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Antoine Compagnon, *Les Chiffonniers de Paris*. Paris: Gallimard, 2017. 496 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. €32.00 (cl). ISBN 9782072735141.

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Expanding on a course he gave at the Collège de France in 2015-2016, Antoine Compagnon offers us an elegant, encyclopedic book on the not-so-elegant ragpickers who filled the streets of Paris from roughly 1820-1870. He has meticulously reconstructed the myths and realities of *chiffonniers* in the social imagination and daily life of nineteenth-century Paris, following them on their prowls to some of the most insalubrious places in and around the city. One of the foulest, he notes, quoting Baudelaire's friend Privat d'Anglemont, "un cloaque, une immondice," was situated "juste en face du Collège de France, à l'emplacement de la place Marcelin-Berthelot et de la rue des Écoles, l'un des endroits les plus infects de Paris" (p. 100). That a book on *Les Chiffonniers de Paris* should take root at the Collège de France is all the more fitting, a reminder that wherever we find ourselves in Paris, the ragpicker was there before us. (In the 1840s one such ragpicker attended Michelet's courses at the Collège and entered into correspondence with him (p. 326).)

*Les Chiffonniers de Paris* is as remarkable for its erudition as it is for its 140 superb illustrations. The book sits at the intersection of literary history, art history, cultural history, urban history and economic history, and is impressive in its command and interweaving of examples from each. Compagnon has tracked down familiar and obscure characters and anecdotes to bring the lost world of *chiffonnage* to life. From the start he makes the case that the marginal ragpicker in the streets of Paris was anything but marginal to the economy of nineteenth-century France. While this may have been one of many *petits métiers* in Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the fifty years from the Restoration to the end of the Second Empire marked the heyday of *chiffonnage*. Thirty to forty thousand men, women and children worked as *chiffonniers* in mid-nineteenth-century Paris (p. 14) retrieving from the filth of the city all matter of waste that could be collected, sold and repurposed: in the first place, rags (*chiffons*) for the manufacture of paper, but also nails and old horseshoes for ironwork, dead cats for fur trim (sometimes passed off as sable), bones for buttons and dominos, equine bone marrow for gelatine, etc. (p. 11). It was during this period that the expression "d'occasion" took on a new meaning in French. Whereas previously *une occasion* connoted a bargain for the customer, around 1820 objects *d'occasion* referred to second hand goods for resale (p. 20). As Victor Fournel noted in 1858: "Rien ne se perd à Paris: cette industrie effrayante, gigantesque ... ne néglige pas le moindre atome de matière..." (p. 10). Compagnon calls the *chiffonnier* "le maître Jacques du XIXe siècle" (p. 9), "l'acteur indispensable de l'industrialisation urbaine" (p. 12). The *chiffonnier* was the wheel that

turned the economy of recuperation and recycling and played a key role in urban waste management before 1883, when Prefect Eugène Poubelle mandated the use of the trashcans that now bear his name.

The *chiffonnier* was an unmistakable figure in Paris at this time, with his three iconic accessories—the basket on his back (*la hotte*), the long hook he used to rummage around (*le crochet*), and the lantern he carried for his nocturnal rounds. Compagnon reconstructs in great detail the material and sensory world of the *chiffonnier*, but he is primarily interested in the allegorical associations invested in this Parisian “type” in the cultural imagination of the time. “Le chiffonnier représente l’idéal-type du XIXe siècle, comme Paris fut la capitale du XIXe siècle selon Benjamin” (p. 413). As a type, the *chiffonnier* occupied pride of place in the panoramic *physiologies* of the nineteenth century, starting with Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris* (1782) and including *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1841) and *Le Diable à Paris* (1845). Just as he prowled the streets of Paris during this same period, the *chiffonnier* roamed through the work of countless artists and writers, from Daumier to Gavarni, from Victor Hugo—“le grand chiffonnier de la littérature” (p. 28)—to Théophile Gautier, Eugène Sue, Théodore de Banville and above all Charles Baudelaire whose work has been central to Compagnon’s own and whose life (1821-1867) overlaps with the fifty years at the heart of this book.

The *chiffonnier* can be a sinister character, a sometimes menacing, drunken creature of the night—as in Baudelaire’s “Le Vin des chiffonniers” or Manet’s painting of “The Ragpicker”. He can be diabolical or devilish: Gavarni’s frontispiece for *Le Diable à Paris* represents the Parisian devil as a *chiffonnier* who hears all, sees all, knows all. [1] The wretched *chiffonnier* moves in a world of excrement, rot and the putrefying carcasses of dogs and horses. Such associations allow Compagnon to find shades of the *chiffonnier* in Baudelaire’s poem “La Charogne.” Even if the literary and iconic images are overwhelmingly of men, there are female *chiffonnières* as well, prostitutes or former prostitutes who add to the abjection. Just as Compagnon argues that the old men in “guenilles jaunes” plodding, sticks in hand, through the mud of Paris in Baudelaire’s “Les Sept vieillards” are *chiffonniers* (p. 369), he makes the case that the “Petites vieilles” in the poem that follows, “serrant sur leur flanc, ainsi que des reliques, / Un petit sac brodé de fleurs ou de rébus,” are *chiffonnières*, clutching small handbags left over from Directory fashion (*réticules*) embroidered with once fashionable rebuses and doubtless retrieved from the trash. Following some intricate etymological word play Compagnon declares: “Il ne subsiste plus le moindre doute: sous le rébus, il y a le rebut” (p. 409).

Other times, with his lantern in hand, the *chiffonnier* recalls the Greek philosopher Diogenes or a carnivalesque king of the gutter, “le philosophe de la borne ... le philosophe du macadam,” “le roi du ruisseau” (p. 154). Most important for Compagnon, however, is the allegorical association of the *chiffonnier* with the writer, both of them outsiders of a sort and “marchands de papier.”

Throughout the period in question the *chiffonnier* played a central role in the fabrication of paper, something of a hyphen between the rag-based production of the ancien régime and the industrialized production of paper from wood cellulose during the last third of the nineteenth century. During the first third of that century a growing readership, the relaxation of censorship laws, and a burgeoning press made the demand for paper—hence the need for old rags and the service of the *chiffonnier*—essential. The circulation of ideas, poetry and novels hinged on the hook of the *chiffonnier* and whatever recyclable scraps it recovered from the trash. Like the *chiffonnier* scavenging in the streets of the city, the writer too, characterized by Baudelaire as a *flâneur*,

collected symbolic scraps of life observed along his way through the city, seeing what others overlooked. In “Les petits métiers” (1825) Jules Janin compares the writer to “l’honnête chiffonnier qui de nuit et de jour, ramasse des haillons” (p. 330). “Le chiffonnier,” Compagnon asserts, “s’impose comme le double du poète” (p. 353). For the *chiffonnier* is the man who turns trash into treasure or discovers hidden treasures in the mud. “Le fantasme de la découverte d’un trésor égaré dans le rebut ... constitue un invariant de la légende du chiffonnage” (p. 89). Thus, when in a famous statement Baudelaire declares “j’ai pétri de la boue et j’en ai fait de l’or,” it is not just a metaphor of alchemy, it is a metaphor of *chiffonnage*. By assimilation, the chiffonnier’s hook becomes a metaphor for the writer’s pen.[2]

If the writer is a *chiffonnier*, who stumbles—or not—onto hidden treasures, transforming ephemeral toss-offs into eternal truths,[3] in this book Antoine Compagnon plays the role of the critic-historian as *chiffonnier*. As he wanders through different pages from the nineteenth century—canonical poems and novels but also caricatures, vaudevilles, journals, police records, public health reports, etc.—he finds unexpected gems. His “rag bag” includes not just reticules and rebuses, but also feather pens, metal pens, ivory toothpicks, swords, cholera epidemics, and fashion plates. When in the final chapter of the book Compagnon’s voice suddenly becomes personal, the “rush” he gets from the pleasure of the hunt becomes palpable as he stumbles onto yet another “find”: “Perplexe, vagabondant à la façon d’un chiffonnier, maniant un crochet qui, de nos jours, prend souvent la forme d’une souris, je tombai sur un article non signé du 27 avril 1837 dans le *Figaro*...”

However, energizing such discoveries are, especially after long hours of “vagabondage,” there is always the risk that the treasures unearthed—sparkling as they may be—are not always as useful as one expects. To maintain the analogy with the *chiffonnier*, at moments like this it is tempting for the finder to overstate the value of the found object. Compagnon is not immune from such temptation which is translated into the speculative language of “sans doute” and “probablement.” In his reading of “Les Petites vieilles,” for instance, Compagnon’s preoccupation with the little embroidered handbag with a rebus that the old woman clutches sends him down a twisted path into fashions, fashion plates and fashion journalism of an earlier age which allow him to demonstrate that, indeed, these 50 year-old once-fashionable handbags known as “reticules” or “ridicules” did sometimes have rebuses. Commenting on the illustration of a stylish woman during the Directory (“une merveilleuse”), Compagnon notes: “voici ... la merveilleuse au sac à rébus qui *devait* frapper Baudelaire” (p. 398, emphasis added). A few pages later he describes a fashion engraving from 1798 with “un rébus parfait, aisément déchiffrable” and adds: “C’est donc *très probablement* l’une de celles que Baudelaire remarqua en 1859, durant son séjour à Honfleur” (p. 402, emphasis added). The critic here is not only practicing *chiffonnage*, he is solving riddles. One might ask: to what poetic end? In “The Painter of Modern Life” Baudelaire described the work of the modern artist as to “dégager de la mode ce qu’elle peut contenir de poétique dans l’historique.”[4] At moments like this Compagnon is driven to “dégager de la mode ce qu’elle peut contenir *d’historique dans le poétique*” (emphasis added). At various moments in his readings of Baudelaire’s poems, it seems that the task Compagnon has set for himself is to excavate the referent behind the signified, the real handbag that corroborates the poetic evocation of another. It is not altogether surprising to learn that Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, with its extensive examination of the literary representations of reality, is one of the books that inspired Compagnon (p. 411).

If Auerbach is one of Compagnon's minor mentors in this book, Francesco Orlando's book, *Les Objets désuets dans l'imagination littéraire*, is one of its springboards, sparking the divergent insight that not only did the word "désuet" not exist in Baudelaire's time, neither did "objets désuets" because there was always someone to appropriate any object that was thrown out, starting with the *chiffonnier*. Compagnon's critical riff on Orlando's book is, in his own terms, something of a "friendly amendment" (p. 411). His running debate with the other critic who was a point of departure for this book, Walter Benjamin, is far more substantial. In *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle* (the French translation of *Das Passagen-Werk*), Benjamin attached particular significance to the character of the *chiffonnier* as Baudelaire's double, something with which Compagnon clearly agrees. Where he forcefully disagrees with Benjamin, however, is in the significance of that doubling. Compagnon states his argument with Benjamin early on and returns to it throughout the book: if Benjamin insisted on the identification of Baudelaire with the *chiffonnier* it was for political reasons, to maintain the image of Baudelaire the revolutionary in 1848, to argue for Baudelaire's class consciousness and disprove his reactionary position after the *coup d'état* of December 1851. But, Compagnon argues, much as Benjamin insisted on the importance of the *chiffonnier* for Baudelaire, he showed hardly any interest in the details of *chiffonnage*. Compagnon ultimately rejects Benjamin's political reading because, he notes, the *chiffonnier* was not an ally of the working class. [5] For Compagnon the importance of the *chiffonnier* is as "une ressource poétique irriguant toute l'oeuvre du poète des *Fleurs du Mal*, et, au-delà de celle-ci, tout le XIXe siècle" (p. 413). For Compagnon, if the shadow of the *chiffonnier* hovers over Baudelaire's work it is because he was visible in daily life and iconography everywhere.

Compagnon's argument for the centrality of the *chiffonnier* in the history, literature and arts of nineteenth-century Paris is undeniable. But if the topic catches our imagination now, in the twenty-first century, it is also because it speaks to a contemporary sensibility of recycling that has again become central to modern urban life, an activity borne out of different concerns but not without parallels. This is how Compagnon introduces the *chiffonnier* on the first page of the book: "En ce temps-là, on ramassait, récupérait, recyclait tout, et les moindres rebuts trouvaient un nouveau destin" (p. 9, my emphasis). As I read this sentence when I opened the book, I confess that my first association was to a campaign at our neighbourhood elementary school, called "The Three Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle." As I closed the book, Compagnon was right there with me on the last page, looking at three recycling bins into which contemporary Parisians now sort their household garbage: "En ce début du XXIe siècle nous sommes tous devenus des chiffonniers" (p. 430). For stories of nineteenth-century *chiffonniers* who preceded us and the role they played in Paris, real and poetic, *Les Chiffonniers de Paris* is now the book of record and a very welcome find.

## NOTES

[1] See especially the well-illustrated chapter eight, "Le Diable chiffonnier."

[2] In an extended commentary on a line from Baudelaire's poem, "Le Soleil": "Je vais m'exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime," Compagnon offers an excursus on swords and pens. He comments on the importance of the invention of the metal pen--la plume de fer--that eventually replaced the feather pen (pp. 370-377). That metal pen is compared to a sword and we learn that there was once a sword called a *badelare*, *badelaire*, or *baudelaire* (p. 367). The pen is mightier than the sword, but both recall the *chiffonnier's* *crochet*.

[3] In “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” Baudelaire defines the task of the modern artist as “tirer l’éternel du transitoire.” Superposing the chiffonnier onto the modern artist, the verb “tirer” suddenly becomes decidedly muscular. Charles Baudelaire. “Le Peintre de la vie moderne” in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-76), vol. 2, p. 694.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Karl Marx might agree. Marx distinguished between “an organized, redemptive proletariat” and the dregs of society, “its disorganized, unreliable remainder” whom he called somewhat contemptuously the *Lumpenproletariat*: the proletariat of rags. See James Ingram, “Lumpenproletariat,” *Krisis*, 2 (2018): 101.

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