
Narrative Improvisations: Balzac's "Facino Cane"

Michael Tilby



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/studifrancesi/4262>

DOI: 10.4000/studifrancesi.4262

ISSN: 2421-5856

Publisher

Rosenberg & Sellier

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2016

Number of pages: 202-215

ISSN: 0039-2944

Electronic reference

Michael Tilby, « Narrative Improvisations: Balzac's "Facino Cane" », *Studi Francesi* [Online], 179 (LX | II) | 2016, Online since 01 September 2017, connection on 18 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/studifrancesi/4262> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/studifrancesi.4262>



Studi Francesi è distribuita con Licenza Creative Commons Attribuzione - Non commerciale - Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale.

Narrative Improvisations: Balzac's "Facino Cane"

Abstract

In this discussion intended to complement existing studies of *Facino Cane*, it is argued that Balzac's short narrative is the product of a persistent reflection on storytelling and on the status of the composition as writing. Balzac is shown to make extensive reference to a range of other texts including *Les Mille et Une Nuits* and Dante's *Inferno*, while his representation of the blind musicians is shown to relate similarly to a prominent literary and graphic tradition that begins with Montesquieu and takes in, for example, L.-S. Mercier, E. de Jouy, and contemporary Parisian guidebooks. There follows an examination of the distinctive play on proper names and of the way the text is generated by a select number of associative chains. It is claimed that the perceptible ambiguities of the composition stem from this self-reflexive and ludic art of improvisation.

Facino Cane has come to enjoy a privileged position in the Balzac canon. Yet although Gérard Genette has rightly insisted that its reader can at no time overlook the presence of the narrator¹, the work's reputation derives largely from elements of its content, in particular the philosophical ambitions the narrator shares with his creator, who, like his surrogate, had occupied in his youth a garret in the rue Lesdiguières. The narrator's stalking of a worker and his wife on their way home from the Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique, in the interests of an «observation [...] intuitive», has, moreover, become a firm fixture in discussions of the Parisian *flâneur*². At the same time, the title character has attracted understandable attention as an example of Balzac's obsession with monomania and madness, as an embodiment of the devouring passion for gold that motivates a number of other figures in the *Comédie humaine*, and for the hints of extraordinary mental powers lodged behind «ce front audacieux et terrible»³. Such dimensions of a work that was initially categorized by its author as an «étude philosophique» have, however, diverted attention away from the narrative composition itself, a bias doubtless encouraged by the work's brevity as well as by its deceptive impression of artlessness⁴. It will be the purpose of this article to suggest

(1) See G. GENETTE, *Figures III*, Paris, Seuil, 1972, p. 225. See also J. BEIZER, *Family Plots. Balzac's Narrative Generations*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 23-26 and 35.

(2) See, for example, J. RIGNALL, *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 45-48.

(3) BALZAC, *La Comédie humaine*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976-1981, «Bibliothèque de la Pléiade» VI, p. 1024; henceforth abbreviated as *Pl.*, followed by volume and page number. Except where indicated, parenthetical page numbers in the text will refer to vol. VI.

(4) Among exceptions, see, in addition to Beizer and Rignall, the discussions by Lowrie and Eb-

guy to which reference will be made below and A. FISCHLER, *Distance and narrative perspective in Balzac's "Facino Cane"*, «L'Esprit créateur» XXXI.3 (1991), p. 21. W. Paulson grounds his Freudian reading of the story in Cane's status as the narrator's double (*Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 124). J. Madden questions a straightforward identification of the narrator with Balzac himself, but his grounds are themselves open to question, especially his attribution to the narrator of a «concern for and interest in the working class» and the deduction from the emphasis on «verbs with an oral connotation» that the narrator is not necessarily a writer (*Weaving Balzac's Web. Spinning Tales and Creating the Whole of "La Co-*

that *Facino Cane*, composed, Balzac led Mme Hanska to believe, in a single night⁵, stems organically from a reflection on the activity of storytelling itself and that its self-conscious emphasis on its status as writing has much to teach us about the genesis of Balzac's narratives, regardless of their length.

The overarching context in this connection is provided by the extensive references within the text to an eclectic range of other writing. These are accompanied by further intertextual presences of varying degrees of implicitness, which, in the case of the representation of Cane and his fellow blind musicians from the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts, include convergent literary and graphic traditions as well as specific authors and texts. To date, only some of these references have been identified⁶. The attempt at a more comprehensive survey that follows should not, however, be seen as implying that sources as such have the capacity to serve as interpretative keys. Instead, it will be suggested that they can be taken as pointers to the way the narrative is structured in response to its own exigencies, independently of character or theme. It will be seen that the composition in question is dominated by the narrator's youthful craving for a story that will satisfy his ambition to become a storyteller, a situation that may be likened to his creator's perpetual need to create a story out of nothing. The text of *Facino Cane* reveals that the narrator shares with Balzac himself an awareness of the prior existence of a multitude of stories and of the challenge these present to a storyteller faced with a demand for novelty. There is clear adherence to the view that the pursuit of such a story should be enacted via an encounter with the social realities of nineteenth-century Paris, but the extent to which the enterprise overlaps with a more detached operation of the creative imagination may be seen in the way the narrator seeks to induce in himself a state of heightened receptiveness to hints of stories waiting to be revealed, and, more especially, to the potential of certain figures glimpsed in the observable world to manifest exceptional gifts as storytellers. Facino Cane has a story to tell and he does not hesitate to tell it to the narrator, just as it appears that he has recounted his story, at least in part, to his fellow musicians. Regardless of whether, in their case, this was initially the result of their interrogation of him or of his having imposed his story upon them uninvited⁷, the narrator's discovery of Cane's colourful life is clearly dependent on his having detected signs of its existence in advance of its telling («la figure [...] de la clarinette était un de ces phénomènes qui arrêtent tout court l'artiste et le philosophe», p. 1022).

The extent to which the narrative grows out of a compulsion on the part of the narrator to satisfy his ambition to enrol in a fraternity of storytellers is evident from his ready evocation of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*⁸. He compares his ability to become another to the way «le derviche des *Mille et Une Nuits* prenait le corps et l'âme des personnes sur lesquelles il prononçait certaines paroles» (p. 1019). The same dervish, though vaguely located on this second occasion in a «conte arabe», is invoked in an account in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* of Jacques Collin's various transfor-

médie humaine", Birmingham (AL), Summa, 2003, pp. 71 and 70).

(5) See BALZAC, *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, Paris, R. Laffont, 1990, I, p. 337.

(6) See J. Acquisto's review of J. LOWRIE, *Sightings. Mirrors in Texts, Texts in Mirrors*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2008 in «Nineteenth-Century French Studies» XXXIX, 3-4 (Spring-Summer 2011), p. 348.

(7) When the narrator encounters the blind musicians the violinist urges him not to persist with his reference to Venice: «- Ne lui parlez pas

de Venise [...], ou notre doge va commencer son train» (p. 1024).

(8) In his letter to Mme Hanska of 26 October 1834 (I, p. 204) Balzac had envisaged a literary depiction of contemporary France in terms of a «*Mille et une Nuits* de l'Occident»; see T. FARRANT, *Balzac's Shorter Fictions. Genesis and Genre*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 306-307. On his delight in the *Arabian Nights*, see G. DELATRE, *Les Opinions littéraires de Balzac*, Paris, PUF, 1961, pp. 9-13.

mations of identity⁹. Identification of the story in question has eluded Balzac's editors¹⁰, thereby raising the possibility that the author's intimation of a precise source is to be seen as a hoax, which in turn would suggest that in neither case does an understanding or appreciation of Balzac's story depend on familiarity with a particular *conte arabe*. Such a possibility is strengthened by a similarly unidentified reference to the *Mille et Une Nuits* that occurs in *Illusions perdues* at the moment when the protagonist encounters Herrera-Vautrin-Collin: «Lucien se trouvait dans la situation de ce pêcheur de je ne sais quel conte arabe, qui, voulant se noyer en plein Océan, tombe au milieu de contrées sous-marines et y devient roi»¹¹. Still more indicative of the likelihood that the author of *Illusions perdues* did not have a particular story in mind is the fact that he had originally written: «je ne sais quel conte arabe dans *Les Mille et Une Nuits* ou *Les Mille et Un Jours*»¹². It follows that it is the generic complexion of these two anthologies (of which one, arguably, is genuine and the other counterfeit) that is invoked, and with it the way the stories invite further exemplification and variation. An idea of how this might be effected is duly provided by a description of Esther Gobseck in *Splendeurs et misères*: «elle réalisait l'admirable fiction des contes arabes, où se trouve presque toujours un être sublime caché sous une enveloppe dégradée, et dont le type est, sous le nom de Nabuchodonosor, dans le livre des livres, la Bible»¹³. It would be difficult to find a more fitting description of the aged Facino Cane than «un être sublime caché sous une enveloppe dégradée»¹⁴.

There is, nonetheless, a specific story in *Les Mille et Une Nuits* that has not been adduced with reference to *Facino Cane*, namely «Histoire de l'aveugle Baba-Abdalla», in which the title-character is punished for his avarice by a dervish he has sought to cheat and who deploys the means at his disposal to cause the hapless camel-owner to go blind. There is no question of Balzac following the actual scenario of the original, which involves the eponymous Baba-Abdalla smart-talking the dervish out of his share of the spoils (amassed solely through the latter's knowledge and magical powers – he casts an unguent on the fire «en prononçant quelques paroles dont je ne compris pas bien le sens»¹⁵), but the likely impact on the novelist's reading of the tale may be seen from the fact that Baba-Abdalla admits to «[une] passion étrange pour les richesses» (p. 11), «un puissant désir de devenir encore plus riche» (p. 9), and to «l'envie insurmontable de contempler à mon aise tous les trésors de la terre et peut-être d'en jouir toutes les fois que je voudrais m'en donner le plaisir» (p. 22). The dervish leads Baba-Abdalla to a «palais magnifique» (pp. 13-14) cut into the rock, a *trésor* containing, like its Venetian equivalent in *Facino Cane*, a mass of gold and precious stones, only a small portion of which the two men were able to transport on the eighty camels that formed Baba-Abdalla's existing wealth, just as Cane and the jailer he has bribed can load only a fraction of their swag onto the gondola. From untold wealth the protagonist is reduced to the status of a beggar and, as such, finds himself, ironically, cast in the role of the dervish for whose asceticism he had pretended to profess respect: «je me vis réduit à la mendicité sans aucune ressource. Il fallut donc me résoudre à demander l'aumône, et c'est ce que j'ai fait jusqu'à présent»¹⁶ (pp. 25-26). Cane is, of course, condemned to an identical fate¹⁷.

(9) *Pl.*, VI, p. 503.

(10) See P. CITRON's statement, *ibid.*, p. 1357, n. 5.

(11) *Pl.*, V, p. 694.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 1398, variant *a* for p. 694.

(13) *Pl.*, VI, pp. 643-44.

(14) It is, however, St Mark's in Venice that is «originellement sublime» (*ibid.*, p. 1025).

(15) *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, Paris, Galliot, 1823-1826, V, p. 12. Subsequent parenthetical references in this paragraph will be to this volume.

(16) The word dervish is held to derive from a Proto-Iranian word meaning «needy» or «mendicant».

(17) For a discussion of Balzac's use of *Les Mille et Une Nuits* in another work that appeared in

Venice as an exemplary meeting place of East and West opens up the composition to a complementary absorption of European culture, with Cane journeying (via Smyrna) to Amsterdam, Madrid, London and Paris. Italy itself remains predominant, however, with the composition being suffused with reflections of the protagonist's Italian identity¹⁸. Here too, the reference points in both *récit* and *discours* are predominantly authors and their writings (just as the prison walls in Venice display graffiti in Arabic). Cane's physiognomy is compared to a plaster cast of Dante, though his blindness provides the link that justifies his also being seen as a second Homer, albeit one who retains within him «une Odyssée condamnée à l'oubli» (p. 1023). The barcarolle Cane executes is compared to an unspecified setting of Psalm 137 («Super flumina Babylonis»), thereby inviting a comparison of the modern-day Austrian occupation of Italy to the Babylonish captivity of Jerusalem. Less specifically, the evocation of Venetian topography reads as an (imperfect) reproduction of one of the numerous travelogues (or fictions) set in Venice that abounded in France in this period, though the narrator's awareness of Facino Cane's medieval namesake seems likely to have derived from Sismondi's article on the *condottiere* in Michaud's *Biographie universelle*. At the same time, knowledge of the figure could only have been increased by the fact that in 1833 Facino Cane's widow had been the subject of an opera (*Beatrice di Tenda*) that Vincenzo Bellini had written for Giuditta Pasta. It was first performed, appropriately as far as Balzac's story is concerned, at La Fenice in Venice, but was a widely reported flop and led to a break between Bellini and his librettist Romani, their polemic being hosted by the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia*¹⁹. The success of Bellini's last opera, *I Puritani*, premiered in Paris in 1835, may also be presumed to have revived memories of the failure of the work that preceded it, as doubtless Bellini's premature death would have done later that year.

As for the events related by Balzac's Facino Cane with regard to the period that followed his return to France having been stripped of his assets and abandoned by a woman said to be a friend of Mme du Barry, the Italian spares the narrator an account of «aventures dignes de Gil Blas»²⁰ (p. 1030). His revelation with regard to being discovered with the married Bianca Sagredo²¹, née Vendramini («le *sposo* nous surprit causant d'amour», p. 1026) recalls the celebrated story of Paolo and Francesca that forms part of Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*, a story the popularity of which in France during the Romantic period extended well beyond Ingres's painting of 1819²². In *Facino Cane* it is nonetheless the husband who is murdered by the lover rather than the other way round. If the broad outline of the Venetian dimension of Cane's story of adultery, murder, imprisonment, bribery, escape and theft is composed of elements that might be regarded as fictional clichés, it has been seen, in respect of the first two,

the *Chronique de Paris* in 1836, see M. LICHTLÉ, *Sur "L'Interdiction"*, «L'Année balzacienne» 1988, p. 161; reprinted in ID., *Balzac, le texte et la loi*, Paris, PUPS, 2012.

(18) See A. BEGUIN in *L'Œuvre de Balzac*, Paris, Club français du livre, 1966, II, pp. 855-856. Rignall speaks of the «operatic extravaganza» that characterizes the display of Italian motifs by the narrator and Cane alike (p. 46).

(19) See S. WILLIER, *Vincenzo Bellini: a guide to research*, New York and London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 5-6.

(20) A stage adaptation of Lesage's novel was mounted at the Ambigu-Comique on 9 March 1836; as Lorant points out, it was reviewed in the *Chronique de Paris* immediately above Balzac's

nouvelle (see *Pl.*, VI, p. 1542, n. 1 to p. 1030). It is tempting to imagine that this was the play discussed by the couple as they returned home.

(21) In his rue Lesdiguières period, Balzac may well have come across the name Sagredo during his research in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal for his ill-fated tragedy *Cromwell*, Jean (or Giovanni) Sagredo having been Venetian ambassador to Cromwell's Commonwealth (and subsequently the Serenissima's ambassador to the court of Louis XIV).

(22) On representations of Dante's Francesca in early nineteenth-century France, see M. TILBY, *Tours or Dis: Balzac's tale of two cities* ("Le Curé de Tours"), «Nottingham French Studies» XLVI.1 (Spring 2007), pp. 28-46.

to recall Alphonse Royer's *Venezia la Bella* (1834), which itself presents an echo of Hoffmann's tale *Doge et Dogaresse*²³. An additional comparison might, however, be made with the story of the colourful life of the seventeenth-century composer, Alessandro Stradella. It is true that *Facino Cane* predates by a year the operatic treatment of this story by Louis Niedermeyer and, by several months, the narrative that Jules Janin published in the *Revue et Gazette Musicale*²⁴, but Stradella's life had been well known since the posthumous publication, in 1715, of the abbé Bourdelot's *Histoire de la musique et de ses effets*. It was the subject of a piece by Baculard d'Arnaud in the *Mercur de France* of December 1777 and was retold in Stendhal's *Vie de Rossini*²⁵. As the tale went, Stradella formed a relationship with one of his pupils, a young noblewoman who lived «in criminal intimacy»²⁶ with a Venetian senator (Alvise Contarini)²⁷. In due course they felt impelled to flee Venice. The senator hired assassins to pursue the couple, who, after surviving attempts on their lives in Rome and Turin (involving events that might indeed be described as «des aventures dignes de Gil Blas»), were murdered in Genoa. Those who recounted the story tended to emphasize its illustration of the long reach of Venice. Cane, as he journeys though Italy, France, Holland and Spain, likewise experiences deep fear of «la vengeance de Venise» (p. 1030).

There are further un-signposted traces of writing in Balzac's text. Cane's passion for gold has been convincingly linked by André Lorant to the avarice of Hoffmann's master-jeweller Cardillac in the story *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, a text that had inspired Balzac's *conte philosophique*, *Maître Cornélius*²⁸. Cardillac's assumption that his passion for jewellery was passed on to him in the womb by his mother's craving for a particular necklace of precious stones is matched by Cane's avowal: «ma mère eut une passion pour l'or pendant sa grossesse» (p. 1026). Moreover, Hoffmann's story, while set in Paris, closes with a reference to a Venetian parallel: «Je me souviens d'avoir lu quelque part l'histoire d'un vieux cordonnier de Venise que toute la ville regardait comme un homme dévot et laborieux, et qui était un assassin et un bandit abominable»²⁹.

As for Balzac's awareness of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts, the blind Cane's home in old age³⁰, it has received little attention, yet an array of representations of the institution provide an established, and highly suggestive, context within which to situate his depiction. A seminal instance occurs in one of the *Lettres persanes* of Montesquieu, an author with whom Balzac professed to have been well acquainted during his youth, to the extent of entertaining the idea of deriving a work for the stage from the philosopher's *Dialogue de Sylla et d'Euclate*³¹. In Letter 32 from Rica to an

(23) See LORANT in *Pl.*, VI, p. 1541, n. 2 to p. 1027.

(24) See the numbers for 10, 17, and 24 July 1836.

(25) STENDHAL had already retailed Stradella's life in his *Vie de Haydn, de Mozart et de Métastase*.

(26) The phrase is borrowed from E. HARDCAS- TLE (W.H. PYNE), «Alessandro Stradella», *Fine Arts, Antiquities and Literary Chit Chat*, I (1824), p. 201.

(27) As *Massimilla Doni* would reveal, Venice was closely associated with music in Balzac's mind.

(28) See *Pl.*, VI, p. 1014.

(29) HOFFMANN, *Contes fantastiques*, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1980, II, p. 118. In Loève- Veimars's translation this formed part of an autho-

rial end note and is assumed by Lorant to have been presented as such by Hoffmann himself (see *Pl.*, VI, p. 1014). It in fact forms an integral part of the original story (see *Contes fantastiques*, II, p. 361, n. 13).

(30) In *Le Cousin Pons*, the struggling doctor Poulain is appointed medical director of the Quinze-Vingts for services rendered to Pons's legal heirs.

(31) There is a reference to the *Lettres persanes* in *Illusions perdues* (see *Pl.*, V, p. 446). On Balzac and Montesquieu, see DELATTRE, pp. 110-113 and M. LICHTLE, *Balzac et la Révolution anglaise*, «L'Année balzacienne» 1990, pp. 170-72 (reprinted in LICHTLE, *Balzac, le texte et la loi*).

unidentified recipient, the writer marvels at the way a resident of the Quinze-Vingts, who only subsequently reveals that he is blind, leads him safely to his destination, which, looking forward to *Facino Cane*, happens to be a street in the Marais³²: «Il me mena à merveille, me tira de tous les embarras, et me sauva adroitement des carrosses et des voitures»³³. To the narrator's equivalent surprise, Facino Cane displays similar skilfulness: «Je me laissai conduire et il me mena vers les fossés de la Bastille comme s'il avait eu des yeux»³⁴ (pp. 1025-1026). Rica ends with an allusion to the licence of the inhabitants of the Quinze-Vingts at this stage in its history to beg, and emphasizes their importunate conduct in the city's churches, just as Cane will exhort the narrator with the words «partons mendiants» (p. 1031) and reiterate «je demanderai l'aumône» (p. 1032). Venice and Smyrna are, what is more, locations common to both *Facino Cane* and the *Lettres persanes*, while Rica habitually confers the appellation «derviche» on any member of the priesthood in Europe³⁵.

The Hospice des Quinze-Vingts was likewise a prominent feature in the various late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century works that sought to depict the picturesque life of the French capital. Thus Louis-Sébastien Mercier, in his *Tableau de Paris* of 1783, advocated, on the occasion of the city being blanketed in fog, the hiring of a *quinze-vingt*. The *quinze-vingts* were able to make up to five *louis* a day providing such a service, «ces aveugles connoissant mieux la topographie de Paris que ceux qui en avoient gravé ou dessiné le plan»³⁶. Mercier's description furthermore introduces the topos of the superiority of the blind over the sighted that Balzac would exploit in *Facino Cane*: «On tenoit le quinze-vingt par un pan de sa robe, et d'une marche plus sûre que celle des clair-voyans, l'aveugle vous traînoit dans les quartiers où vous aviez affaire»³⁷ (The importunity of the *quinze-vingts* in the churches of Paris to which Montesquieu's Rica had alluded is again evoked: «les quinze-vingts sont dans toutes les églises, et se font place en interrogeant vos jambes avec leur bâton»³⁸).

The *quinze-vingts* as musicians were, moreover, an established feature of nineteenth-century representations of Paris³⁹. Étienne de Jouy, in *L'Hermite de la Chaussée-d'Antin*, recounts the story of a well-born citizen being forced to step aside on the boulevard by «une file de cinq ou six hommes qui marchaient très-vite à la suite les uns des autres, en se tenant par un bâton»⁴⁰. Ignorant of the Quinze-Vingts, the *chevalier* in question is surprised to learn that the individuals are blind and that «ces malheureux sortaient tous les jours de leur hospice, situé dans le fond du faubourg Saint-Antoine, traversaient Paris pour aller au Palais-Royal faire de la musique au café des Aveugles, et retournaient chez eux à minuit sans guide et sans accident»⁴¹. *Galignani's Paris Guide* of 1822 advertised this latter attraction in the following terms:

(32) Prior to 1779, the Quinze-Vingts was in the rue Saint-Honoré, on the corner of the rue Saint-Nicaise.

(33) MONTESQUIEU, *Lettres persanes*, Geneva, Droz, 1965, p. 85.

(34) Lorant draws a parallel with Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles* (Pl., VI, pp. 1540-1541, n. 1 to p. 1027). This is developed by LOWRIE (pp. 112-114), but her textual parallels are forced and, in some cases, all but nullified by the fact that at the time of Cane's imprisonment in Venice he was fully sighted. Balzac may also have known Voltaire's *Les aveugles juges des couleurs* (1766). The point of contact between *Facino Cane* and the *Lettres persanes* is much the closest.

(35) In his unfinished play *Le Corsaire*, based on

Byron's oriental verse-tale, the young Balzac had followed the poet in having Conrad disguise himself as a dervish. He may also have known Boufflers's *conte oriental, Le Derviche* (1810).

(36) MERCIER, *Tableau de Paris*, Amsterdam, 1783, V, p. 18.

(37) *Ibid.*

(38) *Ibid.*

(39) FLAUBERT, in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, would write: «CLARINETTE. – En jouer rend aveugle. Ex.: Tous les aveugles jouent de la clarinette» (*Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1966, p. 349).

(40) *L'Hermite de la Chaussée d'Antin*, Paris, Pilet, 1813-1814, III, pp. 258-259.

(41) *Ibid.*, p. 259.

The orchestra, which is pretty numerous, is entirely composed of blind men and women, who come every night from the *hospice des Quinze Vingts*, quite at the other end of the town, entirely by themselves, and return in the same way, after 11 at night. Their vocal and instrumental performances are medley imitations of those at the French opera⁴².

An account more or less contemporary with *Facino Cane*, by a recent Harvard graduate, shows the author to have been unimpressed by the orchestra, which, he maintained, consisted of «a few blind musicians». Recording that it would play any tune on receipt of «two or three francs extra», he revealed that his request for the American national anthem had proved to be «beyond their humble talents», so «they of their own accord struck up “God save the King,” thinking no doubt that would do quite as well»⁴³.

The musicians of the Café des Aveugles had, in fact, inspired a comic, burlesque and satirical tradition. It was widely accepted that the musical talents of the Quinze-Vingts were limited. «Musique de quinze-vingts» indeed became a slang term indicating «musique médiocre comme en exécutent les aveugles nomades»⁴⁴. An engraving of a rip-roaringly successful «Grand concert extraordinaire exécuté par un détachement des Quinze-vingt au Caffé [sic] des à-veugles Foire Saint Ovide au Mois de Septembre 1771», together with a description of the occasion published in the *Almanach forain* for 1773, recorded the cacophony produced by the eight players under their conductor sat astride a peacock and beating out of time, all of them sporting cardboard spectacles without lenses and caps adorned with ass's ears⁴⁵. The pioneer of education for the blind, Valentin Haüy, whose own account provided a little more precision about the uniform score followed by all the instruments, later attributed his vocation to the disgust he experienced on witnessing this performance, judging it to be «une scène si déshonorante pour l'espèce humaine»⁴⁶. With regard to the permanent Café des aveugles, Mercier would subsequently relate that: «douze ou quinze virtuoses» of the «Académie des Quinze-Vingts» «vous déchirent sans relâche les oreilles», in what was said to be an «épouvantable sabat»⁴⁷. It is in keeping with the topos that a stage direction in a one-act vaudeville of 1824 gives with regard to a blind oboist: «il prend son hautbois et prélude en aveugle, tout le monde se bouche les oreilles»⁴⁸. The year before the composition of *Facino Cane*, Henry Monnier, in a new *scène populaire* entitled *Un voyage en diligence*, had featured a blind clarinet player and provided a similar stage direction: «L'aveugle estropié sur la clarinette la valse de *Robin des Bois*».

(42) Galignani's *Paris Guide*, 10th edition, Paris, Galignani, 1822, p. 120. The 1830 edition removes the reference to female musicians and adds: «A man here impersonates a savage by grinning and raving, and beating a drum like a madman, to the infinite delight of the spectators» (p. 185).

(43) H.H. WRIGHT [Hezekiah Hartley Wright], «An American», *Desultory Reminiscences of a Tour through Germany, Switzerland, and France*, Boston, Tickner, 1838, p. 237. The reference by Dickens to the «Blind Men in the Palais Royal who act Vaudevilles» would appear to be the result of his having misunderstood his guidebook: the 1822 edition of Galignani's guide groups the café des Aveugles with three other Palais-Royal establishments that offer various forms of entertainment including vaudevilles (see

The Letters of Charles Dickens, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965-2002, V (1981), p. 26; and Galignani's *Paris Guide*, 10th edition, p. 518).

(44) See E. GOUJET, *L'Argot musical: curiosités anecdotiques et philologiques*, Paris, Fischbacher, 1892, p. 306.

(45) See Z. WEYGAND, *Vivre sans voir. Les Aveugles dans la société française du Moyen Âge au siècle de Louis Braille*, Paris, Créaphis, 2003, pp. 111-112.

(46) See A. DREUX, *La Bibliothèque des aveugles*, Paris, Association Valentin Haüy, 1917, pp. 22-24; and WEYGAND, p. 111.

(47) MERCIER, *Orchestres de café*, in ID., *Le Nouveau Paris*, Brunvic, Vieweg; Paris, Fuchs et al., n.d., IV, pp. 91-94.

(48) BRAZIER, MELESVILLE and CARMOUCHE, *Les Trois Aveugles*, Paris, Quoy, 1824, p. 23.

But it was in the street that the *Quinze-Vingts* were most frequently depicted by visual artists. An 1828 drawing by Martin-Sylvestre Baptiste and engraved by Engelmann showed a troupe of blind musicians (two violins, a clarinet and drum) advancing on a rival⁴⁹. In 1820 Jean-Henri Marlet had drawn «Les Aveugles des Quinze-Vingts en promenade sur les boulevards» (3 violins, 1 cello, 1 clarinet, 1 horn and 1 drum, accompanied by a woman without an instrument⁵⁰). Likewise, when, in 1842, Maria d'Anspach contributed «Les Musiciens ambulants» to *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, she did not mince her words:

Paris, qui ne veut plus de mendiants, est peu habile à les cacher ou à les saisir. Et qu'est-ce donc autre chose, je vous prie, que ces aveugles à la clarinette criarde, ces éternels chanteurs de complaints, et ces petits joueurs de vielle, malheureux enfants des deux sexes qui préludent ainsi à une vie d'opprobre et de misère⁵¹?

Collectively, the artists and writers of the period were thus agreed on the status of the *quinze-vingts* and their still less privileged colleagues. In *Facino Cane*, Balzac's assessment of the musical capabilities of the title character and his two fellows was clearly a continuation of the same representation. Yet there was nothing in that tradition to suggest the likelihood of finding amongst the blind musicians an egregious monomaniac with such a colourful past. At the same time, Balzac was not situating his trio of music-makers solely in a literary and artistic tradition, for the question of the *quinze-vingts* begging had been a controversial matter for a number of decades. Begging was repeatedly forbidden by new sets of regulations, but the objection was raised that the sum paid in compensation was insufficient⁵². During the Restoration, the *ultras* who ran the *Quinze-Vingts* were, in addition, ill-disposed towards the musicians performing in «immoral» cafés, while after the July Revolution those who did so were subjected to a strict curfew. It has been claimed that from the 1830s onwards they were «increasingly subject to laws directly restricting their musical voices»⁵³, though the bulk of these repressive measures were taken after Balzac had written his story.

Neither the extent of the explicit allusions to existing writing nor the number of plausible sources for the composition will come as a surprise to the attentive reader of Balzac. But this «writerly» context is above all significant in the way it fosters «self-consciousness» within the narrative voice itself. The retrospective narrator boasts that the story of *Facino Cane* is but one of many *contes* waiting to be released from the depths of his memory⁵⁴. The lateness of the hour at which he makes the acquaintance of the blind musician encourages the reader to see this *florilegium* of stories in terms of Balzac's evocation of a contemporary

(49) See I. SYKES, *Sounding the "Citizen-Patient": the politics of voice at the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts in post-Revolutionary Paris*, *Medical History*, LV (2011), p. 502. The lithograph, entitled "Les Musiciens aveugles", is reproduced at <http://wellcomeimages.org>

(50) See G. HENRIOT, *L'Assistance publique à Paris sous l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Musée de l'enseignement public, 1915, notice 24.

(51) *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, Paris, Curmer, 1840-42, IX, p. 186. In *La Peau de chagrin*

Balzac had depicted a scene north of Cosne-sur-Loire in which «un ménétrier aveugle continuait à jouer sur sa clarinette une ronde criarde» (*Pl.*, X, p. 287).

(52) See WEYGAND, *op. cit.*, pp. 146 and 294-295.

(53) SYKES, *op. cit.*, p. 498.

(54) «Je ne sais comment j'ai si longtemps gardé sans la dire l'histoire que je vais vous raconter, elle fait partie de ces récits curieux restés dans le sac d'où la mémoire les tire capricieusement comme des numéros de loterie» (pp. 1020-1021).

Parisian counterpart to the *Mille et Une Nuits*. Such an inference is bolstered by the inclusion of the precise information that the narrator's eavesdropping on the worker and his wife occurs between «onze heures et minuit». Not only is this an obvious echo of one of Balzac's two contributions to the *Contes bruns, par une tête à l'envers* of 1832 («Une conversation entre onze heures et minuit»), but the narrator of that story identifies the said time in the evening as a privileged moment for storytelling: «Entre onze heures et minuit, la conversation, jusque là brillante, antithétique, devint conteuse»⁵⁵. As for the oft-quoted, and unexpectedly long, disquisition in *Facino Cane* on the creative imagination as an example of «second sight», it does not so much constitute a free-standing essay belonging to the realm of aesthetics as it underpins the extent to which the opening narrative serves as a sustained, if implicit, reflection on the narrator's consciousness of the way his activity represents a blurring of the distinction between the real and the imaginary, text and world. This in turn may be considered to explain the striking removal of the boundary between *mansarde* and *boulevard* as kindred locations for his studious activity. The strangeness of the discourse on «la seconde vue» indeed stems in part from the way in which its operation is identified by him with an outdoor setting, whereas it is one that conventionally belongs to the attic or study (or, as Proust would later highlight, the bedroom). A similar abolition of boundaries may be observed with regard to the worker and his wife. In being said to comment on the play they have just seen, they continue in their role as members of the audience, yet they are transformed by the *récit* into actors who perform for the narrator and thus the reader.

The way the composition as a whole grows out of a playful, associative reflection on the writing and telling of stories is witnessed in a prominence given to proper names that contrasts with the anonymity of the narrator. Nicknames, *noms de guerre* and assumed names abound. Facino itself is a diminutive (of Bonifacio, as Sismondi notes in his article for the *Biographie universelle*). The shortened version of the character's name (which in full, emphasizing his Venetian origins, is Marco Facino Cane) functions as a borrowed name that thereby connotes subordination to his celebrated forebear⁵⁶. In London he had lived under an assumed Spanish name. For his fellow musicians, he is both «le prince» (since he possesses the title of Prince of Varese) and «le père Canard». This second appellation is again appropriate in view of the *canards* he plays on his clarinet, but it is also part of a play on his name that gives rise to other versions. He explains to the narrator that in France he is known as «le père Canet» (the title given to the 1843 edition of the story). This establishes through its proximity to *caneton* or *canette* an obvious link to *canard*, as well as bringing into play the French monosyllable *cane* alongside the two syllables of the original Italian⁵⁷. But he is also, for reasons that

(55) BALZAC, CHASLES and RABOU, *Contes bruns par une tête à l'envers*, Paris, Éditions des autres, 1979, p. 9. The narrator adds: «j'ai pris la conversation à l'heure où chaque récit nous attachait vivement». The opening of *Facino Cane* may also be seen as an echo of the conclusion to «Une conversation»: «Nous allons voir la Marguerite de Scheffer; et nous ne faisons pas attention à des créatures qui fourmillent dans les rues de Paris, bien autrement poétiques, belles de misère, belles d'expression, sublimes créations, mais en guenilles» (*ibid.*, pp. 62-63). In the «Postface» to *Ferragus*, Balzac had noted: «Ces trois épisodes de l'Histoire des Treize sont les seuls que l'auteur puisse publier. Quant aux autres drames de cette histoire, si féconde en drames, ils peuvent se conter entre onze heures et minuit; mais il est impossible de les écrire» (*Pl.*, V, p. 904). In the same year as

Facino Cane, Balzac's *Le Secret des Ruggieri* began «Entre onze heures et minuit...» (*Pl.*, XI, p. 375). As Lucien de Rubempré learns, this was also the time in the evening when newspapers were put to bed following the submission of the theatre reviews: «Le journal, Monsieur, se fait dans la rue, chez les auteurs, à l'imprimerie, entre onze heures et minuit» (*Pl.*, V, p. 333).

(56) Balzac would nonetheless refer in *Massimila Doni* to «[l]es Facino Cane, princes de Varèse» (*Pl.*, X, p. 544). In the same work, Marco Vendramin learns that «Marco Facino Cane, prince de Varèse, était mort dans un hôpital de Paris» (*ibid.*, p. 549).

(57) The recurrence of the initial «c» is stressed by T. KASHIWAGI, *La poétique balzacienne dans "Facino Cane"*, «L'Année balzacienne» 1999 [II], pp. 572-74.

are soon explained, referred to by the violinist and flageolet player as «notre doge». Cane's membership of a patrician family provides sufficient justification of the nickname (while ironic, since fate prevents him from ever becoming Doge). Yet, as Balzac's rudimentary knowledge of other languages would have allowed him to appreciate, Italian *cane* designated a different species from that of the duck⁵⁸. In the form of the English *dog*, it might even be said to furnish, in this evidently ludic context, a further (spurious) link to *doge*. As the lengthy exordium of *Z. Marcas* reveals, Balzac was ready to engage in extensive play on proper names⁵⁹. On the literal level, Cane's reference to «le secret de mon nom» (p. 1030) alludes simply to the revelation (to his French mistress) of his real name, but the precise choice of words attributed to him here confers upon that name a significance and suggestive power that goes beyond the dictates of the narrative action. Such play with the name, especially when envisioned with regard to a theory of onomastic predestination, was primarily associated by Balzac with Sterne. In *Ursule Mirouët*, for example, he asks, rhetorically: «ne doit-on pas reconnaître avec Sterne l'occulte puissance des noms?»⁶⁰, while in «Une conversation entre onze heures et minuit», the narrator observes: «le nom [de Rusca] me fait pressentir quelque drame, car je partage, relativement aux noms, la superstition de M. Gautier Shandy»⁶¹. It is therefore not surprising that, rather than constituting incidental humour, the play on the name *Cane* is part of a wider narrative self-consciousness such as Balzac had, from the time of his residence in the rue Lesdiguières, relished in *Tristram Shandy*.

A similar chain of associations, what in a different context Montesquieu terms «une chaîne secrète»⁶², may be observed in relation to the various thematic oppositions (actualized or potential) that constitute perpetual reference points within the text and stretch across both the two scenes of the frame narrative and Cane's autobiographical account: sight/blindness⁶³, poverty/wealth, youth/old age, madness/sanity, liberty/imprisonment. What is striking, however, is that the contrasting elements, which, it is important to note, are not necessarily given equal weight, are not preserved as distinct categories. The associative nature of the writing provides an illustration of what the first of Balzac's two stories in the *Contes bruns* revealingly terms «cette ravissante improvisation [...] intraduisible»⁶⁴ and may be held responsible for the way thematic substance may be diminished by a blurring of the literal and the metaphorical and by the way a specific opposition may combine with an element of another.

The narrator's poverty, which is subsequently echoed by that of the various workers from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, including the now institutionalized Cane, forms a contrast with the gold that the latter succeeded in amassing in his younger days. The narrative subsequently mimics the character's obsession with gold through its emphasis on such seemingly unremarkable details as the «Casa Doro» or the Republic's «Livre d'or». As far as age is concerned, the narrator's youth clearly differentiates him from the eighty-two-year-old Italian exile, but the latter's life story goes back sixty years, to the time when he was more or less the age the narrator is now. Moreover, the Venetian's last words to the narrator represent an attempt to annihilate the distinction: «l'on est jeune quand on voit de l'or devant soi» (p. 1032) and, in addition, provide an illustration of the way two sets of oppositions become entwined. This blurring of the age-difference, which is accompanied by the fact that

(58) Balzac's schoolboy Latin would have alerted him to the etymology of the Italian word.

(59) See *Pl.*, VIII, p. 829.

(60) *Pl.*, III, p. 772.

(61) *Contes bruns*, p. 62.

(62) MONTESQUIEU, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

(63) On sight, see J.-D. EBGUY, «Le récit comme vision»: Balzac voyant dans "Facino Cane", *L'Année balzacienne* 1998, pp. 261-283.

(64) *Contes bruns*, p. 9.

the narrator gives no date for the period in which he lived in the rue Lesdiguières, allows both Cane and the narrator to serve as versions of the same autobiographical project, though with regard to Balzac himself this becomes most apparent retrospectively in the light of his first visit to Italy (a visit that would include Venice) later that year. At the same time, the aged Cane presents still more obvious parallels with both the novelist's father Bernard-François Balzac, who was obsessed with longevity and died at the selfsame age of eighty-two, and such existing figures from Balzac's philosophical tales as the Antiquary in *La Peau de chagrin*, Zambinella in *Sarrasine*, and the alchemist Balthazar Claës in *La Recherche de l'absolu*⁶⁵. In other words, this further example of an *étude philosophique* is, unsurprisingly, skewed towards the exceptional phenomenon of great age.

Rather than forming part of an exploratory dialogue with the prerequisites for sanity, the themes of madness form a chain of associations that represent its constant presence beneath the surface. On his initial acquaintance with the blind clarinetist, the narrator confesses: «Je pensai que cet homme était fou» (p. 1025). The Hospice des Quinze-Vingts, like the wine-merchant's where the wedding guests celebrate the marriage of one of the sisters of the narrator's very part-time cleaning lady, is in the rue de Charenton, better known for its mental asylum, as Balzac would himself acknowledge in one of the strands in the chorus of judgments passed by an intoxicated cast in *La Peau de chagrin* on Nodier's Sterne-inspired extravaganza *Histoire du roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux*: «véritable ouvrage écrit pour Charenton»⁶⁶. Prior to entering the Hospice's portals, Cane is committed by his French mistress to Bicêtre «comme fou» (p. 1030), in a manner that links the asylum to a prison. In echo of the treatment meted out to le colonel Chabert, whose spouse seeks to have him committed to Charenton, Cane's approach to the Premier Consul and the Emperor of Austria produces a single result: «tous m'ont éconduit comme un fou!» (p. 1031). Yet he himself is ready to see his actions as madness: «j'ai commencé par la première des folies, par l'amour» (p. 1026), just as the thirty-year-old Sagredo is described by Cane as «fou de sa femme» (*ibid.*)

At the same time, madness as a category attracts a string of related notions of varying degrees of intensity: *passion*, *monomanie*, *dada*. It is *passion* that provides the explicit link between the narrator and the figure of the musician, with the former proclaiming: «Une seule passion m'entraînait en dehors de mes habitudes studieuses»⁶⁷ (p. 1019). It is Cane's passion for gold that, according to his own admission, led to his downfall: «Cette passion m'a perdu, je suis devenu joueur pour jouer de l'or» (p. 1027). It becomes interwoven with the opposition between old age and youth when the narrator observes: «l'or reprit bientôt le dessus, et la fatale passion éteignit cette lueur de jeunesse»⁶⁸ (p. 1031). Cane's linking of it to the effect of a similar passion whilst he was in his mother's womb recalls, given the other echoes of Sterne in this narrative, the emphasis on pre-parturition (along with parturition itself) that occupies the whimsical narrative of the adult Tristram⁶⁹. At the same time, the narrator says of the clarinetist's joy in attracting the apparent

(65) On the alchemical dimension of *Facino Cane*, see Kashiwagi.

(66) *Pl.*, X, p. 105. In earlier editions of the novel Balzac had given Nodier's *Smarra* as the example.

(67) It is significant that in contradistinction to its status in *Gambara* and *Massimilla Doni* (a composition explicitly linked to *Facino Cane* through a shared reference to the Vendramin family) music is far from being a passion for the clarinetist, being

merely a meagre source of income that contrasts with his unassuaged appetite for gold. As the narrator observes, «Sur ce prix-là, certes, ils ne donnaient ni du Rossini, ni du Beethoven» (p. 1022).

(68) The words «de jeunesse» constituted an addition in the *Études philosophiques* of 1837.

(69) It is not impossible that Cardillac's similar claim reflects Hoffmann's memory of *Tristram Shandy*.

interest of a fellow human-being not previously known to him: «il devint gai comme un homme qui monte sur son dada»⁷⁰ (p. 1024), an undoubted reference to Uncle Toby's hobby-horse in Sterne's masterpiece and a phrase that Balzac had used in *Clotilde de Lusignan* with reference to Kéfalein's «joie de pouvoir monter sur son dada», one of several such uses of the word in his early works⁷¹. In another work from that period, *Jean-Louis ou la fille trouvée*, the choice between *dada* and *passion* is presented (with reference to the hero's Pyrrhonian uncle Barnabé) as a matter of personal preference⁷², though in *La Grande Bretèche* (1832) it is maintained that «Un dada est le milieu précis entre la passion et la monomanie»⁷³. In *Facino Cane*, on the other hand, the title character boasts: «J'ai pour l'ore une monomanie» (p. 1026) in a manner that suggests interchangeability with *passion*⁷⁴. Within the composition as a whole the various terms that form this particular string indeed present scant demonstration of their distinctiveness.

In certain cases, notably that of poverty and wealth, it is possible to see in the oppositional terms at least the hint of an authorial evaluation. Thus, in an obvious echo of *Louis Lambert*, the narrator's poverty is linked by him to «L'amour de la science» (p. 1019) and would seem to be almost a badge of honour. The equation of poverty and honesty, in contrast to that of wealth and crime exemplified by Facino Cane, is embodied in the narrator's cleaning lady and her husband. Yet Cane promises the narrator that in accompanying him to Venice: «vous serez [...] riche comme *Les Mille et Une Nuits*» (p. 1025), and although at one level this is clearly a reference to the easy acquisition of fabulous wealth, at another it might be taken to evoke the way the oriental tales represent wealth when seen as products of the creative imagination. Such positive elements associated with both poles reveal how the composition is structured in terms of a deep-seated tension between opposing goals and values. The fact remains that the associative character of the representation of the oppositions, as well as unifying the composition at the aesthetic level, is much less concerned to operate as an exploration at the level of theme than to provide evidence of an obsessive presence of certain concerns appropriate to the tale of a monomaniac. As has been suggested, it is in the form of obsessions (common, at least in essence, to Cane, the narrator and Balzac himself) that the questions of madness, wealth and longevity constantly surface in the text, as is the case of the emphasis on theatre and the theatrical (including exploitation of the proximity to the rue de Charenton of the boulevard Beaumarchais), water (the canals of Venice and the canal Saint-Martin), and prisons (the dungeons of the Palazzo Ducale and the «fossés de la Bastille»). This is also true with regard to the presence of Italy in Cane's story, which goes well beyond the topographical details of the setting. Paris, which contains in the narrator's mind an infinite number of «aventures perdues» (p. 1020) and «dramas oubliés» (*ibid.*), is termed «cette ville de douleur» (*ibid.*), an unmistakable allusion to Dante's *Inferno* even without the pointer of the explicit reference to the Florentine poet already noted. But alongside such clichés, a statement by the narrator stands out by the insistence of its tone: «...mon Italien; car je voulais que ce fût un Italien, et c'était un Italien»

(70) Le Père Canet is linked to le Père Goriot through the possession of a hobbyhorse, Goriot being said to possess «le gai sourire du bourgeois dont on a flatté le dada» (*Pl.*, III, p. 64).

(71) BALZAC, *Premiers romans*, Paris, R. Laffont, 1999, I, p. 731. See also *Wann-Chlore*, where Sterne is mentioned by name and *marotte* is given as an alternative French term (*ibid.*, II, p. 733).

(72) «Les passions ou les *dadas*, comme on voudra» (*ibid.*, I, p. 414).

(73) *Pl.*, III, p. 714.

(74) In *La Recherche de l'absolu* Balzac had written of Claës: «Il avait déjà cinquante-neuf ans. A cet âge, l'idée qui le domina contracta l'âpre fixité par laquelle commencent les monomanies» (*Pl.*, X, p. 770).

(p. 1022). If this might be thought to recall Aladdin and his magic lamp, *vouloir* here may be considered to possess a force that extends beyond acknowledgment of the desire to be proved right with regard to his supposition regarding the clarinetist's nationality⁷⁵. It possesses an obvious link to the narrator's comment: «Venise est une belle ville, j'ai toujours eu la fantaisie d'y aller» (p. 1024). The words «j'ai toujours eu» in the mouth of a twenty-year-old will have only limited impact, but in relation to Balzac's accomplishment of an Italian journey only a few months after the composition of *Facino Cane* it inevitably has greater resonance. It also reveals how the work reflects a merging of the perspectives of 1819 and 1836, just as for Cane his narrative bridges the gap between past and present and dismantles the distinction between old age and youth that will however, reassert itself once the narrative is concluded⁷⁶. As for the writing, it may be regarded as fused with further, hidden examples of the Italian dream. Thus in the hyperbolic evocation of the as yet unidentified Cane, the latter is evoked in the manner of a volcanic eruption that in the context inevitably recalls the specific example of Vesuvius⁷⁷.

Janet Beizer has noted that the title character of *Facino Cane* delivers «a story that is nothing less than the metaphoric reenactment of the narrator's discourse»⁷⁸, but the extent to which the composition is almost exclusively self-generative may be seen from even the tiniest of details. Thus the explicit reference to the dervish of the *Mille et Une Nuits* makes an oblique re-appearance in the description of the dancers at the wedding, who, in addition to being said to embody the spirit of the *guinguette* quarter of La Courtille (p. 1021), possess the appearance of whirling dervishes: «toutes [les personnes] dansaient comme si le monde allait finir» (p. 1021). This is further evidence of the way the text is not designed to be illustrative of an authorial point of view, but forms an artificial construct that enacts a play of random associations generated by otherwise unrelated literary and cultural commonplaces⁷⁹. As an example of *bricolage*, *Facino Cane* is presided over, appropriately, by the early reference to the Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique, the name of which alludes to a specific type of dramatic performance that may be defined as a «pièce de théâtre mêlant plusieurs genres dramatiques» (*Le Petit Robert*). The ambiguous nature of the representation is the inevitable consequence of the plurality and interpretative open-endedness engendered by a ludic art of improvisation in the service of a composition that is, in essence, a reflection on its own creational process.

Once Cane has told his story, it is of no consequence that the narrator does not hear the words of the prayers he recites. There is nothing left for him to do but

(75) Ebguy (p. 270) suggests that the story of *Facino Cane* may be seen as entirely «le fruit de l'imagination du narrateur».

(76) 1836 was also the year of *La Vieille Fille*, where there is reference to «l'excès de monomanie à laquelle le désir de se marier avait fait arriver Mlle Cormon» (*PL*, IV, p. 890; cf. p. 859).

(77) Balzac himself refers to Vesuvius on several occasions in the *Comédie humaine*. Béguin notes, with regard to Cane's physiognomy: «l'Italie est là encore lorsque les orbites creuses sous l'ombrage des sourcils suggèrent des cavernes d'où pourraient

surgir des brigands armés de torches et de poignards» (*L'Œuvre de Balzac*, II, p. 856).

(78) BEIZER, *op. cit.*, p. 24. For a valuable discussion of the parallels between the narrator and Cane that stresses the latter's «ambiguous status», see FARRANT, *op. cit.*, p. 184. S. PARASCHAS notes that «the extent to which the narrator believes Cane's story is a matter of contention» (*The Realist Author and Sympathetic Imagination*, London, Legenda, 2013, p. 184, n. 26).

(79) See RIGNALL, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.

to return to the Quinze-Vingts and die. The narrator's promise that he will accompany him to Venice, where Cane's far-fetched ambition is of rediscovering the abandoned treasure and making the anonymous narrator his heir, is seemingly nothing more than an attempt to provide solace, in other words an exemplary non-story⁸⁰.

MICHAEL TILBY
Selwyn College, Cambridge

(80) Rignall argues that the narrator's «sudden exclamation [...] "Nous irons à Venise" [...] may be read as an attempt to humour the old man by pretending to fall in with his plans to unearth the hidden Venetian hoard, or as signalling the impecunious student's infection by the dream of wealth. But even in the former case he can be seen to have entered into a system of exchange, offering something, even if only assumed acquiescence, in return

for the story that the musician has told him; and if, as Barthes has argued, such an exchange is the basis of all story-telling, it is also clearly related here, through the subject of the treasure, to the larger system of exchange that governs the workings of the social world» (pp. 47-48). Paraschas sees Cane's attitude standing as a warning against the «commodification of the authorial gift» (p. 109).