

Title: The Romantic Artwork as Embodiment: Word and Image in Gogol's *Arabesques*
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Abstract:

Drawing on contemporary Russian interpretations of German Romantic aesthetic theory, Gogol maintains in the essays of *Arabesques* [Arabeski, 1835] that true art simultaneously reflects both a known or knowable reality, i.e. Nature, and the “inner fire” or “inner light” of the poet’s soul—which, through Imagination, illuminates those of Nature’s truths that are concealed from everyday perception. The ideal artwork, then, offers a mimetic rendering of the exchange between the artist’s soul and the realm of Nature. However, a tension emerges in *Arabesques*’ three works of fiction: in these short stories, a contradiction appears between Gogol’s self-proclaimed theory of aesthetics, which perfectly balances ideal thought and physical reality as the objects of artistic representation; and Gogol’s attitude toward his own aesthetic creation, marked by an anxious suspicion that an artwork, as the physical embodiment of a poetic Idea, necessarily represents that Idea’s corruption by fallen matter.

This anxiety arises partially out of the conflict that inheres in Gogol’s simultaneous valorization of the painted image, and his suspicion of his own aesthetic medium, that is, verbal language. The short story “The Portrait” [“Portret”], I argue, itself embodies Gogol’s anxiety over verbal creation by tracing a tension between narrativity—which is shown to be ethically dangerous, in that it is uniquely capable of misrepresenting reality—and the image—which, by signifying immediately its entire content, can only deceive if the viewer herself is impure.

This paper traces Gogol’s struggle in *Arabesques*, and emblematically in “The Portrait,” to reconcile the unequal potentials of word and image to signify, embody, or represent the ideal Romantic referent, the poet’s own spirit in communion with Nature. Ultimately, I argue that this struggle is played out simultaneously on the level of *Arabesques*’ rival discourses: the philosophical essay and the short story compete as the ideal verbal mode for representing, or embodying, the Romantic “reality” of a poetic Idea.