

6. “Sohrab and Rostum”: Matthew Arnold’s Spectacle

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It has become a commonplace to figure the aesthetics of the Victorian era as predominantly visual, and considering the explosive growth and sheer abundance of visual representations during the period, it is difficult to imagine how it could be otherwise. To begin with, as Michael Booth points out, the groundwork for a taste for spectacle had already been laid in the new urban architecture, the “architecture of the Empire”, monumental in scale and explicit in displaying the wealth of the imperial domains.¹ It is not surprising that such spectacular buildings – from bridges to department stores, all built on a vast scale and lavishly decorated – became subjects for painters, and that, as luxury found its way into private homes, there emerged a taste for the display of wealth in the domestic sphere as well.² Of course, access to the rapidly expanding range of visual stimuli was not limited to members of the affluent classes; illustrated mass-market books, magazines, and prints of popular paintings and drawings were becoming increasingly affordable. And from the 1840s and 50s onwards, after tax reforms opened up new opportunities for cheap periodicals, even working class readers were able to consume the spectacle of Empire, as a plethora of low-priced illustrated papers provided a regular supply of images of significant imperial events and foreign and exotic landscapes.³

What lent this cultural development further intensity was that, during the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, visual technologies emerged in unprecedented abundance and diversity. The magic lantern, the peepshow, the panorama, the diorama, the cosmorama, the eidophusikon, the thaumatrope, the phenakistiscope, the zootrope, the

¹ Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850–1910* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 5–8.

² Booth, *Victorian*, 3–4.

³ Booth, *Victorian*, 5–8.

stroboscope, the stereoscope, the kaleidoscope, theatrical spectacles, illustrated magazines, and photography all belong to the rich lexicon needed to refer to the range of artificial visual stimuli available to the Victorian eye.⁴ The Victorian appetite for visual spectacle grew to match the wealth of new forms on offer, and Jean-Louis Comolli's estimation that "[t]he second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible"⁵ seems entirely credible, and a befitting judgement on an age during which photography was developed into a consumer technology. Yet this frenzy, or "cult of images"⁶ as Flint describes it, was not always regarded as self-indulgent or superficial, even if devices now regarded as respectably scientific, such as the microscope, were originally devised for the purposes of entertainment.⁷ Through the amalgam of a number of aesthetic and epistemological postulates, accurate and realistic visual representation came to be seen as a means to represent truth with an previously unavailable fidelity.

While the fact that, during the nineteenth century, the objects to be gazed at, or with which to gaze, were multiplying on an industrial scale is significant in itself, the way in which their products were viewed constitutes a cultural shift on another level. Yet during that century the spectacle assumed so many forms and was present to its audiences in such a ubiquitous manner that it would hardly be possible to conduct a fully detailed critical discussion of the subject in the space available to me here. On the other hand, the demand for spectacle and its grip on the population across all social classes made it such an all-encompassing cultural phenomenon in Victorian Britain that the more general implications of this shift in human experience cannot reasonably be overlooked.

⁴ Booth, *Victorian*, 5–8; Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 105–16.

⁵ In Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

⁶ Flint, *The Victorians*, 6.

⁷ Crary, *Techniques*, 132.

According to Jonathan Crary, the Victorian abundance of devices that made the operation of human vision observable and evident to itself – often as a side-effect of pleasure-seeking and entertainment, as happened with the kaleidoscope, the stereoscope, and even the microscope – problematised earlier conceptions of a rational, detached or disembodied gaze.⁸

Crary argues that, in the early nineteenth century, there was an emergent

repositioning of the observer, outside of the fixed relations of interior/exterior presupposed by the camera obscura and into an undemarcated terrain on which the distinction between internal sensation and external signs is irrevocably blurred.⁹

Since the sixteenth century, the metaphor of the *camera obscura* had provided the dominant model for the observer: “the positioning of a knowing subject to an external world”.¹⁰ This metaphor, or a series of interlinked metaphors suggesting that *seeing equals knowing*,¹¹ came in the form of an optical device that maintained a rigid wall of separation between the objective external reality and the subject, the brain, which observes an unaltered image of that reality projected through an opening in that wall, the human eye. However, the new understanding of the workings of human perception challenged this metaphor, and with profound consequences:

Once vision became located in the empirical immediacy of the observer’s body, it belonged to time, to flux, to death. The guarantees of authority, identity, and universality supplied by the camera obscura are of another epoch.¹²

⁸ Crary, *Techniques*, 113, 116, 132.

⁹ Crary, *Techniques*, 24.

¹⁰ Crary, *Techniques*, 27.

¹¹ As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson might put it. See their *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 393–95.

¹² Crary, *Techniques*, 24.

While this shift towards an embodied vision was not enough to entirely mend the “Cartesian split” between the mind and the body – for the philosophers of the mind at least¹³ – this liberation of vision set in motion intellectual and artistic developments which the Victorians very consciously identified as *modern*.

Spectacle and Melodrama

One of the most dominant forms of self-consciously modern visuality in the Victorian era was the rise of the spectacular, which materialised in a vast variety of visual forms, from miniaturised scenes in illuminated boxes to the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the International Exhibition of 1862, but none, perhaps, is comparable – in complexity, variety, and focus on visual effects – to the staging of spectacular drama. According to Booth, the essence of theatrical spectacle is in the employment of the combined power of mass, light, colour, costume, pictures, and effects.¹⁴ In addition, there was also a persistent preference for, often an obsession with, the material realism that went together with the spectacle throughout the nineteenth century. As Booth has remarked, “if there is any age in which visual taste has been less abstract, it is the Victorian”.¹⁵ This taste was catered for through a widespread application of “pictorialism, historical realism, and archaeological principles”.¹⁶ Kate Flint has suggested an interesting connection between this practice and the shifting understanding of vision in Victorian culture:

¹³ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy*, 397.

¹⁴ Booth, *Victorian*, 92.

¹⁵ Booth, *Victorian*, 14.

¹⁶ Booth, *Victorian*, 30.

A Foucauldian reading of the nineteenth century emphasises the fact that practices of surveillance, of bringing material to the surface, worked in collaboration with practices of codification and classification. In turn, this was linked to a broader aesthetic drive: what Mark Seltzer has termed the “realist imperative of making everything, including aesthetic states, visible, legible, and governable”.¹⁷

The realist movement achieved some of its most striking excesses on the stage, such as the general notion of acting as “an art subordinated to pageantry and scenic splendor”,¹⁸ but, historical realism, in particular, spread across all artistic media, poetry included. The *factual*, a notion which had become widely conflated with *visual information*, and which a theatre-goer enjoyed in a historical spectacular, was also presented, and with a wealth of antiquarian details, in painting, novels, and poetry drawing on “dress and artefacts ... architecture, social life, warfare, the trades, and a hundred other aspects of a past”.¹⁹ Flint argues that this insistence on presenting reality via this kind of literal objectivity is rooted in communicative aims peculiar to that era:

Such collection of detail, in different forms, crowds the painting and fiction of the period, establishing a materiality, a circumstantiality which in turn becomes imbricated with interpretive resonances for both contemporary and subsequent commentators who

¹⁷ Flint, *The Victorians*, 13.

¹⁸ Booth, *Victorian*, 73–74.

¹⁹ Booth, *Victorian*, 15, 19. Subjected to the Victorian taste for spectacle, real archaeology could hardly supply the demand, as Malley explains: “While the British Museum endeavored to police both meanings and visitors, alternative versions of Assyria sprung up outside of its hermeneutic control. ... [A]ntiquity, usually under the guise of historical and religious edification, quickly became the subject of spectacle and popular amusement in London’s “exhibitionary complex” of theatres, salons, displays and lecture halls” (Shawn Malley, *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain: The Case of Assyria, 1845–1854* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 10).

acknowledge the degree to which the representation of objects entails the encoding of values.²⁰

Here the aspiration to depict the particularity of an object through accurate representation becomes intimately connected to a truth claim, and in this case a highly historicised, singular, and concrete understanding of truth as opposed to an *abstract* or a *universal* one. The reaction seems to be that – since the human eye was helplessly embodied, situated in time and place – the artist’s duty was to present the eye with an object as *real* as possible.

For the Victorians, however, the functions of gaze and the spectacle did not seem as straightforward as this implies. There were widely expressed calls to appropriate other narratives from the past, and to employ the techniques of spectacle to interest an emerging modern audience. Musing on the effects of historicity of drama in a 1852 review of Charles Kean’s *King John*, George Henry Lewes concluded that

... we must have some accessory attraction to replace that literary and historical interest which originally made Shakespeare’s historical plays acceptable; and that therefore Macready was wholly right in the principle of his revivals. Scenery, dresses, groupings, archaeological research, and pictorial splendour, can replace for moderns the poetic and historic interest which our forefathers felt in these plays.²¹

Despite Lewes’ claim that certain poetic and historical meanings were lost to nineteenth century spectators and that more direct stimuli were required to attract them to the plays, the idea of increasing their spectacular content was not necessarily regarded as degradation or vulgarisation of the art itself. The justification for “accessory attraction”, or spectacle – the

²⁰ Flint, *The Victorians*, 2.

²¹ In Booth, *Victorian*, 32.

sources of which Lewes finds in the sciences of modern archaeology, geology, and history – is often claimed to be educational or even spiritual rather than merely indulgent.²² Even bodily spectacle, the freak show, was for a while perceived as having an “edifying” function on the spectator, although by the mid-century culture had shifted and the sincerity of these claims was in doubt.²³

The contents of the spectacle in theatre, painting, and literature were often not only historical, but melodramatic. The reasons for this are undoubtedly complex – in part related to new means of industrial production, growing audiences of greater socio-economic diversity, and on the other hand, linked to the developments within aesthetic and cultural movements – but the most salient connection between spectacle and melodrama are the shared commonplaces of event: sport, hunt, races, battles, shipwrecks, disasters, and so on.²⁴ Jonathan Crary claims that there was, in the end, an extensive saturation of visual imagery across different media so that “any single medium or form of visual representation no longer has a significant autonomous identity”.²⁵ In this cross-pollination of the visual, stages became paintings, gardens became stages, and paintings became melodramas.²⁶

Poets, too, were involved in or influenced by this focus on the visual, and at this point we can turn to Matthew Arnold and his poetics in “Sohrab and Rustum”. That Arnold should

²² Joss Marsh, “Spectacle,” in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 281; Booth, *Victorian*, 30.

²³ Lillian Craton, *The Victorian Freak Show: the Significance of Disability and Physical Differences in 19th-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambria Press, 2009), 29–30. Besides the freakshow, the human body was appropriated for spectacle in the field of medicine; the medical clinic or lecture hall became a stage for spectacle with a special lexicon for the apparatus of the clinical gaze with items like the stethoscope, the ophthalmoscope, the auriscope, the nasoscope, the endoscope, and X-ray photography (Robert Jütte, *A History of Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 200).

²⁴ Booth, *Victorian*, 71.

²⁵ Crary, *Techniques*, 23.

²⁶ Dianne Harris and D. Fairchild Ruggles, “Landscape and Vision,” in *Sites Unseen: Landscape and Vision*, eds. Diane Harris and D. Fairchild Ruggles (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 22–23; Jütte, *A History of Senses*, 187; Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Meaning in Western Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1980), 168; Booth, *Victorian*, 9, 12. Regarding hybrid forms, the “realization” of paintings on stage was amongst the most popular: “The stage presentation of a famous painting took the form of a tableau at the end of a scene or act. The tableau method was used to depict a climax of action in melodrama and was entirely pictorial in groupings, attitudes, and the sense that all motion was absent.” (Booth, *Victorian*, 10).

have adapted aspects of a visualised aesthetics into his own work should not come as a surprise. While aspiring to define the features of Homeric style for the purposes of its translation into English, Arnold famously reiterated Wordsworth's claim that Homer composed "with his eye on the object", whether the object be a moral or a material one ...".²⁷ With the exception of just a few lines, Arnold did not embark on such a translation himself, but this formulation of the poetics of vision does seem to have influenced his own attempt at epic in Homeric style, "Sohrab and Rostum". In a letter to Arthur Hugh Clough, he reflects on the results of his creative process:

I have written out my Sohrab & Rostum, and like it less. – Composition, in the painter's sense – that is the devil. And, when one thinks of it, our painters cannot compose though they can show great genius – so too in poetry is it not to be expected that in this same article of composition the awkward incorrect Northern nature should shew itself? though we may have feeling – fire – eloquence – as much as our betters.²⁸

The Horatian echoes – *ut picture poesis* – in Arnold's letter may be due to his Classicist tastes, but the extent to which his own version of epic makes itself acceptable to the taste for spectacle warrants a closer examination.

To a great degree, the topics of the Homeric epic overlap with those most common in the theatrical spectacle and melodrama of the nineteenth century.²⁹ Sport, hunts, battles –

²⁷ Matthew Arnold, "On Translating Homer," in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R.H. Super, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), 111. Yet, as Egbert Bakker points out, "the graphic quality of Homeric discourse" was a critical commonplace long before Wordsworth – for Plato, Longinus and Quintilian among others (Egbert J. Bakker, *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 77).

²⁸ In Cecil Y. Lang, *The Letters of Matthew Arnold, 1829–1859, 6 vols.* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1996), vol. 1, 269–70.

²⁹ Although the word "melodrama" originally suggested a play accompanied with music, the encroachment of spectacle into melodrama made music a less integral element in it, or as James L. Smith has pointed out in his *Victorian Melodramas: Seven English, French and American Melodramas* (London: Aldine Press, 1976), xiii:

crowd scenes in general – duels, shipwrecks, luxurious interiors, and splendid costumes are as central to the epic as they are to the Victorian stage, or indeed, painting. Epic similes, in particular, are highly pictorial, often presenting a dramatic scene in order to provoke a particular emotional response in the audience, and strongly inclined towards what Booth identifies as the “essence of spectacle”, that is to say, “[m]ass, light, colour, costume, pictures, and effects employed in special combinations”.³⁰ Arnold recognised the dramatic and visual potential of similes, and seems to have given them serious consideration when composing “Sohrab and Rustum”. In November, 1853, he wrote to John Fenwick Burgoyne Blackett:

What you say about the similes looks very just on paper: I can only say that I took a great deal of trouble to orientalise them, (the Bahrein diver was originally an ordinary fisher) because I thought they looked strange, and jarred, if Western.³¹

Arnold’s intention to *orientalise* suggests the approach to the past so popular at the time; on stage, the melodramatic spectacle often employed a similar, ostensibly defamiliarizing approach to staging stories that were – in their main features – rather familiar to the audience. Such stories were costumed into freshness, and as Smith describes, these “[e]xotic melodramas simply transport [the] whole bag of tricks to Turkey, Tartary or the Battlefields of Ahmedabad by Moonlight”.³² Soon after finishing the poem in 1853, Arnold himself writes, in a letter to Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, somewhat apologetically about the exoticism in the poem: “I hope you will not be repelled from the first poem of the collection by its Eastern names; for I think you will find the story a very human one”.³³ However, Arnold’s setting in

“[a]s the century advanced, the melodramatist relied for the theatrical excitement far less on music and far more on the resources of the scene painter and stage mechanic”.

³⁰ Booth, *Victorian*, 92.

³¹ In Lang, *The Letters*, 280–81.

³² Smith, *Victorian Melodramas*, xvi.

³³ In Lang, *The Letters*, 278.

“Sohrab and Rostum” is partly a result of his imagination: Sir John Malcolm’s *The History of Persia* and Alexander Burnes’ *Travels into Bokhara* provided him with the necessary geographical details, but the desert, or the “waste”, in which the events of the poem unfold is his own invention.³⁴ The poet Firdousi’s version of the story, and Arnold’s model for it, is in some respects even more spectacular than Arnold’s, and narrates events more suitable for the melodramatic mode. But Arnold’s wasteland is surely a very appropriate setting for catastrophic melodrama.

There are as many as twenty epic similes in “Sohrab and Rostum”, and they frequently contain visual depictions of vast, desolate landscapes and architecture, and ruins and fortifications in particular. Animals and plants often stand in for human actors, both as individuals and *en masse*, but there are some similes depicting human figures as well. Vision is the predominant sense in the similes, but sound figures in them, too, both via explicit commentary on sounds and through sound patterning, as for instance in:

Like some young cypress, tall, and dark, and straight,
Which in a queen’s secluded garden throws
Its slight dark shadow on the moonlit turf,
By midnight, to a bubbling fountain’s sound—
So slender Sohrab seem’d, so softly rear’d.³⁵

Even here, though, where we find both an explicit auditory reference and heavily marked alliteration, visual imagery remains dominant, with the visual elements of the simile taking up three of the simile’s four lines. In other cases, the visual emphasis is even more pronounced.

³⁴ Louise Pound, “Arnold’s Sources for Sohrab and Rostum,” *Modern Language Notes* 21, no. 1 (1906): 15–17; Amrollah Abjadian, “Arnold and Sohrab in Wasteland,” *Victorian Institute Journal* 8 (1979): 65.

³⁵ Matthew Arnold, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (London: Longman, 1965), ll. 314–18. Line references to “Sohrab and Rostum” hereafter are to this edition.

The simile below mixes two rather painterly images, both static, into *tableaux* of death and loss:³⁶

So, on the bloody sand, Sohrab lay dead;
 And the great Rustum drew his horseman's cloak
 Down o'er his face, and sate by his dead son.
 As those black granite pillars, once high-rear'd
 By Jemshid in Persepolis, to bear
 His house, now 'mid their broken flights of steps
 Lie prone, enormous, down the mountain side—
 So in the sand lay Rustum by his son.³⁷

The lines preceding the start of the simile here are part of the grammatical framing of the Sohrab's death *tableau*. The first and the last lines of this excerpt form the beginning and end of a ring composition, which is, in Bakker's discursive definition: "a 'figure of speech' in the most literal sense, a typical speech strategy to effect structure in the ongoing flow of speech by marking the point at which a side track is concluded".³⁸ This is an example of how particular grammatical features help the listener or reader see that an image is presented or projected into a parallel narrative space that is not entirely integrated into the time and space of the main narrative. In this scene, the orchestration of the sound patterning supports the static image of ruined grandeur; the roughness of the consonants (in "Persepolis, to bear", "black granite pillars", "broken", "prone") and the long vowels and diphthongs (in "high-

³⁶ The imagery in the simile is familiar from the spectacle painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These paintings – often depicting apocalyptic scenes – were circulating in affordable prints, and those of John Martin, for instance, sold in hundreds of thousands in the 1820s and 30s (Booth, *Victorian*, 12).

³⁷ Arnold, "Sohrab and Rustum", ll. 859–66.

³⁸ Egbert Bakker, "Discourse and Performance: Involvement, Visualization and 'Presence' in Homeric Poetry," *Classical Antiquity* 12, no.1 (1993): 8.

rear'd", "Lie prone, enormous, down the mountain side") create a haunting soundscape appropriate to the collapsed majesty of the ruin.

In Arnold's adaptations of epic similes, those that employ the image of the tower have significant Biblical and Miltonic overtones. In *Paradise Lost* – and even more archetypically in the Old Testament – the tower is repeatedly employed as a motif of the Fall; as Anthony Low has put it, this image has "traditionally embodied man's aspirations, his glory, and his ultimate transience".³⁹ In Arnold's usage, it becomes an image of tragedy, but in the absence of heavenly machinations, one with a less clear moral dimension. It is, however, an image befitting a Victorian melodrama: as George Kernodle has noted, in earlier forms of melodrama hope was directed towards the heavens, but in later forms towards society:

But most spectacular effects in nineteenth-century drama were a direct expression of some important aspect of the play. In Victorian drama, isolation was usually from the social group and the spectacle presented a group at a dance or important party so that the alienation of the disgraced or misunderstood hero or heroine was made vivid. At the beginning of the century, before the Victorian emphasis on society developed, man's fear of alienation and hope of support were directed toward the heavens.⁴⁰

Like Milton's falling towers, Arnold's image of the tower is catastrophic, or as Low argues, "the opposite of the death-rebirth motif in *Paradise Lost*, whose arc travels first down, then up".⁴¹ Low associates the motif of the tower with glory and pride, splendor and impiety, vanity and foolishness, and Milton can be seen as using it as a motif to show the tragedy and piti-

³⁹ Anthony Low, "The Image of the Tower in *Paradise Lost*," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 10 (1970): 171.

⁴⁰ George Kernodle, *The Theatre in History* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1989), 536–37.

⁴¹ Low, "The Image," 181.

fulness of the aspirations of the humankind.⁴² For Arnold, however, the tower signifies a sense of solitude. Rustum's isolation – and the image of a tower rising above the plains which is the metaphor for Rustum – is made evident from the beginning of the poem, but the tragedy in the poem leaves him in a solitude of a different kind, the drama of which is heightened through a melodramatic commonplace. In Smith's summary, in melodrama “stolen infants reared in poverty are identified by lockets, scars, or gooseberry birthmarks as the long sought heirs of vast domains”.⁴³ In the epic, on the other hand, “[i]nvariably the young man who sets out on adventures is fatherless and aided by mother, uncle, or friend”.⁴⁴ Sohrab, aided by the Nestor-like Peran-Wisa, ultimately finds his father, and the final recognition is sealed by the visual evidence in the form of a tattoo:

“Sohrab, that were a proof which could not lie!
If thou show this, then art thou Rustum's son.”

Then, with weak hasty fingers, Sohrab loosed
His belt, and near the shoulder bared his arm,
And show'd a sign in faint vermilion points
Prick'd; ...
On Sohrab's arm, the sign of Rustum's seal.
It was that griffin, which of old rear'd Zal,
Rustum's great father, whom they left to die,
A helpless babe, among the mountain-rocks;
Him that kind creature found, and rear'd, and loved —

⁴² Low, “The Image,” 181.

⁴³ Smith, *Victorian Melodramas*, xv.

⁴⁴ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 16.

Then Rustum took it for his glorious sign.⁴⁵

The recognition scene curiously refers to Sohrab's grandfather's childhood, one of even greater melodrama, Zal having been abandoned and then brought up by a mythical beast.

However, with regard to society, it is the catalogue of troops that creates the crucial melodramatic and spectacular context for the family tragedy in "Sohrab and Rustum"; the catalogue parades exotic names of peoples and locations like a pageant in a vast panorama:

The Tartars of the Oxus, the King's guard,
 First, with black sheep-skin caps and with long spears;
 Large men, large steeds; who from Bokhara come
 And Khiva, and ferment the milk of mares.
 Next, the more temperate Toorkmuns of the south,
 The Tukas, and the lances of Salore,
 And those from Attruck and the Caspian sands;
 Light men and on light steeds, who only drink
 The acrid milk of camels, and their wells.
 And then a swarm of wandering horse, who came
 From far, and a more doubtful service own'd;
 The Tartars of Ferghana, from the banks
 Of the Jaxartes, men with scanty beards
 And close-set skull-caps; and those wilder hordes
 Who roam o'er Kipchak and the northern waste,
 Kalmucks and unkempt Kuzzaks, tribes who stray

⁴⁵Arnold, "Sohrab and Rustum", ll. 668–84.

Nearest the Pole, and wandering Kirghizzes,
 Who come on shaggy ponies from Pamere;
 These all filed out from camp into the plain.⁴⁶

This list might seem like a rather academic exercise in imitation of epic catalogues, but the Victorians seemed, in fact, to have a taste for exactly this sort of pageantry. For instance, a procession in an 1886 production of *The Forty Thieves* at Drury Lane – which was universally praised by critics – marched each of the forty thieves onto the stage, along with a following of a dozen or so underlings for each thief, ultimately filling the stage with approximately 500 characters in detailed, exotic costumes.⁴⁷ Similarly, Arnold’s catalogue in “Sohrab and Rustum” displays a multitude of peoples in exotic garb, and it can certainly be described as Homeric. It is, in fact, also of a particular type by virtue of not being simply a list of names, but the kind of list described by Charles Beye as “Hesiodic” in style, “representing the antiquarian, indexing, collecting mentality that in every literature has reduced the ornate, emotional pictorial and dramatic material of sage epic to its so-called essentials ...”.⁴⁸

Arnold’s ethnographic catalogue takes full advantage of the opportunity to create an exotic procession by describing garments, hairstyles, horses, weaponry and beards, but besides spectacle there may be a further reason for this expanded catalogue. While performers of epic in the time of Homer and Hesiod could rely on a living tradition and the evocative powers of the name of a hero, it would have been very unlikely that the names in “Sohrab and Rustum” could have had a similar effect on Victorian readers of Arnold’s poem. However, as Kenneth Allott suggests, the names are there “for their sound and suggestiveness”,⁴⁹ and this suggestiveness could perhaps compensate for the fact that a poem cannot project the

⁴⁶Arnold, “Sohrab and Rustum”, ll. 117–35.

⁴⁷Booth, *Victorian*, 88.

⁴⁸Rowan Beye, “Homeric Battle Narratives and Catalogues,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 68 (1964): 369.

⁴⁹Arnold, “Sohrab and Rustum”, 308.

abundance of visual detail and exotic appearances to the mind of the audience with quite the same immediacy as a painting, for instance, could do.

Yet, in addition to supplying the spectacle and the narrative context for the events, the catalogue creates an important spectacular effect. As Kernodle comments,

[m]usic and spectacle in the theatre was one of the great achievements of the Romantic age. Naturalistic critics have jeered at music and spectacle as superfluous ornaments that might entertain the crowd but could only cheapen a true dramatic effect. But most spectacular effects in nineteenth-century drama were a direct expression of some important aspect of the play. In the Victorian drama, isolation was usually from the social group and the spectacle presented a group at a dance or important party so that the alienation of the disgraced or misunderstood hero or heroine was made vivid.⁵⁰

In a similar way, the catalogue is a way of affirming the presence of the society without which Rustom's isolation could not be made evident. As with similes, then, the visualised catalogue is another way by which the narrator – instead of recounting events – invites the audience to witness them.

A Discourse for the Eye

However visually described the spectacular elements in a work of literature may be, it is important to keep in mind the realities of the written media. As Peter Brooks says in his

Realist Vision:

⁵⁰ Kernodle, *The Theatre*, 536–37.

Imitation in literature cannot, in the manner of painting or sculpture or film, present visual images that are immediately apprehended and decoded by the eye. Its representations are mediated through language.⁵¹

Consequently, a claim to a particularly *visual* manner of textual representation must be supported by at least some evidence demonstrating that the text is to be apprehended in a way that can be *justifiably described as visual*. I propose that, in addition to the melodramatic and highly visualised subject matter, or verbal imagery, the spectacular in “Sohrab and Rustum” is also achieved on the level of discourse, in the way Arnold composes – as Egbert Bakker calls it – the “special speech”⁵² of Homeric epic.⁵³ Through a variety of techniques, this special discourse creates a space for performance into which the things and events described by the storyteller can be summoned. As Bakker describes it: “[e]pic narrative is typically presented as, in narratological terms, the description of things seen, with the narrator (performer) posing as eyewitness”.⁵⁴ The dramatic effects of epic presentation can go even beyond this, and in a way, the epic singer becomes, much like Dante’s Virgil, a guide exhorting the audience to behold what is before them, leading their gaze to spectacles unfolding in the present rather than in the past.

As Bakker has proposed, rather than as a recitation of a chronicle of events, the epic narrative should be seen as an “*activation of the tradition*, not only as an idea in the mind of the poet, but also, crucially, as a reality in speech”.⁵⁵ This presence, however, is not – in

⁵¹ Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 6.

⁵² Bakker, “Discourse and Performance,” 25.

⁵³ For Arnold, the most likely models for an imitation of Classical epic would have been Homer, Virgil, and Milton. Regarding the topic of this essay, it is interesting, from the point of view of comparison, that *Paradise Lost* is traditionally praised for its sounds and musicality, whereas Virgil’s style has been described as inward, subjective, suggestive and metaphorical rather than visual or objective (J. B. Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 111) .

⁵⁴ Bakker, “Discourse and Performance,” 15.

⁵⁵ Bakker, “Discourse and Performance,” 20. Bakker’s emphasis.

Heideggerian terms – *presence-at-hand*, that is, something to be viewed with a detached, scientific eye, but present *to us*, meaning that “we are interested in and involved with it”.⁵⁶ This becomes evident, for instance, in the way the poet sometimes addresses the characters as if they were there to hear the singer’s words.⁵⁷ In order to achieve this, the epic singer resorts to various traditional, or formulaic, rhetorical devices, which, through systematic repetition, create and maintain a narrative space with framed images, or rather staged tableaux since these images are more often dynamic than static. In this sense, the epic form is not only highly visual, but very much like staged drama; the “stage” is evoked for the audience (whether listening or reading) through a language that both presents the visual spectacle and guides the gaze of the viewer’s “inner eye” to witness the events taking place in their presence.

The special function of this Homeric manner of presentation was recognised in antiquity as *ekphrasis*, a “technique or quality of both literary and oral composition” with the purpose of “laying out the subject before the eyes”,⁵⁸ as James A. Francis puts it.⁵⁹ Again, not merely a technique for presenting facts to a detached gaze, *ekphrasis* engages the audience by its capacity to invite participation; Francis suggests that, in its ancient form, it does not necessarily involve calm, contemplative observation, but may even subvert “the narrative, often calling into question the very processes of sight, language and thought”.⁶⁰ The effects of *ekphrasis* on the way audiences experience the narrative are significant:

⁵⁶Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (London: Rowman and Little, 2015), 35. In Heidegger’s original terminology: “Vorhandenheit vs Sein bei”. For a related discussion on Heidegger’s “Sein bei”, see Sheehan, *Making Sense*.

⁵⁷Bakker, “Discourse and Performance,” 23–24.

⁵⁸James A. Francis, “Metal Maidens, Achilles’ Shield, and Pandora: The Beginnings of ‘Ekphrasis,’” *American Journal of Philology* 130, no. 1 (2009): 2.

⁵⁹In the present essay, the term refers to a descriptive technique rather than a genre of writing. For a discussion on the historical development of the meaning of the term, see Francis, “Metal Maidens”.

⁶⁰Francis, “Metal Maidens,” 6.

ekphrasis also communicates through both word and image. It appropriates visual material into words and, at the same time, the image it (re)presents appropriates the text and its audience by absorbing them, turning readers into viewers.⁶¹

One specific way in which this technique of description reinforces the sense of a viewing experience is by creating an intradiegetic audience for the spectacle being described.⁶² It can be argued that, by this strategy, the narrative reconfigures the model of visual observation: the reader or listener is not merely an observer of the events, but *an observer of other observers*. These other observers – whom we could commonly refer to as characters in the story – may have a more limited and contextual point of view and, consequently, often a more intuitive and emotional response to what they are witnessing than can be (at least initially) expected from the actual, or extradiegetic audience. One example of *ekphrasis* working in this manner in “Sohrab and Rostum” can be seen in the poem’s second epic simile, which, interestingly, depicts the reaction of an audience consisting of Sohrab’s army to the news that their commander has chosen a duel between the generals instead of pitched battle between armies:

As, in the country, on a morn in June,
 When the dew glistens on the pearled ears,
 A shiver runs through the deep corn for joy—
 So, when they heard what Peran-Wisa said,
 A thrill through all the Tartar squadrons ran
 Of pride and hope for Sohrab, whom they loved.⁶³

⁶¹ Francis, “Metal Maidens,” 7.

⁶² Francis, “Metal Maidens,” 16.

⁶³ Arnold, “Sohrab and Rostum”, ll. 154–59.

The rather intangible notion of “thrill” among the troops is here conjured into a visual image with light and mass (albeit with some residual synesthetic qualities such as the “shiver”) and linked with an emotional state of the audience depicted in the narrative. Indeed, the main function of the simile seems to be to evoke the emotional response of the spectators in the story as an invitation for the reader-spectator outside it to recognise this feeling and become emotionally engaged as well.⁶⁴

While *ekphrasis* works to *convert* the experience of reading or listening into one of imaginative viewing, the grammar of Homeric epic provides means by which the visual experience can be framed, coordinated, and articulated into an intelligible continuity in which the images gain significance from a common context. Egbert Bakker’s analysis of Homeric discourse from the point of view of involvement and visualisation offers an interesting amendment to the interpretation of formulaic language.⁶⁵ Instead of examining the function of formulaic expressions as metrical building blocks – mostly conducted with emphasis on usefulness rather than their descriptive powers – Bakker focuses on the way in which some formulaic expressions clearly seem to situate the audience within and without the narrative. As a result, these stock phrases are revealed to carry significant semantic weight.

According to Bakker, the oral form underlying the Homeric epics lends the poetry the traditional “special speech” of a performance of epic, in which the tradition is “constantly renegotiated between [the poet] and an audience”.⁶⁶ The formulaic – and modular – structure of Homeric epic suggests that a performance by a singer of such an epic would have involved a great degree of interaction between the poet and the audience. Consequently, with regard to

⁶⁴ In this respect, Arnold’s similes seem to follow a functional principle Bakker identifies as one of the most distinctive effects of Homeric similes as a part of dramatic speech, namely, that they “are set apart from narrative as a different register, as a way of speaking in which the performer adopts a different tone and stance and communicates more directly with the audience” (Egbert Bakker, “Similes, augment and the language of immediacy,” in *Speaking Volumes: Orality and Literacy in the Greek and Roman World*, ed. Janet Watson, (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 23).

⁶⁵ Bakker, “Discourse and Performance”.

⁶⁶ Bakker, “Discourse and Performance,” 2.

Homeric poetry, Bakker argues that the needs of performance – visualisation and interaction with the audience – have a significant impact on the workings of its language:

The presentation of Homeric discourse as the description of things seen turns the “contextualization” of ordinary speech into the ultimate aim of the traditional speech of the performance: the creation of what will be called *presence* in the context shared between the performer and his audience.⁶⁷

In order to demonstrate how this “presence” is created by the discourse, Bakker focuses on a selection of “discourse markers”,⁶⁸ in this case, particles as well as certain grammatical arrangements originating in speech rather than writing. Both of these are related to what Bakker calls “stylized” parts of ordinary speech production,⁶⁹ and he proposes that it is this stylisation of speech patterns that gives rise to the interplay between the meter, rhythms and sentence structures in Homeric diction.⁷⁰

Granted, even though Arnold’s imitation of Homeric style shows a deep understanding of its workings in the original Greek, “Sohrab and Rustum” is a poem composed in English iambic pentameters, and this makes direct comparisons of rhythm and meter unfruitful. Yet the semantic dimensions of these smaller parts of speech, whose significance Bakker sees as somewhat neglected, when used in this strategy of stylisation do remain a potential area of inquiry. The same applies to syntactical arrangement, provided that the analysis is based on analogous functions rather than direct comparisons between Homeric Greek and Arnold’s English. Finally, it needs to be stated that the main focus in my inquiry into Arnold’s use of

⁶⁷ Bakker, “Discourse and Performance,” 4.

⁶⁸ Bakker, “Discourse and Performance,” 4.

⁶⁹ Bakker, “Discourse and Performance,” 8–10.

⁷⁰ Bakker, “Discourse and Performance,” 10.

Homeric discourse is on the positioning of the audience, particularly as related to visual experience.

In Bakker's analysis, the Greek particles roughly equivalent to "and so", "see", "now", and "then" are employed to establish a "common basis for conducting discourse",⁷¹ and to refer to things within this established context once it is created.⁷² Thus, the functions of such particles can be categorised into two main categories: first, into framing markers, that is, markers of a beginning of a digression ("as", "like" in epic similes) and assertions that need to be made before the narrative can continue.⁷³ In "Sohrab and Rustum", expressions like "So spake he" or "So slender Sohrab seemed" perform this continuity-function, often employed owing to direct speech representation or a digression such as a simile. These markers are also vital in maintaining the formulaic and modular narrative structure of Homeric epic. As Bakker points out, the narration of events in epic is not strictly sequential, and digressions from a basic timeline need to be clearly signalled to the audience.⁷⁴ Arnold's use of this structure shows a careful use of Homeric devices, as in his description of Rustum's horse:

So arm'd, he issued forth; and Ruksh, his horse,
 Follow'd him like a faithful hound at heel --
 Ruksh, whose renown was noised through all the earth,
 The horse, whom Rustum on a foray once
 Did in Bokhara by the river find
 A colt beneath its dam, and drove him home,
 And rear'd him; a bright bay, with lofty crest,

⁷¹ Bakker, *Poetry in Speech*, 81. See also Bakker, "Discourse and Performance," 12–15.

⁷² For the narrative and discursive functions of the Homeric Greek equivalents – chiefly *ἄρα*, *δή*, *οὕτως*, *μέν* + *δέ* – see Bakker, *Poetry in Speech*; Egbert Bakker, "Pointing to the Past: Verbal Augment and Temporal Deixis in Homer" in *Euphrosyne: Studies in Ancient Epic and Its Legacy in Honor of Dimitris N. Maronitis*, ed. J. N. Kazakis (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999); and esp. "Discourse and Performance".

⁷³ Bakker, "Discourse and Performance," 12–13.

⁷⁴ Bakker, "Discourse and Performance," 11.

Dight with a saddle-cloth of broider'd green
 Crusted with gold, and on the ground were work'd
 All beasts of chase, all beasts which hunters know.
 So follow'd, Rustum left his tents, and cross'd
 The camp, and to the Persian host appear'd.⁷⁵

The description follows an arming scene, of which we are reminded by the assertive “[s]o arm’d”, and hence the modular structure of the preceding element is also visible here. The *topos* of arming is framed by the summary “so”, after which “and” initiates another module in the narrative, the description of the hero’s horse, the closing of which is also signalled by the formulaic “so”. The actual descriptive content is delivered in seemingly incoherent language; there is an instance of *anacoluthon*, an interruption in the flow of thought as if in spontaneous speech, when the description of Ruksh interrupts the sentence occupying the first two lines in the example. There are in fact two interruptions as the narrator restarts after repeating the name of the horse. Furthermore, the passage shows *ekphrasis* in action, as there is a variety of implied audiences: “all the earth”, “hunters”, “Persian host”. These appeals to audiences – or witnesses – hark back to the notions of glory in Homer’s epics. Glory, *kleos*, cannot exist in a social vacuum, and in the objectifying narrative of Homeric epic, the trappings of glory are displayed and described, often in minute detail, so that the audience can witness their presence. Thus, the description of Ruksh immediately after the arming scene establishes Rustum’s glory, his standing as a hero, through visible material forms. As Jasper Griffin has noted with regard to Homer’s manner of narration, “we observe the poet using simple acts or physical objects (a head-dress, a man’s clothes) to convey the emotional significance”.⁷⁶ Through imitation of this pervasive strategy of presentation, Arnold’s Homeric epic gains

⁷⁵Arnold, “Sohrab and Rustum”, ll. 270–81.

⁷⁶Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 3.

elements of staged drama: the objects, as well as their significance in the eyes of imagined audiences, are placed before the actual audience in a concrete manner.

The second group of Bakker's discourse markers is perhaps less conspicuous. These are markers of perspective, tense, and perceptual and emotional involvement that, similarly to the framing devices, help the audience to orientate in the narrative space, but also function as cues as to *how* to perceive the events narrated.⁷⁷ In Homeric language, one marker of this kind is a special particle, ὄρα, which suggests the immediate presence of the things described. When the narrator uses this particle, he effectively makes "an assertion that is prompted by evidence before him, a statement that is uttered in a situation and therefore warranted by that situation".⁷⁸ "Sohrab and Rustum" makes use of such "evidentials" throughout, but one of the most impressive examples takes place during the duel between the father and the son. The duel scene is the pivotal *topos* in the poem, and employs a variety of assertives of time and space to heighten the sense of immediate presence. Rustum's club, for instance, is first described in a simile which – in the Homeric manner – is in the present tense,⁷⁹ after which the narrative returns to its actual present, reminding the audience about this with the assertive "now":

And Rustum seized his club, which none but he
 Could wield; an unlopp'd trunk it was, and huge,
 Still rough—like those which men in treeless plains
 To build them boats fish from the flooded rivers,
 Hyphasis or Hydaspes, when, high up

⁷⁷ Bakker, "Discourse and Performance," 14–16.

⁷⁸ Bakker, "Discourse and Performance," 16.

⁷⁹ The system of tense formation in Homeric Greek is more complicated than it is in Arnold's English verse, but focusing on the narrative powers of tenses, Bakker's formulation is that the distinction achieved through switching between tenses in Homeric discourse is one between "distant" and "close" in spatial rather than temporal terms, so that the verb forms make objects appear as present to the vision of the audience (Bakker, "Pointing to the Past," 57–58).

By their dark springs, the wind in winter-time
 Hath made in Himalayan forests wrack,
 And strewn the channels with torn boughs—so huge
 The club which Rostum lifted *now*, and struck.⁸⁰

A moment later, Sohrab performs a deed of prowess which becomes symbolic for his equal standing with Rostum as he cuts at his head:

Then Sohrab with his sword smote Rostum's helm,
 Nor clove its steel quite through; but all the crest
 He shore away, and *that* proud horsehair plume,
 Never till *now* defiled, sank to the dust;⁸¹

The continuity marker “then” declares Sohrab’s strike, and instead of the article “the”, a deictic “that” underlines the significance of the “proud horsehair plume” and picks it up into a rather cinematic focus in slow motion. The narrator lingers in this crucial moment by means of an *anacoluthon*, the intrusion of “never till now defiled”, to remind the audience of the weight of the ostensibly minor event – the humiliation of an invincible warrior. In this way, the narrative reframes vision so that the objects under the gaze of the audience are placed in a context – of the story and the tradition of epic – in which they can attain the significance needed for a story that is not a mere spectacle.

In short, it is this combination of a consistent evocation of visual detail, presence, and immediacy, and a dramatic presentation of dialogue, that invite readers to become a viewing and listening audience and make Arnold’s co-adaptation of Homeric epic so closely

⁸⁰ Arnold, “Sohrab and Rostum”, ll. 409–17, emphasis added.

⁸¹ Arnold, “Sohrab and Rostum”, ll. 496–99, emphasis added.

analogous to a theatrical spectacle. In some ways, however, one might be tempted to see the performative discourse in “Sohrab and Rostum” as contributing to the experience of a *detached* observer rather than of a *witness* or *participant*. The positioning of the audience by the means of *ekphrasis* and performative discourse resembles that of a diorama, in which “an immobile observer” is incorporated into “a mechanical apparatus” and subjected to “a predesigned temporal unfolding of optical experience”.⁸² This problematic of vision and the role of the observer can, in fact, be seen as one of the major themes in “Sohrab and Rostum”, a theme which opens the path to another element in the Homeric tradition: the questioning of the truthfulness of appearances and dependability of vision.

Arnold’s Vision of Vision

In addition to being a poem with a highly visualising manner of presentation, “Sohrab and Rostum” abounds with implicit and explicit commentary on vision itself. The simile comparing Rostum – who has just unwittingly delivered a fatal wound on his son – to an eagle futilely seeking for its wounded mate presents a scene full of details referring to visual and aural perception:

As when some hunter in the spring hath found
A breeding eagle sitting on her nest,
Upon the craggy isle of a hill-lake,
And pierced her with an arrow as she rose,

⁸²Crary, *Techniques*, 112–13.

And follow'd her to find her where she fell
 Far off;—anon her mate comes winging back
 From hunting, and a great way off descries
 His huddling young left sole; at that, he checks
 His pinion, and with short uneasy sweeps
 Circles above his eyry, with loud screams
 Chiding his mate back to her nest; but she
 Lies dying, with the arrow in her side,
 In some far stony gorge out of his ken,
 A heap of fluttering feathers—never more
 Shall the lake glass her, flying over it;
 Never the black and dripping precipices
 Echo her stormy scream as she sails by—
 As that poor bird flies home, nor knows his loss,
 So Rustum knew not his own loss, but stood
 Over his dying son, and knew him not.⁸³

The simile presents a complex series of images about perception. On the one hand, it offers the memory of both vision and sounds in the mirrors of nature, the lake's surface and the echoes off cliffs, as affirmations of life that is almost lost. On the other hand the eagle, despite its keen sight and its birds-eye point of view, is unable to find its mate, who is unable to answer to its calls. E. Frances Frame's suggestions that "Arnold's extended metaphor of an eagle, the creature most capable of an objective, god's eye view of the world, who has lost his

⁸³ Arnold, "Sohrab and Rustum", ll. 409–17, emphasis added.

mate without realizing it, highlights Rostum's moral flaw"⁸⁴ is convincing, but the meaning is not restricted to the immediate context of the death scene, since the simile can be seen as connected to other images in the poem in which vision is questioned. Furthermore, the eagle simile is not the only instance in "Sohrab and Rostum" where the dependability of perception is in doubt. One of the most widely discussed of these is the simile of a "rich woman" eyeing "through her silken curtains the poor drudge", wondering how she might live and what her thoughts may be.⁸⁵ The rich woman observing the maid cannot imagine, and thus empathise with the woman below her own social class. It is the social reality – and the separation of humanity that follows from the class society – that denies the possibility of basic human understanding, let alone *objectivity*. There is, however, a human reaction presented in the scene: the rich woman is at least trying to imagine what the other person's life could be like.

In a similar vein, it is intuition rather than reason or objectivity that alerts Sohrab during the duel with Rostum: "Who art thou then, that canst so touch my soul?"⁸⁶ Interestingly, it is the sense of touch that is here associated with intuition, whereas both sight and hearing – the higher, "mental" senses – have already betrayed Sohrab multiple times and do so again a moment later with fatal consequences:⁸⁷

Then Rostum raised his head; his dreadful eyes
 Glared, and he shook on high his menacing spear,
 And shouted: Rostum!—Sohrab heard that shout,
 And shrank amazed; back he recoil'd one step,
 And scann'd with blinking eyes the advancing form,

⁸⁴ Frances E. Frame, "Shaping the Self: Critical Perspective and Community in 'Sohrab and Rostum'," *Victorian Poetry* 45, no. 1 (2007): 23.

⁸⁵ Arnold, "Sohrab and Rostum", ll. 301–313.

⁸⁶ Arnold, "Sohrab and Rostum", l. 434.

⁸⁷ As Robert Jütte (*A History of Senses*, 52) describes this hierarchy: "[t]he traditional division of the senses into those that were more mental (seeing and hearing) and those that were more physical (taste, smell and touch)".

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