

## Strategies for Teaching *AVA*

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I have taught *AVA* to a number of different classes, though never with an eye toward writing about the experience. Indeed, those students who joined me for my first classroom work with the text would hardly have thought their experience worth immortalizing, I’d venture to guess! Although they knew their professor had seemingly unbounded enthusiasm for the novel, somehow that energy alone wasn’t enough to sustain us. And while a number of those students ended up choosing *AVA* as the focus of their major essays in the class—a Senior Seminar that culminated in a final writing project of roughly twenty to twenty-five pages—their engagements with the text played out in relatively solitary realms: discussions with me in my office or late night sessions hitting the keys of their computers. Our in-class discussions were disappointing, as much for me as for the group. Still, several students *had* chosen *AVA* for their major projects, which signaled to me that the classroom, and not the text, was where I need to focus my attention in every re-teaching. That I would teach the novel again was never a question: it works in so many different ways, raises so many of the issues that I want students to engage, that it was only a question of *how*, not *if*, to teach *AVA* again. I continue to revise and refine strategies, of course, but I am happy to note that in subsequent classes—one of particular note, about which I speak below—the students have read the text with intelligence and insight, and they have responded to it and to each others’ engagements with it actively. My goal is to leave them wanting more—never to finish a text or a class feeling as if they have exhausted the material, though often we have all exhausted ourselves! It is with that end in sight that I proceed.

I offer these thoughts and strategies, then, as a realistic perspective—and, I hope, as helpful hints—on what has and hasn’t worked for me in teaching *AVA* over the past several years to a variety of different classes.

### The Endnotes: To Tell or Not to Tell

The first few times I assigned *AVA* to a class, I wondered whether or not to let the students know in advance about the endnotes. Why would I consider such an intervention into their initial experience of a text? In Senior Seminar we read *AVA* immediately after Michael Joyce’s hypertext *Afternoon, A Story*, and it might have made sense to alert the students in advance to the textual apparatus accompanying Maso’s novel so that they could consider it as they read. Would they read into and out of the list of sources in the way in which the hypertext had them choose to move into and out of different nodes of text within predetermined, highly regulated fields? Did the material presence of the notes at the back of the book determine by their very presence that a choice of how to read had to be made? Or would that only be the case if I intervened and alerted them to the existence of the list in the back? In the Avant-Garde Fiction class we studied *AVA* after several of Borges’s short stories, including “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in

which footnotes figure prominently as a part of the fiction, and we read it immediately before Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a novel whose footnotes likewise form an integral part of the textual apparatus, working on many different levels. It might have made sense to contextualize *AVA* for the students in this way: "As you read, consider the effect of the notes attached to this text. Do they function in any of the ways in which the notes to 'Pierre Menard' do? Or do they occupy a discursive space quite explicitly other than that of the novel to which they are attached? What makes you think so, one way or the other?" While it's been tempting to offer the students a kind of privileged access to the information contained in the back of the novel by alerting them to the notes in advance, I've opted in every case to let the students discover them on their own. That may be partly because in both classes, we'd already read Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*, and we were all enjoying our metatextual self-conscious recognitions of our own styles and processes of reading as per those foregrounded in Calvino's text. Were we the readers, for example, who read *around* a given text, skimming the blurbs on the inside cover, browsing and discovering the endnotes before entering the fictive world of the text? Or were we the types of readers who start on the first page and proceed dutifully through to the last page, only then to discern this other element of the material book in our hands? My decision not to direct the students to the notes ahead of time meant that once we actually got to discussing the novel, the status of the endnotes was a much richer element of our discussions than had I preempted that experience of discovery for them. It also felt in keeping with the spirit of the text. Maso's comment before supplying the first source reads in part as follows: "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). I did not want to overdetermine the students' experience of the notes, nor did I want to give the notes a kind of prominence they wouldn't otherwise have had. I also wanted to let that randomness—Maso's "at some point"—define to whatever extent possible their experience of the list of sources. One of the first issues we often take up now when we discuss the notes is my making such a decision, one way or the other, and the issues I've indicated above invariably emerge in that discussion.

## Quotes

Among my favorite teaching strategies for all of the texts I teach, whatever genre, whatever class, is to invite the students to put quotations from the text we're reading on the board. Students usually show up a few minutes early to give themselves time to get their quotes up, though it's not unusual for this activity to run over into our starting time. The only "rules" are that the quotes must come from the texts themselves, with page numbers cited for the benefit of all, and that the students should try to keep their quotes on the left-hand side of the board, so I can use the right-hand side for mine (also taken from the text). No one ever has to indicate why s/he has chosen a particular passage to put on the board, though we try to avoid duplicates. (It is always noteworthy, though, when we realize that some of us have chosen the same single word or line from an entire multihundred-paged novel!) I tell the students that the selection can be for any reason at all: they might note a particular passage because it summarizes a character or situation perfectly, because it makes no sense to them at all, because it's funny (in or out of

context!), because it's outrageous . . . for any reason at all. We leave at least a little space in the middle of the board for ideas I might want to jot down that emerge in our discussion once class is actually in progress. Sometimes we end up referring to the quotes during class, but often we don't: they just define our space on any given day for any given seventy-five-minute period. But they actually do a lot more than that. The students and I find ourselves reading the text differently before we ever get to class, anticipating what we might want to put on the board, alert to the language with a heightened attention to the ways in which it functions. They often recall their quotes—and each others'—in exams, too, which reinforces their own sense of knowing a text well.

Perhaps the greatest benefits of the students' writing the quotes on the board, though, are the intangibles that quickly inform the classroom dynamic. It makes for an intensely text-centered course, with students drawn instinctively back to the text to articulate positions during our discussions. Before the professor ever enters the classroom, the students are actively engaged in the text, focusing their thoughts and those of others on issues *they've* determined—for whatever reason—merit our attention. In effect, the conversation has already started before the class has, and students who might otherwise be reluctant to speak can at least make their presence palpable through their response to the text in highlighting a particular passage. The professor, then, comes into a class that's already energized and focused in some way by the students, and there are already issues in some form "out there" for us all to engage, in whatever way or to whatever extent we choose. Sometimes I begin class discussions by remarking on a particular quote or combination of quotes; sometimes I don't. What matters is that we all have a chance, in a deliberately informal way, to let the *text* speak to us and for us in every class.

It's typical for there to be three or four quotes on the board as any given class begins, and it's not unusual for the students or for me to note in the middle of class that we've left off a particularly apt quote and to add it as we go along. What I was completely unprepared for, though, was what happened in the first session, the second time I taught AVA. I came in to the classroom in which the Senior Seminar met—a room that features blackboards on three of the four walls—and *every single student* was at the board, filling our "walls" with quotes! They were physically surrounding themselves with the text and were indulging the excess deliberately and joyfully. Nor did they stop just because the professor had entered the room. On the contrary, my reaction—laughter, surprise, walking around reading the various passages they'd selected to immortalize—only seemed to encourage them further. It was one of those moments professors live for—at least, I do—and it was clear from their reactions that it felt equally exhilarating for the students. Their refusal to stay within the set boundaries—left side of the front board, please!—and their covering of the boards with textual "graffiti" meant not only that my quotes would be lost among theirs, but it also meant that *all* of us spent about the first fifteen or twenty minutes physically walking around the room to see what others had chosen. Clearly what they wanted was to celebrate the text: its words and its silences. And they had found a way to do so. They wanted the physical space in which we met to be defined as literally as possible by the material text that was our common ground. It came as no real surprise later in that same session, then, when a student who was a double major, studying English and Theater, declared that he'd love to choreograph the

novel, to stage it in terms of movement, of dance. We had all just demonstrated to him our own very physical response to the work: the desire to be surrounded by it, immersed in it; the desire to inform—give form to—our study of the novel by insisting that its recursive structuring and rhythmic movements define our collective space.

Subsequent meetings of that class and all of my other experiences with students' writing selections from *AVA* on the board have been more typical, with a range of quotes from every part of the text. So, on any particular day, a combination like the following might appear on the left side of the board:

"It was called:" (93)

"The child practices the letter A. Make a mountain peak. And then cross it. A." (62)

"I'm beginning to detect the heat of the plot." (161)

"Flying into Bloomington, Illinois." (115)

"Learn then to love the questions." (171)

"Careful of the intercom." (249)

I might select my own quotes to focus on issues I want to be sure to cover that day or for other specific reasons determined by our progress to date, but my choices may be "just" passages of compelling beauty or lyricism, too. The purposes are endless, but the quotes are a must.

One added advantage to using quotations on the board as a teaching strategy with *AVA* is that it builds in the students an experience of literature akin to that of Ava Klein, professor of comparative literature, whose life is informed by her own remembered quotes. It opens up a different way for the students to appreciate what's going on in the text with constructs of self (the discursive worlds made present by the different voices and texts invoked) and the multivocal or univocal self constructed in the process of articulating this particular life. Those can be good issues to consider as a group: How *do* those other textual worlds impact this text? Or, a very different question and set of issues, though related: What happens when the reader takes the words of García Lorca, of Borges, of Beckett, of Cixous and others *as* the voice of Ava Klein? How do the slippages back and forth destabilize and/or enrich the perceived fictive world?

### **Class Discussion/Group Work**

When we begin any novel in my classes, I expect the students to have the entire text read so that we can range over any of it as needed in any class session. I prefer to let students lead the way as much as possible in class discussions, so I usually open with one of two strategies, when I'm not using the quotes as points of departure. For a modified version of

student-led participation, I ask some general questions to which they jot a response in about five minutes and then use their responses to set the terms of the discussion; I list their ideas on the board or ask them to pass their papers to the person to their right for a five-minute response in writing from that person. My original questions might be something like, "What seemed to you to be the most [fill in the blank: compelling; difficult; evocative; beautiful; intellectually engaging; controversial] passage of the text? Why?" The second respondent's task is fairly open: s/he might write questions about the classmate's choice of a passage, or s/he might argue for the merits of his/her own choice vis-à-vis the classmate's. If I've set it up in terms of a respondent, though, I call on students and ask them to restate the case of the person whose paper they have in hand—not their own—and only when they've done so to the satisfaction of the original writer can they tell the rest of us what their own thoughts are. We then consider others' choices and try to get a sense of the issues we all consider important in the text, as these selections indicate.

A different kind of prompt to get discussion focused is to ask a question or two (to which they respond in writing for five minutes) about questions they have about the text. In the case of *AVA*, I permit questions of fact (Does one of Ava's husbands really die in a plane crash? Is she ever really pregnant? What's the rabbit path referring to?). While with other novels such questions may indicate careless reading, with *AVA* certain indeterminacies are built into this text quite deliberately, and the fact that the reader is endlessly revising his/her apprehension of what would seemingly be the most straightforward facts of a life bears consideration. We take on as many questions as possible together, and I collect all, often using those we haven't covered to structure subsequent class discussions. I am careful not to position myself as the "answer person," so students volunteer or are called on to pose their questions to the group. While I may inquire about why an issue has emerged as a concern for several students—a way of highlighting emerging topics—usually the students can help quite a bit to address questions their classmates pose.

In this kind of a first session on a novel, then, regardless of the focus of the initial brief written response, there's a certain sloppiness in terms of coverage, but that seems to me a reasonable trade-off (if it is one at all) for greater student involvement in the class. I usually find that the students are good at determining issues, and I prefer to keep them as engaged as possible, rather than entering with my own list and dictating immediately what matters and how we'll cover it.

Alternatively, I have two students come to class prepared to lead the discussion. In that case, the students commit to a text in the first class of the semester, and usually they have no idea what they've agreed to discuss, having read none ahead of time. In teaching *AVA*, I've relied primarily on the student-led discussion for the initial session (of four, usually), insisting that they inform the discussion with some sense of the critical heritage. That is, they need at least to be familiar with whatever's been written about their chosen text, and that needs to be evident. They might propose critics' interpretations and ask the class how viable they seem; they might come to class with questions of their own and integrate the critics' ideas into their responses to each other. In any case, they're developing research

skills and learning how to consider critical articles and book reviews without merely taking them at their word.

Often, students in this situation consult with me before leading the class discussion. They may want to get a sense of what kind of "coverage" I'm looking for. I insist that this is their prerogative; what they don't cover, I will. They can give the presentation, which usually takes the form of discussion questions or small group work, whatever emphasis they choose. The only caveats are that they are not allowed to turn this into a study of the author, and they are not allowed *merely* to use the text as a pretext for musings on their own lives. The former isn't usually a problem; the latter can be. One young woman came to my office and said she was having considerable difficulty figuring out how to lead discussion on the novel because it reminded her so much of her mother's death. It was helpful that she herself realized the inappropriateness of grounding class discussion in so highly emotional and individual an experience. I suggested she design questions to be both broad and narrow (categories that in themselves moved us away from personal memories), and I gave her some samples from a presentation some classmates had made on a different novel. She and her co-presenter decided to break the class into small groups to take up the issues they chose. They posed something like the following:

### **Group 1**

What difference does it make that Ava Klein is dying? How does the novel use her movement towards death? How does the novel use presence—life—and absence—death?

### **Group 2**

Identify as many different kinds of communication as you can in the novel (TV, letters, fax, intercom, conversations, silences, gestures, etc). What does the novel do with them? How do they affect what's communicated to the reader?

### **Group 3**

In an essay we found, Carole Maso says *AVA* is a war novel. Do you agree with her? Why or why not? (They gave the fuller quote to the group upon request):

War as a subject permeates the text of *AVA*, but more importantly war dictates the novel's shape. A very deep longing for peace, one I must admit I had scarcely been aware of, overwhelmed me as I watched the efficient, precise elimination of people, places, things by my government. My loathing for the men who were making this, and my distrust of male language and forms led me to search for more feminine shapes, less "logical" perhaps, since a terrible logic had brought us here, less simplistic, a form that might be capable of imagining peace, accommodating freedom, acting out reunion. ("One Moment" 3-4)

### **Group 4**

What's the "erotic song cycle" there for? What did you make of it? Of music in general throughout the novel?

As is usually the case in the classes I teach, the discussion leaders let the students decide which group they wanted to join, determined by the issues each group considered. The class in general cajoled and coerced if a particular topic had a disproportionate number in its group, whether too many or too few (as the students or as I perceived it). They had each group determine its own spokesperson, and when each reported back to the collective, after about fifteen minutes worth of chatting among themselves, the two discussion leaders, with minimal help from me, pursued by way of elaboration, summary, further questioning for clarification, etc., their classmates' responses.

### **Further Questions for Discussion**

When teaching *AVA*, I have relied to some extent on a very helpful list of ideas provided by Dalkey Archive Press, which I reproduce here with their permission (as Attachment 1). In some cases I've distributed the list to the class so they can use it to ponder ideas we may not get to as a group. In others, I've withheld it so it isn't distracting, if we're only going to touch on a few of the issues the list raises. That decision rests as much as anything on how much I'm expecting the students to do on their own. In Senior Seminar I prefer to let students get some sense of issues and of ways they might think of working with texts without doing too much to set the direction that their much more extensive considerations of a text might take. In the Avant-Garde Fiction class, we do more in-depth work as a group, so in that one I'm more likely to cover the topics with the students, making distribution of the list superfluous. I focus more on the first several sections of the list and haven't had much opportunity to use their "Intersections of the Modern and the Contemporary," though in the Avant-Garde Fiction class I incorporate a version of the "Intersections" by having students compare Maso with other writers we cover. I have never used their "Writing Exercises," so I can't report on that.

How I use the questions suggested by Dalkey Archive Press depends: if I have the luxury of lots of time, I have the students work in groups, so there's a lot of discussion in which they participate in smaller, more comfortable units which then report back to us all. If time is more constrained, I lead the discussion and focus issues more sharply as we proceed. I begin with questions from the "Format" section of the list, and the first question, which highlights students' actual experience of reading, usually elicits quite a lot of response. For that reason, I'm willing to indulge it perhaps more fully than with other novels: I want the students to start to articulate their responses to the experience of the text as material artifact as well as their experience of it as story. It means that when we get into questions of the politics of white space, they've already said something about it, if not quite in those terms. The question about recursive structure also helps us consider strategies of narration, though the students sometimes get impatient with so intense a focus on structure. They're right, to some extent: we may err in the direction of too much initial emphasis on what seems like the apparatus and not the "story." But when

we begin to integrate into our discussion some of the other structural elements—the division of the text into Morning, Afternoon, and Night, for example—they are usually better able to see how inextricably bound up with one another are the telling and the tale.

Taking up the imagery next helps further to build a sense of the interrelationships between the form and the events that the novel relates. Images of flight, for example, range from birds—"finches at the feeder" (5)—to airplanes. The two converge horrifically when we read of an airplane crash killing one of Ava Klein's husbands, and we are offered the surreal rendering, "In the sky a baby flying" (93). We are reminded constantly that "Ava" means "bird," that our narrator is a "rare bird," and we also see "Samuel Beckett learning to fly" (21) and Vladimir Nabokov chasing butterflies. We read, "They make a noise like wings" (235), apparently referring to the "green leaves" of the preceding line of text. While the placement of the line here may give it that association, "They make a noise like wings" is originally from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and refers in the original to "All the dead voices" (40b), not to green leaves, which expands its signifying capacity here markedly. Once we have a group of ideas like this on the board, or once a small group has brainstormed and browsed the text to see what they can generate to construct such a list, we consider more fully how images of flight are working in the novel. Because our list includes references to Beckett and Nabokov and quotes a passage from *Godot*, the discussion leads naturally to considering the question of voice: When so much of the imagery comes from remembered texts, what effect does that have on the narrative? We tend to spend a significant amount of time on voice and those other texts, and it's often at this juncture, if we haven't done so earlier, that we discuss the endnotes. The discussion of voice anticipates the questions on language and the alphabet that students in these more advanced classes seem to enjoy most. Often we begin to trace some of the quoted passages from Cixous, for example, to see what the text suggests about possible functions of language ("to heal as much as it separates"), and we go back to the passages concerning the young girl learning her alphabet and the ways in which the text situates that alphabet (with the primitive fires, with the puns on "letters," with its relation to music and silence, with the available means one has to articulate a world). In short, the questions I use from the list are usually in the order in which they appear. While Dalkey Archive may not have set them up with that kind of adherence in mind, I've found they work well when taken roughly (and selectively) in sequence.

I also occasionally use my own list of "Ideas to Consider" for a text, which signals to the students issues and problems the text might present that we may or may not ever get to explicitly in class. They seem to appreciate having something literally to hold onto, and it gives us some preformulated prompts if discussion slows or threatens to diverge from the text. These are by no means exhaustive, but they do tend to range over a wide variety of perspectives on the focal text. I include (as Attachment 2) a version of the sheet I've used for *AVA*, edited so that there is no repetition of student questions listed above, nor is there repetition of the ideas proposed by the list from the Dalkey Archive Press. These "Ideas to Consider" can be used with the class as a whole or can be distributed among small groups for discussion. They can also be used as exam questions, with perhaps some modification.



As I hope the list suggests, I prefer a combination of broad, open-ended concerns—the body, violence, language—and more specific issues—different ordering systems like the zodiac, specific locales listed in the novel, particular passages to which I want students to attend. I find the combination especially effective in discussing *AVA*. As with the quotes on the board, it demonstrates our need to ground discussion in the words and the form of the text, but it establishes a kind of open-endedness that indicates the impossibility of exhausting the meaning-making strategies of the novel. It affirms indeterminacy and breadth of range without translating into intellectual carelessness.

The essay questions/paper topics follow the same structuring, with a balance, I hope, between particularity of reference and openness to ideas. While the questions can be addressed in many different ways—there’s no “right” answer—they do demand focused attention to and a carefully elaborated sense of very specific concerns. Hence, the need to apply a critic’s statement to a variety of texts or the “what/how” combination that insists on detailed argument of a position. As I try to indicate to the students over the course of the semester in every writing situation, there may not be one right answer, but there are better or worse ways of making an argument or of elaborating an explanation. The questions I pose in the “essay exams/paper topics” segment of the sheet do, I hope, pull students in the direction of better answers, whatever position they argue. Many of the questions ask them to consider two texts in terms of a single proposition and/or in terms of each other; I often find that doing this prompts them to consider new ideas about both. It’s one of my ways of trying to make the taking of an exam a learning situation rather than merely a testing one. Another way in which I do this is to pose questions that don’t allow for mere regurgitation of class notes. While it is always helpful for students to review their notes and to study in small groups for the exams, I use questions that come at by-then-familiar material from slightly different vantage points. They need to know the text well and be able to think and write about the issues with some degree of sophistication. They often surprise themselves with what they can do, and if they’re less than pleased, we review others’ more successful answers in a one-on-one session in my office. This usually demonstrates to them that I don’t have some predetermined magic formula I’m looking for as a “right” answer. More important, it also demonstrates to them that others who have sat through the same class sessions, who have read the same texts, and who have had the same time constraints in writing answers can produce work that is quite good. It demystifies the process and shows them not only *that* they can do better, but *how* they can do so.

### **Instead of a Conclusion**

I want to end this discussion of strategies for teaching *AVA* by recalling how one student initially responded to the text. He came to our first discussion with lists—one indicating every reference in the text to language/the alphabet (with the quotation and page number) and another with every reference to the erotic song cycle (again with quote and page number for each). We joked about his being “the kind of reader who makes lists” as per Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, but we were all grateful when John could locate passages for us quickly when discussion veered into those realms that he’d decided

interested him enough to track. I was struck by the fact that in order to make such a compilation, he'd gone back and reread many times, following those threads, isolating and reintegrating them into his own experience of the text. His reading around and through the text, backward and forward, as he searched for the references he was following, did much to affirm and to demonstrate the many and varied ways in which the text proposes meaning. There was no more committed and engaged reader in that class than this student who, in a subsequent class on James Joyce, announced that he'd have to go back and reread *AVA* because he'd need to think about those passages that referred to "Labyrinth of Crete, mystery of water, home" (4 and elsewhere) in Maso's novel. Taking the pleasures of the text beyond the limits of one class and one collective engagement with it, John reminded me yet again of the pleasures of a professor of literature—comparative or otherwise—in listening to students and in leaving them wanting more.

## Attachment 1

### *AVA*

by Carole Maso

Ava Klein, thirty-nine, lover of life, world traveler, professor of comparative literature, is dying. From her hospital bed on this, her last day on earth, she makes one final ecstatic voyage.

### FORMAT

One of the most compelling ways to open discussion of *AVA* is through the portals of form. Certainly a first glance tells the reader that this novel is not in traditional block-paragraph nor in-medias-res-to-denouement structure. Some initial topics to present are:

- How did you read this book? How is it similar to or different from literature that you've read previously? What structural strategies of space and line most affected your reading, either negatively or positively? Why? (reasons of canonical tradition? preference? limitations of reading experience? difficulty of text?)
- Discuss the politics of white space: generosity, uncertainty, *jouissance*, silence as possibility, silence as death, meditation of reader or narrator or author.
- Why might the author have decided to explore the politics of juxtaposition instead of paragraphing—and what are their freedoms and limits? Imagine the text in traditional "storytelling" paragraphs: would more than form change?
- Speculate on how the author created the text—and why. Compare this style to Faulkner's strategies of line, paragraph and style. [Obviously, since I don't teach Faulkner in these classes, I use others as a point of comparison: Marguerite Duras is quite helpful for the issues noted here; Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A Story* is helpful especially since Maso notes in an interview that she actively chose *not* to set *AVA* as a hypertext.]

- Is recursive structure static or mobile (or both) as a vehicle for the narrative of *AVA*? How is pace affected? Mood? How does the way that the book is divided—Morning, Afternoon, and Night—complement or contradict the rest of the novel's structure? [I find it necessary to define "recursive structure," and Brian McHale's definition is the one that I use. See his *Postmodern Fiction* 112–19.]

### IMAGERY AS NARRATIVE

The imagery and repetition of imagery in *AVA* function to reveal meaning and mood rather than to describe them. The novel's space also allows for a greater participation of the reader than would be granted by a traditional narrative with a concrete plot.

- What imagery seems most effective to you in *AVA*? What does this imagery convey? Why might it be more effective than other images? What does your own realm of experience have to do with your connection to these images?
- Discuss the reshaping of written text from linear format into recursive format through repetition and cyclical imagery such as Ava's erotic song cycles, the little girl writing the letter A, the very shape of the name *AVA*. What do you think these images attempt to relate?
- Suggested reading: Julia Kristeva's essay "Women's Time" about monumental (cyclical) time and linear time. (In *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7 (1981) or as reprinted in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986), 471-85.)

### LANGUAGE

- Cixous describes the novel as one that "attempts to come up with a language that heals, as much as it separates." How can language both bring us together and pull us apart? Where do you find the healing taking place in *AVA*? the separation?
- Suggested Reading: Hélène Cixous's essay about women's language in "The Laugh of the Medusa." (In *Signs* 1 (1976) or as reprinted in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986), 309-21.)
- Carole Maso writes in a lyrical prose that many readers have called poetic. What differentiates prose from poetry? Which genre does *AVA* most closely approximate, and what makes you think so? What prose texts set themselves far from the lyricism of poetic prose? Why?
- How does point of view affect the language of the novel (in intimacy of tone, in relationship of narrator and reader, in its affect on the lyricism or music of the novel's language)?
- Suggested Reading: Walter R. Johnson's essay on the use of pronouns (the I – You impulse in lyric) in "Swans in Crystal: The Problem of the Modern Lyric and Its Pronouns," *The Idea of Lyric* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982), 1-23.

INTERSECTIONS OF THE MODERN AND THE CONTEMPORARY

Many of the images from Ava's memory are of those artists who influenced her—both literary and musical figures. Either as individuals or by dividing the students into small groups, have the students "adopt" the following artists and present insights to the class on the artist's life, works, style/narrative strategies, and relationship to Ava Klein and the novel *AVA* itself. For hints on routes to follow, see the sources section in the back of the book. Prior discussion of the novel's format will facilitate the suggested questions about juxtaposition.

- Pablo Neruda: On page 14, how might the tenth entry about the late verses of Neruda explain *AVA*-as-narrator's strategy in shaping the novel (from the Greek *fictio*, or shaping)? the author's strategy?
- Federico García Lorca: From what Lorca poem does the line "Green, how much I want you green" derive and what is a brief explication of that poem? What does the repetition of this line have to do with *AVA* both through form and meaning?
- Sappho: Look at several of Sappho's poems. What juxtapositions do you find to Maso's book? What major differences?
- Hélène Cixous: What is the "laugh of the Medusa," according to Cixous's essay by the same name? How might that concept of the laugh, as well as the idea of writing through the body, be exemplified in *AVA*? Does Maso "write through the body," as Cixous claims women do? Does Ava? What is the difference between what the author is writing and what the narrator is relaying to the reader?
- Monique Wittig: Define "multivalence" as it applies to feminist theory. Explain how multivalence is shown in Wittig's text *Les Guérillères* and in *AVA*.
- Ezra Pound: What is Pound's theory of vorticism? What is the relationship of Pound's work to the structure of *AVA*? (Be sure to consider the possibility of complements and contradictions herein.)
- Gertrude Stein: Define "stream of consciousness" writing. How might Stein's stream-of-consciousness style have influenced the structure of *AVA*?

Other artists from Ava Klein's memory to assign as student adoptions are:

- Samuel Beckett
- Danilo Kis
- Vladimir Nabokov
- Wallace Stevens
- Wolfgang Mozart
- T. S. Eliot
- Johann Wolfgang Goethe
- Paul Celan
- Nathalie Sarraute
- Virginia Woolf

WRITING EXERCISES

- What is the Joie de Vivre room (literally Joy of/for Life) in the novel, both in tone and meaning? What does it mean to you, for instance, if you were to take a snapshot of one moment in or aspect of your life and label it the Joie de Vivre room?
- We are all influenced by many people in our lifetimes. Who has most influenced your writing and how? Or who would you most like to have as an influence on your writing and why? In both instances, be sure to include how your writing has transformed or might be transformed.
- The author describes *AVA* as a "living text." What might she mean? What are some examples in the novel that show you how the text lives? Explain and cite your examples. You may wish to compare *AVA* as a living text to another novel you've read.

## Attachment 2

### IDEAS TO CONSIDER: *AVA*

- Why all of the references to the planets and the stars? (See, for example, pages 5, 6, 66, 112, 193, 200, 261, 263, 264.) How do these work with the references to disguise and to the zodiac? What do they add to the text? [I usually need to inform students about the Zodiac killings in California.]
- What does the novel do with violence? Identify different kinds of violence in the text (physical and psychological, for example), and consider how they evoke different dimensions of Ava Klein's life and history.
- Discuss what the text does with the body. (For all of *AVA*'s celebrations of desire, for example, it is an AIDS-related illness that seems to determine Ava Klein's fate.)
- It's difficult to keep all of Ava's lovers and/or husbands straight. What effect does this have on the narrative? In general, what does the text do with notions of self and other, with individuation and differentiation?
- What does the text assert about language and languages? How does it do so?
- The text refers to lots of different ordering systems: the alphabet, the signs of the zodiac, religion, language/s, numbers, medicine, armies, to name but a few. What does it do with notions of order and chaos? What makes you think so?
- Critic Gabriel Josipovici has said of certain novels, "As with a cubist painting, the reader is forced to move again and again over the material that is presented, trying to force it into a single vision, a final truth, but is always foiled by the resistant artifact." Does this statement pertain to *AVA*? Why or why not? Does the novel propose singularity even as it resists it? How so? Or does it try for something different? What?
- What happens to voice in *AVA*, with so many unidentified fragments of other narratives interpolated into Ava Klein's meditations?

- Milan Kundera has said, "The novel questions everything." Does *AVA* question everything, or does it just question certain things? With specific reference to the text, what is called into question? What makes you think so? (Be sure to consider form in answering this.)
- *AVA* uses linear time—Morning, Afternoon, Night—as an overriding structure, even as it demonstrates the inadequacy of such a schema to represent the lived experience of time. What's the point? There are several issues here to consider: imposing an organizing strategy that is then (perhaps) subverted; breaking the novel into three discrete segments (what are the arguments for the integrity of each?); the simultaneous representation of conflicting experiences of time.
- Related to the above, what does *AVA* do with beginnings? Endings?
- Maso says that she considered making *AVA* a hypertext but decided against it. Argue for or against the wisdom of that decision. [I only use this, of course, in classes in which we've studied at least one hypertext novel.]
- What does *AVA* propose about the apprehension or the making of meaning in life? How does it do so?
- What does *AVA* do with space/place? You might want to consider this in terms of private (the domestic sphere, rooms, home, private gardens) and public (the hospital, cafés, movie theaters, public gardens, different cities or the idea of the city, national/international realms), or you may consider it in other ways: the affirmation of movement through space in flight, in dance; the evocation of place in sensuous terms in a literal place that would seem to preclude such a perspective, or any other notions of space/place that seem appropriate to the text.
- Which elements of *AVA* are modernist? Postmodern?

### Essay Exams/Paper Topics

When I have students write on *AVA*, I sometimes choose from the "Ideas to Consider" sheet, or I pair novels together for them to discuss. I list here some of the latter possibilities, which might be adapted for in-class or take-home essay exams or for paper topics:

- Argue for or against the following idea: in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *AVA*, Puig and Maso propose that the essential human activity is the telling of stories, an act of the imagination. Be sure to consider whether the structures of the texts themselves affirm or belie such a proposition.
- What do *Afternoon, A Story* and *AVA* do with notions of fragmentation and coherence? How do they do this?
- At one point in *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, Cruz thinks, "to live is to find separation." How does that statement apply to that novel and to *AVA*? How do the content and form of each novel reinforce and/or contravene this statement?
- *Alphabetical Africa* and *AVA* both draw attention to language at its most basic level: the alphabet. Are they, in very different ways, saying the same things about

it? Or are they each saying something distinctive about the alphabet? What is each saying? How is it saying that?

## Notes

1 In trying to discern why that particular teaching of the text was so unsuccessful, I have to admit to being a bit stymied because of the many variables: class dynamic, the particular time in the semester, even the intensity of my own enthusiasm for the novel, against which the students might instinctively recoil or which might have made it more difficult for me to articulate compelling arguments about the text. In their course evaluations, in which I explicitly asked the students why *they* thought we hadn't really done justice to *AVA*, they said perhaps it hadn't worked because we read it after having studied Duras's *The Lover*, which they thought used language and structure in many of the same ways. They thought it had been a good balance to what they saw as an insistently masculine text—Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*—but they thought that Duras and Maso together became a bit tedious. What this signaled to me was that among other things, I had failed to do enough with the complexities of voice that the extensive use of quotation sustains in *AVA*, a feature that distinguishes it from Duras's novel in significant ways.

2 I've taught *AVA* four times, on two different occasions in each of two different courses: "Senior Seminar: Modern/Postmodern," and "Avant-Garde Fiction," a class that studies experimental writing, not the historic Avant-Garde. Both are upper-level undergraduate English courses with prerequisites, and students populating both are, for the most part, junior and senior English majors or minors. It makes a difference, I think, that the students had self-selected based on an interest in experimental forms in both courses and that, as upper-level students, they had some sense of genre and could appreciate some of the ways in which *AVA* works both within and against its boundaries. It helped, too, that every section had enough students to sustain good discussions without being unwieldy.

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