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“The Great Lives, the only Treasures”

In the series of *Great Lives* [first week in May 2008] the Radio 4 website tells us: “Poet Simon Armitage nominates Joy Division singer Ian Curtis who took his own life in 1980 at the age of 23”. The host, interviewing Poet Simon Armitage and the rest, was in fact Matthew Parris. Poet Simon Armitage obliged with a few of his own lines before they got down to Ian Curtis, lines about going out of the back door of Dove Cottage. Snatches of the music of Joy Division were played from time to time. Naturally, their sounds are to music as Simon Armitage’s lines are to poetry. Mr Armitage explained that he was trying to define Curtis’s “telling and lasting contribution to . . . music” and to see his achievements in context. The context was that of pop/punk/rock/heavy metal of the late 1970s for which, the bass player in the band explained, Curtis had been a kind of finishing school.

Some of the pieces were near enough to melody to demonstrate that Curtis sang out of tune. What he sang is called music only by misplaced courtesy. Armitage said that the achievement was to express “the soul of Manchester”. Poor old Manchester! this may well be true.

This was the week after complaints were being reported from the schools that the children were increasingly taking celebrities as role-models, and that most of them want to grow up to be celebrities themselves.

Is it really a great life to make loud uninteresting sounds and then in early manhood to commit suicide? “Tell me what you like and I’ll tell you what you are.” Matthew Parris as arbiter of taste: could anything be madder? The judgement that self-parody by the judging classes can go no further is constantly disappointed. It can and does.

By these standards, Matthew Parris’s is itself a great life. Is suicide a prerequisite for a great life, or can he fit into the series one in which he interviews himself? perhaps while he is in the act of committing suicide?

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