

Ben Davies, Auricular Erotics: Sexual Listening in (and to) Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater*

Abstract:

Reading Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening* (2002) together with Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), this article offers an analysis of auricular sex, a form of sex that involves the pleasure of listening and the auditory aspects of sex. Turning to the overlooked aspect of listening in the text, I argue that Sabbath's sexual pleasures derive from the sense and sensations aroused by listening, and I subsequently formulate categories of auricular sex. Interrelated with this analysis, I argue for the text itself to be seen as a place for and of listening. Given the bodily sensations aroused by listening and the potential erotic pleasure listening can create, I further argue that reading can offer a form of auricular – and possibly sexual – excitement. The reader over-listens to the text and his/her subvocalizations intermingle with the voice of the text; the voices of text and reader merge to create a form of textual, auricular intimacy.

Keywords: Listening; *Sabbath's Theater*; Sex; Auricular; Jean-Luc Nancy; dogging.

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This essay asks the reader to listen, to tune in, to “over-listen”, even to listen to silence. Turning, bending and stretching my ear(s), my auricular attention will be trained on Philip Roth’s 1995 novel, *Sabbath’s Theater*. Specifically, I shall read this text alongside Jean-Luc Nancy’s theory of listening to conceptualise “auricular sex” – the sexual pleasure of listening and the auricular aspects of sex. *Sabbath’s Theater* portrays virile sixty-four-year-old Mickey Sabbath’s intense sexual fascination with listening and offers a sustained and vivid – stereophonic – narrative of auricular erotics. Analysing this overlooked aspect of the text, I formulate the categories of auricular sex in the narrative, offering something of a playlist of *Sabbath’s Theater*. By developing these categories of auricular sex, this essay moves away from the dominant critical focus on the role of the voice and the so-called auditory (for which, read rhetorical) effects of Roth’s prose style.¹ In contrast, I pay attention to the spatiotemporality of sexual listening in Sabbath’s life and in reading the text, arguing for Sabbath’s “theatre” – the text itself – to be appreciated as a space for and of listening.

Listening to Nancy

In *Listening* (2002), Nancy articulates his phenomenological theory through a series of exploratory turns around oppositional pairs, chief among which is the distinction he makes between listening and hearing.² Nancy characterises listening as a “tense, attentive, or

¹ For critical readings of Sabbath’s voice, Roth’s prose style and its rhetorical effect, see, for example: Debra Shostak 1998, 2004, 2007; Sanford Pinsker 2002; Mark Schechner 2003; David Gooblar 2005; David Greenham 2005; Ranen Omer-Sherman 2005; Ross Posnock 2006a, 2006b; and Elaine B. Safer 2006.

² Nancy’s preferred term is “auricular” as opposed to the more usual “aural.” Therefore, I employ the term “auricular,” whilst also using derivatives such as “auricularity” and “auricularly” where appropriate.

anxious state” (2007, 5). It is a “straining toward a possible meaning” (6), and this active movement is more essential to its condition than the acquisition of semantic meaning. In contrast, hearing is receptive and aims “to understand the sense” (6); it is concerned with comprehension.³ Having made this distinction, however, Nancy argues that “in hearing itself, at the very bottom of it, [there is] a listening” (6). This underlying *listening-within-hearing* notwithstanding, Nancy’s initial division between hearing and listening provides a useful analytical distinction through which to think about the auricular. Furthermore, Nancy maintains the characterisation of listening as an active and bodily experience concerned with sense and sensation.⁴

³ In “Thresholds of Attention: On Listening in Literature” (2011), Angela Leighton draws out the distinction between listening and hearing grammatically, explaining: “in English the extra emphasis of listening is signaled by the preposition. ‘To hear’ takes a direct object, leading quickly into what is heard: ‘I hear you’, while to listen requires another word: I listen to you. . . . I can listen to, or for, or out for, or in – even, perhaps, listen up or over or beyond. In each of these, the activity of the verb is redirected, and the object set at a more effortful distance. It is this, perhaps, that creates its appeal for the writer. Listening reaches its object, but does not need it” (202). Surprisingly, in this otherwise perceptive and insightful essay on listening in and to literature, Leighton fails to mention Nancy’s *Listening*, yet writes: “when I began searching for philosophical or theoretical accounts of listening I was interested to find how few they seem, and how incidental, mostly tucked away like asides or afterthoughts” (203).

⁴ The distinction Nancy draws between meaning and sensation is not absolute either. As Charlotte Mandell explains in her English translation of *Listening*, the French word “*sens* means meaning, and it means sense—in all the meanings of that word in English, as in the senses five, feeling, intuition—as well as direction” (xi-xii). Moreover, Nancy argues that “there are only two tendencies, precisely, and listening aims at—or is aroused by—the one

As is evident in the relationship between listening and hearing, as well as the contamination of sound and sense, Nancy's theory is characterised by the connections he makes between the elements of his supposedly oppositional pairs rather than by an attention to the divisions that might separate them; his auricular theory is marked by a series of thresholds, which emphasise indistinction. Indeed, Nancy contends that "to be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin" (7). Consequently, the listener is in a threshold with its concomitant indeterminations – "inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion" (14). Moreover, Nancy's auricular threshold is particularly complex due to its temporal dimensions. As he contends, the presence of listening "is first of all presence in the sense of a *present* that is not being (at least not in the intransitive, stable, consistent sense of the word), but rather a *coming* and a *passing*, an *extending* and a *penetrating*. Sound essentially comes and expands, or is deferred and transferred" (13). Such "presence" is a quasi- or transient presence: it is ontologically indeterminate. Moreover, Nancy claims that "all sonorous presence is thus made of a complex of returns [*renvois*]" (16). As a returned past that has already come into and gone out of being, the sonorous present is therefore doubly transient and indeterminate; its "presence" and its "return" are one and the same.

Nancy's account of listening is quintessentially a somatic one, as is evident when he claims that "to listen is *tendre l'oreille*—literally, to stretch the ear—an expression that

where sound and sense mix together and resonate in each other, or through each other. . . . sense is sought in sound . . . sound, resonance, is also looked for in sense" (7).

evokes a singular mobility, among the sensory apparatuses, of the pinna of the ear” (5).⁵ Furthermore, Nancy contends that the movement made by the body *to* sound is reciprocated by the movement *of* sound, by the way “the sound that penetrates through the ear propagates throughout the entire body something of its effects” (14). This two-way movement is replicated in the ear by the physical mechanics of listening, which create an indetermination of inside/outside due to the “‘acoustic otoemissions’ produced by the inner ear of the one who is listening: the oto- or self[*auto*]-produced sounds that come to mingle with received sounds, in order to receive them” (16). Thus, far from repeating the cliché of the musical body, Nancy articulates the body’s threshold spatiotemporality. Indeed, the admixture of internal and external sounds that occurs within the ear is a crucial, albeit microscopic, component of Nancy’s argument that listening is “a reality consequently indissociably ‘mine’ and ‘other,’ ‘singular’ and ‘plural’” (12). More specifically, listening entails a two-fold form of penetration and invagination, as “to listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside” (14; see also 38). The listening body is involuted, penetrating and penetrated; it is a threshold in which self/other, internal/external, singular/plural become indistinct.

Nancy ultimately underscores the bodily and indeed sexual dimension of listening through his exposition of timbre, “the first correlative of listening” (40), which he traces etymologically to the “the Greek *tympanon*, that is, the tambourine of orgiastic cults” (42). For Nancy, a representational possibility for timbre can be found in “the resonance of a stretched skin (possibly sprinkled with alcohol . . .), and as the expansion of this resonance in the hollowed column of a drum” (42). Nancy implicitly links the body to orgiastic timbre,

⁵ *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the pinna as “the broad flap of skin-covered cartilage which forms the external ear in humans and other mammals.”

seeing the body itself as “a hollow column over which a skin is stretched, but also from which the opening of a mouth can resume and revive resonance” (42). The orgiastic body is a space, an instrument, that “becomes distressed (tightens) and it rejoices (dilates)” (43); it can sound both inside and outside itself, and it listens to itself from inside and to the world outside simultaneously (42-3). Correlatively, resonance is experienced internally and can also be emitted, externalised, by the body through the mouth.

Having worked through Nancy’s theory of listening, one might ask: why should we be concerned with listening when analysing literature, which is now primarily a print-based (or digital) medium read silently? What is the relationship between listening and reading, the listener and the reader? The answers to such questions can be found in Nancy’s theory itself. For instance, he claims that “*écrire* in its modern conception . . . is nothing other than making sense resound beyond signification, or beyond itself” (34-5). In this sense, modern writing aims to make sense, to create sensations; it is concerned with auricular impressions over meaning; it possesses timbre and makes sense resound, vocalising textual sound.

Correlatively, then, modern writing demands to be listened to, as is evident when Nancy turns to analyse the act of writing and his theory becomes acutely self-reflexive. In this exploration of *écrire* and *écriture*, Nancy quotes the poet Francis Ponge, who acknowledges: “I never come to write the slightest phrase without my writing being accompanied by a mental speaking and listening, and even, rather, without it being *preceded* by those things (although indeed just barely)” (35). The speaking and listening of which Ponge writes is, however, more than simply a mental phenomenon. As scientific research shows, subvocalization has a

physical aspect; the speaking voice Ponge listens to as he writes is “his own” subvocal voice, and it is through the role of subvocalization that a theory of auricular reading can be formed.⁶

Nancy himself addresses the concept of the textual listener, but also from the perspective of the writer, arguing:

Speaking—speaking and listening . . . for speaking is already its own listening—is the echo of the text in which the text is made and written, opens up to its own sense as to the plurality of its possible senses. It is . . . the music in it, or the arch-music of that resonance where it *listens to itself* [s’écoute], by listening to itself *finds itself* [se trouve], and by finding itself *deviates* [s’écarte] from itself in order to resound further away, listening to itself before hearing/understanding itself, and thus actually becoming its “subject,” which is neither the same as nor other than the individual subject who writes the text. (35)

Nancy accepts Ponge’s account, but argues that speaking and listening – a textual echo – come *after*, not infinitesimally *before*, writing. He also makes more precise the concept of textual “musicality” (35), contending that the music in the text is the resonance through which the text listens to itself; indeed, the text has multiple possible senses and it listens to these senses before it understands itself or conveys meaning. Moreover, the echo of the text is made to resound in the text by the subject who is neither quite the same as, nor completely different from, the writing subject; the writer gives to the text her voice, which thereafter is simultaneously her voice and the voice of the text.

⁶ For instance, NASA’s subvocal speech project demonstrates that “biological signals arise when reading or speaking to oneself with or without actual lip or facial movement” (John Bluck and Michael Braukus, 2004).

The concept of the textual voice Nancy touches upon opens up the role of the reader, as in each reading the voice of the text is listened to by the reader and is, therefore, neither completely the reader's nor the writer's nor the text's own voice. As this interpretation shows, the reader must be made "present" to complement Nancy's theory of textual listening; given the music, resonance and voice Nancy argues for in texts, reading must be as much an auricular process as it is a visual and cognitive one. Indeed, the role of subvocalization does not belong to the writer alone, but is also an important aspect of reading. When we read a text, we simultaneously listen to it through our subvocal processes, thereby creating a form of auricular contagion in which the voice of the text and our subvocal sounds merge and become indistinguishable.

In reading *Sabbath's Theater*, then, we encounter two forms of the auricular: we experience the auricularity of reading through the process of subvocalization – as with all reading – and we read the auricular episodes in the narrative. Moreover, both forms of listening are inflected and intensified by the bodily, sexual aspect of listening itself, which is implied in Nancy's auricular theory and made more explicit in the narrative. The sexual pleasure and sensuality found in even the most basic form of listening is evident in the opening section of *Sabbath's Theater*, in which Sabbath remembers his instructions to his lover, Drenka: "do as you like, Sabbath said, and she did and liked it and liked telling him about how much she had liked to no less than he liked hearing about it" (1995, 9). The memory of this auricular relationship elicits the mutual, interpersonal connection between the lovers: one enjoys fucking lots of men and the other enjoys listening (and hearing) to reports of these sexual trysts. Sabbath becomes excited and aroused simply by listening to Drenka's sexual stories, and she, too, enjoys auricular sex, pleading with Sabbath: "'Tell me everything. Don't leave anything out,' even while he eased into her" (26). Drenka's command casts listening as a form of desire: she wishes to experience the satisfaction of

penile and auricular penetration, both of which create forms of sensual contagion. Beyond the basic pleasure of interpersonal listening, *Sabbath's Theater* encompasses many more complex forms of auricular sex. Using Nancy's auricular theory and the language he provides to discuss listening, I shall explore the categories of auricular sex in the narrative, turning first to accented listening.

Cunning Linguist

The main focus of Sabbath's narrative is his sex life with his Croatian mistress Drenka, who, the reader is told at the end of the prologue-like beginning, was dead within six months of her revelation that she has cancer. Throughout his narrative, Sabbath depicts the great sexual pleasure he derives from listening, with his taste for the auricular being made particularly apparent in his account of listening to Drenka's "remarkably juicy" (71) accent. This tasteful metaphor of accented wetness marks not only Drenka's speech but also Sabbath's excitement and his desire. Indeed, Sabbath gains pleasure from Drenka's foreign tongue as a result of "the delightful shadow" (71) it gives to everyday words, "making just a little mysterious the least mysterious utterance" (71). Sabbath finds this "phonetic seduction" (71), this lingual making-anew, arousing above what Drenka actually says; it is the sense, the sensation, of words and not their semantic significance that is sexually appealing to him.⁷

⁷ In "Roth/CounterRoth," Shostak argues that Drenka's speech is a sexual part of her existence. Moreover, in an analysis of the way in which Sabbath adopts Drenka's speech patterns, she contends: "the linguistic transference, like their process of co-narration [as they reminisce], suggests that they have realized intersubjectivity, each retaining a self as they interpenetrate one another. This moment of equilibrium and transcendence through sex and death implies the possibility of a 'self' that is not purely illusory, even if linguistic performance is the only possible sign of that self. If one of the fundamental premises of the

In his auricular relationship with Drenka, Sabbath is not, however, completely content with her exotic pronunciation; he also wants her to be an accomplished, stimulating storyteller. Consequently, he trains Drenka in the art of narrative, “since her inclination, in English at least, was to pile truncated sentences one on the other until he couldn’t understand what she was talking about” (71). At a narrative level, then, Sabbath finds Drenka’s English unsmooth and disjointed, which denies him full access to her sexual stories and undermines the potential sonority of her speech. Her sentences are truncated, which has the effect of truncating – auricularly curtailing – Sabbath’s own sexual pleasure. Following Sabbath’s dedicated training, however, “there was an ever-increasing correlation between all she was thinking and what she said” (71), and Drenka becomes “syntactically more urbane than nine-tenths of the locals” (71). Consequently, Sabbath is able to delight in the sense and sensuality of Drenka’s voice as well as experience good storytelling, the combination of which brings out the contamination embodied in the French “*sens*”: Sabbath finds sensual pleasure at the phonetic level and he enjoys sense at the semantic one. Through this combination, Sabbath experiences pleasure from sound, which comes and fades away, as well as from the sequential arrangement that creates sense and makes comprehension possible.

Memories of Listening

Following the prologue-like beginning, the greater part of the text is composed of two timeframes: the first tells of the period after Drenka’s death, how Sabbath’s wife Roseanna asks him to leave home and his subsequent wild road trip to New York and New Jersey; the second travels back into Sabbath’s elaborate memories, in which he recalls his sexually charged life. This second timeframe in particular intensifies and exaggerates the temporal

postmodern is the impossibility of transcendence, Sabbath and Drenka achieve a moment that seems to refute postmodernity” (135).

complexity of auricularity and the coming, fading, returning of resonance. As Sabbath returns from New York, for instance, he remembers and narrates Drenka's last night in hospital before she dies, recalling how Drenka demanded to listen to him tell stories: "'Tell me. Tell me.' At the Bo-Peep too, she had always begged him to tell her, to tell her, to tell her" (420). This memory of Drenka's desire to listen to Sabbath embodies the two forms of auricular memory that occur throughout the narrative, "audible" and "non-audible": in the principal memory, Sabbath remembers the sounds Drenka made and makes them "present" for the reader by repeating them and thus bringing them back into time, however transitory sonorous time may be; in the memory-within-the-memory, Sabbath does not repeat Drenka's sounds but remembers the scene as an auricular event. This second memory is a memory *of or about* the auricular; it is a "non-audible" auricular memory.

Sabbath's pleasure in both forms of auricular memory comes from the sense entailed in listening and the temporal complexity created through auricular recollection. During the remembered sequence of Drenka's last night in hospital, Sabbath recalls how they reminisced about the time they urinated on one another, with Drenka saying: "you stood there, over me . . . and finally there came a drop. Ohhh" (425). To this Sabbath's response is one of simple repetition: "'Ohhh,' he muttered" (425). In this complex and doubled "audible" memory – the memory of a memory – Drenka's "Ohhh" returns the lovers to a past time that no longer exists, to the time of the sexual urination. By repeating Drenka's "Ohhh," Sabbath further reanimates the temporality of this sound, bringing back the "Ohhh" that had passed away, as by its very nature "the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence" (Nancy, 2). Furthermore, Sabbath's memory and narration of this auricular exchange repeats once again Drenka's "Ohhh," thereby reanimating the coming and going of sound. Thus, Sabbath relives the sexual sense of listening to Drenka's voice, to the sonority of her simple yet intoxicating "Ohhh," within the remembered event and, additionally, in his memory of that event. He is

excited by the re-presentation of sounds that fade away, by being able to create and experience a recollection of auricular sexual resonance – the transience of sonority.

Despite the pleasure of recalling auricular sexual events, however, after Drenka's death Sabbath finds certain memories unappealing. For instance, he explains how “he was jealous now of the very men about whom, when Drenka was living, he could never hear enough” (34). As Sabbath expresses, Drenka's death marks a shift from a past “diabolical pleasure” (34) to a present grief. The difference between the exciting stories before Drenka's death and the memories of them that become distasteful after is caused by the difference between the auricular contexts: rather than the sexual excitement of Drenka's voice animating the stories, with her voice gone and the bare content of the stories exposed, Sabbath's focus is now solely on the details – the other man, the “crooked dick!” (70). He no longer has the accompaniment of Drenka's voice coming into his ear, which, rather than the stories' content, created the somatic pleasure of auricular sense and sensation. Rather, these memories remove him from his sensual life with Drenka and position him as just one member in her collection of lovers; the move from sense to meaning accompanies the move from a private to a collective sphere.

Fantasy and Reincarnation

Deriving from the Greek “*φαντασία*” (“a making visible”), “*φαντάζειν*” (“to make visible”) and “*φαίειν*” (“to show”) (*The Oxford English Dictionary*), “fantasy” is understandably often considered to be a visual phenomenon. *Sabbath's Theater*, however, offers an auricular form of fantasy, in which Sabbath creates full-scale auditory productions. The greatest of these productions comes when Sabbath returns home from his road trip, and instead of going straight into the house, he sits in his car and fantasizes about his wife masturbating: “she is muttering aloud, ‘Can I Can I Can I come?’ Whom does she ask? The imaginary man. Men. .

. . . asking herself maybe or her father, or asking no one at all. The words alone are enough, the begging. ‘Can I? Can I come? Please, can I?’” (432). Sabbath’s fantasy provides a sustained emphasis on “Roseanna’s” sounds. He listens to her conjured voice, to the sounds of sexual desire, and he intensifies the auricular aspect of the fantasy by imagining multiple listeners, the men Roseanna addresses and listens to, seeking their permission to release herself in orgasm. Having conjured these men, however, Sabbath allows them to vanish, claiming, “the words alone are enough” (432). He thereby re-emphasises the importance of auricular excitement. Ultimately, however, this claim does not reflect his wife’s thoughts but is instead a projection of Sabbath’s own desire for auricular stimulation.

Auricular fantasies do not have to be entirely internal or solitary. In Roth’s short novel *The Humbling* (2009), for instance, the once great actor Simon Axler and his lover Pegeen (twenty-five years his junior) create a shared auricular fantasy in their personal bedroom auditorium. In this fantasy, Pegeen makes Lara, a young woman she has seen before, “present” through the act of narration: “‘close your eyes. You want her to make you come? You want Lara to make you come? All right, you blond little bitch—make him come!’ Pegeen cried, and no longer did he have to tell her how to ride the horse. ‘Squirt it all over her. Now! Now! Yes, that’s it—squirt in her face!’” (2009, 106). Pegeen’s imperative – “‘close your eyes’” – registers the literal occlusion of Axler’s visual stimulus, making his fantasy of Lara predominantly auditory. Correlatively, Axler senses Lara’s “presence” via listening, and the shared auricular fantasy climaxes in ejaculation. Moreover, the mutual enjoyment both Axler and Pegeen experience in listening to each other brings out Pegeen’s sexual ability to “ride” Axler, the horse; significantly, then, listening to language enables the lovers to enjoy the very physicality sex can offer.⁸

⁸ *The Humbling* establishes the importance of listening for Axler from the very beginning with a description of the actor’s present plight. The narrative opens with the succinct words,

Where Pegeen fantastically brings the living Lara into the bedroom auditorium, Sabbath's auricular fantasies occasionally result in auricular reincarnation. During a visit to Drenka's grave, for example, Sabbath confesses: "he hadn't imagined that, looking down at the plot, he would see through to Drenka, see her inside the coffin raising her dress. . . . 'Go down on me,' she said to Sabbath. 'Eat me, Country, the way Christa did,' and Sabbath threw himself onto the grave" (64). The graveside visit begins with visual imagination but ends with Sabbath's focus on the auricular; his initial corporeal thoughts give way to Drenka's spectral words. This movement from sight to sound once again emphasises the auricular dimension of Sabbath's carnal impulses, and the very auricularity of this fantastical reincarnation causes him to throw himself on Drenka's grave, the closest he will come to "going down" on her ever again. Where he only imagines Drenka's bodily reanimation, Sabbath makes her into an auricular *revenant* when he remembers her words, language and speech, thereby providing his lover with a posthumous sonorous existence.

"he'd lost his magic" (1), after which the reader is told how Axler was from an early age "mesmerized by speaking and being spoken to" (3), and that "he could use intensity of listening, concentration, as lesser actors used fireworks" (3). Axler's ability to listen also extended beyond the stage, as he used it to seduce women, which transformed them into narrators and heroines. The actor thereby inverts the figure of the "smooth talker," the Romeo who arouses women with words; rather than playing the man with alluring speech, he listens. Despite his incredible ability to listen, however, at the narrative's outset, Axler has lost his unique gifts. He cannot speak, listen, hear or act on stage as he once did but is oxymoronicly left with the sense that he is always acting and never speaking. Where his unusually mesmeric relationship to speaking and listening seemed to be the essence of his youthful existence, Axler can no longer act naturally. For Axler, "acting" now connotes his inescapable inability to listen as well as his unnatural use of speech.

Sabbath's auricular reincarnation of Drenka is further intensified when he channels her voice through his body. Having scared off another of Drenka's lovers who leaves flowers and masturbates over her grave, Sabbath is soon found "licking from his fingers Lewis's sperm and, beneath the full moon, chanting aloud, 'I am Drenka! I am Drenka!'" (78). Sabbath therefore mixes his trip to the resting home of the dead with the ingestion of the male life force, and he auricularly reincarnates the deceased Drenka. In this act, Sabbath speaks out as Drenka and simultaneously listens to "her" as if she were alive, with her/his words resonating inside and outside his body in a moment of sensual contagion.⁹ Unable to let go of his lover, Sabbath reincarnates her as a speaking being to whom he can listen once again.

Telephonic Sex

Through its focus on the relationship between Joey Berglund and Connie Monaghan, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) offers a particularly vivid portrayal of the erotico-auricular excitement made possible by telephone sex. Their telephonic interactions have an intense effect on the couple, and Joey in particular finds the sexual experience it opens up

⁹ In her introduction to the 2007 special issue of *GLQ* on queer temporalities, Elizabeth Freeman discusses the staple metaphor of queer theory, the drag act, reflecting: "we might think of it as a nonnarrative history written with the body, in which the performer channels another body . . . making this body available to a context unforeseen in its bearer's lived historical moment" (164). As Freeman implies, drag is often "seen" as queering of self and other, but Sabbath's reincarnation of Drenka offers an alternative way to think about drag, with the speaking performer experiencing auricular auto-affection. Therefore, the value of the drag act would come from an auricular pleasure, in which the performer listens to himself speak as somebody of different gender. For an in-depth analysis of drag's historical potential, see Freeman's *Time Binds* (2010).

irresistible: “he returned to the wormhole three or four or even five times a week, disappeared into the world the two of them created” (259). Operating as an intricate tunnel, the telephone provides the couple with a spatiotemporality through which they can experience a technologically aided form of auricular sex; specifically, “wormhole” marks the telephone call as a structure “that resembles a tunnel between two black holes or other points in space-time” (Perkowitz, 2011, par. 1).¹⁰ As if tapping into or dialling up the etymology of “telephone”, Joey finds pleasure in the telephonic ability to reduce distance, “as if surfacing through a wormhole in the fabric of reality” (257).¹¹ Moreover, the repetition of “wormhole”, with its metaphoric-scientific resonances, combined with the narrator’s depiction of Joey travelling through reality’s spatiotemporal “fabric”, substantiates the connection between the sensual pleasure of auricular sex and “telephonic travel”. Such travel figuratively allows Joey to be in two dimensions simultaneously: he occupies the physical time and space in which he masturbates, and he is with Connie in the electronic wormhole, whilst they are also in two different US time zones (Central and Eastern). Ultimately, the very articulation of sex on the phone heightens the couple’s erotic life; able to “speak sex” and listen to it, the couple

¹⁰ In his *Encyclopædia Britannica* entry, Perkowitz provides the following helpful analogy to describe wormholes: “consider an ant walking across a flat sheet of paper from point A to point B. If the paper is curved through the third dimension, so that A and B overlap, the ant can step directly from one point to the other, thus avoiding a long trek” (2011, par. 1).

¹¹ In a 2010 *Guardian* article, Nicholas Royle also dials up the etymology of “telephone”, writing: “When the phone starts ringing in a novel or short story, the air is charged with magic and coincidence, superstition and death. The word telephone is literally ‘voice at a distance’. We can think of the literary work as a telephone call (the author or narrator addressing us), but also as a kind of telephone network (both in the form of dialogue and in the narrator ‘bugging’ different characters, recording what they say or think)” (par. 2).

experience a fresh appreciation of their sex life through their very use of language in the auricular wormhole.

As the main telephonic episode between Sabbath and a workshop student of his shows, Sabbath, like Joey and Connie, also uses the wormhole to expand and intensify his auricular pleasures. Moreover, telephone sex is the only sexual interaction Sabbath and the student, Kathy, have together: it does not intensify or tint their shared sex life; it is their sex life. When Kathy accidentally misplaces a tape of one of their sex conversations and it is later discovered, a committee is formed and a hotline set up for those wishing to listen to how “Professor Sabbath has been able to manipulate [Kathy] into thinking that she is a willing participant” (215). In the text, a transcript of the conversation printed as a footnote below the main narrative records how professor and student listen and talk to one another during this telephonic exchange. For much of the beginning of the conversation, Sabbath’s questions and directions are aimed at making Kathy describe what she is doing so that he can listen and masturbate to her words. This is not, however, a simple one-sided relationship. The staccato dialogue expresses the to-and-fro, listen-and-respond process of the couple’s telephonic conversation and Kathy herself eventually takes on the role of inquisitor and principal listener herself, asking Sabbath questions and prompting him to masturbate.¹² With Sabbath and Kathy, then, the listener on the telephone is the one who gains sexual pleasure from the erotic sense of language, not the speaker. Both characters wish to listen rather than speak, and their

¹² Taking a different (visual) approach, Kelleter (1998) argues that the layout of the piece itself problematises the position of victim and victimiser (297). Posnock (2006b) notes a similar ambiguity of roles in Sabbath and Drenka’s relationship, writing: “the depth of their shared connection . . . defies ‘orderly life’ and stable categories. Their connection begins conventionally enough as teacher and student. . . . But this is a hierarchy in name only and quickly dissolves” (169).

interaction implies that the speaker and speaking are only necessary components of auricular sex in the telephonic wormhole. Indeed, in the moments before orgasm Kathy and Sabbath are mostly involved in listening to themselves, and they come almost to (the) silence (of) one another, the voice – or here rather the ear – in the wormhole. Having telephoned to listen to one another, Sabbath and Kathy both reach sexual climax by listening to themselves, creating a complex mixture of “acoustic otoemissions,” those “self[*auto*]-produced sounds that come to mingle with received sounds” (16), within their inner ears.

Dogging

Dogging is a sexual practice that engages (with) the sense of sight: doggers wish to see others having sex and/or they themselves wish to be seen having sex by others; dogging is a visual and collective sexual exhibition. In *Sabbath's Theater*, however, Sabbath's desire to listen to others have sex reworks this sexual exhibition into an auricular experience. The animalistically labelled “dogger,” usually a voyeur or observer, is here a listener, an eavesdropper, opening up his or her ears to other people having sex. Correlatively, auricular dogging calls for the distinction Nancy makes between hearing and listening, as it involves more than a simple overhearing: one deliberately strains to listen to others; one “over-listens” not “overhears.”

In the narrative, Sabbath finds particular sexual pleasure in listening to his wife and Christa, a woman he seduces into sleeping with Drenka, have sex. Standing outside their bedroom window, Sabbath over-listens to – auricularly dogs – the lovers as they act as gorillas and, thereafter, recite Roseanna's Alcoholics Anonymous prayer together. Over-listening, Sabbath sexualises what is intended to be a sobering recitation, marking out for special consideration the females' entwined voices and discerning in their harmonious vocalisation their interlaced bodies writhing together. Following the prayer, Sabbath over-

listens to the women as they become aroused, considering: “these weren’t the cluckings of two contented gorillas Sabbath was overhearing now. The two of them were no longer playing at anything; there was nothing nonsensical any longer about a single sound they made. No need for dear God now. They had taken unto themselves the task of divinity and were laying bare the rapture with their tongues” (439-40). Compared to the gorilla “cluckings” Christa makes as Roseanna strokes her and the words of the prayer they say aloud together, Sabbath finds the sounds of the women’s erotic behaviour non-nonsensical. Despite – or because of – the lack of semantic meaning, the sexual sounds make sense to Sabbath; the lovers are “talking in tongues,” not religiously but sexually, and their rapturous tongue-talk prefigures the mutual cunnilingus possible in lesbian sex. The women’s tongue-talk becomes even more pronounced when they finally locate one of their clitorises, with Sabbath describing how “never before had [he] heard in any language anything like the speech pouring out of Rosie and Christa upon discovering the whereabouts of that little piece that made the whole picture complete” (441). Tuning into the lovers’ clitoral excitement and their subsequent ejaculations, Sabbath interprets the sounds as some form of magical, mystical language. But, despite not being able to understand them at the level of comprehension, the lesbians’ “talk” offers Sabbath a new range of auricular, sexual sensations, which pour out of their mouths and flow into his ears.

As well as opportunistic dogging, organised, coordinated auricular dogging forms part of Sabbath’s relationship with Drenka. As Sabbath recalls, “he would listen on the extension while, beside him on the bed, holding the portable phone in one hand and his erection in the other, she drove the latest lover crazy with the words that never failed to do the trick” (26). On the extension line, Sabbath is simultaneously in bed with Drenka who jerks him off and connected to the other man by the telephonic wormhole. Without addressing Sabbath – who is unnoticed by the other man on the line – Drenka is in effect talking to Sabbath, and the

conference call offers a telephonic model of sexual configurations and relations made possible through listening, speaking, absence and presence, as well as the manipulation of time and space.

Moreover, Sabbath and Drenka's organised auricular dogging can be seen to metonymically represent the arranged dogging that exists between text and reader. Specifically, auricular dogging extends to the reader of *Sabbath's Theater*, who "listens" in to Sabbath and Kathy's sexual "telephonic transmission" (214) through the transcript. Announced in the principal diegetic text by an asterisk, the footnote transcript aims to set forth the conversation to "discerning" citizens, of which there are more than one hundred in the first day. Like those interested listeners the reader, too, "listens in" on the conversation; she effectively dials up the hotline, enters the wormhole and listens to the tape recording as an eavesdropper, an auricular dogger.¹³ The reader's role as a dogger is emphasised by the transcript's sub-textual domain below the main narrative, as the positioning of the texts at least gestures towards how the reader must over-listen to the transcript whilst reading the main narrative. Furthermore, the reader is assisted in this role by extra-diegetic notation – "(Babyish laugh)" and "(confessional laugh)" (216-17) – which records how Sabbath and Kathy speak and the sounds they make during their conversation. Such notations emphasise the crucial significance of listening in and to the telephone sex conversation: in contradistinction to a script that guides oral delivery, these notes direct the reader in how to listen in to the couple's sounds and become competent auricular doggers.

¹³ In a similar way, the reader is invited to listen into Nicholson Baker's *Vox* (1992), the entire narrative of which is a "one on one" telephone conversation between a man and woman "in the famous fiber-optical 'back room'" of a sex chat line (14). In *Philip Roth* (2007), David Brauner touches upon the vicarious role of the reader in relation to the transcript, seeing it as a "pornographic transaction between reader and writer" (126).

The establishment of the hotline itself, along with the position of the transcript and the semi-secluded nature of the reader/listener, returns us to the privacy and secrecy entailed in the etymology of the French “*écoute*.” As Nancy explains, the word “*écoute*” referred to both the listening spy and the place in which one over-listens. Moreover, he elaborates, “*Être à l’écoute*, ‘to be tuned in, to be listening,’ was in the vocabulary of military espionage before it returned . . . to the public space, while still remaining, in the context of the telephone, an affair of confidences or stolen secrets” (4). Like the spy, then, the reader listens in secret to the text, partaking in a form of auricular dogging in which other listeners – other readers – participate privately as well. With telephonic listening, the auricular dogging of reading is metaphorically intensified, as the telephone retains the secretive aspect of listening; by listening to the recorded telephone conversation, the reader-listener is placed in the position of one who partakes in the “affair of confidences or stolen secrets” (4). As well as indicating its clandestine nature, the transcript’s sub-textual position also challenges the usual priority given to sight over sound; it is textually underground, something we listen into rather than something put fully on display.

Despite being one of many listeners, the reader is, however, still directly engaged with the telephone recording itself. Indeed, telephonic auricular dogging makes space for multiple listeners without engaging the line and barring the reader from listening to others talk dirty and masturbate. The direct engagement the reader has with the taped conversation is marked by the difference between the narrative text and the footnote transcript. In the “main” text, even moments of direct speech are (conventionally) embedded within a narrative frame, which imposes a form of mediation between reader and textual sound. In contrast, when the committee or the narrator interferes with the transcript through their notation, they do so predominantly to enhance textual sonority, which adds to the auricular aspect of dogging. Furthermore, the genre and form of the transcript attempt to create a sense of

recorded sound and its transmission, making “present” what was said and listened to previously, the sounds that have faded away into their permanence. The transcript is a record, a recording, of what was said as it was said, with the effect of making these transactions (more) present: as auricular doggers, we listen to Sabbath and Kathy’s words as they said them and as they have been recorded, so that their presence – always already a return – remains “present.”

Significantly, the co-presence of the two texts creates a scenario of double auricular dogging, as the reader listens to the tape recording whilst also listening in to the narrative of Sabbath and Kathy’s discussion about the publication of the tape recording. Bringing the reader back to the typical dogging arena of the car park, the conversation above the tape recording transcript takes place in Sabbath’s van, which is parked not far from some pickup trucks. Rather than peering in through the window to see Sabbath and Kathy, however, the reader listens in as the young woman explains how she misplaced the tape and as she cries “I want to suck you” (216). When Sabbath declines her offer, moreover, the narrator brings the reader into the van, with the direct address “not too hard on Sabbath, Reader” (230). Playing at the same time as Sabbath and Kathy’s conversation in the van about the tape is the transcript of the tape recording itself. Consequently, the reader is in a particularly complex auricular threshold, positioned between two textual sections at once, listening (at least figuratively) to two texts at the same time. This double – stereophonic – dogging thereby creates a sense of the all-pervasive auricular penetration in reading this section of *Sabbath’s Theater*: we can listen simultaneously to multiple sounds in a way that we cannot simultaneously read multiple texts; the reader is infiltrated by textual sound, caught between the footnote recording and the main text in a double session of auricular dogging.

Ventriloquial Listening

In *Sabbath's Theater*, an alternative form of auricular manipulation is present in ventriloquism, a performance that involves a displacement of the voice as well as spatiotemporal reconfiguration; correlatively, ventriloquial listening entails the auricular complexity involved in listening to somebody talk as another. The mechanics and effects of this form of listening are most vividly portrayed in the description of Sabbath's 1950s "Indecent Theater of Manhattan" (123), for which "his street speciality, his trademark, was to perform with his fingers" (122). In this act, the audience must suspend its disbelief and listen to a finger, the voice of which comes from Sabbath hidden behind a screen. Moreover, Sabbath sexualises the displacement of voice and body, specifically believing that "in the fingers uncovered, or even suggestively clad, there is always a reference to the penis" (122). Due to the phallic symbolism he discerns in the finger, then, Sabbath effectively gives the penis the power of speech and believes that his audience listens to the voice of finger and penis simultaneously. Taking advantage of his finger/penis act, Sabbath uses his "sly, salacious middle finger" (124) to entice attractive young women. At this important stage in his enticement, there is relative silence as the fingers stop performing the play and begin whispering to one another, which is presumably accompanied by the audience's straining to listen to what the fingers are saying. Having deliberated, the all-important "middle finger" fingers the chosen girl to come forward, listen and respond to its suggestive questions. As the girl is caught up with listening and speaking to this finger, Sabbath uses his non-speaking hand "to unbutton or unzip her outer garment" (124), and in the case of the student whose breast Sabbath manages to caress, the auricular effect of ventriloquism upon the girl allows Sabbath to play with her nipples; the girl is seduced by ventriloquial listening, by the alluring effect of listening to a voice as if it were emanating from two indeterminate locations.

As Sabbath informs the reader, he is able "not only to play with his fingers and his puppets but to manipulate living creatures as well" (125), and a form of human ventriloquism

is at play when Sabbath cajoles Drenka into telling him he can have sex with her eighteen-year-old niece Silvija: “‘Say the things,’ he told her, ‘say everything,’ and she did. ‘Yes, you have my permission, you dirty man, yes . . . you can have her tight young pussy, you dirty, filthy, man’” (22). To fulfil Sabbath’s fantasy, Drenka acts as Silvija, “protesting all the while that ‘Mr. Sabbath’ must promise never to tell her aunt and her uncle what she had agreed to do for money” (23). In this auricular seduction, Sabbath is no longer the ventriloquist but the excited listener, the aroused audience member. Drenka/“Silvija” titillate him through the use of the titular “Mr.,” which emphasises Silvija’s youth, her respect for him and his relative experience, and “they” further their ventriloquial flirtation by drawing a distinction between Sabbath the “man” and the boyfriend, who “comes so soon” (23), leaving “Silvija” unsatisfied. Through role-play and the spatiotemporal displacement of ventriloquism, the lovers create a complex scenario in which their sexual pleasures are founded upon and amplified by listening; Sabbath listens to the absent young “Silvija,” who is made “present” to him through auricular ventriloquism. Consequently, Sabbath is pleased by listening to one person acting as another, which involves a triple listening and an intricate configuration of presence and absence: Sabbath listens to Drenka speak as Silvija; he imagines that he is listening to Silvija; he listens to Drenka even as she speaks as another.

As an episode in *The Humbling* intimates, ventriloquism also – and significantly – takes place in the act of reading. Telling Axler about a former relationship with a woman, Pegeen explains: “We’d be tucked up in bed, reading—reading to ourselves, reading passages aloud to each other” (50). Here, the lesbians’ bed metonymically represents sex, or at least a sexual locus; it is a place of private, intimate reading, both individually and as a shared interaction. Within the intimacy of this sexual bed, reading functions as a metaphor for both masturbation (reading alone) and sexual intercourse (reading to one another). Moreover, as, according to Nancy, “writing is also . . . a voice that resounds” (36), the partner in the bed

who reads to the other also participates in an act of auricular contagion in which her voice mingles with that of the text. By reading aloud, then, the reading partner ventriloquizes the voice of the text, intermingling textual and human voices. This voice is in turn internalised by the one who listens. Distinct from the shared experience in which Pegeen and her lover read aloud to one another, reading to oneself involves a more solitary form of masturbatory ventriloquism. In this type of reading, the reader – including the reader of *The Humbling* – listens to himself through the words of the text and listens to the text through his own subvocalization. As listening readers who tune in to the sexual transcript, or like Pegeen and her lover who arouse one another by reading, or, as we shall see, like Sabbath who masturbates to the music in Dostoyevsky, when we find ourselves aroused by reading we are then experiencing a form of auricular sexual excitement and relationality, which is created by the simultaneous process of textual ventriloquism and ventriloquial listening.

In *Sabbath's Theater*, ventriloquial listening plays out at both the diegetic and the extradiegetic level, as Sabbath occasionally shifts from his usual heterodiegetic voice to an autodiegetic one. Given his love for listening – to others and to himself via his own “turbulent inner talkathon” (230-1) – Sabbath’s narratorial decision to tell his story mainly through the heterodiegetic voice enables him to enhance his oral performance for his own personal auricular pleasure; it is another aspect of his “inner talkathon.” Specifically, the adoption of the heterodiegetic voice creates a rich narratorial configuration by accentuating the gap between the “I” of the narrator and the subject of the diegesis, the gap between Sabbath the narrator and Sabbath the character. Moreover, by narrating his story as a heterodiegetic narrator Sabbath listens to himself as if he were telling and listening to – for every speaking is a listening – the story of another, which results in a form of auto-affective, ventriloquial dogging: Sabbath takes pleasure in listening to himself discuss himself as if over-listening to the sexual exploits of another; like the ventriloquist, he displaces voice,

subject and object, listening to himself and an “other” simultaneously. Consequently, such metaleptic shifts can be seen as forms of narrative ventriloquism, which here involve the reader over-listening to Sabbath speaking and listening to himself; the reader is caught up in an auricular situation in which she listens to Sabbath as he tells his own sexual story to himself as another.¹⁴

Sweet Song

Throughout *Sabbath's Theater*, Sabbath shows a passion for listening to music, using it as a means of seduction and as a way to relive past sexual pleasures.¹⁵ More creatively, Sabbath also finds in musical sense a means through which to fantasize. Indeed, in his long fantasy of Roseanna masturbating, Sabbath interprets her sexual activity *as* music:

¹⁴ In “Bored with Sex?” (2003), Adam Phillips addresses the concept of self-listening, opening up a series of intriguing questions, including: “at such moments I am being addressed, but who is addressing me? I am talking to myself but who exactly is doing the talking, the strangely silent talking we call thinking; and who, perhaps more perplexingly, is the listener when we are talking to ourselves?” (6).

¹⁵ The sexual power of music is equally important to Coleman Silk in Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000). Towards the beginning of the text, the narrator Nathan Zuckerman describes to the reader how “some nights, every line of every song assumed a significance so bizarrely momentous that [Silk would] wind up dancing by himself the shuffling, drifting, repetitious, uninspired, yet wonderfully serviceable, mood-making fox trot that he used to dance with the East Orange High girls on whom he pressed, through his trousers, his first meaningful erections” (14).

Ohhhh. Ohhhh. Ohhhh. And then she lies there and she pants for a while . . . in all, there is much here to be compared with Bernstein conducting Mahler's Eighth.

Sabbath felt like offering a standing ovation. But seated in the car . . . he could only stamp his feet and cry, "Brava, Rosie! Brava!" and lift his God Bless America yarmulke in admiration of the crescendos and the diminuendos, of the floating and the madness, of the controlled uncontrollableness, of the sustained finale's driving force.

Better than Bernstein. His wife. (433)

Within this sexual fantasia, Sabbath places himself as an audience member listening to Roseanna's sonorous masturbation and he acknowledges her performance with the customary musical cry "Brava!" But whilst Sabbath imaginatively listens to Roseanna, he, not she, is getting off to sound. By sounding out this fantasy (internally to himself and externally to the reader as narrator), Sabbath is listening to himself imitate and create the sounds of another. He is imaginatively listening to another whilst listening to his own inner voice, his own subvocalization, in a moment of erotic auricular contagion.

Sabbath's pleasure in listening to his masturbatory fantasia about Roseanna is similar to the sexual excitement he experiences in reading. In a moment of autodiegetic narration, Sabbath recalls his early days as a seaman, telling the reader about his literary habits whilst on board the ship: "I was reading all that stuff and jerking myself off over it. Dostoyevsky—everybody going around with grudges and immense fury, rage like it was all put to music, rage like it was two hundred pounds to lose. Rascal Knockoff. I thought: Dostoyevsky fell in love with him" (155). Sabbath's focus on the music of Dostoyevsky's work unveils the auricular basis of his literary pleasures. He finds in Dostoyevsky an all-consuming music; he reads and listens to Dostoyevsky as an opera, creating an amplification and resounding combination of the voice of, and the music in, the text. As a Rascal Knockoff himself

(Sabbath's homophonic play on "Raskolnikov"), Sabbath knocks one off to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* due to its operatic force and the intense auricular sensation reading this literary opus (no. 1866) creates. As for *Sabbath's Theater*, Sabbath's own sexual revelries are also musical revelries; his sexual desires and deeds come with a soundtrack, which the reader listens to as she is escorted through his erotic life, past, present and fantastical.

The seductive and sexual sensation Sabbath appreciates in music can be traced at least as far back as Homer's *Odyssey*. As Odysseus and his men endeavour to return home to Ithaca, Circe infamously warns the hero that he who "listens to the Sirens / singing, has no prospect of coming home and delighting / his wife and little children as they stand about him in greeting, / but the Sirens by the melody of their singing enchant him" (XII, 41-4). But as well as being seduced by music and seducing others by his own sweet talk, however, Sabbath, like Axler in *The Humbling*, also has a provocative auricular capacity, an ability to entice others by listening. Indeed, by positioning themselves as attentive listeners, both Sabbath and Axler invert the Sirens' erotic potential and the longstanding cultural figure of the "smooth-talking" male. Sabbath's personal ability to seduce women by listening is portrayed in his first telephone conversation with Kathy when she phones to apologise for being absent from class. For his part, Sabbath takes up the position of the interested listening party, and, whilst he listens for his own benefit, he seduces Kathy by listening to her, by paying her auricular attention. Like those who listen to the Sirens, Sabbath is aroused by Kathy's discussion, but Kathy herself, however, is aroused by Sabbath's seeming desire to listen to her. She is seduced not through his "honey-sweet voice" (187) but by his stretching to listen to her, his auricular opening up to her, seduced by the sense and intimacy created in being listened to, by receiving auricular attention. Sabbath's auricular capacity, or at least his ability to persuade women that he is listening, supports his belief that "he had the artistry still to open up to them the lurid interstices of life" (213), and his auricular art has a similarly

seductive power as that of “the magical / Sirens and their singing” (158-9); yet, Sabbath’s technique inverts the classical role of listening, so that the listener is the seducer and the speaker the seduced.

Silence

At the end of an essay on listening filled with voices, sound and resonance, it seems appropriate to close with an analysis of silence. For Sabbath, silence does not offer a respite; rather, he uses it to entice women. Indeed, when he seduces women by listening to them, he becomes quiet and plays upon the erotic effect of listening to silence, as is evident in his seduction of Christa: “he stopped talking and on they drove. In that silence, in that darkness, every breath assumed its importance as that which kept you alive” (60). Here, silence is equated with darkness, but far from being an absence or negation, Sabbath finds the dark night – and silence – to be a time of excitement and sexual possibility. After and to the time and space of silence, Christa eventually tells Sabbath about her previous job as an exotic dancer, and in response to his successfully silent manoeuvre, Sabbath thinks “yep, played it perfectly” (60). Consequently, Sabbath’s play for and upon silence indicates that silence should be “understood [*s’entendre*, heard] not as a privation but as an arrangement of resonance” (Nancy, 21). Silence is a spatiotemporal resonance, something that is both there and not there simultaneously. In the text, Sabbath reaffirms silence’s significance when he refuses Kathy’s offer of a blow job during their discussion of the sex tape, telling her: “do Brian instead. . . . Didn’t you say that the shock of hearing the tape has turned him into a deaf-mute? Well, go home and sign him that you’re going to blow him and see if his face doesn’t light up” (230). In Sabbath’s admonition, he mockingly reads Brian’s silence as a sexual come-on, as an effort to reinitiate sex with Kathy. Moreover, Sabbath takes pride in having made Brian deaf and mute – silent in two senses – through his sexual relationship

with Kathy; Brian is unable to experience the pleasures of auricular sex or provide auricular excitement for others.

Where Nancy argues that “sense opens up in silence” (26), Sabbath, then, uses silence to open up sexual sense and sensation, to open up sexual possibilities and partners. In *The Humbling*, Axler also offers an appraisal of silence when he watches Pegeen and a woman they meet in a bar have sex: “[Pegeen] slid down a ways and gently penetrated Tracy with the dildo. Pegeen did not have to force her open. She did not have to say a word—he imagined that if either one of them did begin to speak, it would be in a language unrecognizable to him” (112-13). The narrator’s exclusively visual description of the two women emphasises the silence of this scene. This is a sexual dumb show, in which Tracy responds to silence, a silence that makes sexual sense to both women; she is opened up to sex with Pegeen through silence, just as she is physically opened by Pegeen’s dildo. During this *ménage à trois*, and that involving Drenka and Christa, the protagonist takes on the role of the observer listener, a role that is similarly played by the reader of *Sabbath’s Theater* – that auricular dogger on the textual telephone who listens in to the music of Sabbath’s sexual tracks.

As this essay itself moves ever closer to silence, the image of the reader as an auricular dogger is one that should hold our attention; specifically and synaesthetically, this image should hold our ear; it should remind us that reading is an auricular activity, an encounter that is at times sensual and intimate. Within the auricular time and space of reading, voices and sounds intermingle, and they can at times seduce and arouse us. Whilst we may not all have Sabbath’s highly attuned ear, listening (in) to texts and the “sens” of the auricular more generally can, however, open us up to textual and erotic possibilities, even – or indeed especially – when there appears to be only silence.

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