

'The Blessed Syncope of Supreme Moments': The Music of Time in *AVA*

Karen Lee Osborne

"Music. The love of my mother's life.

And then—her life." (*AVA* 156)

"Prolonging the world with song." (*AVA* 236)

The changing treatment of time in twentieth century fiction can be linked to the breakdown of belief in a unified subject or an objectively verifiable reality. By the early twentieth century, fiction had begun to emphasize impressionistic perception and interior states of mind. Many writers, responding to scientific, philosophical, psychological and other theories, began to reject linear narrative as insufficient for the kind of experience they wished to create in their fiction. The distinction Henri Bergson and others made between an abstract, mechanical time measured by clocks and the subjective experience of duration is helpful when reading many modern and postmodern texts. Time as flux, a heterogeneous flow of interpenetrating moments, is evoked through fragmentation, montage, jump cuts, ellipses and other techniques. Postmodern writers like Carole Maso adapt these techniques in lyrical novels that can be read as prose poems. *AVA* is an example of such a work. In this essay I hope to show how Maso's approach to time in *AVA* both invents and subverts linear plots and can be understood as a musical composition employing what Catherine Clement has termed *syncope*. Further, I hope to suggest

how the novel's emphases on the human speaking voice and on flight problematize the construction of identity.

Maso's approach to time and perception is similar to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's sense of time as a setting that moves away from us, and perception as a dialogic activity between the seer and the seen, that is, a network of relations. The seeing, touching, surrendering body becomes part of and "vibrates" with what is sensed or perceived (*Phenomenology* 212). Maso has acknowledged reading *The Phenomenology of Perception* in her essay "Except Joy: On *Aureole*" and has described her fiction as an effort to render a "beautiful passing landscape" ("An Essay" 26). Indeed, these fleeting images may appear as disjointed fragments, and not necessarily as parts of a moving, continuous filmstrip. Like Merleau-Ponty, Maso speaks of "[c]reating relations which exist in their integrity for one fleeting moment and then are gone, remaining in the trace of memory" ("An Essay" 27). These "traces of the past do not refer to the past; they are present" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 413). In his work on cinema, Gilles DeLeuze defines "crystal-images" as images that fuse the pastness of the recorded event with the presentness of its viewing, paradoxically exposing the split between the past and the future. The fragmented image is also important to Walter Benjamin. According to Benjamin, we have access to the past primarily through present glimpses of the fleeting images of a "projective past." The present, or "time of the now," is filled with these momentary glimpses of the past, as well as glimpses of the future, or what Benjamin calls "messianic time." In using language to create a choreographed relation of juxtaposed glimpses of time, Maso seeks to redeem the supposedly lost past. According to Benjamin, every present moment contains the possibility of the "strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (264). Every past moment also can potentially be redeemed on

Judgment Day, and thus, "[n]othing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (254).

In its effort to recover this history, both personal and social, the novel or prose poem *AVA* goes further than Maso's three previous novels (*Ghost Dance*, *The Art Lover*, or *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*) in its seamless incorporation of the projective past and messianic time into the present. Rather than the clearly marked, discrete scenes of *The Art Lover*, *AVA* uses only three markers—Morning, Afternoon, and Night. Within these sonata-like divisions or movements, the text presents a virtual flood of scenes or impressions without boundaries, in a Bergsonian flux where "[m]emory is no longer the narrative of external adventures stretching along episodic time. It is itself the spiral movement that, through anecdotes and episodes, brings us back to the almost motionless constellation of potentialities that the narrative retrieves" (Ricoeur 182). We read what appear to be random fragments, sentences or an occasional paragraph. What connects these fragments is the "spiral movement" and the "almost motionless constellation of potentialities" that they create.

The narrative is focused through Ava's consciousness, yet this internal focalization does not limit the novel to a single or monologic narrative voice. *AVA's* open structure and multivocality achieves something close to the polyphonic novel's "plurality of irreducible consciousnesses," although poems and lyric novels generally tend toward the monologic (Morson and Emerson 250). Ava thinks or speaks but just as often recalls or hears others speaking, and it is often impossible to fix the identities of the different voices. Many fragments are not Maso's writing at all but instead quotes from other writers, other texts, presumably writers that Ava Klein, Professor of Comparative Literature at Hunter College, remembers on her dying day (74). The novel's use of textual montage demonstrates Merleau-Ponty's borderless,

reciprocal perception. All time is the present, in the mind, and all the narrative threads are held simultaneously in Ava's mind. Memory and imagination take us backward into the past and forward into the future while we remain bodied subjects bound by specific locations and temporality: here, a woman on her deathbed. A memory of 20 years ago is followed by yesterday, and so on. Her husbands—Francesco, Carlos, Anatole—as well as her lover Danilo, appear and retreat, as do images of her parents, who survived Treblinka, and her aunt Sophie, who did not. *AVA* insists on an infinite, inconclusive present, something like Gertrude Stein's "continuous present" of composition (Stein 524). To be able to "see" time, Bakhtin argued, is to see evidence of "heterochrony," the many different rhythms of time, in the present, and to feel everything that pulsates in the present (Morson and Emerson 416-423). Ava's glimpses of the projective past are always immediate, always destabilizing divisions of past, present and future.

Ava Klein's death takes place on August 15, 1990, the day of the first or present narrative.<sup>1</sup> A Pisces like the author, she is 39, and thus was born in late February or March 1951, but mere dates do not really matter in this book (154). According to Merleau-Ponty, we may be unable to date a memory because often the memory has "lost its anchorage" in the past (*Phenomenology* 418). More importantly, Ava has been diagnosed with a rare cancer of the blood and is in the hospital receiving treatment that will not save her. Yet the proportion of sentences that refer to events happening on this day is fairly small. Instead, like Granny Weatherall in Katherine Anne Porter's famous 1930 stream-of-consciousness story, Ava travels in her mind back to the moments that most deeply affected her. Ava's stream-of-consciousness narration goes beyond Granny Weatherall's complete sentences, paragraphs and distinctions between dialogue and thoughts to create a meditation sustained for 265 pages. And Ava is not limited to remembering experiences she lived, but imagines the lives of others. A bodied subject

limited by the constraints of her own mortality, she resists those constraints through perception, memory and imagination. References to flying abound. Ava and other characters both literally and figuratively fly across time and space. "One longs for. . . the past one never experienced, for the future one will never know—except through an imaginative act" ("An Essay" 26). Ava's ability to imagine these moments is what keeps us reading. *AVA* refers several times to the artist Joseph Cornell, who tries to "conserve moments of existence in biscuit boxes" (182). Cornell's construction of beautifully decorated boxes is similar to Maso's creation of "luminous moments" ("An Essay" 26).

These fragmentary moments compose *AVA*, a list in three sections. Susan Neville claims that lists are "mystical," that they "annihilate" individual items and create wholes "out of disparate parts," yet *AVA* contests both the annihilation of individual items and the creation of a whole (Neville 6). In *AVA* the fragments remain discrete units that also become part of an accumulation of iterative fragments. Both the text *AVA* and the character Ava are enigmatic in the Barthesian sense. The narrative teases readers with deferred, potential meanings, the text's hermeneutics leading through partial disclosures, delays, and ambiguities. Much of the novel is given to "repeating narrative," wherein the narrative repeatedly presents an event that happens only once (Genette 115-116). Usually these are repeating "analepses" or "recalls" of past events (51). For example, the scene of Sophie's death at Treblinka is repeated several times, as is the day of Francesco's proposal to Ava. The text thus builds tension through its anachronies, that is, through the discordances between the present narrative and the repeated analepses of the past. Although each repeating analepsis only occurs once in linear time, each recurrence in memory is not only a repetition but also a singular psychic event.

The distinction between a sentence and an utterance is important here. Sentences are repeatable, but each utterance is unique. "Two verbally identical utterances never mean the same thing, if only because the reader or listener confronts them twice and reacts differently the second time" (Morson and Emerson 126). For example, in Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*, sentences such as "[t]he waves broke upon the shore" are repeated many times, and each repetition is both part of a pattern and a singular event. Maso studied Woolf thoroughly while a student at Vassar and has frequently referred to her work in talks and essays. After reading Woolf, Maso began to write "[f]or the first time," not literally, but for the first time in a way that felt natural to her ("Shelter" 6). The structure of *AVA* is similar to that of *The Waves*, in that both novels follow a progression from morning until night, but *AVA* offers greater fragmentation and less temporal consistency within each section. Like Proust and Woolf, Maso is "intoxicated" with the iterative (Genette 123), but her method is less discursive. Even writers who experiment with time have relied to some degree on narrative linearity, at least within chapters or scenes, in which one sentence often leads discursively to the next. In *AVA*, fragments, sentences and paragraphs frequently interrupt and disrupt one another, defying discursive logic and completion even at the sentence level. The novel's composition in fragments works against its own narrative lines, and is thus closer to the structure of poetry than to chapters. Maso often uses line breaks just as a poet would. "I can usually hear where the line is breaking" (*AVA* 136). The context surrounding a particular fragment in *AVA* is never exactly the same, and the meaning is unique to that occurrence, although the repetition of the fragment may appear to suggest a pattern.

Characters and plots in *AVA* are thus constructed poetically, as images and sounds, in patterns somewhat analogous to narrative *configurations* constructing "significant wholes out of scattered events" (Ricoeur 174). Form is revealed "as patterns are, through elongation and

perspective, the ability to see a whole" (Maso, "An Essay" 26). This wholeness, however, may be impossible to achieve. Maso does 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" ("From *AVA*" 172). In *AVA*, even the "completing analepses" that "fill in, after the event, an earlier gap in the narrative," are often incomplete (Genette 51). The analeptic fragments and the space that surrounds them may yield new meanings most notably in demonstrating that completeness, like narrative progression and linear time, is always already illusory. These fragments, like Blanchot's "unfinished separations," or like isolated notes or beats, tend to "dissolve the totality" their existence as fragments "presupposes" (Blanchot 58-60).

As for narrative dissolution, so too for language. Although Neville argues that the motive of list makers is "a love of naming and the way that naming resurrects the thing named," for Maso, such resurrection is not a given (Neville 11). If one cannot believe that language can save, then how can one write? Ava thinks, "[j]ust once I'd like to save Virginia Woolf from drowning. Hart Crane. Primo Levi from falling . . . Uncle Solly, Aunt Sophie, just once" (20). The novel's silences evoke its hesitation, its syncopated distrust of words even as it limps toward them. Language cannot stop death; it can, however, prolong the moment. "Sometimes, it is given back" (217). Even as Maso reaches for Cixous' language that "heals" rather than "separates," the language itself continually reaches and falls just short (163; 170; 258). This is the language of the *desire* to heal, not an uncontested faith that language can save. The "necklace of luminous moments" that is a life might be only a fictive necklace, an imagined pattern that unravels itself

on every page (Maso, "An Essay" 26). Yet this unraveling is not necessarily cause for alarm. Ava Klein's life is lived in an embrace of its own evanescence.

Ava, like Scheherezade, tells stories or rather, sings a song, a poem, to "prolong the lyric moment," to postpone death (*AVA* 210; "An Essay" 28). The singing voice is an important motif in the novel. Maso has at times considered herself a composer. Approaching writing as musical composition allows for the fluidity of fragments, a seamlessness wherein "[i]t's not desirable or possible to keep things separate. Many things arise" ("An Essay" 27). Ava would like to "imagine there was music" throughout her life (*AVA* 6). "Music moves in me. Shapes I've needed to complete. Listen, listen hard" (7). She refers to a "deepening sense of musical structure" (206). For Roland Barthes, the enigmas of the text are like lines of melody, leading forward and interweaving as in a fugue. Other elements of the text add harmonies and rhythms (Martin 164). In particular, *AVA's* rhythms depend upon the art of hesitation, or syncopé. Syncopé, or at least the western version, is music that starts with a weak beat and then prolongs the strong beat. The weak beat can blur into the strong beat, and the strong beat is often held longer than one expects. Every syncopated note is thus what Rousseau called "counter time," and every collection of syncopated notes is "a movement in counter time" (Clement 254). *AVA's* syncopation both disrupts and prolongs time. Readers are meant to hesitate, to prolong the weak beat. We must take a breath at every break, just as in a line of poetry or of song, because *AVA* is a movement against linear time, a movement opposing death. Its musical structure is a response to "a deepening sense of loss" (206). In order to hear one singing of "lost things" (25), we must "listen to the music that is silence" (123), we must hear Ava singing "the abyss," as Hélène Cixous would put it (*La* 59). Readers must feel the syncopating pulse between sounds and silence, presence and absence. The fragments, together with the gaps, the ellipses within the field of



narration, form the syncopated music of the novel. *AVA* uses rhythm, repetition, and syncopation to create a trance-like, hypnotic state.

The first beat in syncope is the beat of hesitation, and the second is that of dissonance, generated by the carrying over of the weak beat "onto the strong beat" (Clement 5). This dissonance creates a "harmonious and productive discord" that is not unlike the discord produced in the achronous tension between narrative and story. Clement is most interested in the "limping before the harmony" that the process of syncope allows (5). This limping is felt in the ellipses of narration or poetic enjambment in *AVA*. "Suddenly, time falters," and "a fragment of the beat disappears, and of this disappearance, a rhythm is born" (Clement 175; 5). Writing of Woolf's prose style in *To the Lighthouse*, Maso observed that the sentence describing Mr. Ramsay's discovery of his wife's death "limps" with grief ("Except Joy" 115). To limp, to falter; this is how Maso approaches time. The music of time in *AVA* depends upon "[t]he spaces between words. Between thoughts. The interval" (*AVA* 171). In every space between lines in *AVA*, a "fragment of the beat" disappears. In each of these spaces there is syncope, disruption, a rupture of linear time. Hiccups, sneezes, bursts of laughter, epileptic seizures, uncontrollable sobs, tremors and sleep apnea are all examples of the syncopic "short circuit" that disrupts time and disconnects us from words and being. So is orgasm (Clement 175). Syncope is a little death, an escape from ordinary time that challenges death through the moment that does not stop. *AVA* uses rhythm, repetition, and syncopation to create a trance-like, hypnotic state.

Rapturous syncope is also like the experience of love at first sight and the eastern blessed state of spiritual ecstasy. "This exceptional moment makes the surrounding world and its harsh laws disappear" (175). Among these "harsh laws" I would place the laws of linear time and narration. By entering "the blessed syncope of supreme moments," poets and other artists or

mystics escape the confines of these harsh laws and become "free, with an unreal and extraordinary sense of emancipation" (Clement 240). Time falters, and Ava flies through time and space to an earlier moment in another country. The phenomenological world is revealed as "inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in my own" (Merleau-Ponty, "Preface" to *Phenomenology* xx). Ava's astrological sign (Pisces) associates her with water, indicating her fluid identity and the novel's interest in intersubjectivity. Ava asks, "What is this fluidity I move through?" (117). This fluid shifting of identities also occurs during syncope, when the artist or mystic temporarily loses "the secured identity that constitutes them as a single member of the social body" (Clement 240). In *AVA*, the stories of Francesco, Anatole, Carlos, Aldo, Danilo, Philip, Rachel, Sophie, Marie-Claude, and Ana Julia are linked and not separable from Ava's own life. Ava not only remembers or imagines these characters; she becomes them. She explores different identities with each of her lovers and husbands. Masks, costumes, wigs, and human hair, together with Ava's travels, are associated with intersubjectivity and the performance of identity. The line "Ava Klein with her peacock tail, her usual bravada" (120) both suggests a fixed identity (her usual bravada) and contests monolithic identity at the same time. The peacock tail, like the "feather headdress" she sometimes wears (6) allows her to become different Avas for different occasions. She recontextualizes herself and allows herself to be defined in reciprocal relation with others. While it is generally assumed that representations of space have emphasized the exteriority, and representations of time the interiority, of the subject, as Elizabeth Grosz has suggested, in *AVA*, time and space often reverse exteriority and interiority. Hélène Cixous and others have shown that when we travel to foreign countries, we are really going toward what is foreign in ourselves.<sup>2</sup> Ava's fluency in several different languages

parallels the fluidity of the speaking subject. Ultimately, of course, traveling to a foreign country can lead to death, as Turner and others have shown. Thus Ava finds herself in her "thirty-ninth year on a foreign coast," that is, the coast of the country of death (205). Though Ava lies dying in a hospital bed, she enters the blessed syncope of supreme moments and escapes the confines of her wasted body. It is also true that Ava cannot escape except *through* her body. The phenomenological world of her perception is composed of bodily, often erotic sensations. Ava's time, like Proustian time, inscribes the body in language. The disease that is coursing through her blood is the counterpoint to her own desire to cross boundaries.

In order to appreciate the music of specific moments in *AVA*, it is not necessary to understand exactly the linear plots of the stories or *fabula* that these moments help to compose. Indeed, there is good reason to resist the temptation to "construct" the stories behind the narrative. One does not wish to foreclose the text's plurality. As Barthes said, "everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, an ultimate structure" (11-12). Maso describes *AVA* as a novel that "will always be a work in progress . . . a book in a perpetual state of becoming. It cannot be stabilized or fixed," but "could be written forever, added to or subtracted from in a kind of Borgesian infinity" (Maso, "From *AVA*" 172). *AVA* is part of a trilogy that Maso is writing. The second novel in the trilogy, *Bay of Angels*, will take place a few years prior to 1990, when Ava received bone marrow infusions from her mother. Because the trilogy is still being written, the dates of certain events in *AVA* may not always be consistent with references in the other books. The events themselves may change as Maso rewrites them. The beauty of the novel as genre is that there is "no first word" and the "final word has not been spoken" (Bakhtin 30), and this is especially true in the case of *AVA* as part of an unfinished trilogy. Despite this caution regarding the changing nature of the work, it

may be helpful to understand some distinct narrative threads in *AVA* insofar as they open further avenues of association and interrelatedness. The remaining sections of this essay will discuss each of the multiple threads of narration in turn and will clarify certain aspects of Ava's provisional, temporal identity, although I do not wish to claim that "fixing" such an identity should be our aim. Rather, the novel emphasizes the instability not only of linear plots but also of limiting notions of subjectivity. Ava's character is as multiple, fluid, and open-ended as the many separate moments she remembers or imagines.

### I. Treblinka, "a musical word"

Ava Klein (1951-1990) is the only child of Philip and Rachel Klein, who survived Treblinka. Ava has now lost her hair and thus resembles the prisoners at Treblinka (34). Treblinka was an "extermination camp" built in 1942 approximately 50 miles northeast of Warsaw by the Nazis. Most estimates suggest that more than 800,000 people died there. Rachel's only sister, Sophie, did not survive, shot to death at the edge of a pit into which many bodies fell (*AVA* 72). Rachel's parents, as well as her brother, Sol, who wore the pink triangle that homosexuals were forced to wear, died there.

Ironically, Treblinka is "a rather musical word" (*AVA* 32; 62). The prisoners "still had Schubert in their throats" (59). Rachel may have survived because of her singing voice. She was the only woman who had enough to eat. The soldiers kept her "plump" to protect her voice (60). They made her sing for them and also made her undress. Now, on her dying day, Ava remembers seeing her mother undress in her childhood. Her mother "[w]ho gave me life./ Continues to give me life. I watch her undress over and over./ In the dark./ In the German forest./ For them./ Over and over she sang a beautiful song. While my father looked on/ The wind taking away their

sounds" (155). Young Philip Klein plays the cello to accompany Rachel's singing, and he falls in love with her (157). Whereas at first, music was "the love of" Rachel's life, in Treblinka music literally became "her life" (156). Here, as in *The Art Lover*, Maso links singing with survival. A recurring reference throughout *The Art Lover* is the gay anthem "We Are Gentle, Angry People" with its refrain, "We are singing for our lives." For Rachel and Philip at Treblinka, "music saved their lives" (92). Ava imagines her "parents singing the world into existence for themselves./ Prolonging the world with song" (76).

Yet also linked with singing, with the artistic impulse, is the writer's anxiety as to the power of art, words, or music to save. This doubt finds its way into the form of *AVA* through syncopation's hesitation, its gasps between beats. Ava thinks of how her parents "sang" her into life, and she hopes that they will stand at her bedside "singing me gently into death" (143). Aunt Sophie's "beautiful voice could not save her life" (162), possibly because Sophie was "no longer young then" (96), whereas Rachel was only 15 (49). "Only I was spared" (149). Sophie, according to Maso, is pregnant when she is killed, and because she is "not in her right mind," she imagines that her baby will somehow survive her death.<sup>3</sup> She asks the survivors to name the child for her (183). After Sophie is killed, Rachel experiences survivor's guilt (35; 148-149). Later, Ava imagines that she herself bore a child as the result of a one-night stand and named the baby after her dead Aunt Sophie (234). Of Ava's many brief sexual encounters, one was with a man named Franz Muller. It occurs to Ava that "you could have been one of them," meaning he could have been one of the Nazi soldiers who watched her mother undress. If she had married Franz, Ava would have become "Frau Muller" (36). She is fascinated by his possible complicity in her aunt's death and her mother's exploitation. To bear his child and name her Sophie would be one way of rewriting the tragic ending of her aunt's story.

Ava is constantly imagining beginnings, middles and ends throughout the novel. As she constructs the story, the song cycle, of her life, she is also constructing cycles of history. The Treblinka story involved her parents a few years before she was born, yet Ava imagines she is there. Complicity and powerlessness are a recurring concern in these cycles. At Treblinka, Jews, homosexuals, and gypsies were exterminated simply because of their racial, ethnic, or sexual identities. Such persecution continues in many forms. In Ava's elaborate song cycles, Aldo, Bernard, and Andrew are linked with Uncle Sol as homosexuals who die too young due to outright extermination or smug indifference to the AIDS epidemic. Treblinka and World War II are linked with the Gulf War in a world where music (and language) cannot, apparently, save us. The image of Samuel Beckett hiding in a tree from German soldiers and hearing a song sung by Ava's mother at Treblinka, is repeated several times. Beckett's famous silence, his years of not writing, is evoked throughout *AVA* and linked to the unspeakable destruction of war and other evils that writing cannot avert. Beckett turned to music, practicing Chopin Etudes until his friends teased him (87). Like Beckett, Maso searches for a form that explores the silences of language.

## II. Aldo Santini: "building cathedrals with his voice"

Ava grew up in upstate New York, where her father, Philip, tended a beautiful garden and her mother, Rachel, eventually did sing again, children's songs (61). Ava's first love was Bernard Reznikoff, a young student who wished to become a doctor and who later does (75; 92). He dies of AIDS (or Kaposi's sarcoma) while trying to find a cure (66).<sup>4</sup> Ava is something of a child prodigy. Like her mother, she has a beautiful singing voice, and at the age of sixteen, goes to Parma, Italy, to study opera at the Puccini Institute (175). There she meets Aldo Santini, son of

Anthony and Louisa Santini (171). Aldo is important for many reasons. Like Bernard, Aldo is one of the few men in the novel with whom Ava apparently does not have sex. More important, Aldo, a gifted tenor, was "building cathedrals with his voice" (21, 75). He was a boy who drew ladders in an effort to reach heaven, ladders "going nowhere, maybe" (5, 19, 83).<sup>5</sup> Aldo's passion for music and his desire for a connection with the sacred reflects Ava's desire to believe in the agency of the subject and the power of human expression to make a difference. Aldo's singing is the kind of language that might "heal" rather than "separate" (163; 258). Aldo becomes renowned and travels far (236), though he is frequently in New York and visits Ava there.

The beautiful "remote chorus of boys" that Aldo hears becomes a kind of homosexual siren song (22; 75; 236). Ava also hears this chorus. The heterosexual woman and the gay man share an erotic desire that is vividly evoked in a scene wherein Aldo encourages Ava to seduce a young man that Aldo also desires. One of many examples of intersubjectivity in the novel, this scene takes place in Paris at a dinner party sometime after the death of Ava's second husband, Anatole (50-51; 238-239). Like Bernard, unfortunately, Aldo dies of AIDS, at the age of 35 (9; 44). Ava never quite recovers from his death. His voice, like Aunt Sophie's, did not save him. Yet Ava loved him for that voice, for his desire to build a cathedral, his effort to link the desire of the body with heaven. One definition of "chorus" is a body of singers who perform choral compositions, but another definition is "a simultaneous utterance by many voices" (*American Heritage* 156). The question here is that of merging. A chorus may sometimes sing the same words, the same notes, simultaneously. Yet many voices can sing without merging, as in the polyphonic singing of Georgian folk music. Bakhtin privileges the polyphonic in his theory of the novel. Aldo and Ava both dream of a "remote"—unattainable—"chorus of boys," a chorus wherein the voices both merge and do not merge. Ava's three husbands are such a remote chorus

of boys in the novel. Distinct characters who married her at different times, their utterances were not simultaneous, yet Ava hears them as if the song they are all singing is now a polyphonic, continuous present.

Ava seeks to recover Aldo in her memory, just as Aldo and she were "prolonging the world with song" (236). In the blessed syncope of supreme moments, Ava not only postpones her own death, but resists the deaths of Bernard and Aldo. Syncope "deceives death," Clement writes, "in all ways. By delaying the weak beat, excessively prolonging time, and by making it disappear subjectively, it pretends to delay progress toward the biological conclusion" (261). So the novel *AVA* deceives death, prolonging the world "excessively" with song on this final day. Aldo's last lover is a young composer named Andrew, who has also tested positive for the AIDS virus (*AVA* 200). It is Andrew who tells Ava, "you are a poet in your blood" (59) and with whom she composes an actual erotic song cycle that is performed in Rome (92). The AIDS virus and the poetry in her blood are linked to the rare blood disease that is now killing her. The musical enactment of the struggle between life and death, syncope "'attacks' the weak beat, like an enzyme, a wildcat, or a virus; and yet the last beat is the saving one. . ." (Clement 5). The "saving" aspect of the final strong beat, the last word, the triumphant end of a narrative that will redeem itself with meaning, is what we are waiting to hear. Yet by the end of *AVA*, readers are still suspended, waiting for the last strong beat. Viruses are lurking. The song cycle never ends. Like Aldo, Ava is building a cathedral with her voice, or rather, with the chorus of voices of which she is a part. She does not become an opera singer, perhaps because she discovers that her talent is not as outstanding as Aldo's, yet she embraces words and language by becoming a scholar of comparative literature. The words of operas, poems, and novels become a part of her



as she conducts a chorus of voices rather than a solo or monologue, constructing a cathedral in words, or what Julia Kristeva calls "the cathedral of memory we call art" (152).

### III. Francesco Guilini: "*if you die*"

Ava leaves Parma after two or three years to study comparative literature, possibly at the University of Genoa in 1970, and definitely in Rome by 1971, when she is twenty. Rome is where she meets the first of her three husbands, Francesco Guilini, an Italian director not unlike Federico Fellini. Both first names begin with F, and their last names rhyme. The marriage ends in divorce because neither he nor Ava could remain faithful. Yet Ava still has strong feelings for him. The Francesco story is a mixed analepsis, because Ava's relationship with him began long before the present narrative, yet extends into the present (Genette 49). Francesco is a balding yet curlyheaded filmmaker of forty, twenty years older than Ava. They meet in Rome while Francesco is making a film of Dante's *Inferno*, and this is part of the attraction (*AVA* 12; 31). Ava is studying literature, and Francesco is bringing one of her (and Maso's) beloved works to the screen. Francesco is the only husband for whom Ava sings, possibly because she meets him soon after her operatic studies have ended, and possibly because he makes a film of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Francesco is mentioned on the first page of the novel in a recurring fragment: "You spoke of Trieste. Of Constantinople. You pushed the curls from your face" (3). On the next page begins the first of many repetitions of the line "He bounded up the sea-soaked steps" (4). Francesco bounded up those steps on the day he proposed to Ava in Venice in 1976. A fuller version of the story, a "completing analepsis" that fills in some of the gaps, occurs later. It was Christmas Eve day. He has brought her "the fruits of the sea" and lays these "jewels of the sea" at her feet. "The green light of the lighthouse, snow on the beach. . . . Will you marry me?" (243;

see also 38). This day was one of the most important in Ava's life, a moment of syncope that does not stop. She returns to it again and again in her mind on the day of her death.

Throughout the novel, images of Ava and Francesco recur. They spend their honeymoon on Crete (3, 12, 211). They were sexually compatible and their time together was beautiful to Ava (127, 128; 190). He views her as Beatrice to his Dante (35). With Francesco, she learns to try on different selves. Francesco loved masked balls and taught Ava to dress up in different costumes for sex (128). Then and now, he brings her turbans and wigs—emblems of the performed self. Later, when he is working on a film titled *War Requiem*, he sends Ava a helmet. They both construct identities through performances. In addition to their love of opera, they love to celebrate everything "with verve," including saints' days and other holidays (3). Ava celebrates Catholic holidays with Francesco because she finds his joyful exuberance attractive. Like many concentration camp survivors, Ava's parents were often silent, so damaged by their experience that they did not discuss it much and did not observe religious practices or holidays very passionately. Unlike the effusive Francesco, Ava's traumatized mother could not bring herself even to sing for years, and her father was terrified of a simple game of hide and seek. When Ava marries Francesco, she is attracted to Catholicism's pageantry, music and ritual performances.<sup>6</sup> The marriage does not last, both because her intelligence diminished her beauty in his eyes and because they had met their matches and could not be faithful to one another (69; 72-73). Yet they are still the "best of friends" who understand one another's need to be free (69). Their "promiscuity. . . suited our interior multiplicity" (176). He visits her in New York. She remembers a day in Chinatown when Francesco was happy because he had obtained both the financing and the lead actress he wanted for his next film. He takes Ava's hand and tells her he loves her. Outside, in the street, the scene is reminiscent of William Carlos Williams' early

poems, such as "The Great Figure": "rain, a yellow taxi cab. I love you" (*AVA* 6). The moment of the "I love you" is always fleeting, like the fire truck in the rain in Williams' poem;<sup>7</sup> yet Ava relives many such blessed moments with Francesco.

Her relationship with Francesco is filled not only with intense moments of syncope but also with a seamless collage of films, books, and other people. Yet despite the apparent freedom of their "interior multiplicity" and their performances of multiple identities, there is no escaping history. Francesco's wigs are linked to the shaved heads of the prisoners at Treblinka and the piles of human hair (34; 245). Bald herself now, Ava feels no separation between her present moment in 1990 and the past lived by others at Treblinka in 1942. The story of Treblinka, the present day in the hospital, and Francesco's love for her are all part of Ava's construction of identity. Despite her attraction to the rituals of Francesco's Catholicism, Ava remains a Jew.

The memory of Francesco evokes beautiful moments of desire, but Ava also realizes that death was part of that desire. "We are racing toward death, Francesco. We knew it even then," despite "our unstoppable bodies, our optimism" (84; 65). As she comes to terms with her own dying, it is to Francesco that she imagines speaking the words: "I am dying, maybe" (23, 63, 68). The caesura in that line reveals the naked power of the words, and Ava's resistance to their finality adds the "maybe." It is not herself that she is trying to reassure by adding the "maybe"; rather, it is Francesco who needs reassurance, despite his large Roman hands and his mature age (he is almost 60 now). Francesco cannot imagine a world without Ava in it. He also insists on the power of faith. He baptized her "long ago" during the night while she slept because "*if you parted . . . if you died*" (87). There is "a thin man Francesco insists can rise" (183). Ava imagines that Francesco "baptizes me again and again with tears and holy water from Rome, because, *if you die*" (184). Francesco appears to visit Ava as she is dying and asks her to marry him again

(242). He makes "desperate promises I surely would never have otherwise heard: *if you live—*" (106). In these incomplete sentences, in what Francesco can't say, we understand much. Ava imagines or recalls telling him in a letter, "Much is expressed in the interval. Do not worry so much about our silences when they come. I hear you even then" (248). She knows that he is weeping "off-screen" for her (233). She wants Francesco with her at the end of her life, to take her hand, to "pull the infamous plug, if necessary" because he was the great love of her life (242).

She imagines that Francesco tells her "there is a lovely almond tablet on my tongue. By the time it has dissolved, I am in heaven./ Stop scaring me./ Ava Klein goes to heaven?" (106) The tablet echoes the "burnt almonds" and other *dolci* she once enjoyed with Francesco, but even then something "was conspiring against" them, and this almond tablet tastes like cyanide (4). The line, "Stop scaring me" is ambiguous. Francesco is frightened of her death, but Ava wants Francesco to stop scaring her with the idea of a Christian heaven. As a Jew, she believes in the miracle of this earth. When she and Francesco were in Venice, they walked "on water" although it was only "for one night" (110, 112, 184). This is enough, for Ava. "And I am happy for any of this. That we lived at all" (83). For Jews generally, belief in the "here," not in the "hereafter," is crucial. Although modern Jews do tend to view the soul as immortal, their primary concern is not with preparing for heaven but with celebrating life and with *tikkun*, or repairing the world. Ava "came to celebrate. To praise" (208). She seeks Cixous' "language that heals as much as it separates" (52) as a way of repairing the world.

#### IV. Anatole Forget: "Flying"

While Francesco appears in both the past and the present, the analeptic story of Anatole, Ava's second husband, remains external, because he has died several years before the present narrative. The marriage to Francesco ends by 1979, and Ava marries Anatole in 1980. Anatole is the son of a World War I French fighter pilot who served bravely and who went mad as a result of post-traumatic stress (an echo, perhaps, of Virginia Woolf's character Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*). His father later commits suicide (in the same manner as Woolf). Anatole's father was thirty-five years older than Marie Claude, Anatole's mother (135). Marie-Claude did not marry out of love, but duty. Later, Marie-Claude has a lifelong lesbian relationship with a British woman named Emma, and this relationship takes on great importance in the novel despite the relatively few references to it.

Anatole reacts nervously to lesbianism. Ava meets him after she has left Italy and gone to France to "continue my work on Sarraute, Duras, Wittig, Cixous. This made him nervous and we were married" (160). Anatole wanted "nothing to do with" the book Ava is writing on the great French women writers of the Twentieth Century. "He was unhappy even about Colette, a dead woman" (144). Anatole is "vague," "lonely" and "beautiful" (131; 142). He tells Ava that she has no idea what it is like to see your father in a straitjacket. His mad father and his mother's lesbianism may explain his nervousness about masculinity and femininity, and thus his hasty marriage to Ava, undertaken, apparently, in an effort to distract her from her true object in France, that of lesbian desire. Anatole's last name, ironically, is Forget. "I was Madame Forget. For awhile" (131).

Of course she does not "forget" anything. She recalls a few precious moments of syncope, such as carving their names at the tomb of Mary Magdalen at St. Maximin La Sainte

Baume in Provence (157). Ava also goes with Anatole to Carnaval, the winter festival, in "La Belle Province," another name for Quebec City, Canada. "'Ava Klein,' Anatole smiles, petting my feather headdress. 'You are a rare bird.' La Belle Province. 1980. Carnaval" (45). This is apparently where he proposes to her during late January or early February 1980, just before she turns 29. They marry in Paris (81). She takes him to New York for a visit, where he is determined not to be impressed, comparing Harlem to the Place Pigalle in Paris (104) with its thriving jazz clubs and its African-American community. He is "disappointed" because he doesn't see heroin addicts and hear sirens and gunshots in Harlem (104). A melancholy, nervous yet proud Frenchman, it is as though Anatole expects the world to disappoint him.

Later, Ava becomes pregnant. This, too, produces odd reactions in Anatole, who is frightened by Ava's "swollen breasts and belly" (237). Anatole is a pilot like his father, and his cynicism, partially in response to his father's madness, leads to a kind of devil-may-care recklessness. He leaves Ava to go on solitary journeys. His disappearance is ambiguous. She remembers that he spoke "only once, and in a whisper, of freedom and how much you needed the sky and good-bye" (20). She recalls how he looked "just before he put on his flying suit and waved good-bye" (29). Anatole goes to the island of El Tigre off the coast of Honduras. El Tigre is a volcanic island with great accumulations of ash, and Ava associates ashes with Anatole (131).<sup>8</sup> He is "unfrightened" when he frees himself "from the mystery that was his life. Flying" (142). He is supposedly flying over France when he disappears for good, "lost in the air in his one truly hopeful, joyful act" (131) by 1982 or 1983. Ava thinks of him, hidden from her in his "cloak of clouds" (29). She understands his need to be free, but she wishes that he had not disappeared: "Faire une autre chose, Anatole" (112, 144). Ava also loses the baby (81, 151; 237).

The loss of this baby haunts her throughout the novel: one of her few regrets is not having a child.

More important than her marriage to Anatole Forget is Ava's relationship with his mother, Marie-Claude. "It was your mother and her lover, Emma, whom I could not give up, never give up" (36). Ava continues her close friendship with Marie-Claude and Emma after Anatole's death (75). Perhaps as a parallel to her love of French women writers, Ava encounters in Marie-Claude a living example of feminine autonomy. Marie-Claude is also a widow who is not defined by her widowhood and thus a kind of model for Ava. Mother, widow, lesbian: Marie-Claude cannot be reduced to any narrow identity. There is nothing foreign to Ava in Marie-Claude's lesbianism. While Ava regrets not having had a child, her other main regret is that she did not act on the lesbian desire she experienced once while in Rome, when a beautiful woman visited her in Maria Regina's kitchen. Ava "could not keep my eyes off of" her. The woman says in English. "I am ravishing," instead of "ravenous" or "famished," and laughs at her mistake. Ava wanted to tell the woman that she was indeed "ravishing," but did not, and instead merely blushed and looked down at her shoes (80). Years later, when she meets Marie-Claude and Emma, Ava understands more about lesbian desire and realizes that it, too, could be part of her constructed identity. "Why was it I hesitated?" Ava asks herself now, on her deathbed (80). Ava associates the expression of lesbian desire with joy and with female agency. Ava admires Marie-Claude's ability to affirm and celebrate life despite tragedy. She empowered women during the war by teaching them to drive motorcycles—an image of mobility and freedom (68; 106). And Marie-Claude created a new life for herself with Emma. Ava is about to visit them when she is suddenly hospitalized. At the end of her life Ava imagines recovering and flying to the hopeful Marie-Claude (237-238). Like Anatole, Ava would become free by flying. She

announces that this song she sings on the day of her death, this novel, is for Marie-Claude, Emma and Anatole. "This is for you, Marie-Claude and Emma. This is for you, my dear troubled Anatole" (52). She dedicates her last thoughts to them because she "could not at the time get to you" (133). These thoughts must serve as a partial legacy in place of the baby she and Anatole lost. "These stories are for you, Marie-Claude, who, after the earth and its creatures, loves nothing more than the future" (67). Marie-Claude reinvented herself and chose happiness when she had the chance, and, like Ava, has not given up on repairing the world.

Ava will not "forget" Anatole, just as she cannot "forget" anything or anyone she has loved, just as she cannot "forget" the stories her parents have told her about their experiences during the Holocaust. Her memory is often the memory of trauma, of sudden or shocking loss, and repetitive post-traumatic symptoms can be intergenerational (Brown 108). The distinction between traumatic memory and narrative memory is helpful in approaching *AVA*. Traumatic memory, the emotional re-experiencing of a traumatic event, is a solitary activity, "inflexible and invariable" and with "no social component; it is not addressed to anybody" (Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart 163). But narrative memory is a social act, and in it the telling of the story can be adapted to present circumstances. The fragmentary, syncopic, repetitive, dream-like structure of *AVA* may create the illusion of traumatic memory's characteristic isolation, but Ava herself is always imagining an audience, always addressing her fragments to someone. She cannot imagine herself existing alone; she is part of a network of relations.

#### V. Carlos: "I Want You Never To Die"

Ava's third husband was Carlos, a much younger man, whose story forms another external analepsis.<sup>9</sup> The analepsis is proleptic, because Carlos foresees Ava's death in a dream



before he meets her. Just as she met Anatole while in search of French writers, she meets Carlos when she travels to Granada, Spain, to retrace the steps of the poet Federico Garcia Lorca (82). She is searching for "a certain lost aspect" of Lorca, whose line "green. I want you green" she repeats frequently (127). She thinks Lorca would have liked Carlos, this "beautiful and carefree boy" who dances the flamenco (82; 125). At thirty-three, Ava experiences a "throbbing, a sexual awakening " (120). She refers to "blood-soaked" afternoons, her "blood-red" wedding dress and other images of red or bloody intensity with Carlos (120). Granada means "pomegranate," the red fruit. They are wedded "after a glance" (72; 120; 128; 209), traveling from Granada to Barcelona for the wedding (81). The date is in late February or early March 1984.

Soon after marrying him, Ava finds that Carlos is not only possessed by a "mysterious grief"; he is a person of "mute violence" who is "savage" and "doomed" as he proceeds to involve Ava in sadomasochistic sex (120). In sharp contrast to the expressive, creative Francesco, Carlos is unable to express himself except through suffering. He communicates with Ava primarily through sex, making her feel alive by feeling pain. "For months you cried./ And tied me to the bed./ And fucked me in every broken-down villa./ And lit candles. And prayed to Saint Jude." He dresses Ava in leather and gags and blindfolds her, all because he wants her "never to die" (209). She remembers every sexual act, every moment with him and understands the connection between pleasure and pain because of Carlos. "Pointed cactus that we bled by. Stop. Never stop./ Somehow, Carlos, you always knew. /Your conviction to live. To bleed. To sing" (159).

For Carlos, singing requires bleeding, and for a while Ava seems to have agreed with him. Her marriage to Carlos not only follows the death of Anatole, but also occurs close to the time of Aldo's death. Carlos is an appropriate partner for someone suffering from depression.

Ava appears to have repressed the loss of Anatole and of the baby, becoming truly "Madame Forget" so that she could survive and taking on another melancholy lover in an eerie repetition of the traumatic event. In order to remember, we must first forget, or repress that which is unbearable. Because we forget, we repeat the trauma, and finally, through the repetition, we remember. With Carlos, Ava explores a side of herself that is important to know but that represents only one aspect of her fluid identity. Still haunted by the loss of Anatole's baby, she imagines a child with Carlos, a child that would have been a mixture of many different blood lines: "Andalusian, Arab and Hebrew, Jew, Moor, and Gypsy" (128). As a native of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Spain, Carlos has Andalusian, Arab, and Moorish blood, in contrast to Ava's Hebrew, Jewish, and Gypsy blood. Both Moors and Jews were persecuted in this part of Spain. In the spring of 1492, shortly after the Moors were driven out of Granada, so were the Jews, ending one of the largest and most distinguished Jewish settlements in Europe. It is ironic that Ferdinand and Isabella, who drove the Moors and the Jews out of Granada, also funded Christopher Columbus's voyage to America, the land to which Ava Klein's parents would emigrate after being persecuted by the Nazis four centuries later. Part of Ava's fascination with Carlos is another of her many efforts to construct a network of relations that rewrites history. But Ava realizes that it would be a mistake to have a child in a marriage wherein one partner was so addicted to suffering. Perhaps because of the suffering her parents lived through in Treblinka, Ava, who refers to herself as a "gypsy" and "a wandering Jew," does not share Carlos' tragically self-destructive streak (81). She "came to celebrate," after all (208). She tells him that "all along I have just wanted to live" (209). She has never wanted to suffer (57-58).

After a brief marriage, lasting from 1984 until perhaps 1986, Ava leaves Carlos because she can no longer bear to be with him. "Your mood changes, Carlos, and in a moment what was

sunny and bright and endless days without worry or care is suddenly black, fearsome, irrevocable night" (226-227). Ava also said horrible things to him (209). In leaving him, she experiences a kind of joy. "In Spain, in a golden square, she sang for joy, as she let him go./ Handed him back his crown of thorns. His leash. His too short leash" (60). The crown of thorns and his prayers to Saint Jude indicate Carlos' addiction to a religion of suffering. His violent possessiveness, signaled by the "too short" leash,<sup>10</sup> doomed their short marriage. She stays in touch with him primarily regarding Ana Julia, his maternal grandmother (40). By 1988, Ava is back in France dancing with another man, and enjoying Carnival in Rio de Janeiro alone or with a new lover (6; 19; 45).<sup>11</sup> Forgiving Carlos and herself, she imagines him at her deathbed and says there is "[n]othing to regret now. Not even the child we kept putting off, Carlos" (130; 35).

Just as she formed a strong friendship with Anatole's mother, Marie-Claude, so Ava remembers Ana Julia, a puppeteer, an entertainer, with her two assistants (39). Ana Julia's imaginative performances and dreams are related to the novel's emphasis on memory, dream, identity and intersubjectivity. Like Ava, Ana Julia is gypsy-like, traveling from village to village, giving her performances. This mobility and freedom is important to both women. Ava imagines that Ana Julia's death may have taken place on the same day that Ava received the results of her own blood tests (32). Like Anatole, Ana Julia "flies" on the day of her death. After dreaming one night that her maid was stealing her blue satin wedding shoes, Ana Julia woke up "and flew down the street after her. . .like some great bird" because "where she was going, she needed those shoes" (31-32). The next day, probably sometime in 1988, Ana Julia dies at the age of 95.<sup>12</sup> Ava imagines the relatives and villagers grieving. Like Ana Julia, like Anatole, Ava, too, is flying. "I can see it all from here"— from her deathbed, in her mind (9). Throughout the novel

Maso juxtaposes the flying imagination against reminders of the limits of ordinary, linear time, or other limits, such as the image of Carlos' leash.

#### VI. Danilo Hanel: "Just say the words"

Danilo Hanel, a Czech novelist who escaped the Russians when he was twelve, is more capable than any of her husbands when it comes to facing death. He is the one who goes with her to the Dana Farber "Fancy Cancer" Institute in Boston (180). He reminds her that the present is indeed the only time they have: "what is wrong with now?" (87, 88, 190). Danilo Hanel is a novelist, who, like Ava, faces the limits of language and form. She has "saved his hopeful country for last" (45). Trapped in her deathbed, her body wasting away, Ava feels peaceful and free. Danilo has been searching for a similar freedom as an artist, a search that parallels his desire for Ava. Traveling from Europe to join her, he insists on speaking to Ava in person now, because a disembodied letter would not suffice. "I love you, Ava Klein. I have come many kilometers to tell you this in person" (212). When she asks, "[b]ut Danilo, how can I marry you now?" he replies, "[j]ust say the words out loud" (176). Danilo's advice to "say the words" in marrying him is the most powerful affirmation the book offers. Danilo marries her, or tries to, on the day of her death, fully aware that it is the day of her death.

In speaking the words of the marriage rite, Ava would be constructing a new identity, that of an Ava Hanel who can come into existence through language. Yet the text is ambiguous as to whether Ava speaks the words "I do" in response to Danilo. Throughout the novel Ava reenacts the marriage to Francesco. The full account of Francesco's proposal is followed by a space, and then the line, "I will" (243). Readers assume that this "I will" refers to her acceptance of Francesco's proposal on Christmas Eve day in 1976. And in a different context, when the line,

"Yes, I will. I do. I kiss you one thousand times," immediately follows a space and line referring to Danilo, it is tempting to believe that Ava says yes to Danilo (250). Such a logic of utterance and context frequently seems to be at work. The novel, however, cautions against the tendency to find meaning in such patterns. "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). This statement both rejects meaning and affirms the desire for meaning—a disturbing effect indeed, implying that the gruesome atrocities and traumas of the past may literally recur, and not just in memory. Even as the text denies responsibility for this meaning, the troubling *potential* for meaning remains. Such is the text's ambivalence. If we heed the warning to avoid reading adjacent sentences as related (utterances in their contexts), we cannot know for sure whether Ava says the words "I do" out loud to Danilo. When she says, "Maybe not right now," we still hope that she might say yes in another moment (202). We cannot help but "struggle to make meaning./ Where maybe there is none" (229). Ava must "say the words" of the novel as well, because the perceiving subject must bear witness, must both look at and speak of what he or she sees. A writer, Danilo understands all too well the abstractions of words and time. He repeatedly says that he will make "no apologies" for the experimental form of his novels. "And what has been left mysterious or unexplained is so because it is unknowable" (125). He asserts the freedom of the artist to disobey conventions, those harsh laws of form. *AVA* refers to many other writers and includes their voices in quotations throughout the novel. Borges, Goethe, Ingeborg Bachmann, Hélène Cixous, Samuel Beckett, Primo Levi, Rilke, Gertrude Stein, Monique Wittig, Virginia Woolf—the list goes on and on. Writing is also explored through the trope of flying. Primo Levi, Beckett and others fly. Ultimately, the images of flying are linked to death. When Ava imagines she sees Anatole "in

full flying regalia," she tells him, "But I'm not ready, Anatole" (108). Toward the end of the novel she thinks or says aloud, "Today I feel as if I might fly" and then is either told or tells herself, "You pick an odd time to feel like a bird, Ava Klein" (205). Indeed, death, or "the birdcatcher," is "near" and Ava can no longer imagine herself surviving (215; 182). Referred to as "a rare bird" by Anatole and others, Ava (*rara avis*) is like the Topaz Bird in *Ghost Dance* and many birds named as abominable in the harsh laws of that master narrative, the Bible. Many birds, including the eagle, the nighthawk, the owl and the vulture, as well as the stork, the pelican, and the heron, are named as "unclean" in the Bible. Hélène Cixous associates women and writing with this abomination. "Those who belong to the birds and their kind (these may include some men), to writings and their kind: they are all to be found . . . outside; in a place that is called by Those Bible, those who are the Bible, Abominable" (*Three Steps* 113). The abominable is always excluded from the master discourse, yet flies toward a language that "heals" as much as it "separates." Like Danilo, the abominable will make no apologies as it flies toward new forms. One way it flies is through syncope.

#### Conclusion: Flying, Syncope and the Reader

Ava's identity and the text's meaning is always just beyond the grasp of words, although I have attempted to show that the novel's intersecting plots are accessible. Within the present narrative, Ava notices larger historical events. She is aware of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the American response. Her dying day takes place thirteen days after the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and ten days after the American president, George Bush, has drawn his "line in the sand" (*AVA* 139; 143). Although the novel is ambivalent in its approach to patterns, the Gulf War is related to other wars in Ava's mind. She thinks of her parents in Treblinka during 1942-1943 and

of women of different races and ethnicities in history who opposed war and resisted oppression (251, 259, 263). The Iroquois women of 1600 who refused sex, the Filipino women standing in front of tanks, the South African women who knelt and prayed in front of the police all performed these deeds as bodied subjects resisting war and aggression. Limited by the constraints of their time and place in history, they responded out of what can only be described as hope and a belief in the future. The American president is part of a hegemonic discourse of extermination against those perceived to be "other." Drawing a line in the sand is one of many images of division in the novel, including chopped off hair, the leash, and the Berlin Wall: "[h]ome, before it was divided" (21). In contrast are images erasing or crossing lines. If someone is foolish enough to draw a line in the sand, then the sands of national and individual identities will shift, as will the rules of narrative. These shifting sands can illuminate the continuity between superficially distinct selves, countries, worlds.

Ava flies in her mind just as she has always flown across oceans and continents to encounter different aspects of herself. She is not only "rare" but is also a "molting bird" (64). A Jew, she has married Catholic husbands. She has slept with many men, including, potentially, a Nazi. She has loved her husbands' mothers and grandmothers. She has journeyed to Italy, France, Spain, Brazil, Mexico and Canada, yet only at the end of her life is she ready for Eastern Europe, where her parents are from. Germany itself she saved for last in her series of literary pilgrimages. This avoidance of spaces that resonate with her parents' traumas comes to mind when Ava asks, "What is this melancholy melody I have tried my whole life to keep at bay?" (162). It is the "irresistible music of the end" (174). In flying, she is moving into the realm of the dead, where she sees Anatole, Aldo, Bernard, Aunt Sophie, Uncle Sol, Ana Julia, and others. But this music of the end is neither tragic nor pessimistic. Finally, in her dreams on her dying day, she enters

into a new relation with life and death. Like Dante, who wrote the *Divine Comedy* as a dream vision, Ava tries to stop time by creating a "pure simultaneity" with no division between past, present, and future (Bakhtin 158). Yet unlike Dante, she will fail, or will not quite succeed, and in this failure, or this partial success, lies much of the novel's power. Dante's characters sought to escape the perfect but static, vertical hierarchy he had created for them and, to enter, like Ava, "mortal time" (*AVA* 212). The source of tension in Dante, Bakhtin said, is the "struggle between living historical time and the extratemporal other-worldly ideal . . . There is a contradiction, an antagonism between the form-generating principle of the whole and the historical and temporal form of its separate parts" (158). In *AVA*, the separate stories retain their temporal form, as I have tried to demonstrate, yet they also exist as part of an extratemporal pattern that is always already unraveling. The cathedral of memory that Ava builds in her dream vision is an open structure without hierarchies.

Julia Kristeva describes the "staggered time" of dreams as "neither timeless nor strictly linear, but something between the two: an intersection, a structure, a hypertrophy" (331). Such a dream-like state is also, of course, like the state of syncope, where the subject leaves the rational, ordered world of linear time. By leaving consciousness, syncope allows us to anticipate, although not to achieve, timelessness or immortality:

I leave the world, and then I return to it. I die, but I do not die. I am placed between the two, between life and death, exactly in the between-the-two, refusing one and the other. And that is how I dupe not only death but the difficult exercise of the *end of life* (Clement 261).

Ava Klein is engaged in the difficult exercise of the end of life. She is placed between life and death, and what we have in these 265 pages is the experience of that suspension. If the novel



seems "difficult" because it renders Ava's consciousness without explanations or markers, then that too is appropriate to the difficult exercise of the end of life. This difficulty is like the disturbance of syncope. Syncope "makes people temporarily afraid" because it "*is created to disturb the world*". Whoever falls into syncope is afflicted with harrowing torments that are the beginning of free play inside the self. But however terrifying it may be, it is cured, or rather, it cures" (Clement 260; italics mine). Syncope is what allows Ava to see Treblinka as though she was there, to experience the harrowing torments of her parents. This "free play" inside the self also allows the disparate threads of a life to become braided. "It was not my purpose to bring them so close together: Francesco, Danilo, Carlos, now Anatole" (181) The gaps between them are simply part of the larger music that constitutes the intersubjectivity of the phenomenological world.

Perhaps Ava is overreaching to build a cathedral of memory as an open structure that excludes nothing. "Accuse me again, if you like, of overreaching" (217), she says. Like Danilo, she will make no apologies. This "new cathedral" built by a Jew opens up the "memory of sensory time" (Kristeva 170). To be alive is to be conscious of all that has been lost, and to be conscious of the lost is not to be sad. Rather, it is to live fully. "To walk on this earth with you. To hold your hand" (*AVA* 228). At the end of Ava's life, there is pain, but not suffering (212). Only by a willingness to experience the intersubjective—and wounding—phenomenological world, and to break free of linear time, can we embrace those ghosts, those absences just beyond the power of fractured, partial language. "Memories blend. Memories fail in the end" (144). The dead, the lost must be sought in a language that ultimately cannot name them. And so Maso's words become themselves talismans of loss, cries of the heart, sounds of diminishing referentiality.

These enigmatic sounds and silences are at the heart of *AVA's* syncope, a movement in counter time that opposes death as well as the limits of language and narrative by involving the reader as co-creator. Maso refers indirectly to the Foucauldian death of the author and elicits active interventions by the reader. "The poem demands the demise of the poet who writes it and the birth of the poet who reads it" (*AVA* 65). *AVA* demands that readers become part of the chorus of voices. When she recalls the first line of the Emily Dickinson poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" (228), Ava recites only the first clause, and not the second. Readers must complete the remaining clause. Yet most readers will resist. Ava makes us complicit in her death by asking us to inhabit that space, that silence, and to sing into it the three disturbing words we do not wish to say. As we hesitate to complete the line, we experience the reciprocal recognition that happens when the speaking subject speaks of what he or she sees to another. We "hear" the vibration, the beat, the buzz, that Ava hears. The fiction that is Ava's consciousness blends into our consciousness and the "anonymous visibility" that links individuals to the visible. (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 142). In that moment when we are both moving toward and resisting the completion of the Dickinson line, we are suspended in the short circuit of syncope. "Between life and death, only syncope opens the doors—and immediately closes them again" (Clement 198). The text depends on us, in an "extraordinary collaboration" that echoes Ava's collaboration with Andrew on the erotic song cycle (92). We thus enact the rhythm of *AVA*, and become, as readers, extraordinarily free. Shortly before recalling the Emily Dickinson poem, Ava thinks: "Today Danilo says he felt the form of his new book and the form did not betray him but set him free" (*AVA* 226). This freedom is the primary sensation that Ava experiences on her final day. The music of time in *AVA* is the open door, the arch in that airy cathedral that sets both writer and reader free.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The first page of the paperback edition makes the August 15, 1990 date explicit. It is possible that her birthday is Feb. 28. Andrew dates a letter on Feb. 28, 1990. He encloses a purim present. Purim commemorates Esther's deliverance of the Jews of Persia from massacre.

<sup>2</sup> I have discussed the relevance of Hélène Cixous's theories and of women's travel narratives to Maso's work in papers that I presented at the Midwest Modern Language Association Convention in November 1999 and at the Twenty-fifth Annual Conference on Film and Literature in January 2000. These papers, as well as the present essay in different form, will be included in my study of Maso's novels, to be published in 2001 by Peter Lang.

<sup>3</sup> Sophie (and not Rachel) was pregnant, according to Maso, in an interview, 3 April 2000.

<sup>4</sup> In the same interview (3 April 2000), Maso clarified that Bernard Reznikoff and Bernard Goldberg are the same character. The reference to Goldberg on p. 66 was a mistake that she did not catch in the galley proofs.

<sup>5</sup> Cathedrals and ladders recur throughout Maso's novels, as I have indicated in two papers that I presented at the Midwest Modern Language Association Convention in November 1999. Different versions of these papers will appear in my forthcoming study of Maso's novels.

<sup>6</sup>Maso, in another interview (2 August 2000), explained that Ava's parents, Philip and Rachel Klein, were like many Holocaust survivors who practiced a "cult of silence" about it, and that they also did not raise Ava in an actively religious household. Ava is thus drawn to Francesco's practice of Catholicism for its beautiful pageantry, even though she does not convert. Maso said that the references to celebrating holidays, including saints' days, "with verve" are linked to Francesco.

<sup>7</sup>The comparison to William Carlos Williams is not arbitrary. Maso quotes from "The Great Figure" in *The Art Lover* and has discussed her deep admiration for Williams, a poet from her native Paterson, New Jersey. See her essay "The Shelter of the Alphabet: Home."

<sup>8</sup>Ash also has other connotations, such as death and rebirth, and is perhaps an echo of the Treblinka motif. Maso frequently uses images of fire in her novels. In *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*, completed just before *AVA* was written, though published afterward, the narrator imagines herself and the world on fire. Although the line "We lost the baby, Anatole" on 237 could have been spoken to a living Anatole, Maso believes that Ava loses the baby after Anatole has already disappeared. She is writing more about this in *Bay of Angels* (Telephone interview, 2 August 2000).

<sup>9</sup>The book jacket on the hardcover edition refers to Carlos as a "teenager."

<sup>10</sup>The metaphor of the leash returns in Maso's acknowledgments in *Defiance*, where she thanks her editor, Carol DeSanti, for "the length of the leash." Maso thus ironically implies that for a

wild creature such as an artist (or a rare bird, such as Ava) a leash may be necessary, but that it should be long enough to allow for plenty of slack. Carlos' role is taken up in more extreme fashion by the narrator of *Defiance*.

<sup>11</sup>According to Maso, Ava and Carlos divorced before 1988, when Ava goes back to France and to Rio de Janeiro. She is either alone in Rio or with another lover, who "could be anyone" (Interview, 3 April 2000).

<sup>12</sup>I conclude that Ana Julia died in 1988 because several items in the text indicate that she died after Ava and Carlos are divorced, because it is conceivable that in 1988 Ava received her first test results, and because of the date on a container of guandu. When the relatives can finally bear to make Ana Julia's favorite food again, the guandu (made from the pigeon pea, grown in the Caribbean, India, Panama and Brazil) had expired in 1989.

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