

Great Lives

or, How to Be a Cool Godmother

I gave up reading *The Week* regularly to discover “All you need to know about everything that matters” because to some extent the magazine does do what it promises and it’s too depressing to see what, week by week, “matters”. The 30 July 2011 issue had a two-page spread for two obituaries, of (in the judgement of *The Times*) “one of the outstanding musicians of her generation” and what *The Week* headline called “the greatest figurative painter of his day”. The latter we leave to *The Jackdaw*, commenting only that if Lucien Freud really thought Sue Tilley, the subject of *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, “perfectly beautiful”, he not only had no sense of beauty but also defeated his own obvious intention in the famous picture, which was, to displease. The art of the outstanding musician, Amy Winehouse, could indeed be distinguished from that of the mob of female pop-singers by an individual voice and style, but if she “revived the spirit of troubled divas of earlier eras” we have forgotten what real art is.

The present comment is not about the idea of outstanding art but to observe that we have also lost any ordinary sense of a good life. Lucien Freud “was constitutionally opposed to anything that involved ‘duty or compulsion’,” which was perhaps why he “failed to attend his own mother’s funeral.” (He will nevertheless be compelled to attend his own.)

Ms Winehouse led, according to the obituary, the archetypal life of the pop star: early success followed by a life given over to drugs, public scenes, violence as when she was “photographed fighting outside a hotel in Soho. Her face was cut and her feet were seeping blood through her ballet shoes. The implication was that she’d been injecting heroin between her toes.”

All this is reported deadpan. We are all, are we not, free to choose our own lifestyles? and it would be judgemental to offer the opinion that these are evil ones? But at the same time as absolute equality some are role models and others are not. Nevertheless, we still have judgement here if we submit to it. Amy Winehouse was infinitely pitiable, but hers was not a great life, nor even original. Even the sensations were works in a worn-out *genre*.

Is ours the first civilisation in history in which the parents, instead of passing on traditions to the young, do their best to leave the young alone and keep abreast of their language? “My parents pretty much realised that I would do whatever I wanted, and that was it, really,” Amy Winehouse is quoted as saying. A very similar phrase was used the following month by a fourteen-year-old female rioter to excuse her parents, though it is really a censure of them.

Amy Winehouse’s “final public appearance came three days before her death, at the Roundhouse in Camden, where her goddaughter was performing.” Her GODDAUGHTER for godsake! Was Winehouse then a convert to Christianity? or has *goddaughter* some special meaning in the pop world? Did Amy Winehouse, in the name of this Child, renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, not to follow, nor be led by them?

Common life is a unity. Morality and art collapse at the same time. Look again at the last forty lines of *The Dunciad*.

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In August 2011 Mr David Cameron began sounding more like a prime minister. Mr Iain Duncan Smith (the only thinking member of the cabinet?) observed that the rioting this month may be the critical moment in Mr Cameron’s premiership. Mr Cameron was able to say, seriously, that there is something wrong with society including a common loss of the sense of right and wrong. He offers to remedy the situation. But . . . can a sense of right and wrong be either created or restored by politicians? Do they themselves know what is right and what is wrong? If so how? The law can be changed by parliamentary process, but politicians are not particularly authoritative on moral matters. Morality cannot be decided, either, by majority vote. Here is a genuine problem for serious politicians. Is Mr Cameron able and willing to give any thought to it?

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