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## The Feminine Expression in the Novel *AVA*

By Christina Kingen

In the genre of avant-garde literature, authors continuously push the boundaries of what we consider to be fiction. By utilizing unconventional forms, calling attention to the act of reading, and addressing issues often ignored in standard fiction, these contemporary writers look to catch the reader off-guard and push literature in new, uncharted directions. Carole Maso is one of these writers, and her novel *AVA* challenges such traditions. The novel itself is fragmented. Each sentence relates to a different thought in a dying woman's consciousness. We, as readers, question Ava's memories, fantasies, and realities, and then must make sense of it all in order to establish a view of her life and the novel as a whole. The ability of a fragmented language to accurately communicate Ava's most intimate thoughts is Maso's challenge and a reflection of her message. Not only does the specific disruption of every thought inhibit our understanding, but also the natural way that language is structured defines Ava's experiences and reactions. Societal forces have conditioned language, literature, and our personal response to reflect the masculine dominance of our culture. The influence and development through centuries of masculine thought contribute to the manifestations of preconditioned understandings of language and experience. As part of a genre that has been carefully cultivated to reflect a masculine image, Maso utilizes common misunderstandings of language and experience to more adequately reflect Ava's complex and very feminine sexuality. It is through this technique that Maso then enables *AVA* to be "a feminine text" (Maso 163). By questioning the capability of a masculine derived language to communicate the ideals of the feminine, Carole Maso creates an effective method of expressing a woman's sexuality.

Simone de Beauvoir said, "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient (one is not born woman, one becomes woman)" (qtd. in Conley 6).

Women are shaped by the world around them, and this thought is even more powerful when applied to fiction. The implication of this state-

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ment is that a character must become feminine and only does so through the definitions of a language created by the masculine. When a writer creates meaning it must appear through the interaction of heterogeneous elements, the male and female (Stirling 940). With the creation of a female narrator, the inner femininity of Ava is subject to male domination because it is through language that the author communicates and the readers find meaning. When a woman is an intermediary through which meaning appears, one may assume that the male and female elements unite. However, this coming together only occurs by submitting the female character within a masculine method of communication (Stirling 941). Maso does not sacrifice Ava in order to produce a state of masculine-influenced meaning. Within Ava, Maso recognizes the many challenges of expressing femininity and conquers it by using unconventional methods of communicating, or, perhaps more importantly, disrupting that communication.

This problem arises in the use of Ava, a woman, as a first person narrator. Her only method of connecting with the reader is through language. How can the reader correctly interpret a character's sexuality if her direct method of communication is inadequate and derived from the experiences of the opposite sex? When a concept is verbalized, all ideas that the concept tries to convey are halted, and what remains is merely a concrete masculine impression of a nebulous and feminine thought. The verbalization interrupts those concepts of the narrator (Conley 146). Consequently, Maso has the challenge of verbalizing the intimate feelings of her woman narrator without sacrificing the intent of her thoughts. In order to write in the feminine to convey that feminine, certain critics argue for the deliberate removal of sexual stereotyping. One argument works to reject all symbols of the feminine that are objectifying (Harris, "Emancipating" 182). Ava, herself, seems aware of this necessity and at one point says, "Feminine can be read as the living, as something that continues to escape all boundaries, that cannot be pinned down, controlled or even conceptualized" (Maso 160). The writer must find ways to transcend the traps of convention. One escape is the intentional application of the feminine as being outside a masculine dominated situation. This idea manifests itself by applying the concept of homelessness to that of feminism, resulting in an implication that the true aspect of feminism is a drift (Harris, "Emancipating"

182). Immediately, the application of this thought is clear. Ava is nomad. Having had three husbands and a multitude of lovers, she has spent her entire life traveling. In a way, she is outside the world of her lovers, who are all inscribed in a specific time and place. Yet, Ava transcends them all, adrift from each situation. In one instance, Ava is making love to one lover while simultaneously thinking about someone else (Maso 39). She does not regret her lack of attachment. In fact, she regrets not having taken every opportunity presented to her which would have allowed her feminine homelessness to move to a greater extreme. The position of a female narrator could comprise her quest for independence. If Ava had ever completely submitted to a single man, then Maso's intent to present a feminine text would have been compromised. Ava, as narrator, symbolizes the feminine moving outside the boundaries of male domination. She is never submissive, and the men in her life find her elusive. Because of Ava's position as an unattached nomad, masculine convention escapes her, and the text allows the reader to see unfiltered feminine as the voice, not a feminine interpreted through masculine distortion.

Moving away from Ava's position within her society, the novel also reflects Ava's perception of the human body. The term *écriture féminine* formulates the idea of intermingling the implications of language and body. Both represent desire, pleasure and pain. Maso asserts, "The body to me is interchangeable with language" (Harris, "Interview" 110). So we must ask the question: if Maso is concerned with the portrayal and sincerity of Ava Klein's sexuality, how does she write sexually? The very format of the novel suggests a breathless, intense urgency. Moving jaggedly from thought to thought, the interruption of sentences, the pace of a short line as compared to a paragraph, the shifting point of view, all move toward a single goal. This anticipated urgent ending is a giant climax, the orgasm of the book and the death of the narrator. Maso pulls the reader into a world of confusion and chaotic thought, but in the end, she leaves us speechless, as Ava was when she first heard, "You are ravishing!" (Maso 265). Discarding the traditional narrative form of fiction, Maso chooses to express the thoughts of Ava in almost poetic fashion. Helene Cixous argues, "The closest allies of us women are the poets. They are our friends. True, they are the ones who are furthest removed from anything

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decisive, cutting, and they let their femininity traverse them" (qtd. in Conley 152). As Maso/Ava often quotes Cixous' thoughts on the relationship between language and sexuality, Maso's use of a poetic structure supports many of the feminist implications that Cixous defines. The space between each thought allows the reader time to breathe, another essential function of the body that is now transposed into language. By utilizing the conventions of the body and applying them to the structure of the novel, Maso succeeds in manipulating an instinctively masculine way of communicating with the reader and effectively conveying the liberated feminine.

Simple misunderstandings within the text contribute to the effective portrayal of Ava's sexuality. When these instances occur, they signify the breaking away from traditional sexual experience and propel Ava into questioning what truly motivates and liberates her desire. Although the examples of this are numerous, I will focus on two general issues raised through the fallibility of direct communication. The first inhibits Ava from realizing the potential of her sexuality in the specific situation. Although Ava's lovers are numerous and ably satisfy her desire in that specific moment, proposals also occur that result in apathy or disgust from the woman. Through sexual innuendo or blatant suggestion, a masculine voice succeeds in repressing Ava's sexuality. The first is a simple catcall on the streets of Rome. Ava shows apathy: "Bellissima! He shouted to me from the tower, but I just shrugged, having heard it countless, maybe twenty times that day" (Maso 20). Instead of promoting sexuality, the reckless use of innuendo actually diminishes the power of suggestion. Ava is left empty, as the language loses its meaning to communicate sexual desire because of excessive repetition. In another instance, a professional bluntly accosts Ava: So I see you are into kinky sex, the advertising executive smirked the next morning, having gotten just the slightest intimation the night before. But something about 'kinky sex' bothered me. He had committed a sin of language and I never saw him again. (Maso 58) Ava herself admits the effects of the executive's insinuating and crude manner. Instead of promoting Ava's sexual response, he destroys the desire of the moment. What can these two examples illustrate about Maso's attempt to create a "feminine text"? Masculine communication is ineffective. Coupled with interaction, the ability of direct communi-

cation between male and female is radically compromised by language. Admittedly, these extreme situations do not occur in her committed relationships. However, in an interaction between two anonymous people, relying exclusively on a single moment of male dominated expression, meaningful communication is destroyed.

In a novel where traditional interaction is frustrated, Maso does provide instances where the unsaid or the misunderstood results in heightening a sexual situation. Again comparing Ava's interaction with two strangers, the results of these encounters promote the liberation of Ava's sexuality. However, they differ dramatically from the before mentioned instances, because they rely on the fallibility of language to communicate, and they involve women only. This results in a powerful message about the ability of silence/misunderstanding to propel sexual desire. In the first example, the situation is mentioned only once. The readers do not know who the woman is, or what happens to the relationship between the woman and Ava. "A woman. My age. Drenched. Standing over my bed. And who are you? I ask. She smiles and shrugs. I love her, whoever she is" (Maso 201). Words are not spoken by the mysterious woman. That silence effectively communicates, encouraging the intensity of feelings towards a stranger. Whether Ava had a sexual response or a platonic one, she did have a specific reaction that inspired emotion instead of repressing it. Another of Ava's experiences with women runs the course of the novel. Obviously an inspiring occurrence, Ava is transformed by the interaction and, in effect, her last words recall the woman.

The beautiful woman I couldn't keep my eyes off of, waltzes in the kitchen taking the lid from the pot and says I'm ravishing.

Yes, you are that, I wanted to say, but did not.

...

I mean—what is the word—famished, starving, ravenous- she laughs.

You are ravishing.

...

The beautiful and hungry woman. The steam rising from the spaghetti water.

Why was it I hesitated? (Maso 80)

The woman saying, unknowingly, that she was ravishing, places both in a provocative situation. Ava's sexual desire is awakened through a simple misunderstanding. It is this situation that occupies Ava's thoughts through her last day. A fallible communication between two women results in a truly feminine response: the uninhibited desire for another woman. But, we then must realize that both of these situations are nothing but fantasy for Ava. Although her sexuality was awakened by both, neither came to fruition by becoming significant "real" relationships. I believe this is deliberate on the part of Maso in recognizing the still dominant masculine reality in which these women are both involved. If Ava had certifiable relationships with other women, it would signify the liberation of language and the expression of feminine sexuality. The purpose of the novel is to question the ability of a language, distinctly masculine, to adequately communicate the desires of the feminine. No, masculine derived language fails this communicative transmission. Ava dwells on her lost opportunity with the Italian woman: "Why was it I hesitated?" and "Why did I hesitate" (Maso 81) and "You are ravishing" (Maso 265). If Ava could effectively communicate her desires, she would have had relationships with the beautiful women. However, she cannot and, in reality, she floats from one male lover to another. Her desires frustratingly point to the hungry woman. Marilyn Farwell suggests that the narrative positions of male and female are intertwined in such a way that they prevent the alliances of women (qtd. in Stirling 942). This supports the argument that Ava's position as narrator and her method of communicating with her audience frustrates her feminine nature. Had Ava not hesitated, then the reader could assume that communication, under masculine influence, adequately expresses her very feminine desire; this would frustrate Maso's desire to undermine language as an effective communicator.

It is Helene Cixous that says, "The ideal, or the dream would be to arrive at a language that heals as much as it separates. Could one imagine a language sufficiently supple, intense, faithful, so that there would be reparation and not only separation" (qtd. in Maso 163). In *AVA*, Carole Maso looks for ways to enable that dream to adequately express a woman's sexuality. Ava spends her life looking for meaning and experience. As she nears the end it is that which is found in the chances that she did not take, the words she did not speak, and the times she could not communicate. Outwardly, Ava is a part of a society that has been evolving in a significantly masculine way. Maso looks to challenge some of these very male conventions while propelling Ava into experiences that will shape her sexuality and empower her feminine nature. With a fragmented and disruptive form, Maso is able to communicate an entire life through the seemingly random moments of a dying woman's consciousness. Linking language and body creates a sincere and sensual portrayal of a sexual nature discovered through the course of Ava's life. By focusing on language, misunderstanding, silence, and one's response, we discover that Ava is inspired by the unexpected. The words that are not said, and the disdain for the ones that are, speak clearly to the role of language, and its inability to reflect the character's desire accurately. Ava is not satisfied with normal experience and the status quo. She, like the novel itself, questions the position of the masculine to stimulate feminine needs. In doing so, Ava and Maso succeed in creating a foundation for a truly feminine method communication.

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