

# Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*: A Literary Arabesque

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Master of Research

Thesis

**Statement of Authentication**

I, Fatima Tefaili, hereby declare, to the best of my knowledge and belief, that the work presented in my thesis is my own original work except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or part, for a degree at this or any other institution.



Fatima Tefaili

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## Abstract

This thesis reads Vladimir Nabokov's (1899-1977) postmodern novel *Pale Fire* (1962) as a literary arabesque. The arabesque is an Islamic art form which integrates different shapes and elements to produce a symmetrical ornament containing a single continuous line. The arabesque is also an artistic representation of foliage. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the literary arabesque was a style adopted by the Romantic writers Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) and Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852). Influenced by Gogol, Nabokov adopted the writing style of the arabesque. Hence, this thesis compares *Pale Fire* to Gogol's literary arabesque, *Arabesques* (1835). Just as writer's rendered cubism, for example, in modernism, Nabokov incorporated the arabesque's motifs in his postmodern novel. Furthermore, the presence of 'patterns' in *Pale Fire* have been identified by Nabokov's readers. However, these patterns are very generalised. This thesis specifically identifies the pattern as an arabesque. I therefore define Nabokov's literary arabesque as the figurative incorporation of the arabesque's decorative motifs. These motifs include symmetry, reflection and infinite circulation. For example, "Pale Fire" is a symmetrically structured poem that repetitively circulates back to the beginning.

## The Literary Arabesque: Chronology

Date	Century	Event
428 -348 BC		Plato-Cosmos-repetitive patterns, symmetry, infinity (Gocer, “A Hypothesis”, 691). All that exists in the cosmos – five Platonic Solids (Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> , 49, 55d). “The Perfect Circle” (Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> , 22-23, 33a-34b). “Since the middle becomes first and last and similarly the first and last become middle ... and in so doing achieve unity together” (Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> , 22).
300 BC		Euclid- <i>Elements</i> . Geometry, the crystallisation of tessellated shapes (Marks, <i>Enfoldment</i> , 12). The “Perfect Circle” – the triangle, square and hexagon inscribed within the circle (Euclid, <i>Elements</i> , 103-116).
224 -651 AD	3 <sup>rd</sup> – 7 <sup>th</sup>	Sasanian Empire – Persia and Arabia – at war with its neighbour, the Byzantium Empire. Sasanian art – mix of Greek and Byzantium art – captured Greek and Byzantines of which some were artists – took/borrowed/adopted Byzantium Architecture. (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 20-21).
	5 <sup>th</sup> – 15 <sup>th</sup>	Byzantine Empire-also called Eastern Roman Empire-fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 AD. Early Christian and Byzantine art. Vine Art-the scrolling of vine leaves. (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 17-20).
	5 <sup>th</sup>	Arabic literature. Pre-Islamic Arabic Culture-Trade between Petra (200 BC-106 AD; most important city in Arabia) and China and India (also familiar with Graeco-Roman art/culture). (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 28-30).
610 AD	7 <sup>th</sup>	Islam; Qur’an-Ayat (verses) within Surat (chapters). Islamic art – continuation from Sasanian and Byzantine art (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 17-36).
	8 <sup>th</sup>	Ibn al-Muquaffa – <i>Kalila wa-Dimna</i> (fables)-translations into Arabic from Persian; Pre-Islamic art to please Kings (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 182, 184).
	8 <sup>th</sup> -13 <sup>th</sup>	Islamic Golden Age-Abbasid Caliphate – in competition with Byzantines and wanted to be greater/smarter-held a “House of Wisdom” in Baghdad – translated many texts into Arabic from Greek, Indian, Persian, Chinese, etc – development of algebra, geometry, metaphysics, science, medicine, architecture.
	9 <sup>th</sup>	Acanthus art began to contain symmetrical repetitive rhythm (Kühnel, <i>The Arabesque</i> , 16).
800-860	9 <sup>th</sup>	Al-Abbas ibn Said al-Jawhari – <i>Commentary on Euclid’s Elements</i> (988AD, Baghdad, Iraq) – expansion of Euclidean geometry; influenced by Euclid’s <i>Elements</i> .

	9 <sup>th</sup> – 10 <sup>th</sup>	Stories of <i>1001 Arabian Nights</i> began to circulate among various authors and storytellers in Baghdad. Stories were left “open” and without endings for the following narrator to continue from the previous story; eventually resulted in a famous collection of short stories (Gerhardt, <i>The Art of Story-Telling</i> , 28). Mid-9 <sup>th</sup> century – literary art; Arabic (text) paintings – “spillage of words onto objects” (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 167).
940-998	10 <sup>th</sup>	Abu al-Wafa al Buzjani – developed spherical geometry; influenced by Euclid’s <i>Elements</i> .
989-1079	10 <sup>th</sup> – 11 <sup>th</sup>	Ibn Mu’adh Al-Jayanni – developed spherical trigonometry-law of sine; influenced by Euclid’s <i>Elements</i> .
	11 <sup>th</sup>	Fully developed Islamic art that contained geometrical characteristics and an infinite repetition of symmetrical motifs (Kühnel, <i>The Arabesque</i> , 24).
	10 <sup>th</sup> – 13 <sup>th</sup>	Development of Calligraphy; Arabic writing in stylised, artistic form for aesthetic purposes (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 180).
1453	15 <sup>th</sup>	Ottoman Empire-Mehmed-conquest/fall of Constantinople, Europe. Constantinople is renamed to Istanbul, Turkey. <i>Tughra</i> script – “developed by Ottoman Turkish officials as a way of authenticating documents that would be difficult to forge” (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 180); signature writing, calligraphy, <i>Makus</i> (“mirror script” – left reflects right), “Kufic letters rotated to make a symmetrical pattern within a sealed square” (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 179).
	16 <sup>th</sup>	“Mirror for Princes” – a political writing genre (Irwin, <i>Islamic Art</i> , 184).
1646-1716	17 <sup>th</sup> – 18 <sup>th</sup>	Antoinne Galland travelled through the Middle East, studied Islamic culture and became familiar with the Arabic language. Galland translated <i>1001 Arabian Nights</i> into English and European languages including French, German and Russian (Gerhardt, <i>The Art of Story-Telling</i> , 11-14; Mommsen, “Goethe”, 1).
1749-1832	18 <sup>th</sup> - 19 <sup>th</sup>	Johann Wolfgang von Goethe-Influenced by <i>1001 Arabian Nights</i> (Mommsen, “Goethe”, 2). Literary Arabesques: <i>Faust</i> (1790); <i>Wilhelm Meister</i> (1795-96).
1772-1829	18 <sup>th</sup> - 19 <sup>th</sup>	Friedrich Schlegel – creator of higher and complex forms of literary arabesques. Literary Arabesques: <i>Lucinde and the Fragments</i> (1799); <i>Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms</i> (1809).
1809-1852	19 <sup>th</sup>	Nikolai Gogol – Influenced by Schlegel. Literary arabesques: <i>Arabesques</i> (1835); <i>Dead Souls</i> (1842).
1882 -1964	19 <sup>th</sup> - 20 <sup>th</sup>	Ernst Kühnel – German Islamic art historian – the first to document the evolution of the arabesque ornament to a literary figure. <i>The Arabesque: Meaning and Transformation of an Ornament</i> (1949).
1899-1977	19 <sup>th</sup> - 20 <sup>th</sup>	Vladimir Nabokov – Influenced by Nikolai Gogol. <i>Nikolai Gogol</i> (1944).
1962	20 <sup>th</sup>	Vladimir Nabokov writes <i>Pale Fire</i> (1962).

## Introduction

This thesis examines Vladimir Nabokov's (1899-1977) postmodern novel *Pale Fire* (1962) as a literary arabesque. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* presents itself as a scholarly edition of the 999-line poem "Pale Fire" written by Nabokov's character, John Shade. *Pale Fire* includes a Foreword written by the poem's so-called editor, Charles Kinbote; the poem itself; Kinbote's almost two hundred pages of commentary on the poem; and an index to the text. This thesis illustrates *Pale Fire* as a literary arabesque that incorporates the metaphorical arabesque through its motifs of symmetry, infinitely finite patterns and its unending structure.

Chapter 1 outlines the history of the arabesque's evolution from the vine scroll used for architectural decoration during the 5<sup>th</sup> century and its development into a symmetric ornament representing foliage as an Islamic art form. Islamic scholars derived the arabesque's geometric logic from the teachings of Greek philosophers, namely Plato and Euclid. Their geometric concepts and cosmological theories are reflected in the arabesque as infinite unity. That is, just as the planets and stars are all united in the cosmos and celestial sphere in eternal agreement, the different shapes and elements that make up the arabesque are all united by a single interweaving contour and the whole ornament, reflecting infinite unity.

The decorative motifs of the arabesque also include repetition and continuity and have been expressed throughout the tales of *The Arabian Nights*. The structure of this collection of short stories echoes the arabesque's repetitive, continuous and unending patterns. Arabic calligraphy, which was a popular art in the Arab world from the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, is also evoked in *The Arabian Nights*. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, these tales were translated into English and European languages. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was inspired by these stories as a child and adopted an arabesque style of writing in his poetry. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the literary arabesque became a Romantic writing style adopted and raised to



higher and complex forms by Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) who called the arabesque a romantic novel. Subsequently, Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) was influenced by Schlegel's concept of the arabesque and wrote *Arabesques* (1835).<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 2 pursues Goethe's and Schlegel's use of the literary arabesque, including Schlegel's definition and theories of the arabesque novel. In spite of the compelling nature of Edward Said's criticism of Schlegel, for the purpose of this project it is necessary to engage closely with the fact that Schlegel found his source of literary inspiration in the Orient. Despite having rejected Schlegel's proposal to raise the literary arabesque to the highest form, Goethe's poetry in *West-East Divan* (1819) manifests elements of the arabesque style, including cultural interchange, which he dedicated to the Persian poet, Hafez (1320-1390).

Chapter 3 examines Nikolai Gogol's *Arabesques*, a collection of short stories and essays, which Gogol refers to as "a collection of pieces" that were not written in any particular order and literarily replicates the arabesque's characteristic of fragmented wholeness (fragmented and diverse sections uniting to form a whole book).<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I examine the short story, "Nevsky Prospect", since the imagery of the arabesque's bifurcating stem is evoked through the events and experiences of Gogol's characters. In addition to the arabesque, I also include elements of fractal art because Schlegel was inspired by Novalis' who integrated mathematics with literature. Hence, mathematical fractals are also evoked in "Nevsky Prospect".

Chapter 4 discusses the relationship between Nabokov and Gogol since Gogol is a significant influence on Nabokov. This is evident in the fact that Nabokov wrote a book on the life of Gogol called *Nikolai Gogol* (1944). Additionally, Gogol and Nabokov both share

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<sup>1</sup> Although Gogol rejected Romanticism, he was nonetheless placed in the category among romantic writers. Carl Proffer argues that Gogol's "descriptions often read like summaries of the features which typify romantic art" and his essay "A Few Words About Pushkin" (1835) (in *Arabesques*) is an example of Gogol's Romantic writing (Proffer, "Gogol's Definition of Romanticism", 121).

<sup>2</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 23.

the same experiences as they were both writing in a language other than their native language; Gogol was Ukrainian writing in Russian and Nabokov was Russian writing in the English language. Chapter 4 therefore analysis the similarities and differences between *Pale Fire* and *Arabesques*. Furthermore, it also examines the similar arabesque patterns that are identified in both texts.

In his Essay “‘Pale Fire’: Poem and Pattern” (2010), Brian Boyd, Nabokov’s authorised biographer, states that “poetry... must always operate with patterns and indeed patterns of patterns. Even metaphor offers a new link between one more or less familiar pattern and others”.<sup>3</sup> He continues his discussion by comparing the poem “Pale Fire” to Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 30* and the “alignment of its structural, logical and syntactical patterns”.<sup>4</sup> However, Boyd’s use of the word ‘pattern’ is generalised. He does identify the ‘pattern’ as a metaphorical function in *Pale Fire*. Nonetheless, apart from the spiral, echoing Nabokov’s quote about the “thetic arc”, Boyd’s explanation of Nabokov’s pattern remains unclear.<sup>5</sup> This project specifically identifies Nabokov’s pattern as the arabesque pattern.

Chapter 5 identifies the arabesque’s motifs of symmetry and reflection in *Pale Fire*. These configurations portray the doubling of characters; John Shade and Charles Kinbote are both portrayed in *Pale Fire* as simultaneously similar and different. Refractions occur when Kinbote’s interpretation of Shade’s poem results in a distorted translation of the commentary. Multiple refractions consequently lead to kaleidoscopic effects and metaphorical kaleidoscopes are also identified in *Pale Fire*. In other words, just as elements of the arabesque are present in *Pale Fire*, so too are the motifs of kaleidoscopes.

Chapter 6 continues the analysis of *Pale Fire* as a literary arabesque, focusing on the infinitely circulating motif of the arabesque in a finite amount of space, therefore rendering

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<sup>3</sup> Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov*, 342.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>5</sup> Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 10, 233.

the novel as an infinitely circulating and unending text, akin to *The Arabian Nights*. It examines infinite circulation in the poem “Pale Fire”, Commentary and Index. Each section contains pieces of texts that portray circular patterns. For example, the Index provides references to a group of words that forces the reader to circulate around the same group of words, endlessly. These circular motifs also occur in the poem, which itself is a circulating text because the last line reverts back to the first line, thus, repeating the reading process of “Pale Fire”. However, although circulation occurs in a never-ending motion, the course of the circle remains confined to its own limits, never changing its cycle, thus representing infinitely finite (Schlegel’s concept of symmetrical contradictions) motifs. The literary arabesque confines the arabesque to the space of literature, just as *Pale Fire* contains infinitely circulating pieces of texts (the poem circulates back to the beginning) in the finite domain of the novel itself.

## Chapter 1: The Arabesque: A Genealogy

This chapter illustrates how the arabesque art form eventually became a literary style during Romanticism, modernism and postmodernism. Due to the arabesque being a synthesis of various cultural traditions that occurred in different times and places throughout history, this chapter does not provide an exact sequence, or timeline, of the events occurring that contributed to the formation of the arabesque. However, this chapter illustrates the concepts of the arabesque's genealogy and examines how it came to be. It first explains the evolution of the arabesque from the vine art scroll to a geometric and symmetrical decoration, drawing on Ernst Kühnel's (1882-1964) document of the history of the arabesque and its significance in literature during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The arabesque writing style therefore incorporates the decorative motifs of the arabesque such as repetition, symmetry and reflection.

This chapter also outlines the way the arabesque is a synthesis of Pre-Islamic aesthetics which include Sassanian and Byzantium art, as argued by Robert Irwin in his book *Islamic Art* (1997). It also includes Greek philosophy and cosmology, focusing mainly on Plato and Euclid. Plato's Platonic solids and his theories about the cosmos, along with Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* are discussed to portray their contribution to the theological and mathematical arrangement of the arabesque.

I also discuss Islamic calligraphy and the arabesque's transference into a writing style, beginning with its decorative letters, and eventually into literary works. The arabesque's motifs of repetition and continuity manifests throughout Arabic literature and the unending tales of *The Arabian Nights*. The arabesque writing style subsequently moved across cultures and generations and was adopted by the Russian writer, Vladimir Nabokov. The postmodern novel *Pale Fire* is an example of Nabokov's style of the literary arabesque.

Prior to Nabokov, the arabesque also influenced the German writers, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schlegel. Friedrich Schlegel modified the arabesque as a writing style to a more complex form. Hence, this chapter ends with a discussion on the literary arabesque and its Romantic definition as developed by Schlegel; as a broad concept, Schlegel's definition of the arabesque is a romantic novel. Schlegel's romantic definition is also examined through a selection of critical interpretations which include the mingling of poetry and prose, symmetry and contradictions. Their interpretations also acknowledge the era in which the arabesque influenced Romantic artists and literature.

### **Arabesque Art**

The arabesque is an Islamic art form which integrates different geometric shapes, including circles and triangles, to produce a single line that continuously circulates back onto itself. It is an artistic representation of flora and sometimes fauna with “geometric and vegetal forms, and even decoratively executed inscriptions and figural motifs”.<sup>6</sup> The arabesque is used by Muslims for decorative purposes on walls of Mosques. Its decorative motifs include regular repetitions, knots, interlacing, spirals, mirroring forms, continuity, unification of disparate elements, fragmentation and symmetry. Apart from theological connotation, the arabesque has also been examined through various perspectives including aesthetic, literary and philosophical concepts. This thesis focuses on the arabesque's literary application in *Pale Fire*.

Ernst Kühnel was a German historian who studied Islamic art and was the first to document the transformation and development of the arabesque ornament dating “from Late Antique times until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when European art made its inroad on the Islamic world”.<sup>7</sup> In *The Arabesque: Meaning and Transformation of an Ornament* (1949), Kühnel

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<sup>6</sup> Kühnel, *The Arabesque*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

argues that “the arabesque was born from the idea of the leafy stem, but just as branches turn into unreal waves or spirals, so do leaves bifurcate and split”.<sup>8</sup> The arabesque is an artistic representation of nature and its idea is derived from the recursive spiralling leafy stem.

Figure 1 shows a “cornice decorated with acanthus leaves ... [in which] the foliage emanates and turns back regularly on itself” that was used for decoration during the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> This form of vine art is not developed into the geometric structure of the arabesque at this stage. The artistic style of the acanthus continued to evolve over time and was used for decoration in architecture between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the 9<sup>th</sup> century, images of symmetrical patterns that followed a repetitive geometric structure began to emerge.



**Figure 1. “Late Antique Cornice, 5<sup>th</sup> Century”.<sup>10</sup>**

The earliest ornament documented by Kühnel which resembles an arabesque was during the Abbasid era, mid-9<sup>th</sup> century. Figure 2 shows how the design in Figure 1 transformed “from the freely flowing scroll ... [to a pattern where] the whole regenerates itself imperceptibly in a symmetrical rhythm”.<sup>11</sup> The design is no longer free-flowing but is structured symmetrically and regulated by a specific path. This is also more visible in Figure

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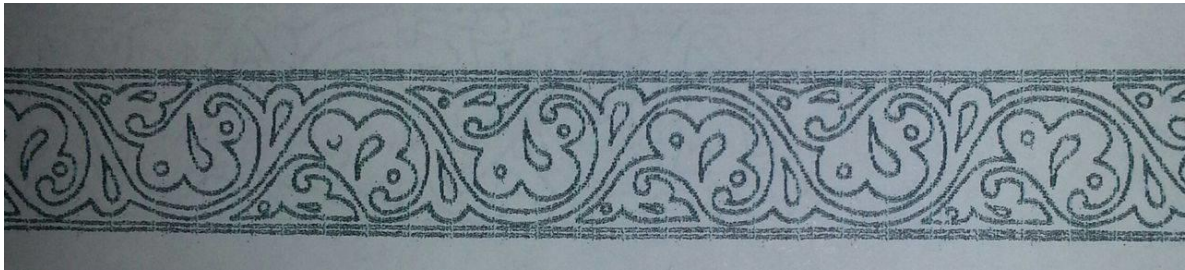
<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 14.

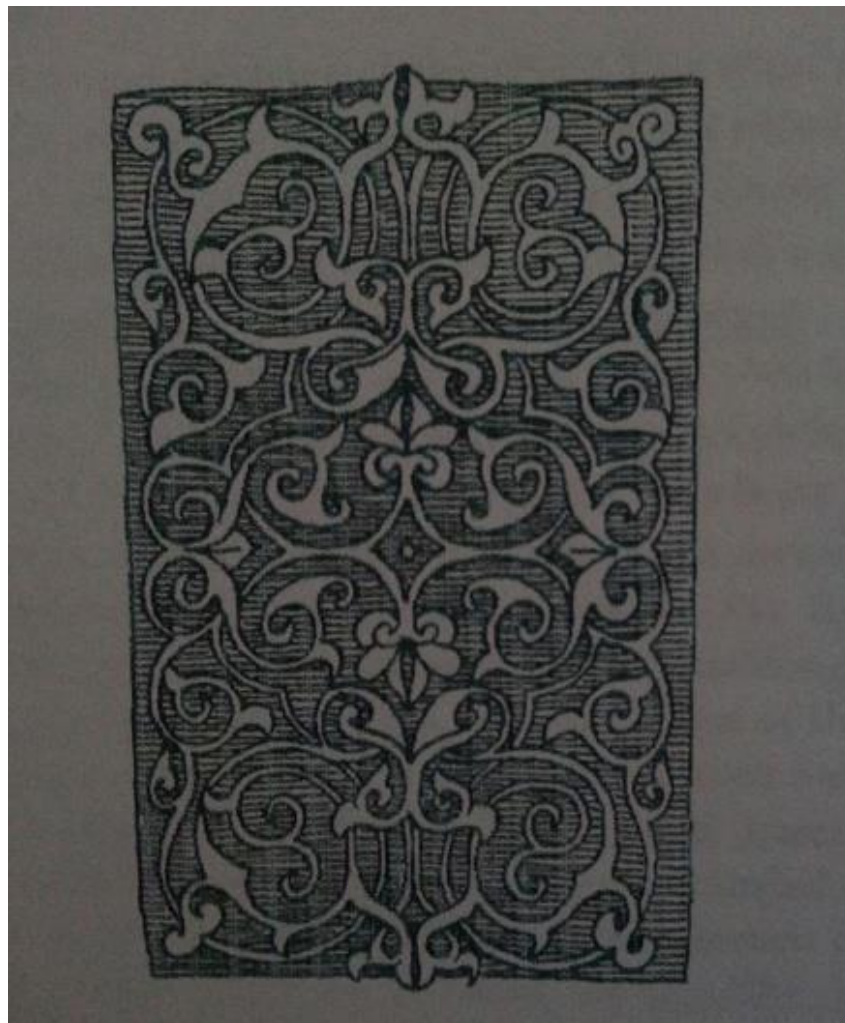
<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 16.

3 which shows the evolution and transformation of the design into a symmetrical composition.



**Figure 2. “Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, end of 9<sup>th</sup> Century”.<sup>12</sup>**



**Figure 3. “Wood Carving, Egypt, about 1000”.<sup>13</sup>**

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 24.

Figure 3 displays an arabesque where, “starting from the centre, scrolls and bifurcated leaves spread out in various forms and in complete symmetry over the whole rectangle”.<sup>14</sup> This image shows a thoroughly developed arabesque decoration from the 11<sup>th</sup> century which illustrates a congruently repetitive embellishment. The arabesque can also take on forms of kaleidoscopic and crystalline appearance via accumulated tessellation of shapes.

### **Tessellation and Reflection<sup>15</sup>**

A single shape can be repeatedly rotated, tessellated and conjoined to a previous shape in order to obtain three-dimensional ornaments as well as produce kaleidoscopic and crystalline effects. This is called geometric tessellation. Geometric tessellation and the rotation of shapes form links “between opposite points of a pair” of shapes.<sup>16</sup> This creates a “controlling centre point”, or a mirror-like subject between two identical shapes acting as opposites.<sup>17</sup> The significance of geometric tessellation with regards to the arabesque is that the arabesque consists of reflected geometric shapes that fill the space of art leaving no gaps. Keith Critchlow, a leading expert in sacred geometry and architecture and co-founder of the Temenos Academy in London, documented the relation between Islamic art arrangements and cosmological patterns in *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (1976). Critchlow details the outcomes of tessellated shapes as follows:

If a single element of any description or shape is reflected between two mirrored surfaces ... that element will take on an entire new set of values in the patterns of reflection. This has been exploited in many ways in different kinds of kaleidoscope.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>15</sup> The ideas of tessellation and reflections in Islamic geometric patterns is important to this thesis because chapter 5 reflects on these concepts when *Pale Fire* is analysed as a literary arabesque.

<sup>16</sup> Irwin, *Islamic Art*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns*, 76.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 74.



Tessellation therefore generates, not exactly the same, but similar reflections with leeway for different patterned forms from the initial shape being tessellated. This is relevant to *Pale Fire* because it deals with mirroring characters such as Shade and Kinbote, Kinbote and Hazel, and ‘tessellated’ forms of reflection. This is discussed in Chapter 5 where I elaborate on the way the various levels of reflection lead to kaleidoscopic effects which have been identified in *Pale Fire*.

In Islamic art, the three primary shapes used for tessellation are the triangle, square and hexagon. This is because of their ability to fill the space leaving no gaps.<sup>19</sup> An individual shape reproduces itself multiple times around the same object and continues to accumulate until the pattern eventually becomes one whole design or ornament. When different shapes are used in geometric tessellation, the separate elements combine to comprise of a new form of shape as in Figure 4. Figure 4 is not kaleidoscopic, but when an additional pattern and circular kinetic is applied to the pattern (like circular arabesques discussed in Chapter 5), it becomes kaleidoscopic.

The image in Figure 4, as well as Critchlow’s discussion of tessellations, refers to two dimensional elements and forms. Moving on from Critchlow’s explanation to three dimensional forms (crystallisation occurs in 3D form and not in 2D forms), the three shapes, the triangle, square and hexagon, are the elementary bases in which crystals form. Crystals are also important to this discussion because Nabokov conjures up images of crystals in *Pale Fire*; in the first stanza of the poem, Shade refers to a “crystal land”.<sup>20</sup> The following discussion explains the link between the arabesque, tessellation and crystals.

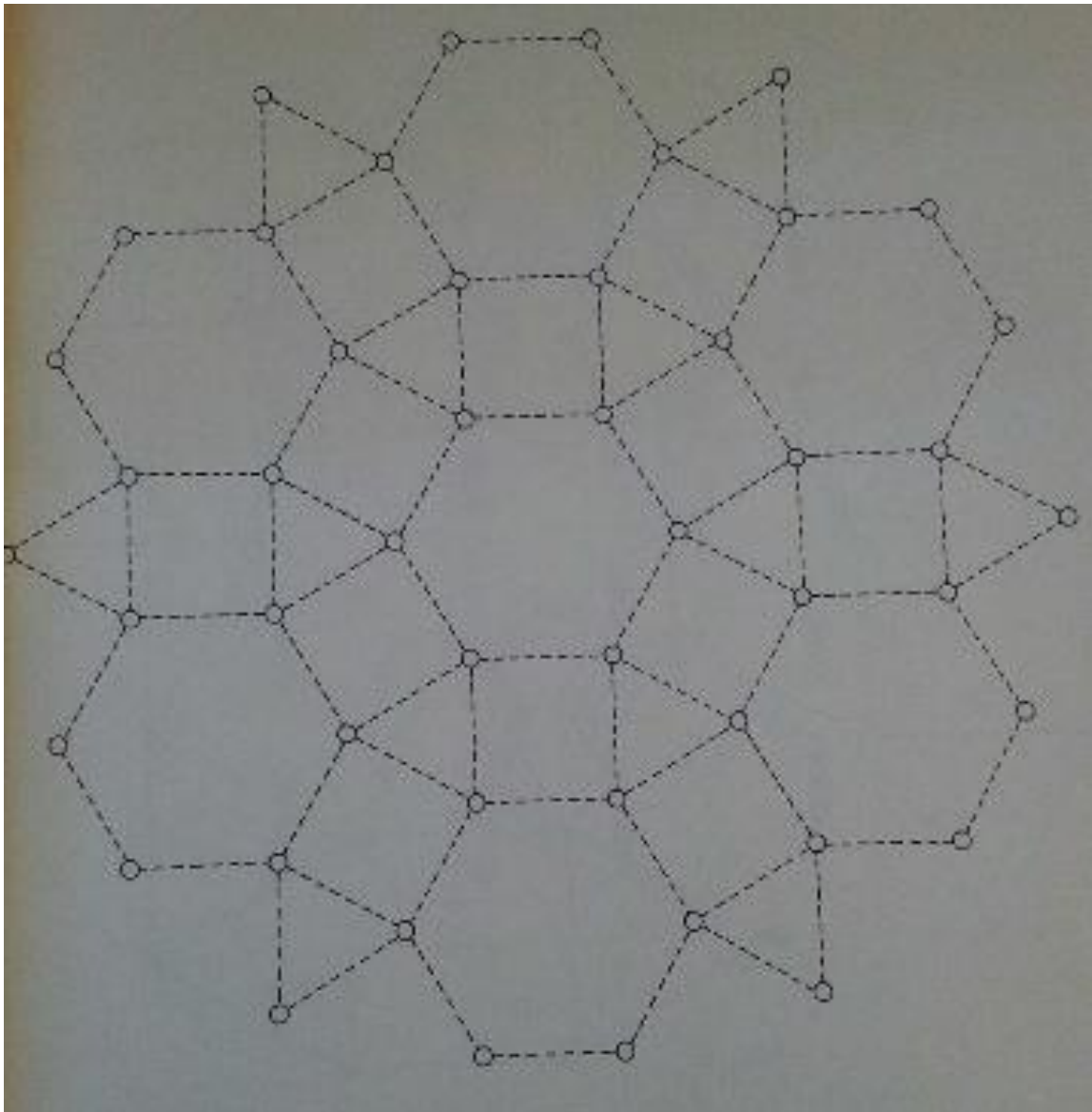
The hexagon consists of six sides and each side can be repeatedly rotated around a middle point or conjoining shape. Substituting the six sides (or 2D shapes) for spheres (3D)

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 117-149.

<sup>20</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 27, line 12.

and tessellating them around a centre sphere is the process in which “many crystals grow along”.<sup>21</sup> Figure 5 illustrates this process and the spaces filled between the spheres, which are accumulated to form a hexagon, consist of squares and triangles. These shapes are the 3D version of Critchlow’s 2D image in Figure 4.



**Figure 4. “Semi-regular pattern which also recalls the combination of hexagons, triangles and squares”.<sup>22</sup>**

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<sup>21</sup> Lundy, *Sacred Geometry*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns*, 123.



**Figure 5. Formation of a cuboctahedron and crystallisation.<sup>23</sup>**

The three primary shapes (the triangle, sphere and hexagon) appealed to Islamic art and architecture, particularly in floor and wall tiling, because they offer the perfect solution to “fill the plane, leaving no spaces”.<sup>24</sup> Frazier argues that the arabesque’s importance of filling up an entire space has been incorporated into literature because the arabesque ornament “is a pure expression of space” in its aesthetic form.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 6 shows Islamic decorations which Muslim *mudejar* craft workers began building in the 14<sup>th</sup> century at Alcazar palace. The “stucco and glazed tiles arranged in geometric tessellated patterns [that] covered the surface of the walls” give a crystalline appearance.<sup>26</sup>

Figure 7 also displays a crystalline-like arabesque decoration in the Alhambra Palace in Spain. Irwin states that

Those who entered the Palace were forced to turn and turn again by the skewed layout of courtyards, corridors, and rooms. What is even more striking is the sheer elaboration of the decoration, the play of intricate crystalline forms, and the use of shapes that were designed to catch the changing light.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Lundy, *Sacred Geometry*, 10.

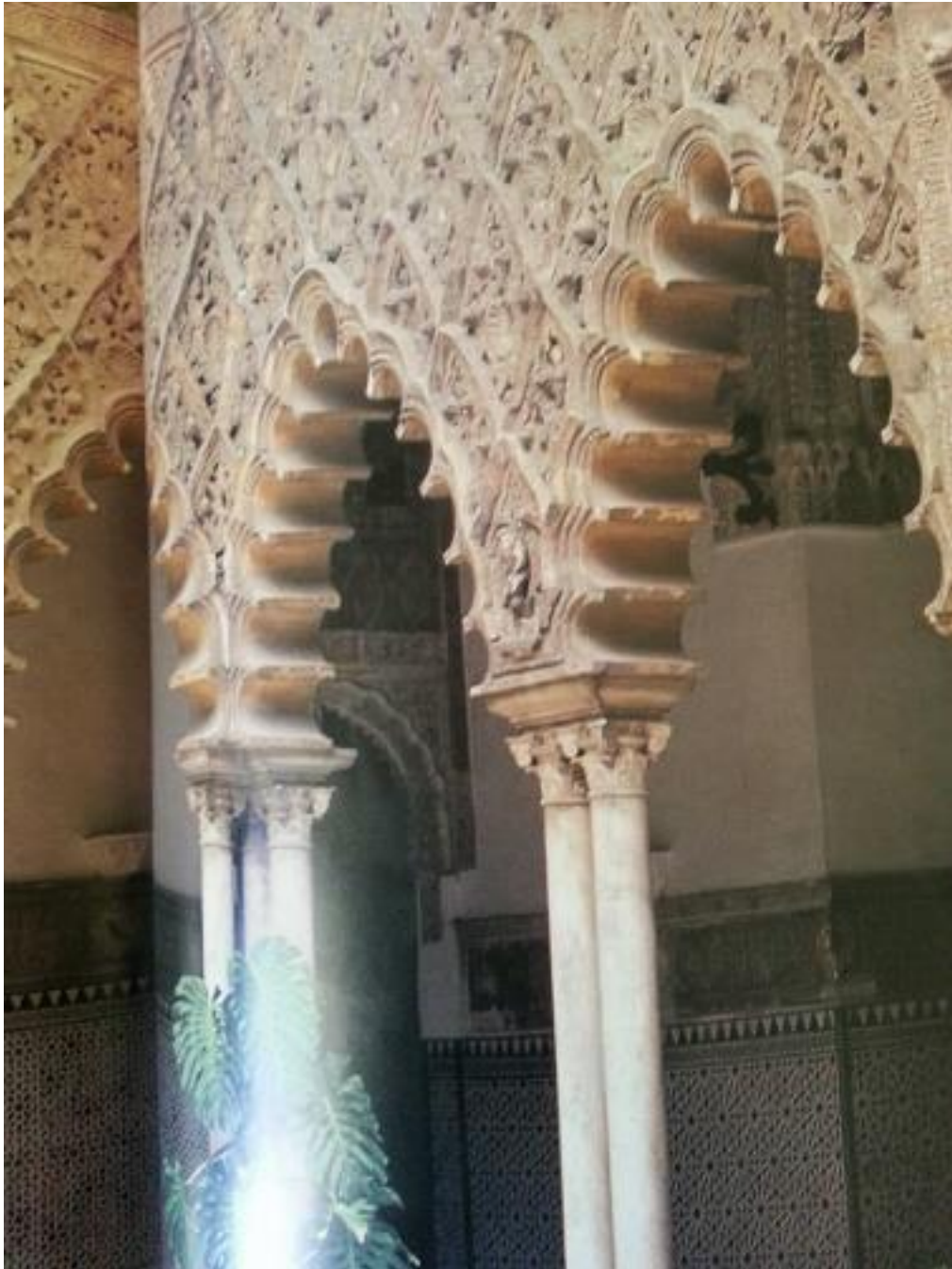
<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Frazier, *Frames*, 148.

<sup>26</sup> Irwin, *Islamic Art*, 222-223.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.

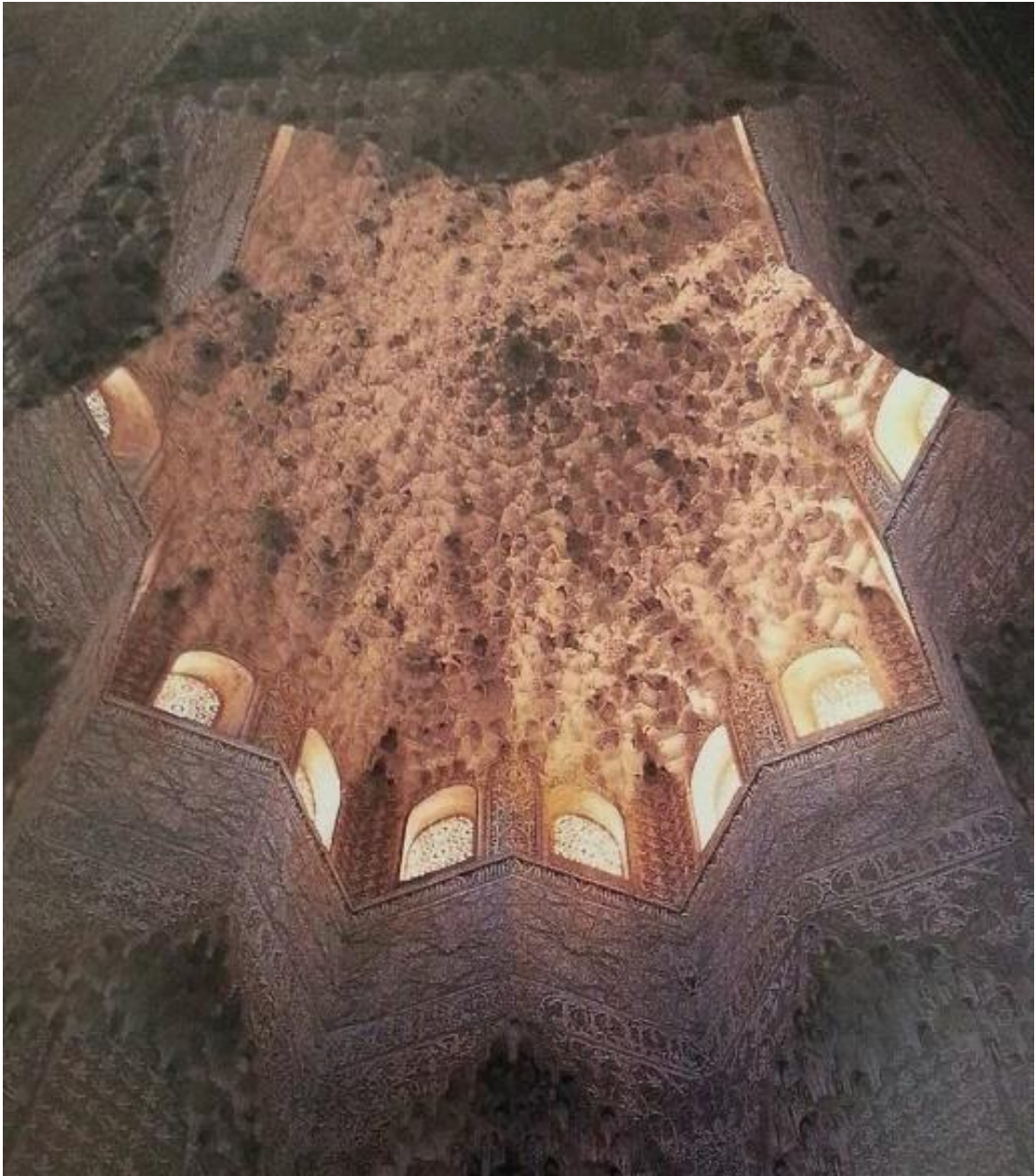
Palaces and their crystalline appearances are mentioned again and again in *Pale Fire* as well as opalescent images.



**Figure 6. “An interior courtyard of the Alcazar palace, Seville”, 14<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>28</sup>**

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 223.



**Figure 7. “Hall of the Abencerrajes in the Alhambra, Granada” in Spain.<sup>29</sup>**

In the notes to line 130, Nabokov mentions a palace while giving a recount of the “adventures of Charles Xavier, the last King of Zembla”.<sup>30</sup> This palace is filled with secret passages and corridors with “angular and cryptic courses”.<sup>31</sup> Irwin’s mention of people ‘turning and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>30</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 98.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 104.

turning again' in the palaces is also evoked in *Pale Fire* when Nabokov describes a palace that can only bring an image of the view by 'turning one's head' whilst simultaneously mentioning opalescent and repeated reflecting objects. These descriptions include "imagined reflections of the trembling transparent water on rock wall boat [that] were tantalizing" as well descriptions of the palace from various points on a compass such as "beginning his luxurious captivity in the South West Tower" then turning his attention to "a bed-table that had been place in the north-east corner".<sup>32</sup> The various compass directions portray images of repetitive turning from one direction in the palace to another and evokes both Irwin's description of the Alhambra Palace filled with Arabic writing along the crystalline walls, as well as the turning of shapes in tessellations.

*Pale Fire* continues to reveal images of tessellated reflections when the story of Charles Xavier continues in the notes to line 149. As the King reaches Rippleson Caves, he witnesses that Odon's (Charles' bodyguard) "face had been injured in [a Glass Works] explosion".<sup>33</sup> Odon's face, along with the mention of a merman, whose tail is made up of tessellated scales, evokes reflective mirror-like patterns:

and all the art of plastic surgery had only resulted in a hideous tessellated texture with parts of pattern and parts of outline seeming to change, to fuse or separate, like fluctuating cheeks and chins in a distortive mirror.<sup>34</sup>

The description of Odon's face conjures up images of the patterns in the arabesque. These aspects of light reflecting tessellated shapes are significant to the arabesque because kaleidoscopic images are arabesque in form and structure. Distorted reflections and fluctuating tessellated shapes result in refractions that produce crystalline and kaleidoscopic effects in which the 'shapes were designed to catch the changing light'. Chapter 5 elaborates

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 119.

on how kinetic refracted patterns of the arabesque produce kaleidoscopic effects, and how these shapes have been figuratively incorporated in *Pale Fire*, contributing to my argument of Nabokov's alluding to the arabesque.

## **The Influence of Greek Philosophy on Islamic Art**

The arabesque arose as a synthesis of geometric concepts and theological thought. The geometric logic behind the arabesque was initially derived from the philosophical teachings of Greek scholars such as Plato, Aristotle, Euclid and Plotinus, and particularly their views about the cosmos. This thesis focuses on Plato and Euclid as major influences on Islamic thought, including the contribution of their geometric and cosmological teachings. In the creation of Islamic art, Greek philosophy appealed to Islamic scholars because their ideologies that provided the base theories of the logic behind the arabesque reflected one another; theological connotation of Greek cosmology seemed to echo Islamic thought of God's 'Oneness'.<sup>35</sup> The arabesque is a synthesis of their many selected theories, notions and teachings with regards to its fragmented wholeness and eternal unifying characteristics. For example, Muslim scholars' search for an art form that reflects or resembles "the existence of a separate reality that was perfect in form and crystalline in character" was influenced by Plato's philosophies.<sup>36</sup>

Plato is a significant Figure in the creation of the arabesque because the cuboctahedron in Figure 5 contains a centre hexagon in 2D form. That is, once dissected equally in half, the resulting cross-section is a hexagon. In 3D form, it consists of triangles and squares which form the 3D solids of the tetrahedron (First Platonic Solid) and the cube

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<sup>35</sup> Marks, *Enfoldment*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Cetin & Kamal, "Evolution of the Arabesque", 160.

(Third Platonic Solid) which are derived from Plato's Five Platonic solids denoting fire, air, earth, water and the cosmos, all separate bodies constituting one infinitely ordered whole.<sup>37</sup>

## Plato

Plato (427BC-347BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher and wrote his dialogue *Timaeus* in 360 BC. In *Timaeus*, Plato puts forward a discourse on the physical and natural world in which he also addresses his theory of theological cosmology, a theory which influenced Christian as well as Islamic thought.

Asli Gocer argues that Plato's philosophy appealed to Islamic scholars because his theories of the cosmos were similar to Islamic thought which includes perfect symmetry and "exactness of proportion".<sup>38</sup> This idea of perfect symmetry is reflected in Islamic art, as Critchlow argues that

The deeper meaning of reflection as a psychological counterpart to the more obvious way in which a physical object is reflected in, say, a mirror or a still lake, was used extensively by the poets, philosophers and sages of Islam. Symmetry, or the series of ways in which a single motif can be repeated an exact number of times within a circle is the most fundamental manifest aspect of Islamic geometric art.<sup>39</sup>

The beauty of symmetry and reflection has therefore been adopted by writers as well as Islamic philosophy. Gocer also points out the aspect of symmetry within the cosmos by reflecting on Plato's discussion which reveals the repetitive patterns of the infinitely orbiting planets in a single course. According to Gocer, Plato associates the shapes of the celestial spheres and triangles to beauty:

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<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 49, 55d.

<sup>38</sup> Gocer, "Hypothesis", 691.

<sup>39</sup> Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns*, 74.



Plato thinks that divine beauty is revealed especially in shapes such as the circle and the triangle. The world, celestial stars, and human heads are all round, for instance, because divinity is made manifest in the perfection of the circle.<sup>40</sup>

Hence, the circle, which was considered a perfect shape due to its ability to create a perfectly symmetrical ornament was used by Islamic scholars to create an art form.

A detailed analysis of the way the primal shapes (the circle and triangle) are related with the cosmos are provided in Keith Critchlow's *Islamic Patterns* and by Critchlow's student, Miranda Lundy, in her book, *Sacred Geometry* (1998). Both Lundy and Critchlow describe how a single dot or 'point' with a direction or 'point of departure' results in a single straight line. The point of departure can also rotate to form a circle, "move a vertex" to form a triangle or "translate a line" to form a square.<sup>41</sup> A single line which produces the three primal shapes can also be re-combined by an artist to begin an arabesque pattern and eventually produce a single line. Lundy's *Sacred Geometry* builds up on Critchlow's ideas developed in *Islamic Patterns* that focuses on two dimensions and extends this to also discuss three dimensional shapes. Lundy begins her discussion of drawing sacred geometry by describing that

the basic journey is from the single point, into the line, out to the plane, through to the third dimension and beyond and eventually returning to the point again, watching what happens all the way.<sup>42</sup>

The significance of Lundy's argument to the arabesque is that this is precisely the journey of an arabesque pattern in construction as it begins from a single point, emanates and spirals out, returns to its starting point and continues. It can also take on a third dimension in the crystallisation process as is illustrated in the development process from the image in Figure 4

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<sup>40</sup> Gocer, "Hypothesis", 689.

<sup>41</sup> Lundy, *Sacred Geometry*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

to the outcome in Figure 5. Its significance to the literary arabesque and specifically *Pale Fire* is that crystallisation is mentioned with connection to poets, literary metaphors, metaphysics, the universe, reflections and symmetry.

Simultaneously, any point on the ornament becomes a ‘point of departure’ as well as a point of ‘return’ and ‘continuation’. This idea is also derived from Plato’s theories as he argues that in order to combine two elements, a third element needs to be added to hold the two disparate elements together: “it is not possible to combine two things properly without a third; for there has to be some bond in the middle to hold them together”.<sup>43</sup> This subsequently gives the corollary that

For whenever you have three numbers or bulks or powers with a middle term such that the first term is to it as it is to the third term, and conversely what the third term is to the middle the middle is to the first term, then since the middle becomes first and last and similarly the first and last become middle, it will follow necessarily that all can stand in the same relation to each other, and in so doing achieve unity together.<sup>44</sup>

Plato’s statement (and its circularity) evokes an arabesque pattern as its beginning, middle and end eventually become one and the same when the whole unit of the arabesque pattern is complete. This analysis is included in Plato’s discussion of the four bodies of the world: earth, air, fire and water, which all exist in the cosmos. It also includes his reasoning as to why the circle represents the heavens and is dubbed the ‘perfect circle’.

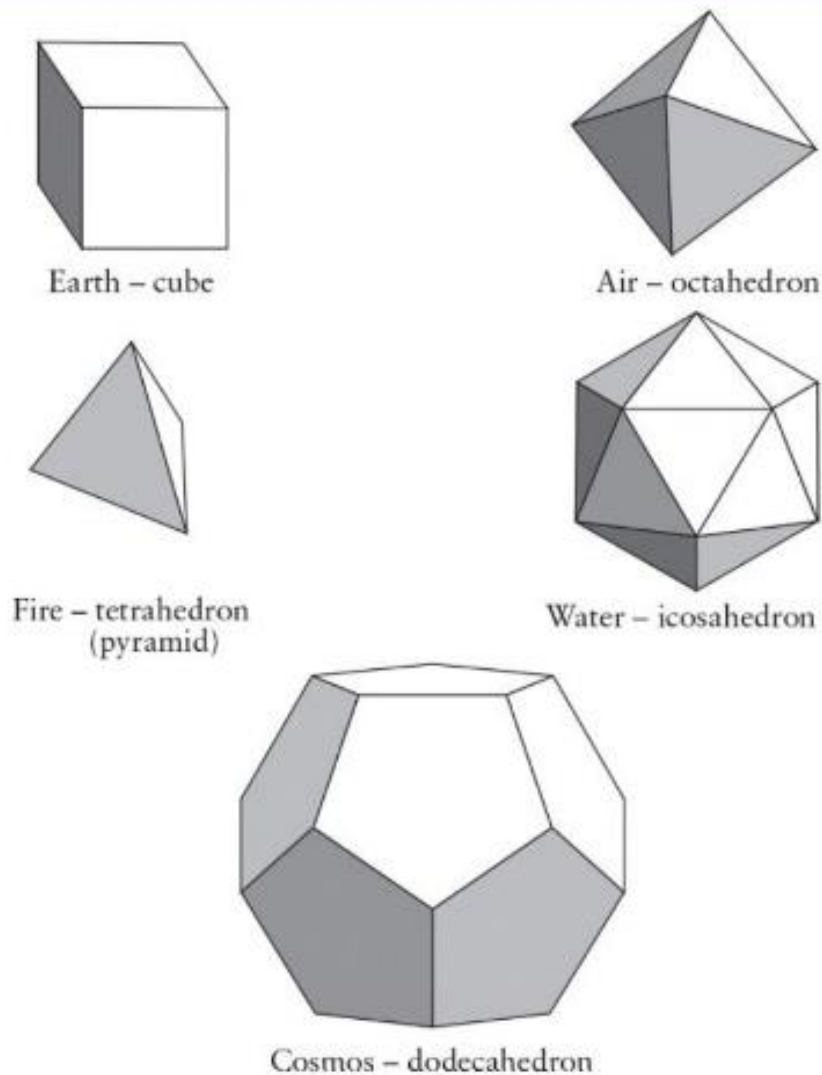
The circle represents the heavens and the whole world because it does not consist of sharp edges such as the tetrahedron (fire) which is able to penetrate the octahedron (air), and both are able to infiltrate through the cube (earth) and all are able to be encompassed by the icosahedron (water); the lesser the triangles used to form a 3D object (see Figure 8), the sharper their corners are, hence, the more capable they are of penetrating through other

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<sup>43</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 21, 31c.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22, 32a-32b.

matter.<sup>45</sup> The dodecahedron, representing the cosmos, is almost in equal volume to that of a sphere and contains 12 faces, making the edges not as sharp. All four shapes are able to cut through the dodecahedron, as earth, air, fire and water all penetrate through the cosmos.



**Figure 8. Platonic solids.<sup>46</sup>**

The centre starting point of the arabesque is always the circle and all objects are drawn inside the circle because that is how the ornament achieves perfect symmetry (The

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 50, 56a-56b.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 49.

section on “Euclid” provides more detail with illustrations). This can be concluded from Plato’s following discourse:

...and by leading the [circle] around [God] made it move in a circle, spinning uniformly around its own axis on the same spot... with every point on its surface equidistant from the centre, a body whole and complete.<sup>47</sup>

The distance from any point on the circumference of a circle to the centre will always remain equal the whole way around. Hence, perfect symmetry is maintained throughout the arabesque ornament when the circle is the encompassing centre point.

Although the rhythmic movements of the arabesque initially originated from the integration of the primal geometric shapes of the cosmos, beginning with Plato’s teachings, the arabesque is an artistic form of integrated synthetic geometry which does not require a fixed set of formulas. It is free from restrictions of the graph and algebraic expressions. Nonetheless, arabesque artists do rely on axiomatic logic whilst constructing it, including precise measurement by ruler and compass in order to obtain perfect symmetry. And the perfect symmetry has been achieved in arabesque art via the shape of the circle.

## Euclid

In addition to Plato, Euclid’s geometric theories also describe why the circle is the starting shape for the arabesque. Euclid of Alexandria (Mid-4<sup>th</sup> century BCE -Mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) was a Greek mathematician and is famous for his development of Euclidean geometry and algorithms. Muslim scholars translated and studied Euclid’s *Elements* during the 9<sup>th</sup> century: “Geometry, so commonly associated with Islamic art, was the fruit of translations from the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 22-23, 33a-34b.

Greek; for example, Euclid's *Elements* came into Arabic through the translation of al Hajjaj ibn Yusuf ibn Matar (786-833)".<sup>48</sup>

Laura Marks argues that the arabesque's potentiality of obtaining a form of crystallisation through repetitive tessellated shapes has also been influenced by Euclid's *Elements*.<sup>49</sup> *Elements* was later "expounded on by Al-Abbas ibn Said al Jawhari (800-860)" who wrote a book called *Commentary on Euclid's Elements* (988 AD) during the Islamic Golden Age under the Abbasid Caliph that ruled between 8<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>50</sup> During this time, and in competition with the Byzantium Empire, the Abbasid Caliph held a "House of Wisdom" in Baghdad which contributed to the translation of many texts, including Indian, Persian, Chinese and Greek into Arabic. Subsequently, the Muslims' pursuit for further knowledge led to the development of a range of fields such as algebra, metaphysics, science, medicine, architecture and geometry. Among the scholars of geometry, whose geometric background originated from Euclid's *Elements*, was Abu al-Wafa al Buzjani (940-998) who advanced the study on spherical geometry.

In his fourth book of *Elements*, Proposition IV, Euclid explains that if a circle was to be inscribed in a triangle (Figure 9), the lines DE, DF and DG will not be able to be extended outside the circle. This is because the lines will only touch the sides of the triangle, rather than cut or pass through them: "For if it should cut them, a right Line drawn on the Extremity of the Diameter of a Circle at Right angles, will fall within the circle; which is absurd. Therefore, a circle described about the Centre ... with either of the distances ..., will not cut the sides ...; wherefore it will touch them".<sup>51</sup> Additionally, although line DB does cut through the circle and can be extended, line DB is not equal to the lengths of the lines DF, DC, DG and DE. Lines of equal length are fundamental to the arabesque pattern in order to maintain

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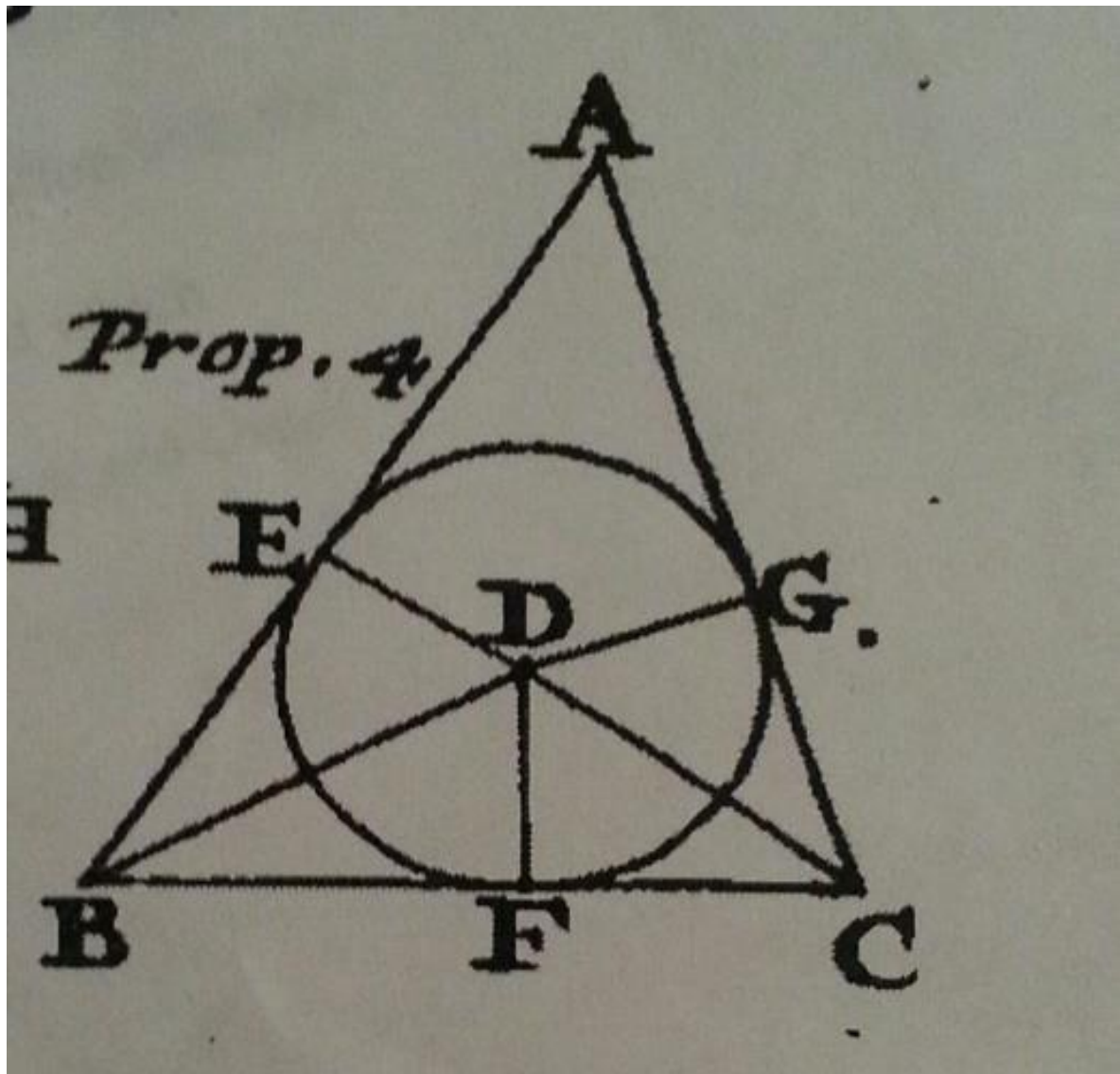
<sup>48</sup> Marks, *Enfoldment*, 154.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>50</sup> Cetin & Kamal, "Evolution of Arabesque", 160.

<sup>51</sup> Euclid, *Elements*, 104.

its symmetrical structure. Hence, for an arabesque pattern, that also consists of infinite emanation and continuous extension, inscribing a circle ‘within’ the triangle is not sufficient to complete the artwork.



**Figure 9. Euclid’s “Proposition 4: To inscribe a Circle in a given triangle”.<sup>52</sup>**

The same properties also hold true for a circle inscribed within a square in Proposition VIII: “For if the Circle should cut the sides of the Square, a right Line, drawn from the End of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 103-104, 116-117. Diagram accessible between pages 116-117 upon printing, but not electronic version.

the Diameter of a Circle, at right Angles will fall within the Circle; which is absurd”.<sup>53</sup> Since the lines extending from the circle inscribed within the triangle will not be able to cut through the triangle, the arabesque will not be able to exhibit the eternally continuous characteristics that it does because it would have been confined by limits.

Additionally, the triangle allows for either a three-point, and turned into a six-point Figure, where three lines will be unequal to the other three. Similarly, a square will produce a four-point, and turned into an eight-point Figure. The circle, on the other hand, allows for multiple and an infinite number of extending lines and they will always remain equal in order to provide perfect symmetry. Hence, the circle is always the starting shape to be drawn in an arabesque pattern.

Since symmetry is important to the arabesque, a hexagon inscribed within the circle is used in favour of the pentagon because “the side of the Hexagon is equal to the Semi-diameter of the Circle”.<sup>54</sup> Euclid’s fifteenth proposition of his fourth book offers the perfect starting point for objects that are capable of tessellation. Notice how the hexagon in Figure 10 allows for a second circle to be drawn in order to keep the infinitely repetitive tessellating process. The hexagon inscribed within a circle can also form shapes of triangles and diamonds within them, offering an extended variety of patterns, as well as being able to be extended into a second joining circle, as well as a third, a fourth, and so on.

All of the above mentioned developments of geometry and cosmological knowledge by Greek philosophers were used by Islamic scholars “for determining the Qibla and times of Salah and Ramadan, [which] all served as the impetus that was to become the arabesque”.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 116, 117.

<sup>55</sup> Cetin & Kamal, “Evolution of Arabesque”, 160.

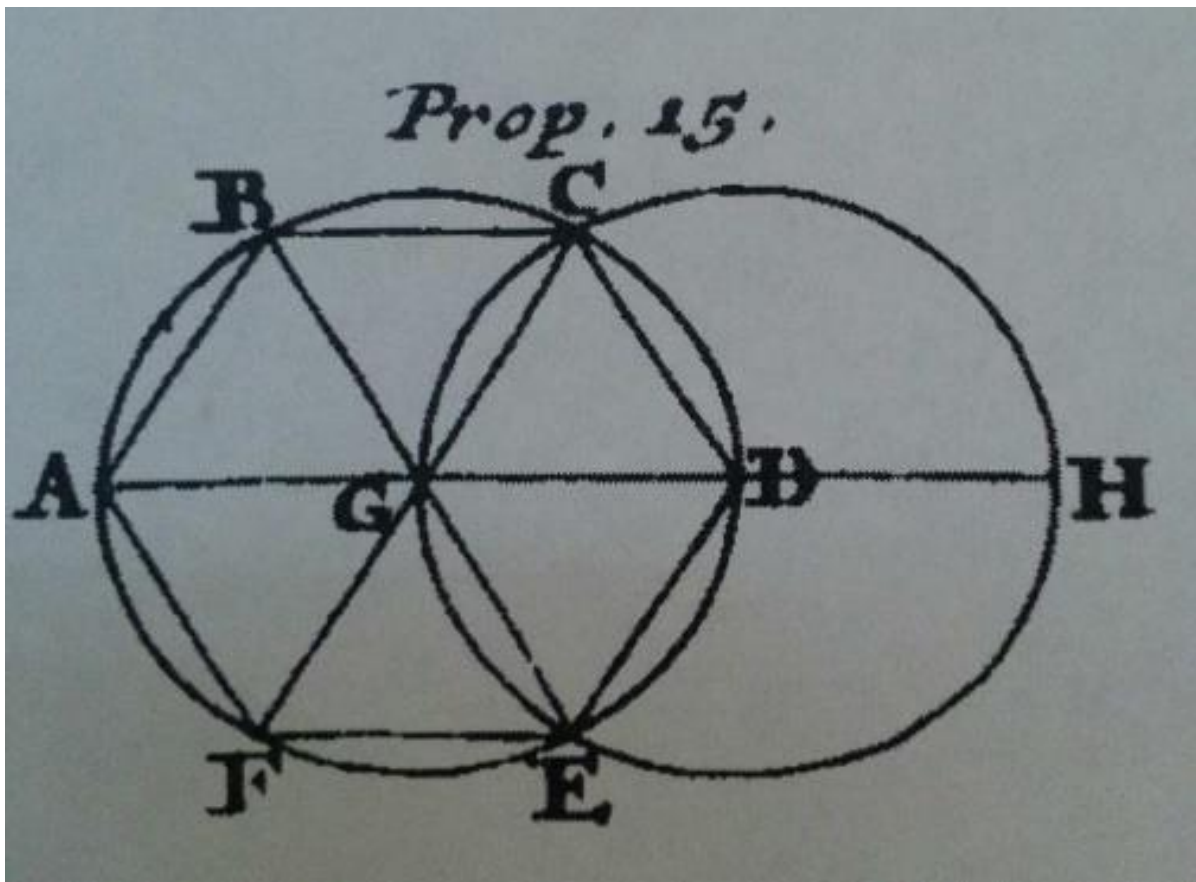


Figure 10. “Proposition XV: To inscribe an equilateral and equiangular Hexagon in a given Circle”.<sup>56</sup>

## Pre-Islamic Art

In addition to Greek philosophy, pre-Islamic art also contributed to the formation of the arabesque. Pre-Islamic art is not rooted in the grounds of Arabic art, but is a continuation of both Sasanian (3<sup>rd</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> centuries) and Byzantium (5<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> centuries) art.<sup>57</sup> It is also an extension of Greek philosophy. Furthermore, Byzantine art has been influenced by pre-Christian Greek figures such as Homer and Sophocles.<sup>58</sup> Lewis Day states that:

Of yet more universal occurrence in ornament is the vine, symbol of philosophies as wide apart as the poles. We find it in the bas-reliefs of Nineveh, and the painted

<sup>56</sup> Euclid, *Elements*, 114-116.

<sup>57</sup> Irwin, *Islamic Art*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



decoration of Egypt; on Etruscan vases, and Greek and Roman altars; on Byzantine sarcophagi; in early Sicilian silks; it recurs in every form of Gothic art; and throughout all phases of the Renaissance.<sup>59</sup>

Hence, the vine has always been represented in philosophical terms and the artistic scrollwork of the imitation of the twining vine has always existed. As Day argues, this is because it is simple for humans to copy and imitate flowers, leaves and stems with a simple “stroke of the brush”.<sup>60</sup> Vine scroll can be traced back to Byzantine art and “Byzantine art was greatly influenced by its pagan classical inheritance”.<sup>61</sup> Robert Irwin states that before the 6<sup>th</sup> century, “Byzantine sculptors [experimented] with various forms of abstract ornament, including a new style of deep-cutting on capitals that gave a lace-work effect”.<sup>62</sup>

Neighbouring the Byzantine’s was the Sasanian Empire that ruled Persia and Arabia between 224 and 651 AD. Due to ongoing conflict and war between the Sasanians and the Byzantines, cultures were spread throughout, and among each other, and they became familiar with each other’s culture:

The Sasanians were well acquainted with themes and techniques of Roman and Byzantine architecture, and in the course of their wars had captured large numbers of Greeks and other Byzantine subjects. Some of their captives seem to have been skilled artisans, and they were used as part of the labour for grand building projects ... The Sasanians also seem to have taken their characteristic decorative use of the scrolling vine from the Romans via Byzantine art. Sasanian vine scrolls are typically rather fleshy and not very sinuous; in the Islamic period, this sort of vine scroll would evolve into the arabesque.<sup>63</sup>

Sasanian art is a fusion of both Greek and Byzantine styles that transferred into, and were adopted by, Arabic, Turkish and Persian cultures. An example of this is the Byzantium

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<sup>59</sup> Day, “Lesson in Ornament”, 132.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>61</sup> Irwin, *Islamic Art*, 18.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

monument “Hagia Sophia” which was a Christian church built during Byzantine rule in Constantinople. When Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks towards the end of the Middle Ages, the monument later became a mosque and is now a museum in Istanbul, Turkey.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, since Sasanian rule occupied most of Persia and Arabia, Graeco-Roman and Byzantine art can be seen throughout Iraq and Iran today in historical places and ruins, and their architecture continues to influence artists in the Arab and Islamic world. As we can see, Islamic art is a combination of both Byzantine and Sasanian styles which have been influenced by Greek aesthetics.

### **Islamic art and Calligraphy**

From the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, literary art and calligraphy arose as a popular art in the Arab world. Arabic calligraphy was further developed between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and has similar characteristics of the arabesque in its cursive and continuously flowing style. During this time, artists associated Arabic calligraphy with “difficult geometry” (due to its balance, measure and spacing) as well as “music, for the scribe behaved like a musician, sometimes mixing the heavy movement with the light one ... or by adding a beat or subtracting a beat”, which evokes the art of poetry.<sup>65</sup>

As the “Islamic culture was highly literary”, calligraphic designs were placed on pottery, bowls and plates (Figure 11), and walls of buildings (Figure 12).<sup>66</sup> Additionally, Figure 7 is described by Irwin as “an inhabitable book” because it is filled with instructional texts throughout the building along the walls, doors and gates.<sup>67</sup> Geometry was sometimes included in calligraphy in order to give it a more symmetrical outlook which was deemed

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 124.

more desirable because “ideas of beauty were often closely linked to the concepts of symmetry”.<sup>68</sup>



**Figure 11. “Bowl from Nishapur, Iran, 10<sup>th</sup> Century”.<sup>69</sup>**

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 166.



**Figure 12. “Detail of entrance façade of the Ince Minare Madrasa at Konya, Turkey”,  
13<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>70</sup>**

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 171.

Various styles of calligraphy existed which included *naskhi* (“copy hand”; rhomboid shaped letters that were suitable for government officials when copying scripts), *thuluth* (“large cursive script used for monumental inscriptions”), *muhaqqaq* (rounded letters mostly used for decoration and for the Quran) and Kufic (squared script for decorating buildings).<sup>71</sup> Kufic script, being the first style of Arabic writing, was rectilinear and the letters were sometimes “rotated to make a symmetrical pattern within a sealed square” for aesthetic purposes.<sup>72</sup> Mirror script, or *Makus*, was another fashionable and symmetrical style during this same time where “the left reflects the right” and was used to decorate buildings.<sup>73</sup>

The composition of text and art during the “period of Kufic writing” is also discussed by Kühnel in *Arabesques*.<sup>74</sup> Although Figure 12 shows how Arabic writing is presented as an arabesque decoration, Kühnel also states that the actual letters themselves were also presented in arabesque style: artists “treated the upper ends of tall straight letters or the curves of others as if they were ornaments and even gave them the appearance of arabesques”.<sup>75</sup> Hence, from a mere ornament to a physically and visually decorative writing style, the arabesque’s decorative motif of continuity, symmetry and “mirror images and upside-down repetitions” eventually figuratively transferred into Arabic texts.<sup>76</sup>

The *Arabian Nights* is an example of a text that portrays decorative Arabic writing.<sup>77</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> night of *Arabian Nights* tells the story of a King who is looking for a vizier that also happens to be a skilled calligrapher in order to replace his previous vizier. The King makes acquaintance with an ape who is actually a wise man that had a spell cast on him. The ape decides to show the King his calligraphic skills and writes on a scroll in various scripted

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 178-179.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>74</sup> Kühnel, *The Arabesque*, 30.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>77</sup> Irwin states that “the art of calligraphy is celebrated in the *Arabian Nights*’ “Tale of the Second Dervish” (Irwin, *Islamic Art*, 177).

styles including *rūka 'i*, *raihani*, *thuluth*, *naskhi*, *tumar* and *muhaqqaq*, of which the last one reads:

Open the inkwell of grandeur and of blessings;  
Make generosity and liberality your ink.  
When you are able, write down what is good;  
This will be taken as your lineage and that of your pen.<sup>78</sup>

The art of writing, which denotes a sense of ‘liberation’, is commemorated in *Arabian Nights* through meta-textual forms. Furthermore, images of calligraphic art on surfaces continue to be evoked such as when the narrative mentions “a lead tablet inscribed with names and talismans”.<sup>79</sup> Not only does this reinforce the idea that decorative and artistic scripts are ‘good’, spiritually, but it also reflects the images of Figures 11 and 12 where surfaces are decorated with Arabic writing and are presented within an Arabic fiction.

### ***The Arabian Nights***

Very little is known about the date of the first publication of the collection of short stories *1001 Arabian Nights*. Gerhardt states that several authors contributed to its continuing sequence when the stories began to circulate among storytellers during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries in Baghdad.<sup>80</sup> The French orientalist, Antoine Galland (1646-1716), was the first to translate selected versions from the tales of *The Arabian Nights* into English and European languages after having travelled through the Middle East, studied Islamic culture and familiarising himself with the Arabic language.<sup>81</sup> Although the original stories were left ‘open’ and without endings in order to allow the next storyteller to continue the events,

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<sup>78</sup> Lyons, *Arabian Nights*, Vol 1, 83.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol 1, 91.

<sup>80</sup> Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-Telling*, 28.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-14.

Galland's versions included definite endings.<sup>82</sup> Malcolm Lyons' version also provides a possible alternative denouement, suggesting a sense of 'completion' to the collection of stories. Nonetheless, the original versions did not consist of a definite finale and the stories continued endlessly just as the arabesque pattern also continues endlessly.

Countless versions of *The Arabian Nights* have been repetitively re-created by different authors, which evokes the literary arabesque's unending form. This includes the American writer, Edgar Allan Poe's (1809-1848) *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Sheherazade* (1845) which is delivered as a 'continuation' of the stories and echoes Sheherazade's repetition of 'continuity' at the beginning of each short story; Malcolm Lyons begins each anecdote by repeating "SHE CONTINUED".<sup>83</sup> The "continuity of ideas", as well as lack of endings, have been reproduced and recreated by 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic writers such as Goethe, Schlegel and Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852). Goethe was also influenced by the tales of Sheherazade in *Arabian Nights* and wrote literary arabesque texts. Goethe's poem "Unbounded" echoes the characteristics of the arabesque, as the next chapter discusses. Schlegel regards Goethe's poetry as a high form of art and links Goethe's poetry with arabesques.

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<sup>82</sup> Lyons, *Arabian Nights*, Vol 1, xix.

<sup>83</sup> Lyons, *Arabian Nights*, Vol's 1, 2 & 3.

## Chapter 2: Goethe's and Schlegel's Arabesques

While Schlegel viewed the arabesque as a central idea to Romantic writing, Goethe rejected Schlegel's view of the arabesque as a fundamental concept in literature. Nonetheless, his writing and poetry reveal that Goethe had a strong connection to the Eastern tradition, in both ornament and Arabic literature. His poem "Unbounded" reveals a description of the arabesque. Goethe is central to this thesis because his familiarity with *The Arabian Nights* as a child contributed to his writing style.

Before turning to Goethe's literary arabesques, however, this chapter examines Schlegel's definition and use of the literary arabesque in his *Dialogue on Poetry and Lucinde*. Schlegel's incorporation of the arabesque's characteristics as a figurative style can be identified through his phraseology that depict the arabesque's floral motifs. These motifs include symmetry, reflections, contradictions and unending narratives.

### Schlegel's Literary Arabesque: A Romantic Definition

This section examines Schlegel's definition of the literary arabesque. Bianca Theisen argues that Schlegel "terms the novel arabesques" which is why Schlegel is a significant writer for this thesis; Schlegel is considered as the father of the literary arabesque.<sup>84</sup> However, Schlegel's definition is far more complex and this observation only reflects a fragment of his definition that concludes the arabesque is a novel. In its very simplest conception, for Schlegel, the arabesque is a romantic novel. However, Schlegel's corollary also provides various complex ideas regarding the arabesque.

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<sup>84</sup> Theisen, "Absolute Chaos", 303.



Schlegel's notion of the literary arabesque links various literary forms, genres, and a range of ideas. Schlegel views the arabesque as a romantic novel, a combination of poetry and prose, symmetry and contradictions, and witty confusions. According to Marilyn Johns,

The word "Poesie" means three things for Schlegel: it is at one and the same time poetic literature in verse or prose, a human faculty on the same order as imagination or reason, and a universal essence, rather like Soul, which permeates the entire cosmos.<sup>85</sup>

Schlegel's religious lifestyle also committed him to combine the subject of God and the universe with his view of the poetic ideal, which symbolises chaotic order and ordered chaos.<sup>86</sup> This concept, as will show in Chapter 6, as well cosmology, has definitely influenced Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Furthermore, *Pale Fire* is made up of both prose writing (Foreword and Commentary) as well as poetry ("Pale Fire").

Focusing on Schlegel's metaphorical reference to the arabesque as a romantic novel, the following outlines Schlegel's interpretation of the novel which he discusses over four pages in "Letter About the Novel". He first calls the novel "a romantic book", which is "an existing whole".<sup>87</sup> Upon further elaboration Schlegel makes the following observation:

*A theory of the novel* which would be theory in the original sense of the word; a spiritual viewing of the subject with calm and serene feeling, as it is proper to view in solemn joy the meaningful play of divine images. Such a theory of the novel which would reflect imaginatively every eternal tone of the imagination and would again confound the chaos of the world of the knights. The things of the past would live in it in new forms ... these would be true arabesques.<sup>88</sup>

Hence, Schlegel concludes that the highest form a romantic novel can reach is an arabesque.

This is because an arabesque is a progressive ornament; it is forever developing, which is

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<sup>85</sup> Johns, "Schlegel's Concept", 137.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.

<sup>87</sup> Schlegel, *Dialogue*, 101.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

Schlegel's view of the romantic novel.<sup>89</sup> Boglárka Kiss also argues that “it is not surprising that Friedrich Schlegel claimed that the literary arabesque is the highest form a novel can reach”.<sup>90</sup> Schlegel's literary arabesque is a mixture of what would be considered as the romantic ideal which includes classical poetry, music, storytelling, witty arabesques and opposing combinations of (dis)ordered spiritual (dis)order.

In *Dialogue on Poetry* (1799-1800), Schlegel sarcastically gives the arabesque novel very little importance, when, in fact, he regards it to be of great value. Schlegel argues that the arabesque is a higher form of art because it is a ‘natural product’: Schlegel writes that “as long as the arabesque is not a work of art but a natural product” and requires wit and pure imagination, it becomes “far more eccentric and fantastic”.<sup>91</sup> As the arabesque is derived from the idea of nature which reflects continual evolution, the literary work of art is also ever-progressing, therefore, akin to the development of an arabesque, hence a progressive motif. Further sarcasm from Schlegel occurs in *Dialogue* when he has his characters mocking the unpaid attention of the arabesque's value. In “Letter About the Novel”, Schlegel's character, Antonio, refers to Diderot's *The Fatalist* as an artwork of “no high rank, but only an arabesque”.<sup>92</sup> Directly following this, Schlegel has Antonio contradicting himself by arguing, “But for that reason it has in my eyes no small merit; for I consider the arabesque to be a very definite and essential form or mode of expression of poetry”.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, to Schlegel, echoed by Antonio, the arabesque novel is a work of great excellence, despite his initial satirical disregard of it.

In addition to the novel, music was also associated with arabesques during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. John Daverio discusses Schlegel's metaphorical use of the literary arabesque in his

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<sup>89</sup> “Progressive”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v.

<sup>90</sup> Kiss, “Presence and Absence”, 234.

<sup>91</sup> Schlegel, *Dialogue*, 97.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

article “Schumann’s ‘Im Legendenton’ and Friedrich Schlegel’s ‘Arabeske’” (1987).

Daverio’s article analyses Schumann’s musical piece in relation to Schlegel’s metaphorical literary arabesque. In doing so, Daverio describes the musical patterns of an arabesque construction such as circulating back to the middle during a musical progression as it has “no real end” and also contains symmetry and fragments.<sup>94</sup> Daverio argues that

The arabesque was first used as a critical term in Germany during the late nineteenth century, where it was applied to literature by way of its association with the pictorial arts and architecture. Indeed, the period saw a revival of interest in the arabesques of ancient Pompeii—fanciful but symmetrically arranged patterns depicting tenuous, plant-like shapes or fabulous creatures that were used as a framing device to finish off a wall that had a small picture in the middle.<sup>95</sup>

Hence, the arabesque art form, used to complete a decoration for architectural purposes, was used by German writers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a literary style. Likewise, Schlegel’s *Lucinde* is symmetrically structured, which is discussed in Chapter 2. Schlegel also refers to novels as ‘arabesques’ in *Dialogue*, which consists of sections that have ‘no real endings’. Also in *Dialogue*, Schlegel calls literary works a “symmetry of contradictions”.<sup>96</sup>

Schlegel’s view of the literary arabesque is a chaotic mixture of simultaneous opposites. In his article “Romantic Irony and Romantic Arabesque Prior to Romanticism” (1969), Raymond Immerwahr argues that:

the definition of irony as understood by Friedrich Schlegel ... [is when] the writer means something different from what he appears to be saying: His argument, creation, or representation is not to be taken solely at its face value or in dead earnest. Although he does not mean simply the opposite of what he says, he is likely to mean at the same time both what he seems to be saying *and* its opposite.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Daverio, “Schlegel’s ‘Arabeske’”, 160-163.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>96</sup> Schlegel, *Dialogue*, 86.

<sup>97</sup> Immerwahr, “Romantic Arabesque”, 665.

Immerwahr later argues that “the word *romantisch* in literary works ... may be considered arabesques by Schlegel’s definition”.<sup>98</sup> Finally, Immerwhar concludes that the “term arabesques applies to the form of a narrative or other literary work and to stylistic devices”.<sup>99</sup> For Friedrich Schlegel, the arabesque is a stylistic device for “any playful random, and capricious treatment of artistic form”.<sup>100</sup> In *Dialogue*, Schlegel concludes that it is up to the reader to “look at [novels] as witty products of nature”.<sup>101</sup> He then gives an example of this by referring to “Laputa, an imaginary country in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*” as being “everywhere and nowhere”.<sup>102</sup> In addition to Immerwahr, Schlegel’s confused mixture of contradictions is also discussed by Hans Eichner. Eichner argues that Schlegel referred to “post classical poetry by such expressions as “witty”, or “arabesque form”, “confusions” and “chaos”, asserting for instance that “all romantic poetry in the narrow sense of the word is chaotic””.<sup>103</sup>

Schlegel’s incorporation of a chaotic mixture of witty, arabesque-like contradicting confusions is seen throughout his writing. For example, in *Lucinde*, Schlegel interweaves intricately contradicting phrases in a way that seems intelligible in “A Novel”:

With eternally immutable symmetry, both [the ‘definite’ and the ‘indefinite’; “the warp and the woof”] strive in opposite directions toward the infinite and away from it. In a quiet but sure progression the indefinite expands its innate desire from the beautiful midpoint of the finite into the infinite. The perfectly definite, on the other hand, leaps daringly out of the blessed dream of infinite desire into the limits of finite action, and refining itself, continually increases in magnanimous self-restraint and beautiful self-sufficiency.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 674.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 683.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 673.

<sup>101</sup> Schlegel, *Dialogue*, 97.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>103</sup> Eichner, *Schlegel*, 62.

<sup>104</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde*, 120.

This paragraph seems like the opposite ‘things’ Schlegel seems to be talking about appear to be separate phenomena, or “incomprehensible comprehension”.<sup>105</sup> However, it is the one and same phenomenon, using different words and phrases; each sentence describes a process of emanation, where two elements are ‘moving away’, or expanding out from a centre point or object into infinity, akin to the way an arabesque sprouts out from the centre and both folds and unfolds, infinitely. Schlegel’s ornate language alludes to ordered chaos, where his writing appears to be complex. Daverio also argues that Schlegel’s “arabesque refers to humorous, witty, or sentimental digressions that intentionally disturb the chronological flow of a narrative. But as a total form, the arabesque tempers a seemingly chaotic diversity through a deliberately concealed logical process”.<sup>106</sup> Recognising that Schlegel is referring to arabesques (particularly in his section titled “A Novel”), makes his writing easier to decipher. According to Schlegel, simultaneous imagery of juxtaposed contradictions requires wit and imagination. Its progressive purpose is what makes the literary arabesque a high form of art. Schlegel also refers to Goethe’s poetry as a high form of art, which is to be discussed in the next chapter after examining Schlegel’s use of the literary arabesque in *Dialogue* and *Lucinde*.

## Schlegel’s Arabesque Novels

Schlegel’s *Dialogue on Poetry* is made up of five short sections that do not end with definite endings. For example, “Epochs of Literature” ends with Schlegel’s character, Ludovico saying, “What I have to offer and consider timely for a discussion is a”, without completing what Ludovico has to discuss, nor providing a full stop at the end.<sup>107</sup> Schlegel’s intention of producing indefinite or incomplete endings at the end reflects the way an arabesque does not

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>106</sup> Daverio, “Schlegel’s ‘Arabesque’”, 151.

<sup>107</sup> Schlegel, *Dialogue*, 80.

have a definite ending. Similarly, Nabokov's poem "Pale Fire" and Gogol's *Arabesques* do not provide readers with a sense of a definite endings at the end.

Schlegel's unending sections evoke the way the short stories of *1001 Arabian Nights* are left open-ended for the proceeding story-teller to continue the sequence. Schlegel's characters discuss and answer each other's questions about poetry, drama, and the novel. Each section leads into another as Schlegel has one of his characters answering a question of another character in the previous section. For example, "Letter About the Novel" is Antonio's response to Amalia's various questions in the section before it in "Talk on Mythology". In his letter to Amalia, Antonio writes

But how sparingly and only drop by drop even the small amount of the real in all those books is handed out. Which travelogue, which collection of letters, which autobiography would not be a better novel for one who reads them in the romantic sense than the best of these?

Confessions, especially, mainly by way of the naive, develop of themselves into arabesques. But at best those novels rise to the arabesque only at the end.<sup>108</sup>

Following this section, the final paragraph reads:

Marcus announced some observation about Goethe. "What, again a characterization of a living poet?" asked Antonio. "You will find the answer to your objection in the essay itself", replied Marcus, and he began to read.<sup>109</sup>

This leads the reader into the next section. These sections are left open-ended and their continuity conjures up elements of the arabesque and its continuing circulation from one narrator to another. Furthermore, observation and analysis of Goethe's poetry is also included in the discussion that Schlegel's characters have regarding the literary arabesque. Even though Schlegel does not refer to the arabesque in his final section, "Essay About the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 105.

Different Styles in Goethe's Early and Late Works", Schlegel has nevertheless given Goethe, among many romantic writers, his own section following a discussion on romantic poetry and the literary arabesque. This reveals that Schlegel connects Goethe's writing with the literary arabesque.

Schlegel argues that Goethe's works contain elements of mirror-like symmetries and poetical progression which is the connection and creation of ideas.<sup>110</sup> Schlegel's *Athenaeum Fragment* 116 states, "The Romantic type of poetry is still becoming; indeed, its peculiar essence is that it is always becoming and that it can never be completed".<sup>111</sup> Its inability to be completed is portrayed through the unending style of the literary arabesque. Schlegel also has Marcus reading that "Goethe's art is thoroughly progressive" which is linked with poetic arabesques:

Goethe has worked himself up from such effusions of the first fire as are only possible in a time that is still partially crude and partially already distorted and that is surrounded everywhere by prose and false tendencies, to a height of art which for the first time encompasses the entire poetry of the ancients and the moderns and contains the seed of eternal progression.<sup>112</sup>

The following highlights four observations as to why Schlegel's above argument hints at Schlegel describing Goethe's poetry as literary arabesques. The first is that Schlegel's definition of romantic poetry is the "union of ancient and modern" poetry.<sup>113</sup> The second is that Schlegel refers to the romantic novel as an arabesque (mentioned previously in "The Literary Arabesque: A Romantic Definition). Thirdly, Schlegel's suggestion that all writing is to be treated as poetry is portrayed when he has Amalia asking: "If it goes on like this, before too long one thing after another will be transformed into poetry. Is, then, everything

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 109, 113.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 114.

poetry?”<sup>114</sup> Schlegel’s character, Lothario, responds to Amalia’s question by stating that “Every art and every discipline that functions through language, when exercised as an art for his own sake and when it achieves its highest summit, appears as poetry”.<sup>115</sup> The fourth observation is that Schlegel considers Goethe’s poetry to be a high form of art. He also refers to arabesques as a high form of art, therefore linking Goethe’s poetry with arabesques.

In addition to the last mentioned judgement, Amalia links arabesques with romantic poetry in “Talk on Mythology”:

Here I find great similarity with the marvellous wit of romantic poetry which does not manifest itself in individual conceptions but in the structure of the whole, and which was so often pointed out by our friend for the works of Cervantes and Shakespeare. Indeed, this artfully ordered confusion, this charming symmetry of contradictions, this wonderfully perennial alternation of enthusiasm and irony which lives even in the smallest parts of the whole, seem to me to be an indirect mythology themselves. The organization is the same, and certainly the arabesque is the oldest and most original form of human imagination.<sup>116</sup>

Again, the metaphorical reference of the arabesque to romantic poetry, keeping in mind that Schlegel calls the romantic novel an arabesque, reveals that romantic prose and poetry, to Schlegel, is one and the same, and the text as a whole, is a metaphorical ‘arabesque’.

Furthermore, Schlegel’s *Aphorism* 116 links prose and poetry, art and nature: “Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry... It will, and should, now mingle and now amalgamate poetry and prose, genius and critic, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature”.<sup>117</sup>

Schlegel not only unites poetry and prose in his novel *Lucinde*, but also symmetrically unites letters and play scripts and calls the confused mixture of texts “*a Novel*”.<sup>118</sup> Similar to the way *Pale Fire* integrates diverse sections to form a whole novel, “*Lucinde* is a mixture of

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>118</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde*, 41.



many things. This mixture may, on a first and second reading, seem confusing, and there is perhaps no real consolation knowing that it was meant to be so”.<sup>119</sup> *Lucinde* is “divided into thirteen sections; possesses its vaunted natural or “organic” form ... to show how all the separate parts form a united whole; *Lucinde* displays a kind of formal symmetry: the central section, the “Apprenticeship,” is preceded and followed by six short sections”.<sup>120</sup> That is, Schlegel’s *Lucinde* is structured symmetrically like an arabesque ornament.

Reflections between real and fictional characters also occurs in *Lucinde*. In the “Introduction” to *Lucinde*, provided by Peter Firchow, Firchow argues that Schlegel’s “Julius was a thinly disguised Schlegel and Lucinde a thinly clad Dorothea”.<sup>121</sup> If this be the case, then the reader can assume that Schlegel’s imaginary characters, Julius and Lucinde, are mirror reflections of the real-life Schlegel and his wife, Dorothea.

Reaching into a deeper layer of mirrors within *Lucinde*, Julius also “sees his own light and his own image reflected in” Lucinde.<sup>122</sup> Julius’ character is portrayed as being odd and he is “misunderstood” by his friends which “made him think that his honour was deeply hurt and he felt torn by secret hate”.<sup>123</sup> However, Julius’ sense of being emotionally torn apart disappeared after he met Lucinde. Due to her lively character, Julius enjoys a social life with his companions because “Lucinde united them and kept them going”.<sup>124</sup> Lucinde represents unity and emanation because Julius’

spirit was made whole and enriched in a variety of ways and circumstances. But here too he found full harmony only in Lucinde’s soul – the soul in which the germs of everything magnificent and everything holy awaited only the sunlight of his spirit.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Firchow, “Introduction”, 22.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>123</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde*, 89-90.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 103.

Additionally, the name Lucinde is a name “derived from the Latin *lux* meaning light – [and] is Julius’ illumination” where, through her, he is able to shine in society.<sup>126</sup> Lucinde also tells Julius, “then you see reflected in me... the marvellous flower of your imagination”.<sup>127</sup> Schlegel’s writing portrays reflecting characters through an elaborately ‘flowery’ style of language, reflecting on the arabesque’s mirror-like qualities and ornamental design.

Similar to *Pale Fire*, *Lucinde* expresses metaphorical characterisation of the arabesque art form on two levels. The first is by presenting the novel, as a whole text, as a metaphorical arabesque. The second is by replicating the decorative motifs of the arabesque on a micro-grammatical level, similar to Goethe’s writing style. The following paragraphs outline Schlegel’s use of words that evoke the arabesque’s patterns. While Nabokov’s poem “Pale Fire” circulates back to the beginning the way the arabesque “foliage emanates and spirals back onto itself”, Julius’ experience of love mimics this process.<sup>128</sup> In “Apprenticeship for Manhood”, Schlegel gives the following description of Julius:

There burned in him a love without object that shattered his inner being. At the slightest inducement, the flames of passion would break out; but soon, from pride or willfulness, this passion seemed to scorn its object and would turn back, doubly enraged, on itself and him, in order to feed on the core of his heart. His spirit was in a state of continual turmoil. At any moment he expected something extraordinary to happen to him. Nothing would have surprised him, his own destruction least of all. Without aim and without occupation he moved among things and people like a man who frantically looks for something on which his whole happiness depends.<sup>129</sup>

The repetitive passion that ‘continually’ fed on the centre of his heart reflects the way an arabesque’s continuous line repeatedly returns back to the centre, or initial starting point of the ornament. Julius’ ‘passion’ that ‘fed on the core of his heart’ also reflects the way the

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<sup>126</sup> Firchow, “Introduction”, 24.

<sup>127</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde*, 126.

<sup>128</sup> Kühnel, *The Arabesque*, 14.

<sup>129</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde*, 77.

arabesque revives itself from its centre where the embellishments emanate from. Hence, it portrays the continuous spanning rupture of Julius' passion, akin to the arabesque's outflow of fragmented portions, and its objective of 'turning back' and being united by its core. As this process of the arabesque in construction seems to be in a state of regulated chaos, Julius' 'spirit' is also 'in a state of continual turmoil'

Furthermore, 'Without aim and without occupation' evokes the philosophical analysis of the arabesque as it's "spirited contour" 'moves' without any purpose.<sup>130</sup> During the early stages of the arabesque's development, its goal was believed to simply return to its beginning and continue the process with no attached "symbolic meaning" and devoid of "a meaningful purpose".<sup>131</sup> Schlegel also mentions a love interest of Julius before he met Lucinde which describes a woman who had "no real joy or cheerfulness, or even spirit, except for just enough intelligence and wit to mix everything up intentionally and pointlessly", which ironically resembles the same as early thoughts of the arabesque.<sup>132</sup>

Also in *Lucinde*, metaphorically speaking, Julius is the continuous line of the arabesque that represents 'divine order' as he feels he needs to control and govern both Lucinde and Antonio.<sup>133</sup> Simultaneously, Lucinde is also the intertwining vine because she is the character that binds the characters as well as the diverse sections together. I write 'vine' because, like both nature and femininity, she reproduces and gives birth to Julius' child, who, as the third character, further unites them. This links with Plato's argument (mentioned in Chapter 1) that a third element in the middle is necessary to combine two different forms of matter. The middle becomes the first source of fusing the two ends together, forming a unity, hence, the two ends both simultaneously become first, last and middle, and middle becomes first and last, creating a complete 'whole'.

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<sup>130</sup> Kühnel, *The Arabesque*, 7.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>132</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde*, 82.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

Three main motifs of the arabesque developed by Schlegel are identified in this section. The first is in correspondence with Goethe's use of the literary arabesques which consists of intricately ornate words and phrases that hold characteristics of a real arabesque ornament. Additionally, Schlegel also includes oxymoron and paradoxical expression in his writing such as 'finitely infinite' phenomena which reflect the arabesque art work's infinite continuity in a finite amount of space. The second is symmetrically structuring his 'novels', as he did with *Lucinde*. The third is reflected in his *Dialogue* where he leaves the endings of each section unfinished in order for his others to continue the narrative from the previous section. The unending continuity of narratives resembles the open-ended and continuing stories of *Arabian Nights*. The arabesque also does not have a specific ending and is in a symmetrically ever-continuing state.

## Goethe's Arabesques

Goethe's initial reaction to arabesques was one of discomfort. However, he later came to appreciate the decorative ornament.<sup>134</sup> Prior to his visit to Pompeii, the "decorative elements based on foliage [and] tendrils ... were referred to as 'grotesques' and 'arabesques' by travellers", which caused Goethe to perceive the arabesques as a negative art work.<sup>135</sup> However, following Goethe's own sighting of the art work (which irritated him at first), and after an extended period of contemplation, according to Thorsten Fitton's translated version, Goethe concluded that

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<sup>134</sup> Goethe wrote an essay after his visit to Pompeii called *Die Arabeske* (The Arabesque; or Fitton's translated version, "On Arabesques"). However, it is written in the German language which I cannot read or interpret, nor I have been successful in finding an English translation. My assessment of Goethe's perception of the arabesque is based on previously established research, publications and English translations. Interpretations of the figurative literary arabesque of his poetry in *West-East Divan* is my own.

<sup>135</sup> Fitton, "Goethe's Repeated Approaches", 20-21; The words 'arabesque' and 'grotesque' were quasi-synonymous during this time.

the arabesques of this time were not wasteful of art, but rather an efficient *saving of art!* The wall was not intended to be a *single, unified* work of art. Instead, it was meant to be decorated as a friendly and pleasing object. A proportionally good artwork which would attract the eye and satisfy the intellect was intended for its middle.<sup>136</sup>

In addition to his observation of the arabesque's simplistic unity, Goethe's impression of the artwork was one of 'space' and he focused on the 'middle' location of the ornament as a point of attraction. It is indeed the centre point of the arabesque where the pattern expands out from and then returns to. Fitzon also argues that although

Goethe initially found the arabesques rather distressing, however, it is not mentioned in his essay 'On Arabesques'. It is merely in his apologetic gesture that he shows his disagreement with such dogmatic critics of ornamentation ... while justifying himself why he finds so much pleasure in the decorative art of Pompeii despite the fact that it technically contradicts the norms of classicism.<sup>137</sup>

Goethe's oscillating feelings with regard to the arabesque contributes to a confused critique of his true intentions regarding the art work. Nonetheless, one can conclude that although he did not entirely disagree with the art work, Goethe did not favour the arabesque as a highly valued work of art: "he considers the arabesque to be a subordinate art form".<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, Fitzon states that

Goethe was not willing to agree with Romanticism's reinterpretation of the arabesque, as brought forth, for example, in the *Fragments* of Friedrich Schlegel, who transformed it from a marginal to a central principle of art.<sup>139</sup>

This observation again leads to an ambiguous critique in determining how Goethe viewed the arabesque.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 22.

Despite his rejection of Schlegel's arabesque as a literary style, Goethe, nonetheless, still produced work that evoked the arabesque's floral design. Katharina Mommsen argues that due to his "attraction to [the] Eastern tradition" and fascination with Arabic literature, Goethe channelled the arabesque's decorative motifs into his poems.<sup>140</sup> Goethe was highly influenced by the tales of Sheherezade in *The Arabian Nights*. As a young boy, his mother read him these Arabic stories translated into German. The influence of Arabic literature, and particularly the arabesque writing style in *Arabian Nights*, projected into his writing which included "interweaving ... words... in the form of a flowery wreath of intertwined loops".<sup>141</sup> Hence, Goethe's poetry also incorporated characteristics of the arabesque.

As stated above, Goethe's initial observation of the arabesque in Pompeii was its emphasis of its 'middle' which is also the start and end of the arabesque. Goethe portrays this characteristics of the arabesque in his poem, "Unbounded":

That you can make no ending makes you great;  
That you have no beginning is your fate.  
Your song turns round, a star-vault heaven frame;  
Beginning, ending, evermore the same;  
And the clear import of the middle part  
Is present at the end, as at the start.<sup>142</sup>

Kühnel describes the way Goethe's poem from "Hafez Nameh" (1814-1819) echoes "a single, continuous and apparently unending melody ... bubbling up and then fading away in harmonies just as does [sic] the continuously branching of [the arabesque's] scrollwork".<sup>143</sup> Goethe's poem also reflects the way the arabesque ornament is capable of beginning where it ends, continuing where it starts, or beginning in the middle. Goethe's poem provides the perfect description of an arabesque ornament because its beginning and ending are the same

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<sup>140</sup> Mommsen, *Goethe*, 1.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>142</sup> Goethe, "Unbounded", *West-East Divan*, 23.

<sup>143</sup> Kühnel, *The Arabesque*, 10.

and the middle is at the start as well as at the end. Hence, the poem that was originally named “Hafez”, has been renamed to “Unbounded”.

The title’s reflection of the limitless circulation between beginning, middle and end also refers to Goethe’s limitless devotion to the Persian poet, Hafez of Shiraz, Iran.<sup>144</sup> Hafez is the pen name of Mohammed Shams-e-Din (1320-1390) who learnt to recite the Qur’an off by heart. Due to his ability to recite sections of the Qur’an at any given time, he was named Hafez, referring to a ‘safe-keeper’ of the words of the Qur’an. The name “Al-Hafez” is also the 39<sup>th</sup> out of the 100 (including Allah) Names of Allah, meaning the Protector or the Preserver, whilst “Na’meh” means a blessing.<sup>145</sup>

Goethe’s inspiration to imitate Hafez’s poetry in *West-East Divan* was due to their multiple shared interests. Both were lovers of “eternal beauty”, “wine”, “immortal thought” and cherished the “ability to produce poetry of everlasting appeal”.<sup>146</sup> Both Hafez and Goethe also shared the unfortunate fate of “living in periods of great political turmoil and disturbance”.<sup>147</sup> Hence, their poetry expresses their resentment of infinite bloodshed and endless wars.<sup>148</sup>

In the second stanza of “Unbounded”, Goethe writes to Hafez, “Of joys you are the truest poet-spring, / that wave on wave unnumbered up will fling”.<sup>149</sup> Again, Goethe repeats his emphasis of ‘the infinite’ with “wave on wave unnumbered” which circulates back to the notion of eternal rhythms.<sup>150</sup> The last line of “Unbounded” suggests a sense of ‘uncompleted completion’ as Goethe writes, “You have united old and new”.<sup>151</sup> He completes the poem with only two lines in the final stanza while the previous three stanzas contain six lines each,

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<sup>144</sup> Baroudy, “Hafez and Goethe”, 236.

<sup>145</sup> Mommsen, *Goethe*, 125.

<sup>146</sup> Baroudy, “Hafez and Goethe”, 223, 224, 240.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>149</sup> Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 23.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

leaving readers wondering whether to return to the first line which reads “That you can make no ending makes you great”.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, in his poem Goethe writes to Hafez that he (Hafez) ‘unites old and new’ because similar events that occurred (war) during the times of Hafez are also happening in Goethe’s present, hence uniting both past, future and present experiences.<sup>153</sup> Goethe’s indication of ‘unity’ at the end of “Unbounded”, which portrays a sense of Hafez entering Goethe’s present and Goethe simultaneously returning to Hafez’s present, which is Goethe’s past, evokes the way the arabesque returns to its beginning during its final stage of construction and completion of the ornament.

Another example of Goethe channelling the arabesque into his poetry by producing intricate elaborative words and sentences that evoke patterns of the arabesque is in his final poem in *West-East Divan*:

No longer on silken leaf  
Do I write symmetric rhymes;  
No more do I enfold them  
In golden scrollings;  
What for shifting sand are designated  
The wind wafts over, yet the strength remains,  
Firm to the center of the earth,  
Bound to the soil.<sup>154</sup>

Once again, an arabesque ornament comes to view with words and phrases such as ‘symmetrical rhymes’, ‘enfoldment’, ‘scrollings’, ‘centre’ and ‘bound’. Although Goethe writes that he “no longer / ... [writes] symmetrical rhymes” in his final poem no. 249 of Bidney’s version of *West-East Divan*, nonetheless, he is acknowledging his symmetrically

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 172.



rhythmic writing style.<sup>155</sup> It also portrays his youthful investment in the arabesque writing style.

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

## Chapter 3: Gogol's Arabesques

The primary focus of this chapter is to explain how Nikolai Gogol's *Arabesques* performs the literary arabesque. This chapter also illustrates the book as an imagined literary arabesque that metaphorically represents a real arabesque ornament. The arabesque's decorative motifs identified in *Arabesques* correlate with themes of fragmented wholeness. This includes elements of fractal art since both fractals and arabesques contain similar recursive fragmented patterns.

### *Arabesques* and Gogol

Gogol's *Arabesques* is made up of two parts containing three short stories and thirteen essays that cover a range of historical, geographical, political, religious and aesthetic topics. Gogol claims that he did not write them in any particular order: "This collection is made up pieces which I wrote at different times, in different periods of my life. I did not write them in any order".<sup>156</sup> However, the "pieces" follow an organized structure as they are ordered as: Preface, three essays, one fiction, six essays, one fiction, four essays, one fiction. In terms of the arabesque's exactness of proportion, this does not reflect perfect symmetry. However, Gogol's book is also made up of two parts in which the first and second both contain eight sections, splitting the book into two equal parts. Nonetheless, the first part contains seven essays and one fiction, while the second part contains six essays and two fictions, disrupting a credible argument for *Arabesques*' representation of perfect symmetrical structure, as a real arabesque ornament does. Melissa Frazier also argues that *Arabesques* "fails as a collection" referring to the book's concept of fragmented wholeness.<sup>157</sup> However, the fragmented

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<sup>156</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 23.

<sup>157</sup> Frazier, "Space and Genre", 453.

sections united as a whole book and titled *Arabesques* does allude to the way a real arabesque ornament unites diverse elements.

During the nineteenth century, critics shunned Gogol's works, particularly his *Selected Passages*, which was greatly disapproved of by Belinsky.<sup>158</sup> However, Maguire states that Gogol "constantly complained of being misunderstood".<sup>159</sup> Apart from the arabesque art form, Gogol's works have been interpreted through various thematic lenses including religious, social, economic, death, psychology and even universal demonism.<sup>160</sup> Gogol depicts the devil as an international motif in his fiction, "The Portrait", in *Arabesques* as the "stranger" who plays the role of 'looking in' on society's alienation.<sup>161</sup> Bidoshi states that

In Russian texts of the earlier half of the nineteenth century, the figure of the stranger was used as an evaluative tool. The community portrayed through the eyes of a visitor was praised or condemned on a more objective level, under the assumption that the outsider can perceive (and name) that which insiders can or will not or are too close to see. This stranger became a substitute for the national reader, who was educated along with the protagonist.<sup>162</sup>

Furthermore, nineteenth century Russian literature, including Gogol's *Arabesques*, were characterised as the chronotope, "a term employed by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtain (1895-1975) to refer to the co-ordinates of time and space invoked by a given narrative" and presented in realism.<sup>163</sup>

During the twentieth century, critical attention was focused on Gogol because his writing style was recognised for its "inimitable use of language as aesthetic values independent of content. His art was approached as a verbal construct, the formal linguistic

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<sup>158</sup> Maguire, *Twentieth Century*, 9, 28.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>160</sup> Maguire, *Twentieth Century*, 8, 18, 20, 30, 31.

<sup>161</sup> Bidoshi, "The Stranger", 3.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>163</sup> Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 60.

structures and mechanisms of which could be objectively examined and analysed”.<sup>164</sup> This was only possible during the mid-1900s when socialist realism and socialist realistic art was on the rise in order to “promote progressive political goals” in the Soviet Union.<sup>165</sup> Despite the negative connotations behind Gogol’s language, Jenness argues that

as far as aesthetics is concerned, [Gogol] expressed his ideas rather consistently over two decades, and although his statements may strike one as overdrawn at times, there is no reason to doubt his sincere belief in certain principles on which he attempted to base his creative practice.<sup>166</sup>

Gogol’s creative practices for *Arabesques* is analysed in terms of a metaphorical arabesque by both Frazier and Jenness.

Furthermore, Gogol’s *Arabesques* interweaves the arabesque and the literary chronotope (time space). Gogol had developed the idea of the literary arabesque from Schlegel who established his notion of the metaphorical arabesque in substitution for the novel from Novalis’ integration of the mathematical metaphor in literature.<sup>167</sup> Chronotopes are employed through literary criticism, however, time-space is also expressed through graphic arts as space-time fractals. Since Gogol’s *Arabesques* consists of both literary arabesques and fractal motifs, we will examine the fractal elements identified in *Arabesques*. This is necessary for discussing Gogol’s “Nevsky Prospect” because the motifs of fractals coincide with the arabesque.

### **Imagery of Fractal Art and the Arabesque in *Arabesques***

In this section, I focus on “Nevsky Prospect” in *Arabesques* because the arabesque’s bifurcating stem, as well as fractals, can be visualised when reading the story of Gogol’s

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<sup>164</sup> Jenness, *Gogol’s Aesthetics*, 2.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>167</sup> Theisen, “Absolute Chaos”, 301-321.

character's, Piskarev and Pirogov. In "Nevsky Prospect", the plot begins with two main characters, Piskarev and Pirogov, in a single place before they set off in different directions. After revealing the experiences of Piskarev, the story returns to its starting point (like the crisscrossing line in Figure 14 that will always find its way back to the central star), the story then continues in another direction which narrates the experiences of Pirogov.

Firstly, understanding fractal art can hopefully assist in visualising the patterns of Nikolai Gogol's style of writing and the plot of "Nevsky Prospect", which is his chaotic vision of a whole city (St Petersburg) based on a road within that city. With regard to time and place, the fusion of infinite space expanding from a single finite time is referred to as space-time. Space-time fractals are associated with geometric algebra and repetition.<sup>168</sup> Gogol's projection of fragments in "Nevsky Prospect" is similar to fractals.

Fractal art is a composition of repeatable units on a multidimensional grid which is generated by algorithmic rules so that it is "subdivided again and again ... giving rise to a seemingly infinite series of evermore detailed events of great variety".<sup>169</sup> The reverse is also true as the artwork can begin to project outwards from a fixed spot "and creates a repeating motif which decreases in size from the centre outwards".<sup>170</sup>

However, fractal art is not merely repetition. It is "similar" repetition, or "self-similar" repeated iteration; it produces the same shape or pattern, but on a different scale or size (as in ratios) as a "rescaled version of the complete figure".<sup>171</sup> Notice how Figure 13 contains small circles which are the exact same pattern as the larger scaled circles and one of the parts is a reflection of the whole.<sup>172</sup>

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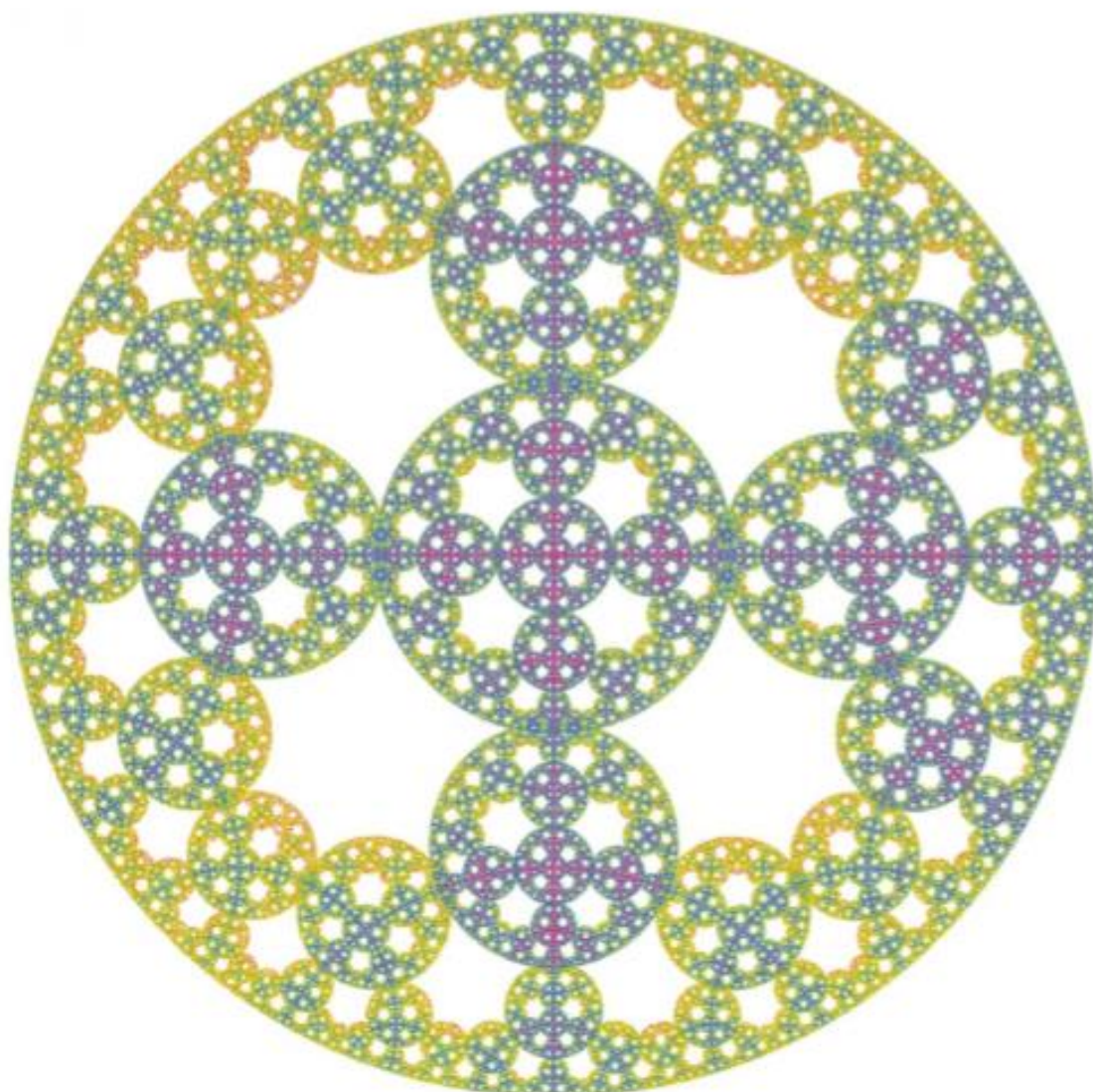
<sup>168</sup> Geometric and fractal art are similar to those used in "E. C. Escher's drawings of infinitely receding patterns, inspired by patterns he observed at the Alhambra" (Marks, *Enfoldment*, 59).

<sup>169</sup> Marks, *Enfoldment*, 61.

<sup>170</sup> Adcock et al., "Symmetry in the Hyperbolic Plane", 791.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 794.

<sup>172</sup> For information on how 2D fractals can be extended to form 3D fractal models, see Nikiel, Slawek & Goinski, Adam. "Generation of Volumetric Escape Time Fractals". *Computers and Graphics* 27, no. 6 (2003): 981; For escape-time fractals, see Wareham, R and J Lasenby. "Generating Fractals Using Geometric Algebra".



**Figure 13. Fractal: “Fourfold rotations around the centres of the circular cells as well as reflections across them”.<sup>173</sup>**

Gogol produces the same process in “Nevsky Prospect” as a literary style of writing. In mathematical fractals, vectors can exist as real vectors on 2D planes as  $e_r$  or as complex vectors on complex planes as  $e_i$ , where ‘e’ is a vector, ‘r’ is a real number and ‘i’ is an

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*Advances in Applied Clifford Algebras* 21, no. 3 (2011): 647-659. For Escher’s infinite tessellations, see page 653.

<sup>173</sup> Adcock et al., “Symmetry in the Hyperbolic Plane”, 794.

imaginary number.<sup>174</sup> Basically, the linking idea here is that similar to the way fractals can be displayed on both real and imaginary planes, the literary arabesque has also been transferred from a real arabesque ornament (that we can visually see), to an imaginary arabesque as a literary style (an imagined literary arabesque). The conflict between real and imaginary worlds are portrayed in Gogol's "Nevsky Prospect" which can be depicted as his substitution of a real arabesque ornament for an imaginary arabesque book.

Gogol portrays Nevsky Prospect as being a fragmented representation of the whole of St Petersburg. Nevsky Prospect is a road in the town of St Petersburg, Russia, which Gogol describes as a sparkling road that "epitomizes the whole town". This is evoked in the arabesque art work in Figure 14 where an emanating line projected from a star expands to form a larger picture of more images of stars. Here, the "line multiplies, branches and doubles back on itself, until it takes on an additional dimension: it almost becomes a plane, fractal style".<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, it bifurcates from a single point and travels in various directions.

The events that Piskarev and Pirogov experience in "Nevsky Prospect" evoke the way the arabesque vine bifurcates and each new stem travels along a new path. During their time in Nevsky Prospect, Piskarev and Pirogov each spot two different women who they both fancy. They then both separate from one another like bifurcating shoots of arabesques setting off on different paths. Gogol first narrates the story of Piskarev to where he follows a young lady up the stairs and into a room. Piskarev is disappointed to discover that she is a prostitute and she declines his offer to marry her. Unable to comprehend reality's disappointment, Piskarev enters an unreal world that permeates his dreams as well as his waking life. Piskarev's life becomes a nightmare, and his sleeps become endless fantasies

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<sup>174</sup>  $e_i$  produces an imaginary vector on a complex (imaginary) plane and models a fractal pattern. Fractal arrangements can extend to 3D and even 4D images. See Wareham, R and J Lasenby, "Generating Fractals Using Geometric Algebra". *Advances in Applied Clifford Algebras* 21, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>175</sup> Marks, *Enfoldment*, 57.



**Figure 14. “Geometric pattern of interlocking stars”.<sup>176</sup>**

of encounters with his love interest. He constantly meets the lady in his dreams, but their meetings do not reach a goal because she disappears just before he wakes up. Piskarev becomes driven to insanity and eventually takes his own life and “thus perished poor Piskarev”.<sup>177</sup> Gogol then circulates back in time to continue the experiences of Pirogov “where he departed from poor Piskarev”.<sup>178</sup> This evokes the arabesque’s bifurcating path

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>177</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 173.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 174.



turning back on itself. The pattern of the plot is also similar to the way the arabesque's interweaving line (see Figure 14) travels along a path only to return to its main starting point to where it began only to continue the process.

As the story of Pirogov continues, more images of dividing arabesque stems can be perceived as Gogol portrays the differences between the characters of Piskarev and Pirogov. In contrast to Piskarev's encounters, Pirogov has no intention in marrying the lady he follows and assumes he is pursuing a prostitute. However, Pirogov discovers that she is not a prostitute but a loyal wife of a German craftsman named Schiller. Despite this, Pirogov is determined to follow his desires and attempts to seduce Schiller's wife, hence, "the Germans grabbed Pirogov by the arms and legs" which resulted in a "tragic event" for Pirogov.<sup>179</sup> Due to his rage at Pirogov's behaviour, and considering "a lash too light for a punishment", Schiller sets out to notify the Headquarters.<sup>180</sup> As he takes a stroll down Nevsky Prospect, Schiller's rage is gone and he decides "not to disturb the General on a Sunday" and Pirogov's actions go unpunished by the authorities.<sup>181</sup> In contrast to Pirogov's bad behaviour that is eventually brushed off by Schiller, Piskarev's innocent intention leads him to his death. The paradoxical fate of these characters are also depicted as split and fragmented.

One of Schlegel's notions of the literary arabesque is symmetrical contradictions, and this is identified in the story of "Nevsky Prospect". Through his characters and events, Gogol portrays Nevsky Prospect as a fragmented representation of the whole of St Petersburg. At the beginning of "Nevsky Prospect", he writes that "There is no finer sight than Nevsky

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 183. Nevsky Prospect, along with the rest of Gogol's fictional stories and essays in *Arabesques*, portray the type of racial and stereotypical writing that Gogol adopted during the beginning of his writing career. His *Arabesques* and *Selected Passages from a Correspondence with Friends* (1847) was heavily shunned by 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian critics due to his Christian religious conservatism. Furthermore, his depiction of Jewish stereotypes is also present in *Arabesques*. For a history of post-Soviet culture and the various allegorical stereotypes and prejudice against the Jews incorporated in Russian writing during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Shrayar, Maxim. "Anti-Semitism and the Decline of Russian Village Prose". *Partisan Review* 67, no. 3 (2000): 474-485.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 184.

Prospect, at least not in St Petersburg; it epitomizes the whole town”.<sup>182</sup> Gogol also presents Nevsky Prospect to be a place of illusions and deception. Upon narrating the strange thoughts that people conjure up on Nevsky Prospect, Gogol tells his readers “never believe Nevsky Prospect” because “it’s all an illusion” and “everything breathes deception”.<sup>183</sup> Frazier also argues that

“Nevsky Prospect” is crowded with these strange characters whom you meet on Nevsky Prospect, sometimes presented in full but more often characterised through metonymy... [and] the reader meets parts and not wholes, although parts which are presumably capable of conjuring up wholes.<sup>184</sup>

Frazier suggests that the fragmented events, such as Piskarev’s events being told separately to Pirogov’s which both occur at the same time, represent the whole of St Petersburg through Gogol’s chronotope. Like space-time fractals and the fractal image in Figure 13, one section of the pattern reflects the whole decoration and the fourfold circles are symmetrically reflected from the centre circle at the same time. Furthermore, Gogol depicts the strangeness of the consequences of Piskarev and Pirogov through motifs of symmetrical contradictions, which reinforces one of Schlegel’s concepts of the literary arabesque.

## **Gogol’s Metaphorical Arabesque**

This section discusses how Gogol attempted to unite all cultures in *Arabesques* by constantly emphasising symbols or ideas of a “middle” object or place as a mediator between two places or things. This relates to Plato’s argument of a middle element which combines two ends, hence, forming a single unit. An arabesque design is a visual example of this concept. The decoration is united by a single line that interweaves different shapes. The line can be traced

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 184-185.

<sup>184</sup> Frazier, *Frames*, 81. This evokes the visual image of fractal art in Figure 13.

starting at any random point, thus a real beginning, middle or end does not exist, yet can also exist simultaneously because any point can be the start, middle or end. This is also true for the reading process of *Arabesques*. The different sections can be read in any particular order and the same reading effect is achieved; an actual beginning, middle or end does not exist in *Arabesques*.

In *Arabesques*, Gogol fuses together different places and opposite experiences of his characters which evokes the motifs of Figure 14. Figure 14 is a single decoration that unites different objects by a single interweaving line. These objects, although they harmonise together in a single decoration, remain distant and dissimilar to one another. It contains two irregular polygons, one of which has six sides, and another four. The stars also show one with five points and another with eight points. The dissonance of these objects gives the decoration a sense of fragmented wholeness by fusing disparate shapes.

Three examples of a linking ‘device’ that Gogol uses in *Arabesques* is the ‘frame’, the Caucasus and the Ukraine. The frame in “The Portrait” takes on the role as a ‘middle’ border that unites, as well as separates, not only the natural and supernatural worlds of Gogol’s character, Chertkov, but also his negative and positive fates. The artist Chertkov is barely able to pay his rent. After purchasing a portrait and realising that it is a portrait of the devil, Chertkov leaves it in the shop and flees home, leaving behind the very little amount of money that he has. The following day, Chertkov sees that the portrait has somehow made its way into his apartment by what can only be supernatural activity. The devil in “The portrait” is a trope for restriction of freedom.<sup>185</sup> Chertkov is unable to escape poverty, nor is he able to, as an artist, use his talents to succeed. As Chertkov begins to envision the devil capable of

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<sup>185</sup> Bidoshi, “The Stranger”, 6.

crossing the boundaries of the frame and stand in front of Chertkov, the frame therefore “in some way represents the meeting point of the space of art and space of life”.<sup>186</sup>

The frame also represents a turning point in Chertkov’s life when policemen enter his apartment to collect the rent money that Chertkov owes his landlord. Attempting to confiscate the portrait, an officer places his hands on the frame which cracks and a “jingling bundle of gold [falls] onto the floor”.<sup>187</sup> Chertkov’s discovery that the portrait had gold hidden inside the frame allowed him to pay the rent in full and move to a better apartment. His life then transitions from poverty to a wealthy one, portraying the frame as the linking point of transition, as well as the border of separation between good and bad.

Gogol also presents the Caucasus as both a place of separation and a border where two different areas meet. The Caucasus is a mountainous region situated at the border of Europe and Asia, and the Caspian Sea and Black Sea. In “A Few Words About Pushkin”, Gogol refers to the Caucasus as a central theme, or a middle path, between the West and East. After displeasing the “Government for writing some verses on liberty and for his liberal utterances” in 1820, Pushkin was exiled from Russia and spent some time in the Caucasus.<sup>188</sup> Pushkin then wrote his poem *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822). After visiting the Fountain of Tears at the Khan Palace, Pushkin also wrote *The Fountain of Bakhchisaray* (1840). Gogol describes Pushkin as “Russia’s national poet” and an “exceptional phenomenon” to the history of Russia through his literature.

The Caucasus was, to Pushkin, in Gogol’s view, the linking place that distinguished Pushkin’s bad writing from his good writing. After rising to popular fame, Pushkin eventually began to produce works of “unending follies”.<sup>189</sup> Gogol blames Pushkin’s diminishing “brilliance” on the fact that “his last poems were written by him at a time when

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<sup>186</sup> Frazier, “Space and Genre”, 455.

<sup>187</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 66.

<sup>188</sup> Wiener, “Aleksánder”, 125.

<sup>189</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 110.

the Caucasus was hidden, hidden from him”.<sup>190</sup> It was Pushkin’s exile to “Caucasus and its freedom-loving inhabitants” that served as the source of inspiration for Pushkin’s writing. Bidoshi’s argument that the devil in Gogol’s “The Portrait” is also an international motif also relates to Gogol’s “A Few Words About Pushkin”, particularly that the devil in Gogol’s story has “Eastern features”, suggesting a foreign stranger.<sup>191</sup> Gogol depicts Pushkin’s good quality Russian writing when he was in exile looking in to Russia.<sup>192</sup> Similarly, Gogol’s Russian writing is from a Ukrainian perspective; Gogol looking in on Russia from Ukraine. Both writers are at a liminal position, oscillating between Russia and Gogol’s homeland, or Russia and exile.

Similarly, Ukraine also represents a central point. In “A Glance at the Composition of Little Russia”, Gogol critiques the ‘unity’ that existed among the people in Russia: “all of one faith, one tribe, one language, all stamped with the same character and all of which, it seemed, were united against their will”.<sup>193</sup> Gogol merges many nations in this section in order to explain the history of Russia and Ukraine. He blames Ukraine’s geographical location, for being placed in the centre where other nations pass through, rather than the time in history, for its ongoing war that occurred between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. Bidoshi argues that “place ... represents for Gogol not an east – west disjunction but a single individual’s place within, for example, Petersburg or between east or west” and she also argues that Gogol represents St Petersburg as a liminal place.<sup>194</sup> Similarly, Ukraine is situated between, as well holding positions of both sides’ borders which made the region susceptible to war. War subsequently created economic classes and resulted in southern Russia to be

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>191</sup> Bidoshi, “The Stranger”, 6, 8.

<sup>192</sup> In “The Anglo-Arab Encounter”, Edward Said argues that there exists “an estimably substantial library of English-language but non-English works” (Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 405). Similarly, Pushkin’s Russian poetry reflects his source of inspiration from Caucasus and Gogol’s Russian writing dominates a Ukrainian perspective and voice. The same also applies to Nabokov who was born Russian, writes in English, yet his works are Russian.

<sup>193</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 98.

<sup>194</sup> Bidoshi, “The Stranger”, 5.

“separated completely from the north” and formed two states.<sup>195</sup> Hence, its uniting element is the cause for its transition into a fragmented nation, just as the uniting line in Figure 14 separates the stars and hexagons.

Gogol later contradicts his initial argument and criticism of ‘unity’ by criticising ‘separation’ between Rus and Lithuania which were once united nations and connected to Russia:

But there was no longer any communication between them. Different laws, different customs, a different goal, different connections and different exploits formed two nations of entirely different characteristics for a time.<sup>196</sup>

Despite Gogol’s initial disagreement with the idea of unity, which meant people were tied to the same customs, he nonetheless also disapproves of nations being separated and different.

Gogol conjures up images of the arabesque’s motif of ‘fragmented wholeness’ as he continues on to explain that these differences are the cause of ‘location’:

The purpose of the study of our history is to see how this happened. But first of all, we must take a look at the geographical position of this country which, doubtless, preceded everything as in the complexion of life ... Much in history is decided by geography.<sup>197</sup>

Gogol circulates back in time to re-unite all nations separated by war in “this land which later became known as the Ukraine”.<sup>198</sup> He portrays that it is their diversity which sometimes unites them. For example, the Cossacks were united by their “eternal fear and eternal danger [that] instilled in them”.<sup>199</sup> He also implies that history is forever repeating itself when he states that “afterwards, the same carefree dissipated life would return ... This nation, it

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<sup>195</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 103.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

seemed, would exist forever”.<sup>200</sup> This evokes the fragmented form of the arabesque which is a mix of diverse shapes and objects such as in Figure 14 that appear to be situated independently of one another. However, they are intertwined and united by a single line that seems to be floating away. Yet, this line returns to its initial point and continues along the same path forever. In Gogol’s essay, “Little Russia”, he represents Ukraine as the space in the middle that intersects diverse nations.

Gogol himself also represents a ‘midway’ in addition to the three themes mentioned above, (the Caucasus, the Ukraine and the frame). Gogol was born in Ukraine and moved to Russia to pursue his career. Bidoshi argues that “Gogol was never really at home, neither in the Ukraine, nor in Russia”.<sup>201</sup> Additionally, “Gogol’s liminal position on the threshold of two worlds” suggests he oscillated between the place of his birth and the place where he attained his writer’s identity.<sup>202</sup> Similarly, Nabokov shared this experience:

Through two decades of Western European emigration, he had suffered from a sense of agonizing distance from the Russia he had loved so dearly as a child. Curtained from Cambridge by his nostalgia, isolated from Berlin by language and by choice, irked by his penniless and unsettled existence in Paris, he had found in America the fulfilment of his young dreams.<sup>203</sup>

If Gogol reflects the midpoint between Ukraine and Russia, therefore, Ukraine is beginning point at one end (the beginning of Gogol’s life). However, Russia is also the beginning point of Gogol’s writing career. Like the arabesque that has no real beginning, middle or end, yet, all points are simultaneously the beginning, middle and end, Gogol, the Caucasus and the Ukraine also evoke a central position. Additionally, Ukraine seems to be simultaneously holding positions of beginning, middle and end, akin to an arabesque.

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>201</sup> Bidoshi, “The Stranger”, 19.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>203</sup> Boyd, *American Years*, 4.

## Conclusion

It is not until the reader reaches the end of *Arabesques* that the implied realisation that *Arabesques* is a metaphorical arabesque is made. Paul Waszink argues that *Arabesques* follows an intended pattern which evolves throughout the text and completes a “vicious circle”.<sup>204</sup> He bases his argument on the way that “an empty space in the form of incomplete information or an unanswered question brings about the effect of a vicious circle in a narrative”.<sup>205</sup> *Arabesques* ends with a very unusual finale and event that is completely unrelated to Gogol’s character, Poprishchin, in “The Diary of a Madman” (This is examined in Chapter 4). Again, Gogol makes an unexpected outcome possible at the end of his book, leaving the reader questioning where to go to next for a comprehensible conclusion of *Arabesques*. It also adds to the fragmented nature of *Arabesques* as Gogol unites different themes and plots in a single book, the same way he attempts to unite nations in his essays, only to fragment them, as in Figure 14. This achieves *Arabesques*’ motif of ‘fragmented wholeness’.

The symmetrically ordered fragmentation of Piskarev’s and Pirogov’s fate which reflects the whole town literarily iterates the motifs of the fractal art in Figure 13. The roles of real and imagined events for Piskarev and Pirogov are reversed, portraying symmetrical contradictions between the similar, yet, different characters. In visual artistic expression, this corresponds with Figure 13 where digital fractal art can be depicted on both real and imaginary planes. Gogol’s *Arabesques* is presented as an imaginary arabesque book which resembles the characteristics of a real arabesque ornament.

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<sup>204</sup> Waszink, “Writers and Readers”, 82.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.



## Chapter 4: Nabokov and Gogol

A significant role that Nikolai Gogol plays in this thesis is his prominent connection to Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov wrote a book entirely devoted to the life of Gogol called *Nikolai Gogol* (1944). In this book, Nabokov refers to Gogol's *Arabesques* as "patchy" and not as lively as his later progressive works such as *Dead Souls* (1842) and *The Overcoat* (1842).<sup>206</sup> Like the arabesque which begins where it ends and ends where it starts, Nabokov's *Nikolai Gogol* begins with Gogol's death and ends with his birth. Furthermore, just as modernism provided a leeway for individual expression as well as a writer's rendering of cubism, realism and futurism (to name a few), Nabokov also incorporated concepts of the arabesque in *Pale Fire*.<sup>207</sup> Additionally, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* seems to pick up from where Gogol left off in *Arabesques* as if to 'complete' the pattern. He subsequently presents Gogol's *Arabesques* as an 'infinite' text that does not end. Thus, the Eastern tradition of the arabesque was subsequently adopted as a writing style in modernism as well as postmodernism.

After discussing similarities between the lives of Gogol and Nabokov, I will then argue that Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Gogol's *Arabesques* are similar literary arabesques. In my discussion, I will show that the literary arabesque is Nabokov's and Gogol's writing style in which the motifs of the arabesque have interpretative potential. For example, the arabesque's interweaving contour that unites beginning, middle and end positions of the pattern portrays the oscillation of characters and authors between past, present and future.

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<sup>206</sup> Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 31.

<sup>207</sup> Iftikhar Dadi's article "Sadequain and Calligraphic Modernism" examines the life of Pakistani artist, Sadequain Naqqash (1930-1987), who reworked the calligraphic motifs into Muslim aesthetics as a transnational modernist movement called "calligraphic modernism" during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nabokov's incorporation of the arabesque in *Pale Fire* is of the same modernist concept. See Dadi, Iftikhar. *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Accessed March 14, 2018. Proquest Ebook Central.

## Gogol and Nabokov

Apart from both being Russian writers and sharing similar life experiences (living and writing in a country other than their place of birth), Nabokov and Gogol also wrote literary arabesques. However, Nabokov completely omits the word ‘arabesque’ in both *Pale Fire*, which might not seem so surprising to many readers, and in *Nikolai Gogol*, which is surprising because he mentions Gogol’s *Arabesques*, even though only twice: once in “His Death and His Youth”, and once in the “Chronology”.<sup>208</sup> He also places the ending of *Arabesques* at the beginning of *Nikolai Gogol* as a preface. The reason for Nabokov’s application of the motifs of the arabesque throughout *Pale Fire*, despite his circumvention of the word ‘arabesque’ and a detailed analysis of Gogol’s *Arabesques* in his *Nikolai Gogol*, remains ambiguous.<sup>209</sup> It could be that Nabokov viewed Middle Eastern art work as inferior which would subsequently interpret the narrative through Orientalism.<sup>210</sup> However, the depiction changes direction if we follow Nabokov’s perspective of interpreting Gogol’s *Dead Souls*.

In *Nikolai Gogol*, Nabokov interprets *Dead Souls* in “Our Mr Chichikov” and *The Government Inspector* in “The Government Specter” by examining Gogol’s style rather than the storyline as a reflection of Russian society. Nabokov writes that “Russian critics saw in *Dead Souls* and in *The Government Inspector* a condemnation of the social *poshlust*

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<sup>208</sup> Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 31, 158.

<sup>209</sup> The final chapter of this thesis also mentions that Gogol only used the word ‘arabesques’ in the title but not in his book, whereas Nabokov only mentioned the word ‘arabesques’ in his *Nikolai Gogol* when referring to Gogol’s book, *Arabesques*.

<sup>210</sup> Berman argues that Orientalism influenced Poe’s vision of the arabesque as ‘grotesque’: “what has animated the arabesque ... from religious repose to grotesque horror, is the European imagination” (Berman, “Poe’s Arabesque”, 148). Orientalism could have had a similar effect on Nabokov. The same would therefore apply to Schlegel. Edward Said argues that after having studied “Sanskrit in Paris ... Schlegel had practically renounced his Orientalism”. In 1800, when Schlegel said, “It is in the Orient that we must search for the highest Romanticism”, Said argued that he was not referring to the Semites, but to the “Orient of *Sakuntala*, the *Zend-Avesta*, and the *Upanishads*” (Said, *Orientalism*, 98). Said suggests that Schlegel’s racism is a result of Orientalism. However, around this time (1800), *Dialogue* (1809) and *Lucinde* (1799) both include writing that reflect Eastern art and he referred to the arabesque novel as ‘a high form of art’ in *Dialogue*. Whether Schlegel was mocking the Eastern tradition or not, he nonetheless found his writing talent through his creation of complex forms of the literary arabesque.

emanating from serf-owning bureaucratic provincial Russia and thus missed the true point”.<sup>211</sup> Nabokov argues that Gogol’s characters and plots have nothing to do with Russia or Germany, but are a mixture of his few travels and memories from his youth in Ukraine.<sup>212</sup> Nabokov then goes on to describe the patterns of Gogol’s plots which he refers to as illusions “concealed by the maze of complex machinations”, concentricity and “tight folds”.<sup>213</sup> Hence, Nabokov proposes, “so let us look at the patterns more closely”.<sup>214</sup> Nabokov disregards the story line, (un)intended origin of Gogol’s characters, or place where Gogol set his plots because he describes Gogol’s writing as though they were colourful patterns coming to life. For example, Nabokov writes, “I doubt whether any writer, and certainly not in Russia, had ever noticed before, to give the most striking instance, the moving pattern of light and shade on the ground under trees or the tricks of colour played by sunlight with leaves”.<sup>215</sup> Nabokov explains that Gogol’s writing shocked Russian readers. Another description of the effect Gogol’s writing had on Nabokov was sensing as though the “passages [would] fairly burst with little people tumbling out and scattering all over the page”.<sup>216</sup> Hence, Nabokov interprets Gogol through his writing style by focusing on patterns and images.

One of the patterns presented by both Nabokov and Gogol that relates to the arabesque is the oscillation between two ends, as they portray images of migration (which reflect their real lives) which causes them to feel they are situated in the middle, between two nations. Gogol was born Ukrainian and had to write in Russian in order to succeed in his writing career. Similarly, yet, simultaneously also differently to this, Nabokov abandoned Russian writing when he migrated to America in 1940.<sup>217</sup> Additionally, born into “an old

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<sup>211</sup> Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 70.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 72, 74.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>217</sup> Boyd, *American Years*, 11.

noble family” and having “associations with England in early childhood”, Nabokov wrote in English from an early age, therefore mixing up languages (including French, English and Russian).<sup>218</sup> Furthermore, Nabokov spent his life emigrating from St Petersburg, Russia, to England, Germany and France which placed him between two nations. As he is united with one country, it becomes the dividing line between him and another country from his past, as well as the point of transition from a previous language to a new language, which is reflected in his writing. In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov describes the Bera Range as being a “chain of rugged mountains” as a middle geographical area that divides Zembla’s “eastern region of Onhava” and its western strip, yet, the “two coasts are connected by two asphalted highways”.<sup>219</sup> Similar to Gogol’s description of the Caucasus as being a mountainous region that both connects and divides Europe and Asia, Nabokov also places emphasis and concentration on a “middle course” or “middle point”. As someone who spent his life circulating from Russia to France and later to America, taking the middle course would have been necessary for Nabokov. This pattern of travel evokes the way the arabesque’s interweaving line as it divides the symmetrical spaces on the ornament as well as connecting the whole ornament together, swinging back and forth along the decoration.

## **Arabesque Windows**

The relevance of the window to the arabesque is that of its frame. The arabesque frame consists of both centrifugal and centripetal characteristics. It is enfolding, sprouting outwards around the frame, and also encompassing inwards towards the centre of the frame. It happens to be going both backwards and forwards, inwards and outwards, simultaneously. The

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<sup>218</sup> Boyd, *Russian Years*, 3, 420.

<sup>219</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 113.

window also allows for two perspectives (looking in to, and looking out from) in which the frame is a median point between the two mirroring views (as discussed in Chapter 3).

Gogol's Poprishchin also 'looks in' and 'looks out' of windows in "The Diary of a Madman". When Poprishchin wishes to escape the torment of the asylum, he imagines a "house which looks blue in the distance" and asks, "Is that my mother sitting by the window?"<sup>220</sup> In reality, Poprishchin is 'inside' an asylum imagining a better place 'outside', yet looking 'inside' another window for hope. Gogol weaves his readers through waves of reality and assumptions as Poprishchin seems to be everywhere, yet, there also seems to be "nowhere for him on earth".<sup>221</sup> Molly Brunson also makes a similar observation about Gogol when she argues that Gogol depicts Russia's social, economic and geographical landscape by mirroring it through Russian literary rhetoric in *Dead Souls*.<sup>222</sup> She argues that "classical perspective in Gogol's visual aesthetic is somewhat of a double agent, engaged in the simultaneous destruction and construction of the subject".<sup>223</sup> Further examples Brunson offers are that "Russia's cultural ambivalence in the literary trope of the provinces [is a] space [that is] neither central nor peripheral" and "Russia is neither here nor there".<sup>224</sup> Gogol uses a similar writing style in *Arabesques*. He places Poprishchin in an asylum, imagining himself to be a King, but is also imagining to be outside his mother's window. Poprishchin is both inside and outside a window at the same time, reflecting on what 'could be' and what actually 'is'.

Gogol mentions windows at the end of *Arabesques* and Nabokov begins *Pale Fire* with an image of a window. As a writing tool, "the window figure's metaphorical density transforms even the most banal observations into ones loaded with compositional

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<sup>220</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 260.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>222</sup> Brunson, "Gogol Country", 387.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 391, 392.

meaning”.<sup>225</sup> Nabokov seems to be continuing Poprishchin’s story in his first lines of the poem. In his doomed mental state, Poprishchin replicates himself to be ‘outside’ of the asylum looking ‘into’ his house. “Pale Fire” ‘continues’ (both begins and continues) as

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain  
By the false azure in the windowpane;  
I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I  
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.  
And from the inside, too, I’d duplicate  
Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate.<sup>226</sup>

The narrator explains himself to be ‘by the windowpane’, yet, also ‘inside’ where he is ‘duplicating’ himself, but has died. This seems like a possible continuation of Poprishchin’s story in which the window acts as the fundamental link for this possibility.

## Arabesque Phraseology

Some of Nabokov’s and Gogol’s words and phrases evoke arabesque foliage. In *Arabesques*, Gogol’s use of words resemble the arabesque vegetation when he describes events as though they are trees or nature: “consequences, like broad branches, reach out across future centuries, branching out more and more from barely perceptible shoots”.<sup>227</sup> This phrase mimics the arabesque’s shooting and bifurcating stem.

Another example of arabesque phraseology is when Gogol describes Gothic architecture. In “On Present-Day Architecture”, gothic architecture is an “elegant forest of arches towering overhead”.<sup>228</sup> Furthermore, similar motifs of the arabesque are evoked when Gogol writes, “when one enters the sacred gloom of the temple through which the fantastic,

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>226</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 27, lines 1-6.

<sup>227</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 44.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 116.

multi-coloured light of the windows shines and raises one's eyes to that point where the pointed arches disappear one behind the other in an infinite number of intersections".<sup>229</sup> Again, 'intersections' is another distinctive feature of the arabesque as the contour, or intertwining stem, constantly intersects itself. This elaborate ornamented style of writing is seen throughout *Arabesques* and is a distinctive feature of the book. Although Gogol tells us that "it is pointless to attribute it to an Arabian derivation", it is, however, very similar to the description of Islamic art.<sup>230</sup> This is because it contains 'multi-coloured pointed arches' and an 'infinite number of intersections'. Gogol also mentions that "everything in [gothic art]" is united, but every diverse element and object in the arabesque is also united.<sup>231</sup> This is also evocative of the way Nabokov's poem "Pale Fire" mentions a "system of cells interlinked within / Cells interlinked within cells interlinked / Within one stem" since the whole arabesque ornament is a unity of interlinked motifs.<sup>232</sup>

Gogol and Nabokov also describe architectural designs that evoke images of arabesque art. In *Arabesques*, Gogol associates the columns and walls of architecture with nature and foliage. His description of plants used for decorations resembles the arabesque when he depicts buildings and towns as looking like "interwoven leaves ... or with decorations bearing a vague resemblance to the branches of a tree".<sup>233</sup> Additionally, the objects that Nabokov makes reference to bring to mind patterns of arabesque decorations. However, the optical effect of the arabesque can be received in a skewed manner. For example, one may not notice the interweaving contour of the arabesque as a single line unless one carefully follows it, which can then seem dazzling. As Kinbote attempts to spy on Shade through his binoculars, he "had learned exactly when and where to find the best points from

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 116; see footnote 188 as the same concept of viewing Arabian art as inferior applies.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>232</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 50, lines 704-706.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 122.

which to follow the contours” in order to get a glimpse of Shade while attempting to avoid “interference by framework or leaves”.<sup>234</sup> The arabesque also consists of a contour depicting interlaced vines and leafy framework. Again, Nabokov manages to integrate arabesque-like words and phrases which leads us into a discussion about unending interwoven themes and arabesque motifs.

## No Endings

Both Gogol and Nabokov write open-ended narratives. The difference between *Pale Fire* and *Arabesques* is that *Pale Fire* circulates back to the beginning in a recursive pattern, whilst *Arabesques* contains an open-ended ending. *Arabesques* does not circulate back to the beginning, but sprouts out, akin to an arabesque’s bifurcating stem, into a new topic. When Poprishchin cries out to be freed from the guards at the asylum, the reader assumes that “The Diary of a Madman” will end in a resolution to Poprishchin’s circumstances. Instead, the fiction ends with the question, “And do you know that the Bey of Algiers has a pimple right under his nose?” which leaves plenty of room for the reader for further questioning and analysing.<sup>235</sup> As if to further reinforce this notion, as well as the idea of Gogol’s ‘unending’ *Arabesques*, Nabokov begins his fiction *Nikolai Gogol*, as his “Preface”, with the ending of *Arabesques*.<sup>236</sup> This echoes Sybil’s response to Kinbote when he asks to see Shade’s unfinished poem: “He never shows anything unfinished. Never, never. He will not even discuss it with you until it is quite, quite finished” to which he reinforces in *Nikolai Gogol*.<sup>237</sup> Nabokov does not discuss *Arabesques* which is an unfinished book, just as Shade does not

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>235</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 260.

<sup>236</sup> Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, “Preface”.

<sup>237</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 73.



discuss his unfinished poem. Furthermore, an arabesque is not complete until the pattern is complete, to which, even then, it does not end.

Although *Arabesques* and *Pale Fire* finish off with different metaphorical motifs of the arabesque, they nevertheless characterise the unending nature of the arabesque pattern. Similar to an arabesque, beginnings and endings are the same in *Pale Fire*. The novel ends with the Commentary stating that line 1000 of the poem “Pale Fire” is the same as line 1. Since the poem only contains 999 lines, this means it circulates back to the beginning and continues endlessly. Its beginning is its ending, and its ending is its beginning. In addition to the poem circulating to its starting point, the story of Kinbote also circulates back to Kinbote’s past. In the final commentary, Kinbote imagines someone asking him, “what will *you* be doing with yourself?” now that the novel is complete.<sup>238</sup> Kinbote then takes his imagination to his past by contemplating, “History permitting, I may sail back to my recovered kingdom”.<sup>239</sup> Straight after this, Kinbote dismisses the past and returns back to an imaginary ‘distant’ future where there might be a “more competent Gradus” who will attempt to assassinate him.<sup>240</sup> This might seem like Kinbote is moving on towards the future, but he is also returning to his past memories since a ‘Gradus-like’ figure originates from his past Zemblan life.

The imagination of Kinbote’s distant past, which he continues to circulate back to, is as if to hint at the idea that history repeats itself, akin to a recursive arabesque. For Gogol, on the other hand, the metaphorical arabesque is more likely to indicate a continuous future. Frazier argues that “the goal of the Romantic criticism then becomes to correctly identify past genres with past times, and, what is more difficult, to predict the present and future genres

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 236.

conditioned by present and future times”.<sup>241</sup> Frazier also argues that Gogol was unable to predict the future, or that he could see the end for the arabesque novel that was occurring in Gogol’s present, the nineteenth century. Hence, the ending for his *Arabesques* is undetermined. It neither returns to the beginning, nor completely ends. But the book does have a ‘never-ending’ sense to it which heads off into the ‘unknown’.

Nonetheless, the arabesque in both books seems to metaphorically resemble the undulations of historical events into present and future, and vice versa. In his final commentary, Nabokov mentions ‘colours in the distance’ which is similar to Gogol’s ending of his final section, “The Diary of a Madman”. As Kinbote rereads “Pale Fire”, he senses a “dim distant music” which he describes as “vestiges of colour in the air”.<sup>242</sup> Likewise, Gogol also has Poprishchin stating that “The sky whirls before me; a little star twinkles in the distance” and also asks “Is that my house which looks blue in the distance?”<sup>243</sup> Both literary arabesque’s end by conjuring up images of phosphorescent objects in the distance as the characters’ (Kinbote and Poprishchin) imaginations oscillate between history, present, future and distant pasts. This reflects the perpetual arabesque which seems to also be suspended between time and space.

## Conclusion

Despite their similarities regarding the literary arabesque, *Arabesques* and *Pale Fire* do share differences. Their difference is that *Arabesques*’ ending does not return to its beginning, but the story diverges akin to the bifurcating stem of the arabesque, while *Pale Fire* circulates to the beginning. Additionally, *Pale Fire* displays a more symmetrical structure than

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<sup>241</sup> Frazier, *Frames*, 106. In her chapter, “No Need for Endings”, Frazier argues that the Romantic genre of the arabesque was one that would encompass all genres. She also argues that the arabesque novel did not exist past the era of Romanticism. However, this thesis proves otherwise; literary arabesques continued to be produced in the twentieth century as well.

<sup>242</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 232.

<sup>243</sup> Gogol, *Arabesques*, 260.

*Arabesques* with regards to metaphorically characterising the arabesque ornament. The order in which the sections are laid out in *Arabesques* gives the resulting pattern of: 4 non-fiction sections (including the “Preface”) followed by a fiction; 6 non-fiction sections followed by a fiction; 4 non-fiction sections followed by a fiction. Hence, *Arabesques* is not a symmetrical book. Gogol’s open-ended ending of “The Diary of a Madman” does not allow a return to the beginning like an arabesque, but bifurcates and spreads out (like an arabesque) indefinitely. All sense of symmetrical structure is lost from Gogol’s *Arabesques*. The following chapter examines and identifies patterns of symmetry as well as reflections and refractions in *Pale Fire*.

## Chapter 5: Symmetry, Reflections and Doubles in *Pale Fire*

Considering the arabesque's evolution from an art form to a literary style, this thesis will now focus on Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* which is the stimulus for examining the historical development of the literary arabesque. Drawing on the arabesque's symmetrical and geometric concepts from Chapter 1, I now discuss its function as a modernist literary concept in *Pale Fire*. This chapter therefore aims to identify the decorative patterns of the arabesque in *Pale Fire*. These patterns include the symmetrical structure of the poem "Pale Fire" and symmetry, reflections, refractions, optics and kaleidoscopic images in the whole novel. Furthermore, the meta-textual nature of *Pale Fire* is presented through imagery of manifold reflections and refractions between texts, characters, author and reader.

### "Pale Fire's" Symmetrical Structure

Shade's poem is structured symmetrically; the whole poem is constructed by Shade through an equal numbering of cards, lines and Cantos. In the Foreword, Kinbote tells us that Shade uses thirteen cards for cantos one and four, and twenty-seven cards for cantos two and three:

The short (166 lines) Canto One, with all those amusing birds and parhelia, occupies thirteen cards. Canto Two, your favourite, and that shocking tour de force, Canto Three, are identical in length (334 lines) and cover twenty-seven cards each. Canto Four reverts to One in length and occupies again thirteen cards.<sup>244</sup>

Hence, the poem is symmetrical. However, Canto Four contains 165 lines, but since it turns back to Canto One, the last line of Canto Four becomes the first line of Canto One. This means that Canto Four also has 166 lines, completing the poem's symmetry.

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<sup>244</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 11.

The amount of time it takes Shade to write each Canto is also symmetrical. Shade completes Cantos One and Four in three days and completes Canto's Two and Three in seven days. Again, the number of days he spent writing "Pale Fire" is described as 'symmetric'.

Canto One was begun in the small hours of July 2 and completed on July 4. He started the next canto on his birthday and finished it on July 11. Another week was devoted to canto Three. Canto Four was begun on July 19, and as already noted, the last third of its text (lines 949-999) is supplied by a corrected draft.<sup>245</sup>

The relevance of symmetry to the arabesque is that it maintains a repetitive symmetrical structure throughout its patterns. Nabokov's repetitive use of symmetry is similar to the way the arabesque also expresses these styles, making the element of the arabesque's harmoniously encompassing unity identifiable in the poem "Pale Fire", suggesting that *Pale Fire* itself is a literary arabesque.

Additionally, Hazel's death occurs halfway into the poem at line 500 at the end of Canto Two (Brian Boyd has also made similar observations).<sup>246</sup> Boyd argues that there seems to be "an unbearable tension and poignancy as time swings back and forth, ticking away at the irretrievable moment of her death at the very midpoint of the poem".<sup>247</sup> This oscillation that occurs at the centre of "Pale Fire" signifies symmetry between the first and second halves. However, the second half of the poem does not add up to 500 lines, but 499 lines. Boyd offers the possibility that line 1000 has been left out by Shade because "by adding Gradus to Kinbote's Zembla, he can in death, write line 1000 by rewriting line 1 in an almost infinitely expanding way".<sup>248</sup> This adds to the continuation of the poem, thus reverting the poem back to its starting point. Since Boyd has already established the poem's symmetrical style, including its infinite continuation, the text becomes akin to a literary arabesque,

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>246</sup> Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 33.

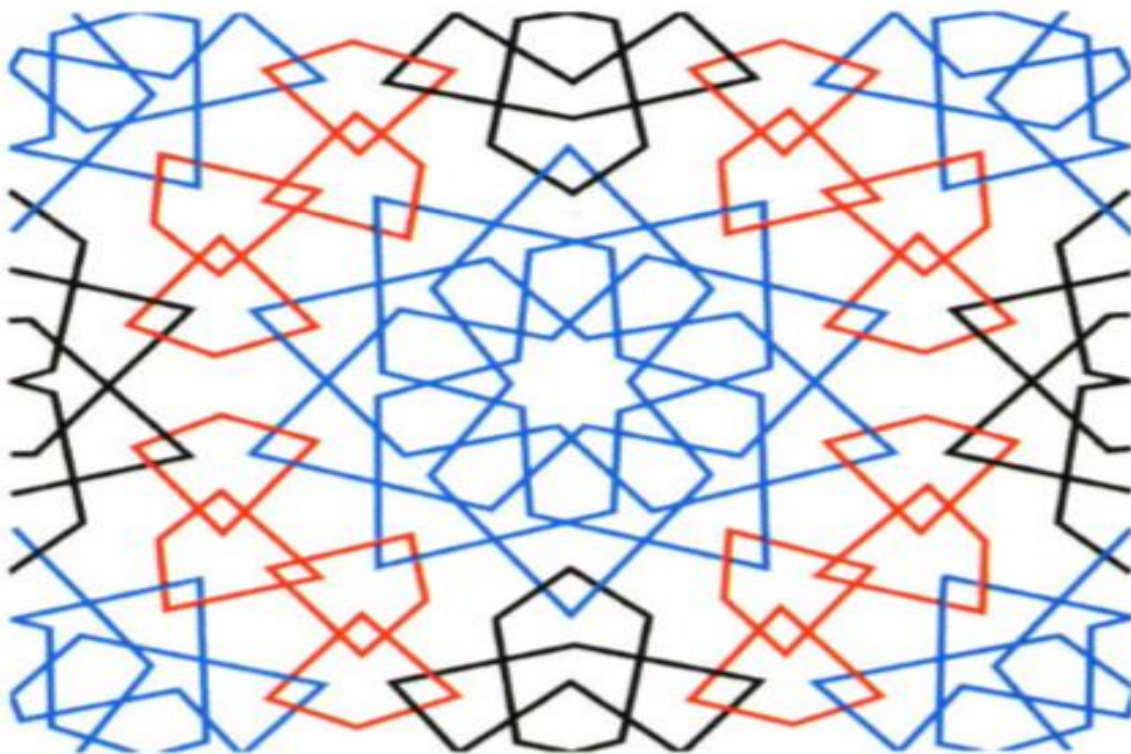
<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 218.

particularly its relation to a supernatural afterlife concerning Shade and Gradus.<sup>249</sup> Shade has not yet met Gradus to include him, or intentionally omit him, from the poem. Additionally, symmetrical contradictions in *Pale Fire* alludes to one of Schlegel's concepts of the literary arabesque as discussed in Chapter 2.

## Reflections

As a literary arabesque, the relationships between the characters in *Pale Fire* can be visualised through the arabesque ornament and its repetitive doubling of shapes.



**Fig 15. Complex geometric design by mirroring stone panels.<sup>250</sup>**

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<sup>249</sup> Brian Boyd discusses the poem's symmetry in Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 3, 19.

<sup>250</sup> Broug, "Geometric Design", 96.

Figure 15 shows an Islamic pattern by repeating various conjoined patterns around a central ten pointed star. Eric Broug, a professional in Islamic geometric art, author and educator of arabesque designs and patterns, analyses the image in Figure 15 as follows:

The design that has been created by mirroring one stone panel can itself again be mirrored, and that new design can then be mirrored again. This process can be repeated infinitely, and it is the essential attribute of Islamic geometric design.<sup>251</sup>

Thus, the mirroring process can continue infinitely, creating multiple reflections.

In contrast to the postmodernist *mise-en-abyme* effect that portrays “an endless succession of internal duplications” between characters in novels, which is infinitely projected in a single linear direction with the same image being reflected every second replica, my perception of multiple mirroring levels in *Pale Fire* causes both the image and the direction to change.<sup>252</sup> In his article, “The Viewer and the View: Chance and Choice in *Pale Fire*”, David Walker argues that

The dominant image of [*Pale Fire*] is the mirror, trapped in a prison of reflections, the characters are doomed to see, or think they see, everything as reflected image. Twins, doubles dualities, imitations abound. But these are no ordinary mirrors: all images are in some way altered or distorted.<sup>253</sup>

Walker gives an example of distorted mirrors from the first stanza of “Pale Fire” when Shade provides reflections of opposing realities. Shade initially describes himself to be outside a window who “flew on in the reflected sky”, followed by duplicating himself “from the inside, too”.<sup>254</sup> Shade continues to portray opposites when he writes the lines, “A dull dark white

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>252</sup> Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 228.

<sup>253</sup> Walker, “Viewer and the View”, 205.

<sup>254</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 27, lines 4-5.

against the day's pale white" and "As the night unites the viewer and the view".<sup>255</sup> Walker argues that this

suggests that the shadow (the illusory, half-real double) *can* penetrate the looking-glass, can transcend the boundaries of time and space, into the shadow world of illusion and art. The rest of the stanza demonstrates that on the other side of the glass there is also a reality reflected, a projected shadow world.<sup>256</sup>

However, Walker suggests merely reflection, a two-way projection, reflecting one set of opposites. I argue that *Pale Fire* consists of multiple sets of opposites and the reflections are penetrated by additional mirrors. This subsequently leads the reflections into different directions therefore distorting the initially distorted reflection. My argument corresponds with Meyer and Hoffman's observations that "*Pale Fire* is structured on the idea that reality has an infinite succession of false bottoms".<sup>257</sup> Additionally, *Pale Fire* consists of "mirror image left-right reversal" which adds additional directions to the reflections between characters, rather than an infinitely linear series of replicated images.<sup>258</sup> In *Pale Fire*, multidirectional reflection is portrayed through various levels of reflections between characters. I will illustrate this motif in Schlegel's literary arabesque before examining its similar structure to *Pale Fire*.

In Chapter 2, I have established two mirroring levels that appear in *Lucinde* between Julius and Lucinde and the real life Schlegel and his wife, Dorothea, as the first mirror. The second reflection occurs between Lucinde and Julius. However, a third mirror also lies between Julius and Antonio. In "Julius to Antonio", Julius writes to Antonio to tell him the cause for the end of their friendship (which is the beginning of a new friendship between Julius and Edward). Julius places a mirror between himself and Antonio when he informs

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 27, lines 15, 18.

<sup>256</sup> Walker, "Viewer and the View", 205.

<sup>257</sup> Meyer & Hoffman, "Infinite Reflections", 197.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 198.



him that he can see through and understand him: “I know and see very well how you think about [Edward]. And if I didn’t know and see it, where then would be the invisible communion of our minds and the beautiful magic of this communion?”<sup>259</sup>

After Julius compares himself to Antonio, he then contrastingly juxtaposes Antonio to Edward, thus placing a fourth mirror between his two friends: “You two are unquestionably separated by an unbridgeable gulf... In the final analysis you have to become yourself what you want to see in others”.<sup>260</sup> Schlegel incorporates various levels of reflective comparisons between his characters and describes their friendships as either being external, or internal, the latter being “a wonderful symmetry of the most characteristic qualities”.<sup>261</sup>

The literary arabesque utilises the symmetrical form of the decoration, including its doubling motifs, to portray relationships between fictional characters. Boglárka Kiss argues that the literary patterns of Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002) can be analysed through “the concept of the arabesque – both in its original form as an ornament and in its reinterpretation as a literary device”.<sup>262</sup> In her book chapter, “The Arabesques of Presence and Absence: Subversive Narratives in Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith*”, Kiss argues that “postmodern imitation and reshaping of Victorian genres correspond to the various uses and aspects of the arabesque” by portraying doubling characters in *Fingersmith* via the arabesque motifs of mirrors, repetitions and distortions:

Doubling of characters reflects the primary function of the arabesque as an ornament, where the two parts of the pattern mirror each other, on the other hand the distortions between these pairings, the manipulation of the adopted genres, as well as the collision of fictional and real experiences are congruous with the Romantic re-appropriation of the arabesque.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde*, 122.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>262</sup> Kiss, “Presence and Absence”, 234.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

This method can be applied to the characters of Kinbote and Hazel. They both feel they are different from the rest of society and also incorporate mirror words in their speech. Like the repetitions of mirrored patterns in Figure 15, *Pale Fire* also portrays these motifs between Hazel and Kinbote. In the poem, Shade recalls Hazel's use of "twisted words: pot, top / Spider, redips. And 'powder' was 'red wop'".<sup>264</sup> Kinbote uses similar mirror words when he attempts to persuade Sybil to reread "Proust's rough masterpiece", asking her to, "Please, dip, or redip, spider, into this book".<sup>265</sup> Pot and top are spelt backwards, making them mirror words. Adding an 's' at the end of 'redip' makes 'redips' and 'spider' mirroring words with the conjoining 's'. Both Hazel and Kinbote reverse the order of spelling. Kinbote observes that similarities exist between himself and Hazel when "discussing 'mirror words'" with Shade one day: "it is also true that Hazel Shade resembled me in some aspects".<sup>266</sup> Kinbote is not only comparing Hazel to himself, but to all Zemblans since mirror words is the language of the Zemblans: "the tongue of the mirror".<sup>267</sup> For example, the mirror-name for Shade's killer, Jakob Gradus is Sudarg Bokaj. Assuming that the 'j' is silent and pronounced 'y', then the index reference, "Sudarg of Bokay" implies Gradus, who is "a mirror maker of genius, the patron saint of Bokay in the mountains of Zembla".<sup>268</sup> As it is traditional for Zemblans to indulge in mirror-words, as Hazel also does, reflection between her and Kinbote projects onto all Zemblans. Therefore, multidirectional reflections occur when Hazel is reflected into a mirror and the image of Kinbote is shown one minute, Zemblans and Gradus the next. The image changes direction from one character to another, creating multidirectional reflection; Kinbote and Hazel are mirroring characters and this reflection is repeated by exposing similarities between Hazel and other Zemblans through Kinbote as the conjoining character,

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<sup>264</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 38, lines 347, 348.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 131, 132.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

just as the conjoining star in Figure 15 projects out to create different shapes in the pattern. It is a reflection of a reflection which creates a new image.

Furthermore, multidirectional reflections do not only continue linearly, but rather, somewhere along the way, the sequence shifts direction and an additional mirror is added from an alternative direction; another dimension is added, as if to liberate the direction of reflection from its own convention, thus fragmenting its linear order. Fragmentation can be seen in *Pale Fire* when Kinbote not only sees a reflection of himself in Hazel, but also sees Hazel as a reflection of all Zemblans (first mirror). Kinbote himself is a Zemblan (second mirror), hence, also reflects Zemblans, therefore, Hazel's reflection projects from Kinbote, out across to all Zemblans (third mirror). Further distorted reflections occur when Kinbote also sees his Zembla in Shade's poem (fourth mirror), only to discover that his Zembla is not there, therefore his translation of the poem changes (Kinbote looks for an image for the fifth mirror), causing multidirectional reflection and multidirectional translation. This style of writing also reflects the transition from modernism to postmodernism which portrays "an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world".<sup>269</sup> Kinbote searches for an alternative reality through his own fictional Zemblan characters and Nabokov presents his postmodern novel through the arabesque writing style as it is an ideal method for portraying double characters, opposites and fragments.

## **Optical Illusions**

This section argues that multidirectional reflection (manifold mirrors) in *Pale Fire* points to multidirectional layers of deception. In *Pale Fire*, various deceptions occur: the characters deceive one another and are also deceived by images in the plot, Kinbote is deceived by Shade's poem, the reader is deceived by both Kinbote's commentary and the whole novel.

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<sup>269</sup> Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 288-289.

Images of the arabesque's multidirectional proliferation, where recursive stems and shapes multiply and spread out to cover the whole art work, manifests on a meta-textual level throughout Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.

Multidirectional deception is achieved in *Pale Fire* through mirroring characters and applying parodies for deceptive purposes via a method of optical illusionary narratives. Multidirectional parodies and deception, when visualised in terms of multidirectional shapes and contours of the arabesque, creates an optical image. This is particularly with Nabokov's paradoxical style which is pointed out by Uhlmann: "the genre of the academic scholarly edition is parodied, with the novel being the work of an 'editor' Charles Kinbote, who provides a delirious Introduction and critical apparatus to the long poem "Pale Fire"". <sup>270</sup> Nabokov's style of parodies is precisely his method for incorporating themes of deceptions in *Pale Fire* and this is achieved through various methods.

One of the methods includes phraseology and incorporation of images of optical illusions. The second is multiple layers of comparable paradoxical characters. <sup>271</sup> During his escape into exile, the Zemblan King Charles reaches a lake in which he believes he can see his reflection, only to realize that he is "deceived" by an "optical illusion". <sup>272</sup> Kinbote's reflection is not where he initially imagined it to be "but much further" due to the erosion of the lake. <sup>273</sup> The initial reflection "had deceived him" and did not exist, creating illusions. <sup>274</sup> This writing style is adopted by authors of literary arabesques. For example, in "Poe, Optics, Hysteria and Aesthetics", Rae Gordon argues that Poe's arabesque writing uses optical

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<sup>270</sup> Uhlmann, "Method", 401.

<sup>271</sup> A similar concept is discussed in Chapter 2 reflecting Schlegel's idea of a literary arabesque where a writer incorporates doubling meanings by saying what something is and what it is also not, at the same time. This is reiterated through characters that are both simultaneously similar and different.

<sup>272</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 117.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

illusions in order to create parodies and deception in his narrative.<sup>275</sup> Hence, phraseology and insertion of the word ‘optical’ is one method.

The second method is through multidirectional deception and by depicting different characters as similar; Nabokov and Kinbote are different, however, they also share similarities in their deceptive nature. Although Shade does not intentionally write “Pale Fire” to deceive Kinbote, Kinbote’s commentary presents the narrative as though he does. Kinbote writes, “I started to reread the poem. I read faster and faster. I sped through it, snarling, as a furious young heir through an old deceiver’s testament”.<sup>276</sup> This is not the only time Kinbote exposes the deceptive nature of *Pale Fire*. Another time is when Kinbote praises his own deception towards the characters: “Thus with cautious steps, among deceived enemies, I circulated” with divided batches of Shade’s canto cards hidden in Kinbote’s jacket.<sup>277</sup> Couturier also concludes that readers “have been victims of an illusion” by an author who is “preoccupied with his sexual identity and with death, and who tries to unburden himself of these obsessions by generating a kind of paranoia in us, hoping to divert our attention away from himself”.<sup>278</sup> The deception that occurs between author and reader that splits the author’s identity in two parts, is mimicked through the characters of Kinbote and Shade. Their differences are their similarities; both are portrayed as deceivers and victims of illusions. This is more obvious in Kinbote’s character. Shade is deceived through his accidental death by Kinbote’s assassin. Readers also feel deceived by Kinbote as one questions whether he reassembled the cards in their correct order.

The direction of deception shifts from merely existing between characters, to occurring between novel and reader. Readers confirm that they have been misled upon discovering that Kinbote adds (or subtracts) an extra twelve cards to Shade’s poem. In the

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<sup>275</sup> Gordon, “Poe: Optics”, 49-50.

<sup>276</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 232.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>278</sup> Couturier, “Near-Tyranny of the author”, 64.

Foreword, we are told that the manuscript “consists of eighty medium-sized index cards”.<sup>279</sup> At the end of the novel, Kinbote tells us that he “distributed the ninety-two index cards about [his] person”.<sup>280</sup> Hence, the reader is forced to return to the beginning in order to recheck the correct number of index cards. Discovering an extra twelve index cards confirms that the reader has been deceived during the reading process and throughout the colourful optics of Kinbote’s story. Furthermore, adding up the first batch collected at the beginning, then calculating the last batch that Kinbote divides at the end, evokes the process of unthreading an arabesque pattern. Since the arabesque is constructed by collecting and uniting fragmented geometric shapes, Kinbote reverses the order of the development of the arabesque by fragmenting the poem (which an arabesque is a metaphor for) as if to untie the thread of the ornament and re-fragment it. His additional twelve cards suggest an extension to the pattern in order to re-create and re-shape it.

## **Literary Kaleidoscope**

In geometric art, as well as in arabesque art, where the same rules are applied, infinite extensions of moving reflected shapes eventually produce a kaleidoscopic effect. Nabokov extends the layers of mirroring forms from one character to another, from texts and characters to the reader. The same pattern can be visualised in Broug’s illustration of repeating mirroring designs in Figure 15. When this is visually applied to texts that contain multiple doubling of characters, a metaphorical literary kaleidoscopic text can be envisaged. And this is the case with *Pale Fire* as Kinbote is doubled with both Shade and Hazel.

If the 2D process in Figure 15 is given 3D imaging and circular kinetics, then a similar kaleidoscopic effect is achieved which is called a circular arabesque.<sup>281</sup> This analysis

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<sup>279</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 11.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>281</sup> Shilton, “Alterity in Art”, 359.

relates to the 2D shapes that develop into 3D elements via tessellation and the crystallisation process discussed in Chapter 1. The kaleidoscopic motifs can also be transferred to literature as a writing device, also in the form of a literary arabesque, because a kaleidoscope is a 3D, or kinetic (moving), version of a 2D arabesque ornament, containing the same geometric rules.

Shifting perspectives, as a style used by writers, can be viewed in the light of Shilton's notion of the 'infra-thin' in art work. Shilton argues that the infra-thin is the point of transference from one meaning, or element (artwork), to the spectator. Shilton also discusses how the infra-thin (the intersection of altering ideas) acts as the mirror of reflection, in which the signifier is transformed into the signified. In Shilton's article, the infra-thin, in visual artistic form, "refers playfully – often humorously – to the almost imperceptible separation, and passage, between two things" in which an example of this is "the reflection from a mirror or glass".<sup>282</sup> Shilton argues that art work responding to the 'Arab Spring' result in multidirectional translation from art to observer.<sup>283</sup> Furthermore, Shilton illustrates how kinetic circular arabesques metaphorically depict social and political turmoil. The movements of circular arabesques result in a kaleidoscopic effect. This subsequently portrays how the kaleidoscopic multidirectional images are signifiers for multidirectional interpretation.<sup>284</sup> The circular arabesque (signifier) transforms its visual appearance into a signified meaning when it is in circular motion, such as an ongoing revolutionary process, for example.

The relevance of the metaphorical kaleidoscope to *Pale Fire* is the multidirectional translations of the text(s). Rather than following a linear direction of thought that changes, the image is skewed entirely in another direction through another influence such as the character changing the story. This occurs on two levels: the first is between Shade's poem and

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>283</sup> The 'Arab Spring' is an anti-government movement that took place in 2011 throughout the Middle East as a protest to government corruption and mistreatment of people.

<sup>284</sup> See Shilton, "Alterity in Art", 359-364.

Kinbote's commentary, and the second is between Kinbote's narrative and the reader's perception of Kinbote's interpretation of the text. If this is understood in terms of Shilton's argument about the infra-thin of alterity, it can be said that an infra-thin exists between Shade's "Pale Fire" and Kinbote's Commentary, as the first invisible mirror. The mirror between Shade and Kinbote creates a refracted event in which the translation of Shade's text becomes distorted. The poem's meaning is altered as it is transferred to the commentary and altered again into the Index. The second mirror is between the novel and the reader, and likewise, interpretation changes direction as it goes back to an attempted perspective of the original text, which is Shade's poem. The interpretation of *Pale Fire* is constantly distorted as the direction of translation changes.

However, the original interpretation of Shade's poem is also refracted between the poem and the reader because various interpretations will also be drawn through the third infra-thin passage, which is Kinbote's translation. This ongoing multidirectional interpretative process is akin to that of a kaleidoscopic effect when an arabesque is in circular kinetic mode. *Pale Fire* is also read in a circular pattern because both the poem and the novel circulate back to the beginning. *Pale Fire*'s multidirectional interpretive nature is an infinitely repetitive process which leads us into the concept of the 'infinite'. However, before the infinite is discussed in the next and final chapter, another element, the lemniscate, needs to be considered. This is because the lemniscate is also a symmetrical symbol which signifies infinite conjoining of chaos and harmony, another multidirectional interpretative literary device.

## **Symmetrical Event**

A symmetrical event occurs in Shade's poem that reflects the arabesque's chaotic order when Shade describes "nonchalantly deft bicycle tires" that create the shape of a lemniscate:



I was the shadow of the waxwing slain  
By feigned remoteness of the windowpane.  
I had a brain, five senses (one unique),  
But otherwise I was a cloutish freak.  
In sleeping dreams I played with other chaps  
But really envied nothing – save perhaps  
The miracle of a lemniscate left  
Upon wet sand by nonchalantly deft  
Bicycle tires.<sup>285</sup>

The miracle of the lemniscate shape caused by relaxed but skilled movements of a bicycle circulating in a repetitive “∞” (lemniscate) shape is similar to the way the arabesque endlessly circulates around its own path. The construction of the arabesque relies on skilled artists due to its complex geometric nature. Only when its perfect symmetry is completed, the harmony of the diverse motifs cause a calming effect on the observer of the ornament: “in its original form as an ornament the arabesque is based upon rhythmic repetitions and symmetries, where the corresponding parts mirror each other – and this harmonious design was supposed to calm the viewer”.<sup>286</sup> Shade writes that he ‘envied nothing’ except for the ‘miracle’ of an infinitely symmetrical pattern, artistically drawn out by ‘nonchalantly deft’ bicycle tyres. The arabesque’s patterns, where symmetry and repetition are brought together in harmony, is intended to produce a serene effect.

Nonetheless, in literary arabesques, the arabesque emphasises harmonised chaos and is utilised as a metaphorical literary device to represent the chaotic structure of events and life in general. Frazier refers to the motif of the literary arabesque, ordered chaos, as *kunstchaos*, which means the chaotic structure of order, or the ordering of chaos: “a symmetrically and orderly constructed confusion”.<sup>287</sup> Furthermore, “In the arabesque, confusion and chaos are

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<sup>285</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 31, lines 131-139.

<sup>286</sup> Kiss, “Presence and Absence”, 234.

<sup>287</sup> Frazier, *Frames*, 26.

arranged into an aesthetically organized and symmetrical totality”.<sup>288</sup> “Pale Fire” displays this notion of ‘ordered chaos’ when Shade returns home after searching for a white fountain and discovering the he has been deceived by a misprint in a magazine (*Fountain*, rather than *Mountain*). He tells Sybil he is “convinced that I can grope / My way to some ... Faint hope”.<sup>289</sup> Shade is disappointed that his journey to find the ‘white fountain’ ended with no result. Yet, he is determined that he can find a very small amount of hope.

Double meaning and double talk is presented when Shade does not find hope, nor does his trip end in what he reports as “splendid”.<sup>290</sup> However, in order to coordinate his chaotic situation, Shade describes the “remote events / And vanished objects” as an ornament-making event: “Making ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities”.<sup>291</sup> The transference of lost hope into a pattern and work of art is what allows Shade to restore order to his unending chaotic confusion. This circles back to the infinite symbol, the lemniscate, as an ornamented image displayed on the wet sand which signifies Kinbote’s confusion: “I cannot understand what this has to do with bicycling”.<sup>292</sup> However, it is the bicycle tires that create the lemniscate sign by cycling in a double circulating and crisscrossing path. The scene is both chaos and harmony; they are brought together by the confusion of its meaning and the picturesque movements of the bicycle that produces a symmetrically infinite pattern.

## Conclusion

Symmetrical patterns and symbols are incorporated in *Pale Fire* to portray double speech and double meanings. These meanings can also be refracted through the characters, such as the distorted relationship between Kinbote and Shade. These distorted interpretations are then

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<sup>288</sup> Jenness, *Gogol's Aesthetics*, 62.

<sup>289</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 54, lines 833-834.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 54, line 832.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 54, lines 827-829.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

reflected on to the reader. Hence, multidirectional confusion occurs, such as the effect a kinetic arabesque produces (shapes change optically). The symmetrical patterns of the arabesque, including mirroring forms and recursive elements identified in *Pale Fire* reveal the novel's style as a literary arabesque.

## Chapter 6: The Infinite and the Finite in *Pale Fire*

Due to the arabesque motifs of the infinite and the finite in *Pale Fire*, the novel is therefore a literary arabesque that does not end. The arabesque consists of the contradicting characteristics, eternal expansion and encompassment. Just as the arabesque pattern illustrates an infinite display of expansion in a limited amount of space, *Pale Fire* also portrays these motifs. Nabokov presents the infinite and the finite in *Pale Fire* through recursive circulating pieces of texts (individual pieces of texts within the novel that suggest the reader reads them endlessly) that remain confined to their own limits within the novel and not necessarily connected with the rest of the text. Throughout the reading process, pieces of perpetually circulating texts continue to appear within the poem “Pale Fire”, throughout the Commentary and in the Index.

*Pale Fire*'s meta-textual structure consists of circular motions within circular motions, the same way an arabesque contains smaller objects and circles within a larger replication of similar patterns. This is similar to fractal art demonstrated in Chapter 3 which is a smaller scaled pattern within a larger scale of the exact same pattern. However, the arabesque is a much more complex and abstract decoration than fractal art. Fractal art does not contain a single line that interweaves and unites the whole ornament as the arabesque does. In other words, *Pale Fire* is made up of smaller circulating texts (the style in which Nabokov writes evokes a circular motion) within the Commentary, Index and the poem “Pale Fire”. The poem also circulates around itself; it continues where it ends since the ending (line 1000) reverts to its beginning (line 1). Hence, *Pale Fire* displays patterns of circles within circles within a circle which gives the novel its motif of infinite circulation in a finite piece of work. This recursive motif shows how the textual patterns in *Pale Fire* contribute to its style as a literary arabesque.

## The Arabesque's Infinite Circulation in a Fixed Location.

Figure 16 shows an arabesque patterned carpet from Isfahan, 17<sup>th</sup> century. It consists of a number of circulating lines that wind around the whole carpet. Four particular lines are visible: Darker lines that stand out from the paler lines which circulate the carpet's border, and darker lines which are also more noticeable than the paler line that encompasses the decorative pattern of the central area of the carpet. This style is known as double arabesques where knots and interlacing attach two sets of arabesques to form a whole new arabesque pattern that renders contradicting sets of shades.<sup>293</sup> In Figure 16, four set of arabesques make up the whole decoration: two in the centre of the carpet, and two circulating its border. The arrangement can be described as heterogeneous circulating lines that are infinitely expanding and are homogenised via their encompassment towards the centre, therefore confining them to a finite amount of space, which is the space of the art work itself.

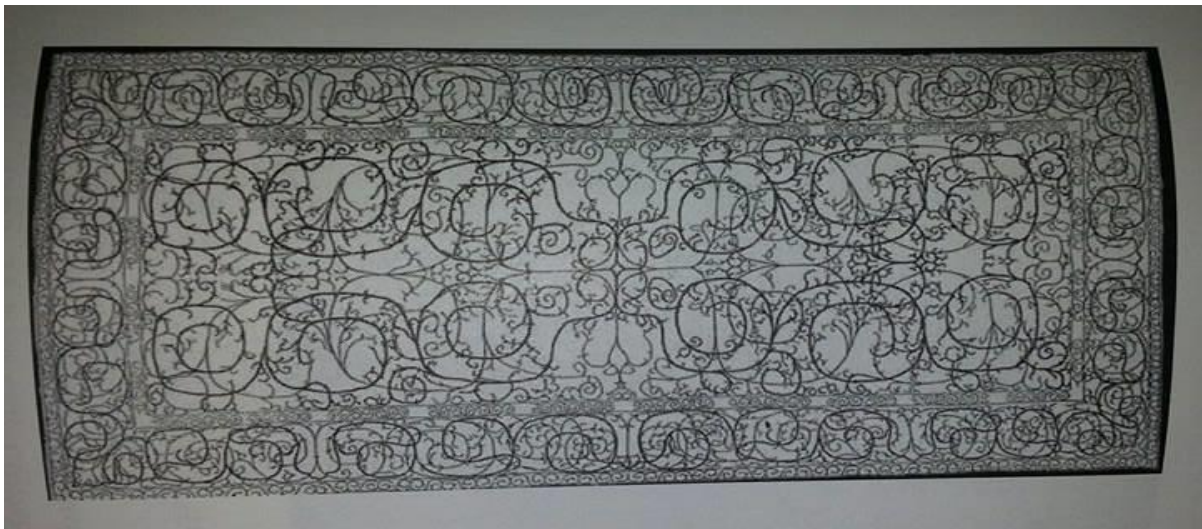


Figure 16. "Diagram of Spiral-tendrils carpet", Isfahan.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Kühnel, *The Arabesque*, 22-26.

<sup>294</sup> Marks, *Enfoldment*, 181.

The relevance of this pattern to *Pale Fire* is that Nabokov places ‘circulating’ texts, which evoke this recursive arrangement, within the whole novel. Nabokov therefore adopts a similar-patterned style of writing by producing ‘complete’ circulating texts that represent a full turn back to the beginning, which is the central starting point of the novel’s expansion.

### **The Poem “Pale Fire”**

*Pale Fire* presents motifs of the infinitely finite via Shade’s endless journey of discovery in pursuit of what the afterlife consists of. Shade begins Canto Three by speaking of an “Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter”, the “I.P.H” that invited him to give a lecture on death.<sup>295</sup> The poem continues with Shade mentioning various possibilities of the aftermath of death, including reincarnation, that he’s “ready to become a floweret / Or a fat fly, but never, to forget”.<sup>296</sup> This canto expresses Shade’s longing to forget the death of his daughter, Hazel, as he writes to Sybil, “Later came minutes, hours, whole days at last, / When she’d be absent from our thoughts, so fast / Did life, the woolly caterpillar run”.<sup>297</sup> However, Shade does not forget as he dwells on the issue of death throughout the poem, questioning the possibilities of reincarnation one minute, and being “tossed / Into a boundless void” the next, only to become nothing but a ghost and possibly having “a person circulate through” him.<sup>298</sup> Recurring images of the hereafter continue to spiral from one possibility to another in the first half of Canto Three.

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<sup>295</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 44, lines 502-506.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 44, lines 523-524.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, lines 665-667.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, lines 541-542, 556.

In the second half of Canto Three, Shade talks about his journey which results in a void discovery and eternal hopelessness. He also narrates what heavily evokes the arabesque's repetitive circulation:

And blood-black nothingness began to spin  
A system of cells interlinked within  
Cells interlinked within cells interlinked  
Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct  
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.<sup>299</sup>

The relevance of the interlinking system of cells to one stem in relation to the arabesque has already been established in Chapter 4. However, this is one example of Nabokov's illustration of meta-circulation and connection to a single stem like the diagram in Figure 16. This image evokes the arabesque's motifs of the infinitely finite as it continuously interlinks. It is also connected to a single stem therefore it spirals around the stem which it is indefinitely confined to.

Another example of an eternally continuing path is the fountain's flowing water. Following Hazel's death, Shade also has near-death experience which causes him to envision a fountain before he returns to consciousness. He later believes to have found the answer to what exists in the afterlife when he reads in a magazine that Mrs Z. also "glimpsed a tall white fountain" before she is brought back to life by a surgeon. Shade therefore sets off to find her and discover more. However, he is told there was a misprint in the magazine that is meant to read "*Mountain, not fountain*".<sup>300</sup> Shade's journey to find the connection he believed to have existed between his and Mrs Z.'s experience ends in vain and he returns home with what he claims to be "Faint hope".<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 50, lines 703-707.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 53, line 801.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 54, lines 834.

Shade's denial of inevitable death reflects his desire to be liberated from the eternal limits of death. His chaotic experience is harmonised by the fountain as a serene feature. The fountain itself also presents the idea of an infinitely finite pattern since the water travels endlessly along its own limited path, just as the arabesque's single contour does. Furthermore, the course of the flowing water does not end; it continues where it starts and ends where it continues. Hence, the symmetrical contradictions of chaos and harmony that are simultaneously presented with scenes of the infinitely finite motifs of the arabesque contributes to *Pale Fire* presenting itself as a literary arabesque.

## **The Commentary**

In *Pale Fire's* Commentary, Nabokov presents bounded continuous circulation which occurs between Shade and Kinbote (the poem and the commentary) as well as text and reader. The pattern of unlimited, yet simultaneously limited, circulation can be likened to the pattern of the tendrils in Figure 16 that circulate around a carpet an unlimited number of times in a limited measurement of space. Hence, it represents unbounded boundaries. The pattern of reading Kinbote's commentary to lines 39-40 is similar. The following paragraphs examine Kinbote's process of literarily reiterating this pattern, followed by the reader's attempt to decipher this pattern, which subsequently results in the same arrangement.

Kinbote is convinced that Shade's passage, "And while this lasted all I had to do / was close my eyes to reproduce the leaves, / or indoor scene, or trophies of the eaves", replaced Shade's original draft.<sup>302</sup> According to Kinbote, the original draft is "... and home would haste my thieves, / The sun with the stolen ice, the moon with the leaves", inserting the word 'thieves' since it rhymes with leaves, but not necessarily 'eyes'.<sup>303</sup> From this draft, Kinbote

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 28, lines 38-40.

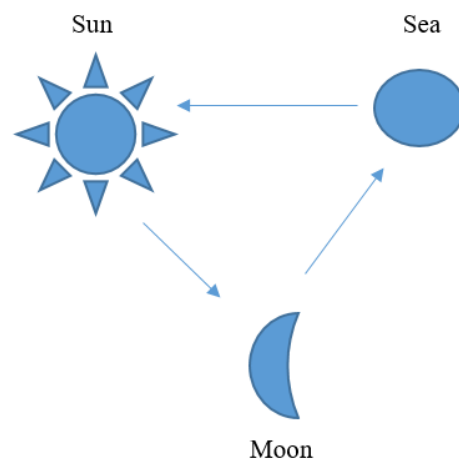
<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 68.



recalls the passage from *Timon of Athens* where Timon provides examples of thievery that displays a boundless cycle. The passage from which Kinbote claims that Shade has borrowed from Shakespeare's *Timon* is as follows:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction  
Robs the vast sea: the moon's an arrant thief,  
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun:  
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves  
The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief,  
That feeds and breeds by a composure stolen  
From general excrement: each thing's a thief:<sup>304</sup>

This section of the play portrays boundless thievery just as boundless circulation is illustrated in Figure 17. The sun gives its light to the moon, the moon's reflection lies in the sea, and the sea is gravitationally attracted to the sun.



**Figure 17. Endless circulation amongst the activities of sun, moon and earth.**

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<sup>304</sup> Shakespeare, *Timon*, 83.

The pattern is an ever-continuing circulation without an ending. Nonetheless, it remains within its own boundaries, representing the infinitely finite, or unbounded boundaries. In his article “Adopting Styles, Inserting Selves: Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*”, Maurice Charney argues that *Pale Fire* is “grounded in Shakespeare’s play, *Timon of Athens*, one of his least performed and perhaps not completely finished works. We need to understand this relation before discussing *Pale Fire*”.<sup>305</sup> Charney also describes this passage as a “long lecture on the general pattern of thievery that pervades the cosmos”.<sup>306</sup> Nonetheless, this recursive pattern is boundless since ‘thievery’ is passed on, or lures, and is lured by, another. Shakespeare writes, “... for there is boundless theft / In limited professions” before he has Timon providing the examples of endless thievery.<sup>307</sup> The pattern of the cosmos is reflected in the patterns of the arabesque, hence, the pattern illustrates universal thievery, bounded by the three elements, the sun, moon and the sea, where everything, the sun, moon and sea, all penetrate the cosmos.

Just as Shade seems to perpetually circulate around his own desire to discover answers about the hereafter, Nabokov also sends his readers on a journey of discovery to look in Shakespeare’s *Timon* (Act 4, scene 3) for some correspondence with Kinbote’s commentary only to discover that Shade’s poem has nothing to do with Shakespeare’s *Timon*.<sup>308</sup> After following Kinbote’s instructions to “see note to line 962 ... for a prudent appraisal of Conmal’s translations of Shakespeare’s works”, Kinbote tells us that his uncle Conmal’s Zemblan version is nothing like Shakespeare’s: “All I have with me is a tiny vest-pocket edition of *Timon of Athens* – In Zemblan! It certainly contains nothing that could be

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<sup>305</sup> Charney, “Adopting Styles”, 27.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>307</sup> Shakespeare, *Timon*, 82. With regards to literature, borrowing ideas from and for literary works was at its peak during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The arabesque’s application to European literature was in synchronicity with Arabic and particularly Egyptian translation of English texts into Arabic, changing the “plot to an Arab or Egyptian milieu” (Cachia, “The Arab World”, 40). Cachia states that at “a time when elements of two cultures were meeting, vying, clashing or intermingling, translation was a revealing index of new directions and new priorities, as well as an important channel for the diffusion of new information and new perceptions” (Cachia, “The Arab World”, 44).

<sup>308</sup> Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 42.

regarded as an equivalent of ‘pale fire’”.<sup>309</sup> Boyd also argues that we discover Shade’s poem has nothing to do with *Timon* only after looking in Shakespeare for a correlation, and after flipping pages back and forth between Kinbote’s notes and the poem.<sup>310</sup> Hence, the process of readers circulating back and forth for answers evokes Shade’s quest for answers about the afterlife which he hopes to find in the fountain.

The fountain’s infinite circulation of water within a finite amount of space, and within its own bounds (the course its cycle runs along, repetitively), is akin to the readers’ infinite cycle around the same notes, lines and references. The reading process follows the repetitive routine of checking Shakespeare’s *Timon* for correspondence, then checking Shade’s poem, followed by checking notes to line 962, only to discover there is nothing there and Kinbote made it up. The next reader will follow this same cycle and the pattern repeats itself in a finite space of reading, indefinitely.

## **The Index**

This section provides more examples of Nabokov’s presentation of the infinite and the infinitely finite through repetitive patterns of circulation, as well as sending his readers on a continuous rereading journey. The rereading process can also be visualised through Figures 16 and 18. Figure 18 is an architectural roundel from the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, India. It contains Arabic mirror-words around the edge and arabesque florals and stars inscribed in the centre.<sup>311</sup>

The mirror words displayed in this pattern evokes Nabokov’s manoeuvring of circulating mirror words in *Pale Fire*. In other words, a small bounded section of writing, within another section, such as the poem or index, and all lie within the whole novel. It is similar to the way

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<sup>309</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 68, 223.

<sup>310</sup> Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 43.

<sup>311</sup> Schimmel & Rivotla, “Islamic Calligraphy”, 53-57.

the orbiting spherical bodies such as the earth, sun, moon and everything lie within the cosmos. Individual pieces of ‘circulating’ texts in *Pale Fire* are ‘bounded’ because they circulate around themselves and are bounded ‘by’, and ‘to’, their own structure. At the same time, these very texts remain ‘boundless’ because they are fragments of a larger ‘bounded’ text, which, again, is ‘unbounded’ to the whole novel because it is unlimited to its own, and is circumscribed in, and encompassed by, the whole novel.



**Figure 18. “Late 16<sup>th</sup>, early 17<sup>th</sup> century architectural roundel, India”.<sup>312</sup>**

What seems to be a game of “word golf”, denoting transformation, such as the butterfly that Nabokov interweaves throughout *Pale Fire*, actually implies the ‘unbounded’, hence, the ‘infinite’. Word golf is a game where a word is transformed into another word by replacing one letter with another per move. For example, lass can be changed to male in four moves: lass, mass, mars, mare, male.<sup>313</sup> The symmetrical creature, the butterfly, is also a symbol of transformation. However, it is also a symbol of recursive activity because its

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>313</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, see “Lass” in index, 242.

genetic transformation, which alters its evolution process, can arise from the butterfly's ability to mimic and copy dead leaves.<sup>314</sup> Furthermore, Nabokov's use of word golf in the Index denotes the evolutionary process and subsequent changing forms from one generation to another, just as the word changes from one move to another.<sup>315</sup> The significance of the butterfly in *Pale Fire* with regards to the changing form of the arabesque pattern throughout its evolution, is the perpetual circulation of words and their consequent transformation.

The process the reader undergoes is not the actual "word golf" game itself, but the mere experience of circulating around words. For example, "*Lass*, see *Mass*", leads to "*Mass*, *Mars*, *Mare*, see *Male*", which leads to "*Male*, see *Word Golf*", which leads to "*Word golf*, S's predilection for it, 819; see *Lass*", which leads back to "*Lass*, see *Mass*".<sup>316</sup> The game has already been played for the reader (the moves are made and the word is changed). The reader merely needs to follow the circulation of words. However, in this particular case, the Index entry, "*Word golf*", interrupts the game and "*Male*", followed by "*Word Golf*", then going straight on to the word "*Lass*", breaks the rules of the game and interrupts the gradual evolutionary process. Kinbote also names it a game of "so-called word golf. [Shade] would interrupt the flow of a prismatic conversation to indulge in this particular pastime".<sup>317</sup>

Although double talk is also presented here, my main focus is on the way Kinbote claims that Shade interrupts their conversation to play world golf, whereas, it is Kinbote who interrupts the actual system of the flowing words (required for the game word golf) in the Index. Hence, the prominent attention is on the pattern of endless circulation around the same words, as pictured in Figure 18 which shows Arabic words circulating around a decoration and its reading process consists of repetitively rereading the exact same words.

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<sup>314</sup> Alexander, "Teleology", 213.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-206. Nabokov "had a gift for science" and worked as a "curator at Harvard's museum of Comparative Zoology in the 1940s", see also p 177.

<sup>316</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 242, 246.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

Another example in the Index that sends readers on a never-ending reading cycle is the references following “*Crown Jewels*; see Hiding Place”.<sup>318</sup> The process is similar to the above example; “Hiding place, *potaynik*”; “*Potaynik, taynik*”; “*Taynik*, Russ., secret place; see *Crown Jewels*”.<sup>319</sup> Again, this does not follow the rules of ‘word golf’, therefore has nothing to do with the game, but alludes to motifs of indefinite circulation akin to the arabesque’s infinite circulating contour. However, the circle rotates around a single path, never changing its shape, as does the arabesque (Figure 16) and the fountain’s running water, making the shape limited to its own boundaries. The mentioned examples of index entries that continually circulate around the same words is the same as this pattern.

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<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 239, 243, 245.

## Conclusion: The Novel *Pale Fire*

The whole novel *Pale Fire* includes the sections, Foreword, the poem “Pale Fire”, Kinbote’s Commentary and the Index. The Commentary is also made up of diverse stories told by Kinbote. Similarly, the Index consists of a collection of ‘circulating texts’ (as mentioned above). These diverse sections are contained within the whole novel, that also circulates back onto itself, just as the arabesque stem repetitively returns to its beginning.

The ending of *Pale Fire* does not provide the reader with a definite resolution; the reader is either left to believe there are two authors (Shade and Kinbote), or various unresolved endings. Additionally, Shade’s quest for the deceptive fountain that keeps him “replaying the whole thing” in his mind reflects the effect that the whole novel has on the reader.<sup>320</sup> *Pale Fire*’s ending sends the reader back to the beginning of the text looking for clues and answers, and back to confusion and misunderstanding. Likewise, the poem “Pale Fire” circulates back to line 1 to complete the poem’s 1000-line structure, thus contributing to its continuity and literarily replicating the unending circulatory pattern of an arabesque.

An arabesque novel consists of unresolved endings. Nabokov’s writing fits the description of arabesque writing, particularly when he states that

Desperate Russian critics, trying to find an Influence to pigeonhole my own novels, have once or twice linked me up with Gogol, but when they looked again I had untied the knots and the box was empty.<sup>321</sup>

Nabokov is therefore bringing the reader’s attention to his association with Gogol as he admits to having ‘untied the knots’ that will link him up with Gogol. The knots that are associated with the arabesque are ones that Kühnel examines while discussing the double

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 51, line 730.

<sup>321</sup> Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 155.

arabesques (discussed in Chapter 6, Figure 16).<sup>322</sup> This decoration requires the artist to “string together” two opposing sets of arabesques “in regular repetition so that new units are created by means of knots and interlacing”.<sup>323</sup> In some cases, double arabesques create a darker pattern that stand out against a lighter pattern such as a “dark purple against a turquoise green ground”, or a different shade of colour which stands out against the original base of the whole ornament.<sup>324</sup> This image is also created by Shade in his poem when he describes the falling snowflakes: “A dull dark white against the day’s pale white”.<sup>325</sup> Hence, the motifs of the arabesque and Nabokov’s phraseology are very similar.

Nabokov deliberately conceals the arabesque in *Pale Fire* because subversion of the arabesque is a writing convention of the literary arabesque.<sup>326</sup> Hence, the arabesque is often overlooked by Nabokov’s critics. For example, Martine Hennard’s paper, “Playing a Game of Worlds in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*” mentions all of the motifs of the arabesque including doubles, reflections, kaleidoscopes, cycles, imitation, fragmented wholeness, mirror-mazes, a “two-way mirror”, contradictions, centrifugal and “in-betweenness” elements.<sup>327</sup> Despite the characteristics of the arabesque being present in Hennard’s article, the art form itself is not mentioned.

Furthermore, Nabokov’s above statement (“untying the knots and emptying the box”) reflects the way that both Gogol and Nabokov omit the word ‘arabesque’ from their books. The element of the arabesque is present. However, the word ‘arabesque’ is not. Uhlmann states that:

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<sup>322</sup> The ‘knots’ can also refer to Gordian knots and Celtic knots. Gogol’s *Arabesques* presents an array of Middle Ages aesthetics which also refer to Gothic, Greek, Crusade, Christianity, Mohammedan, Alexandrian and Byzantine (to name a few) ornamentation.

<sup>323</sup> Kühnel, *The Arabesque*, 18.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-21.

<sup>325</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 27, lines 10-15.

<sup>326</sup> Kiss, “Presence and Absence”, 234, 236, 240.

<sup>327</sup> Hennard, “Game of Worlds”, 299, 300, 304, 308, 310, 311.



A logic of gaps or significant absence is in play: the question of interpretation is the question of what is not said as much as what is said; or rather how what is not said relates to what is.<sup>328</sup>

It is the absence of the ‘arabesque’ and the presence of the arabesque’s motifs in *Pale Fire* that identifies the novel as a literary arabesque. Gogol also never mentions the word ‘arabesque’ in his book *Arabesques* except for its title. Likewise, Nabokov only writes the word ‘arabesques’ when referring to Gogol’s title in his *Nikolai Gogol*. Once again, Nabokov attempts to create an unending problem regarding the presence of the arabesque in his writing. As examined in Chapter 4, Nabokov seems to be continuing the story of Gogol’s character, Poprishchin. This evokes the continuation of the tales of *The Arabian Nights*.

The relevance of *Pale Fire* to the arabesque writing structure of *The Arabian Nights* is its unending circulation among people and its sections left open-ended in order to eternally continue its tales. In addition to Nabokov presenting circulating pieces of texts throughout *Pale Fire*, he also makes reference to *The Arabian Nights*’ Ali Baba and the “forty Arabian thieves”.<sup>329</sup> Nabokov’s Oriental stories are also present throughout his other novels, particularly *Ada*.<sup>330</sup> Additionally, Shafiee-Sabet and Pourgiv discuss whether it is ethical for Nabokov to incorporate Oriental stories in his favour, making them his own, without stating their Arabic origin:

In almost all the important parts and aspects of the novel, Nabokov references, whether explicitly or implicitly, this collection of Oriental stories, and as we argue here, he draws on the *Nights* as a key subtext in the cultural mosaic of his novel by extrapolating its story-line and characters and recontextualizing it in his own favour.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Uhlmann, “Method”, 403.

<sup>329</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 170.

<sup>330</sup> Shafiee-Sabet & Pourgiv, “Nabokov’s *Ada*”, 45.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. Edward Said argues that the imperialist’s view, particularly of the Middle East, manipulates cultural histories and dominates traditional values through literature. Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* adopts this strategy by applying the Middle Eastern art form to his novels and omitting the actual word ‘arabesque’, as if to eliminate the Middle Eastern traditional voice (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxii-xxiii). However, Arabs also adopted this modernist style as political and economic independence were interrelated and aesthetics transferred

In addition to *Ada*, Shafiee-Sabet and Pourgiv make the observation that “In *Pale Fire* the narrator of the Zemblan story is associated with Shahrazad”.<sup>332</sup> Hence, Oriental stories have been identified in Nabokov’s works.

Thus, Nabokov echoed writers such as Galland and Poe who recreated the stories of *The Arabian Nights* and in the process, adopted the motifs of the arabesque’s repetition and continuity. Where the original did not contain endings, Galland narrated a finale. Poe contributed to the motifs of the arabesque’s continuing structure and wrote a sequence to the thousand and one nights, resulting in the *Thousand-and-Second Tale of Sheherazade*. Nabokov also adopted this Eastern traditional style of writing. His literary arabesque, *Pale Fire*, consists of the arabesque’s motifs of continuity, symmetry, the infinite and the finite, where both the poem and the novel indefinitely circulate back to the beginning while bounded by the confined limits of the novel itself. This is akin to the arabesque continuously circulating around its own finite boundary.

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from the native value to the imperialist enterprise. Consequently, the native language became lost to colonisation, seeming to push the colonised voice further into the shadow, but rather, exposing colonial history and rendering imperialism as vulnerable (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 228-231).

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 45.

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