



## ***Quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno.*** **Petrarch and Schopenhauer: Elective Affinities**

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**Abstract:** Art plays a fundamental role in Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophical system, and among the many artists who Schopenhauer cites, Francis Petrarch may be considered the most significant. Schopenhauer includes Petrarch among his favorite authors, referring to him as "the poet of [his] heart" and quoting him in those parts of *The World as Will and Representation* and *Parerga and Paralipomena* that center on the topics of ethics and the art of living. In this essay, I analyze Schopenhauer's most significant passages on Petrarch, suggest connections between those passages, and conclude that, for Schopenhauer, the Italian poet is much more than a poet; he is a true sage whose words one can turn to for comfort. Petrarch is a thinker, a promoter of solitary life and the love of knowledge, a writer of philosophy and, although only in part, even an ascetic man. From Schopenhauer's writing, it appears that Petrarch encompasses many of the features of the ideal Schopenhauerian man: someone who understands the senselessness of life, who has succeeded in denying the Will and has been able to express it through his poetry, his philosophical writings and his life choices. Petrarch's verses foreshadow the basic ideas of Schopenhauer's philosophy; his actions and his example serve not only as a model and inspiration for the readers of Schopenhauer but also for the German philosopher himself.

"Petrarch has always been and will remain the poet of my heart."  
(Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena* 2: 443)

Author Bryan Magee was working on *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* when he met the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges who was enthusiastic about Magee's latest project. Borges made no secret of the significant impact the German philosopher had had on his own life, having specifically studied German in order to be able to read Arthur Schopenhauer in the original, and shared another interesting detail with Magee. Borges had often been asked why he, who had such a predilection for complex constructs, had never attempted to explicate his vision of the world systematically—to which he consistently responded that such a project had already been brought to fruition, to wit, by Schopenhauer himself.

Schopenhauer's philosophy has played, and continues to play, a significant role in the realm of the arts, and Borges was far from the only one to succumb to its attraction. In fact, although Schopenhauer's influence is clearly recognizable in the works of psychologists and

philosophers (Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, Wittgenstein) and has contributed to the foundation of the fundamental concepts of evolutionary psychology and sociobiology (Young 221-46), there is no doubt that musicians like Wagner, Mahler, and Strauss and writers including Thomas Mann, Conrad, and Tolstoy (among countless others) have been the most receptive to Schopenhauer's ideas on art and his worldview. Moreover, Schopenhauer always held artists and writers in the highest esteem, and there is ample evidence that he had a special affinity for Petrarch. There is no basis for establishing a hierarchy of authors cited by Schopenhauer, and this essay does not propose to do so; however, in examining the citations of Petrarch chosen by Schopenhauer, it would appear that his fondness for the Italian poet involves not only Petrarch's exquisite literary qualities but, in a wider sense, his philosophical and exemplary characteristics as well. An example of this attraction and of the importance Schopenhauer attributed to Petrarch as a moralist can be found immediately at the threshold of *The World as Will and Representation*—most specifically in the preface of the third edition of the work (1859).

Schopenhauer's cosmopolitan background had allowed him to acquire extensive knowledge of both modern and ancient languages. In addition to German, he read Greek, Latin, English, French, Italian, and Spanish and their respective literatures. He found this knowledge to be particularly helpful while writing *The World as Will*.<sup>1</sup> Because art occupied a position of some significance in his system of philosophy, quotations from both ancient and modern authors abound in his work as a matter of course. A quick glance at the analytical index of *The World as Will* confirms this assertion. There are few philosophers who cite literary texts as widely as Schopenhauer. At this point in his career, Schopenhauer had at last attained the fame he had always longed for but which had eluded him since 1818, the year the first edition was published. Finally, celebrities and artists like Richard Wagner and others flocked to him, wrote to him, and regarded him as a maestro. Universities were offering courses where his philosophy was studied, and artists were beginning to appreciate and discuss his ideas on the visual arts and music. For him, this was total success: his philosophy was at last accepted and appreciated.

With publication of the third edition of *The World as Will*, Schopenhauer decided to add a new brief preface in which he reflected upon the destiny of his work in a manner that was, for him, unusually subdued. Many a work—and most likely his were not the only ones—had not been able to benefit the world since those who were themselves incapable of producing such works had found ways to hinder them and prevent them from gaining ground (*WWR* 1: xxviii). As a consequence, Schopenhauer had to wait until he was seventy-two years of age to see the publication of this third and final edition of the work that he had conceived and realized back when he was thirty. Despite this adversity, he stated that he found comfort in the words expressed in Petrarch's *De vera sapientia*, “Si quis, tota die correns, pervenit ad vesperam, satis est” (“If anyone who wanders all day arrives towards evening, it is enough”) (xxviii).<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer then added that if he also arrived towards evening, he could only hope that the influence of his work would last longer in proportion to the lateness of its beginning. Could the reconciled and even optimistic tone Schopenhauer used to discuss the citation from Petrarch be attributed to the very presence

of this excerpt itself, which he had just experienced directly, or could it be the consequence of a longstanding familiarity with Petrarch?

Schopenhauer had already quoted Petrarch in passing in the second edition of *The World as Will*, but the presence of the words of the Italian poet in such a privileged place as the preface to the final edition reconfirms how important Petrarch had always been for Schopenhauer throughout his entire career. Petrarch is not only an author to whom one turns for his intuition, anticipating and confirming one's own philosophic discoveries, but he is also a sage who proffers words that provide comfort. He is not just a poet whose writings have attained an unsurpassed level of purity and style, he is also a philosophical thinker whose ideas and reasoning are comparable to those of the most systematic thinkers. Furthermore, the significance of the place where Schopenhauer chose to cite Petrarch is also crucial. The preface is paradoxically the first and the last place in the text related to space and time: it is the first because, spatially, it is the one immediately preceding the text for which it opens the way; and it is the last because it is, chronologically, the final one to be written. One could say with some emphasis that Petrarch is the name that opens the way and closes the journey of *The World as Will*. In this major work, Schopenhauer cites Petrarch nine times, but he also cites him once in *On the Basis of Morality* and then, with greater license and in a more personal way, five times in the *Parerga and Paralipomena*.

In analyzing the importance of the most significant citations, we will attempt to clarify the relationship between Schopenhauer and Petrarch. To that end, however, it behooves us to offer a necessarily brief synthesis of the thinking of the German philosopher. Schopenhauer believes that the external world is but appearance: it is only the result of the patterns that dominate our capacities to perceive. The real world—the one hidden behind appearance—is the Will, a blind and irrational force never satisfied with what it obtains. While the world of phenomena is made up of countless individual things according to their positions in time and space, the Will is one and a single unity, immutable and unknowable, without cause or goal, independent and beyond time and space. Two important consequences ensue: the first is that life is marked by suffering (since the Will can never be fulfilled); the second is that all phenomena (including human beings) share one fundamental identity and form essentially a single unity, given that these are but the result of the process of individuation which is the way in which the Will is objectified in time and space. It is from this fundamental unity that compassion, the foundation of Schopenhauer's ethics, arises.

In order to end this state of suffering and pain, Schopenhauer proposes three alternatives: the most practicable is the aesthetic experience (the core argument of the third book of *The World as Will*); the second is the exercise of compassion; and the third, the most radical, is the denial of the Will which leads directly to asceticism, to which Schopenhauer dedicates the fourth book of the work. As for art, Schopenhauer believes that in the moment of the aesthetic experience, the Will is placated and the subject is thus able to attain a level of detachment that allows for pure and disinterested cognition of the (Platonic) idea that lies behind the variety of phenomena. Moreover, it is in music that what is perceived is not a representation or a copy of the Platonic idea but, in substance, is the idea itself.

Experiencing art allows us to free ourselves, so to speak, from ourselves, from our ego that is the seat of the Will to live:

...aesthetic pleasure in the beautiful consists, to a large extent, in the fact that, when we enter the state of pure contemplation, we are raised for the moment above all willing, above all desires and cares; we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves. (*WWR* 1: 390)

This synthesis should offer a clear picture not only as to why the philosophy of Schopenhauer has fascinated so many musicians and writers but also why art was so important both structurally and instrumentally in the system of Schopenhauer's philosophy. This comes about not only because through art is it possible to set aside the I and forget the Will, but also because of the strong affinity between poetry and philosophy. Thinking and poetizing, as Schopenhauer explains in the second volume of *The World as Will*, have in common the act of knowing; "poetry is related to philosophy as experience is to empirical science" (*WWR* 2: 427), just as experience allows us to become familiar with a specific phenomenon and, through examples, science embraces the totality of phenomena through universal concepts. Poetry makes Platonic ideas familiar to us through the particular or through examples, while, in the same way, philosophy shows us the underlying nature of those things that are expressed therein (427). The enrichment of the concepts (abstract and arid by nature) that we grasp through perception (rich and complete but incommunicable) is for Schopenhauer the common thread of both philosophy *and* poetry (74).

Schopenhauer chose the first citation from Petrarch in his preface to *The World as Will* not only for Petrarch's value as a poet, but also for the quality of the knowledge and the moral philosophy that Petrarch had exercised as poet and cultivator of the classics. Petrarch is thus introduced not only as a great lyrical poet whose renown Schopenhauer assumes is familiar to all his readers, but also as a man who has attained a high level of knowledge of himself and of the world and who has come to comprehend, intuitively as poet and intellectually as thinker, the true nature of the world and how to live in it. Petrarch, as we will see, becomes an increasingly exemplary figure for Schopenhauer.

In this regard, it is of some interest to observe that the citations from Petrarch that appear in the first edition are not found in the third book, the one dedicated to the aesthetic experience, but appear instead in the fourth, the one centered on ethics, on the mystery of compassion and on the theory of denial of the Will—in other words, in the one which constitutes the final focus of Schopenhauer's entire philosophy. Paragraph 64 of the third book studies the phenomenon of weeping (a phenomenon, like laughter, unique to human beings) that, for Schopenhauer, is caused not by actual pain when it is present and felt but only once the pain has already stopped (*WWR* 1: 376-77). Weeping is therefore connected to the representation in the memory of a past pain. In this case, we are the object of our own compassion, which emerges from our capacity for affection and sympathy and from our imagination. Empathy is the basis for compassion that comes from the awareness of the substantial identity of self and the other. While egoism cancels out the other, perceiving it as otherness, compassion allows us to see instead that it is only time and space that

determine the difference between the self and the other and that this is an illusion caused by the mental patterns tied to our perceptive capacity: “Indeed weeping is always regarded as a sign of a certain goodness of character, and it disarms anger. This is because it is felt that whoever is still able to weep must also necessarily be capable of affection, i.e. of sympathy towards others” (377).

To illustrate his thinking, Schopenhauer uses verses 1-4 of Petrarch’s canzone 264 (“I’ vo pensando: e nel pensier m’assale”):

I’ vo pensando: e nel pensier m’assale  
 Una pietà sì forte di me stesso  
 Che mi conduce spesso  
 Ad alto lagrimar, ch’i non soleva. (377)

As I wander in deep thought so strong a sympathy with myself comes over me, that I must often weep aloud, a thing I am otherwise not accustomed to do.

Schopenhauer points out that, “The description which Petrarch gives of the rising of his own tears, naively and truly expressing his own feelings, is entirely in accordance with the explanation that has been given” (377). Julian Young reminds us that Schopenhauer often tends to attribute his own thoughts to certain predecessors (20), and this warning must certainly not be ignored. In this case, however, the objective is not to judge whether the German philosopher has correctly interpreted Petrarch but simply to understand what the relationship between Schopenhauer and Petrarch is and how Schopenhauer incorporates him into his system of philosophy. There can be no doubt that Petrarch is the focal point of the chapter. Schopenhauer has chosen him because he is the poet who has succeeded in expressing in the most crystalline form a phenomenon that is exquisitely human and is fundamental to the understanding of compassion, which could be called the cornerstone of the ethical system of Schopenhauer.

Several pages later Schopenhauer calls upon Petrarch anew, not to quote him, but to set him forth as the example of a man who has successfully arrived at comprehending the vanity of the world and has comported himself accordingly. All springs forth from observing physiognomy: we associate the idea of nobility of character to a certain trace of silent sadness (*WWR* 1: 396). This results from knowledge of the vanity of all possessions and of the suffering of all life and not merely of one’s own. Such knowledge may be awakened by an individual experience of personal suffering. The Will, which has been irrevocably opposed by fate, is extinguished and ceases to strive. Schopenhauer asserts that this is the case for Petrarch in that his Daphne had vanished from his hands so that she might leave him the laurels of fame. A single desire whose fulfillment had been denied him had thus brought Petrarch to “that resigned sadness concerning the whole of life which appeals to us so pathetically in his works” (396). It cannot be clearly established to which portrait of Petrarch Schopenhauer is alluding in this case, but the importance of physical appearance for Schopenhauer is undeniable. In fact, for Schopenhauer, the body is one of the objectifications of the Will, and, once the latter has been subdued, the body reveals it through its posture and facial features. It would then appear that Schopenhauer, after having

invoked Petrarch as a wise person as well as a poet, wishes to offer his readers a more precise idea of Petrarch by analyzing his face.

At this juncture, in order to wholly appreciate the significance of this passage, it would be advantageous to refer to the essay on physiognomy in the second volume of *Parerga and Paralipomena*. In this piece, Schopenhauer links the expression of the face with intelligence and wisdom and centers his discourse on Petrarch. The face is of the utmost importance, as it is the perfect expression of man. If the mouth does nothing but give words to the thoughts of a person (thoughts that might well not be original), the face, on the other hand, reveals a person's true nature. Moreover, it is through the face that a person's intellectual and spiritual qualities are best revealed. Reading a person's face is therefore difficult but of the utmost importance and, should we be mistaken in our reading, we must certainly blame not the face but our own fears, apprehensions, and desires—in a word, we must blame our lack of objectivity. To prove his point, Schopenhauer offers the reader an anecdote that features Petrarch as protagonist.<sup>3</sup> One day, at the court of the Visconti, Duke Galeazzo asked his son, who was still a child, to pick out the wisest man amongst those present (Petrarch was part of this audience). After careful examination of the men, the child walked up to Petrarch, “seized him by the hand and led him to his father, to the great admiration of all those present” (*Parerga* 2: 640). Schopenhauer concludes that “nature sets the seal of her dignity on some privileged individuals so clearly that even a child is able to recognize it” (640).

Furthermore, as we compare Schopenhauer's comment on physiognomy in *The World as Will* (1: 396) to the anecdote told in *Parerga* (2: 640), even though they were written thirty years apart, what is quite clear is that, for Schopenhauer, Petrarch embodies a double ideal—that of the poet and that of the wise ascetic man. Nature may well have provided him with wisdom, but the loss of his Daphne has facilitated the denial of the Will, which adds to the typical somatic features of the genius (the facial expression, deep eyes), an air (or perhaps an aura) of silent sadness. Schopenhauer's observations on the expressions of Petrarch's face have been confirmed by Giuseppe Brivio, whom Schopenhauer believed to be a contemporary of the poet.<sup>4</sup>

As for the ascetic aspects of Petrarch, it is not known whether Schopenhauer believes that this denial of the Will propitiated by an event—to wit the loss of Daphne—can be attributed to the ascetic practices of Petrarch, and confirmation of any knowledge of these practices cannot be found in his works. Nevertheless, in the *Parerga*, Schopenhauer pauses more than once to praise Petrarch's writings on solitary life, which do approach asceticism in Petrarch (Blanchard 402). According to Blanchard, Petrarch's ascetic practices were “mild” and “his recreation of the ascetic life is resoundingly scholarly and intellectual in its complexion and might be seen as a partial effort at a secularization of the monastic life” (404). Though what counts even more for Blanchard is that this asceticism is the direct result of “a specifically intellectual and textual set of practices” (406). For Schopenhauer, the kind of knowledge a saint or an ascetic can attain is intuitive, devoid of concepts and therefore unlike philosophical knowledge which feeds on concepts instead of intuition and is therefore transmissible but dry (*WWR* 2: 600). Petrarch, who according to Blanchard considers himself a “lay sage” (404), seems to have successfully created for himself a form of

asceticism that is unique, a form one might refer to as a hybrid that is, in Schopenhauerian terms, both poetic and philosophical. Asceticism of this kind aims at mortification and denial of the Will, but it does so intellectually, in a manner that is thus necessarily indirect and detached in the way of literary models.

Petrarch's asceticism was interpreted in Schopenhauer's time as "no more than a redefinition of ascetic practices as the benign pursuit of scholarship and erudition" (Blanchard 407). Thus, Petrarch "built an ivory tower founded only upon a disinterested love of learning" (407). Schopenhauer could not but approve of such a definition since, once again, Petrarch appeared to be the invisible model, the point of reference for his philosophical system. In the *Parerga's* most famous essay, "Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life," Schopenhauer asserts that worthy men realize that the scope of life is not happiness but experience, and in the end, once they have been accustomed to exchanging hope for knowledge, they can only agree with Petrarch's words, "Altro diletto, che 'mparar, non provo" ("No other happiness than learning do I feel") (*Parerga* 1: 413). Only a few pages after this, Schopenhauer cites the poet anew (*Canzoniere*, sonnet 221) as he explores the theme of solitary life for which Petrarch held a love so "strong and constant" (426). Later, in volume two, Schopenhauer also shows that he knows and appreciates other works by Petrarch such as *De vita solitaria*, *De contemptu mundi* and *Consolatio utriusque fortunae* (*Parerga* 2: 444).

To these works we need to add the *Familiars*, where Schopenhauer finds in Petrarch a source of consolation.<sup>5</sup> While writing about fame, Petrarch claims, "whoever produces a really great thought ... lives with posterity as well as for it" (476). It should come as no surprise that Schopenhauer chose this particular passage as he reflected upon his own situation. The absolute failure of the first edition of *The World as Will* (1818) had prostrated him; his philosophy, in which he had invested all his dreams of fame and success, had been totally ignored. Now he could find comfort in the words of Petrarch: according to the Italian poet, his philosophy and his thoughts were already alive in the future as well as for the future. In this future, a reader eager to meet the author, to know him and to speak with him, would be able to see his dream fulfilled. The author too "longed for a posterity which would acknowledge him and pay him the honor, gratitude and affection" that had been denied him in life (476). One can hardly help noticing how the quotation from Petrarch operates once again on two levels: Schopenhauer chose it to illustrate and support his ideas, but it also serves, perhaps essentially, to support his innermost conviction of the value of his writings in spite of the heretofore lack of public acknowledgment.

The failure of the first edition of *The World As Will* brings Schopenhauer to spend a period of time in Italy followed by a second time between 1822 and 1823. Here, according to him, he learns to speak Italian so well that he sounds like a native, and he is happy to be able to formulate thoughts that only Dante and Petrarch had been able to conceive, thoughts that are inextricably linked to the language in which they were conceived (McGill 160). In his journals written during this period, Schopenhauer expresses his love of Petrarch and how he reads him for the beauty and the wonder it instills in him, adding that he holds no such affection for Dante whose dictatorial tone is offensive to him (174). Indeed, in the

second edition of *The World as Will* (1844), there appears to be some evidence of Schopenhauer's ameliorated ability to appreciate Petrarch's work in the original. Schopenhauer briefly comments on Petrarch's language (*WWR* 2: 126) and on the cognitive and communicative capacities of his poetry that seems to proceed not in an analytical and systematic manner but, rather, by intuition and with gaps in thought (432). However, Schopenhauer again dedicates attention and space to Petrarch in the chapters devoted to ethics, specifically in one of the supplements to the fourth book entitled "Metaphysics of Sexual Love."

For Schopenhauer, an individual's desire is at the mercy of an impersonal force. The belief that desire is personal and that it works in the individual's self-interest is a complete delusion (538). Desire belongs to the species and is therefore infinite and eternal. Consequently, it is not surprising that poets are overwhelmed by the desire and suffering that stems from their own frustrated love. Their breast is too limited to hold desire and frustration, which are infinite (551). Schopenhauer asserts that there has been many a Petrarch who has had to drag the weight of amorous ardor, of an unrequited love, and who has sighed in solitary woods (576). "But in only one Petrarch," the philosopher adds, "does there dwell the gift of poetry" (576). If his desire had been fulfilled, Petrarch would never have written verse (577).

For the first time, Schopenhauer claims that Petrarch is thus both an individual and a member of the human species. As a human being, Petrarch embodies human desires perfectly: he is unique in that he has been able to understand those desires intuitively and, through poetry, has rendered them simultaneously individual and contingent, as well as eternal and universal, as is required, according to Schopenhauer, in the best art. If we then consider this discourse together with the text in which Schopenhauer addresses the poet's physical appearance, it appears evident that in Petrarch, fate, poetry, denial of the Will, and philosophical interest (as it appears in the preface to *The World as Will*) are inextricably intertwined. The outcome is the portrait of a poet who knew to take advantage of his misfortune to deny the Will, who devoted many writings to this subject, who was able to intuitively comprehend the reality of the world through poetry, and who was able to communicate this intuition to his readers. One of these intuitions, perhaps the most important for Schopenhauer, is expressed in the sonnet 231, "Mille piacer' non vagliono un tormento" ("A thousand pleasures do not compensate for one pain") which Schopenhauer quotes in his chapter on the vanity and suffering of life (576). This is also the philosopher's final parting with Petrarch in his major work. Here, Schopenhauer uses this final quotation from Petrarch as evidence that the active principle in life is pain and suffering and that good is nothing but absence of suffering.

## Conclusions

It is most probable that Schopenhauer deliberately ignored Petrarch's constant oscillations between worldly desires and spiritual longings, between his desire for fame and his love of solitary life. Schopenhauer's Petrarch seems to have found his equilibrium thanks to the help of destiny who deprived him of his Daphne, through the denial of the



Will, and through a hybrid brand of asceticism. The philosopher focuses on Petrarch's thirst for knowledge, his constant self-analysis, and the sincerity and precision of his poetry when it comes to expressing the most subtle stirrings of the soul. Petrarch, for Schopenhauer, is the poet who was able to grasp reality and had no rivals when it came to expressing his perpetual search for a literary style, permeated with knowledge, readings, and syncretism, and a lifestyle solitary and detached from earthly matters. Schopenhauer was bound to yield to the strong attraction the figure of Petrarch held for him, for there were too many commonalities in their ways of thinking. Petrarch the artist and Petrarch the ascetic devoted to solitary life represent the means and the end that Schopenhauer proposes as the ultimate goal of his philosophy where figures of saints and ascetics play a significant role.

Yet, the poet Petrarch is also a man of thought as confirmed by his philosophical preparation and writings. The combination of these two aspects of his personality would appear to furnish those elements that Schopenhauer deemed significant in the pursuit of the knowledge of life and of the best possible way to live it. In other words, Schopenhauer sees Petrarch as an inextricable amalgam of poet, ascetic, and philosopher, a model to imitate or through whose words it is possible to find solace. Petrarch's presence can be perceived in Schopenhauer's complete works, as it is to him that Schopenhauer constantly turned throughout his career.

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1 *The World as Will and Representation* has been abbreviated as *The World as Will* in this text and as *WWR* in all parenthetical references.

2 All translations from Petrarch's original Latin and Italian into English are by E.F.J. Payne.

3 Schopenhauer finds this anecdote in Gerolamo Squarciafico's *Vita Petrarcae* (1501). The specific episode, Squarciafico notes, was mentioned in Giuseppe Brivio's panegyric of Petrarch which, unfortunately, is now lost (Solerti 356).

4 It is possible that Schopenhauer did not know that Brivio was born (in 1378) after Petrarch's death (1374). It is however worth noting that he deems the episode "credible" (*Parerga* 640) not because of Brivio's testimony but because it logically follows the philosophical premises of his own physiognomy.

5 Schopenhauer quotes this work in the 1492 Venetian edition.

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