



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

Ozick puts it, what it means to be a Jew in principle. To Krupnick, Ozick's focus on religious traditionalism now seems more innovative than the secular outlook of Roth or Bellow.

Yet the example of Eliot exerts a cautionary influence on Ozick. Readers flocked to the poet, Krupnick notes, "in the spirit of acolytes, blurring the distinction between sacred and profane texts." That conflict between religious orthodoxy and the religion of art is central to Ozick's work. Time and again Ozick creates some object or character, imbues it with mystical significance or power, and then symbolically destroys it, rescuing her art from the imputation of idolatry.

In "Puttermesser and Xanthippe," for example, a bureaucrat fired from her job literally dreams up her revenge in the form of a golem

(an artificial being, endowed with life by supernatural means), who uses magic to transform New York City into what seems like a utopia. But this Paradise, like the original, is flawed: The golem's sexual awakening unleashes chaos on the city and Puttermesser finally must bury her creation in the earth. "Too much Paradise is greed," Puttermesser concludes.

Ozick "wants to have it both ways," Krupnick says. "She gives and then she takes away, imagining the story and then destroying it before our eyes. Before she can be punished for the presumption of setting up in competition with God, she disavows her own creation." This conflict between Ozick's Judaism and her commitment to art, Krupnick believes, will assure her of "steady work for as long as her strength—or her ambivalence—holds out."

OTHER NATIONS

Russian Nightmare

"Republic of Humbug: The Russian Nativist Critique of the United States, 1830-1930" by Abbott Gleason, in *American Quarterly* (Mar. 1992), Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 701 West 40th St., Ste. 275, Baltimore, Md. 21211.

Looking upon the United States as a hellhole of extreme individualism, rootlessness, greed, and violence was second nature to Soviet ideologues during the Cold War. But Brown University historian Abbott Gleason points out that they did not invent this nightmarish picture of America—they inherited it.

America's acquisitive individualism was anathema to the first generation of Slavophiles in 1830-61, most of whom were aristocratic landowners. Rejecting "a dying West dominated by secular plutocrats and consumed by the class struggle," critic Ivan Kireevsky and other Slavophiles embraced the communalism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity of "Holy Russia." Slavophile views, Gleason notes, "are still influential in Russian culture today, especially on the political Right. From Alexander Solzhenitsyn to the 'intellectuals' of *Pamiat'* (Memory), the force of Slavophile preachments is apparent."

In the quarter-century after

the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, conservative writers, notably Fyodor Dostoevsky, took up the Slavophile critique. Although he never visited America, Dostoevsky "thought that of all the wretched individualisms of the contemporary European world, that of the United States was the most crass, shallow, and vulgar." He wrote little about the United States directly, but



Tolstoy at the Plough (1887) reflects the continuing romanticization of Russian peasant life after the Slavophile movement waned, but Tolstoy also wrote about the harsher realities of that life.