

Voluntas and Potentia in Secretum (Petrarch)

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Abstract: *The autobiographical treatise Secretum constitutes a valuable testimony of the manner in which a literary topos such as the image of the self (illustrated in Augustine’s Confessiones) was projected on the Humanist background. In this paper, I intend to analyze the philosophical and theological relationship established between the concepts of voluntas and potentia, as highlighted within the dialogue between Petrarch and Augustinus, by starting from the premise that they function as terminological vectors in the composition of the author’s self-image. In Augustinian philosophy, these terms are used as symbolic notions in the theory of free will, in the definition of human strength as a direct consequence of the will. Petrarch shares the Augustinian vision with an exacerbated fidelity, but, at the discursive level, he tends to emphasize the pragmatic side of the relationship between will and power. The author insists on the regenerative power of man by insisting on the importance of the decision-making factor in elevating the spirit.*

Keywords: *self; voluntas; potential; treatise; Humanism;*

Petrarch is part of that category of complex literary personalities, widely known and studied especially from the perspective of a single part of their creation, in his case from the perspective of his poems written in vernacular, known as *Canzoniere*. This lyrical collection offers a lot of starting points for an analysis of a hurt, disappointed or dreamy self, unfulfilled in love. However, this is not the only work in which the author’s self is manifested with a disarming sincerity. Among the Latin treaties of Petrarch, which began to be interpreted with some consistency and intensity in the last decades, *Secretum* is the one which requires special attention. It must be emphasized from the very beginning that the purposes in which the image of the self is used in both *Canzoniere* and *Secretum* are different: in the first case, it explores the self’s ability to grow and develop through love, in the second case, it examines the self’s ability to evade human ideals and social convention. The autobiographical treaty *Secretum*, which illustrates the worries of its author, Petrarch, who struggles for redemption despite his attachment to the material world, differs from Petrarch’s other writings in Latin firstly because it is based on an authorial strategy meant to veil the desire for literary glory, and secondly because by establishing a discourse on

will and power, it acquires the value of a pre-Renaissance manifesto, a period which inspires man's confidence in his ability for spiritual regeneration.

Petrarch's literary model is Augustine, an aspect that Petrarch openly acknowledges at the beginning of book I:

*Ex quo fit ut, quotiens Confessionum tuarum libros lego, inter duos contrarios affectus, spem videlicet et metum, letis non sine lacrimis interdum legere me arbitrer non alienam sed propriam mee peregrinationis historiam. (Secretum, I, 14)*¹

Petrarch's remark shows that autobiographical literature, which is carried on the heights of perfection by Augustine, arouses opposite feelings such as hope and fear, which are specific to one's own journey through this world, the term *peregrinatio* being a term frequently used in medieval religious writings, with the meaning of "pilgrimage" far from the land of origin, *patria*, a very well attested notion in the Augustinian theory of salvation. In Paul Lehmann's view, a metaphysical hermeneutic of autobiography is born with Augustine, since the Latin author not only talks about his existential quests before conversion, but also enriches his account with a meditation on the divine nature: "With Augustine, an autobiography was for the first time metaphysically understood and made comprehensible" (Lehmann 42). Therefore, the first large-scale autobiographical work written in Latin bears a Christian imprint that will function in the Middle Ages as a benchmark for the very few cases in which we have to deal, programmatically, with this literary genre: *Historia calamitatum*, written by Peter Abelard (whose title is otherwise similar to the full title of Petrarch's treatise, *De secreto conflictu curarum mearum*),² *De vita sua sive monodiarum suarum*, written by Guibert de Nogent. Very similar to these ones, but only selectively autobiographical (as they are not oriented towards the chronological recovery of the past), are the monastic writings, which aim to illustrate the personal extrasensory experiences, such as visions (*Liber visionum suarum et aliorum*, *Liber de temptationibus*, written by the monk Otloh). The description of epiphanies is a very common practice in the Middle Ages, but the interest in presenting and quantifying them arouse

¹ Cf. *Secretum*, I, 13: A. *Nec tamen admiror te in his nunc ambagibus obvolutum in quibus olim ego ipse iactatus, dum novam vite viam carpere meditarer. Capillum vulsi, frontem percussi digitosque contorsi.* For Petrarch, Augustine is a literary, Christian and life model. Besides the fact that they shared similar life problems, the two of them had in common the idea according to which self-knowledge has priority over knowledge of the world, an idea highly exploited by the treaty *Secretum* (cf. *Confessiones*, X, 8, 15: *Et eunt homines mirari alta montium et ingentes fluctus maris et latissimos lapsus fluminum et oceani ambitum et gyros siderum et relinquant se ipsos nec mirantur*).

² On *Historia calamitatum*, see Lehmann (48).

already in the Imperial Latin period. The famous diary *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* was written in the 3rd century and presents the revelations which Perpetua, a young noble woman, had before the martyrdom.

The dialogue between Petrarch and Augustine constitutes the functional framework for describing the dark side of Petrarch's self, which is basically the subject of his soteriological project. More concretely, the dialogue takes the form of a confession in which the author's capital sins are revealed one by one within three books, in order to analyze the context of their commission, if it existed (for example, the sin of envy is disabled). This existential search does not raise only the issue of salvation itself, which, by means of specific rituals, is sealed by the representative of the ecclesiastical community, but also, on the same line of importance, the issue of happiness, as a constitutive state of a redeemed soul: *F. Fare autem apertius, queso: quid hoc est quod in me satis mordaciter arguisti? A. Much post hac; nunc unum illud indignor: quod fieri quenquam vel esse miserum suspicaris invitum* (*Secretum*, I, 4-5). As it emerges from Augustine's first interventions, the fall and unhappiness of man do not belong to fatality, but are generated by the lack of a good will (A. *neminem in miseriam nisi sponte corruere*, *Secretum*, I, 10) authentically and fully manifested (the adverbs: *vere, plene* are suggestive in this sense): *quia qui miseriam suam cupit exuere, modo id vere pleneque cupiat, nequit a tali desiderio frustrari* (*Secretum*, I, 3). In *De civitate Dei*, V, 9, 3, commenting on the thesis related to the divine foreknowledge and distinguishing between the will of God and the will of man, Augustine emphasizes: *Non est autem consequens, ut, si Deo certus est omnium ordo causarum, ideo nihil sit in nostrae voluntatis arbitrio*, showing that God and man are co-participants in the act of creating destiny, but the proportion of their contribution to it is different, as shown by the order of the terms in the sentence. The authenticity and completeness in the manifestation of the will (which is the indispensable condition to perform an action³), are in fact the two features of a healthy and whole self. Their absence in Petrarch's behaviour refers to the disturbing factors (the earthly ideals) that he is not able to overcome on a psychological level (the awareness of the need for

³ Seneca speaks about the firmness of the will in *Epistulae ad Lucilium*: *Si vis eadem semper velle, vera oportet veils* (95, 58); and *mutatio voluntatis indicat animum natate, aliubi atque aliubi apparere, prout tulit ventu Secretum* (35, 4). Cf. Augustinus, *Confessiones* VIII, 9, 21: *Sed non ex toto vult: non ergo ex toto imperat. Nam in tantum imperat, in quantum vult, et in tantum non fit quod imperat, in quantum non vult, quoniam voluntas imperat, ut sit voluntas, nec alia, sed ipsa. Non itaque plena imperat; ideo non est, quod imperat. Nam si plena esset, nec imperaret, ut esset, quia iam esset. Non igitur monstrum partim velle, partim nolle, sed aegritudo animi est, quia non totus assurgit veritate sublevatus, consuetudine praegravatu Secretum Et ideo sunt duae voluntates, quia una earum tota non est et hoc adest alteri, quod deest alteri.*

change) and on a practical level (the recourse to specific actions in order to respond to external and internal stimuli).

The idea of a volitional act assumed from a psychological point of view and succeeded by an action that makes use of all human resources is attested in *Confessiones*, VIII, 8, 19. Augustine talks about the will to gradually approach God with determination and consistency:

Nam non solum ire verum etiam pervenire illuc nihil erat aliud quam velle ire, sed fortiter et integre, non semisauciam hac atque hac versare et iactare voluntatem parte assurgente cum alia parte cadente luctantem,

in which the determination depends on the firmness of the decision, and the consistency on the repetition of the action, which thus becomes a habit. The elimination of old, harmful habits is a recommended practice in *Secretum*, II, 46: *nec in tergum verti, nec assueta respicere*. Augustine's allusion to the disinterested manner in which Petrarch approached his inner problems, trivializing the relevance of his own will in solving them, places Petrarch, at first glance, in a vulnerable position: he is defeated in his own earthly ideals. However, it is not about guilt here, but about the resignation with which Petrarch's dark self represents its existence, giving the will a limited or better said zero space for action.

The notion of will appears in Augustine's writings as referring, on the one hand, to God's will (*voluntas Dei*), and on the other hand, to man's free will (*voluntatis arbitrium*). The main source of information that Augustine had at his disposal is the Stoic philosophy (Seneca), on which occasion he also commented on Cicero's position in relation to the Stoics (Sun 35-53). In *De civitate Dei*, V, 8, Augustine shows that a confrontation with those (the Stoics) who terminologically likened fate to a chain of causes is not necessary as long as they recognize in it the will and power of God:

Qui vero non astrorum constitutionem, sicuti est cum quidque concipitur vel nascitur vel inchoatur, sed omnium connexionem seriemque causarum, qua fit omne quod fit, fati nomine appellant: non multum cum eis de verbi controversia laborandum atque certandum est, quando quidem ipsum causarum ordinem et quandam connexionem Dei summi tribuunt voluntati et potestati.

Ignoring the fact that, for the Stoics, this causal chain represents the equivalent of the divine reason, Augustine introduces the thesis that *fatum* is the product of God's will and power, establishing between the two actions, *voluntas* and *potestas*, a type of coordination that could imply, if not

identity,⁴ at least concomitance, unlike the deterministic relationship extant in *Secretum*, I, 15: *Desiderium potentia consequitur*. Although the terms *potestas* and *potentia* are often used interchangeably in the classical era, the attention in using *potestas* (with the primary meaning of "official power, authority") in reference to divine power cannot go unnoticed, a remarkable difference from the use of the term *potentia* in *Secretum*, where Augustine transparently refers to man's personal power. Augustine approaches the Stoic thesis of destiny when he rejects the idea that man's destiny is inscribed in the movement of the stars, and when he admits the existence of a chain of causalities, but he keeps his distance from the Stoic thesis of destiny when he replaces the divine reason with the divine will, developing a broad theological doctrine of the will, of which the human will is also a part, whose ultimate objective is the subjective knowledge of God (Sun 35-53). The fact that the Stoics do not recognize the active role of the human will in shaping the destiny: *Optimum est pati quod emendare non possis, et deum quo auctore cuncta proveniunt sine murmuratione comitari* (*Epistulae ad Lucilium* 107, 9), but attributes to man the ability to endure the blows of fate, an aspect that contributes to strengthening his virtue, makes the exponents of Probabilism, who campaign for the establishment of community good through free actions, such as Cicero, challenge this idea: *Quod si ita est, nihil est in nostra potestate nullumque est arbitrium voluntatis* (*De civitate Dei*, V, 9, 2). For Cicero, the will belongs to the sphere of human intentions and finds its expression in the contribution of each citizen to the well-being of the republic, and these deliberate acts are directly proportional to the degree of civic involvement, as it appears in *De natura deorum*, III, 69-71. But, supporting this idea, Cicero contradicts the thesis of the divine foreknowledge (*praescientia*), which for Augustine equates to the divine existence itself: *Nam et confiteri esse deum et negare praescium futurorum apertissima insania est* (*De civitate Dei*, V, 9, 1). Although he enters into a polemic with Cicero regarding divine foreknowledge, Augustine resonates with him regarding the falsity and charlatanism of human practices that undermine God's authority.

Later on, in *De civitate Dei* XIV, 6, Augustine defines *voluntas humana*, which he classifies into *recta* and *perversa*, putting it in relationship to joy or sadness: *Nam quid est cupiditas et laetitia nisi voluntas in eorum consensione quae volumus? Et quid est metus atque tristitia nisi voluntas in dissensione ab his quae nolumus?* The Stoics and, in particular, Seneca often uses the term *voluntas* to indicate the divine reason: *Adice nunc, quod non externa cogunt deos, sed sua illis in lege aeterna voluntas est* (*De beneficiis*, VI, 23, 1). When it comes to *voluntas humana*, a first and relevant distinction

⁴ See Augustinus, *Confessiones*, VIII, 8, 19: *et ipsum velle iam facere erat*.

made by Seneca between desiring useless things and desiring what is useful, i.e. virtue, appears in *Epistulae ad Lucilium* 116, 1: *Nam cum tibi cupere interdixero, velle permittam*, a terminological distinction that was maintained until the age of Augustine, when cupiditas meant the capital sin of greed.⁵ Making the distinction between excess and measure is another way of affirming the appropriateness of choosing good instead of evil, which belongs to reason, so *voluntas* refers here to the moral function of the intellect, which characterizes the philosopher. In *Epistulae ad Lucilium* 92, 3, when Seneca talks about the acquisition of the happy life, he emphasizes the contribution of the good will (*innoxia ac benigna*), represented as being oriented towards reason (*intenta rationi nec umquam ab illa recedens*), never losing contact with it; however, no textual indication gives us to understand that it is an integral part of it:

Ad haec quomodo pervenitur? Si veritas tota perspecta est; si servatus est in rebus agendis ordo, modus, decor, innoxia voluntas ac benigna, intenta rationi nec umquam ab illa recedens, amabilis simul mirabilisque.

Surprisingly, in another passage, the very cessation of will appears to be equivalent to the attainment of the state of happiness, for the moment man ceases to desire things, he will attain the state of happiness, considered that immense good and unsurpassed:

Natat omne consilium nec implere nos ulla felicitas potest. Causa autem est quod non pervenimus ad illud bonum immensum et insuperabile ubi necesse est resistat voluntas nostra quia ultra summum non est locus. (Epistulae ad Lucilium, 74, 11)

Things get complicated when, discussing the process of birth of the will in the human soul, about which he cannot remember anything because its appearance is imperceptible: *Neminem mihi dabis qui sciat quomodo quod vult coeperit velle: non consilio adductus illo sed impetu impactus est (Epistulae ad Lucilium, 37, 5)*, Seneca mentions that *voluntas* is generated by an irrational factor: *impetus*. Most often, in Seneca's letters, *voluntas* appears with the meaning of "desire", when it refers to the realization of small actions which, being considered isolated instances of human inner manifestations, cannot improve the state of things from the outside of the being, but only from the inside. Since one cannot run away from the inevitable destiny, it can

⁵ Cf. *Confessiones* VIII, 5, 10, for *voluntas perversa*; *De libero arbitrio*, I, 13, 27: *bona voluntas* opposed to *mala voluntas*; *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 15.31.

be defeated within man: *Effugere non potes necessitates, potes vincere* (*Epistulae ad Lucilium*, 37, 5); the *voluntas-potentia* binomial becomes, from this perspective, the elixir of happiness. Seneca shows that the will cannot be learned: only the philosopher knows the value of gratitude in the face of fatality and possesses the ability to show it, while the crowd does not, even if it has the will to do it: *Nemo referre gratiam scit nisi sapiens. Stultus quoque, utcumque scit et quemadmodum potest, report; scientia illi potius quam voluntas desit: velle non discitur* (*Epistulae ad Lucilium* 81, 13). By showing that *voluntas* characterizes the human race, Seneca comes to designate by means of it the survival instinct, with which man is endowed from birth⁶: *sui amor est et permanendi conservandique se insita voluntas atque aspernatio dissolutionis* (*Epistulae ad Lucilium* 82, 15). The individual's self-love is the desire to resist in the world and preserve oneself, from which it is clear that self-love is an aversion to death.

The use of the notion of *voluntas humana* in Seneca, in the *Epistulae ad Lucilium* follows a patchy line of thought, in the sense in which two opposite tendencies can be noted: either placing *voluntas* in the space of reason, or in that of irrationality. The fact that the term does not benefit from a profuse analysis shows that it is outside the thematic priorities of the philosopher, being treated tangentially. If in Seneca, the status of that *voluntas humana* is still uncertain, its scope of action is validated only within human nature, which *voluntas* brings into balance through resignation and the sharpening of virtue: *Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt* (Ep. 107, 11). Augustine develops a philosophical system in which the divine will, separated from reason, and the human will collaborate in the destiny of man, the author integrating into this system theses related to the divine foreknowledge and grace. In addition, by dedicating two works to the thesis of free will, *De libero arbitrio* and *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, Augustine proves his affinity for this theme, showing that free will was planted in us, but not also the faith itself, which holds to our free will choice (*De gratia e libero arbitrio* 14, 29). With Augustine, *voluntas* becomes a sign of man's capacity to intervene freely in his fate and to change the reality of his existence, and this aspect becomes more important than the very conditioning of this notion of reason. But as far as *voluntas divina* is concerned, the fact that man's free will is analyzed in a work that speaks of grace as an emanation of the divine nature, which has a plan for everyone, denotes that the *voluntas divina* is for Augustine, as well as for Seneca, an image of order. So it turns out that the differences of opinion between the two authors strictly concern the notion of *voluntas humana*.

⁶ Cf. Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, XIV, 6: *Voluntas est quippe in omnibus (...); De gratia e libero arbitrio*, 2, 2: *Revelavit autem nobis per Scripturas suas sanctas, esse in homine liberum voluntatis arbitrium.*

In the opening of Book I of *Secretum*, the acquisition of happiness in Augustine's opinion is, as we showed above, conditioned by the full manifestation of one's will (*Secretum*, I, 3-5), an idea that Petrarch does not share (*Dubitari igitur meo iudicio non potest quin multi quidem inviti nolentesque sint miseri*, *Secretum*, I, 4). Such a problem does not need words, the answer seems far from clear: *A. Si hoc inter nos convenit: nisi vitio miserum non esse neque fieri, iam quid verbis opus est?* (*Secretum*, I, 7). For Augustine, solving problems depends on a simple procedure: first they are presented, analyzed, and after that they are overcome: *primum veluti gradum obtinere meditationem mortis humaneque miserie; secundum vero desiderium vehemens studiumque surgendi* (*Secretum*, I, 8). Petrarch seems to agree with Augustine's reasoning, but only out of respect for him: *non tam iudicio quam reverentia*. Petrarch states that, as far as he is concerned, he experiences the opposite of what he wants:

Hoc igitur unum est quod me super ambigenda propositionis tue veritate sollicitat, qua conaris astruere neminem nisi sponte sua in miseriam corruisse, neminem miserum esse, nisi qui velit; cuius rei contrarium in me tristis experior. (*Secretum*, I, 9)

The human being can choose and therefore can reject being or becoming unhappy: *nec fieri miserum nec esse qui nolit* (*Secretum*, I, 9), *videas neminem in miseriam nisi sponte corruere* (*Secretum*, I, 10), *Sine peccato autem nemo fit miser, quod michi iam superius concessisti* (*Secretum*, I, 10). Accordingly, the absence of will automatically generates an absence of happiness as an experience suspended in timelessness, circumscribed to the moment or as an evolution process in itself.

The distinction between falling into sin and remaining there amplifies the discussion on the will to rise, return and assume a new beginning:

Innumerabiles sponte prolapsos non sua tamen sponte iacere; quod de me ipso fidenter affirmem. Idque michi datum arbitror in penam ut, quia dum state possem nolui, assurgere nequeam dum velim. (*Secretum*, I, 11)

Many times, although the fall does not follow the line of our will, the rising from the bottom and the continuation of life is conditioned by our will. After Petrarch admits the fact that he is unhappy: *quod miser sim – id enim me esse non infitior* (*Secretum*, I, 12), Augustine shows that the lack of power is generated by the lack of will, and that in the activation of power a change of the discourse is necessary, therefore a change of the perspective on reality:

Verba vero, quibus uti te velim, hec sunt: ut ubi "ultra te non posse" dixisti "ultra te nolle" fatearis (Secretum, I, 12), F. Quotiens dixi me ulterius nequivisse? A. Quotiensque respondi, imo verius noluisse? (Secretum, I, 12)

The pathetic accents complicate the situation, because tears have no ability to change anything as long as the will does not change: *Lacrimarum tibi testis sum multarum, voluntatis vero minime and, a little further on Lacrimas tibi sepe conscientiam extorsisse, sed propositum non mutasse (Secretum, I, 12)*. The power follows the desire: *desiderium potentia consequitur (Secretum, I, 15)*, and the desire follows the discourse. Even if Augustine considers that Petrarch sometimes manifested his full will, he did not make this gesture a habit, so he did not integrate this behavior into the usual mechanisms of reaction to stimuli: *Fateor et ipse te voluisse nonnunquam (Secretum, I, 15)*. In the context of the desire to acquire salvation, the problem of reason is addressed by Augustine in order to introduce the thesis that only conscience can make a clear and faithful analysis of the personal facts: *A. Ut certius credas conscientiam ipse tuam consule. Illa optima virtutis interpres, illa infallibilis et verax est operum cogitationumque pensatrix (Secretum, I, 15)*. Augustine draws attention to the fact that it is not enough to awaken the conscience, as Petrarch believes, but only practice can lead to favorable results: *A. Impossibilem propensi conditionem: ut qui, quod assequi potest, ardentem cupit, obdormiat (Secretum, I, 16)*. To support the practice of good habits, it is necessary to amplify the desire for virtue, which in itself represents a large part of virtue itself: *Ad hoc ipsum per se virtutis desiderium pars est magna virtutis (Secretum, I, 16)*. For Augustine, the desire to acquire salvation is the good desire par excellence, it can take on many forms in earthly reality: *A. Quia hoc ipsum "optare" verbum unum est, sed quod innumerabilis consistat ex rebus (Secretum, I, 16)*. The human openness to this unique desire determines the exclusion of all other types of desires, which are useless earthly attachments: *A. Nulli potest desiderium hoc absolute contingere nisi qui omnibus aliis desideriis finem fecit. (Secretum, I, 17)*. On this occasion, Augustine talks about the duality of human desires: *Ita, dum et ascendere et in imis permanere cupitis, neutrum impletis in alterna distracti (Secretum, I, 17)*, which make progress impossible, because the factor of order is abolished. The only activity capable of achieving the disjunction of the two types of will is meditation, specific to the philosopher: *A. Ad hunc terminum profecto meditatio illa perducit quam primo loco nominaveram, cum mortalitatis vestre recordatione continua (Secretum, I, 18)* because only this one draws the attention to the human shortcoming of the mortal state, of

which very few people are aware: *Paucos invenies sat profunde cogitantes esse sibi necessario moriendum* (*Secretum*, I, 19).

Petrarch's use of the will-power paradigm shows that, on the one hand, the author is clearly interested in a plea on the side of man as the decider of his destiny, despite his finitude which is an ontological given. On the other hand, being framed in a type of medical discourse, with an emphasis on the symptomatology of a mental illness like *acedia*, broadly described as a lethargic state, of disgust with existence, this paradigm shows that healing is itself a volitional process, of conscious emotional cleaning of the residues that painful experiences or past failures can engrave in the subconscious. In this treaty, there is a whole series of binary, dual structures and instances: two characters in dialogue, two perspectives on the world, two types of existence, the relationship between will and power interfering with them in a way that subsumes the basic principles of the universe: passivity and action/reaction. If in the absence of will, there is no power, and power without will is meaningless: it turns out that the whole human life is a combination of these elements. This understanding constitutes an important starting point in defining the Humanist self-image of man, who, aware that he can influence the course of his own destiny, reevaluates his potential of the authentic self unshadowed by ego. This can be accomplished by accepting a past that can no longer be corrected or annihilated and undertaking the experience of soul renewal.

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