ALIVE, ALIVE, O

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If we could spend a day in eighteenth-century Paris or London or Philadelphia, we would probably first be struck by the difference in clothes. But almost as soon as our eye had noticed the wide bright skirts, the wigs and embroidered coats, and the contrast between rich and poor, our ear would mark as great a change in sound. Instead of today’s motor traffic that roars with the monotony of a waterfall we would be assaulted by a rich clashing of noises from drays thundering over the cobbles and from the more delicate axles of the chaises rattling as horses’ hoofs irregularly struck the stone. At intervals, the jumble of din would seem to sink while some peddler’s brazen throat and leather lungs bawled from street to street, like an operatic aria evolving out of the orchestra.

Our southern ports still hear an occasional call of “catfish” or “old clothes,” which gave Gershwin a picturesque note for Porgy and Bess. Even in the North a last cry echoes now and then when a newsboy bellows “uxtree, uxxtree” and then gargles alarming vowels. But what is the use? His sensation is no longer salable, for the news has reached every home by radio a good hour before. The newsboy’s cry must be the oldest surviving city noise—even older, perhaps, than draft horses and wheels. The cry must have sounded the same when peddling figs in Athens or bullrushes in Babylon, for the hawker can only make himself heard by prolonging all vowels until every language sounds alike. An old Londoner listened to the melody, not to the words, to distinguish between “Round and sound, five-pence a pound, Duke cherries” and sweet Molly Malone’s “Coccles and mussels, Alive, alive, O.”

Now that the street trades have almost all hidden indoors we forget how these humble ambulants once divided themselves up into classes. The peddler (from ped, a basket) carried small wares himself, like the French colporteur (from col, neck, and porter). He specialized in light articles such as ribbons, pamphlets, and ballad sheets, rings, scissors, and shoe buckles. The huckster or hawker (from the Low-German hoken, to carry on the back or to squat) was a step higher because he had either a wheelbarrow or a donkey cart. The costermonger (from costard, an apple, and monger, dealer) hawked fruit and vegetables.

Before the days of buses, when wet filth lay thick on city streets, the hawker who brought the housewife’s needs right to her door also entertained her with the gossip that he had picked up here and there. A London writer in 1650 said, “A peddler first fills his pack with reports and rumors, and then goes peddling up and down.” This baggage of tattle must have been particularly relished in Italian towns where the various parishes lived so separately that they quarreled like distinct villages. The peddler’s free commodity of news eventually made him one of the most
active booksellers to the poor and the half-educated. By taking his booklets direct to his customers’ doors, the peddler in France also escaped the police, who strictly controlled bookstores. The French law struggled in vain for years to prevent itinerants from hawking indecent or seditious pamphlets.

Northern Italy engraved some of the first prints of itinerant tradesmen in the later 1400’s. Then about 1600 Annibale Carracci drew the first extensive series of studies, which were copied in etchings—first in 1646 and later in 1660 as “the trades that go through the streets of Bologna.” This first set of street cries was imitated all over Europe for two centuries, until the last echo of it may be said to have died away in the 1890’s in Phil May’s drawings of London flower girls.

The various sets of cries often give the most vivid pictures of life in the slums of the various cities. In “fat Bologna” Annibale Carracci’s set shows over a third of the peddlers selling food and drink. In Venice, Zompini’s set includes a canal dredger, a buyer of broken glass to feed the Murano glass furnaces, and a link boy to accompany returning opera-goers with a lantern lest they step off the unbalustraded bridges into the black water. There is also a poor busy jobber who offers to regulate sinks, tinker pans, wire broken earthenware, and castrate cats. In Bouchar- don’s set hawkers of food are scarce because the Paris markets were so well supplied and organized.

The recent disappearance of street cries is but one more sign of the far-reaching change that machinery and mineral fuels have brought to the world. The human voice, which dominated city life from its beginnings in Chaldea until the automobile, must now give way—for who knows how many thousand years—to the beat of the machine.