IMAGE, TEXT, AND SOUND THROUGH THE ARABESQUE IN THOREAU'S WALDEN

Lupina Farhana

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IMAGE, TEXT, AND SOUND THROUGH THE ARABESQUE IN THOREAU'S WALDEN

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

In

English Literature

By

Lupina Farhana

May 2022
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WALDEN

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Approved by:
Chad Luck, Committee Chair, English
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ABSTRACT

This essay looks at Thoreau’s *Walden* through the lens of the motif of the Arabic arabesque. It first considers the arabesque in a playful paradigm, that interrupts, crosses, and breaks boundaries through a Derridean parergon. However, this event results in an overturning of the binary that had, for centuries, been deemed merely the center to hold the highest of importance. Art historian Cordula Grewe utilizes Derrida’s parergon to analyze the poems of Goethe in the context of an arabesque frame which gives the sensation of sound by imitating the repeatedly playful consonants of the text written in the center. Thus, text, image, and sound are joined using the arabesque. When turning directly to the Arabic arabesque, the motif is an intentional evasion of representation. Though, within this avoidance of representation, new meaning is found in image, text, and sound. Going through multiple iterations of the arabesque, the motif transcends one medium to another. When we finally turn to Thoreau’s rich passage in the chapter entitled “Spring,” the transformation of text into image and sound are ubiquitous. Thoreau’s use of language demonstrates that signifier might not all be arbitrary. As repeated consonants flow into each other, new meaning is created. Ultimately, Thoreau believes that language has a way of connecting words to the empirical world, and it is done—unbeknownst to him—through the innate transformative nature of the arabesque. Thinking in the manner of this transformative arabesque, earlier restrictions of form and meaning in language can find new meaning, thus freeing us from otherwise assumed constraints.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. iii

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................................ iv

CHAPTER ONE: IMAGE, TEXT, AND SOUND THROUGH THE ARABESQUE IN THOREAU'S WALDEN .......................................................................................................................... 1

BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................................................................................................... 36
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. Grewe’s interpretation of an arabesque border.........................13

FIGURE 2. Arabesque conjoined horses with spiral ears .........................16

FIGURE 3. Cochlea—inner ear anatomy...................................................17

FIGURE 4. Arabesque rabbit ears connecting to border.............................19

FIGURE 5. Arabesque Koran linked border.............................................22

FIGURE 6. Arabesque motif in Alhambra connecting earth to heaven..........23

FIGURE 7. Koran with arabesque motif.................................................25

FIGURE 8. Arabesque embroidery from Islamic scripture.........................26
Charles Kraitsir was a Hungarian philologist who immigrated to Boston in the mid-nineteenth century, and with him came his publication of *The Significance of the Alphabet*—a copy which Henry David Thoreau eventually had in his own possession. Thoreau’s study of Kraitsir’s philology broadened with the publication of Kraitsir’s *Glossology: Being a Treatise on the Nature of Language and the Language of Nature*, which claimed that all language roots were connected in unity due to the fact that all men possessed the same speech organs. These similarities bound men together both anatomically and through the sounds in language that they were able to produce. But Kraitsir also emphasized that beyond our physical capabilities of language, there was a higher intuition of language, one that connects man to God. He writes that "language [is] for its divine ends, as a pole, so to say, whereon the tendrils of clear reason…climb up, in the direction of man’s posture, towards the Source of Light" (Kraitsir 10).

Therefore, Kraitsir claims that there exists a literal rising, a climbing up, through tendrils that connects our spoken words to the Light of God. In other words, there is a transcendence as we speak our words. In *Glossology*, Kraitsir further claims that "Man is a mirror of, but also a mediator between, all objects left without and within himself” (Kraitsir 23), thus emphasizing an interiority of man that is mirrored and manifested exteriorly. This mirroring and connection extend much
of the conversation that surrounds quintessential Transcendental philosophy, and especially in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his disciple, Thoreau.

Evidence of such a transcendental move is present in Thoreau's *Walden*, and specifically with in a passage in the chapter entitled “Spring,”—a season often symbolized in literature as encapsulating growth, expansion, and transformation. Several literary critics have focused on this particularly transformative passage in Thoreau—a passage which, incidentally, is always presented in its entirety, as is done here, in order the capture the full breadth of its transcendent weightlessness. What can be seen in this passage, is Kraitsir's philological theories, as language—according to him—comes from within man, and, as it unfurls outwards it rises and connects to a higher force. We can see these exact moves made by Thoreau as he contemplates language and form:

“No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea of inwardly. The atoms have already learned this law, and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist think *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat, (λείβω, *labor, lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapping; λοβος, *lobus, lobe, globe*; also lap, flap, and many other words,) *externally* a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and the *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of lobe are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single lobed, or *B*, double lobed,) with a liquid *l*
behind it pressing it forward. In the globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and the wings of the birds are still drier and the thinner leaves. Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit. Even ice begins with delicate crystal leaves, as if it had flowed into mounds which the fronds of water plants have impressed on the watery mirror. The whole tree itself is but one leaf, and the rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth, and towns and cities are the oval of insects in their axils.

-Thoreau 205-206

Critics such as Philip F. Gura link Kraitsir to Thoreau’s *Walden* through this passage. He claims that what man does “*internally* is what he does to make it *external* again, how through verbal forms he reflects or expresses it… this process of ‘reflection,’ as well as the mediation which occurs when a piece of language is formed, fascinated Kraitsir and Thoreau” (Gura 42). Note here, there is a sense of interiority that spills out and expresses exteriorly. Specifically, Gura notes a “wordplay…as Thoreau moves from a lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly” (Gura 50). Play is where I enter the conversation, as I too am interested in Thoreau’s playful transformation between the interiority that spills out and manifests exteriorly. More specifically, the fact that Gura calls
Thoreau’s famous metamorphic passages a “wordplay,” leaves room to analyze his works through an initial theoretical framework of play.

Thoreau’s playfulness with language in this passage is also noted by other literary critics. Rochelle Johnson says that Thoreau’s “passion for nature beyond metaphor [is a] melding of the material and the imaginative, of nature and language—the amalgam of language in things” (Johnson 102). Picking up on Thoreau’s famous metaphors but warning us to consider metonymy more specifically, critic Sean Ross Meehan says that Thoreau’s metonymy “is without metaphor, but not without figure…metonymy speaks to the literal instead of the metaphorical senses of words” (Meehan 312). Here, Meehan is considering the empirical version of transcendentalism, suggesting that Thoreau engages with nature through the tangible and material world, and that language is a means by which he moves between the written text and the natural world that surrounds him. Going even beyond the written word, Thoreau’s playful use of language is utilized by experimental musician John Cage in his poetry and music where he directly entertains Thoreau’s Walden, thus showing us that sound is very much a part of Thoreau’s playful language.

This essay looks at Thoreau’s Walden in the context of play, by first defining play in the more traditional parameters determined by Johan Huizinga. Huizinga delineates strict boundaries by which play must take place, though later scholars of play declare that the circle of play has been breached and spills over into our daily lives. We turn to Derrida’s concept of play as an interruption, and
therefore, as an overturning of the binary that has, for centuries deemed the center to hold the highest of importance. Specifically in this discussion, the concept of boundaries, parameters and frames are important, so we will turn to art historian Cordula Grewe, who utilizes Derrida’s parergon to analyze the poems of Goethe in the context of an arabesque frame. This arabesque frame is of great importance, as it will be the basis of my argument in terms of borders being a place of liminality and transformation between text and ornament. Beyond a simple crossing of boundaries, Grewe shows that language and image can evoke sound and that this sound can also be seen beyond language and into image through the arabesque. Specifically, the arabesque in Arabic calligraphy demonstrates exactly the transformative move which Thoreau is making in *Walden*. This is significant because it allows us to see the way Thoreau, in an almost religious and transcendental fashion, sees form as an evasion of representation and yet, in the very lack of meaning are able to see and hear new meaning. Ultimately, language—through the framework of a playful arabesque—connects our words to the empirical world. The arabesque has the ability to morph and boundaries and defy impinging delineations. Through the arabesque, borders are not borders, but places where form can be evaded. Ultimately this is important as we turn to that dark moment when Thoreau contemplates his night in jail where he sees the walls that surround him, not as constricting, but as a freeing.
To get to this moment of free play, we first start with the restrictions defined by Johan Huizinga in his book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, which is deemed to be the Holy Grail of “Play.” Painstakingly, chapter through chapter, he explores the different avenues of this elusive field, while also being very direct and distinct in his articulation of what play might be. He writes that “play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aims in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life” (Huizinga 28). This is a good summary of certain aspects of play—its limitations for example, in terms of temporal and spatial requirements. There is a contrast here, with the “freely accepted” rules, which imply a freedom for play to unfold and yet, it must occur only within certain constraints of time and space. Ecstasy and freedom can be experienced, but only within specified boundaries. If we were to adhere to Huizinga’s strict rules of play, then Thoreau’s wordplay, though it appears that he is having fun, would still remain stagnant and trapped within one form. May it be the lobes in the lungs or the liquid l, it would not flow into the other letters. It would leave text trapped solely within language, and much of the transcendental appreciation of transformation through the observation of nature would not be perceived.

Following Huizinga’s strict adherence to the rules, several scholars have revisited his criteria of play, allowing us to modify its definition and perhaps,
revisit Thoreau’s playful words in the context of an interiority of texts which spills over into an exteriority of the world. One such scholar is Anne-Marie Schleiner in her book, *The Player’s Power to Change the Game*, where she investigates how playing games has intermingled with our daily lives, though this intertwining can be quite dangerous. She sees this an “an ominous growth of ‘gamespace,’ an invasive agonistic...[where the term]... ‘Gamification’“ that has taken hold of our society. This gamification has overflowed into every crevice until it has invaded our lives in dangerous ways. Everything in our lives has become a game—from electronic task lists on our phones, rewards points when shopping, or learning games for math or languages. There is a reciprocity between player and game, and the dichotomy or the power structure of the subject and object is erased. In other words, previously held power dynamics no longer give precedence to the game or the person playing the game being superior. Both are equally at risk of crossing over and toppling the other. The crossing of boundaries in the context of play has been explored by Cage, who has for many years, been in deep contemplation and conversation with Thoreau’s journal and the way his language crosses over into music. My essay will contemplate Thoreau’s language as it plays—not only through—sound and image—but also on the level of the visual arabesque which inherently embodies such transformations.

In the context of Thoreau as he is contemplating nature, we find this crossing over in this passage particularly appropriate in this chapter entitled “Spring,” since this passage appears just a few lines before our passage of
interest. In particular, if we are interested in play which spills through boundaries, then here is a perfect passage where Thoreau, in awe of nature, is contemplating boundaries. He writes,

“when I see on the one side the inert bank,—for the sun acts on one side first,—and on the other this luxuriant foliage, the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me…and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about”

-Thoreau 205.

First, we note that there exists a division of two banks—with one that is graced by the light of the sun, perhaps the center of all things. We can view the solar center as the oneness of God, light, the Divine Word, which is usually held in a superior position. On the other side, we have a luxuriant foliage—which I read as vines—the very vines which we will be considering in the context of the arabesque later in this essay. Of note for now, is that this bank of arabesque vines and foliage bares no light, and its intertwining shrubbery, though it lies in the dark in contrast to the other sunlit bank, and though we might otherwise perceive as subordinated, is all part of Thoreau’s belief that everything he sees, was created by the Artist—the artist with a capital A, thus implying the work of the Divine, created both light and dark. Therefore, this Divine God, does not reside simply within the light, but also in the darkness of the arabesque vines.
To better understand the idea of deconstructing that binary, and specifically, the concept of play which exists within the circle and yet, spills exteriorly, I turn to Jacques Derrida’s essay, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences.” Here, Derrida speaks about an “event” and a “rupture and a redoubling.” There exists a structure which has always existed, and we know and acknowledge this structure with a “center” or a “point of presence.” This is a “fixed origin.” This is precisely why this sudden event is important, because with this event, we have entered into play when Derrida says, is “paradoxically, within the structure and outside of it. The center is at the center of the totality, and totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not in the center” (Derrida 1). Therefore, the center of the circle, and what is prioritized, is no longer of greater importance than what lies exteriorly. More specifically, Thoreau, in his contemplation of man and nature, is concerned with an interiority which manifests and transforms into an exterior plane. He specifically says that the lobes that lie within our bodies are manifest throughout our language that is spoken. And as we have already seen, he is concerned with a crossing over of vines which lie on a darkened side of the bank, which is equally worthy as a sunlit bank. Thoreau is very much interested a crossing of boundaries.

However, I am specifically interested in the boundaries that surround and inscribe a particular area. In other words, I want to explore entirely defined frames which, are not necessarily well defined. For this, we can turn to Derrida’s essay entitled “Parergon,” where he juxtaposes what lies outside and exteriorly to
a work of art, in contrast to what lies within. Following Immanuel Kant aesthetics, Derrida points out that the “parergon (frame, garment, column) can augment the pleasure of taste (Wohlgefallen des Geschmacks), contribute to the proper and intrinsically aesthetic representation if it intervenes by its forms (durch seine Form)” (Derrida 64). By this, we are first establishing that the parergon can be either the garment placed on a sculpture, or on a person; it can be the columns that align a building, which also provide more than structural support—and instead again, gives way to aesthetic tastes. Finally, the parergon can be a beautiful frame, which, according to Kant, is a finalized vehicle of pleasure. The frame does not signify anything, nor does it represent anything, thus making it deprived of text or meaning. Derrida says that “like the framing-foliation, the framing parergon is a signifying and a-representative. Another common trait is that the framing can also, as parergon (an additional external to the representation), participate in and add to the satisfaction of pure taste” (Derrida 98). For Derrida, this framing foliation, this parergon has no meaning, and is therefore a-representative. Because of its lack of meaning, it remains external, it is simply additional, and yet, because of this interruption and event, what lies exteriorly has as much importance.

Having looked at Derrida’s claim that a frame surrounding an artwork is just as important as the artwork itself, I turn to Cordula Grewe’s book, The Arabesque from Kant to Comics, where she uses Derrida’s parergon. More specifically, she uses the example of an arabesque frame, which is particularly
noteworthy for our discussion of frames, as I will soon delve into the a-signification, or as Derrida puts it, a-representative nature of the arabesque. In Grewe’s book, she looks at an arabesque border in lithographic illustrations (figure 1), which puts Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s _Dance of Death_ at the center, as if to celebrate language at the center of our world. Goethe’s writing is then surrounded and encapsulated by Eugen Napoleon Neureuther’s lithographic illustrations, in the form of arabesque borders. Here, while Goethe’s stanzas are crafted with aspirated sounds such as “k…k…reckt, rukt, wackelt, klippert’s klappert’s, sacken, lacken.” Grewe argues that the

“poet’s masterful use of dactyls, monosyllables, and spiriant sounds…produce the clumsy, dangling, disjointed, rocking motion of dancing skeletons with its staccato, clacking effect. We can literally see the ballad’s soundscape…the line does everything in its power to solidify the text as verbal image…the final spiral loop is so tense, so brimming with stored-up energy, that it threatens to pull down the text itself, resistant in its solid black density, pull it down into the abyss without leaving the audience time to read it first.”

-Grewe 159

Therefore, Grewe is reading the poetry as sounds which are reverberated by the dancing skeleton, thus recreating the sound through image. She argues that the solid line of the arabesque solidifies the text, but also weighs it down, in what she
calls, a black density. The weight of the solid line creates an abyss, into which the text falls, thus not allowing the text to be first read. There is no definite superiority of text versus the arabesque frame which surrounds it, and though an arabesque frame bares a-signification, it still holds enough power to dissuade us from reading the text.
Figure 1: Grewe’s interpretation of an arabesque border.

Source: Grewe 2021.
I therefore use Grewe’s read of the arabesque frame as a way to enter into my own conversation with the arabesque. First summarizing Grewe’s argument in relation to Derrida, we have a playful border in this example, the exterior border—what Derrida would call, the parergon—which is an ornament without signification. Specifically, it is the arabesque which, in its a-signification, has no meaning, and therefore is subordinated. But as Grew points out—our initial inclination of subordinating the border as a marginality, while putting writing, text, and meaning in the significant center—is a hasty, binary decision. Because the text, in its black density disappears into an abyss of darkness, allowing only the border—the arabesque on the exterior which we initially deemed unworthy—to itself create meaning and sound.

Finally, I turn to the Arabic arabesque because it demonstrates a more fluid transformation between text, image, and ultimately, sound in Thoreau’s playful utilization of language. To illustrate the motif, Sandra Naddaff in her book *Arabesque*, utilizes Roland Barthes to argue that the arabesque has a linguistic function. Through joining, a transformation unfolds, and yet, an exact representation—as is seen in language—never occurs. She says that as with the written text, the arabesque in its innate function is an “avoidance of the portrayal of animate forms” and there exists a “reluctance to engage in figural representation.” She goes on to say that the “arabesque takes as its point of departure the denatured, indeed unnatural leaves,” and therefore is “at once the means of signification and the thing it signifies” (Naddaff 115). There is therefore
a transitional movement in the arabesque, one that never represents and yet is always departing, always reaching, but never arriving at a perfect signification.

Looking closer at the Arabic arabesque, it was specifically created in the Islamic world due to the intense fear of idolatry that pervades the faith. The question then becomes, how does one abide to strict religious rules, while yet creating art—whose intention is to do exactly that—represent? There are tales of early draftsmen in the 9th century who would take life-like images from nature, and then intentionally transform the images into less exact representations. In other words, where much of the Western world aimed to capture life-like images and bring them closer to their true forms, the Islamic world’s intention was to draw them further away from a perfect replication, because it was believed that only God could create a true, lifelike image. All other artists should therefore refrain from trying, because it gave them the audacity of trying to equal God, which of course is also forbidden. Given this sentiment, we can observe such images in an 11th century wooden door (figure 2), where, instead of a perfect depiction of two horses, the craftsman excises their bodies and anneals them into a single creature. Though they are bridled and connected with their reins—giving the impression that they are indeed horses—their ears twist into spirals—spirals that we might observe in the horns of a ram or a family of deer.
Figure 2: Arabesque conjoined horses with spiral ears. Source: Kuhnel, 1949.

The spiraling ears also give the impression of a morphing into scrolls on which one might not only draw images, but more commonly use to inscribe the written text, thereby calling attention and linking image to text. The fact that it is the ears that are transformed into scrolls emphasizes the connection between image and text that might be seen, and words that might be aurally heard through the auricular canal. In this manner, the utterance of sound becomes important.
The particular spiraling shape itself has significance in relation to the ear’s natural anatomy (figure 3). Though it cannot be proven that this craftsman had any knowledge of human form, a closer examination of the anatomical structure...
of the inner ear illustrates the vital hearing organ of the inner ear: the cochlea. The cochlea contains many characteristic spirals—a form that this craftsman intentionally or coincidentally emphasizes in his depiction of the horses’ ears. Therefore, while there is a superficial evasion of representation of the horse and its ears, the fact is that the depiction of what is represented exteriorly in the horses by the artist, are naturally occurring anatomical forms that exist internally within the inner ear of the auditor canal. In this manner, there is not only an evasion of representation through the conjoining of two organic depictions of horses to create a non-representation of the animal, but there is also a crossing over, with a spiral that originally and naturally exists within the auditory canal, now exteriorized and brought outside the ear. Furthermore, the scrolls also reemphasize the written word, thus blending image with the allusion to text, while still existing within the image realm. Therefore, delineated borders where play can occur are broken through the arabesque through not only images and text but calling attention to sound.

This crossing over of sound and image is seen previously in Grewe’s analysis of Goethe’s *Dance of Death* which was surrounded by Neureuther’s lithographic illustrations with the skeletal arabesque border. Grewe points to the monosyllabic clattering from the poem as it echoes of the clattering of skeletons to recreate sound through image. And since Grewe argues that despite the arabesque’s a-signification, there is no definite superiority between text and image, the image of the horses with their scroll-like ears that seemingly evade
representation, that also bear an a-signification and a depiction that do not resemble the outer part of ear, it actuality might contain a truer representation of what exists within the ear.

This re-representation and emphasis on the ears and sound are seen in other examples of the arabesque, such as this 13th century bowl from Syria. In figure 4, we see the way an artist depicts a rabbit whose legs and ears are deliberately twisted.

![Arabesque rabbit ears](image)

Figure 4: Arabesque rabbit ears connecting to border.
Source: Kuhnel, 1949.
If rabbits have large ears, then this depiction exaggerates its famously gigantic auricular appendages. The ears aid in joining and creating a continuum that connects the focal point of the rabbit in the center—which would otherwise always take priority over the arabesque border that surrounds the image of the rabbit. However, the rabbit’s depiction is distorted to a point where it is no longer recognizable as one, thus decreasing its importance, annealing it to the arabesque border, and showing that both a distorted image of a rabbit and the a-signification of the arabesque can both have no meaning. In other designs of arabesques, a similar annealing and distortion of a delineated barrier is depicted, along with other representations of sound.

Naddaff draws attention to an art critic describing the arabesque from the ninth-century mosque of Ibn Tulun: “From the freely flowing scroll, stemmed leaves with an unnatural outline emanate in both directions, then split again, and the whole regenerates itself imperceptibly in a symmetrical rhythm—unequivocally arabesque” (Naddaf 112). The emphasis is on unnatural outlines, even if the original outline is of a leaf. There is also a splitting and a separation of the motif, with an emphasis on symmetrical form, before the whole regenerates. Furthermore, there is a sense of rhythm and therefore, repetition. Focusing on the sense of repetition and rhythm, Naddaff draws parallels from the arabesque to stories from 1001 Nights. In these series of stories, Naddaff points to the way lovers spend nights “embracing…the particle of copulation in concert and joining the conjunctive and conjoined” (Naddaff 33). Naddaf argues that the pattern of
the arabesque reenacts the act of lovers in the night that split and conjoin in the act of copulation. This rhythmic act of the arabesque also draws attention to sound—the very sound that we have seen in Grewe’s assessment of the arabesque, as well as the conjoined horses with their ears that mimic the inner ear of the auditory canal, along with the rabbit with its large ears that fuse with the peripheral border. Furthermore, Naddaf argues that Shahrazad’s technique of repeatedly halting the story before its conclusion every night builds anticipation for the next night and each night is a prolongation of her life, as the King who holds her captive cannot kill her, but instead must wait for the following night for the conclusion. In this way, Naddaf takes each night as a singular event—perhaps a single turn or twist in the visual arabesque motif—which Shahrazad then links to the next night, and each story becomes an interconnected chain of events that continue into infinity.

The most common place where the arabesque is found, is in the religious context, where the linkage of interconnected chains as well as our inability to decipher its transition or direct delineation, is most prominent. Take for example, this design from a 15th century Quran uncovered from the Alhambra (figure 5).
We are initially presented with a dense foliage of bifurcated vines and leaves that intermingle without much sense. However, if one deliberately follows a main strand of the arabesque, it sprouts and then becomes the pattern which we previously assumed to be completely separate from this first one. In other words, the two patterns penetrate each other and are actually one unit, though we see it as separate. Instead, the foreground and background anneal together, and a sense of separateness is an illusion. Instead, there are no boundaries in the same way that we have seen arabesque borders transform and join with the main central text, until both are equally vital and important, and neither is subordinated to the other. This conjoining is a distinct feature of the Arabic arabesque which covers walls of mosques, palaces, and space on holy scripture, with the intent that, when the worshiper views the arabesque, its intertwining
laces connect and collide into each other, leading our eyes from the mundane earthly plane into the divine heavens (figure 6).

Figure 6: Arabesque motif in Alhambra connecting earth to heavens.

Taking a closer look at the examples of this Arabic Arabesque in relation to text, the illustration shown is that of the exterior of the holy Quran, with its interlaced foliations (figure 7). Text, like that we saw in Grewe’s work, resides in the center. But, as she so astutely pointed to an abyss in the black text, so too
does an abyss exist in this Arabic work. Arabic writing in the form of calligraphy exists only in this tiny, dense center, which, though it is writing, is difficult to read, even by the Arabic reader, thus evades meaning, even while having meaning through text. Instead, what surrounds it repeatedly, are interlaced ornamental arabesque designs without signification. Yet, each iteration around the central text pulls us away from it, and instead, brings us exteriorly until our eyes rest of the illustrious borders. We are lost within its vine searching for text we saw in the center, but all we get are iterations of a-signification. By the time we realize that text does not exist in the exterior, we are lost in the borders, perhaps muddled and confused, perhaps, convinced that this arabesque with no meaning, that is deliberately there without meaning, has significance. Perhaps if we remain here longer, we will at last find meaning, and so we keep dwelling on the edges. In this manner, we find ourselves playing in the exterior, where text is no longer apparent, and yet, where we seek to find meaning.
To further illustrate the playfulness of arabesque calligraphy, I turn briefly to another example of Arabic calligraphy by an unnamed artist. This is an
embroidery that I purchased in the street markets in Cairo (figure 8), and which is now hung in my home. It contains the familiar golden threads that interweave text and ornament. Here, text appears in small, confined spaces, even in the surrounding borders, as well as in the center, though the center also contains text that is decorative and ornamental. If the arabesque, as I am claiming, is a way to playfully exceed borders and is a way to play outside the magic circle, then here we see the artwork blending signification with a-signification, until meaning resides in both or neither. The viewer is lost in the intersecting lines, trying to determine if a line is text or arabesque design.

Figure 8: Arabesque embroidery from Islamic scripture.
However, I am aware that this analysis of the Arabic arabeque is also easy to interpret as image if Arabic is a foreign language for the viewer. Though the Arab world would still have a difficult time deciphering text and image, I therefore presented Thoreau’s playfulness with language, as a way to demonstrate his conception of boundaries which are actually fluid.

At first the connection between Thoreau and the arabeque might seem incongruous—much like the two patterns in the border of Quran that do not coincide. The first step to notice is that Thoreau is of course Ralph Waldo Emerson’s disciple and student. While much of Emerson’s work revolves around his relationship with nature, one of Emerson’s lesser-known facts are his interest in the Middle East. According to literary critic Jeffrey Einboden in his book *Islam and Romanticism*, Emerson had purchased his own copy of the Quran in London, while visiting his friend and fellow romanticist, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Emerson later published a poem in the 1842 edition of the *Dial* which he entitles “Saadi.” Eidboden points out that “the poem’s title, ‘Saadi’ —[is] the name of a celebrated Persian poet and predecessor of Hafiz, a paragon of Islamic spiritual verse” (Einboden 192). In fact, much of Emerson’s journals contain translations of Hafiz’s poems. One of the most poignant moments in Emerson's life, is his mourning for his youngest son. It was so devastating that Emerson was driven to exhume the grave of his son—an act which Saadi himself did when his son passed away. Beyond these direct connections that Emerson—and by association, Thoreau had—this period was thriving with Islamic influence. Goethe
being a German Romanticist, was influenced by Islamic spiritualism which of course helped Emerson and Thoreau shape their philosophies of transcendentalism at that time. Nathaniel Hawthorne was writing stories critiquing Transcendentalism, such as his novel, *The Blithdale Romance* which bears many references to the East, including the name of the main character after the third century Syrian Queen Zenobia. Washington Irving spent a considerable amount of time at the Moorish Palace, the Alhambra, in Spain. And of course, the notorious and often difficult-to-decipher Edgar Allan Poe entitled his collection of stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque*—which incidentally contained several allusions to the arabesque. Therefore, Eastern influences along with the arabesque motif was flourishing in nineteenth century America.

Having spent a considerable amount of time on Derrida’s interruption of the inside and outside, Grewe’s arabesque border, along with the deep analysis of the Arabic arabesque, and how it appears in American literature, we can now turn to Thoreau’s passage which was presented earlier and move slowly through it. Initially in this passage in *Walden*, Thoreau is establishing a border by saying, “no wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea of inwardly,” though no direct delineation is demarcated. However, in the next lines, he writes that the “atoms have already learned this law and are pregnant by it.” At this moment, we notice that he is first speaking about labors of expression, and then about an inherent pregnancy, thus drawing attention to the growth from within—as for example, a pregnancy would generate a fetus from
within the womb. Thoreau brings attention again to the interiority and developing
the theme of a pregnant growth from within. He says,

> Internally, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist think
> lobe, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the
> leaves of fat, (λείβω, labor, lapsus, to flow or slip downward, a
> lapping; λοβος, globus, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other
> words,) externally a dry thin leaf, even as the f and the v are a
> pressed and dried b.

Very much in keeping with his contemplation of borders and the relationship
between what lies internally and externally, he analyzes the word globe. With the
earth, Thoreau is pointing to a manifestation of earth’s divinity in its exteriority
through its leaves and foliage (the very foliage that we have seen in the
arabesque). However, Thoreau, I argue is playing with an interiority where he
notes that animals themselves have lobes, such as those we see in the liver or
lungs inside our bodies. Also note that the uterus containing a pregnancy—the
very pregnancy and labor to which Thoreau is referring—is also an individual
sac, a lobe and a confined space from where a baby first begins gestation. With
regards to Naddaff’s description of the arabesque, the conjoining of lovers, the
repetition of figures opening and closing, and ultimately her allusion to an
extension in Shahrazad’s parallel in themes of Thoreau’s pregnancy in words
which flow into and impregnate each other. Looking closely at his choice of
words, lobe is contained within the word globe. The lobe itself is a part of the
spelling of the word *globe*. Thoreau plays with this interiority not only through spelling, but though sound: *liver* and *lungs* both have the lingual consonant *l* that create a rhythmic repetition in not only the words *liver* and *lungs*, but also in *labor, lapsus*, and *leaf*. These words all hold the letter *l*, as if it were part of the whole. The *l* is at the beginning of the word, and therefore bears an exteriority. Finally, the repeated consonant plays to our auricular sense, in the very same manner that Grewe noted in Goethe’s poem of “*k…k…reckt, rukt, wackelt*, which imitated the clattering sounds that the skeletons that intertwined in the exterior arabesque might produce.

Experimental musician Cage is very aware of Thoreau’s attention to words and sound, and he brings that out in his poetry (figure 9). After calling reference to Thoreau, Cage turns to a winter scene. He says, “Now under the snows of winter / apple tree / chips of dead wood (lines 3-5). Then he calls attention to east by saying “Persian city / spring advances (lines 12-13) and aligns it to the very season to which Thoreau speaks of in this chapter. Earth comes alive for Cage, as “all parts of nature belong to one head, the curls / the earth / the water” (lines 14-16). Note here the water flows, the same way that liquid is flowing through Thoreau’s liquid *l*s. The “curls” to which Cage refers, bear the similar curls seen in the arabesque as well as the cochlea of the ear, further joining Cage’s poems on Thoreau to the arabesque. As the poem unfolds into spring, Cage writes, “I hear it roaring, reminding me of March, March,” (line 22). Therefore, beyond Cage’s roaring, even the repetition of the “March, March” calls
attention to the auricular senses and creates almost a changing mantra, allowing the season March to twist and transform into soldiers, or ants marching, while uttering the words over and over again leads them to lose their meaning, thus transforming from one meaning to another. We have seen this concept of losing and yet finding meaning, the idea of evading representation only to acquire a different form of representing, within the context of the many arabesques this essay has explored.

Therefore, the arabesque, as we saw, produced sound in not only Grewe’s interpretation, but also in my own analysis of the arabesque that contained the strange and yet intentional morphing of the ears in both the horses and the rabbit. And though the horses’ ears in particular were strangely twisted into a coil, it resembled the cochlea—the inner hearing organ of the ear. It is as if the inner cochlea is itself a lobe of the ear—in much the same way that lobes lie within the liver and the lungs in Thoreau’s *Walden*. That the inner cochlea was pulled exteriorly, again reemphasizes the Derridean play which Grewe was noting. The fact that both exterior border which is usually not the focal point, but rather is connected, shows that the exterior is just as significant, and perhaps even more significant than what lies interior.

Thoreau too, as we have noted, is concerned with the flowing from interior to exterior. Reverting back to his analysis of the *lobe* which is contained within the word *globe*, he notes that there is an overflowing, as liquid *l* flows out, pushing on the *b* of *globe*, impregnating it, and allowing its stomach to grow
externally into the letters b and B. There is a translation and a transcendence, and the leaves flow like water. The / flows like the Arabic letters contained within the arabesque designs, or the rabbit’s ears within the arabesque frame.

Therefore, Thoreau’s influence on Kraitsir’s theories of language is evident, as he claims it to be a mediator of all objects left without and within man. Words themselves are empirical as they become a material medium which connects man to nature. Though we look at letters such as B and b as arbitrary, Thoreau says there is meaning to the very letters that form the words. Though the arabesque has no meaning in its form, and is separate from text, through its iterations it finds meaning in its form—as we saw in Grewe’s example, and in the previous example of the arabesques, then the English language with the letters allow a transcendence and a transformation. If script lies within the center of the circle, as in Arabic texts, and as we saw in Goethe’s works with the arabesque border, then Thoreau is saying that even within the script and within the words “lobe” and “globe” there is a visual outward manifestation by pushing the pregnant belly of the b. Script is not only in the center but extends beyond the initially transcribed border of play. It extends beyond the magic circle that divides script and design. It plays outwards into form, and into design and into a supposed a-signification, thus resisting the earlier meaning which assumes that an external design cannot have meaning. And while Arabic texts and art are trying to evade representation, the English text, as we see though words such as globe and lobe, are trying to come closer to representation, trying to reach
towards form, and amalgamate signifier and signified. Therefore, I argue that the arabesque is not simply an empty void of a-signification, but a playful reaching through different mediums. Though it is relegated to the outside, it allows play. The arabesque is not just exterior, but it joins the exterior to the interior. It is playful, and it is the space and the liminality between image, text, and sound.

This essay explores the arabesque in its manifestation in language as a way of contemplating its playfulness. If, as we saw in Thoreau, he allows language to meld and transform into new things, we can imagine other moments in his where he must have felt enclose, entrapped, and perhaps, saw beyond his entrapment. Therefore, for further inquiry, I prose using the arabesque in more dire circumstances, such as exploring the exteriority and interiority in relevant Thoreau’s famous essay, “Civil Disobedience.” Here, he describes his experience with his one night in jail because he did not pay taxes by saying,

As I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet think, the door of wood and iron, a foot think, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up…I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was still more difficult one to clime or break through, before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar.
As we have seen with play, or rather, the expulsion of the circle in play, I see Thoreau first playing with language, and then putting himself in such a place of play. As he feels confined within the prison, the walls that encase him evade representation, especially if Thoreau imagines the walls as an arabesque border. They are arabesque in the sense of not only connecting him to the outside, but also a link to the outside because of his very belief that even within the prison, within the center of his cell, he is still free because of the playfulness of arabesque borders that breaches perfect delineation. The center at which Thoreau stands, does not contain the truth, and he believes in his truth of not paying taxes. And just as the arabesque border lacks meaning, so too do Thoreau’s walls that surround him lack meaning, and in doing so, become the very method for him to escape the confinements. By playfully evading borders, as does the arabesque, they allow him to play with restriction and ultimately break free.

Through the quintessential 19th century American, Henry David Thoreau and his endless musings of Walden that bears endless passages of transformation, we can begin to understand why Thoreau was so monumental in the belief systems of his future disciples such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. In their own reenactments of peaceful protest, they were able to see boundaries as malleable. Though they were constrained in their own station at that time, they were able to read Thoreau’s essay on "Civil
Disobedience,” read his moment of peace and freedom he feels despite his own incarceration. Borders are for them, not borders, but an evasion of form, which one can choose to permeate, depending on their perspective. And the very ability to see oneself transcend borders, allows people to not only think beyond previously held beliefs, but also themselves pass through, spill over, and play beyond their otherwise deeply restrictive stations in life. Such is the power of the ever transforming arabesque. The very evasion of representation, the very lack of meaning, has a way of finding new, and transformative ways of thinking and being.


