

Textual Bodies: Carole Maso's *AVA* and the Poetics of OVER-REACHING

Nicole Cooley

In a recent essay about her writing practices, Carole Maso quotes Gertrude Stein: "It can easily be remembered that a novel is everything." Yet Maso takes Stein's assertion one step farther when she next addresses the reader, saying, "Accuse me again, if you like, of over-reaching" ("Notes of a Lyric Artist" 24). What is "over-reaching"? Who might "accuse" her? And, finally, what is out of reach and why? Both statements reveal central elements of Maso's narrative poetics. If, for Maso, a novel is "everything" and writing is "over-reaching," her narratives are premised on a transgression of boundaries and an inclusion of the marginal. More than any of Maso's other works, *AVA* (1993), her fourth novel, is a text about over-reaching, a novel that is everything.

In fact, inclusion is a premise of this novel's form: the book is structured by the thoughts that run through the central figure's mind, by a matrix of her references and quotations. The citations are wide-ranging: Maso includes texts by Samuel Beckett, Hélène Cixous, and Anaïs Nin as well as film transcripts and artists' statements. A multiplicity of voices forms the network of this text narrated by Ava Klein, former professor of comparative literature. In her list of "Sources" concluding *AVA*, Maso notes that these sources "include among the many private voices and versions of herself, those voices that arise from her 'passionate and promiscuous reading' of the texts of the world" (269). First and foremost, *AVA* is a text about writing and reading, and, thus, more strongly than any of her other narratives, *AVA* proposes Maso's poetics of the novel. In *Ghost Dance* (1986), Maso's first novel, the narrative centers on the narrator's mother, who is a poet. In *The Art Lover* (1990) and *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* (1993), the woman writer functions as each book's narrator. In *AVA* Maso positions the woman reader as her central character.

However, Ava Klein is not simply reading and referencing texts because she is a literature professor; she is reading to save her own life. Ava is dying of a rare blood disease, and the novel relates the events on the last day of her life. Ava's body and its breakdown structure the narrative, which Ava herself calls "a farewell to the body" (208). In her essay "Precious, Disappearing Things: On *AVA*," Maso asserts, "I cannot keep the body out of my writing; it enters the language, transforms the page, imposes its own intelligence" (70). Maso explicitly connects the physical body and the textual body; the former becomes a figure for her writing practice.

Yet Maso's narrative is formed and reformed by the social and material world, and this is the underlying assumption of Maso's writing of the body: the twentieth-century body is always socially inscribed, marked by violence. Thus it is significant that Ava speaks of the Holocaust, in which members of her family both died and survived, that the Persian Gulf War begins during the course of the narrative, and, finally, that her body is literally being invaded by medical interventions as she undergoes cancer treatment. In this essay I read *AVA* in terms of the interplay of the body, social reality, and technology by looking

closely at the reader/writer relationship. The first section discusses the role the body and its breakdown play in this narrative and how Maso thematizes Ava's illness and eventual death through an awareness of both the limits and possibilities of language. The second section focuses on two central aspects of Maso's poetics of the novel in *AVA*: first, her relinquishing of authority and control in the text to make a space for the reader, and, second, her invocation of other forms and genres to challenge narrative codes and her wish for fiction's "democracy."

The Body in Pain

The ways in which the body transforms writing are certainly important for all of Maso's books, especially her most recent works. In the preface to *Aureole* (1996), for example, Maso writes, "Line by line I have tried to slip closer to a language that might function more bodily, more physically, more passionately" (ix). Throughout her work, Maso seeks new textual structures to contain her experiments, continually pushing the boundaries and questioning the definitions of what fiction might be. In *AVA*, however, this challenge to traditional formulations of narrative enacted through the body is most compelling and complex because the novel follows Ava's dying. Nowhere do questions about the relation between the textual body, the writer, the reader, and the world become more engaging than in this book.

To emphasize the passing of time on the last day of Ava's life, *AVA* is structured into three parts: "Morning," "Afternoon," and "Evening." "Morning" introduces Ava and her illness. The first hint that Ava is gravely ill is given early in this section and, significantly, Maso formulates the illness as an interruption in the lush language of the text that constitutes Ava's reverie:

Night jasmine. Already?

On this slowly moving couchette.

Not yet.

Tell me everything that you want.

Wake up, Ava Klein. Turn over on your side. Your right arm, please.

Tell me everything you'd like me to—your hand there, slowly. (4)

An erotic writing of the female body ("Tell me everything that you want" and "Tell me everything you'd like me to—your hand there, slowly") is, literally, interrupted by the voice of a clinician giving the patient different directions ("Wake up, Ava Klein. Turn over on your side. Your right arm, please"). These directions, given by an unnamed member of Ava's medical team, are frequently repeated throughout this first section. Many times, Ava's body is commanded; she is told to turn over, to open her mouth. With

each order, Ava seems to further relinquish her position as subject and to become the object on which medicine can inscribe its interventions, always through the use of her first and last name ("Ava Klein").

Maso creates a tension between medicine's desire to make Ava an object and Ava's own desire to retain her status as a speaking subject by continually positioning the language of pleasure and the language of pain side by side. Ava speaks of "the daily betrayals of my body that . . . are taking place. This perfect traitor that has afforded me so much pleasure, which has served me well" (54). Over and over, Ava recalls the pleasure her body has given just as pain overtakes her. While Maso exposes the tensions and contradictions between these two treatments of the body, she also suggests equivalencies between the language of pleasure and pain.

As the narrative proceeds through "Morning," Ava remembers, early on in her cancer treatments, losing her hair: "Shiny hair on the pillow next to me: it was mine and not mine. Detached from my head. Beautiful wavy hair" (61). Maso's image reflects another crucial opposition: the simultaneous sense of body ownership and estrangement experienced by the very ill. Similarly, near the start of "Afternoon," Ava remarks, "It is and is not my body" (128). How to reconcile this contradiction about possession and dispossession of the body becomes, increasingly, the focus of Maso's narrative. Toward the end of the novel, Ava approaches eventual and complete bodily estrangement. In "Evening," the novel's last section, she compares her body to "an unfamiliar coast, a foreign coast" (251). With this image, the body is a site from which to launch the self, a point of departure, and a place that is becoming deeply "unfamiliar." In her essay "Emancipating the Proclamation: Gender and Genre in *AVA*," Victoria Frenkel Harris observes, "Ava's celebrated 'interior multiplicity' . . . is traversed by a medical profession that perceives the human body as self-contained" (176). Harris also points out that Ava's voice would seem to contradict that containment. Thus, despite the fact that the doctors try to contain and limit her body, Ava nevertheless employs a metaphor of freedom and openness to understand it herself.

Significantly, Maso enacts the breakdown of her physical body through a breakdown of the narrative, thematizing bodily loss through textual strategies. Throughout the novel, language constitutes reality, yet at the same time language is also capable of destroying it:

I was on my way to Germany finally to
 When the result of the extremely rare
 Do not worry
 The considerable irony of this has not been lost
 Treblinka, a rather musical word.

Are you positive? Yes, I am extremely positive, Aldo said. In fact, I've got the first signs—forgetfulness, night sweats. (99)

In this passage, broken sentences and fragments are deployed to evoke gradual bodily disintegration. *Blood* here has multivalent meanings. Ava's friend, Aldo, dying of AIDS, suggests a double meaning of *positive*—to be positive is to be sure, confident, yet, as well, to be carrying antibodies signifying a deadly disease. Ava's own fatal blood disease is aligned with Aldo's, blood linked intimately with blood. In addition, a reference to the Nazi concentration camp Treblinka, where Ava's father, a survivor, was interred, interrupts Ava's meditation on her disease. This reference suggests a connection between collective, mass destruction and individual suffering. Ava points out the "irony" of being en route to Germany when she is diagnosed with cancer, underscoring again the way the violences of the twentieth century, from epidemics to world wars, exist not separately but rather on a continuum of bodily suffering. Repeatedly, Maso reveals connections between war's destruction and Western medicine's cures that poison the body to make it well. (Maso even names Ava's oncologist "Dr. Oppenheim," echoing Oppenheimer, inventor of the atomic bomb.) The Holocaust, AIDS, and the Gulf War therefore become specific and terrible markers of history on the body of the text and the text of the body.

As *AVA* proceeds, the body of the text and the text of the body move closer to one another as Ava draws nearer to death. The link becomes more inextricable, and, finally, the two conjoin. At the end of "Afternoon," Ava states:

I'm feeling the form—finally.

A more spacious form. After all this time.

Breathe. (212)

While Ava wants to claim agency, to make her body a site of resistance, she weakens, her health fails, and, ultimately, her body betrays her. But as her death approaches, the narrative acknowledges its own structural transformations, as body and narrative "form" increasingly enact one another. Ultimately, Maso's textual body rather than Ava's physical body will become the site of true resistance.

Against Mastery, Toward the Democracy of Literature

Midway through the novel, Ava Klein observes that "Iraq invades Kuwait. The president draws a line in the sand today" (189). This invasion, division, and the bombing of Iraq by the United States is integral both to *AVA*'s narrative, haunting the text, and to Maso's actual writing of the book. In her essay about *AVA*, Maso describes working on the novel during the Persian Gulf War in January 1991:

I do not think I am overstating it when I say that mainstream fiction has *become* death with its complacent, unequivocal truths, its reductive assignment of

meaning, its manipulations, its predictability and stasis. As I was watching the war it became increasingly clear to me that this fiction had become a kind of totalitarianism, with its tyrannical plot lines, its linear chronology, and characterizations that left no place in the text for the reader, no space in which to think one's thoughts, no place to live. All the reader's freedoms in effect are usurped. ("Precious, Disappearing Things" 67)

Maso's challenge to "mainstream fiction" refutes a vision of writing as a totalizing gesture, an act of domination. Such an "objectifying," mastering authorial stance is not only suspect but actually dangerous. In his essay "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," Craig Owens contends that "the modern age was not only the age of the master narrative, it was also the age of representation. . . . For what is representation if not a 'laying hold and grasping' (appropriation), a 'making-stand-over-against, an objectifying that goes forward and masters'?" (66). For Maso, war is deeply implicated in such an "objectifying that goes forward and masters." Defined by objectifying representation, the Persian Gulf War existed only as representation on our television screens for most of us in the United States. The war on television was many steps removed from violence's reality. Ironically, the Gulf War, itself a system of technologically generated violence, was only available to us through technology's mediation, by way of the television camera.

If the war is premised on technological control, Maso's narrative poetics seek to dismantle such ideas about mastery and domination. Significantly, Maso describes her ideas about alternative fiction primarily in terms of the *reader's* relationship to it. This relation is not based on control of the text but rather on its release, on the reader having the chance to dream and think "one's thoughts" outside of the text s/he is reading. She further explains, "In *AVA* I have tried to write lines the reader (and the writer) might meditate on, recombine, rewrite as he or she pleases" ("Precious, Disappearing Things" 67-68). The place for the reader in Maso's work is therefore a space of between-ness; the text's interstices are a site diametrically opposed to totalitarianism and war. Thus Maso does not simply reject the notion of the writer's "master narratives," a now infamous rejection within postmodern fiction, but rather she works to subvert the reader's mastery of narrative.

Crucially, in *AVA* the displacement of the force of the text onto the reader is not just a theoretical gesture. As a former comparative literature professor, Ava Klein is, literally, a professional reader of other texts. Ava's role as a reader defines *AVA's* formal structure. Rather than being composed of paragraphs, the narrative consists of words, phrases, and sentences positioned beside one another with intervals of white space standing between each syntactical unit. Meanings result from the juxtapositions and intervals between pieces of text:

What is wrong with you, Ava Klein?

The effects of chemotherapy in the childbearing years.

My uncle wore a pink triangle through the gray of

Treblinka—a rather musical word.

How have I ended up back here, again?

The only industrialized country in the world, besides South Africa, without health care. (35)

Multiple images and linguistic registers are placed not sequentially but side by side: questions, sentence fragments, phrases, and a political statement about health care exist on the same plane. Maso shows the associations between poisonous cancer treatment, a Nazi death camp, Nazi marking of gays and lesbians, and the United States' lack of universal health coverage. Juxtaposition makes all of these lines simultaneous, and the sense of everything happening at once enforces the fact that Maso's novel takes place during the course of a single day. Thus textual positioning reveals all three to be not just coterminous but also connected. In all cases, Maso implies, violence is repeatedly inscribed on the body.

If the body can be controlled and dominated by technology, Maso's imaginative recreations of the body must necessarily unravel the nexus of assumptions surrounding the mastery of the body and show the inherent danger in such mastery. While it depicts the body in pain, under social control, *AVA* also reveals a range of potential freedoms of language and narrative form. This freedom is evident in the following passage where the narrative announces its reading strategy:

It's only a moment of course.

A matter of moments. This life.

As short as one of these sentences. As brief as that. But with a certain quiet beauty. As seemingly random as it all appears—there are accumulated meanings. I believe that. (129)

"Meanings" in *AVA* accrue within a series of "moments." The comparison of "this life" with "one of these sentences" underscores a vision of "life" as a textual construction, arranged and positioned. *AVA* privileges "the interval," what Maso calls the "spaces between words. Between thoughts" (171). Between-ness defines Maso's writing practice: the text hovers between lyric and narrative as juxtaposition creates textual meaning. In addition, by presenting language as performative, constitutive rather than constituted, *AVA* offers a conception of language markedly different from the view offered by "mainstream" fiction as she critiqued it earlier, in which "sentences" function as a totalizing vehicle of communication to describe "life" and "truth."

A central feature of Maso's challenge to traditional fiction's discourses of mastery and totality is *AVA*'s reliance on structures and genres not drawn from the tradition of literary

narrative. By challenging genre, Maso emphasizes language's power to construct rather than mirror reality. In "Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose: A Lifelong Conversation with Myself Entered Midway," she speaks of the "desire of the novel to be a poem" (23), and wonders how to "reconcile poetic forms with the narrative requirements of an extended prose work?" (31). This is an important question in *AVA* because poetry is one of the forms Maso deploys to critique the established codes of traditional fiction.

With her invocation of poetic modes, Maso emphasizes the spaces and intervals between images, as is made clear in this passage which takes a quote from the poet Federico García Lorca as a point of departure:

Olives hang like earrings in August, in Italy. In France. In Greece.

Green, how much I want you green.

Gray-green, blue-green, emerald.

Green, how much I want you.

Roman hills.

Francesco, how very much I want you now. (82)

Lorca's phrase, "Green, how much I want you, green," an expression of sensual desire, is interpolated with Ava's erotic wish for Francesco. Through her use of repetition, Maso again insists on simultaneity and suggests a series of equivalencies: she conjoins Lorca's voice with her own, and she links a love for the colors and things of the physical world with sexual love. Thus she creates a continuum of the sensual and sexual longings and bodily pleasures. In addition, when she borrows repetition, play with sound and syntax, and lineation from poetic discourse, Maso blurs distinctions between fiction and poetry in ways that ask the reader to rethink the limits and boundaries of fiction.

Another crucial form Maso deploys in *AVA* is film. Maso frequently makes reference to films and filmmakers. Francesco, one of Ava's husbands, is himself a filmmaker. His film, often referenced in the novel, is titled *The War Requiem*, a name that resonates with this text's central focus on war. These references notwithstanding, however, it is nevertheless most useful to look at the ways in which cinema offers a way to understand Maso's writing practices. Visual discourses are central to this text, and cinema offers Maso a range of formal practices with which to challenge the traditional definitions of fiction she feels are so deeply inadequate. Specifically, Maso plays with ideas of montage and cutting in *AVA*. Within the montage structure of film, "meaning" is produced by the encounter of two images, by the moment of emptiness between shots. In *AVA* the interval of white space between lines and images functions like a cut between moments of a film. Maso quotes Rosemarie Waldrop on Edmund Jabes, saying "Shifting voices and constant breaks of mode let silence have its share and allow for a fuller meditative field than is possible in linear narrative or analysis" (184). "Shifting voices" and "breaks" are both

central tropes of *AVA*'s poetics. They are figures for the gaps and chasms that comprise this narration, the interstices where something appears to be missing and the reader must fill the interval of silence.

Furthermore, Maso uses film to question a series of binary oppositions drawn from traditional fiction, particularly, image/narrative and form/content:

When the woman disappears, you already know that her lover and her best friend will end up together, you see it coming from a mile away, and of course, in the end he will be no good, but because of the gorgeous, the startling shots, you forget for a moment the melodrama of the plot.

The quintessential Italian male at the center.

What's wrong with this film? (72)

The last question is absolutely central. "What's wrong" here is very much like the flaws Maso points out in "mainstream" fiction: the plot is expected, the character roles rigidly codified. But, as Ava also notes here, the viewer is still carried away by the "gorgeous, the startling shots." These images, film's vocabulary, enthrall and transport us, as the "shot" takes precedence over the "plot." It is in fact this interplay between the shot and the plot that we see constantly at work in *AVA*. Maso then extends her challenge to this opposition to discuss the larger question of the relation of form to content. Later in the narrative Ava recalls filmmaker Su Friedrich saying, "The challenge comes in trying to push film beyond its usual narrative capacities—so that the form takes as many risks as the content" (227). Friedrich's statement echoes and underscores Maso's poetics of the novel, with its focus on transgression, inclusion and "risk" through form. Thus film is deeply implicated in Maso's desire to define a new novel that supercedes conventional narrative boundaries.

Implicit in this new definition of narrative is the notion that the novel is not simply a long work of fiction. The novel of "over-reaching," for Maso, includes a number of forms and genres, such as poetry and film, and may exist most fully between genres, on the boundaries between many modes of representation. In *AVA*, ultimately, the body cannot be contained by the text unless "mainstream" definitions of narrative undergo profound transformations. Maso thus demands new textual forms for her experiment. Her use of intertextual reference further broadens the wide range of codes and genres employed in this book. *AVA* concludes with a coda titled "Sources," in which Maso documents, noting the pages on which they first appear, the various intertextual references in *AVA*. "Sources" opens with the following passage:

What floods the mind of my Ava Klein on her final day include among the many private voices and versions of herself, those voices that arise from her "passionate and promiscuous reading" of the texts of the world. I have attempted as much as possible to attribute the sources of this "irresistible music." When a source is self-evident, I have not cited additional and complicating information here. My hope is that these

notes, at some point, will enhance the reader's pleasure but in no way interrupt the trance of the text. (269)

Maso, author of *AVA*, appears to be telling the reader how to read the novel, but she is also undermining and exposing her own authority. The author "attempts" to attribute the sources and hesitates to include sources in cases in which they might override the text. Thus text is privileged over author. In contrast to conceptions of the author as a transcendent godlike figure, the writer privileges both text and reader and allows the text to speak through her. The text is a "trance," a visionary state for the reader.

Such a view of reader, writer, and text transforms the novel's reading and writing positions. Maso's "Sources" suggest a reader in accordance with Roland Barthes's definition of the reader as "simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constructed." For Barthes, writing is no longer "an operation of recording" but rather "a performative" ("The Death of the Author" 145-46). Within Maso's performative writing, Ava Klein is defined by the speakers she invokes. Her subjectivity is at every moment mediated through language. The citations of other texts function as voices who are part of Ava's voice, producing a speaking subject that is multiple rather than unitary, mobile rather than fixed.

And, finally, the other voices that define Ava have important resonances beyond a reading of Maso's use of intertextuality. In my interview with her, Maso offers the following statement about her narrative poetics and her politics:

I feel that the democracy of literature is important, the idea that we're all related, that ownership isn't something so important, that Virginia Woolf can exist next to Beckett next to me next to Sappho next to Paul Celan. All these disparate things can come together in a whole. It's part of what I was thinking about as I wrote that book [*AVA*], about totalitarianism and tyranny and peace. Making peace with one's influences was important to me. Embracing sources. Imagining a world, on the last day of this woman's life, in which almost everything can co-exist, seemed to me important. (34)

In this passage, "democracy," a term commonly used to describe the body politic, becomes a mode of talking about the textual body. Democracy arises from the positioning of language and the speech of multiple voices. Thus Maso suggests possible equivalencies among the textual body, the personal body, the collective body, and the body politic. Textual positioning therefore has political effects. This passage has broader relevance for Maso's narrative poetics and politics: according to Maso's formulation of narrative poetics, the text offers a democratic invitation to the reader. Such an invitation runs counter to traditional fiction's discourses of mastery and domination.

The text that "embraces" everything, the narrative that refuses to be reduced to a single meaning, is Maso's novel. It is *AVA*. It is a text challenging the notion of authorial mastery and opening a space of freedom for the reader. When Maso addresses the reader, saying, "Accuse me, if you like, of over-reaching," in the statement I cited at the beginning of this essay, she indicates that she senses the reader's potential "accusation"

and that she knows her work exceeds fiction's limits in ways that may unsettle us. Yet only the novel of "over-reaching" can offer the space for Maso's project in *AVA*. Only the novel of "over-reaching" can help the reader to re-imagine the text and the world.

Notes

1 I wish to thank Monica Berlin for her valuable insights about this essay. For his many careful readings of my work on Maso, I am very grateful to Alex Hinton. And, finally, Pamela Barnett's comments about Maso's project helped me to rethink my argument in crucial ways.

2 Two other implicit formal challenges are raised by this essay and by the context in which it first appeared. First, Maso invokes Stein within an "essay" which subverts our expectations about the form's discursive logic. It resembles a poem, composed of isolated phrases, sentences and short paragraphs spoken by multiple voices, drawn from multiple texts. In addition, "Carole Maso: A Supplement" (this essay, an excerpt from Maso's novel *Defiance*, and an interview I conducted with her) first appeared in *The American Poetry Review*. The publication of Maso's fiction and essays within a poetry magazine further unsettles the conventional divisions between genres.

3 I place *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* chronologically before *AVA* because although *The American Woman* was published after *AVA*, it was written before it.

4 For a sustained examination of physical pain and its relationship with language, see Elaine Scarry.

5 Elsewhere in the same essay, Maso describes childhood reading experiences which foreshadow both her current beliefs about writing and reading and her textual practices: "I would wander year after year in and out of our bedtime reading room, dissatisfied by the stories, the silly plot contrivances, the reduction of an awesome complicated world into a rather silly, sterile one. . . . I would wander out to the night garden taking one sentence or one scene out there with me to dream over, stopping I guess the incessant march of the plot forward to the inevitable climax" ("Precious Disappearing Things: On *AVA*" 69). The image of the reader "wandering" outside with one sentence to "dream over" is only possible within a revolutionary notion of fiction, narrative and the novel and even describes reading as an act of over-reaching.

6 Maso has also recently begun to explore the ways in which other media and digital technologies, particularly, the Internet, ask us to reconsider and reformulate texts and the role of the reader. See Maso's essay "Rupture, Verge, and Precipice, Precipice, Verge and Hurt Not," in her recent collection of essays, *Break Every Rule: Essays on Language, Longing, and Moments of Desire*, in which she considers electronic as opposed to print writing.

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