



2007

A Feminist Discourse on Carole Maso's *AVA*

Courtney Holden '07

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Holden '07, Courtney (2007) "A Feminist Discourse on Carole Maso's *AVA*," *The Delta*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/delta/vol2/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

A Feminist Discourse on Carole Maso's *AVA* Courtney Holden

Deviating from traditional literature in both style and structure, Carole Maso's contemporary novel *AVA* presents the story of a dying woman in a sensually rhythmic, poetic style. Memories return to Ava Klein, professor of comparative literature, world traveler, lover and friend as she lies helpless in her hospital room. But Maso's prose does not recount each tale in easily understood chronological or thematic order. Instead, the text is a compilation of Ava's recollections; fragments of each memory intermingle. Like a quilt lovingly woven together, the story begins incoherently and ends with devastatingly beautiful understanding. Maso, however, does not claim stylistic innovation. Highly reminiscent of French "écriture féminine,"¹ *AVA* draws extensively from the works and theory of Hélène Cixous. Maso escapes the traditional masculine form and assumes a more feminine freedom of space and substance.

Verena Conley describes the theory present in Cixous's work: "The insistence is on movement, not stasis. Speech is never all rational, scientific. Always becoming, it never becomes the system, the recipe to be applied" (Conley 6). Similarly, Maso's *AVA* is fluid, continually advancing towards the narrator's end. Most obvious are the titled sections of the text—Morning, Afternoon, Night. As instructed by Cixous, Maso's work does not settle in a single place, time or moment. It moves constantly. But this progression is not always forward toward a specific initiative or goal. The focus, rather, is upon equilibrium, as if the text sought an equalizing, though never stagnant, flow. Maso illustrates that fluidity superbly when she describes the process through which Ava learns to spell her name. In the beginning Ava remembers, "The child practices the letter A. Make a mountain peak. And then cross it. A" (Maso 62). Later:

The girl draws the letter K.

The letter L. (90)

Nearing completion, "The lovely V at the end of the alphabet" (229). And finally:

The girl draws an A. She spells her name:

AVA. (265)

As a child, Ava learned to draw her letters and formulate them into coherent words. Slowly, she learns the process of communication: single letters, the alphabet, then an entire word. Maso shows how the child grows and learns to articulate. Ava, by penning her name, establishes herself in the world. On that physical level, as a child growing into an adult, the character “moves.” Maso also creates movement on that most fundamental level, the simple letters in her name, their beautiful fluidity: A-V-A. The letters progress from the beginning of the alphabet to nearly the end, and then back once more to the beginning. Maso has followed Cixous’s analysis of names— “Grâce à ce nom j’ai su très tôt qu’il y avait un lien charnel entre le nom et le corps. Et que le pouvoir est redoutable parce qu’il se manifeste au plus près des secrets de la vie humaine, à travers la lettre”² (Cixous 32). Maso illustrates the movement between body and person on the most basic level of the communication. Simulating the rocking motion of a boat on water, the rhythmic A-V-A lulls the reader into the pacific ideal of Cixous’s feminine writing.

That same concept of fluidity reappears throughout the novel, taking many different forms. Within each section, the memories are not from single blocks of Ava’s life. The text cannot be separated into childhood and adulthood:

Danilo reads me a letter from his father far away.

Ready or not. (224)

It cannot be distinguished by her time in Greece, her time in France, her time in New York:

At the next table, talk of Greece.

Still cheap... Feta cheese.

I could not as it turns out get on a plane to France, or Germany, or any plane, that day. Rare blood disease, demanding as the doctor said, *immediate action*.

New York. (33)

Rather, the moments flow into one another. Memories span months and years. Maso refuses stagnancy, interspersing individual moments at the height of passion,

Fax me.

Fax me harder. (102)

with tepid instances in the hospital: "What do you want, Ava Klein?" (73). Where her lover knows her intimately, the hospital staff refers to her by her full name. Life's multiple aspects coalesce; different times, different places and different people are all remembered in an unspecified order. What gives an author the right to separate each particular memory into paragraph form? Maso superbly creates the wave-like motion appreciated by Cixous, a perpetual rising and falling from the brink of consciousness all those happenings and individuals that made an impact on the narrator's life.

And that does not mean that each of these individuals was known personally. Not only is there a combining of time and space and an integration of characters who knew Ava on varying levels of intimacy, but Maso also includes as memories brief passages of musicians' program notes, excerpts from other literature and lines of poetry. Among them, Garfein, "The last movement begins with a slow introduction in F# minor. There follows an allegro in A major;" from Jorge Luis Borges's *Atlas*, "You will use up the number of times assigned to you to articulate this or that hexameter and you will go on living;" and the sardonically ironic line by Emily Dickinson, "I heard a fly buzz," which references her poem about a dying woman (Maso 220, 141, 228). As a whole, one sees the flow between various forms of artistic creation, whether music, fiction or poetry. Individually, each line reflects a similar suggestion of movement. There is the progression of chords, the utilization of resources and finally, the noisy, flying insect. The objective of interlacing so many facets of creative expression lies in their representation of the feminine: "The otherness of female desire is the basis of the otherness of female language. Just as a 'woman has sex organs just about everywhere' (p. 103), so her language is non-linear and incoherent, and incomprehensible to male language, with its focus on the logic of reason" (Weedon 64). Perhaps the suggestion of male incomprehension is rather extreme, but Weedon's point still resonates in Maso's compilation from numerous sources. The non-linearity and incoherence associated with the feminine are undeniably

present in *AVA*. She does not focus on a particular order, opting instead to center her novel on the particular moments as they surface in Ava's consciousness.

However, to imply that the text remains truer to its lack of consistency than to an ultimate ability for the reader to understand would be to undermine both that reader's ability to piece the text together, as well as the consideration with which it was constructed. Often, when a line appears to be a lonely thought, seemingly inexplicable, after sifting through the novel and piecing them together, the lines form comprehensible, nearly unbearably beautiful memories:

He bounded up the sea-soaked steps. (4)

You have Italy in your soul, Ava Klein, Francesco said on the night he proposed. He bounded up the sea-soaked steps. (38)

He bounded up the sea-soaked steps. (171)

The reader gleans throughout the story what each line references. Thus, it truly is the text as a whole that matters to Maso. She cares extremely for the overarching effect of her scattered prose. Cixous wrote, "Mon corps est mots,"³ and lamented that though women have not taken great part in writing history, it is, undeniably, "figée dans la mémoire du corps femelle"⁴ (Cixous 63). If Cixous considers her body to be composed of words, would it not then follow that words together form a body; that Maso's text, though out of chronological order and seemingly unsystematic, is also a body? That, though unobvious, the necessary pieces for a comprehensive literary oeuvre are present and do function in an untraditional way to create a traditional form of expression, that of writing? Certainly. In *AVA*, Maso explores a feminine approach to a historically masculine art.

An interesting question, however, rises to the forefront: Maso's *AVA* does not appear to have been "written." Composed as a series of scattered memories, the book is more "thought" than "writing." It could be inferred that Maso distances herself from what Cixous instructs as if afraid to fully commit to the recreation of a history, even though the "history" is actually someone's life; as if she were afraid to completely abandon the acknowledged and masculine trends in writing. More probably,

Maso's decision to create a novel of "thoughts" was not from lack of gumption, but lack of need. The beauty of *AVA* is that the plot moves forward, but the individual words themselves also move. By extracting the chronological element of a story, Maso takes out the domineering, and suggestively masculine, narrative power. As complicated as life itself and as fragmented as the memories which make that life worth living, *AVA* captures the movement and complicated irrationality which Cixous first suggested: "Et à la femme... Il y a tant de frontières, et tant de murailles, et à l'intérieur des murailles, d'autres murailles"⁵ (Cixous 11). For women, there are frontiers, so many walls within walls.

Maso represents those walls in two ways. As explained above, the story's chronological order is disturbed. Like the beautiful tangle of a spider's web, the reader jumps from memory to memory. More obvious visually, however, are the open spaces between lines. Ava even mentions them directly—"The spaces between words. Between thoughts. The interval"—solidifying their importance (Maso 171). Western feminist criticism would interpret those gaps as Maso's illustration of female oppression: Ava has a desire to assert herself, yet cannot form the words, leaving instead only silence, absence and a lack of fulfillment. Conversely, Monica Berlin argues that that space speaks in itself: "Maso turns silence into something that heals" (Berlin "Approaches"). Though lying in a hospital bed, awaiting her end, Ava does not hurriedly scribble out a memoir; she does not dictate her story to another in the hopes of concretely preserving her experiences in life. Those gaps are the unremembered events, hovering on the edge of her consciousness, not quite recognizable enough to bubble into memory. So many people, places, foods, sayings must have been left out. Ava remembers:

If you had one wish.

Blow out the candles. (170)

How could two phrases completely illustrate a perfect memory? By intermixing white space with black text, Maso combines the concrete with the abstract and thereby furthers the metaphor of the difference between the traditionally rational masculine method of writing and the softer, more abstract tendencies of feminine writing.

This feminine technique correlates with another of Cixous's notions. In her explanation of what composes a human mind, she writes: "Toutes les personnes que je me surpréends à être à la place de moi, mes innommables, mes monstres, mes hybrides, je les exhortais au silence"⁶ (Cixous 36). Maso's deliberate interruptions in the text substitute as Ava's own "unnameables," her "monsters," her "hybrids." Silence is a representation of the unspeakable. Like a compilation of the colored spectra into white light, those memories too painful to remember coherently block together to form the empty space between the words. Ava never elaborates on the loss of her child:

Your lips, Anatole. Your silence. Source of all superstition, storytelling, invention, source of all mystery, for awhile. (82)

She praises her husband, but ends the first line with the implication that their relationship would end. Then nothing; no elaboration:

We lost the baby, Anatole. (82)

An onslaught of pain must have accompanied that statement. But again, simplicity followed by silence.

Green, how much I want you green, green wind, green Branches... (83)

And finally a complete change of subject. From death to a vivid description of life and nature. Maso does not attempt to recreate the unimaginable pain that follows the loss of a child; instead, she inserts white spaces that sufficiently embody that tremendous suffering. But after this devastation, Maso inserts a line that suggests Ava's movement past her hardship. The final line's reference to "green," its suggestion of life, alters the focus and shows that Ava is a survivor.

Similarly, those silences are yet another method in which Maso strays from traditional literature and follows the feminine forms of Cixous. Ava recognizes Cixous's rejection of typical structure, directly quoting,

You will have literary texts that tolerate all kinds of freedom—unlike the more classical texts—which are not texts that delimit themselves, are not texts of

territory with neat borders, with chapters, with beginnings, endings, etc., and which will be a little disquieting because you do not feel the

Border. (Maso 113)

So much of what Maso looks to accomplish with *AVA* is built into this single quote. Notice the overall irony: how fitting that Maso should fragment a passage describing fragmentation, that her own novel is an example of the type of “literary text” here described. *AVA* does not have the tidiness of chapters, specific beginnings and endings or borders found in “classical texts.” Maso’s character is a representation of a female exploring the feminine right to exist in a traditionally masculine world. Ava is dying, but she does not know specifically *when* she will die; her memories are scattered; her level of consciousness wavers. Ava’s condition mimics that of feminine literature with its instability and lack of boundary. Maso’s Ava personifies what Cixous believes to be the feminine form of writing.

But Ava is also representative of what Cixous defines to be a believable person in a fictive work. In “A Realm of Characters,” she expounds that “with her fiction she can allow the ‘meaning’ of her writing to ‘gather slowly’—giving the reader of her text ‘the whole of eternity if she wishes’” to understand her characters (Blyth 56). For the duration of the novel, the scattered text illustrates Maso’s method for “gathering meaning slowly.” Memories recur, but to understand them takes patience. The reader must put time into allowing them to coalesce into comprehensible descriptions. Unlike the reader, however, Ava Klein does not have eternity. Her time is limited; her future nearly gone. And yet, a sense of eternity is created as she spins the tales that have lived in her for so many years and will continue to live in those who survive her. On some occasions, her memories are tragic, and though from a different time, now correspond to the fear she feels toward death:

All the stars going out.

I looked up and they were gone. (149)

Ava knows that the finality of life will soon manifest itself in her death, yet her final words are those which allude to an extension of life:

A throbbing. A certain pulsing.

You are ravishing. (265)

Repetitive motion; beauty—though dying herself, Ava does not forget the ultimate splendor of life and its holistic circularity. She feels the last efforts of her body; she remembers how the lovely woman thought she had misspoken, but how Ava herself heard the truth in her words. Both lines are reminiscent of what Cixous associates with the feminine. Obviously Ava herself is female, but that awareness and connection with her outer shell correspond to Cixous's connection of words with the body. The misspoken "You are ravishing" is an illustration of the supposed irrationality of the feminine form. What is seen as unintelligible by the traditional form is actually completely comprehensible, simply on a different and deeper level.

Sandra M. Gilbert calls Cixous a "voice crying in the wilderness... dancing, laughing, shrieking, crying... It is the voice of a woman, newborn and yet archaic, a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced but savage" (Gilbert ix). The French author has analyzed the numerous facets of writing as a woman, making note of the obstacles a female must overcome to find her place either within or beyond the masculine tradition. Cixous knows that that feminine voice is ready to be awakened. New to the world yet old in the world, both nurturing and aggressive, previously repressed but ready to make itself known, Cixous acts as a pioneer in feminine literature, and Maso uses her as a guide. Ava is a whisper of that voice in the wilderness:

We danced as the planets. (112)

I mean—what is the word—famished, starving,
ravenous—She laughs. (80)

One climax after the next. (120)

My heart is breaking. (136)

Her memories reflect dancing, laughing, shrieking and crying. Maso draws from the feminine mystique dictated by Cixous and creates a poignantly beautiful literary oeuvre. *AVA* is unlimited, undefined, unfathomable—soft, gentle, yet mysterious and unrelenting: a female enigma in a literary context.

Notes

¹ “gendered women’s writing”

² “Thanks to this name I knew very early on that there was a connection between the name and the body. And that the power [of this connection] is unquestionable because it manifests itself closest to the secrets of the human life, through the letter.”

³ “My body is words.”

⁴ “manifested in the memory of the female form”

⁵ “And to woman... There are many borders, and many walls, and inside these walls, more walls.”

⁶ “All the people that surprise me by being in my place, my unnameables, my monsters, my hybrids, I exhort them to the silence.”

Works Cited

- Berlin, Monica. "Approaches to Carole Maso's AVA." *A Casebook on Carole Maso's AVA*. Ed. Monica Berlin. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005.
- Blyth, Ian and Susan Sellers. *Hélène Cixous : Live Theory*. London : MPG Books Ltd, 2004.
- Cixous, Hélène; Madeleine Gagnon and Annie Leclerc. *La Venue à l'Écriture*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977.
- Conley, Verena Andermatt. *Hélène Cixous : Writing the Feminine*. USA : University of Nebraska Press, 1984.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. Introduction. *The Newly Born Woman*. By Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément. Trans. Betsy Wing. Theory and History of Literature, vol 24. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. ix-xviii.
- Maso, Carole. *AVA*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1993.