

ABSORPTION. A term for the process of a reader's deep engagement with a poem, marked by a lack of self-consciousness about the materiality of the reading process. Poetic rhythm is often used to enhance the experience of deep absorption in a poem; this is most marked in such hypnotically rhythmic poems as S. T. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," but the condition is also achieved by a range of representational and material devices that pull the reader into a poem. Absorption typically works by unifying the sound, form, and theme of a poem into a construct that the reader perceives as seamless. Absorption may extend to such effects as a heightened sense of the poem as *fiction and an identification with the *persona.

Various modernist modes, incl. *collage, *parataxis, and *cacophony, are often understood as disrupting the readability of poems. Such modes may seem to make the reader self-conscious about negotiating the compositional structures of the poem and, by so doing, theatricalize (in Fried's term) the experience of reading. Bertolt Brecht's "alienation effect" (*verfremdungseffekt*), a term he first used in the 1930s, provides a useful model for breaking the identification of the spectator with the spectacle under *modernism, esp. as this term relates to the Rus. formalist Viktor Shklovsky's 1917 discussion of *ostranenie* or *defamiliarization. Both *verfremdungseffekt* and *ostranenie* are antiabsorptive devices.

Neither absorption nor its converses—impermeability, unreadability, disruption—are inherent poetic values; rather, they suggest approaches to reading and listening. The difference is not as much an essence as a direction: a centrifugal (projective) poetic field versus a centripetal (introjective) one. Poems that attempt to be conventionally absorbing in form and content run the risk of becoming tedious and boring—that is, highly unabsorbing—esp. when they rely on traditional forms and themes that may seem outmoded to historically conscious readers. In contrast, many seemingly antiabsorptive gestures, incl. discontinuity, cut-ups,

and opacity, may create rhythmically charged, hyper-engaging poems. Moreover, the active use of linguistic materiality—the reader's or listener's acute awareness of the verbal materials and structures of the poem—may contribute to multilevel, supercharged poetic absorption. It seems evident that absorption is historically conditioned: for some readers and listeners, depending on the period and particular poems, dissonance will be more absorbing than consonance or *euphony. Indeed, lit. hist. might be seen as incl. cycles of change in readers' affective responses to emerging acoustic, structural, and thematic dimensions of poetry. The shock of the new for some is the invigorating tonic of the contemporary for others. Modernist and avant-garde poetics that emphasize fragmentation, discontinuity, visual materiality, incompleteness, boredom, or noise often do so in order to open new possibilities for "verbivocovisual" (James Joyce's word from *Finnegans Wake*) engagement of all the senses. Such poetics often explore the chordal possibilities that result from incommensurability, rather than unity, among the levels of form, rhythm, and content; under the sign of overlay and palimpsest, discrepant and impermeable elements of a poem can be recognized as pleats and folds. Temporal, thematic, and stylistic disjunction may form, dissolve, and reform into shifting constellations (to use Benjamin's term) that are open possibilities for a reader's or a listener's absorption into the newly emerging force field of the poem.

See AVANT-GARDE POETRY AND POETICS, DIFFICULTY, LANGUAGE POETRY.

■ B. Brecht, "Brecht on Theater," trans. J. Willett (1977); C. Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption," in *A Poetics* (1991); V. Shklovsky, "Art as Device" (1917) in *Theory of Prose*, trans. B. Sher (1991); Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in *Art and Objecthood* (1997); W. Benjamin, "The Doctrine of the Similar" (1933), *Selected Works*, v. 2, trans. T. R. Livingstone (1999); R. Tsur, "Kubla Khan"—*Poetic Structure, Hypnotic Quality, and Cognitive Style* (2006).

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