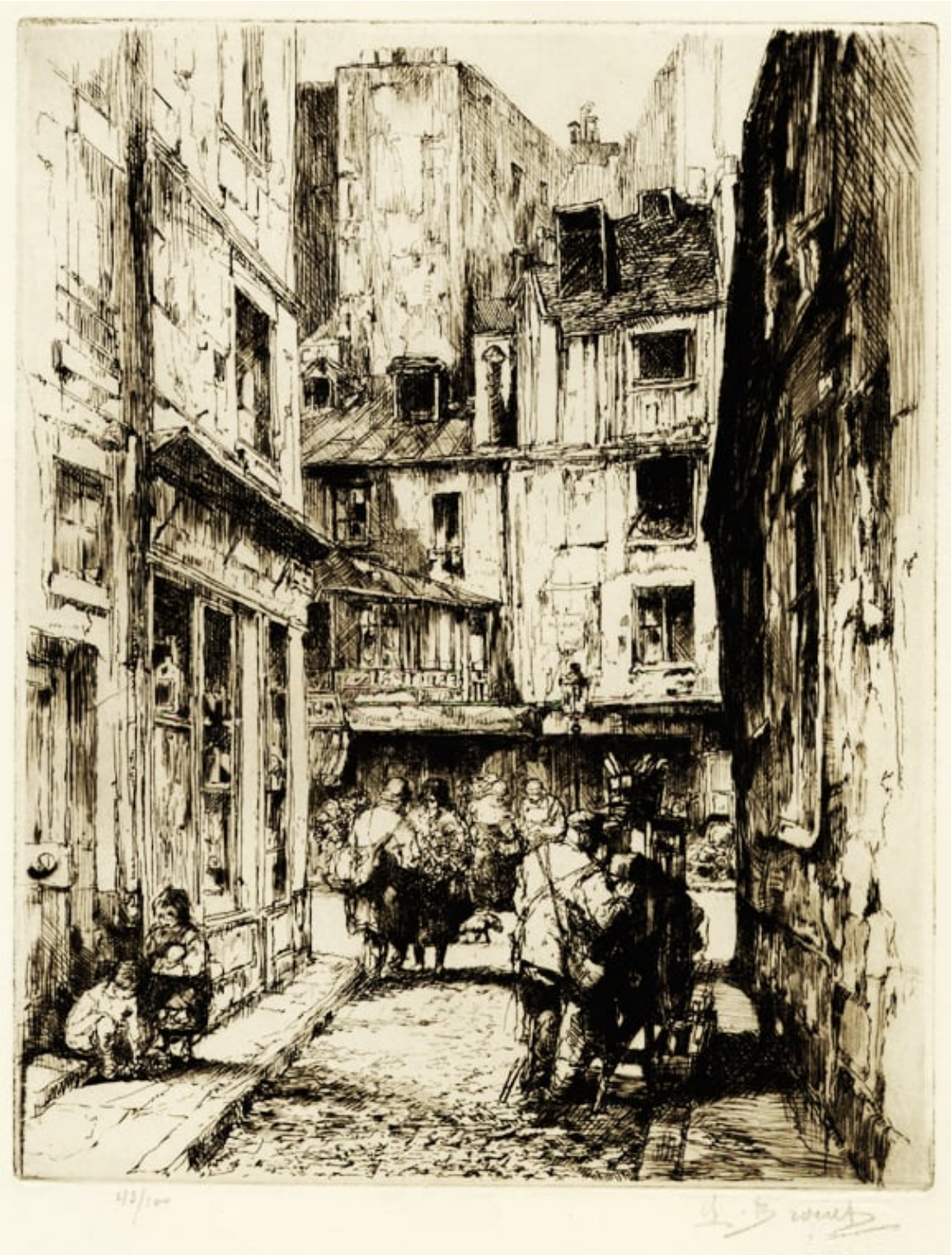
Rag & Bone

by Theodore Dalrymple (August 2019)



Le Rémouleur (The Knife Grinder), Auguste Brouet, circa 1921

It seems to me astonishing now, but when I was young there was an onion man on a bicycle who came to our house in suburban London twice a year. He was a Frenchman who might have been taken from, or as, a caricature of his compatriots. He wore a shirt of dark blue and white hoops and on his head was fixed a beret. Whether he dressed like this unselfconsciously, because it came to him as the natural way to dress, or whether he wanted to signal to everyone where he came from, I do not know, and will now never find out; suffice it to say that nowadays you hardly ever see anyone in a beret on the streets of France, which I much regret. I knew a very distinguished professor in England who wore a beret, which for him, I think, was a conscious statement that he was of an un-materialist and intellectual disposition (though in fact, without necessarily aiming at it, or meaning to, he had done very well from the economic point of view). I myself have a beret, but it is a Spanish one, larger and flatter than the French type, but I have never had the courage to wear it. I do not have enough self-assurance to make myself conspicuous, though on very rare occasions I have worn my deer-stalker.

The onion man’s bicycle was draped with strings of onions and my mother always bought of him. Had he really pedalled all the way from France to sell his onions, or was it an elaborate charade? Was there a lorry just round the corner from which onion men emerged like creatures from a viviparous mother? I never saw him after about 1961 because we moved away.

Another man who came to our door was an itinerant gardener, a fat elderly Irishman (though everyone in those days who was over the age of 35 looked elderly to me). I think my parents employed him more as an act of charity than for the value of his work, though without letting him know it. Any marked physical effort, such as bending over, brought him out in

sweat, and I cannot imagine that his work caused much flourishing in the garden. What I remember of him most, apart from my difficulty in understanding what he said, was the way in which he took his elevenses, that peculiar little meal that in those days deemed necessary for the maintenance of energy, consisting of tea and biscuits. He would sit down on a chair which looked as if it might break under his weight into sticks, for no chair was really big enough for him and with his bulk he overflowed all chairs we could offer him. He mopped his brow and spent a contented half hour recuperating from his labours with his tea. Almost all movement for him must have been a heavy labour.

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He was not very clean; his clothes were impregnated with dirt. Not to put too fine a point on it, he smelled. But my mother taught me a lesson with his help. I was once cheeky to him, and she made me apologise to him. This was important to learn: that one was to be polite to everyone no matter his station in life. I cannot, of course, claim to have been polite to everyone ever since, but I have at least been aware that I ought to have been. Few of us, I imagine, live up to our moral principles, and I am not sure that I would want to live in a world in which everyone did so.

Still, there is nothing that provokes people to anger and bitterness more surely than to treat them with disdain or contumely, letting them know that you think them of as beings

inferior in fundamental importance to yourself. Small acts of scorn or contempt are more wounding, cumulatively, than greater injustice, and are rarely forgotten or forgiven. Where immediate retaliation is impossible, they fester in the mind and poison the existence of those who suffer them. They stimulate a thirst for revenge and even were they not wrong in the ethical sense, they are often—as Talleyrand once put it—worse than a crime, they are a mistake, a mistake that often comes back to haunt those who indulge in them. The pleasure that some people take in the gratuitous humiliation of others to make themselves appear larger in their own eyes (and that comes to be habitual) does not do so in the eyes of others, rather the reverse. All this my mother tried implicitly to impress upon me. Manners maketh man.

Another memory that now astonishes me is that of the rag-and-bone man who used to come down the street, also about twice a year, with a horse and cart, shouting something whose precise wording I could not make out beyond ‘And old iron?’ It was a far less throwaway society than today’s—clothes were still mended, for example, and cobblers who repaired shoes were not difficult to find—and people had far less to dispose of. The rag-and-bone man was the equivalent of those tips where everyone now takes their defunct, redundant or more likely obsolete, white goods. These days, it is hard even to give furniture away and many possessions come to be liabilities rather than assets.

When I was young, I was fascinated by and curious about the rag-and-bone men. Where did they come from and where did they go? Of course, I never had the courage to ask or find out, and now it is too late, for they exist no longer. I thought I would have time to ask when I was older, for when you are young time moves so slowly that you think that nothing changes

or ever will change: there will always be time to do things later. It is only later that the fleetingness of things makes itself apparent.

Forty years later, however, an itinerant knife-sharpener used to occasionally make an appearance at our door. He somewhat resembled our gardener of yore, at least in his washing habits, though he was much thinner. He was always jolly, with hackneyed jokes. We always found him work to do, for he represented, at least in our imagination, the kind of person increasingly rare in modern society: the free agent. Whatever money he made—it couldn't have been very much—he had in hand. He escaped the trammels of the state, the only way to do so being the acceptance of poverty. At least if his manner was anything to go by, he thought it a good exchange, poverty for freedom. Few people are willing to make such an exchange, and once a cashless economy is established (in the not very distant future), it will be impossible. Every transaction, like every crime according to the famous dictum of the pioneer forensic scientist, Dr Locard, will leave a trace. You won't just feel that you are being followed everywhere: you *will* be followed everywhere.

The knife-sharpener is no more: he has gone into whatever retirement was reserved for him, not a very prosperous one in all likelihood. But from time to time there is a rap on our front door, and there stands a young man—never a young woman—with a large bag of assorted goods for sale of the kind that I never really want to buy, but nevertheless always do buy. When I open the door to these pedlars, they immediately thrust some or other certificate in my face, encased in transparent plastic, which supposedly establishes their bona fides: someone has given them permission to do what they are doing, though whether that permission itself has any legal

validity is unclear, for there is no time to check. But any document is better than none.

For a time, these pedlars always claimed to be released prisoners trying at last to go straight. I think they probably were. I know more than the average respectable citizen about prisons, having long worked in one, and on brief testing, these pedlars were able to give me convincing details of their sojourn as guests of the criminal justice system. They were also mostly former drug-addicts.

Though I am a hard-liner on questions of crime, I am much in favour of giving released prisoners a chance, and it cannot be easy for someone who has spent most of his life doing the wrong thing to change direction, especially when he lacks qualifications to do anything else. So it is that I end up with more leather cloths to wipe the windows of my car than I can possibly use in my lifetime, or little torches that I lose almost immediately, or oven gloves, enough to furnish a bakery. If my purchases keep the sellers out of prison, they are cheap enough, and so far, at least, they—the sellers—have not turned out to have been casing the joint, for none of my purchases from them has been closely followed by a burglary, as secretly has been my fear.

More recently, the pedlars have changed their story (a story can be true, of course). They say that they are—strange locution—learning difficulties. ‘I am learning difficulties,’ they say as soon after the householder opens the door to them. By this they mean that they are what in my childhood was called mentally subnormal, a term that meant no ill but which we have come to regard as intrinsically demeaning. (I had a first cousin who was ‘a little backward’.)

They do indeed seem a little different from average. They have with them a certificate of backwardness, as we once would have put it, which is an odd qualification, but they have learnt the use and price of the wares they bring with them and are trying to sell.

The sudden change in the nature of these pedlars from ex-prisoner to persons with learning difficulties (not necessarily mutually exclusive) leads me to suspect that there is an organised racket behind them, that somewhere in the background there is a spidery person who, from the centre of his web, is organising a whole system of exploitation. What percentage of the receipts from what they sell do the pedlars actually receive? Presumably enough to make it worth their while, but they are classes of people vulnerable to exploitation.

How quickly one succumbs to paranoid ideation! One immediately suspects that they are exploited and that they in turn are exploiting you! There must be a conspiracy somewhere, certainly someone benefiting more than he should or is morally entitled to. What one fears also is to be made a fool of.

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Dr Johnson said that it is better sometimes to be deceived than never to trust, and he was surely right. When the pedlars

come to the door, what I see is someone who is doing something that I should not like to do myself, and that surely cannot be very easy to do. Their stories might be true and I have no time to check their veracity. Buying from them will certainly give them a little pleasure and cause me little pain. They are not so many, and do not call so frequently, that they are a nuisance. If I turn them away empty-handed, they will form the impression that people are hard-hearted. They must know that they are in receipt of charity, for it must be very rarely that the people they solicit say on seeing their wares, 'Yes, that feather duster, or that oven-scourer is just what I wanted!' Yet by selling something rather than merely asking for money outright, they are saved from the humiliation of beggary and they provide a service of a kind, even if someone else is profiteering from it.

My attitude to buskers is less forgiving. If I like their music, I give, if I do not, I do not give. On the Paris *Métro*, for example, I reward the accordionists, but not those who wheel an apparatus of electronic backing to their singing. Here, for me, it is not a question of the buskers' personal need, but of their worth as assessed by my personal taste. I want to discourage some but not others. Some I regard as a pleasant accompaniment to my journey, others as noise pollution that prevents concentration on my reading. And I suspect that the accordionists are less likely to be drug addicts than the buskers who sing rock music and imagine themselves as stars.

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