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A Feminist Discourse on Carole Maso's AVA

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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 feminine,” *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 tot 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." (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.

want, Ava Klein?" (73). Where her intimately, the hospital staff refers name. Life's multiple aspects could different places and different people remembered in an unspecified order author the right to separate each paragraph form? Maso superbly creates motion appreciated by Cixous, a person falling from the brink of conscious happenings and individuals that make narrator's life.

And that does not mean that each known personally. Not only is there space and an integration of character varying levels of intimacy, but Maso brief passages of musicians' program literature and lines of poetry. Among movement begins with a slow intro, follows an allegro in A major;" from Atlas, "You will use up the number articulate this or that hexameter and the sardonically ironic line by Emil buzz," which references her poem a 220, 141, 228). As a whole, one sees forms of artistic creation, whether race or genre.

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representation of the feminine: "This is the basis of the otherness of female language is non-linear and incoherent, male language, with its focus on the 64). Perhaps the suggestion of male extreme, but Weedon's point still r

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to draw her letters and formulate them slowly, she learns the process of letters, the alphabet, then an entire word. Ava grows and learns to articulate. A va, establishes herself in the world. On that growing into an adult, the character states movement on that most simple letters in her name, their beautiful letters progress from the beginning of the end, and then back once more to the allowed Cixous’s analysis of names—très tôt qu’il y avait un lien charnel entre le pouvoir est redoutable parce qu’il est des secrets de la vie humaine, à plus 32). Maso illustrates the movement on the most basic level of the rocking motion of a boat on V-A lulls the reader into the pacific ideal writing.

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,” and lamented that though women have not taken great part in writing history, it is, undeniably, “figée dans la mémoire du corps femelle” (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 without the plot moves forward, but the interest also move. By extracting the chronology, Maso takes out the domineering, narrative power. As complicated as the memories which make that captures the movement and comp frames Cixous first suggested: “Et à la fenêtre ent tant de muraill es, et à l’intérieur des muraill es” (Cixous 11). For women many walls within walls.

Maso represents those walls above, the story’s chronological chronology, the beautiful tangle of a spider’s web memory to memory. More obvious open spaces between lines. Ava et “The spaces between words. Between solidifying their importance (Maso’s criticism would interpret those gaps) female oppression: Ava has a desire form the words, leaving instead of fulfillment. Conversely, Monica speaks in itself: “Maso turns silent (Berlin “Approaches”). Though by awaiting her end, Ava does not hol she does not dictate her story to a concretely preserving her exper unremembered events, hovering over consciousness, not quite recognize memory. So many people, places, been left out. Ava remembers:

If you had one wish.

Blow out the candles. (17)

How could two phrases complete:

By intermixing white space with concrete with the abstract and the difference between the traditional method of writing and the softer, feminine writing.
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 frontiers, et tant de muraillés, et à l’intérieur des muraillés, d’autres muraillés” (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 Cixious's notions. In her explanation of what composes a human mind, she writes: “Toutes les personnes que je me surprends à être à la place de moi, mes innommables, mes monstres, mes hybrides, je les exhorteai au silence” (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 border beginnings, endings, etc., disquieting because you c

Border. (Maso 113)

So much of what Maso looks to as into this single quote. Notice the c Maso should fragment a passage c her own novel is an example of th described. AVA does not have the beginnings and endings or borders. Maso’s character is a representative feminine right to exist in a tradition dying, but she does not know specific memories are scattered; her level c Ava’s condition mimics that of fet instability and lack of boundary. N c Cixous believes to be the feminine.

But Ava is also representative a believable person in a fictive wo Characters,” she expounds that “w the ‘meaning’ of her writing to ‘g reader of her text ‘the whole of ete understand her characters (Blyth 5). A novel, the scattered text illustrates “gathering meaning slowly.” Mem them takes patience. The reader them to coalesce into comprehensin reader, however, Ava Klein does n limited; her future nearly gone. An created as she spins the tales that h years and will continue to live in thin some occasions, her memories are a different time, now correspond to th death:

All the stars going out.

I looked up and they were

Ava knows that the finality of life with her death, yet her final words are the extension of life:
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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. A VA is unlimited, undefined, unfathomable—soft, gentle, yet mysterious and unrelenting: a female enigma in a literary context.

1 “gendered women’s writing”
2 “Thanks to this name I knew very connection between the name and the this connection] is unquestionable by closest to the secrets of the human li
3 “My body is words.”
4 “manifested in the memory of the t
5 “And to woman...There are many inside these walls, more walls.”
6 “All the people that surprise me by unnameables, my monsters, my hybrid silence.”
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From Midrashim to Merli: Jewish Commentaries in H. L. de France's Roman de Renee Sc...

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