

## Confronting Transcendence

Novelist Saul Bellow contemplates Mozart in *Bostonia* (Spring 1992), and finds in his music "a dimension . . . which prohibits final comprehension."

*Some of my speculations on Mozart are notably unscientific. I often puzzle over the nature of his genius. How was it that it should appear so early and develop so swiftly and be so complete? Was it because his father was an educator of corresponding genius? Nobody ever suspected genius of any sort in Leopold. Neither do the educational or genetic contributions of his mother strike his biographers as exceptional. Mozart, to borrow a figure from William Blake, was a piece of ground already spaded and seeded. It looks, in other words, as if he had brought it all with him. And then I think of other prodigies born into mathematical or musical families. The mature forms assumed by these exceptional creatures are not to be accounted for by environmental or historical theories. They resemble the flowers or the insects, they have powers which astonish and physiological refinements or resources of intelligence too curious to be explained by probability theory or the ponderous slowness of time, or by trial and error. What they suggest is the intervention of invisible purposes. "To a certain extent,"*

*writes Alfred Einstein, "it is true that Mozart was only a visitor upon this earth. Mozart as a man was nowhere truly at home: neither in Salzburg, where he was born, nor in Vienna, where he died."*

*At the heart of my confession, therefore, is the hunch that with beings such as Mozart we are forced to speculate about transcendence and this makes us very uncomfortable, since ideas of transcendence are associated with crankiness or faddism—even downright instability and mental feebleness. These are the charges and the guilts you open yourself to when you confess that you find it impossible to dismiss such speculations . . .*

*Music, I assume (amateurishly), is based on a tonal code containing, inevitably, expressions of the whole history of feeling, emotion, belief—of essences inseparable from what we call our "higher life." I suggest also that this is where we tend to go when we have gone as far as we can in the new modern positive orthodoxies that keep us within bounds—the assumptions which our education and the business of the world have trained us to accept as normal, practical, and indispensable: the founding postulates of our scientific and technological achievements.*

*From all this a Mozart gives us an orderly and also emotional exit—an endlessly rich and exalted release.*

text for the New York Edition. "As *The Ambassadors* passed into what James saw as its perfected final condition, the 'fearful' error was to be silently removed simply by avoiding the

English text altogether, which alone contained the 'reversed' chapters 28–29." But the Master, it appears, did not foresee what modern scholarship can do.

## Mapplethorpe And the Museums

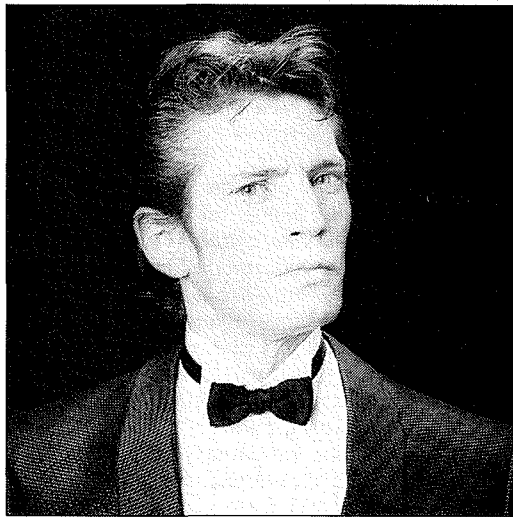
"Art, Morals, and Politics" by Robert Hughes, in *The New York Review of Books* (Apr. 23, 1992), 250 West 57th St., New York, N.Y. 10107.

The Robert Mapplethorpe affair—the fierce controversy over the museum exhibition of his photographs of sadomasochistic homosexual acts—did much more than poison relations between museums and government, contends *Time* art critic Robert Hughes. It revealed the utter bankruptcy of traditional American ideas about art.

Ever since the first American museums were opened in the 19th century, Hughes says, they have claimed to provide "education, benefit, spiritual uplift, and not just enjoyment or the recording of cultural history." By the 1880s, the

notion of art as quasi-religious uplift had begun to evolve into the more secular idea of art as therapy, personal or social. Great art, thought the wealthy founders of American museums, would alleviate the resentments of American workers.

In the decades after 1920, the emphasis on the therapeutic function of art increased. Cultivated Americans initially resisted modernism because it did not seem "spiritual" enough. But starting with the founding of New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1929, museums emphatically insisted that it was. "America came up



Robert Mapplethorpe's Self-Portrait, 1986.

with the idea of therapeutic avant-gardism, and built museums in its name. These temples stood on two pillars . . . aestheticism, or art for art's sake . . . [and] the familiar one of social benefit: though art for art's sake [put art] outside the frame of moral judgment, works of art were moral in themselves because, whether you knew it or not at first, they pointed the way to higher truths and so did you good."

The exhibition of Mapplethorpe's X portfolio exposed the wretched state of those two pillars, Hughes says. "[T]he truly amazing thing about the defenses that art writers made for these

scenes of sexual torture is how they were all couched in terms either of an aestheticism that was so solipsistic as to be absurd, or else of labored and unverifiable claims to therapeutic benefit." He cites critic Janet Kardon, "reflecting on one photo of a man's fist up his partner's rectum, and another of a finger rammed into a penis, and fluting on about 'the centrality of the forearm' and how it anchors the composition, and how 'the scenes appear to be distilled from real life,' and how their formal arrangement 'purifies, even cancels, the prurient elements.'" This, Hughes adds, is "the kind of exhausted and literally de-moralized aestheticism that would find no basic difference between a Nuremberg rally and [a] Busby Berkeley spectacular, since both, after all, are example[s] of Art Deco choreography."

Other writers, such as Ingrid Sischy and Kay Larson, took the therapeutic tack, and claimed that the Mapplethorpe images "teach us moral lessons, stripping away the veils of prudery and ignorance and thus promoting gay rights by confronting us with the outer limits of human sexual behavior." Similar images of women being degraded, Hughes observes, would not likely be greeted so calmly.

It is a great mistake, in Hughes' view, to think "that all taboos on sexual representation are made to be broken, and that breaking them has some vital relationship with the importance of art, now, in 1992." A museum that does not exercise artistic and intellectual discrimination is not doing its job, he says, "no matter how warm a glow of passing relevance it may feel."

## *The Modernist Golem*

"Cynthia Ozick as the Jewish T. S. Eliot" by Mark Krupnick, in *Soundings* (Fall/Winter 1991), 306 Alumni Hall, Univ. of Tenn., Knoxville, Tenn. 37996-0530.

No contemporary writer can hope to match the cultural authority that T. S. Eliot had in America during the 1930s and '40s, but Krupnick, a professor of religion and literature at the University of Chicago, is reminded of Eliot when he reads Cynthia Ozick's fiction. Eliot, profoundly affected by the horrors of the Great War and what he saw as the artistic decadence of his day, sought, in such works as *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943), to fashion a new cultural vision based on medieval Christian orthodoxy.

A similar calamity—the Holocaust—and view of culture infuses the work of Ozick. Author of numerous short stories, criticism, and novels (*The Messiah of Stockholm*), a New

Yorker and a Jew, she hopes in her fiction to recover "an ancient Jewish civilization . . . organized around Judaism as a universal religion."

Although Ozick, born in 1928, belongs to a generation of postwar novelists that includes Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, she is disenchanted "with the older kind of Jewish secular intellectualism and the assimilationism that went along with it," Krupnick writes. Bellow and Roth insisted on being regarded as *American* rather than as *Jewish* writers. In *The Bellarosa Connection*, for example, Bellow writes about Jewishness rather than Judaism. His concern is with American Jews' immigrant and post-immigrant experience—not with, as