

## Approaches to Carole Maso's *AVA*

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As the essays in this casebook examine, the difficulty of teaching a text by Carole Maso is the difficulty of teaching our students to think in new ways. I use excerpts from Maso's work, usually just after midterms, when energy is disappearing. I shyly hand out the work and ask my students to consider what we, as readers and writers, are being given within these seemingly fragmented pages. Nearly all of the students return to the next session energized, thoughtful, filled with questions about form (something most of them had never considered before), and a little afraid.

The difficulty of teaching Maso's work is reminiscent of the difficulty of teaching students to correctly use the semicolon, which insists that the sentence exists in the process—on the verge—of becoming something else. Massachusetts poet Mary Ruefle explains that the semicolon (which, as it happens, is the least common mark in all of poetry) allows us to go on connecting speech that for all apparent purpose is unrelated. She asks us to consider the poem as a semicolon, "a living semicolon, which connects the first line to the last, the act of keeping together that whose nature is to fly apart."

Ruefle goes on to insist that between the first and last line, "there exists a poem—and if it were not for what exists in between the first and last line, there would be no poem." I like to think of Carole Maso's work in this way; the 265 pages that comprise *AVA* are the clauses of Ava Klein's lifelong sentence.

Each is independent of the next while simultaneously being reliant on both what has come before and what might follow. If it were not for the imagined first and last breath of the novel's protagonist, which exist beyond the pages of the text, there could not be the middle that is *AVA*.

Graciously hailed by critics as groundbreaking and allusive, daring and lyric, symphonic and sensually evocative, upon its release by Dalkey Archive Press in 1993, *AVA* received a great deal of acclaim for its voluminous experimental possibilities. Nearly all the book's critics noted what becomes quite important to the essays that follow, how the world Maso offers exists dangerously on the margins of being and nonbeing. The *New York Times* review explained that "Like a piece of music, *AVA* uses repetition and thematic layering to create a shimmering, impressionistic portrait that eschews linear narrative in favor of the sensations aroused by resonant imagery" (Smith 23). Undoubtedly, as readers and as teachers, we must insist to both our students and to ourselves that *AVA* is no place to nail down characters or names, plots or (re)actions, nor will I do that here in this introduction. Moreover, in spite of itself, *AVA* is indeed logical, organized, and ordered; only it relies on a different system of order, logic, and meaning, as the close reader is apt to discover. Still, in the way that the text is shaped, making a chronology of events or a list of dates and places feels irrelevant and unnecessary. Yes, *AVA* calls itself a novel; but arguably,

*AVA* is also not a novel. It is a work of lyric proportions: written and unwritten, done and undone, created, dispersed, and re-created. Such destruction of coherent meaning and the pattern of Maso's prose insists that readers believe *AVA* to be neither traditional narrative nor typical poetry. In this way Carole Maso creates in *AVA* a work of extremity and urgency. Breaking life in parts on the last day of Ava Klein's life, Maso develops a work called a novel but with all the characteristics of a poem. She captures the fragmented essence of life (in the midst of dying) in its totality, experienced through the body's sense of both infinity and affinity. Because Ava Klein is the witness to other's extremes while she herself is entering into death, both the author and the narrator are able to find a place where opposites do not clash but, instead, work together.

*AVA* is a patchwork of voices that intuitively explores how language, as it currently exists, cannot speak universally because, as Maso suggests, the narrator's struggle is "The struggle all along—how to accept one's inner voice" (177). *AVA* speaks completely in each fragment, with no obvious or clear connection to the next fragment. Each line written, however, simultaneously speaks to the lines that come before and the words written thirty pages later. Every poetic sentence in *AVA* depends on every poetic sentence contained in the text—every word depends on every word—and yet each utterance can stand on its own, complete in its wordness, though every line relies heavily on every other line in every moment of *AVA*. For example, in the development of the phrase "come quickly" throughout the work, we can grasp *AVA* in its totality.

A throbbing.

Come quickly.

The light in your eyes. (3)

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Where are those voluptuous sorrowful songs? The lit temple? the jewels? The things I would have liked to have known. No—the things I needed to know.

Come quickly, my mother says, there are finches at the feeder.

Not yet, Dr. Oppenheim. On the slight possibility that I should survive. (53)

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Show me the way there.

My mother—dressed in a gown of gold satin. Suppose it had been me?

Come quickly, she says, there are finches at the feeder.

Afternoon. (138-39)

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Treblinka

Come quickly, Ava.

Blood transfusion.

Even though you were afraid: you held my hand; you said. (264)

The varying contexts within which readers discover the phrase "come quickly" allow us to identify with the familiarity of two words whose repetition is readily felt and understood while simultaneously questioning the previous existing meaning of the phrase. We understand "come quickly" differently when placed before "the light in your eyes" than we do if it is the utterance spoken after "Treblinka." In part Maso wants readers' minds to call up the image, say of finches at the feeder, with the repetition of certain words and yet she wants each word to be a new beginning. She tells us that "Other strange things happen: each page I write could be the first page of the book. Each page is completely entitled to be the first page" (58).

We can begin to see this argument most clearly when the naming of *AVA* is addressed in early discussion. Here we can offer a lens through which we can first focus on the nonlinear qualities necessary to an acceptance and comprehension of Maso's attempt at a Borgesian text. While the title can be read as either an allusion to Eve (the first woman) or Ava Maria (Mary/Madonna), *AVA* is most simply a palindrome. Ava is still Ava, backward and forward. References to both H  l  ne Cixous and Jorge Luis Borges within the text establish the narrative's need for a text that neither begins nor ends—for a work that is constantly shifting and unstable, nonlinear as well as noncyclical. The tiered structure of tradition fades away in *AVA* and as with the text, there is no solid beginning etched in a particular time and no end that couldn't be the beginning or the middle.

Of course in more traditional literature we expect to approach a text that contains a beginning and an end, but in *AVA* this linear progression exists nowhere. Students, who may be struggling with this seeming lack of linearity, can be comforted by what Maso, herself, tells us:

I do not pretend to understand how disparate sentences and sentence fragments that allow in a large field of voices and subjects, linked to each other quite often by mismatched syntax and surrounded by space for 265 pages, can yield new sorts of meanings and wholeness. I do not completely understand how such fragile, tenuous mortal connections can suggest a kind of forever. How one thousand Chinese murdered in a square turn into one thousand love letters in the dying Ava Klein's abstracting mind. (*Conjunctions* 172)

The connections therein are not explicit in the form of the text, nor in Ava's life, nor in her death, and certainly not in the relationship of the sexual to the work. According to Karen Osborne's review in the *Chicago Tribune*, at the center of *AVA* "is a reckless, incandescent desire" (6) where neither sadness nor pleasure comes to an end, not even

after intercourse, when she and her lover are feeling the words come back. For Ava Klein, remembering lovemaking is another aspect of the lovemaking, remembering the life she has lived keeps it from closure, despite death. Everything means, is defined, by Ava so differently that readers know immediately how Ms. Klein neither lives by the same standards as the rest of the world nor loved in the same manner we have. She loves so much—"Truth be told there is not one day that has gone by where I have not fallen in love with someone, with something" (94)—that we come to respect the ways in which the narrative succeeds most at this level. In fact, both the sexual and the sensual realms of *AVA* are transformed into what is perhaps one of the novel's central metaphoric explorations into "The zone of speechlessness one sometimes enters during sex, the tug of silence, the weird filling in with words that do not seem to make sense" (*Aureole IX*).

We should also assure our students, who do not want to surrender the knowledge they have of literary forms, that it is necessary not to neglect the characteristics of the novel present in *AVA*. Readers must, however, be acutely aware of *AVA*'s desire to be something more:

The desire of the novel to be a poem. The desire of the girl to be a horse. The desire of the poem to be an essay. The essay's desire, its reach towards fiction. And the obvious erotics of this.

Virginia Woolf knew the illusion of fiction is gradual even if moments are heart stopping, breathtaking. There is a pattern, which is only revealed as patterns are, through elongation and perspective, the ability to see a whole, a necklace of luminous moments strung together. How to continue the progression, the desire to go beyond the intensity of the moment or of moments. Like sex, one has to figure out how to go on after the intensity of the moment—how in effect to compose a life after that, how to conjure back a world worth living in, a world which might recall, embrace the momentary, glowing obliterating, archetypal. One longs for everything. For the past one never experienced, for the future one will never know—except through the imaginative act. One longs to be everything. To have everything.

A certain spaciousness. There would be time and room for it all.

The creation of an original space. The desire for an original space in which to work. ("Notes" 23)

Clearly, Maso neither neglects the position of the novel nor negates the essence of poetry. Our students can grasp this notion more completely if we insist that *AVA*'s form, its quality of being between genres, is not necessarily a threat to the order of language or society, but rather a redefining of order and boundaries. The work that is *AVA* pirouettes on the edges between modern, postmodern, and contemporary discourse while reaching with longing toward the traditional novel's form. While glancing over its shoulder to the coherent shapes which exist in a more ordered world, *AVA* stands in a genre all its own.

We might also add to the discussion that the text offers a fragmented reflection of Ava, by Ava, on the last day of her life, perhaps in an attempt to escape the inadequacy and dangers of language. Ava knows that her struggle to find closure and structure for the life that is ending and for the stories she must tell, which both belong to her and are not hers, may fail just as conventional form and tidy endings have failed others before her who needed to speak. Throughout, Maso attempts to liberate the nature of language from the notions of mechanical progression and false order imposed through literature. For instance, Ava Klein knows that memory is not limited to her particular experience but is the experience of all who have come before and all those to follow. Perhaps this is how we can best understand the interweaving of voices throughout the narrative. In the fleeting instances when Ava's memories coincide with the memories of those who are dead, which occurs throughout her last day, Ava both believes she has a future and is able to let go. In her attempt to leave the flaws of language behind, to leave as witness readers of this text, Ava reenters language from a different position. To this end, the beauty of what is unsaid and the failure of what has been spoken, for Ava, are strongly apparent. Deficiencies of words are best exemplified in *AVA* through the voices of the dead—many of whom died as a result of their language or their use of language—that fill the text with the fragmented nature of their impressions.

Paradoxically, protected by this space in which the speaking subject can move freely from one subject position to another or merge with the world, Ava Klein feels deeply secure about the life she has lived and the life she is about to abandon. The narrative is created by constructions similar to those of memory itself. Ava searches for "What the story was—and if not the real story—well then, what the story was for me" (125), which Maso believes is an essentially necessary aspect of coming into one's separate existence. Ava comes to know herself as a separate being, as "I," within the reflection she sees in others. Thus discovering her likeness in the mirror of literature, she immediately identifies with herself and yet the reflection is something unfamiliar and frightening. Because death of the body, for Ava, brings up a multitude of issues—"What is offhand, overheard. Bits of remembered things" (6)—awareness of the failure of language is often touched by both death and this coming to know oneself. Ava is touched by many deaths: the extermination camps of World War II: "Treblinka, a rather musical word" (99); AIDS: "Are you positive? Yes, I am extremely positive, Aldo said. In fact, I've got the first signs—forgetfulness, night sweats" (99); suicides by writers and artists: "After all this time. Primo Levi tries to fly. Paul Celan underwater. . . . And the drowned poet says:" (99); lovers lost in the sky: "Lost in the air in his [Anatole's] one truly hopeful, joyful act" (131); strangers in the streets: "A bullet shot into the air kills a twelve-year-old girl out shopping for a summer dress and sandals with her mother" (129); victims of political struggles: "García Lorca, learning to spell, and not a day too soon" (113), not to mention the end of her own life wherein Ava is "pulled toward the irresistible music of the end" (258).

It is through the musical tone of the text, the music toward which Ava is pulled, that the character of Ava Klein redefines the feminine. At the center of her life, which is in itself an erotic song cycle, is the body. Ava's body is a sensual exile that allows her to move beyond the linear discourse familiar in traditional literature and conversation toward "the

seduction that is, that has always been language" (227). Because eroticism is the only sense of subjectivity in *AVA*, this use of the erotic as subject offers an exit from the need to acquire power and self in relation to the dyadic nature of patriarchal law and structure. Ava's body and the centering of the text around her body should not, however, be read as the origin of desire or the end of desire. Ava's body exists rather in moments and as a gesture of desire. The body (Ava's dying body) confronts its own absence from itself, which is never so intensely experienced than in this sorrow of what will never be done. What Ava seeks without knowing, what she questions in the silence of the text, is the body unmarked by patriarchal or feminist signifiers—the body and the text's white space remains untouched by the dyads of gendered or didactic discourse.

The deceptive shifts in point of view and the dangerous fragmentary lines as narrative techniques employ the belief that writing is a way both of recovering the self, once lost, and a way of discovering the self. In *AVA* Maso discovers and unfolds her narrator while weaving abstract musing with concrete realism. The narrative journey is one that plunges into the depths of the self and into the arc of language's possibilities. Exploring the concept of seeing self as "you" as a way to come to terms with the "I," allows the sexual provocativeness of the text to help us to better understand Ava Klein. In the most simplistic terms, the text is filled with words of physicality. Through the physical, the sensual, readers can discover Ava's sense of the erotic within the context of living and within the content of life as background or foreground or foreplay, for that matter. There is profound beauty to the novel's searching and to the panic of Ava's relationship with others, powerful threads in her life, to which we, as readers, can relate. The hurried "urgency, for you in that apartment vestibule. It should have been obvious, even then" (24), and the frantic pace of the narrative's sexuality allows the reader to absent herself within *AVA*'s erotica.

Ava Klein clearly relies heavily on the power of sexuality to turn her fate. While some of the most powerful aspects of feminine writing include the way sexual overtones are implied, sexuality goes through a series of tonal changes in *AVA*. The role of the sexual in the text allows Ava Klein constantly to reinvent herself through its fragmented form, thus enabling a complete abandonment of the ideal sexual relationship. Without hesitation, readers know that Ava and her lovers are colored by sexual desire:

Later in the circular room, we danced for hours to Prince. He pulled me toward him. He pushed me away. I have a woman and a child, he whispered over and over, in broken English.

It must have been what he wanted. He must have wanted to touch a boundary, to feel some limit.

He watched me dance away.

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But you are married, I thought, I said to the stranger. You have a woman and child.

Keep the light on.

Take me from behind this time.

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Overheard, bits of remembered things,

In letters, or on the beach

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Take me from behind this time.

Or at the moment of desire. (50-51)

At moments like this in the narrative, which at first seem easy to dismiss because of casual way sex is addressed, Ava points to the nearly inaudible, broken language shared between herself and this stranger, Jean-Luc. Rather the words which we, the reader, are not supposed to hear—perhaps because Jean-Luc is married, perhaps because in him Ava sees the possibilities of escaping her loss over Anatole, her second husband who had been dead nearly a season (50), or perhaps because in his desire to feel the limits of himself, Ava will be able to dissolve her own boundaries—imply a complex and simultaneous act of translation, complicated first by the very essence of language which connotes and denotes meanings and symbols differently to each speaker/listener and second by the theory that men and women do not speak the same language:

All the personal pronouns—j/e, m/on, m/a, m/es—are split to emphasize the disintegration of the self that occurs every time women speak male language (37).

Nearly all of Ava's lovers are from foreign lands and do not speak the same language as Ava. Hence, not only is speech translated once through the very act of using words as symbols, but a second time because of the gender differences of language. Finally, a third translation is necessary between Ava and her loves, from their foreign tongues to the other foreign tongue.

Within the narrative, silence between Ava and her sexual partners, between one fragment and the next, functions not as a nonlanguage but rather as the only language whose words need not be put through a series of translation. The constructions of silence which dominate this text function as a parallel discourse through which Ava affirms Hélène Cixous's belief that "Almost everything is yet to be written by women about their infinite and complex sexuality, their eroticism" (216). Yet, despite Maso's affinity for *écriture féminine* and her "intermingling the implications of language and body" (Harris 110), many French feminists "theorize writing the body as a gender issue, [while] Maso reveals her lyrical bent in her attachment to more traditional notions of subjectivity and voice" (Harris 108). Often, Western feminists claim women's silence is essentially linked to women's oppression, but Maso turns silence into something that heals. The textual spacing in *AVA*, as well as the character's own attraction toward quiet, implies that

muting allows for empowerment of the self and that silence is more true than meaning produced in language.

Through the silence of the text, the music toward which Ava is pulled, Maso engages readers to redefine the ways through which we are taught to approach the seeming inaccessibility of such a work. We learn that such pauses appear as metaphor for the impossibility of articulation and for the inability of words to represent anything fully. Only within the blank white spaces that separate Ava's thoughts can we begin to accept that the alienation felt by Ava throughout rests partially in her inability to equate the self with the language spoken around her, but not in her inability to assimilate truth and power of an ideal language, where, according to Cixous,

You will have literary texts that tolerate all kinds of freedom—unlike the more classical texts—which are not texts that delimit themselves, are not texts of territory with neat borders, with chapters, with beginnings, endings, etc., and which will be a little disquieting because you do not feel the

Border.

The edge. (113)

By writing the body and death of the body as Maso does, *AVA* creates an experience absent of the symbolic order, absent of any order except that of "The ideal or the dream [which] would be to arrive at a language that heals as much as it separates" (53).

Unfortunately, some of *AVA*'s critics feel that this is where the novel falters, insisting that "the novel never satisfactorily explains how a 'feminine text' can heal while a conventional one separates" (Smith 23). More unfortunate, however, is Smith's misunderstanding of the feminist principle that heavily influences the craft of *AVA* and her inability to seek such an explanation within the blank spaces of the text. On the other hand, Michael Dorsey points out that at times "the novel falls short of its promise, not from a shortcoming in what she [Maso] has written so much as from the vastness of that promise" (1). Further, he admits that for this very reason he comes to love the book "simply because it illuminates possibility and promises a terrain that is infinite" (1). And perhaps, more than anything, *AVA* is a book of infinite promise—of infinity promised.

Little has been made of the white space within *AVA* beyond its stylistically visual element and/or experimental strategy, yet within the physical spaces between lines, Maso explores the possibilities of development of our true nature and our true language shown through the healing of silence. Additionally, because pauses appear in the narrative at points where the inexpressible erupts into the narration—where meaning breaks down and is lost—we come to accept the often-brutal nature of the thoughts in Ava Klein's mind. For example, how can we, the reader, continue reading after the horror of these phrases:

The parents now being asked once more to survive



Not again.

Yes.

Try not, if you can relate it to that.

In the French cemetery Jewish graves dug up in the night.

Skeletons. Swastikas.

The skeletons hung up and asked—

Please stop.

To die again. (164-65)

Ava, herself, must break between each thought. The painful sense of each phrase, and the connection of her parents' survival from the terrors of the Holocaust to surviving their own daughter, is a weight we carry with us. We too need a moment to collect our feelings. I return to what Ava says about her father who hated endings of all kinds (186) and to his actions, which are, in essence, a dual metaphor. As God had spared his wife and him through the harsh night of the death camps, Mr. Klein acts as a benevolent higher being who believes he must spare a small part of everything he touches. Leaving the lone basil in the garden, the bite of oatmeal in the dish, Ava's father symbolically saves another life that was lost. It is his way of naming the more than six million Jews killed, whose names cannot all be known. This way, he believes, something will always survive. Perhaps, more importantly, his gestures serve as a representation of hope: despite the consumption of the Jewish people there must always be something/someone left to carry on. His gestures insure that the memory always exists. And yet in contradiction to his attempt at avoiding endings, he is once more being asked to continue in what is perhaps the most difficult survival of all: a parent outliving his child—"Gone, my father whispers" (207). Ava's death is most distressing at this level when we are asked to consider the pain her parents must go through yet again.

As the text develops, however, we come to accept what Maso has done—the connections she draws between the physical closure of love and the spiritual closure that comes with dying. Ava's father knows there is no closure for the dead. He insists, through his relationship to the world, that death is not an ending because nothing is forgotten and something is always left behind to serve as reminder. But Ava's father also knows that there is no language with which to speak about the dead. Ava's father (and Ava too) knows that he cannot say their names; they no longer have names. In his silence, his actions whisper. His gestures, however, cannot take a grammatical form. Silence does not have a grammatical form—we cannot diagram a moment of silence. And Mr. Klein knows that we cannot put a period after the silence—cannot mark the silence with an end stop, because the loss goes on. Such silence, moreover, offers both Ava and the reader

space to heal—because there are no words which can be offered to make these parallels any more bearable.

In part, as readers we are asked to leap repeatedly, to make connections that are only clear to Ava on this last dying day. And yet Ava tells us that the relationship between her thoughts may not even make sense to her: "Two Germanys become one. In a graveyard in France Jewish skeletons are dug up and hung to blow in the breeze. Putting these two sentences next to each other as I have doesn't necessarily mean anything" (74). Ava demands, in these instances, that we rely on the aesthetically silent spaces in the text—they allow us (and Ava) the space to breathe. Rather, it is in these places where Ava must confront "the hurt of the century" and where the reader, in order to continue the harsh reality *AVA* insists upon, has to infer links between things that are not explicitly connected or assume meanings that are not given in the text itself. Silence, as a literary tool, is something uncomfortable to the reader in part because we rely on the established rules of language within the temporal framework of text—we do not rely on an author's breaking of such guidelines. Yet, in *AVA*, the reader finds a fractured world that is difficult to access:

The world falls apart as you read. One hopes, by the end that the impact of the fractures are not only understood, but felt. Because having been engaged, involved in the fluency of images, when they begin to dissolve, one feels dissolved as well. Only senseless shards remain, disrupted syntax, words detached from their meanings. A bleak code calling up the lost, the fluent, the integrated world, once whole. Language enacts the speed and degree and manner of breakdown. We are forced to Witness an entire history: a world is born, evolves, warps and finally breaks. Breakdown is dramatized, imaginative and linguistic ways of escape are cut off. ("Notes" 30)

The repetitive function of victims throughout Ava's story enables the reader to understand why Ava Klein is capable of decoding the messages of witness—"Such clarity finally. Why not earlier? Why at such cost?" (226). Like the many ghosts which surround her on her last day, Ava tries to untangle her own confused past by attempting to understand the workings of the world left behind for her in the texts of others. We can identify Ava with all survivors; both are distracted by the remains and traces left by victims—the "Nostalgia. What is remembered. What never existed except as remembrance" (132). Ava becomes a survivor at the exact moment when she is the most vulnerable: a victim of death. Her survival rests in the meaning of her life, set before the reader as this text, and her victimization becomes the physical illness that has invaded her body, making what she once knew intimately (her body) more and more foreign to her. And we can identify Ava's longings with those of the writers about whom she speaks; all linger in the spaces between words, want what they cannot have, and attempt to mold the future because of someone else's past:

That's always the writer's struggle, finding a genuine language in which to speak, given all the silence, given everything . . . . [In] Ava, the silence is really a presence, a character. It exists as much as anything else exists in that book. And I

was really struck by the silence of death, the silence of living after World War II, the speechlessness. I read a great deal of the Holocaust writers. I read Celan; a lot of his struggle is how is it possible to speak, is there anything to say. He speaks in code. He really struggles with the silence. It's such a moving struggle. Another person I read, an Egyptian Jewish writer who also works in fragments and is very interested in silence, is Edmund Jabès. It seemed very important that Ava Klein be Jewish. The question of can one speak, is it possible to speak. (Cooley 34)

Analogies are so clearly drawn between the layers of *AVA* and other works of literature, in part because Maso herself connects her own writing with the writings of others, that one cannot help but combine and bleed these layers in order to piece together the intricate patterns of the characters' minds and the complexities of the modernization of the world for all literary figures. In *AVA* the past is a rehearsal of the present and the present often appears to be a reenactment of the past. Ava spends her life, as it appears on her last day, living for the moment wherein she can remember and pay tribute to the writers for whom she mirrors. Even in her last act, dying, Ava wants "to save Virginia Woolf from drowning. Hart Crane. Primo Levi from falling. Paul Celan, Bruno Schultz, Robert Desnos" (20), just as readers wish they could save Ava. The similarities between the difficulties and failures faced by the authors Maso speaks for, and about, are rooted in the bankruptcy and decay of the generations before them. Like Ava, beyond personal loss and grief, the artists she brings back to life on her deathbed felt the failure, the disease, and the decomposition of whole cultures.

Symbolic of the inherited tragedy of failure, that Ava is left to carry on and come to terms with, are the words of others that fill a majority of Ava's thoughts on her last day. Because Ava is dying, she becomes privileged to perceptions she had at some point misunderstood. In her hospital bed, reinterpretation becomes possible.

Tell me again, everything you want.

I'm feeling the form—finally.

A more spacious form. After all this time.

Breathe (212).

The tenses of time captured by memory in *AVA* draw all time into an uncertain progression. There are instances in the narrative where the reader questions whether Ava possesses her memories or whether she is her memory. The hallucinatory reactivation of memory-traces sometimes totally obliterates the present moment so much so that the present does not become real until she can look back on it and qualify its pastness. Because it seems that Ava Klein consistently loses time, is in and out of time, the narrative seems to be frequently interrupted with dreams and dreamlike imagery—with the rebuilding of memory.

Nothing justifies the paradoxical loss and desire of *AVA* more in the text than during Ava's anamnesis, a result of which insists that the words of the dead become the center of *AVA*. The reflection of these characters trying to escape the inadequacy and dangers of language through death is an incomplete movement because someone living will not or cannot let their words go. Ava will not let their words be forgotten and yet she too is dying. Ava's emotional attachment to the phrases of others is representative of her inability to release the dead—their memories, their touch, or in their words. Clearly, as we come to realize Ava is dying, we begin to understand that she ends her life remembering time in the only way any past can make sense, through memory. *AVA* begins at a place in time beyond the reader's capable understanding of time—a place filled with inaccurate accounts of moments without chronology because, on the last day of one's life, the nature of order changes. Ava Klein knows there is no tomorrow because "it is suddenly all too clear, that we are losing" (153). She has been witness to the empty shells of men who want "simply to tell it (though not without some consideration for the people he mentions by name): his life" (146); to the monstrous tyrants of our century like "Josef Schwammberger carrying sacks of gold from the mouths of victims, and jewelry" (112) and "Adolf Hitler [who] pedals a tricycle" (96); and to the living corpse of "Ezra Pound [who] walks along a canal in his dreamy, last madness" (96). Ava has seen "Samuel Beckett alone in the dark. When no provisions come. Waiting. But no provisions come" (141-42); also "Primo Levi poised at the top of the stairs" (160) and the composer who has "come to die with you, Erik Satie in the air-raid shelter, dressed in funeral garb, announces" (160). She knows that these ghosts have either pasts or presents. Such echoes are the voices that Ava must listen to on her last day. Still, she refuses to become like those whose peace of mind is denied them as long as they have not clearly recovered their memories and their consciousness of identity: like Celan "And the poems the drowned man wrote—and the songs" (190) or Ava's own dear father who "cannot bear endings of any kind. Leaving one spoonful of oatmeal in his bowl. One basil plant in the ground in winter" (186). Ava Klein knows that memory is not limited to just her particular experience but is the experience of all who have come before and all those to follow. This is how we can best understand the interweaving of voices throughout the narrative. Only when her past is eventually relived, as it is on the last day of her life, as she remembers, does death become possible again. Through memory she can begin "losing the vague dread" (236); however, the possibility of death brings the cycle back around; in the rare fleeting instances when Ava's memories coincide with the memories of those who are dead, Ava believes she has a future.

Moreover, Ava Klein believes that if she is able to translate the meaning of all the lost lives, then she will be able to find her own history and subsequently find herself within the language of literature, which she has always worshipped and loved. More clearly, the language that Ava would like to claim as her own is the language of her dead mentors and yet she knows their language failed them as it is failing her. She is painfully aware that the words in which she finds comfort are not her lovers' words—but are the absent words and the silence. In part, too, the silence which pervades the text, can be read as a postscript to the twentieth century's disavowing of language which examines what is "The imperceptible of the text, the unconscious dimension that escapes the writer, the reader" (161). In Maso's attempt to right/write the past, she has produced a text that

allows the possibility for the most abstract of reflections: the limits of language. The failure of language to register experience becomes most evident when Ava tries to confront horror. Ava Klein's sentences, in these instances, are more fractured—break off too soon—her words represent a pause, are sometimes reluctant. Ava's "groping for language, her at times hesitant, tentative use of the word, and her breaking of syntactical structures represent an attempt to regenerate" the sometimes fatal and often propaganda-like nature of words in the twentieth century. In *AVA* we acutely feel the desperate failing of language as it has been.

Ava Klein's struggle to articulate the terror and the beauty of the twentieth century is strongly apparent in the voices of the dead, which speak during nearly every moment of Ava Klein's last day. Death, throughout the text, is closely related to both solitude and language, subjects toward which Ava is driven in her very nature. Readers easily piece together that Ava is the representative figure of aloneness, a professor and lover of literature, a thirty-nine-year-old woman married three times, divorced twice, once widowed, with "Uncountable lovers. All forgotten. All cherished," without children, the daughter of Holocaust survivors and a Wandering Jew

who knows she must

Learn to love the questions themselves.

The spaces between words. Between thoughts. The interval. (171)

In part, for this reason, some critics—including National Public Radio's Allen Cheuse, who said in a review of *AVA* that "more than meeting her maker, it seems like Ava Klein is getting ready for the GRE" (qtd. in Cooley 33)—have condemned *AVA* for its self-indulgent form and its self-involved content. Yet, the text rises above these traps, as most readers come to see. On her last day, Ava makes an extreme sacrifice. She gives voice to hundreds who can no longer speak instead of allowing herself to say everything that must be said. We hear from biblical "Moses the stutterer, [for whom] no words are available with which to articulate the essential, the election of suffering that is history" (61); and from the contemporary artist Keith Haring, whose "radiant baby [is] crawling though the dark city" (40). Ava listens to Paul Celan, the drowned poet, whispering "We drink and we drink you" (38) again and again, and to her own beloved friends and family who have passed away: Aunt Sophie, Uncle Solly, Grandpa and Grandma, Uncle Isaac, Anatole, Ana Julia, and Aldo (her friend who died of AIDS). Ava ensures that no death is portrayed as more painful or ugly than any other, including her own. Every dead voice is given equal space to speak because the text allows us to build connections between the relative characteristics of death in the twentieth century. For instance, there is a direct correlation between possible genocidal features of AIDS and the definite distinguishing marks of the landscape of death and the anonymous mass graves of our century. The book is built and relies on waves of association like this.

The waves of *AVA* become even more powerful for readers because *AVA* is offered as a product of imagination: "Offhand, overheard, remembered things. Imaginary things"

(125). Maso has always "loved poetry most, but at the same time felt the need for a larger canvas: a series of panels, a series of screens. [Her] form is always an odd amalgam—taken from painting, sculpture, theory, film, music, poetry, dance, mathematics—even fiction sometimes" ("Essay" 27). As a result, in the presence of Ava Klein, readers experience a shift in the nature of freedom which is constructed into the subjectivity of the narrator, whose words are laced with hope and fear for the life that is leaving her. The text opens in the first person plural of Ava's past: "Each holiday celebrated with real extravagance. Birthdays. Independence days. Saints' days. Even when we were poor. With verve" (3); and then shifts to a second person imperative of the narrator's imagination: "Come sit in the morning garden for awhile" (3), addressing "you" with certain urgency. The men, all absent in the future tense except Danilo, are addressed as "you," hence the insistent use of the second person imperative links readers to the absent men. But we must not solely accept this identification; we need to identify with the "you" as well as the narrator.

Added to the already complex reading of *AVA* is the shifting function of the pronouns throughout. Paralleling the transformation of the "I" into "she" which makes first-, second-, and third-person (singular and plural) narration possible in *AVA*, we are able to envision Ava Klein as a three-dimensional character:

I remember how my parents would weep uncontrollably and without warning, on a summer day, or in the car on the way to school, or during a simple game of Hide and Seek. But not that day. I called them at the summerhouse. (53)

You are a wild one, Ava Klein. (4)

She finds herself on a foreign coast on her thirty-third birthday. (118)

We were working on an erotic song cycle. It was called *Long Life*. (119)

In the above quotations, for example, the other is both another subject, although the object of representation, and a distinct representation of the self, as well. The narrator constructs the other as fictional subject by displacing her own story onto the stories of the other figures in the text and by concurrently displacing the stories of others onto Ava's own. By transforming the "I" into "she" and "you" and "they" and "he" and "we," the narrating subject is able to look at herself as the object of discourse. The second-person pronoun represents the absent object, which is most important but more subtle in the narrator's "I," thus allowing the subject/Ava to absent herself—to remain seemingly nameless as narrator, although we know she/I/you is always and never Ava Klein. By writing about other people who absorb Ava's tragic but beautiful life rather than Maso demanding Ava's "I" center the novel, the narrator introduces a "you," who appears not only as an audience but also as the self disguised as "she."

For all readers of *AVA*, submersion into the narrative's "you" empowers us to become the subject of the text, although the subjectified identity may feel somewhat pornographic at times. Acceptance of the "you" enables readers to experience their own absence and/or to

assume sympathy with the narrator that may be contrary to our interest, yet the narrator implies that if we are to assume this "you" that we may forget many things—most of all we may forget that we are separate from this work. Ava Klein is not in search of love, she's in search of desire—a desire stronger than herself, and she is in search of freedom—or the desire implicit in freedom. She allows us to examine and re-vision our ideals about sexuality and sensuality while simultaneously begging identification between the character of the dead and the elemental attributes of living. *AVA* contemplates humanity on every level through the concurrent marginality and centrality of Ava Klein's existence. On the most simplistic plane, we can locate what is real to and for Ava. The purity of images within the text, whether it be that "We ran through genêt and wild sage" (3) or the presence of "A mournful book" (95), give us something concrete to grasp, to hold. Yet this innocence, placed in such an intricately patterned and convoluted world, allows readers an opportunity to examine the notions of normalcy that define the space within which we live and begs the question of how we define our ever-shifting self.

If *AVA* has an agenda, it is one of simultaneous reverence for the past and desire for a changed future. The fragments that comprise the novel involve evaluations of social, political, and philosophical values, particularly those most enshrined in traditional literature, such as the glorification of conquest and the faith that the world is—must be—hierarchically ordered with earth and body on the bottom and mind and spirit on the top. This is important not only because new meanings must generate new forms—when we have a new form in art we can assume we have a new meaning—but because the verbal strategies Maso uses draw attention to the discrepancies between traditional concepts and the conscious mental and emotional activity of re-vision. In the "Joie de Vivre Room" where Ava Klein has lived much of her life and that she now must leave, it would be possible to only see the loss that has/is taking place, but through the lush images of the text we know that Maso believes the future involves continual transformation without complete reparation. Insofar as the subject of *AVA* is representative of Ava's "I," the divided voices evoke divided selves: the rational and the passionate, the active and the suffering, the conscious life and the dream life. In many ways too, Ava seems to challenge the validity of the "I," of any "I." She wants readers to examine the role of the individual in the horror of our century, but she does not want us to assume, by any means, that this story (or any story) is solely about any one of us. We are not the victims in *AVA*, nor is Ava Klein. Instead, we are the ones who must listen.

## Notes

1 I am grateful here to Mary Ruefle and her lecture, "Our First and Last Conversation" (June 29, 2000. Vermont College. Montpelier, Vermont), which encapsulated my unspoken thoughts about *AVA*, even though she never once discussed Maso's work, and asked me to consider issues of poetry relevant to the way the text is structured. As well, the quotation that follows is also Ruefle's.

2 Here Ruefle paraphrases and refers to something Ernest Fennelosa said to Ezra Pound: "some languages are so constructed, English among them, that we each only speak one sentence in our lifetime."

3 The death camp where Ava's entire family (except her father and mother) perished.

4 Here I believe Maso is paraphrasing from Hélène Cixous, *Le Livre de Promethea*: "This whole book is composed of first pages. For the author that is serious. Sometimes, also, it is troublesome and painful. It gives me a headache: I would like Promethea to pick a page to be first, the way one picks up a shell on the beach" (15).

5 The references to Borges in *AVA* are powerful yet subtle:

Borges in a hot-air balloon.

Jorge Luis Borges, with his sand clock, watch, map, telescope, scale.

Borges dreams columns of numbers in chalk.

The writing starts in the left-hand margin in the strict alphabetical order of encyclopedic dictionaries. After each word is affixed to the precise number of times you will see, hear, remember or live it during the course of your life.

The dreaming blind poet in Reykjavík touching columns of chalk.

The cylinder, the cube, the sphere, the pyramid.

You will use up the number of times assigned to you to articulate this or that hexameter and you will go on living. You will use up the number of times your heart has been assigned a heartbeat and then you will have died.

The child Borges and his father comparing encyclopedic tigers with real ones.

As I write these lines, perhaps even as you read them, Robert Graves, beyond time and free of its dates and numbers is dying in Mallorca.

The dreaming blind poet speaks:

Taken from pages 138-42. The longer passages are quoted from Borges's own *Atlas*. I believe that an understanding of what Borges intended "Text" to mean and to be is essential to the knowledge necessary to read *AVA*, both as a traditional novel and as a poetic work.

6 In one of my many readings of *AVA*, I explored the novel in the reverse order—from what we would call the end to what we would call the novel's start. The whole, for me, was not really changed. There is meaning here. Maso creates a work in which the parts



are more necessary than the whole. Each fragment is whole, complete in itself, and yet utterly dependent, not necessarily on the words which surround but on the reader's ability to call up the memory of the existence of other words.

7 Federico García Lorca was dragged from a friend's house and executed by a Fascist squad on August 19, 1936. He was thirty-eight years old. His murder foreshadowed, to the whole of the Western literary/artistic community, the mindless destruction of humanity that would follow in the years during World War II.

8 Though *AVA* is a book full of regrets as Maso has stated (see her introduction in *Conjunctions*), they are not regrets of things done but things not done.

9 I have taken the liberty of excerpting the passages that only refer to Jean-Luc, a drunk stranger who interrupted a dinner party and with whom both Ava and Aldo fell in love briefly.

10 Refers to Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*.

11 Some of Ava's loves included Francesco who was from Rome, Anatole from France, Carlos from Granada, Jean-Luc from France, Franz from Germany, and Danilo from the Czech Republic.

12 One of *AVA*'s best examples of the tentative act of translation follows: "It is difficult to convey in English the exact meaning of the word *Wandern*. Perhaps 'to roam' comes nearest to a definition of that half-joyous, half-melancholy notion. *Wandern* serves both as a symbol of freedom, of not being weighted down by responsibilities, and as a symbol of not belonging, of homelessness" (98).

13 Here Maso quotes Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa."

14 Quoted from "An Exchange with H el ene Cixous" in Conley's *H el ene Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (146). Maso writes in *Conjunctions*, "When I read this line by H el ene Cixous, I knew she was articulating what I was wordlessly searching for when I began to combine my fragments. . . . And yes, isn't it possible that language instead of limiting possibility might actually enlarge it? That through its suggestiveness the gorgeousness of its surface, its resonant, unexplored depths, it might actually open up the world a little, and possibly something within ourselves as well?" (174-75).

15 From Maso's "Traveling Light" in *The Bay of Angels* (130). *The Bay of Angels* is forthcoming from Maso, part of the trilogy that *AVA* began and in which Ava Klein is a character. Maso has said *AVA* is the only text she has continued to write and rewrite, even after its publication.

16 Erik Satie was born 1866 and died in Paris in 1925. It has been said that in his one-room apartment Satie owned two pianos, one placed on top of the other and their pedals interconnected. In the same small flat he had a collection of umbrellas. Satie once bought

twelve gray velvet suits. He would wear one suit until it wore out at which point he would put on another. When he died six suits and one hundred umbrellas were found in his apartment. Most relevant to *AVA* is Satie's "Vexations," a 180 note long piano composition which was directed to be repeated 840 times. In 1963, in New York, it took a relay team of ten pianists over eighteen hours to perform this work which was recorded for the only time. It is the longest musical composition ever written and yet is only 180 notes.

17 Fox, *Border Crossings* (57). Fox here is discussing the East German author, Christa Wolf and her epic novel *Patterns of Childhood*. Wolf's collected works are responsible for my own interest in the work of witness. The rest of Fox's analogy establishes Wolf's linguistic mirroring of Adolf Eichmann "who spoke in slogans until the very end, even about his own death: a master and a victim of the lethal use of language which brings yearned-for absolute political equality to some and annihilation to others—annihilation at the hands of persons who are permitted to commit murder without remorse by a language stripped of a conscience" (Wolf 237). *Patterns of Childhood* is one of the first books written by a German about this coming to terms with the Nazi past of Germany and is one of the most crucial novels of Witness written. The connection here between Maso and Wolf is clear: Maso is a witness of the witness, telling the story for Wolf and what she could not have said. Wolf offers a first hand testimony of a child who was very clearly a child during Hitler's reign but who in 1971, as an adult, must confront the effects of the Nazi regime on the development of self and the shaping of memory—who must find a way to understand her guilt and her fears. *Patterns of Childhood* attempts to piece together the terrifying history of the German people while helping to explain whether everything in history repeats itself (Wolf 64).

Wolf and Maso share another commonality: the fear of becoming victims. Wolf writes: "The final solution. You've forgotten when you first heard those words. When you gave them their proper meaning; it must have been years after the war. But way after that—to this day—every tall, thickly smoking smokestack forces you to think 'Auschwitz.' The name cast a shadow which grew and grew. To this day, you can't bring yourself to stand in this shadow, because your otherwise lively imagination balks at the suggestion that you might take on the role of the victims" (Wolf 233) and Maso writes: "I was never much interested in American fascists or Italian fascists, the Austrians, the Nazis or the neo-Nazis, or the skinheads, like so many of my Jewish friends. I was not particularly interested in the Aryan sons of the people who killed people whose names I know. I never wanted to embrace that evil or some idea of it. I have never felt bad about surviving. I have never been to Auschwitz, never been to Treblinka. No all along" (57-8). And yet both Ava and Wolf's narrator find themselves back at the camps, again and again.

18 The quote is from page 70. Ava's childlessness is referred to on page 81 of *AVA*: "We lost the baby, Anatole" <Ava's one pregnancy ended in miscarriage. Ava calls herself a "Wandering Jew" also on page 81. Ava's Jewish heritage is necessary as Maso points out (see Cooley Interview). This detail about Ava seems to hint at something Muriel Rukeyser wrote in her long poem entitled "Letter to the Front": "To be a Jew in the

twentieth century/Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,/Wishing to be invisible, you choose/Death of the spirit, the stone insanity./ Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:/Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood/Of those you resist, fail, and resist; and God/Reduced to a hostage among hostages./The Gift is torment. Not alone the still/Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh./That may come also. But the accepting wish,/The whole and fertile spirit is guarantee/For every human freedom, suffering to be free,/Daring to live for the impossible" (65).

19 In "Sources," Maso cites George Steiner's *Real Presences*.

20 "When I awake I know it's Danilo Kis I've slept with" (115). Even Ava, herself, has some confusion over who her last lover is: the text is filled with numerous references to the relationship between Danilo, her lover, and Danilo Kis, the Eastern-European Author.

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