нетопыря, -- но главное: дар сочетать все это в одной точке... Нет, тайна еще н раскрыта... (228). (“I am not an ordinary – I am the one among you who is alive – Not only are my eyes different, and my hearing, and my sense of taste – not only is my sense of smell like a deer’s, my sense of touch like a bat’s – but, most important, I have the capacity to conjoin all of this in one point – No, the secret is not revealed yet…” (52)).

Through all of the madness of the false world around him, Cincinnatus must constantly guard that which makes him different, his divine spark, and keep it hidden from those who desire to keep him in darkness. However, although he tries by “employing a complex system of optical illusions” (24) to hide his secret self, he is not able to completely protect himself: “Цинциннат понемножку перестал следить за собой вовсе, -- и однажды, на каком-то открытом собрании в городском парке, вдруг пробежала тревога, и один произнес громким голосом: ‘Горожане, между нами находится ---------- тут последовало страшное, почти забытое слово...’”(217) (“Generally, Cincinnatus stopped watching himself altogether, and, one day, at some open meeting, in the city park there was a sudden wave of alarm and someone said in a loud voice, ‘Citizens, there is among us a ----------‘ Here followed a strange, almost forgotten word.” (31-32)). Cincinnatus’ crime of “gnostical turpitude” itself is indefinable, but the reader finds as the story unfolds that Cincinnatus’ crime is that, in a futuristic and incomprehensible

world where "matter had grown old and weary" (50), he is opaque while everyone else is transparent: "Чужих лучей не пропуская, а потому, в состоянии покоя, производя диковинное впечатление одинокого темного препятствия в этом мире прозрачных друг для дружки душ..." (210-211) ("He was impervious to the rays of others, and therefore produced when off his guard a bizarre impression, as of a lone dark obstacle in this world of souls transparent to one another" (24)).

In a world where no one any longer retains substance or depth, Cincinnatus alone maintains a solid, material body which hides his secret soul, or divine spark, which others do not seem to possess in their transparent bodies. This could be related to a myth that Christian heresiologist Irenaeus in Adversus haerses attributes to the Gnostics: "This myth relates that Adam and Eve once had bodies that were luminous and incorporeal and that the act of eating the forbidden fruit led to their loss of the luminous divine substance and to their expulsion from heaven. After the fall, their bodies became dark and material" (Lang 96). According to Davydov, the walking on air and subsequent fall in his childhood that Cincinnatus describes in his writings (96) could be related to the fall of Sophia, which led to Adam and Eve not necessarily falling but attaining gnosis by eating of the Tree of Knowledge. Thus, Cincinnatus has eaten the forbidden fruit, fallen and gained substance whereas everyone else remains luminous, incorporeal and ignorant.

At one point, Nabokov clearly references "The Song of the Pearl,"[9] a Gnostic poem which describes "a prince's quest for a pearl," which is hidden in a serpent in the bottom of the sea, but is also "a gnostic tale of salvation, of sleeping in error and awakening to light, of quest not only for the pearl, but for the benefit of possessing the pearl: a return to the light" (*The*

[9] An alternative title for this poem is "The Hymn of the Soul," suggesting a direct correlation between the pearl and the soul (*The Gnostic Bible*, 406).

*Gnostic Bible* 406). Cincinnatus becomes the prince searching for the pearl in his own tale: "Я дохожу путем постепенного разоблачения до последней, неделимой, твердой, сияющей точки, и эта точка говорит: Я есмь! – как перстень с перлом в ковавом жиру акулы, -- о мое верное, мое вечное... и мне довольно этой точки, – собственно, больше ничего не надо" (251). ("I am taking off layer after layer, until at last… I do not know how to describe it, but I know this: through the process of gradual divestment I reach the final, indivisible, firm, radiant point, and this point says: I am! like a pearl ring embedded in a shark's gory fat – O my eternal, my eternal… and this point is enough for me – actually nothing more is necessary" (90)). Like Cincinnatus, the prince in the Gnostic myth must shed his "garment of glory, which is his spiritual body" (*The Gnostic Bible* 407) and "put on a robe like theirs, lest they suspect me as an outsider" (*The Gnostic Bible* 410). Cincinnatus also has learned to assume the robe of his world by feigning translucence. The prince, immediately upon seizing the pearl, strips off "those filthy and impure garments" (*The Gnostic Bible* 412). Cincinnatus is also able to strip off the unclean garments of the physical world and shed his body parts as if they are clothes in order to reveal his soul, but just as the prince must hide who he really is, Cincinnatus also must not reveal his "criminal exercise" to his world (Nabokov, *Invitation*, 33).

Cincinnatus also practices the ascetic lifestyle of an ancient Gnostic. He has no concern and little use for his physical body. He doesn't engage in any kind of exercise, and, although the food he is served is described in great detail, he never seems to really eat it. His body is often described as small and weak, an unlikely vessel to carry such an important secret. Gnostics ritually participated in both ascetic and libertine practices as a way to defy the body in which they find themselves trapped. The body is a poor vessel, the treatment of which is not important. The physical world is an illusion; what happens here materially matters not in the grand scheme.

The soul and God are alien to this world and will eventually return to the place from which it came. The Gnostics believe that the material body of man is merely a poor vessel which carries the soul until that time when it attains gnosis and is freed from the shackles of this world. Plato's anthropology states a belief in reincarnation in which the soul is eternal and exists prior to its material body. He distinguished mind, soul and body as separate entities (Pearson 17). Gnostics borrowed this idea from Platonist dualism; however, it is reinterpreted in the Gnostic system:

> The true human self is as alien to the world as is the transcendent God. The inner human self is regarded as an immaterial divine spark imprisoned in a material body. The human body and the lower emotive soul belong to this world, whereas the higher self (the mind of spirit) is consubstantial with the transcendent God from which it originated (Pearson 13).

According to Gnostic gospels, even Jesus made mention of the imprisonment of the soul in its material body in the Gospel of Thomas: "If spirit came into being because of the body, it is a wonder of wonders. Indeed, I am amazed at how this great wealth [the spirit] has made its home in this poverty [the body]" (Pagels 26). The Gnostics describe the body "as if the actual person were some sort of disembodied being who uses the body as an instrument but does not identify with it" (Pagels 5). The reader can see this parallel clearly when Cincinnatus is explaining that his reasons for wanting to know when his execution will take place are not because of fear. He brushes off the physical signs of fear by saying, "Пускай не справлюсь с ознобом и так далее, -- это ничего. Всадник не отвечает за дрожь коня" (206) ("Even if I can't control my chills and so forth – that does not mean anything. A rider is not responsible for the shivering of his horse" (16)). By referring to the soul and the body as a rider and a horse, Nabokov makes the

distinction that both are separate entities not responsible for the actions of the other but both are still intrinsically entwined and unable to be separated for the time being.

The Gnostics claim that the divine spark of the soul longs to return to the father, the transcendental being who rules the Fullness, which, rather than being a physical place somewhere on another plane or up in the heavens, occupies a place within every human soul. Likewise, the father longs for the souls to return to him and for the Wholeness to be complete once again. The fall of Sophia and the Demiurge's transgressions caused the souls to forget the transcendental and ineffable father and exist in an illusory world under archons whose sole purpose is to keep them in this state of forgetfulness and ignorance. In his half-awakened state, Cincinnatus recognizes this: "Какие звезды, -- какая мысль и грусть наверху, -- а внизу ничего не знают" (211) ("What stars, what thought and sadness up above, and what ignorance below" (25)). Cincinnatus does not know his father, Nabokov's nod to the unknowable father of the souls which contain the divine spark. He is an "unknown transient" (23) and even Cincinnatus's mother, Cecilia, admits, "Да, Я не знаю, кто он был -- бродяга, беглец, да, все возможно…"(277) ("It's true, I don't know who he was – a tramp, a fugitive, anything is possible" (133)), but she also reveals, "Он тоже как вы, Цинциннат..." (277) ("He was also like you, Cincinnatus…." (133)). Cincinnatus is first suspicious of his mother's intentions "not quite fairly," as Nabokov himself admits (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 76). Cincinnatus insists she is playing a part in the parody:

> Я же отлично вижу, что вы такая же пародия, как все, как все. И если меня угощают такой ловкой пародией на мать... но представьте себе, например, что я возложил надежду на какой-нибудь далекий звух, как же мне верить в него, если даже вы обман. Вы бы еще сказали: гостинцев. И почему у вас

> макинтош мокрый, а башмакчки сухие, – ведь это небрежность. Передайте бутафору (276).
>
> (For I can see perfectly well that you are just as much of a parody as everybody and everything else. And if they treat me to such a clever parody of a mother… But imagine, for instance, I have pinned my hopes on some distance sound – how can I have faith in it, if even you are a fraud? And you speak of 'candy!' Why not 'goodies'? And why is your raincoat wet when your shoes are dry – see, that's careless. Tell the prop man for me (132)).

However, as Cecilia speaks, he sees something in her that makes him believe that she is more than just a parody and more than just another illusion in this world:

> Во взгляде матери Цинциннат внезапно уловил ту последнюю верную, все объясняющую и ото всего охраняющую точку, которую он и в себе умел нащупать. О чем именно вопила сейчас эта точка? О, неважно о чем, пускай – ужас, жалость... Но скажем лучше: она сама по себе, эта точка, выражала такую бурю истины, что душа Цинциннаты не могла не взыграть (279).
>
> (In his mother's gaze, Cincinnatus suddenly saw that ultimate, secure, all-explaining and from-all-protecting spark that he knew how to discern in himself also. What was this spark so piercingly expressing now? It does not matter what – call it horror, or pity… But rather let us say this: the spark proclaimed such a tumult of truth that Cincinnatus's soul could not help leaping for joy (136)).

He finally sees his mother for what she is, not as another transparent person put in his path to deceive him, but as a being like him who also possesses the divine spark. In this instance, his mother acts as a more advanced Gnostic who "not only possesses the divine spark, but seems

able to reveal it at will" (Alexandrov, 103). She plays the role of Sophia, of wisdom, of a messenger sent to help Cincinnatus along on his path toward gnosis. We also see in this exchange between Cincinnatus and his mother a possible parallel to Nabakov and his relationship with his mother. Nabokov's mother's religious views impacted and influenced him just as Cincinnatus is impacted and influenced by Cecilia C. It is possible that Nabokov gave Cecilia some of his own mother's spirituality.

One element that is often overlooked in other Gnostic treatments of *Invitation* is the parallels of Cincinnatus to the Gnostic Jesus. Nabokov introduces the Jesus parallel on the very first page of the novel when he describes Cincinnatus walking after he receives his sentence "как человек, во сне увидевший, что идет по воде, но вдруг усомнившийся: да можно ли?" (203) ("as if he were about to fall through like a man who has dreamt he is walking on water only to have a sudden doubt: but is this possible?" (11)). This is not to say that Nabokov meant for Cincinnatus to be a direct manifestation of Jesus, but there are some definite comparisons one can make between Cincinnatus and Jesus. According to Gnostic sources, Christ was a "Messenger of Light" sent from the transcendental beings in the form of a man to help men toward the attainment of gnosis. Therefore, he is a messenger of gnosis, not a divine man who died for our sins: "The world was not created perfect, its present state is not the result of a fall, and the human race did not incur an original sin that is passed on to all men and women. Consequently, there is no need for God's son to be sacrificed in order to pacify his wrathful Father and thereby save humanity" (Hoeller 16). Salvation, according to the Gnostics, is not salvation from sin but from ignorance. Cincinnatus also seems to see himself as some kind of messenger when he first decides to write down his thoughts: "Кто-нибудь когда-нибудь прочтет и станет весь как первое утро в незнакомой стране" (228) ("Some day someone

would read it and would suddenly feel just as if he had awakened for the first time in a strange country" (51-52)). He wants his experiences to teach others like him what it is about them that is different. He wants his words to lead others to the attainment of gnosis. It is also not a coincidence that Nabokov chooses for Cincinnatus the profession of teacher, "working with children of the lowest category," those who are "lame, hunchbacked or crosseyed" (30). Jesus was also a teacher to children and tended those who were sick, weak or otherwise inflicted. Cincinnatus also channels Jesus in a sudden burst of emotion at one point: "'Неужели никто не спасет?' -- вдруг громко спросил Цинциннат и присел на постели (руки бедняка, показывающего, что у него ничего нет). 'Неужели никто,' -- повторил Цинциннат, глядя на беспощадную желтизну стен и все так же держа пустые ладони" (273) ("'Will no one save me?' Cincinnatus suddenly asked aloud and sat up on the bed (opening his pauper's hands, showing that he had nothing). 'Can it be that no one will?' repeated Cincinnatus, gazing at the implacable yellowness of the walls and still holding up his empty palms." (125-126)). The upturned palms and the words which are reminiscent of Jesus on the cross, crying out," My god, why hast thou forsaken me?" seem to be an obvious parallel that Nabokov drew between Cincinnatus and Jesus.

The Gnostics also did not believe that Christ was the son of God but a "mysterious aenioal being, a great spiritual power that descended in the form of a messenger to humanity" (Hoeller 67). Because Christ was a divine spirit who could not die, he was not crucified on the cross; only his living body in which his eternal spirit dwelled was crucified. "The Acts of John… explains that Jesus was not a human being at all; instead, he was a spiritual being who adapted himself to human perception" (Pagels 73). In the same way, although he is frightened to be separated from his physical body, Cincinnatus also recognizes that his death is only the death of

his living body and will provide a continuance of life for his soul: “Ведь я знаю, что ужас смерти это только так, безвредное, -- может быть даже здоровое для души, -- содрогание, захлебывающийся вопль новорожденного или неистовый отказ выпустить игрушку... и сейчас придут за мной, и я не готов, мне совестно...” (314) (“For I know that the horror of death is nothing really, a harmless convulsion – perhaps, even healthful for the soul – the choking wail of a newborn child or a furious refusal to release a toy… and any moment now they come for me, and I am not ready, I am ashamed…” (193)).

Cincinnatus’ eventual execution also seems to draw some parallels to Jesus’ crucifixion on the cross. In the Gnostic gospels, the disciple Peter claims to have seen Christ “being glad and laughing above the cross” (Pagels 75). The resurrected savior explains to Peter that the Christ whom Peter saw is “the Living Jesus” and the one into whose hands and feet nails were driven was merely the fleshly substitute (Pagels 94). In this way, the Gnostics view the passion and the resurrection of the Christ as a symbolic interpretation of the process of attaining gnosis: “In the moment of full gnosis the indwelling divine spark is effectively released and one rises up from the double sepulcher of body and mind, united with the timeless spirit. Forgetfulness falls away; remembrance of the realities of the spirit return” (Pagels 94). Although the means of death and attaining gnosis are different, Cincinnatus’ beheading is reminiscent of this description of the passion of the Christ. As his head is separated from his body by Pierre’s ax, the Living Cincinnatus “медленно спустился с помоста и пошел по зыбкому сору” (333) (“slowly descended the platform and walked off through the shifting debris” (222)). The shattering of the illusion is quite complete, and Cincinnatus is able to move “в ту сторону, где, судя по голосам, стояли существа, подобные ему” (334) (“in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him” (223)). He is able finally to give himself over to the Fullness and be reunited

with the transcendental father, having shaken off the last ties that held him to the physical world, just as Jesus was able to transcend the physical world through his crucifixion. Cincinnatus has finally fully attained gnosis, and his soul moves on to the transcendental plane. The reader can infer from the audience reactions and "the headsman's still swinging hips" (222) that the beheading has occurred. However, the state in which Cincinnatus' physical body is left is no longer important for it is not the real Cincinnatus. The real Cincinnatus has arisen and become impervious to the illusion, making his way back to the father he had forgotten.

On some level, as Alexandrov points out, Cincinnatus is always aware that the world around him is staged like a play for his benefit, but his awareness of how much of an illusion actually exists increases as the story moves forward. As his awareness increases, however, he still experiences a longing for things to stay as they are, a resistance to the painful process of gnosis: "Как мне, однако, не хочется умирать! Душа зарылась в подушку. Ох, не хочется! Холодно будет вылезать из теплого тела. Не хочется, погодите, дайте еще подремать" (212) ("But how I don't want to die. My soul has burrowed under the pillow. Oh, I don't want to! It will be cold getting out of my warm body. I don't want to…wait a while… let me doze some more" (26)). At the beginning of the story, it's the unseen narrator who notes the props and the specific elements that have been staged to make the world seem real, but as Nabokov tells the story, it becomes less the narrator and more Cinncinatus who notices the false props, and this awareness finally culminates when he accuses his mother of being a part of the parody "как этот паук, как эта решетка, как этот бой часов" (278) ("just like this spider, just like those bars, just like the striking of the clock" (134)). He is slowly climbing the ladder out of his ignorance and opening his eyes to the illusion:

> The world in which [the Gnostic] finds himself is forever in danger of becoming disenchanted. Thus he itches for a rapture in the depths of his psyche whereby his alienation will cease and his longings be consummated. But the work of the Gnostic is an infinite task. He must constantly ascend the ladder of *gnosis* which stretches endlessly toward heaven (Raschke 69).

The illusion completely crumbles and shatters by the end, when he is taken out of his cell to be taken to his execution. The prison is dissolving and crumbling as if it had "suffered a minor stroke…" (213), and everything he sees along the way, his house, Marthe, the statues, the trees, is noticeably coming part or very obviously staged. He can see the world for what it is, and by the time Pierre's ax is swinging through the air at his head, he wonders," Зачем я тут? отчего так лежу?" (333) ("Why am I here? Why am I lying like this?" (222)). Instead of continuing to be a part of the charade, the Living Cincinnatus, having finally achieved total awareness and gnosis, is able to get up and walk away, leaving his physical body and the physical world to its fate.

Although the Gnostic themes in *Invitation* are very prevalent, they do not in any way negate other ways in which the book may be interpreted, particularly the political aspect. *Invitation* is not a Gnostic novel; it is only a novel with Gnostic themes. Other interpretations are still relevant, and *Invitation* remains primarily one of Nabokov's most politically charged novels; the Gnostic themes only help to solidify this interpretation. The Gnostic and political themes are intrinsically linked and not mutually exclusive by any means. Nabokov himself suggests the possibility of this connection when he answers "Yes, possibly" to the following question during the *Wisconsin Studies* interview: "Is it fair to say that *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* are cast as mock anti-utopian novels with their ideological centers removed – the totalitarian

state becoming an extreme and fantastic metaphor for the imprisonment of the mind, thus making consciousness, rather than politics, the subject of these novels?" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 66). Nabokov was notoriously tight-lipped about meanings and symbols in his novels so to receive a positive answer on a question such as this one is as much an affirmation as one could hope to get from him.

Nabokov interrupted his work on *The Gift* and wrote *Invitation* in "one fortnight of wonderful and sustained inspiration" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 68). At the time, he was researching the nineteenth-century political activist and writer, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, for a biography ("The Life of Chernyshevsky") that would later be included in *The Gift*. Chernyshevsky, along with other revolutionaries, was also rumored to be influenced by Gnosticism. In fact, we can see Cincinnatus as the antithesis of Rakhmetov, the hero of Chernyshevksy's novel, *What is to be Done?* While Cincinnatus represents the pneumatic man who "wishes to release from the bonds of the world and to return to his native realm of light," Rakhmetov "wanted to act within the world and to reconstruct it artificially by technical and political means" (Buss 62). It's almost as if Nabokov placed Cincinnatus within a version of the constructed world of Rakhmetov to show just how dangerous this type of world could be. Nabokov continued to research Chernyshevksy throughout the months-long editing process of *Invitation*, and it seems that his research into Chernyshevksy may have impacted the themes he eventually introduced in the novel.

Although the Gnostic interpretation of the scriptures, equal treatment of women and heretical viewpoints outraged the ancient Orthodox Christians, what they really saw as a threat was the fact that the Gnostics did not recognize the authority of institutions. The Orthodox Christians worshipped what the Gnostics considered the Demiurge while they thought

themselves to be above His authority and, therefore, above the Church which claimed to represent Him. The attainment of gnosis was a solitary, internal transformation which did not require external authority: "Some Gnostic Christians… expected human liberation to occur not through actual events in history, but through internal transformation" (Pagels 131). In a time when the Church was a very powerful institution, the Christians felt threatened by the Gnostics' lack of recognition of any authority but their own: "If ethics and morals are taken to a system of rules, the Gnostic is not likely to regard them very highly. Rules without the consciousness that reveals the reason behind the rules are little better than useless" (Hoeller 21). Similarly, the characters within the artificial world in *Invitation* see this same non-recognition of authority and failure to observe rules in Cincinnatus, which makes him a dangerous individual in a world that depends on clever props and parody to maintain its existence. He is persecuted just as the Gnostics were persecuted and just as revolutionaries who based their doctrines upon elements of Gnosticism, were persecuted.

In this way, we can see that Nabokov's condemnation and commentary on totalitarianism through Cincinnatus' experiences is completely in line with the Gnostic themes he introduces throughout the book. In fact, the Gnostic themes, if anything, strengthen Nabokov's arguments against oppressive political regimes. When Cincinnatus' soul is freed from the physical world, he is also freed from the totalitarian regime whose primary goal was also to keep him ignorant. However, a deeper analysis of how Nabokov juxtaposes political and Gnostic themes in *Invitation* requires more than what can be related in this paper.

Although there are several ways in which *Invitation* can be interpreted, none are complete without recognizing the prevalent Gnostic themes. A study of Gnostic texts reveals several direct parallels between them and Nabokov's story of Cincinnatus. Other treatments of *Invitation* have

typically acknowledged the existence of the Gnostic themes and, in some cases, more thoroughly analyzed them but most have fallen short of truly understanding how much Nabokov relies on the Gnostic themes to create the story and reveal the deeper meaning of the novel. In the end, although Cincinnatus may have been a victim of a totalitarian environment, his attainment of gnosis saves him from a false and deceitful world whose sole purpose is to keep him in ignorance.

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