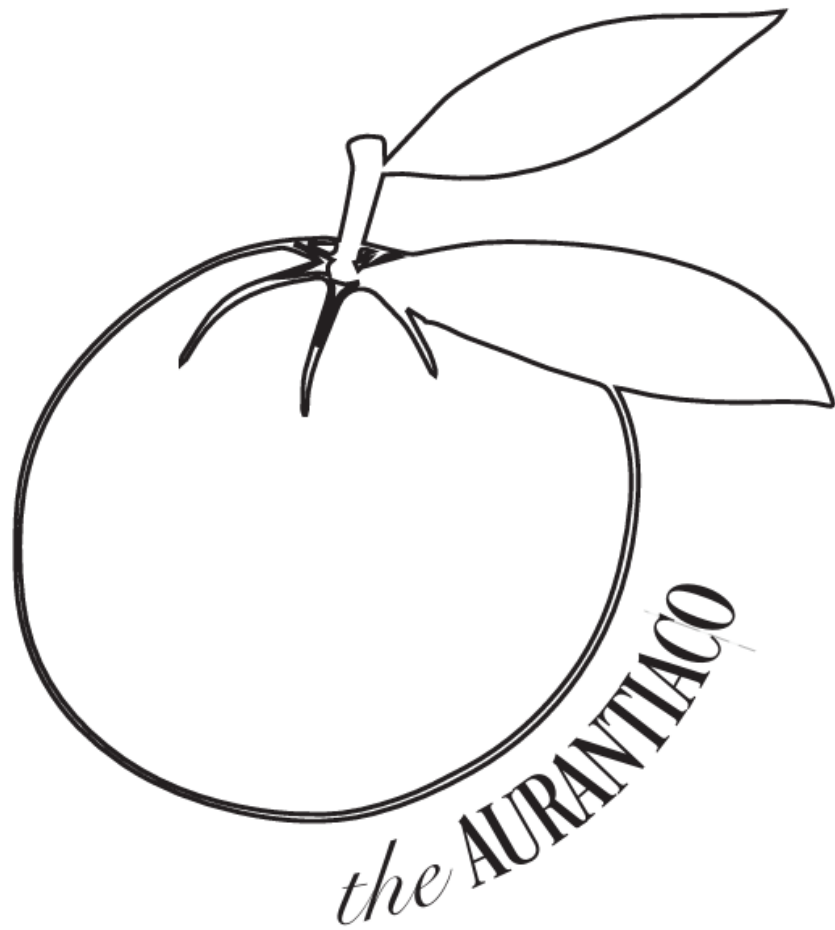


*the* AURANTIACO





This year's journal is dedicated to Dean Nicholas Vazsonyi, a trusted mentor and The Aurantiaco's number one supporter. Your advice and constant encouragement is one of our organization's most valuable assets.

To the reader,

Welcome to the 2026 issue of *The Aurantiaco*, Clemson's undergraduate journal for the humanities and social sciences. Founded with the purpose of fostering a community where students in these fields can share their work, our team is proud to share pieces we believe provide meaningful contributions to their respective disciplines. We are beyond grateful to have been entrusted with these works, and hope we can continue to encourage critical minds to engage in the intellectual curiosity that led to them.

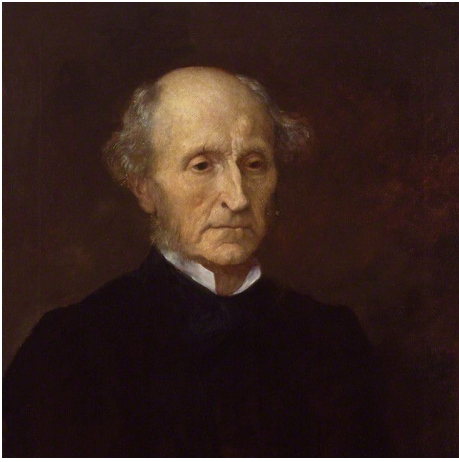
In its fifth year as an organization, *The Aurantiaco* is proud to have highlighted the importance of the humanities and social sciences in our society and to have created events that cultivate dialogue among peers. Last fall, in partnership with Clemson's Phi Beta Kappa chapter, the Humanities Hub, and the College for Arts and Humanities, we held our annual symposium on *The Future of AI*. During this two-day event, we hosted seven speakers from Clemson, Anderson University, and UofSC Law School across various disciplines, from philosophy to computer science. Their input on the complex subject quickly sparked larger conversations among attendees, and we would like to extend them a sincere thank you for sharing their expertise.

Finally, we would also like to thank everyone who helped create this journal. Thank you to Ella Drew Dodd, our graphic designer, for her wonderful creative work. Thank you to the faculty for identifying brilliant writers and encouraging them to submit their pieces. Thank you to the authors for allowing us to explore their most captivating ideas, and thank you to our team of editors. Without their skills and dedication, this would never be possible.

It has been a pleasure to have the opportunity to build on the legacy of *The Aurantiaco*, and we hope we have done it justice. While we are sad to see our time here come to an end, we cannot wait to see everything the journal will achieve in its coming years. And with that, we hope you enjoy the wonderful journey you are about to embark on, as you delve into the worlds of political theory and diplomacy, poetry, neuropsychology, and much more.

Sincerely,

Salma Solis, Editor-in-Chief      Andrew Hiner, Managing Editor



# CONT

Table of

2

Letter from the Editors

5

Authorship over Approval

Michael Mosholt

11

*The Faerie Queene*: A Tool for Combating the Literacy Rate Crisis

Olivia Kirkland

15

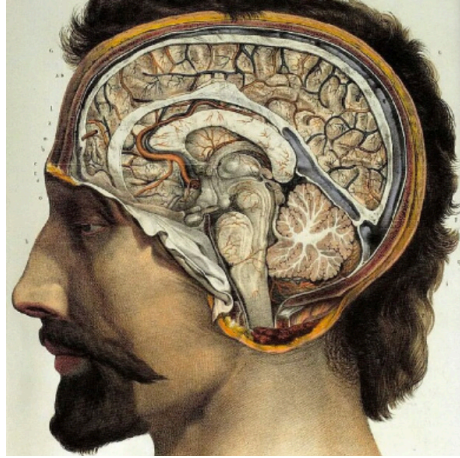
The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam:  
A Microcosm of the African Water Insecurity Crisis

Adam Zulewski

19

Nobility & Wisdom in *Antigone*

Zoe Wyatt



# EVENTS

25

A Discussion of Structural & Functional Brain Differences Between Reactive & Proactive Offenders

Nadav Sternheim

31

Dugin's Fourth Political Theory: Understanding Putin's Invasion of Ukraine

Madeline Leonard

37

Pecan Dissonance: A Clash Between Identity and Historic Reality

Margaret Thoen

45

References

53

Staff Page

# AUTHORSHIP OVER APPROVAL

Michael Mosholt

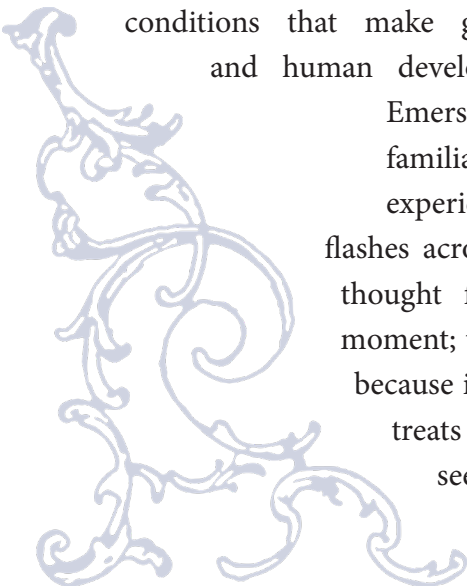
The greatest threat to individuality is not always coercion; often, it is approval. People can be shaped so thoroughly by custom, expectation, and the desire to remain legible to others that they cease to live from convictions they actually own. Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Stuart Mill both recognize this danger and treat society as capable of a kind of tyranny that works without force because it works through the soul. Emerson's account of self-reliance shows how conformity corrupts the self at its root, training people to abandon inward authority for social acceptance. Mill's defense of liberty and individuality gives that worry a broader social form by showing how custom and opinion can regulate life as powerfully as law. Together, they suggest that individuality is not mere eccentricity or preference, but authorship: a lived relation between judgment, action, and accountability. Society helps form the self, but when it begins to substitute for the self, it undermines the very

conditions that make genuine freedom and human development possible.

Emerson starts with a familiar but overlooked experience. A thought flashes across the mind; the thought feels clear for a moment; then it is set aside because it is one's own. He treats that reflex as the seed of conformity. Self-reliance is the opposite

habit, a steady practice of trusting inner perception long enough to test it against reality. He states the cost of refusing the practice in one of the essay's sharpest lines: "Envy is ignorance" and "imitation is suicide."<sup>1</sup> The person who imitates may look busy, but he is not acting from himself; he circulates without creating. For Emerson, what we call society is not a neutral backdrop. It comes organized around a discipline of conformity. He does not claim that people actually agree on everything; he claims that they like names and customs more than reality and creation. His blunt statement makes the structure visible: "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," and "society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater."<sup>2</sup> The metaphor may be dated, yet the logic still describes how respectable routines can erode an inner standard. This is why Emerson's measure of integrity is not whether one can repeat approved positions. It is whether one can speak in one's own key and accept the cost that follows.

Self-reliance is not permission to chase whims Emerson knows that charge will come, so he answers it directly. "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist," and the point of his attack on consistency is not randomness but responsiveness: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."<sup>3</sup> He demands answerability to reality rather than obedience to yesterday's image. The discipline is harder than it sounds; it means breaking with habits whose only defense is age and with expectations that look like duty



but are only a need to please. Emerson pairs the inner rule with a sober warning about cost. “Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself,” but “for nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure.”<sup>4</sup> This is not a complaint; it is guidance. Emerson adds that “a man must know how to estimate a sour face,” because otherwise, he will keep selling his freedom to save other people from brief discomfort.<sup>5</sup> The lesson lands only if we take Emerson’s final claim seriously: “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.”<sup>6</sup> Peace is not comfort; it is the honesty that comes when action follows conviction. This standard sets the frame for the rest of the argument. A person is not a public object to be adjusted by the latest majority taste. A person is an agent who must answer for what he does. If social life invites us to trade authorship for approval, even kindly approval, the trade is a loss that compounds over time.

Mill takes Emerson’s worry and gives it institutional shape. His subject is social liberty. He starts with a simple history. The first enemy of freedom was the ruler who acted without consent. Modern states changed that problem, but they did not remove it. Now, the threat is not only the magistrate, society itself can also be the tyrant. The danger is not just laws; it is the pressure of

custom and opinion. Mill names it “a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression” because it “leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself.”<sup>7</sup> The sentence is not extreme, it is exact. People begin to narrow their choices in advance, not because they fear prison, but because they fear looking foolish. Mill’s public case for individuality begins with a defense of free discussion. As he puts it, “complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action.”<sup>8</sup> His case then extends to life itself. He writes that “there should be different experiments of living,” and “the free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of well-being.”<sup>9</sup> He pushes against an ideal of self that aims to be without marked character and the sort of culture that compresses parts of human nature that stick out, as if the right shape were always

smooth and small. The line that sums up the worry names a present force with complete clarity: “The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement.”<sup>10</sup>

The picture gets clearer when Mill turns from ideas to habits. He notes that modern people congratulate themselves for being progressive, yet they often change together. His point is not that people oppose change as such, but that they resist individuality. He also describes what happens to once-fighting creeds. When a position becomes inherited instead of earned, it drifts into what he calls “a dead dogma, not a living truth.”<sup>11</sup> In that condition, beliefs remain on the surface of the mind rather than shaping judgment from within, which is why social



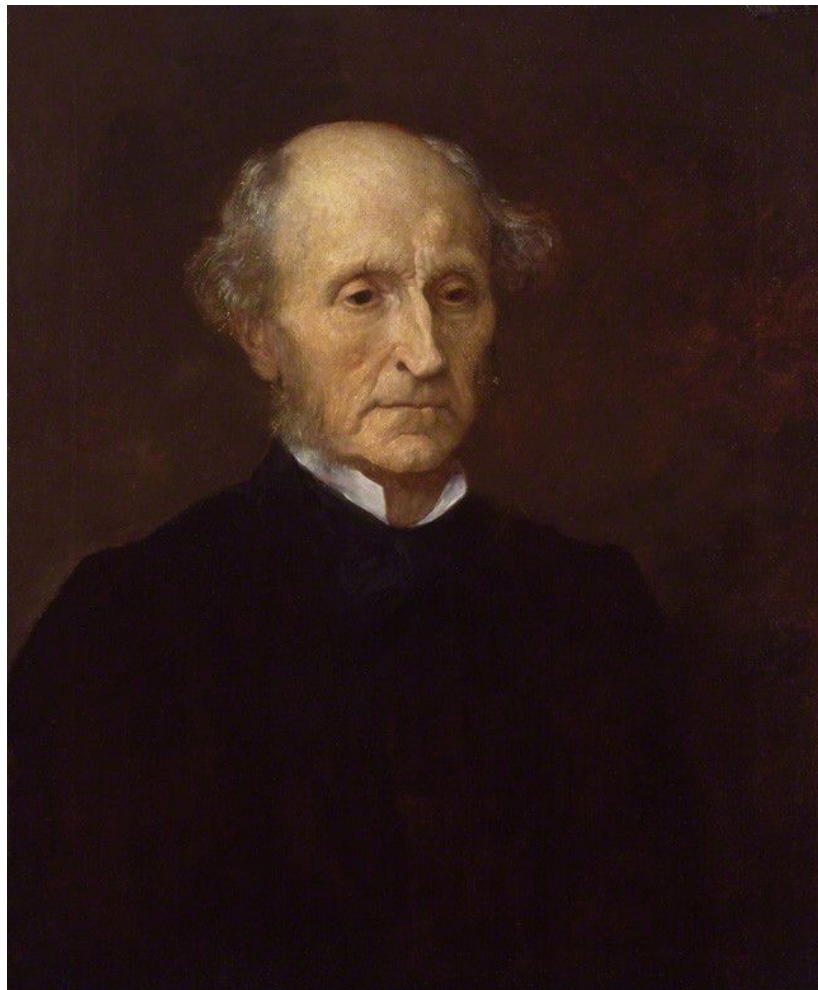
opinion can punish difference without ever stating its reasons. Two parts of Mill's architecture matter for practical lines. First, the harm principle. "The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way," so long as we do not deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it.<sup>12</sup> Offense and disgust are not harm. Second, he warns against the doctrine of "social rights" that would turn every bad or disliked choice into a violation of rights. He calls it "so monstrous a principle" because "there is no violation of liberty which it would not justify."<sup>13</sup> Mill's core value here is not comfort but human development through responsible choice. He says that "it really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it."<sup>14</sup> At this point, the connection to Emerson is visible. Emerson supplies the inner criterion: integrity of mind. Mill supplies the social structure that protects it. Mill is not worried about oddballs for their own sake. He is worried about the machinery that makes originality feel like a mistake and that turns caution into a public virtue. The target is not disagreement or advice; the target is a culture that teaches people to outsource the authorship of their lives.

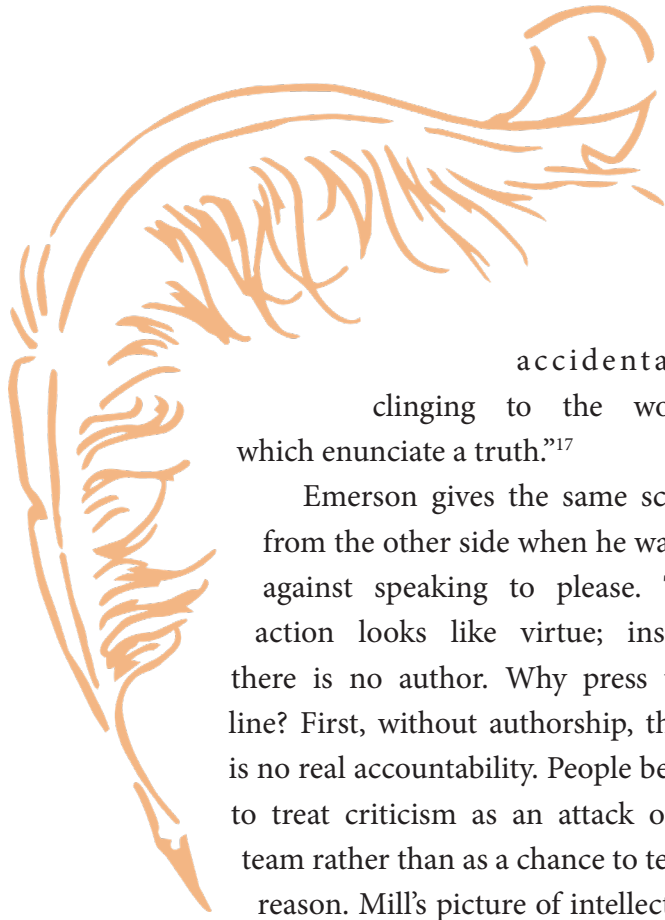
If people do not grow in a vacuum, how do we draw the

boundary? We learn by imitation and instruction. We often begin in someone else's order and later see its limits. Emerson has a striking passage about how young thinkers delight in a new system and try to fit the world to it. He does not mock the stage. He says that if they are honest and do well, their "new pinfold will be too strait and low, will crack, will lean, will rot and vanish."<sup>15</sup> Mill is just as explicit. He wants diversity in education and rejects any scheme that molds students into one form. A general state education, he writes, is "a mere contrivance for moulding people

to be exactly like one another."<sup>16</sup> Neither writer rejects formation. They reject replacement.

A workable test comes from a simple question: who holds the pen? Guidance adds tools and clears fog; it does not take the pen. Substitution occurs when a person's practical reasoning is replaced by deference that lacks inner endorsement. The tell is not that one agrees with the guide. The tell is that one cannot say why in one's own words. Mill describes the same shell condition when he warns that "truth, thus held, is but one superstition the more,





accidentally  
clinging to the words  
which enunciate a truth.”<sup>17</sup>

Emerson gives the same scene from the other side when he warns against speaking to please. The action looks like virtue; inside, there is no author. Why press this line? First, without authorship, there is no real accountability. People begin to treat criticism as an attack on a team rather than as a chance to test a reason. Mill’s picture of intellectual responsibility is of someone who can answer for his choices because he has faced the strongest objections in full: “He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form; he must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of.”<sup>18</sup> Second, without authorship, public life loses experiment. A uniform people can change together and never try a new way of living. Mill calls custom a standing hindrance to advancement, and Emerson calls conformity a conspiracy against manhood. Third, without authorship, education slides toward indoctrination or entertainment. Mill’s hostility to a general education plan that molds people alike is not a rejection of public schools; it is a rejection of any design that reduces variety and inquiry.<sup>19</sup> This line is not merely a theory, but a check one can use. When one takes advice, the real question is whether one could still own the decision in solitude. If the answer is no, or if the only reason

available is that the group will punish refusal, guidance has crossed into substitution. In that case, resistance is not defiance for its own sake. It is the price of staying oneself.

A serious objection comes from a communitarian angle. It begins with a fact and turns it into a verdict. The fact is that there is no self before society. Language, categories, tastes, and even what counts as a reason are inherited. Autonomy is always social. The verdict is that Emerson’s call to self-trust and Mill’s defense of individuality mistake the source of agency. Since selves are formed by others, the notion of an author can only be a story told to ignore those debts. On this view, social substitution is not a threat, but the normal state, and the only question is whether the community that forms us forms us well. There is force here. No one wakes up as a blank author who chooses. We are raised into a vocabulary and a family of meanings. Even rebellions have a genealogy. Emerson grants the condition in practice when he complains that people “measure their esteem of each other, by what each has, and not by what each is,” which is part of his larger diagnosis that society trades reality for names.<sup>20</sup> Mill is equally clear that custom can masquerade as reason. He describes “the magical influence of custom, which is not only, as the proverb says, a second nature, but is continually mistaken for the first,” as exactly why inherited standards so often feel self-evident.<sup>21</sup> If that is right, why not drop the line between guidance and substitution? Why not say that formation is all there is?

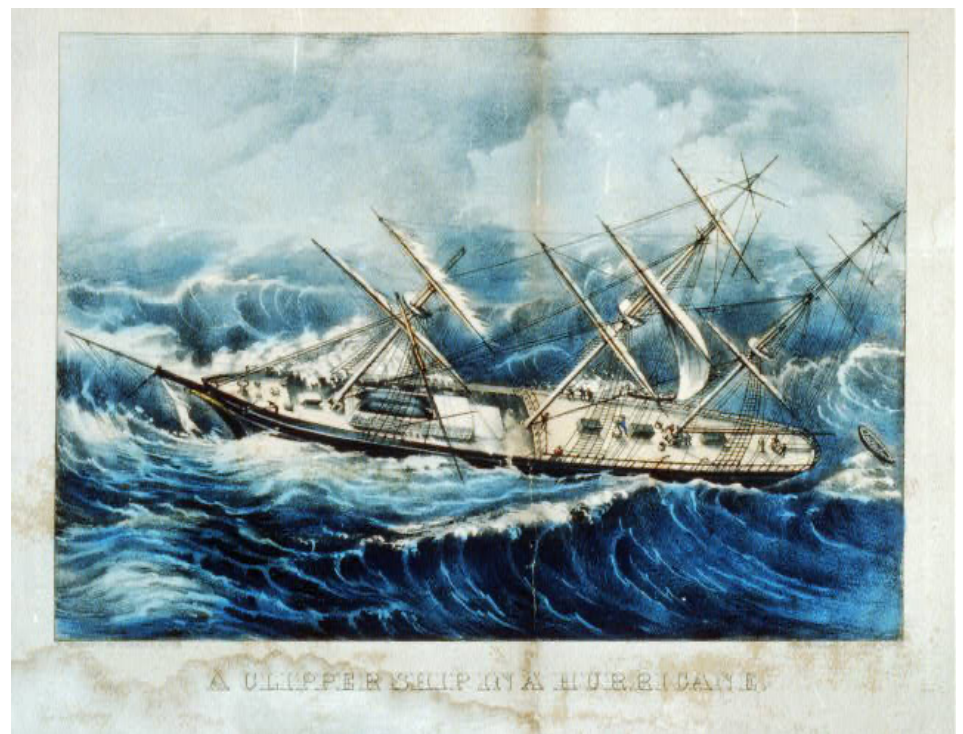
I answer with two claims. First, the formation fact does not cancel the authorship norm. A person can inherit a moral vocabulary and still own it. Ownership means being able to give reasons that fit the case and to adjust them when faced with better ones. Mill makes the point in a way that names ownership directly: “If the cultivation of the understanding consists in one thing more than in another, it is surely in learning the grounds of one’s own opinions.”<sup>22</sup> Second, the formation fact may heighten the need

for authorship. If custom feels like nature and conformity is rewarded, then people who want to keep a live connection between conviction and action need stronger habits of self-trust, not weaker. Emerson's attack on consistency is not a pass for flakiness. It is training in responsiveness to what is real rather than to what yesterday's image requires.<sup>23</sup> Another part of the objection worries about social costs. Experiments of living will go wrong. Communities pay when people try foolish plans. Mill knows this and still wants room to try, short of harm. His point is that a culture that permits real variety learns more and grows sturdier in the long run. The safer plan may produce fewer visible mistakes, but it also produces fewer discoveries and shallower convictions. That is why Mill's attack on "social rights" matters here: Once every disliked choice is treated as a public grievance, liberty can be curtailed in the name of improvement with almost no limiting principle.<sup>24</sup>

The answer to that objection takes the form of a way of living. It uses social formation to build authorship instead of to cancel it. That means exposure to real difference, practice in stating one's reasons in one's own words, and a standing invitation to be shown wrong. Mill makes this explicit when he praises the person who arrives at sound judgment "because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct."<sup>25</sup> Emerson condenses the corresponding practical rule into a command: "Always scorn appearances, and you always may." Taken together, the habit looks like this: learn as much as you can from other people, then decide in a voice you can still defend when the room is empty. Two images help because they are simple. Mill's negative image is that the despotism

of custom helps level people, then mistakes the result for order.<sup>27</sup> Emerson's positive image is the voyage of a ship: "The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks," but "from a sufficient distance" that line "straightens itself to the average tendency."<sup>28</sup> It seems inconsistent up close because living judgment answers to changing circumstances; from the right distance, the line is still faithful to its direction. Both images keep the focus where it belongs. Uniformity, even polite and prosperous uniformity, is not the goal; authorship is.

So what does this mean in practice? The line between guidance and substitution often appears in ordinary decisions long before it appears in dramatic ones. Consider a student who begins in a field that fits the map other people like to see. The plan is clear, and the subject is respectable. Advisors can picture the job at the other end. The student shadows people in the field, joins the relevant clubs, and learns the phrases older students use to describe success. On paper, it is the sensible thing. What is not being noticed is where attention goes when no one is watching. It keeps slipping toward a different set of questions, then is dismissed as a hobby, so that the sensible script can



remain intact. The pressure to stay the course does not feel like pressure; it feels like care. Advisors may be generous, friends may be supportive, and family may be proud. There may be no ban and no threat. There is just a form of guidance that works like gravity. Over time, the student realizes that the plan can be defended only by talking about other people's expectations. The reasons sound respectable, but they are not really his or hers. That is the condition Emerson and Mill teach a reader to notice. No rule forces the choice, and no law bars an alternative. Opinion does the work by supplying a ready-made script that keeps approval steady. When the student finally changes course, nothing dramatic may happen. Most routines stay the same. The change is small and decisive. Work that had been just casual reading, one makes *necessary* for oneself. The shift returns energy. Emerson would call it doing one's own work. Mill would call it beginning a fitting experiment. The cost is a few worried looks and a set of questions about jobs. The benefit is that attention comes freely once the work is genuinely one's own. A plan can be borrowed; energy cannot.

That example is not heroic. It is ordinary, and that is the point. Mill's worry operates in small choices that add up. Emerson's call to trust a thought long enough to test it is a practice that can guide a form, a major, a move, or a day. In the example, the line between guidance and substitution becomes easy to name: once the student can speak only in other people's words, the pen has left his or her hand. The fix is not to scorn help. The fix is to decide in a voice one can answer for. What follows is a modest set of rules that comes out of the argument and applies in classrooms, families, and teams. Rule one: When giving advice, teach reasoning, not only conclusions. If a path is recommended, give the logic in a way that the other person can later repeat without the guide standing there. Mill's practice of hearing the other side is not a ritual for debate club; it is part of how someone comes to own a view. Rule two: When receiving advice, test for uptake. Ask whether the

reasons could still be given alone. Emerson's instruction is to ask whether conviction would survive solitude. If not, one is wearing someone else's posture. The fix is not withdrawal from people. The fix is to keep working until the reasons are one's own. Rule three: In institutions, design for variety. Culture fit sounds efficient; it can become a cover for sameness that starves learning. A system that makes people alike will look orderly and move fast for a while. Then, it will stall. Mill's warning about custom as a standing hindrance is not a period piece. It reads like a memo to any organization that mistakes coordination for improvement.

None of this makes it easy to say where guidance should end and social control should begin. Mill says that "the practical question, where to place the limit—how to make the fitting adjustment between individual independence and social control—is a subject on which nearly everything remains to be done." Still, the direction of travel is clear. Err on the side of authorship, of free discussion, and of allowing people to try plans that seem odd when those plans do not harm others. Err on the side of demanding reasons, not badges.

Society becomes tyrannical not only when it coerces, but when it quietly substitutes approval, custom, and inherited scripts for a person's own authorship. Emerson shows why that substitution is a betrayal of self-reliance: Imitation kills agency, conformity scatters force, and peace comes only with the triumph of principles. Mill shows why the danger is political as well as personal: Opinion can govern without law, custom can flatten character, and individuality is a condition of well-being rather than a decorative luxury. The right response is not isolation, it is formation without replacement: learning from others, testing inherited standards, and keeping the pen in one's own hand. That is good for the person, but it is also good for public life, because a culture that protects authorship preserves criticism, responsibility, and genuine experiments in living.

# THE FAERIE QUEENE: A TOOL FOR COMBATING THE LITERACY RATE CRISIS

Olivia Kirkland

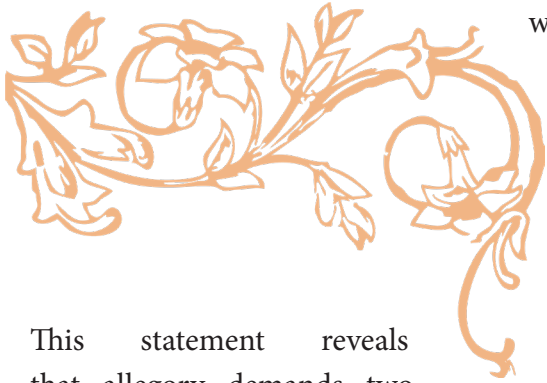
Declining literacy rates have swept across the United States. According to the Nation's Report Card, 40% of fourth graders and 33% of eighth graders failed to meet basic reading proficiency in September 2025.<sup>1</sup> In response to these reports, *The Harvard Gazette* writes that "American students' literacy skills...have fallen significantly."<sup>2</sup> While it is a common misconception that the decline in literacy in students is directly due to COVID, the author points out that the decline "predates the pandemic."<sup>2</sup> Rather than being an issue that only surrounds this present, post-COVID moment, illiteracy is a spreading virus that began long before, gaining more and more traction over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> This revelation, however, is not new. Edmund Spenser's 16th-century epic poem *The Faerie Queene* addresses the importance of reading. In a letter regarding his work, Spenser states, "the generall end therefore of all the books is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline."<sup>3</sup> In this phrase, the author showcases his intention for the audience to leave reading his work transformed by their understanding of allegory. *The Faerie Queene* strives to improve its readers through nothing but the sheer power of words, and one can do that only through literacy. By emphasizing the need for close reading to develop both intellectual and moral growth, it serves as a tool to combat modern declining literacy rates in its demand to be understood allegorically.

Spenser's insistence on close reading starts with the allegorical nature of *The Faerie Queene*. Merriam-Webster describes allegory as "the expression of truths or generalizations about human existence by means

of symbolic figures and actions."<sup>4</sup> This definition suggests that the tangible plotline of any allegory is not the main point—it also represents reality. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* expresses it as:

"Spenser describes his exuberant, multifaceted poem as an allegory—an extended metaphor or 'dark conceit'—and invites us to interpret the characters and adventures in its several books in terms of the particular virtues and vices they enact or come to embody."<sup>5</sup>





This statement reveals that allegory demands two requirements of its readers. First, they must understand the surface-level, literal “characters and adventures” of the plot.<sup>6</sup> Though this requirement applies to almost every form of writing imaginable, allegory’s demand for readers to comprehend the literal is dependent upon its second, simultaneous requirement: they must understand the metaphorical. Readers must be able to identify the “particular virtues and vices they enact or come to embody,” meaning they must understand what the literal figures are specifically symbolic of.<sup>6</sup> Unlike other forms of fictional writing, leaving the true meaning of an allegory up for debate is not an option the readers have. The allegory itself defines the intended interpretation—not the audience’s initial readings. Thus, its very nature requires a higher reading comprehension than the average story because it expects readers to leave with both the intended literal and metaphorical interpretations.

The need to understand the duality of any allegory relies heavily upon close reading, but

when it comes to *The Faerie Queene* in particular, Spenser’s use of allegory goes beyond the expectation of readers’ logical understanding of the text—he desires moral change.<sup>7</sup> Spenser endeavored to improve the morality of his readers by combining medieval literary motifs with the Christian Faith, intertwining them so that the audience may be morally reformed.<sup>8</sup> He wished so heartily for them to grasp this understanding that he actually told his friend and statesman, Sir Walter Raleigh, the summarized plot itself so that he may understand “the whole intention of the conceit... which otherwise may happily seem tedious and confused.”<sup>9</sup> Spenser heavily concerned himself with his readers’ understanding of the allegorical power behind his poem in order to incite the moral impact he desired. Understanding “the whole intention of the conceit”<sup>9</sup> was exactly what he wanted his readers to strive for when reading his epic poem. Without close reading, none would have been able to comprehend his literal interpretation of *The Faerie Queene*, much less so his metaphorical—and more intentional—interpretation. To be morally changed by the allegory, one needs to first understand the allegory—and this requires reading comprehension skills.

For this intellectual and moral growth to begin, readers must first focus on Spenser’s intensive attention to detail. The strict ABABBCBCC rhyme scheme left Spenser with no room for error, and, in turn, every word holds great literal and metaphorical value. Not a single line within the allegory is left in by chance—each one is important for both the literal and metaphorical plot. For example, Book 1, Canto 1, Stanza 19 reads:

“His Lady sad to see his sore constraint,

Cride out, ‘Now now Sir knight, shew what ye bee,

Add faith unto your force, and be not faint:

Strangle her, else she sure will strangle thee.’

That when he heard, in great perplexitie,

His gall did grate for grieffe and high disdain,

And knitting all his force got one hand free,

Wherewith he grypt her gorge with so great paine,

That soone to loose her wicked bands did her constraine (1.1.19).”<sup>11</sup>

In the literal interpretation of this stanza, the Lady Una calls out advice to Sir Knight Redcrosse during his battle with the snake-woman, Error. As Redcrosse struggles to fight the monstrous creature, Una tells him to “add faith

unto [his] force” in order to “strangle [Error].” Her advice proves to be true, and Redcrosse successfully strangles Error’s neck and frees himself. However, this is only one interpretation of the passage. When one recalls that *The Faerie Queene* is an allegorical story, every line must be read in a new light. The stanza no longer discusses only a knight fighting a monstrous creature, but a spiritual battle rather than a physical one. Redcrosse’s name shifts into the virtue he represents—Holiness. Meanwhile, the snake-monster Error can only mean what her name imitates—errors. Thus, the stanza not only tells an entertaining tale of a knight slaying a monster, but also indirectly urges readers to be holy by fighting errors through the Christian faith. This message can only be seen through the readers’ acceptance of allegory. Without the death of the literal meaning of a physical battle, the intended metaphorical connotation cannot be born. Readers must be able to comprehend this double significance in Spenser’s writing—to pull back the veil the author intentionally left for them to find so that they might discover the truth about reality and apply it to their own lives in order to improve themselves morally.

The importance of allegory goes beyond those reading *The Faerie Queene*; it applies to those within the pages themselves. The Redcrosse knight repeatedly finds himself misreading situations. One of the most palpable examples is in Book 1, Canto 2, Stanza 13, which reads:

[Sans foy] had a faire companion of his way

A goodly Lady clad in scarlot red,  
Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay,  
And like a Persian mitre on her hed  
She wore, with crownes and owches garnishéd,  
The which her lavish lovers to her gave;  
Her wanton palfrey all was overspred  
With tinsell trappings, woven like a wave,

Whose bridle rung with golden bells and bosses brave.<sup>14</sup>

A casual reader may read this stanza as a mere description of the appearance of the woman, Duessa, but Spenser describes much more than her physical form. While the stanza portrays Duessa’s literal image, it also figuratively refers to a character in the Bible called the “Whore of Babylon.” The Bible describes this figure as:

“A woman...upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication” (Rev. 17:3–4).<sup>15</sup>

Upon comparing the two passages, the resemblance becomes clear. The shared traits of scarlet red colors, jewelry made from gold and precious stones, and past lovers are not accidental—each detail is written intentionally to indicate Duessa as the “Whore of Babylon”. Yet, despite this seemingly obvious connection, Redcrosse fails to recognize her. Instead of discerning her true identity, he falls into her trap like a fly in a web. Where he should have understood the severity of the threat before him, he instead allows Duessa to join him on his journey, completely unaware of her two-faced nature for the rest of Canto 12. This failure stems from his lack of biblical literacy, causing both his intellectual and moral deficiency and proving that the readers are not the only ones who must read the lines closely to understand the literal and metaphorical truth—the protagonist himself must observe his life through an allegorical lens to understand the situation before him. Only then can the Redcrosse knight also be improved in the moral ways the author wishes his readers would grow.

Spenser’s authorial intention can be fulfilled solely through close reading. If allegory is what shaped *The Faerie Queene* into the story it is today, then close reading is the pedestal the writing

depends on. Without it, the epic poem falls to the floor—shattered and meaningless in the eye of every beholder. Even the surface-level plot line of *The Faerie Queene* falls out of reach for those who lack sufficient literacy skills. Close reading enables readers to hold Spenser's work up to the light and examine how every word, line, and symbol paints the dual image of fantasy and reality. Therefore, understanding its true depth requires using advanced reading comprehension in order to recognize both the literal and metaphorical interpretations for intellectual and moral growth.



However, in an age of declining literacy rates, the hope for readers to discover the duality of *The Faerie Queene* dims more and more each day. Spenser's meticulous epic poem requires reading comprehension skills that American students today simply do not possess. As the percentage of teenagers reading for pleasure decreases, likely due to "growing competition from...media consumption that...offer[s]...immediate gratification," the academic reading scores in the USA



are decreasing drastically. Due to these shocking statistics, reading *The Faerie Queene* has become all the more important for students in the 21st century.

In contrast to a world that thrives on immediate gratification, *The Faerie Queene* demands a slow, close reading to achieve a comprehensive understanding of both the literal and metaphorical story.<sup>17</sup> While this type of reading may go against every grain in the average student's nature, it is necessary for students to learn how to read a text carefully and intentionally in their pursuit of intellectual and moral growth, an activity that can perhaps even create a genuine love for reading that could further serve as an additional antidote for the literacy crisis we face today.<sup>17</sup> Despite this possibility for the modern American student to initially reject *The Faerie Queene*—an allegorical epic poem that takes time, energy, and effort to understand—this sixteenth-century text is the exact cure needed to combat plummeting literacy rates.

# THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM: A MICROCOSM OF THE AFRICAN WATER INSECURITY CRISIS

Adam Zulewski

Ethiopia has recently completed the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile, a lower tributary of the broader Nile River, in an attempt to transform a struggling economy that has left 43% of Ethiopians living in poverty.<sup>1</sup> With construction efforts beginning in 2011, the GERD's size compares to the entire metropolitan area of Houston, and could more than double Ethiopia's previous electricity output capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Increased energy production would prove instrumental for existing infrastructure and the broader economy, given that, according to a World Bank survey, only 55% of the population has access to electricity, inhibiting economic growth and lowering basic everyday quality of life.<sup>3</sup> With its completion, the East African nation could become an all-encompassing energy hub of Africa, with surplus energy being exported to neighboring countries. Additionally, subsequent profits would prove an ample revenue source for the Ethiopian federal government.<sup>4</sup>

However, the Nile River also provides for the basic necessities and agricultural industry of nearby Sudan and Egypt. The United Nations Children's Fund,

otherwise known as UNICEF, an agency committed to strengthening health, education, and welfare in host nations, reported Egypt's water supply could have realistically run out last year.<sup>5</sup> Sudan, with an arid climate perpetually prone to water shortages, is currently engulfed in civil war, displacing thousands of its citizens. Along with these concerns, the country also hosts millions of refugees seeking shelter from similar internal conflicts in neighboring countries like South

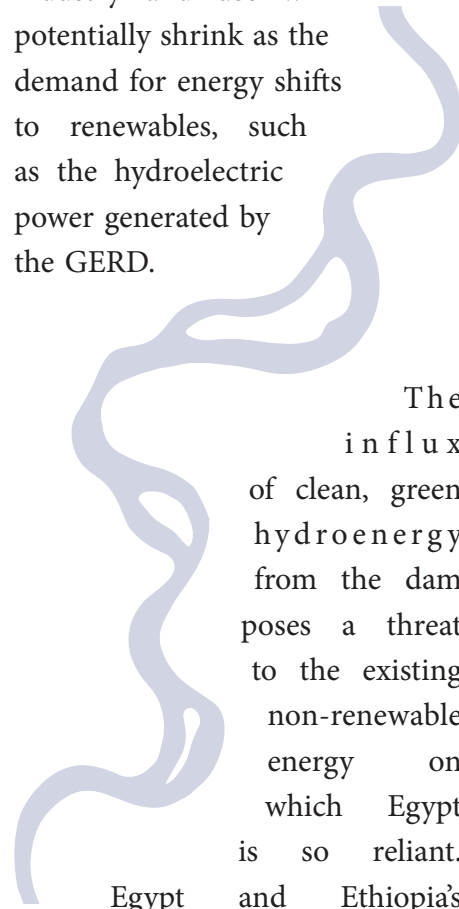
Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea.<sup>6</sup> The GERD's construction remains a long-standing qualm of Egypt, with tensions recently escalating as the completion of the dam triggered further diplomatic disagreements. Last year, Egypt experienced deadly flooding, which its Ministry of Irrigation

attributed to "reckless, unilateral water releases" from the GERD.<sup>7</sup> The 1959 Nile Water Agreement, a treaty dividing water access between Egypt and Sudan, acts as a framework for the allocation of resources.<sup>8</sup> Egypt asserts that the treaty grants it complete control over the Nile River, but the claim continues to create conflicting interests between Egyptian water security and Ethiopian resource rights.



While United Nations (UN) guidelines toward a nation's regulation of shared natural resources require equitable utilization, the UN General Assembly Resolution 1803 (XVII) states, "the right of peoples and nations... over their natural wealth and resources must be exercised in the interest of their national development."<sup>9</sup> The GERD complies with these guidelines by prioritizing internal economic growth, but Egypt previously overstepped Ethiopia's sovereign right to its natural resources through the exclusionary 1959 Nile Water Agreement. The North African nation recently doubled down, sending letters to the UN Security Council accusing Ethiopia of "violating international law by continuing to fill the dam without agreement from downstream countries."<sup>10</sup> Egypt boasts the second-largest economy in Africa, with a GDP of \$347 billion, almost double that of Ethiopia's.<sup>11</sup> It also retains respectable geopolitical relevance, balancing between global powers and reaping the benefits of a pragmatic foreign policy. President el-Sisi of Egypt has retained close ties to the Trump Administration, all while retaining BRICS membership. Even more, Egypt possesses abundant natural gas reserves, second in Africa only to Algeria. High production has resulted in

heavy reliance on fossil fuels, with 88% of its electricity stemming from fossil fuel consumption.<sup>12</sup> The dominance of non-renewable energy in Egypt clashes with UN Sustainability Goal 7, focused on creating forms of cheap and clean energy. The country's fossil-fuel industry and use will potentially shrink as the demand for energy shifts to renewables, such as the hydroelectric power generated by the GERD.



The influx of clean, green hydroenergy from the dam poses a threat to the existing non-renewable energy on which Egypt is so reliant.

Egypt and Ethiopia's diplomatic efforts have yielded no progress towards long-term agreements. Egypt's intransigence continues to threaten the development and spread of electricity access across the Horn of Africa, and Ethiopian officials have repeatedly stated the GERD will not affect Egypt's water supply to any significant extent.<sup>13</sup> These statements were not convincing

to Egypt, which responded by stationing 5,000 troops and fighter planes in Somalia, bordering Ethiopia. Such a move directly undermines Ethiopia's position in Somaliland, a partially recognized breakaway state that seceded from Somalia in 1991. This region is a focal point of tension, as Somalia continues to view it as a federal member state despite its *de facto* independence, a status Ethiopia recently moved to recognize.<sup>14</sup> Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed addressed the Egyptian move shortly after in his September 8, 2024, speech, warning against foreign nations considering an Ethiopian invasion, stating, "anyone intending to invade Ethiopia should think ten times before doing so. We have a long history of defending ourselves," invoking memories of the nation's stubborn defense against Italian invaders almost a century prior.<sup>15</sup>

Ethiopia wants to retain majority control of the GERD to maximize its economic advantages unilaterally. Egypt believes it has a historical right to the Nile stemming from the 1959 agreement, and that the GERD would be detrimental to its citizens' quality of life due to a further decrease in water security. In an attempt to leverage control, Egypt has repeatedly expressed desires for a legally binding agreement on the future filling and operations of the dam. Ethiopia

views it as a violation of sovereignty and believes such an agreement would unfairly favor Egypt's water security and economic interests, rather than those of the Ethiopian population that the government invested in.<sup>16</sup> Any binding agreement would include a fixed amount of water going to Egypt each year. Factors such as evaporation and water influx would vary from year to year, so there is potential for Ethiopia to lose many of the intended benefits of the project if circumstances are wrong.

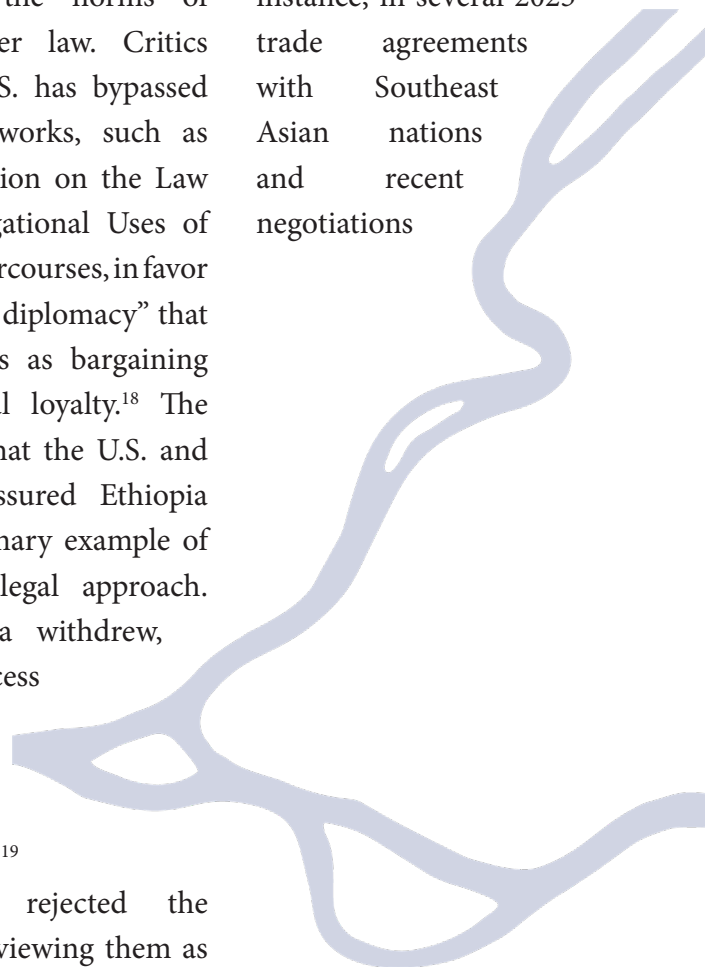
To address the deadlock from Ethiopia's refusal of a binding agreement, a temporary, non-binding agreement could be established to regulate water flow. Under this model, Egypt's water share would be determined by a combination of the dam's current reservoir levels and documented Egyptian water needs. This provisional approach provides immediate relief for instability and a foundation for ongoing negotiations. The potential solution would succeed in reestablishing a foothold for further diplomatic negotiation, while also attracting foreign mediators such as the United States. On the contrary, the non-binding nature could weaken enforcement efforts, as there would be no official law in place to ensure Ethiopian compliance, which could change under mediation. While Ethiopia would likely

favor this solution, as it preserves national sovereignty, eases regional tensions, and secures the GERD's intended economic benefits, Egypt may be resistant to the proposal. For them, this would address the immediate issue of their extreme lack of water supply. As of February 10, 2026, Egypt's Minister of Water Resources, Hani Swelim, confirmed that per capita water availability has fallen to 500 cubic meters annually, exactly half of the UN's threshold for water security.<sup>17</sup>

A critical failure of the United States' mediation efforts lies in the accusation that its efforts lack a valid legal foundation and operate outside the norms of international water law. Critics argue that the U.S. has bypassed established frameworks, such as the UN's Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, in favor of a "transactional diplomacy" that treats water rights as bargaining chips for political loyalty.<sup>18</sup> The 2020 agreement that the U.S. and World Bank pressured Ethiopia to sign is the primary example of the alleged extralegal approach. However, Ethiopia withdrew, labeling the process as "non-neutral" and "a violation of its sovereign rights."<sup>19</sup> They especially rejected the technical clauses, viewing them as

a *de facto* permanent water sharing treaty. Such a treaty would reaffirm colonial-era water allocations, which modern international law widely views as inequitable. Critics have also argued that by mandating a "minimum release" of water, even during droughts, the United States attempted to legally bind Ethiopia to a framework that prioritized downstream security over upstream developmental needs.<sup>18</sup>

Recent U.S. peace mediations in 2025 and early 2026 have reinforced public concerns that these interventions are "peace-for-favor" deals rather than truly impartial resolutions. For instance, in several 2025 trade agreements with Southeast Asian nations and recent negotiations



with Brazil, the U.S. has utilized reciprocal tariff reductions in exchange for specific political allegiances.<sup>20</sup> In the context of the Horn of Africa, an area riddled by international conflict, these deals potentially establish a dangerous precedent in which mediation becomes a tool exploited to secure favorable trade terms rather than to achieve a fair legal settlement.<sup>21</sup> For Ethiopia, a “success” under this recent U.S model would be a surrender to external pressure in exchange for the removal of economic sanctions or the restoration of past trade benefits like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). In reality, this highly transactional nature undermines the long-term stability of any agreement, as it is built on short-term political leverage instead of a mutually agreed-upon legal framework, resulting in the future of the water crisis in Egypt being just as unpredictable as before.<sup>22</sup>

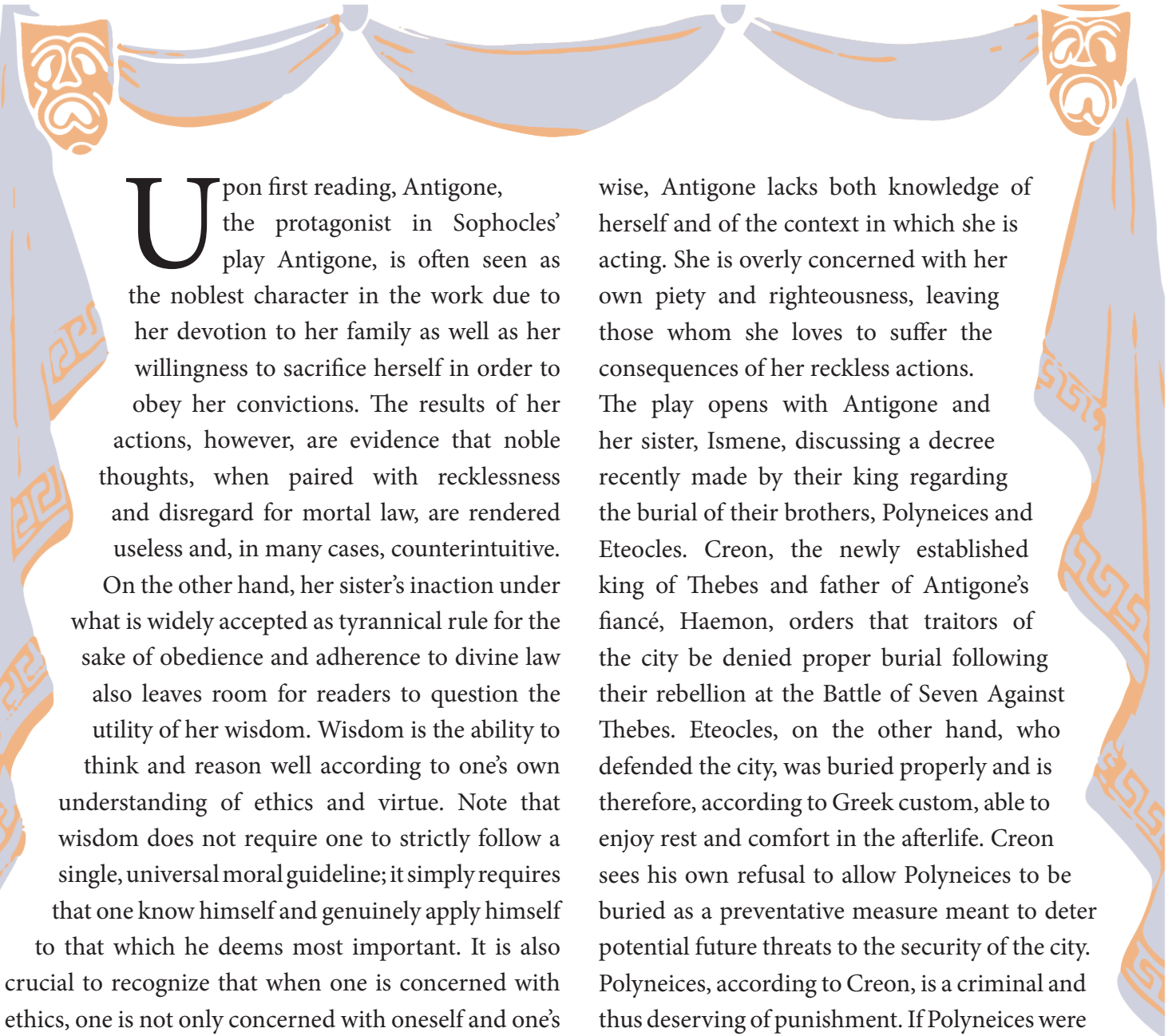
Another viable solution would be a third party, such as the United Nations or the African Union, mediating negotiations until a permanent agreement is reached. Egypt has already expressed displeasure

over the UN’s lack of involvement in the conflict, advocating for international action earlier on.<sup>23</sup> An impartial mediator, whether that be an international organization or a single sovereign state, could find a solution that would balance both parties’ interests. The successes of mediation from a global power, without ulterior political motives, would shine an international spotlight on the water crisis in Egypt and, in general, bring more stability to the Horn of Africa, a region plagued by civil strife and refugee crises. Both parties would follow the guidelines imposed by a third party rather than hostilely exchanging demands. One downside is that mediation in an international context can take years, and Egypt’s water supply will be dangerously low or completely depleted by the end of the process. Due to lackluster results from past diplomatic negotiation efforts, both parties would be equally likely to participate in future talks. Nonetheless, for the stability of the region and the well-being of the countries’ citizens, reaching a compromise is vital.



# NOBILITY AND WISDOM IN ANTIGONE

Zoe Wyatt



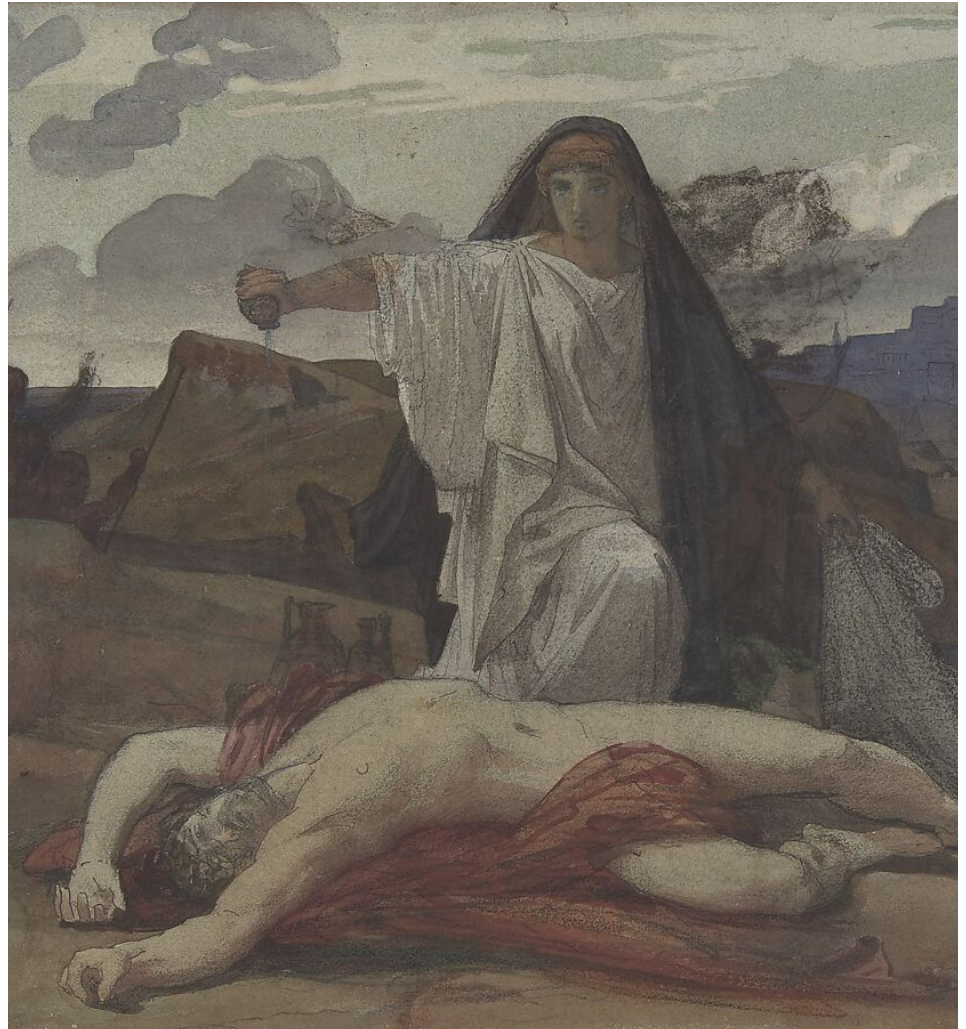
Upon first reading, Antigone, the protagonist in Sophocles' play *Antigone*, is often seen as the noblest character in the work due to her devotion to her family as well as her willingness to sacrifice herself in order to obey her convictions. The results of her actions, however, are evidence that noble thoughts, when paired with recklessness and disregard for mortal law, are rendered useless and, in many cases, counterintuitive. On the other hand, her sister's inaction under what is widely accepted as tyrannical rule for the sake of obedience and adherence to divine law also leaves room for readers to question the utility of her wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to think and reason well according to one's own understanding of ethics and virtue. Note that wisdom does not require one to strictly follow a single, universal moral guideline; it simply requires that one know himself and genuinely apply himself to that which he deems most important. It is also crucial to recognize that when one is concerned with ethics, one is not only concerned with oneself and one's own betterment, but also the context one exists within. This concern for one's surroundings should guide one to some kind of noble action. A person of noble character must act in accordance with his wisdom, pursuing that which he believes to be good and just. In the play, it is clear that while both sisters may be somewhat

wise, Antigone lacks both knowledge of herself and of the context in which she is acting. She is overly concerned with her own piety and righteousness, leaving those whom she loves to suffer the consequences of her reckless actions. The play opens with Antigone and her sister, Ismene, discussing a decree recently made by their king regarding the burial of their brothers, Polyneices and Eteocles. Creon, the newly established king of Thebes and father of Antigone's fiancé, Haemon, orders that traitors of the city be denied proper burial following their rebellion at the Battle of Seven Against Thebes. Eteocles, on the other hand, who defended the city, was buried properly and is therefore, according to Greek custom, able to enjoy rest and comfort in the afterlife. Creon sees his own refusal to allow Polyneices to be buried as a preventative measure meant to deter potential future threats to the security of the city. Polyneices, according to Creon, is a criminal and thus deserving of punishment. If Polyneices were to have avoided penalty for his acts of treason, the laws of Thebes would be rendered meaningless. Criminals must be afraid of retribution; this is the only way to maintain order. Surely, Polyneices knew that if he were to lose this battle, he would be deemed a traitor of the city and therefore would be unable to enjoy the

same privileges as those who abided by the law. These privileges include proper burial, which, in Greek tradition, was necessary for obtaining peace in the afterlife. This is a risk that he was willing to take, and his fate is one that he chose by his own volition.

This tension between state law and familial obligation remains throughout the length of the work as Antigone and Ismene struggle with their understandings of justice. Antigone, in burying her brother, claims that she is acting from a place of conviction and is “satisfying those whom [she] must especially please,”<sup>21</sup> referring to the gods. Ismene, however, is much more reluctant to act in defiance of the laws, as she highly esteems the laws of the city. Antigone, upon hearing that her sister will not accompany her to the field to bury their brother, is disgusted with her lack of compassion.

Laws are meant to reflect the values of the people under them. Under legitimate, non-tyrannical rule, these laws are in place to ensure the safety, order, and social cohesion of the specific people who must obey them. The laws of any given area derive a substantial portion of their authority from the lawgiver’s capability to enforce them. Polyneices’ decision to betray the city was not only a betrayal of the laws in place there; it was also a betrayal of the people within the



city, who also must obey the laws within the constraints of the existing order— the people for whom the laws are in place to represent and protect. In burying her brother, Antigone denied the authority of the city, becoming guilty of crimes of the same nature as her brother, and it is only right that she be punished as well. She has, thus far, simultaneously proven to be noble regarding divine law and loyalty to her kin. Ismene’s decision to obey the laws of the city, however, proves her loyalty to her fellow citizens.

Creon asserts that, “whoever

conventionally holds a loved one as better than the land of his own fathers, I say this man is nowhere.”<sup>22</sup> It is nearly impossible to determine which form of loyalty is superior without first discussing the validity of divine law. This discussion, however, is heavily dependent upon the existence of the gods, which Antigone wished to please. Because it is so difficult to determine which sister acts more in accordance with absolute moral and ethical truth, the utility of either kind of loyalty will be measured by its overall benefit to others. All conversation

of a legitimate higher power aside, an analysis of the actions, as well as the outcomes of those actions, of each of the sisters is necessary in determining which kind of loyalty is most beneficial.

Ismene makes it clear that she is “by nature incapable of acting in violent defiance of the citizens.”<sup>3</sup> She seems to carry an immense amount of respect for the law, even if it is not beneficial to her and may very well cause emotional turmoil in times such as these. She is able to recognize that, though the law may prevent her from following her own moral convictions, her acceptance of its authority will be beneficial to the order of the state. Note that Ismene’s course of action takes the wishes of other living people into account, while Antigone’s only recognizes the will of the gods and the well-being of the dead. Ismene is aware of the context within which she exists and is mindful of how her actions may have tangible consequences. Also note that Ismene is not concerned with personal convictions and self-righteousness, as is Antigone. If she has any personal convictions at all, they urge her to be still and to take into account the will of the city as a whole. Antigone’s uncontrollable sense of individuality throws into disregard her identity as a citizen. Regardless of what the afterlife holds, one must not forget that in this life, they are a string within a sometimes fragile web of

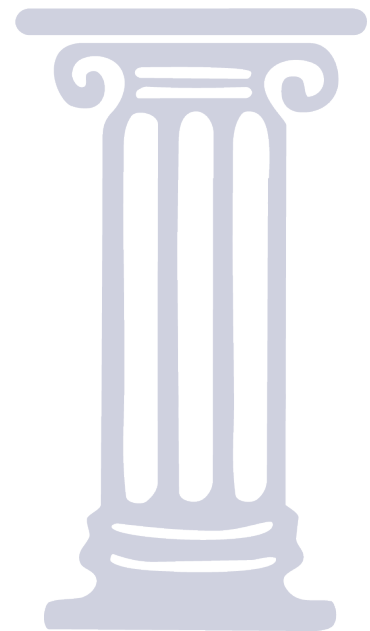
other beings. It is not wrong to be concerned with the divine, but a person’s status as a devotee should not be a hindrance to his duties to his fellow man. Antigone’s desire to act out of personal conviction does not promote peace; instead, her self-righteousness and concern only for her own moral understanding of the world will cost others their lives, and those who live will be left with irreparable harm done to them.

Going against the king’s decree and her sister’s wishes, Antigone buries her brother. When the king hears of this, Antigone is sentenced to death by entombment. During her sentencing, she makes it clear that she is not afraid of death and that this lack of fear deems her ungovernable. She also claims that if it is the will of the gods for her to die “before [her] time,” then that is the most noble thing she can do.<sup>4</sup> As the story progresses, however, Antigone does not seem very genuine in her willingness to die for her convictions, and her nobility comes into question. As the chorus foreshadows near the beginning of the play, “no man is so foolish as to love being dead.”<sup>5</sup> Antigone may have realized her own foolishness once the time had already passed for her to change her fate, and her devotion to the gods could hardly be seen as entirely genuine or beneficial.

During Antigone’s sentencing, Ismene risks her own

life by offering to share in Antigone’s punishment.<sup>6</sup> Readers are unsure if Ismene did, in fact, aid Antigone in burying their brother. It is also possible, however, that she is offering to endure the same fate as her sister as a sign of solidarity. Ismene may very well have been reluctant to act at first, but she is now feeling regret over her previous inaction and lack of support for her sister. When this offer is made, Antigone rejects her sister, stating, “It suffices that I die.”<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting also that Antigone’s attitude toward her own death is somewhat prideful. She goes as far as to say to the king:

To me, nothing in your words is pleasing, nor ever would be pleasing, and so also to you are mine by nature displeasing. And yet from what source would a fame more splendidly famous be mine, than from laying my own brother in his grave?<sup>8</sup>



It seems here that she is less concerned with the soul of her brother and more with how she will be perceived and remembered by future generations. Pride is not necessarily a negative thing for the Ancient Greeks, but it is alarming for Antigone to be so concerned with her reputation when she originally claimed that her actions were rooted in a desire to please the gods. Neither mortal law nor divine law promises that those who adhere to them will gain honor or glory. Both are instead concerned with actions that benefit others in some way, whether those “others” are members of the same polis, souls of loved ones, or gods. Both mortal and divine laws ask followers to do things that will not necessarily lead to individual prosperity.

This rejection of her sister’s offer may have been a tactic Antigone thought that she could utilize in order to hoard the glory of martyrdom for herself. Though this is not explicitly stated in the text, it may be implied through certain attitudes Antigone expresses throughout the play regarding dying a noble death. This seems to be a question of self-righteousness in relation to absolute righteousness. It would be quite shocking for someone who claims to be concerned with divine ethics to also be concerned with their standing and reputation in the mortal world.

When she is finally taken to her tomb, she completely turns on her prior attitudes towards the gods. She seems to forget entirely that it was her own rebellion against the city that resulted in her death, not any fault of the divine. Antigone’s perspective on death shifts dramatically when she is faced with her own. She no longer seems to view martyrdom as a noble endeavor. In fact, she begins to talk about her own death as if it were a punishment for her actions, asking, “What injustice of the divinities have I transgressed? Why should I, miserable one, still look to the gods?”<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Antigone was acting out of grief and anger towards Creon’s decree, and she might not have anticipated the consequences of her actions. In fact, she makes no acknowledgment of others at all as she is grieving in the cave. Instead, her woe is self-centered. She is upset that the gods did not pity her or spare her because of her piety.<sup>10</sup> She makes no mention of her fiancé, either. Instead, she adopts a strange obsession with death and likens her suffering to a marriage with the underworld instead of a marriage to any living man.<sup>11</sup> When faced with death, she is only concerned with what could have been or with what she supposedly deserved; in her case, this is marriage and the upbringing of children. Again, when she

grieves this, she makes no mention of her betrothed; she is concerned only with what she herself will lose. She is completely careless when it comes to the grief her fiancé will endure as a result of her death or of the grief her sister will surely have to face. After grieving her own life, Antigone escapes a slow death by starvation, hanging herself using a noose made from her own clothing. Despite her previous willingness—almost eagerness—to suffer for her cause, it seems that her tolerance for suffering has its limits.

In the case of Antigone, it appears that adherence to divine law is only appealing to an individual when it does not directly encourage the disobedience of the mortal laws that the individual may also be required to adhere to. The laws of a city must be compatible with the divine laws that its members follow in order to maintain social order. There may be a few who are genuinely willing to suffer as much as their cause requires, but most are not; it is unnatural (not necessarily good or bad) to love to suffer. One’s love for suffering, however, should not impact the lives of those around them. Masochists with little regard for others should not be celebrated.

After discovering the body of his future bride, Haemon enters the tomb and, with his father present, “drew his cross-hilted sword... and drove the sword half its length into his side.”<sup>12</sup> Hearing the news of her son’s death, Eurydice decides to endure the same fate. Creon, whether a just ruler or a tyrant, is left grieving both his wife and his child.

Under the rule of a king who doesn’t care for the heart of his people, it is difficult to say that one sister is objectively more noble or wise than another. The moral outlines that they are each required, by conviction or by the law, to follow are incompatible; the adherence to one requires, in many cases, the betrayal of another.

This dilemma can be likened to that surrounding the burial of one brother but not another. It is an injustice in the eyes of the gods to leave the corpse of a loved one exposed and without proper burial. Simultaneously, it could also be seen as an injustice to Eteocles to bury Polyneices, his brother who killed him and betrayed Thebes.

While Ismene’s inaction was out of respect for the city, it is also, in Antigone’s eyes, a horrible disrespect to the family and to the gods. To Antigone, divine law is superior to mortal law. She obeyed what she believed divine law to ask of her, so she is noble by her own standards. At the same time, despite complying with what was required of her by the gods, she made

certain disconcerting statements that may lead readers to believe that her devotion to the gods and intensity of her convictions were not entirely legitimate. Ismene, on the other hand, acts in accordance with what mortal law asks of her. This makes her more noble in the eyes of the law, but not in the eyes of the gods. Without a legitimate higher power that has created divine law, which would then take precedence over mortal law, there is no way to say without bias which is more important or noble to follow. Some may argue that divine law takes precedence over mortal law and that this



justifies Antigone's actions, but this position cannot be defended without proving the legitimacy of divine law; that is, again, a completely separate, and unimaginably nuanced, argument. Even then, a real divine law—which may or may not be verifiable—may or may not be the same divine law that was created by the gods recognized at the time or in that region of the world. Without this legitimate divine law, there is no reason to believe that adherence to it is any more noble than adherence to mortal law. Even considering the existence of a legitimate higher power(s), however, Antigone's loyalty to the divine was not at all beneficial to her fellow man. It is difficult to believe that a god is worthy of submitting to when he asks recklessness of those who invest their faith in him.

Despite the pride and recklessness of Antigone, she is still somewhat justified in her actions by her own understanding of morality. The divine authority that she believed she must follow required her to sacrifice herself for the repose of the soul of her brother. Her disregard for any consequences that came as a result of her pursuit of this is admittedly, at least slightly, admirable. It cannot be wrong for a woman to love her family and to wish them well, either in this life or the next. Ismene tells Antigone, "You go as mindless, but rightly dear to your loved ones."<sup>13</sup> This is what mattered most to her. At the same time, despite the inaction and potential prudishness of Ismene, she did just what was required of her as well. It is only concerning that Ismene, in times of tyranny or injustice, may be hesitant to disobey the law and stand up for any cause. If one relies solely on mortal law, what will become of their ethics when that law becomes corrupt? Recall, though, that Ismene was willing to sacrifice herself for her sister once Antigone had already disobeyed Creon's law. Although she was hesitant to be the cause of conflict, she was also courageous enough to step in when her sister may have needed her. She was much more cautious with her sacrifices, but she made them when it may have been necessary. That is much more

admirable than the act of sacrificing oneself purely for self-actualization.

The key difference between the sisters is that one is solely concerned with divine ethics and has little regard for those around her; the other is much more considerate of those her actions may affect. A passion for the divine must be tempered with care for the living. If not, a person becomes reckless, and whatever cause they suffer for becomes a means of destruction. The same applies to Creon; his desire to protect the land and people he holds authority over must be met with genuine care for the things they hold dear. If the culture of the people is stripped away from them, there is hardly anything left to protect. Note that Creon suffers greatly as a result of Antigone's death. This is a result of her recklessness, but also his own apathy and inflexibility. Neither are absolved of responsibility.

Traditionally, Antigone is seen as the more noble of the two sisters because she was more willing and eager to sacrifice her life for the sake of her brother. This idea of nobility assumes that the intensity of one's conviction or the extent to which they follow their conviction correlates with the validity of their actions. An action is not justified simply because someone believes deeply in the motives behind it. While it is a good and noble thing to be concerned with the soul of a loved one, and while it may be noble to be concerned with matters of the divine, that concern cannot become so great that it puts the safety of others in jeopardy. The sentiment behind an action cannot justify it. Ultimately, Ismene's loyalty to the city and to her fellow men proved to be more beneficial than her sister's rash loyalty to the gods (really, to herself and her own self-actualization). Her thoughtfulness and caution render her the wiser of the two sisters, and, therefore, the more noble as well.

# A DISCUSSION OF STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL BRAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REACTIVE AND PROACTIVE OFFENDERS

Margaret C. Thoem

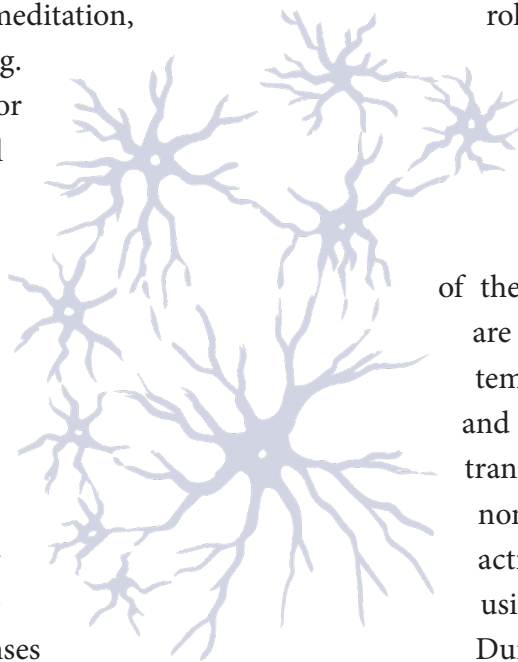
**R**eactive and proactive criminal offenders are driven by different motivations; these differences are reinforced and explained by structural and functional abnormalities within the brain. Proactive criminals commit offenses actuated by goal achievement and utilize aggression as a tool. Increased activation is present in the parts of their brains responsible for premeditation, decision-making, and planning. Structurally, it is characteristic for proactive offenders to have atypical development in brain areas that are key to emotion processing and empathy. These abnormalities blunt morality, making them especially successful at callous and unemotional behavior, such as exacting revenge and using others to promote their status. Reactive offenders, on the other hand, are motivated by intense emotions and have severe responses to provocation. Similarly, they exhibit impairment in areas of the brain that hinder impulsivity. This type of offender commonly has neurodevelopmental shortcomings that suggest issues in the fight or flight response, inhibition, and self-control, which lead to recurring approach behaviors. This paper aims to differentiate between the two

categories of offenders and provide evidence of faults within the structures and functions of the brain; some key areas include the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and cavum septum pellucidum, which impact and explain resulting behaviors.

The function of the prefrontal cortex (PFC), a subarea within the frontal lobe, plays a prominent role in the behavioral influence of reactive and proactive offenders.

When functioning properly, the PFC performs operations like impulse control and emotion processing. Deficits in the activity of the orbitofrontal cortices of the PFC are primarily responsible for the short temperament of reactive offenders. Chen and colleagues conducted a study using transcranial direct current stimulation, a non-invasive technique for manipulating activity in specific parts of the brain using low-intensity electrical current.<sup>1</sup>

During the study, proactive and reactive aggression were reduced after regulating the right ventrolateral PFC. When the dysfunction within the PFC was adjusted, the externalized behaviors were resolved. Additionally, Raine and colleagues conducted positron emission tomography (PET) scans of the brains of reactive murderers, finding significant impairment in the functioning of their PFCs; this



further supports the connection between their brains and inhibition failures, perpetuated by emotionality.<sup>2</sup>

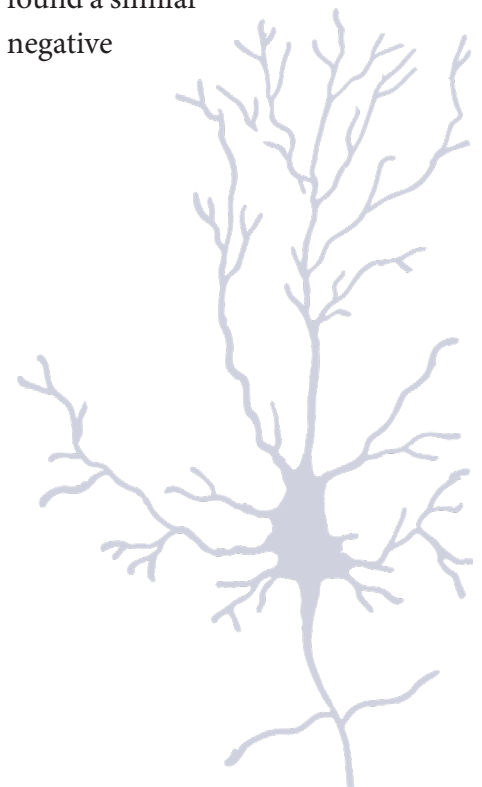
Proactive offenders, on the other hand, are able to control their impulses to later exact revenge, reach a goal, or satisfy an urge to release anger. These abilities indicate a high-functioning PFC, contributing to executive functioning and decision-making. Raine and colleagues' study using PET scans found that predatory murderers' PFC functioning was at similar levels to the control group, but with higher subcortical functioning.<sup>3</sup> These results signify well-working decision-making, planning, and executive function attributed to the PFC, but increased sensitivity to aggravating factors represented by abnormally high autonomic arousal. From this research, we may conclude that low tolerance to frustration from hyperactive subcortical regions is what motivates this subgroup's aggression, while effective functioning of the PFC makes them adept at the self-control required in proactive offending.

Aggression, both impulsive and instrumental, is part of the criterion used in the diagnosis of Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) and Conduct Disorder (CD). However, there are distinct differences in the motives behind each type of aggression.

The reactive type is commonly associated with APD, congruent with similar diagnostic traits such as overarching impulsive behavior and substance abuse disorder comorbidity. Moreover, the divergence between the types of aggression is further evident in the scores on the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R), which quantifies personality traits used for diagnosis. Individuals with APD who score higher on the PCL-R show a lower propensity toward heat-of-the-moment aggression and instead indicate premeditation, consistent with the proactive category of aggression.<sup>4</sup> In addition, APD, CD, and Psychopathy have been strongly correlated to abnormalities within the structure of the prefrontal cortex.<sup>5</sup> These differences point to impaired decision-making, planning, and social interaction; they manifest as behaviors indicative of deficits in action inhibition or in the conscious selection of prosocial conduct. According to Zhang and colleagues, individuals with verified conduct disorders showed significantly lower grey matter volume (GMV) across the entire brain.<sup>6</sup> The same study concluded that the right pars orbitalis, located in the frontal lobe, was also smaller in individuals with conduct disorders. The pars orbitalis is involved in behavioral and motor inhibition, and its volume reduction indicates deficits

in those operations. In individuals who display reactive aggression, immediate, impulsive motor responses corroborate the presence of developmental flaws in the pars orbitalis.<sup>7</sup>

Another study by Raine and colleagues (2011) found that prefrontal impairment, characterized by reductions in ventral and middle frontal gray matter, was robustly associated with APD.<sup>8</sup> This study controlled for confounds such as participants' psychosocial deficits and earlier head injuries to fortify the argument that prefrontal grey matter reduction and APD had a direct relationship. Even when the study's direction was reversed, the correlation remained significant. Other analyses have found a similar negative

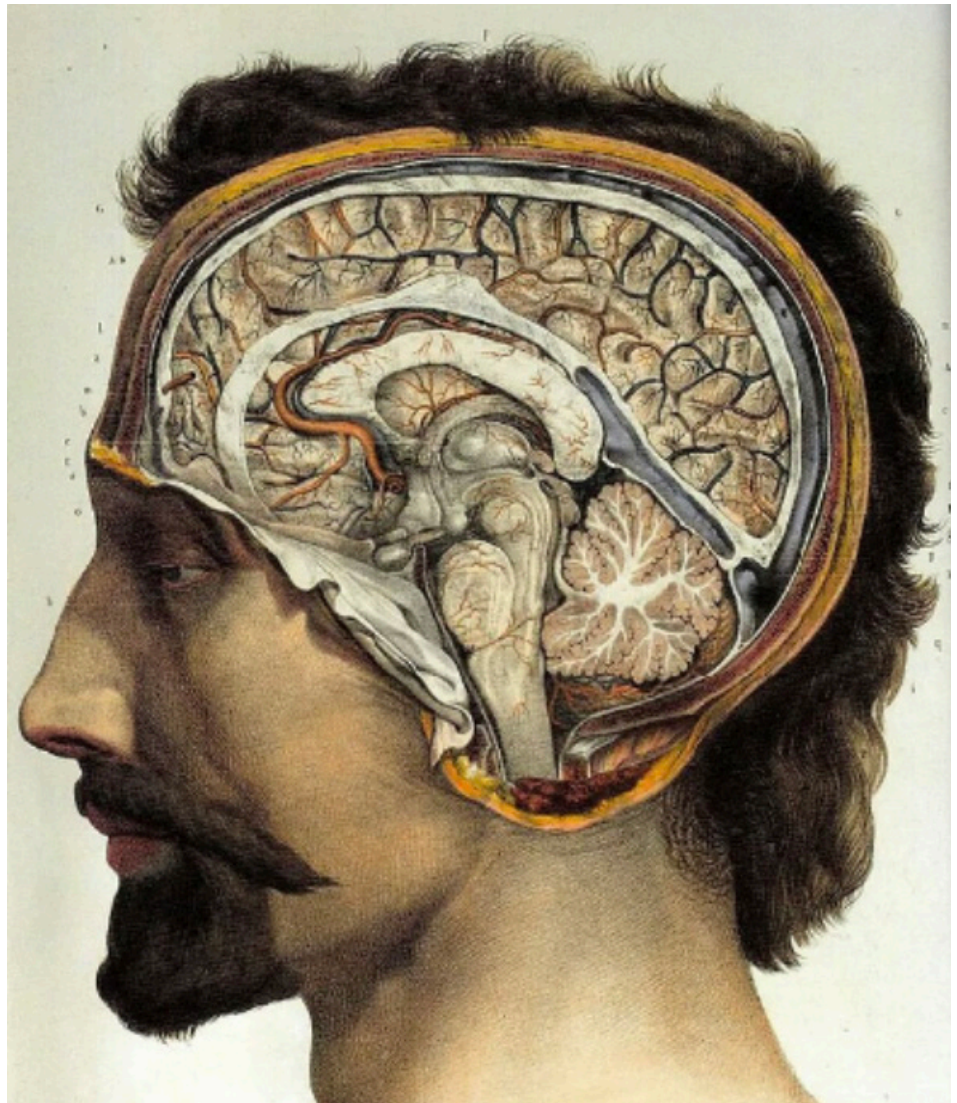


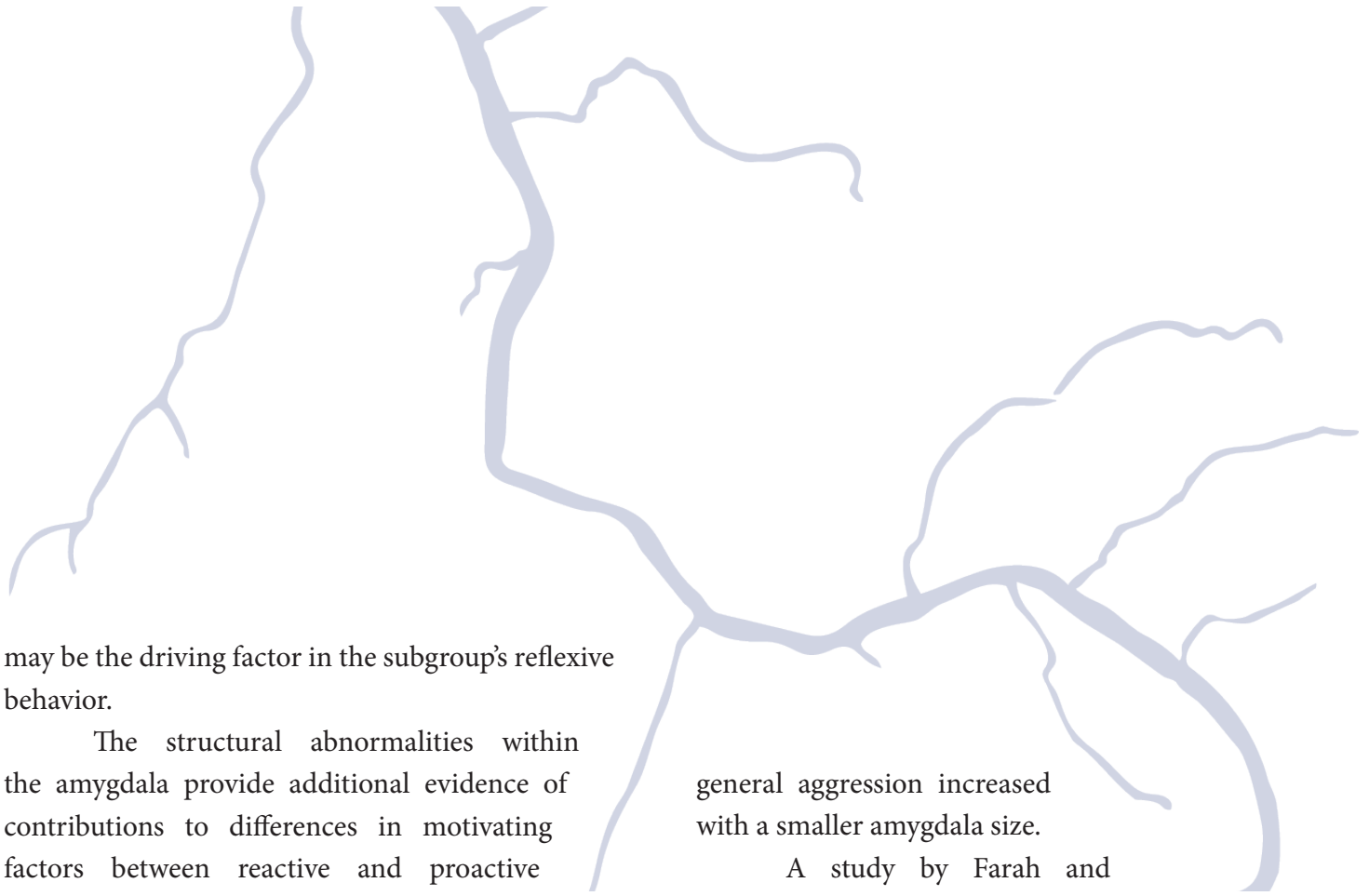
correlation between PCL-R scores in the antisocial category and overall GMV in superior regions of the PFC. Atrophy of grey matter indicates deficits in cognitive control, leading to antisocial behaviors.<sup>9</sup> In the context of proactive offenders, reduced GMV in these areas exemplifies underlying problems in social intelligence, such as the ability to recognize others' emotions or experience guilt. Overall, a reduction in grey matter volume in the prefrontal cortex is characteristic of both subgroups. This congruence may confuse the separation between categories and insinuate that distinctions between motivations do not exist. However, in reactive offenders, the reduction correlates with reflexive aggression and difficulty negating impulses fueled by intense emotion. Meanwhile, in proactive offenders, the volume reduction instead manifests as behaviors favorable to goal achievement, such as a lack of guilt and disregard for the emotions of others.

The amygdala, involved in threat assessment and emotional processing, is hyperactive in reactive offenders and reduced in proactive offenders, further separating the subgroups and alluding to unequal underlying motivation. The emotions of others do not impact proactive offenders' calculated and thoughtful

behaviors, nor do they experience regular emotionality themselves. Proactive aggression was observed in youths who demonstrated further callous-unemotional tendencies; these individuals also displayed hypoactive amygdala response during emotional distress cues of others.<sup>10</sup> This research determined that instrumental aggression stemmed from blunted empathy responses brought on by an ineffective amygdala. Reactive offenders, on the other hand, demonstrate increased sensitivity

to emotionally charged stimuli. A study by Lee and colleagues used a Stroop task, a cognitive assessment tool designed to identify attentional biases and reaction times, on a sample of spousal abusers.<sup>11</sup> The results found that the spousal abusers displayed higher amygdala activation compared to control groups when seeing emotionally charged words like 'kill' during the task. This heightened response among the reactive offenders suggests a constant state of emotional alertness, which



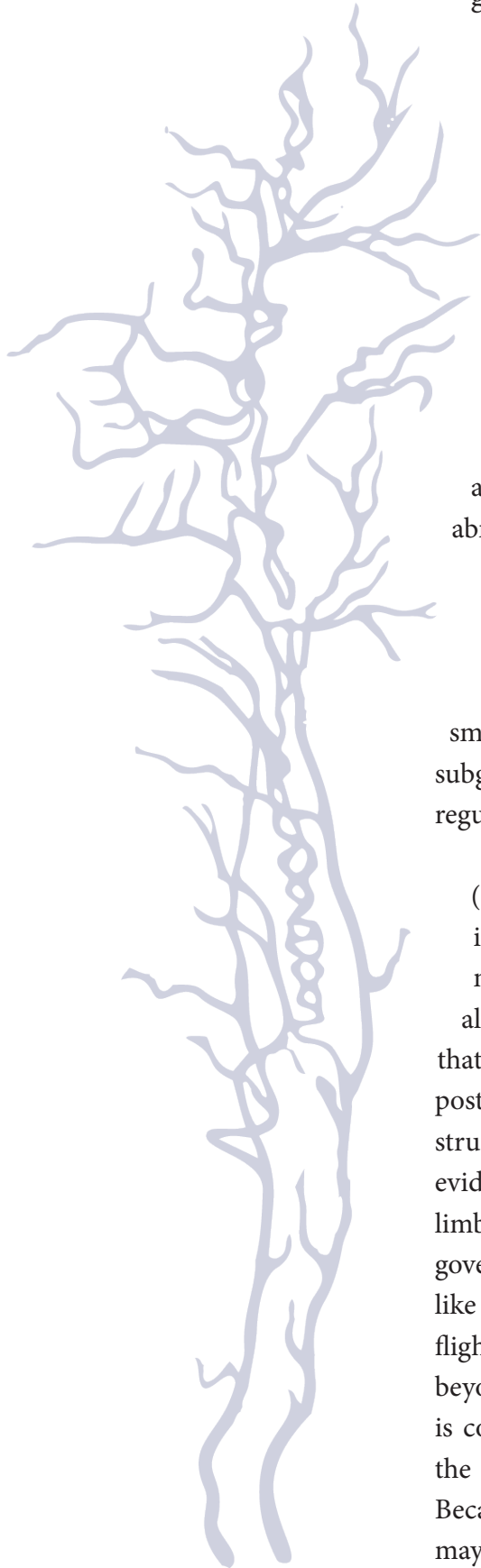


may be the driving factor in the subgroup's reflexive behavior.

The structural abnormalities within the amygdala provide additional evidence of contributions to differences in motivating factors between reactive and proactive offenders. In individuals with diagnoses of Psychopathy or APD, abnormality in the amygdala size has been repeatedly identified.<sup>12</sup> This connection, when further explored, clarifies the relationship between flawed development and disorders that commonly include aggression. In the opposite direction, CD, APD, and Psychopathy strongly predict reduced amygdala volume.<sup>13</sup> From this conclusion, it can be inferred that behaviors applied in diagnosing these disorders are related to the defect within the structure of the amygdala. A study by Pardini and colleagues solidified the implication of reduced amygdala size related to persistent overall lifetime aggression.<sup>14</sup> They found an inverse relationship: men with lower amygdala volume exhibited more psychopathic and aggressive behaviors during youth and adulthood in their 22-year longitudinal study. Unfortunately, the study failed to differentiate between the two categories of aggression and instead could only conclude that

general aggression increased with a smaller amygdala size.

A study by Farah and colleagues focuses specifically on reactive aggression and amygdala size.<sup>15</sup> They found that a larger right amygdala volume was a strong indicator of both reactive aggression and alexithymia, the inability to name one's emotions. Their takeaway was that the increase in amygdala size may be the underlying factor in reactive tendencies. They hypothesized that resulting aggression was driven by the reactive offender's high emotionality, coupled with a lack of understanding of one's own feelings. If further supported, these findings may influence treatment related to reactive aggression, integrating alexithymia treatment as a way to mitigate internal frustration and facilitate impulse control. On the other hand, a study by Naaijen and colleagues supports the presence of subtype-specific differences, finding higher rates of proactive aggression related to reduced amygdala size. This inverse relationship may imply flawed development, lack of use, or dysfunction in the



amygdala. Proactive offenders' goal-oriented behavior is carried out with a lack of fear or emotionality consistent with an abnormally developed amygdala marked by a reduced volume. These findings may prove helpful in the development of interventions to specifically target impaired functions such as fear-conditioning and emotion acknowledgment. Overall, abnormalities in the amygdala are associated with aggression. Further, larger volumes in the reactive subtype indicate enhanced emotionality, while smaller volumes in the proactive subgroup indicate impairment in regular function.

Cavum Septum Pellucidum (CSP) is a fluid-filled space in the septum pellucidum, a narrow membrane located along the brain's central axis, that ordinarily closes during postnatal development. CSP is a structural condition that shows evidence of disruption in early limbic system development, which governs emotional processes like attachment and the fight-or-flight response. CSP that remains beyond 3 to 6 months after birth is correspondingly associated with the aggressive features of APD. Because of this, the abnormality may be used to flag or predict

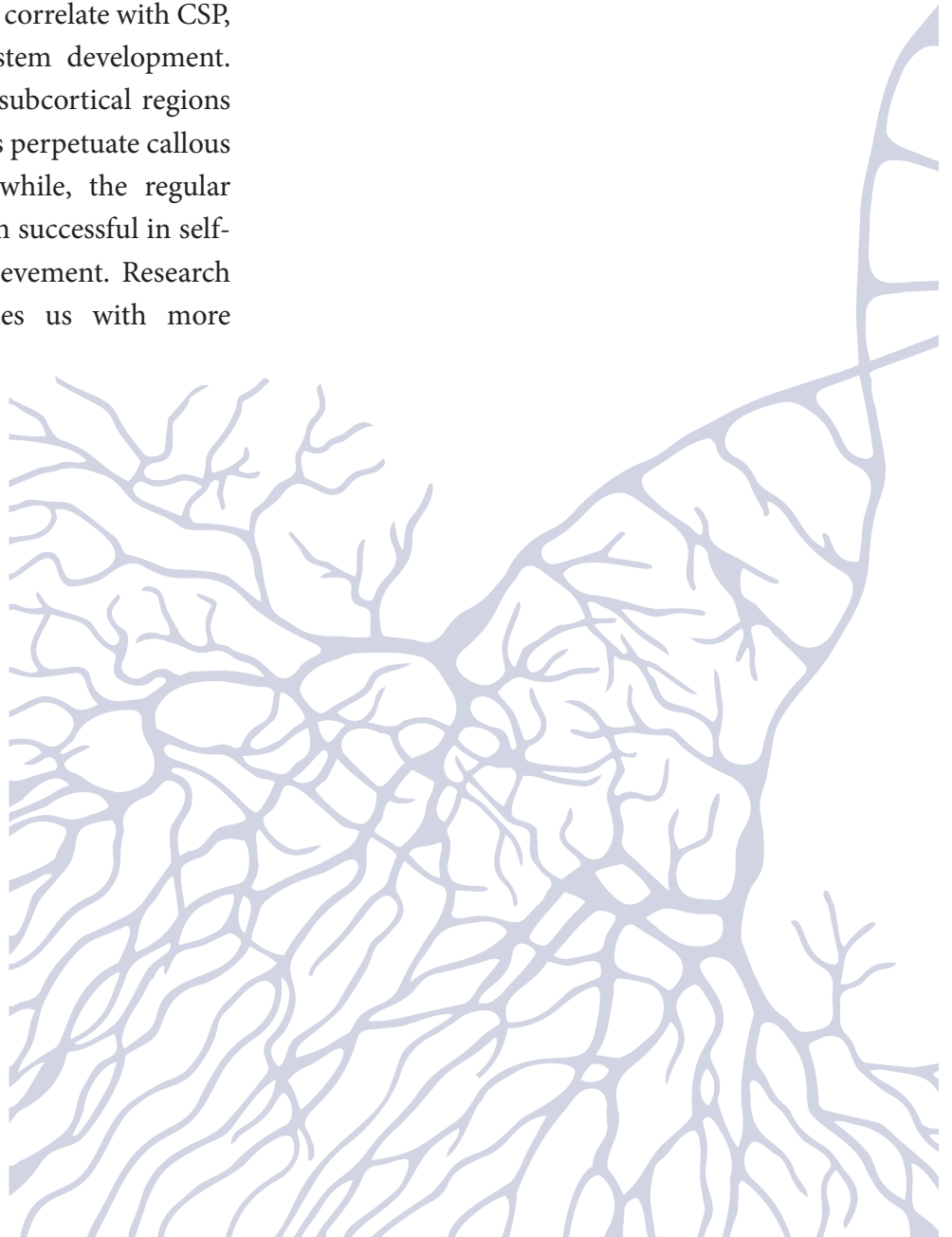
aggression from a young age, as observed by Blair and colleagues. They found large CSP present in youth who met the criteria of Disruptive Behavioral Disorder. This affirms the early onset of externalizing behaviors associated with the abnormality. A study by Raine and colleagues (2010) found supporting results when observing adult behavioral symptoms associated with CSP. Larger defects correlated with significantly more arrests, convictions, behaviors associated with APD, psychopathy, and proactive offending. The defect also precedes the onset of criminal careers, reinforcing the relationship's direction. These studies suggest CSP as a marker associated with proactive and reactive offending alike, not separating the two categories during observation. However, based on the variety of diagnoses and behaviors associated with CSP, it is possible that subgroups are distinct and driven by bifurcated motives.

In summary, reactive and proactive offenders have distinct neurological influences shaping their operational methods and behavioral manifestations. In reactive offenders, the PFC volume reduction marks difficulty in negating impulses fueled by intense emotion. Additionally, larger amygdala volumes indicate enhanced emotionality. Diagnoses associated with CSP

are correlated with externalized behaviors of reactive offenders as well. Impairment to PFC function in reactive offenders further supports the connection with inhibition and impulse control issues. Furthermore, a heightened amygdala response suggests a constant state of intense emotional arousal, which distinguishes this category of offender's behavior.

In contrast, proactive offenders exhibit PFC volume reduction linked to a lack of guilt or insight into the emotions of others. Similarly, reduced amygdala size is related to a lack of fear and emotionality. Diagnoses associated with proactive offending correlate with CSP, which indicates flawed limbic system development. Lastly, hyperactive functioning in subcortical regions and hypoactive amygdala responses perpetuate callous and unemotional conduct. Meanwhile, the regular functioning of the PFC makes them successful in self-control and favorable to goal achievement. Research done on brain structure provides us with more information on the physical pitfalls of the two categories of offenders, and by observing functional research, we gain a more comprehensive picture of the differentiation between driving influences in the behavior of proactive and reactive offenders. The neurobiological patterns examined in this paper lead to broader interdisciplinary questions. From a legal perspective, the brain-based deficiencies of both proactive and reactive offenders call into question the extent of their culpability for crime. If abnormalities in their brains truly drive these individuals, it is important to consider whether it is in the interest

of justice to punish them as though their brains are typical. These findings emphasize the need to critically reevaluate assumptions about free will, the impact of cognitive dysfunction, and the brain's role in criminal behavior. In the future, punitive responses may need to be adjusted to better serve both the offender and the broader public.



# Dugin's Fourth Political Theory: Understanding Putin's Invasion of Ukraine

Nadav Sternheim

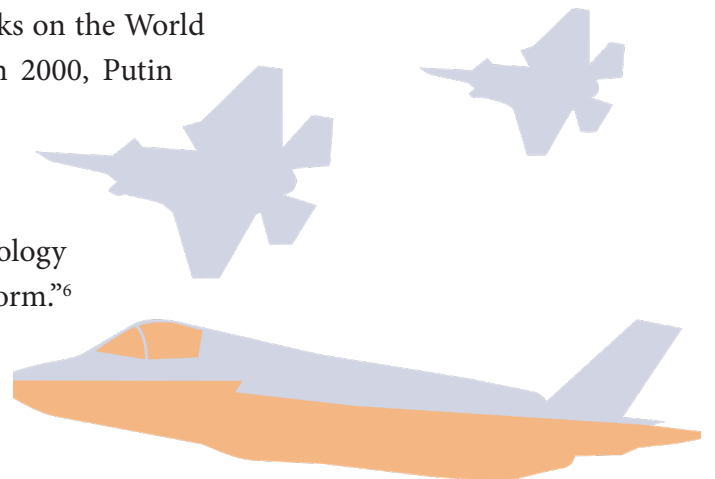
On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly announced that Russia had begun a “special military operation” in Ukraine. As justification for the invasion, Putin claimed that his goals were to “demilitarize and denazify” Ukraine, protect Russia by preventing Ukraine from joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and to reincorporate Russian-speaking populations in eastern Ukraine into what Putin views as their rightful nation.<sup>1</sup> Leading security analysts thought that when Putin first announced the invasion, he believed that he would take control of the entirety of Ukraine within 10 days.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Ukraine has valiantly defended itself, with foreign nations sending hundreds of billions of dollars in weapons and humanitarian aid.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that Putin's initial plan to quickly annex Ukraine has failed, at the cost of the lives of hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers. Yet Putin, seemingly inexplicably, looks more determined than ever to continue fighting a war with no end in sight.

Understanding why Putin first invaded, why he continues to fight, and how he uses political ideologies such as Aleksandr Dugin's Fourth Political Theory to justify his actions is crucial for assessing him as a leader and predicting his next moves.

The question of whether Putin has a coherent ideology has been heavily analyzed by Western scholars and researchers. Many of Putin's political moves seem contradictory, and his outspoken policies have changed over time. When Putin first came to power, he spoke openly about the possibility of joining NATO, and he was one of the first foreign leaders to lend support to American President George Bush after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.<sup>4&5</sup> In 2000, Putin even wrote that he was “against the restoration of an official state ideology in Russia in any form.”<sup>6</sup> Now, more than twenty years later, he has made it clear that

he views NATO and the United States as his enemies,<sup>7</sup> and he has also introduced countless policies that have unabashedly promoted Eastern Orthodox Christianity and certain political ideologies as central to Russian statehood and identity.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Putin, at the very least, uses preexisting ideologies such as nationalism, traditionalism, and Orthodox Christianity to his advantage. If his moves can be explained by these ideologies, then it is of utmost importance to examine them closely.

A prominent source of political ideology in Russia is Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian philosopher who has had an immense influence on



contemporary Russian foreign policy. Dugin was born in 1962 to a family of Soviet military intelligence officers and became deeply involved in his early years with various far-right groups and occult organizations within Russia. In the 1980s, Dugin became a staunch anti-Soviet dissident, and in 1993, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Dugin co-founded the National Bolshevik Party, which promoted a mixture of ultranationalism and communism. In 1998, Dugin left the National Bolshevik Party due to an intra-party feud, and in 2000, he founded the Eurasia Party, which combines elements of National Bolshevism with the idea that the true Russian state is fundamentally distinct from both Europe and Asia. Aside from being a political party leader, Dugin is also a widely-read writer, university professor, lecturer, and television editor.<sup>9</sup> Through this blend of political activism and academic work, Dugin has cultivated an ideological platform whose reach extends far beyond Russia's traditional intellectual circles.

It is difficult to determine whether or not Dugin has directly impacted Putin in any way, but it is evident that he has significant influence within Russian intellectual culture. The two men do

not have a public relationship; they have never been photographed together, and Dugin does not serve publicly as an advisor to political offices in any form. However, Dugin's *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997) has had immense influence within the Russian military, police forces, and foreign policy elites, and has been used as a required textbook in Russian universities and military academies.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in the last decade, Putin's foreign policy actions have evolved to closely mirror Dugin's theories, to the extent that, according to one *New Yorker* article, "Putin has come to sound like Dugin to such an extent that Dugin has been called Putin's Rasputin and Putin's philosopher... Putin's assimilation of Dugin's thinking is likely indirect, maybe even unconscious."<sup>11</sup> Lastly, Dugin's only daughter, Darya Dugina, was killed in 2022 by a car bombing, and it remains unclear who ordered the assassination or whether Dugin himself was the intended target.<sup>12</sup> If he was, indeed, the target, then evidently someone found his ideas dangerous enough to influence Putin's policies. Despite the lack of a formal relationship, it is probable that Dugin's ideology has seeped into Putin's political strategies and public rhetoric.

The most intuitive understanding of Dugin's



ideology, and its relation to Putin's invasion of Ukraine, can be developed by examining Dugin's "Fourth Political Theory." According to Dugin, the three major political theories are liberalism, communism, and fascism. He never explicitly defines these, but instead focuses on their "subjects"—their foundations—with liberalism being centered around the individual, communism around class, and fascism around the race or the state. Dugin argues that these three theories have fought against each other throughout the 20th century, with liberalism emerging as the ultimate winner. Since liberalism has prevailed, the world has descended into a state of postliberalism, which is characterized by a rejection of politics and social obligations as a whole. With no need to defend itself against other political theories, liberalism has seeped into everyday social and cultural norms. As a result, its critics were left "struggling against the air"; their political or economic arguments were ineffective because liberalism, no longer a political theory, had become a ubiquitously accepted lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> According to Dugin, this predicament necessitates the creation of a "Fourth Political Theory"—one which, like communism and fascism, is fundamentally anti-capitalist and anti-individualist, but unlike communism and fascism, will be able to defeat liberalism once and for all.

In his work *The Fourth Political Theory*, Dugin begins by describing the first three political theories of the 20th century. According to Dugin, liberalism arose in the late 18th century and grew to be "the most stable and successful ideology" compared to its rivals. Communism appeared later as a result of "the emergence of the bourgeois-capitalist system."

Finally, fascism made a brief appearance in the early to mid-20th century, but quickly disappeared due to Adolf Hitler's "suicidal geopolitical miscalculations", as well as the alliance of liberalism and communism against fascism. Then, after the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and ultimately the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, communism dissolved as well, leaving

only liberalism. With no opponents left to fight, liberalism stopped having to improve upon itself, and consequently morphed into postliberalism. According to Dugin, postliberalism is defined by "economics in the form of the global capitalist market" and states and nations dissolving into "the melting pot of world globalization." By emphasizing the individual as the fundamental subject of political theory, Dugin says, liberalism has freed people "from all forms of collective identity", and it has replaced traditions, rituals, and the community with postmodernism, inhuman technocracy, and economic exploitation in the name of profit.<sup>14</sup> Dugin's foundational claim, then, is that the world has been

overtaken by the disease of postliberalism and that his Fourth Political Theory is the only possible cure.

Dugin does not provide a positive description of the Fourth Political Theory all at once; instead, he begins by detailing what it is similar to and what it isn't. At its core, the Fourth Political Theory is less of a cohesive theory than a complete inversion of the basic axioms of liberalism. While liberalism's subject is the individual, Dugin says that, under the Fourth Political Theory, "every human identity is acceptable and justified except for that of the individual." While liberalism rejects religion and myth, the return of



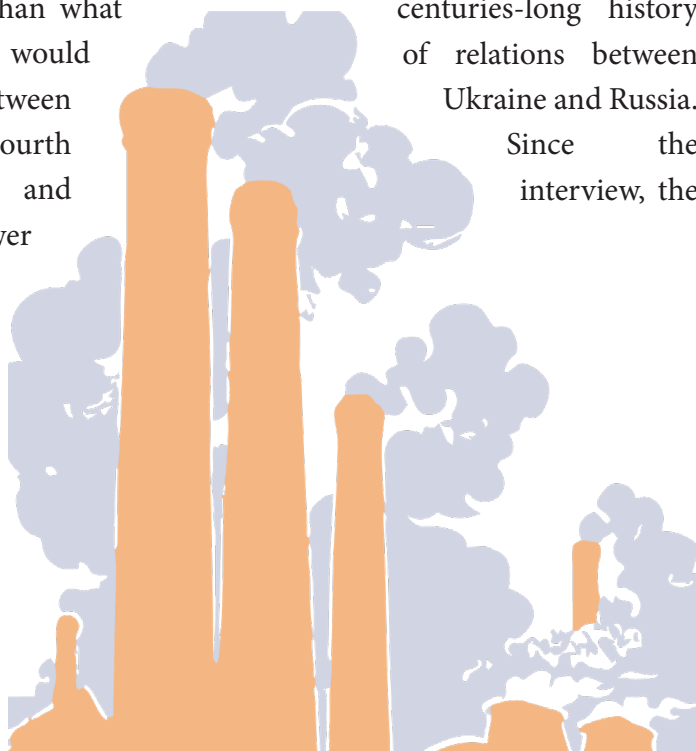
theology “becomes an essential element of the Fourth Political Theory.” While liberalism praises modernity and scientific advancement, according to the Fourth Political Theory, “all that is ancient gains value and credibility for us simply because it is ancient.” While liberalism promotes globalism, which Dugin sees as the racist imposition of American values on the rest of the world, the Fourth Political Theory treats all ethnicities, cultures, nations, and people as fundamentally equal and inviolable.<sup>15</sup> In essence, the Fourth Political Theory sanctifies everything liberalism dismisses and dismisses everything liberalism holds sacred.

At first, it may be difficult to see any relationship between the Fourth Political Theory and Putin’s “special military operation” in Ukraine. However, the ties become abundantly clear once Dugin begins to describe how the Fourth Political Theory applies to Russian foreign policy, and specifically its view on the U.S., Europe, and NATO. According to Dugin, the U.S. represents the epitome of liberalism because it has fully accepted it as its governing ideology and implemented it into its political actions. Worst of all, Dugin says, the U.S. does not only practice liberalism within its own borders; since modernization and progress are central to liberalism, the U.S.

sees the subjugation and erasure of other nations and cultures as imperative to its cause. This mentality is in direct opposition to the Fourth Political Theory’s facet of complete cultural relativism, and is especially dangerous to countries such as Russia, which, if taken over by the West, risk losing their unique identities and traditions. According to Dugin, U.S. hegemony is not the only possible future; however, the alternatives, of which Dugin names an Islamic World State, South American Socialism, or Eurasianism, lack “vision and ideology”, as well as “sufficient infrastructure and resources to put their ideas into practice.” Dugin says that successfully rejecting American supremacy and safeguarding existing nations and identities would require something more than what currently exists; it would require union between ideology (i.e., the Fourth Political Theory) and political power (i.e., Russia). Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, then, can be understood as a first step in the implementation of the Fourth Political Theory. If looked at through the

lens of the Fourth Political Theory, Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine, rather than being what looks like a mystifying instance of greed and a product of dubious geostrategy, becomes something else entirely.

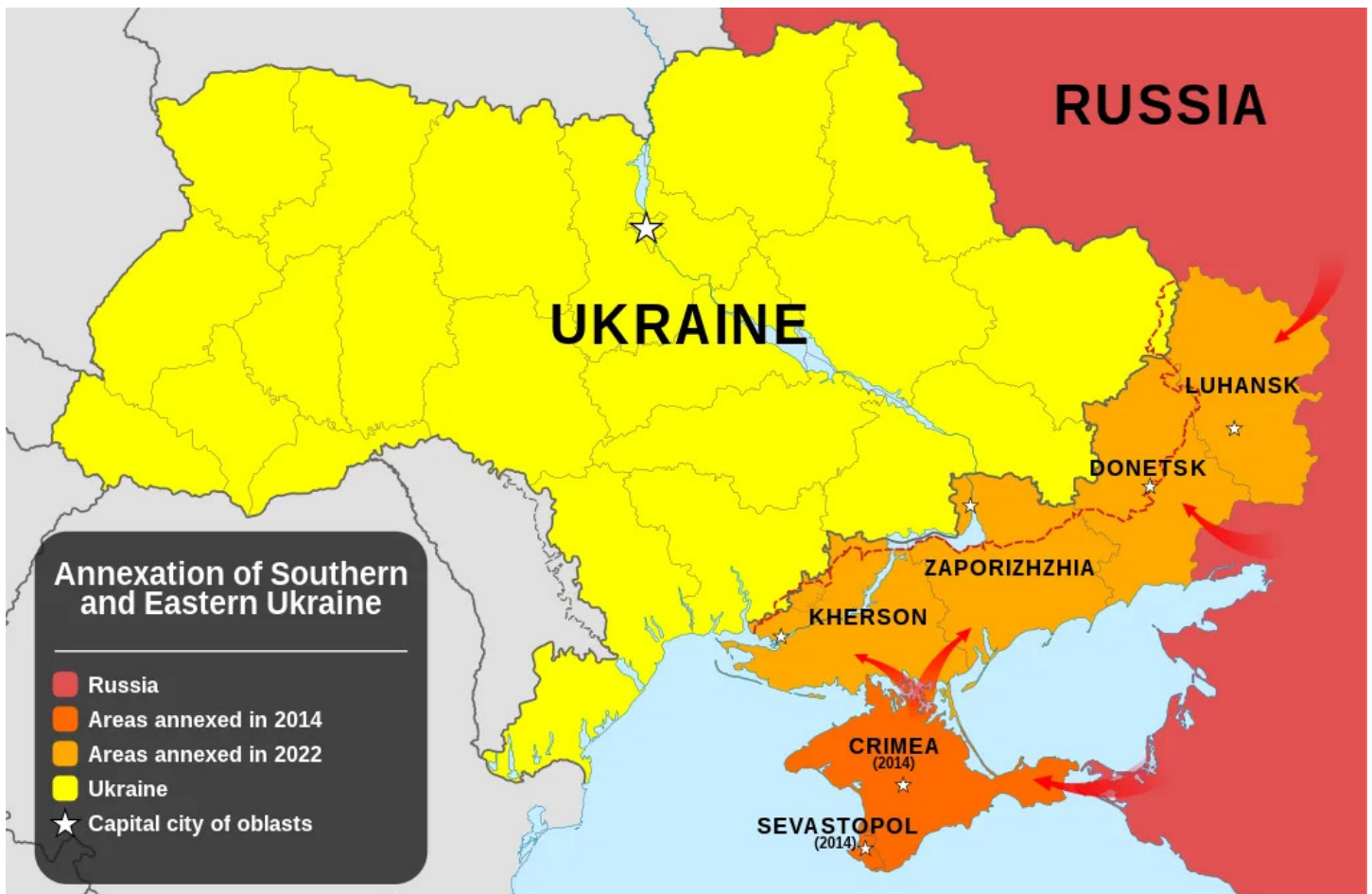
Examining Putin’s attempts to justify the war sheds more light on how Putin uses elements of the Fourth Political Theory to explain his actions. In February of 2024, American conservative commentator Tucker Carlson released a two-hour interview with Putin, filmed in Moscow. At the beginning of the interview, Carlson asked Putin why he thought that the U.S., through NATO, might initiate a surprise attack on Russia if Ukraine were to join NATO. Instead of directly answering the question, Putin went on a thirty-minute monologue on the centuries-long history of relations between Ukraine and Russia. Since the interview, the



the monologue became infamous for its historical inaccuracies and rambling nature. Yet, it reveals an important fact about how Putin uses history to justify his actions. According to Putin, Ukraine is not, and never has been, a distinct entity from Russia. Putin sees his invasion not as an act of imperialist conquest, but as a justified instance of reunification between Russia and its proper subsidiary. It should not be surprising that Dugin has been calling for Russia to invade Ukraine for decades, and for the same reasons that Putin provides. A key element of the Fourth Political Theory is the restoration of traditional groups, which encompasses communities such as tribes, villages, states, and even empires. Ukraine, according to the Fourth Political Theory, is inseparable from its root Russian identity, and an annexation of it would simply be an act of reconstruction, not an act of expansion. This viewpoint also explains why Putin has not given up or backtracked

on his original goal of conquering the entirety of Ukraine; the war in Ukraine, for Putin, is not about conquest, but rather performing an act of historical destiny.

Putin's often-quoted defense of his "special military operation" is that his goal is to "demilitarize and denazify" Ukraine. While there are undoubtedly small factions of neo-Nazis in Ukraine, Putin's claim is farcical, especially given that the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is Jewish. However, in the context of Russian history and the Fourth Political Theory, Putin's reasons for openly making such a statement become far clearer. In World War II, the Soviet Union fought against its Western enemies, Nazi Germany. Putin often uses the memory of WWII battles and heroes to inspire positive attitudes towards the war in Ukraine, and to Russia's fight against its contemporary Western enemies, the U.S. and NATO. While there is no immediately obvious parallel between the U.S.



or NATO and Nazi Germany (in fact, the U.S. fought alongside Russia against the Nazis in WWII), the Fourth Political Theory again offers guidance. Dugin

d e f i n e s racism as viewing any individual or culture as superior to any other, and he makes it abundantly clear that the Fourth Political Theory rejects all forms of racism.

These various forms, Dugin says, can include both crude biological racism, as in the case of Nazi Germany, or an ideology of cultural and moral superiority, as in the case of the modern-day U.S. and NATO. Through the perspective of the Fourth Political Theory, there is no fundamental difference between American racism and Nazism; thus, by collapsing American liberalism and Nazism into a single category of ‘Western racism,’ Putin recasts Russia as a defender of the oppressed rather than an imperialist regime.

Importantly, Dugin does not limit his criticism of Western liberalism to just an accusation of racism. According to Dugin, every component of liberalism—its focus on individualism, capitalism, modernization, and scientific progress—is rotten and contradictory to what comprises Russian identity. If understood through the Fourth Political Theory, Putin’s war in Ukraine takes on a much more menacing shape than simply a conflict between a large nation that thinks it is entitled to the lands of a smaller one. Instead, the war represents

a colossal feud between the West as an enemy and a ‘messianic’ Russia. To Putin and Dugin, the war in Ukraine is not just a war of soldiers, armies, nations, and

geopolitical strategies; it is a war fought in defense of the ideas that, in this framework, preserve Russian identity and statehood. Given Russia’s role as a major player in global

politics, it is crucial that Western scholars and analysts accurately understand how Putin uses Dugin’s philosophy to understand the war in Ukraine, for the safety of Ukraine, Europe, and the world.



# Pecan Dissonance: A Clash Between Identity and Historic Reality

Madeline Leonard

There are few foods more tied to the American identity, in particular the southern identity, than the pecan. Featured in pecan pies and Thanksgiving sweet potato casseroles, this small nut has long been considered an iconic staple of the South. However, despite its current heavily southern identity, the iconic pecan did not originate in the southeastern region of the United States, but instead came from along the Mississippi River as far north as Illinois and to the west of the river as far south as Northern Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Although pecans have become a cherished symbol of southern hospitality and American heritage, a tracing of their rise from an Indigenous food source to an aristocratic snack to a mass-produced commodity reveals a persistent dissonance between modern cultural associations surrounding the pecan, which claim a humble and homey background, and its true historical and present reality.

The modern southern cultural identity of the pecan was constructed on selective memory, obscuring its Indigenous

origins and relatively recent entry into southern foodways. Native communities used pecans for food, ritual drinks, and medicine, yet white Southerners later recast the nut as naturally theirs, erasing its true origins both geographically and culturally. Though native to the North American continent, the pecan was not always grown in the southeast, where it is now most popular. Instead of being a native of Georgia or South Carolina, the pecan actually hails from along the Mississippi River and the Gulf Coast region, with particularly high concentrations in modern-day Texas and Louisiana.<sup>2</sup> There, the indigenous tribes named it the “pakan,” which roughly translates to “hard-shelled nut,” referring to the fact that stones were often

necessary to crack them open.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, pecans became popular for consumption in their naturally occurring region due to the fact that pecan trees are highly productive and do not require replanting each season. Pecans themselves are “fat-rich” and “highly nutritious,”<sup>4</sup> need “little processing to be suitable for human consumption,”<sup>5</sup> and store well for long periods without the implementation of any preservation techniques.<sup>6</sup>

However, the pecan played a role beyond mere sustenance in native communities. For instance, tribes located in the Mississippi River Valley region often incorporated powhiccora, a fermented drink milky in substance and made from pecans and other hickory nuts, into



their celebrations and ceremonies, believing that it would “enhance a warrior’s bravery in battle.”<sup>7</sup> Other tribes, such as the Comanche, who lived in present-day northern Texas, are known to have ground “pecan leaves and used them as a poultice for treating ringworm.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the Kiowa used the tree bark as a treatment for those with tuberculosis.

And yet, the value of the pecan extended beyond practical purposes. Within the Caddo tribe, a mythological story has been passed down through the generations about the origins of the pecan. As the legend goes, an old woman described as being the “mother to all the pecan trees” jealously guarded her trees by preventing anyone from taking nuts home to plant their own trees elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Though she would allow the local villagers into her house to eat the nuts, she prohibited them from taking any pecans home for themselves. This stipulation frustrated the people of the village, who desired to have their own pecans to use as they wished. Finally, a stranger named Coyote decided to put an end to the issue and murdered the old woman so that the whole village could have access to her trees. Despite the story’s gruesome end, the presence of such tales demonstrates the cultural weight of and fondness towards pecans and their trees in native communities.

The pecan’s reputation began to take a turn in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as agrarian elites began to intentionally plant pecan trees, transforming this native staple into a symbol

of southern gentility, thereby creating a reputation of aristocracy surrounding the nut that became difficult to shake off. Unlike the Native Americans, who used pecans and their trees in a variety of ways but did not intentionally plant or cultivate them, white agrarian elites on the East Coast actively planted and cultivated

the nut, but for a smaller number of uses. Notably, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were among the first documented planters to arrange for the planting of pecan trees on their estates, outside of the pecan’s native range.<sup>10</sup> By 1775, the trees had been

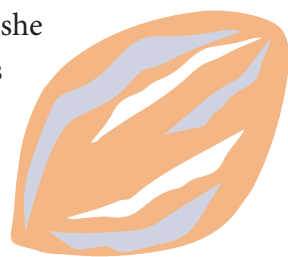
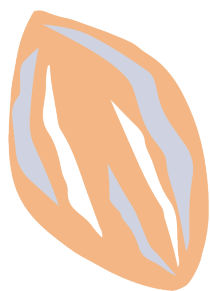
planted at Washington’s Mount Vernon estate, and Thomas Jefferson “made arrangements to have pecan nuts planted at Monticello” upon his 1790 return from France, continuing to grow his pecan grove by some 100 to 200 trees every few years.<sup>11</sup>

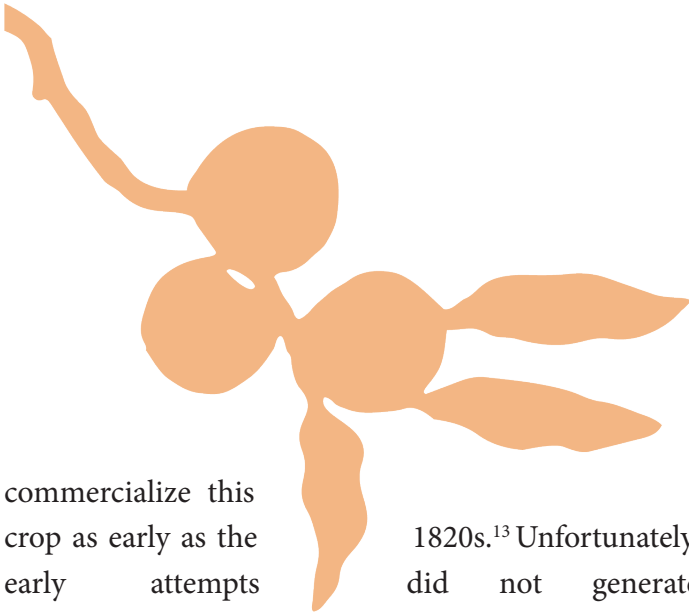
These men used the pecan trees exclusively as upper-class decorations and delicacies. They were often installed in plantations as beautiful shade trees or, in Washington’s case, as a ready source of

nuts for the General to snack on during the Revolutionary War. Nevertheless, the rarity of the pecan tree along the East Coast made the availability of pecans for snacking nearly exclusive to the planter aristocracy.

Those who could afford it might purchase the nuts during the holiday season or other special occasions, but their costliness prevented them from becoming a household staple and instead earned them the reputation of being “the aristocrat among nuts.”<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the pecan’s rising popularity motivated planters to attempt to





commercialize this crop as early as the early attempts much success. The nature of pecan trees were followed by one to two years with very little yield, creating unstable output.<sup>14</sup> Another issue was the use of pecan trees for timber. By the 1820s, America's frontier had pushed into the pecan's naturally occurring region, but this influx of new settlers increased demand for timber, leading early Americans to frequently cut down the trees for the purpose of building new structures rather than attempting to generate revenue through pecan commerce.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, it was not until "the late 1800s that people in the pecan's native range realized the pecan's potential worth for income and trade," following innovations in transportation and in pecan farming techniques by enslaved laborers.<sup>16</sup>

Due to alternate bearing and the fact that trees do not produce nuts during the first several years after planting, there was originally much uncertainty in the pecan farming process, as farmers had to wait to discover the quality of their grove.<sup>17</sup> As a result, they sought to employ grafting, a technique wherein the branches of one or more trees of a different type are joined to the trunk of the desired tree in order to change the genetics of that tree, so that certain undesirable genes could be eliminated and other desirable ones added.<sup>18</sup> The first attempt at grafting pecan trees for the purpose

of increasing the quantity and speed of production occurred in 1822 by "an amateur potter" from Edgefield County, South Carolina, but these early attempts were largely unsuccessful.<sup>19</sup> Instead, it was Antoine, an enslaved worker on Oak Alley Plantation in Louisiana, who made the first notable breakthrough in grafting. Under directions by plantation owner J. T. Roman and his neighbor, who had been the one to donate the pecan tree cuttings for the undertaking, Antoine successfully created "the country's first commercially viable pecan" variety in the 1840s.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, Antoine's experimentation, combined with the inventions of the railroad and the steamboat, which made transportation of goods swifter and more far-reaching than ever before, turned pecan farming into a viable option as a profession or side business. As a result, the pecan industry was officially established in the South.

It is difficult to track the size and importance of the pecan industry during its fledgling years due to lack of documentation, but it is clear that though "cultivated orchards in the South were still rare into the 1900s,"<sup>22</sup> statistics recording the number of bushels of pecans imported to the North reveal both high prices and high demand in wholesale and retail as early as the 1890s.<sup>23</sup> Public discourse on how to plant and raise pecan trees also began to spread. In 1902, an article was published in the *Southern Cultivator*, a bimonthly agrarian publication, responding to the ideas of a new pecan farmer on how best to plant and care for the trees.<sup>24</sup> The article's author, a Georgian man by the name of S. W. Peek, had become interested in cultivating pecans years prior, during the time when they grew naturally only in Louisiana and Texas. By the time of the article's publication, pecan farming had been quickly embraced by farmers throughout the state, despite being relatively novel. Discourse on farming techniques increased, with some farmers suggesting that pecan trees ought to be incorporated into existing peach groves, while others debated the optimal planting distance between trees. This lack of a common understanding of farming

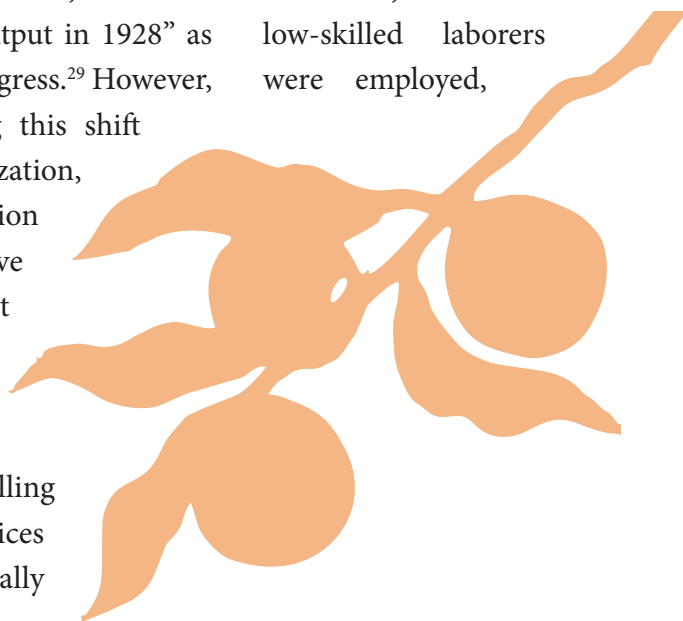
techniques reveals the newness of pecan cultivation in southeastern states, like Georgia, in the early 1900s. Nonetheless, having seen the pecan industry's growth, Peek remarks that within twenty years, "pecan culture in Georgia and all over the South and West will become one of the most profitable industries."<sup>25</sup>

Peek's predictions turned out to be true; pecans soon gained prominence in southern cuisine. Regrettably, though, this development came with the side effect of unfair working conditions and labor conflicts within the industry. Just as general American industrialization in the preceding decades had led to the emergence of large-scale exploitative labor practices, so too was mounting industrialization in the pecan industry closely followed by a greedy pursuit of profits at the expense of laborers. The result was unfair wages and poor working conditions. In response, many workers united in protests such as the famous 1938 pecan shellers' strike, revealing a violent gap between the modern, nostalgic imagery of pecans and the brutal conditions that contributed to the industry's growth. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Texas and the broader South had become centers of pecan production, relying heavily on the labor of Mexican-Americans

and Mexican nationals, especially women, in order to shell the pecans before bringing them to market.<sup>26</sup>

By the 1880s, the industry had developed to include pecan shellers in addition to growers, and San Antonio's prime location near many of Texas's pecan groves, which produced roughly forty percent of the nation's pecans,<sup>27</sup> contributed to its rise as a hub for shelling companies.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, its relative closeness to Mexico meant that the steady stream of migrant workers looking for employment provided plentiful, cheap labor to take on the hard and tedious task of shelling. It is perhaps because of this phenomenon that the unlikely occurrence of switching from hand labor to mechanization was then undone in the 1930s, after improved technology had allowed companies in the San Antonio area to mechanize their operations during the 1920s. The Duerler Company, for instance, "achieved the peak of its output in 1928" as a result of this progress.<sup>29</sup> However, directly following this shift towards mechanization, the Great Depression caused massive unemployment and left the majority of consumers unable or unwilling to pay high prices for goods, especially

non-essential goods. Consequently, Julius Seligmann and Joe Freeman, owners of the San Antonio-based Southern Pecan Shelling Company, began to look for ways to cheapen the processing of pecans for market sale.<sup>30</sup> With many families desperate for any income at all, industry leaders like Seligmann and Freeman realized that they could pay "large numbers of low-skilled workers" at a lower rate than the cost of upkeep of the shelling machines.<sup>31</sup> In turn, the Southern Pecan Shelling Company moved away from mechanization and towards the employment of those willing to work for mere pennies,<sup>32</sup> gaining an enormous advantage over competitors who continued to depend on the machines. As a result of this switch, its factories soon began processing between 25 and 30 percent of Texas' pecans, shelling 15 million pounds per year.<sup>33</sup> In order to keep up with the work, thousands of low-skilled laborers were employed,



approximately 12,000 of whom were Mexican nationals or Mexican-Americans contracted seasonally from November to March, with over 90 percent of this number being women.

These employees worked in sweatshop conditions with “poor ventilation and lighting,” no “inside flush toilets” or running water, and were sometimes not even paid in legal tender for their labor, instead receiving “meager allotments of coffee, flour, rice, or beans for their week’s work, drawn from the company commissary.”<sup>34</sup> When they were paid in wages, it was a mere two dollars per week, some of the lowest compensation rates in the nation. This situation was only made worse with the onset of the Great Depression, which caused wages to drop even further to a meager 16 cents per week. This led to the first strike in 1934, but issues remained unresolved, and working conditions worsened as a recession in 1937 caused

further wage reductions and the elimination of the vast majority of Texan residents from state relief rolls.<sup>35</sup>

In response, somewhere between 6,000 and 12,000 workers<sup>36</sup> “walked out” of the Southern Pecan Shelling Company, and others, on Monday, January 31, 1938, “in a spontaneous protest against a 15 percent pay cut” and “bad working conditions.”<sup>37</sup> This strike became known as the Pecan Shellers Strike and lasted for 37 days with over 1,000 picketers,<sup>38</sup> grabbing the attention of Texans statewide, with smaller strikes and negotiations continuing on for another two months thereafter.<sup>39</sup> Mexican-American civil rights activist and member of the Workers Alliance of America, Emma Tenayuca,<sup>40</sup> quickly stepped into a leadership role within the strike. Capitalizing on the energy of the spontaneous walkout, she convinced additional workers to join the strike so that, ultimately, “with over 10,000 participants,” it became the “largest labor strike in San Antonio history



and the most massive community-based strike waged by the nation's Mexican Americans in the 1930s."<sup>41</sup>

Thirty-seven days after the initial walkout, the strike officially came to an end as both sides agreed to arbitration, and the "three-person board ruled in favor of the strikers, ordering higher wages and officially acknowledging the International Pecan Shellers Union No. 172," a recently established union for pecan shellers in the area.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, workers gained a grievance committee,<sup>43</sup> and the influence of the strike worked as one of many push factors in passing the Fair Labor Relations Act on October 24, 1938, which established the first federal minimum wage at 25 cents per hour.<sup>44</sup> The unintended result of these reforms was a return to mechanization, as hand-shelling was no longer the cheaper alternative. Subsequently, roughly 7,000 to 10,000 workers were laid off, a reality made even worse by the fact that their previous low wages did not amount to the level required by law to qualify these workers to receive benefits under the Texas Unemployment Compensation Act, which would have helped assuage their sudden lack of income.<sup>45</sup>

Another result of this sudden drop in employment in pecan shelling was the disbandment of Pecan Shelling Workers

Union No. 172. Not only did the dissolution of the union lead to decreased advocacy for workers, but it also emboldened other smaller companies to push back against the Fair Labor Relations Act by refusing to comply with its stipulations, leading to more picketing and a series of smaller walkouts over the next several years. On the whole, however, labor struggles in the pecan industry greatly diminished with time, and as these moments of conflict slowly disappeared from public memory, the old, aristocratic view of pecans began to emerge once again despite a return to mechanization in the industry.

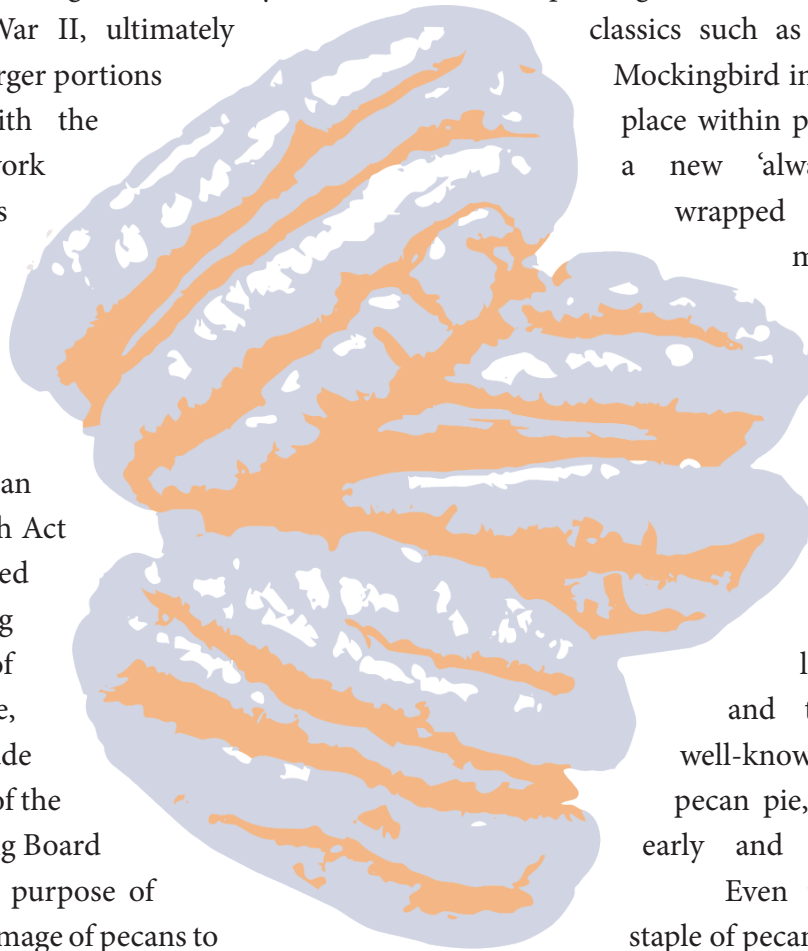
By the mid-twentieth century, pecans had become a widely mass-produced commodity. And yet, it was during this time, rather than at the nation's founding or during industrialization, that the pecan was shaped into a cultural symbol of southern hospitality, obscuring its native origins and past labor disputes within the industry. Production levels of pecans grew steadily around the middle of the twentieth century, and large organizations began to take note of this growth. For example, a 1942 *New York Times* article felt it worth mentioning to its readers that there had been a bumper crop that year, while the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported in 1947 that

pecan growers had produced 13,000 more tons of pecans that year than in 1946.<sup>46</sup> The regions in which pecans were grown were also shifting. In Georgia, where pecan groves were a rarity at the turn of the century, farmers were now, in the 1940s, producing up to 42 million pounds of pecans within a single year.<sup>47</sup> Over the next couple of years, production continually rose with alacrity, but with very little increased demand to match, the federal government decided to involve itself in the promotion of pecans.

One avenue of advocacy was through the distribution of promotional materials. Having taken note of the burgeoning pecan industry in the 1930s, in 1938, the USDA distributed a publication on how to use pecans in an attempt to increase their usage.<sup>48</sup> However, advertising efforts such as this reveal that even as recently as the 1930s, pecans had yet to become a commonly used commodity in southern households. Their old reputation hung on too strongly—the average homemaker did not think to include the nut in everyday cooking because it was seen as something reserved for the upper-class or special occasions, while manufacturers unthinkingly dismissed the pecan's "potential as an industrial food product" for the same reasons.<sup>49</sup> The government's next attempt involved turning the

nut into something common and beloved by all in order to increase demand levels among household and industrial buyers alike.

In addition to pamphlets and other promotional publications, a price ceiling was implemented to encourage consumption, but consumers were still not biting.<sup>50</sup> Instead, the government “ended up buying the surplus pecans and integrating them into the National School Lunch Program” in the years directly after World War II, ultimately helping to familiarize larger portions of the population with the nut, beginning the work on re-shaping its image.<sup>51</sup> Government promotion continued throughout the twentieth century, as seen by the introduction of the Pecan Promotion and Research Act of 1989, which was passed with overwhelming support as a part of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990. As a result of the Act, the Pecan Marketing Board was established for the purpose of presenting “a favorable image of pecans to the public with the express intent of improving [their] competitive position in the marketplace and stimulating sales” through avenues such as “paid advertising.”<sup>52</sup> A continued interest in promotion is demonstrated by the USDA’s creation of the American Pecan Promotion Board (APPB) in 2021 under the Agricultural Marketing Service’s Pecan Research, Promotion and Information Order.<sup>53</sup> Distinguishing itself from the earlier Pecan Marketing Board, the APPB provides recipes for consumers in addition to



resources for professionals and industry insights.<sup>54</sup>

These efforts successfully changed the pecan’s reputation, but not without the help of the private sector. Through literature, cookbooks, and advertising, the pecan gradually acquired a homey image of southern heritage and family ties. These cultural portrayals, rather than historical or economic realities, shaped how Americans now perceive the nut. Passages dedicated to pecan groves, nuts, and deserts in American classics such as Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* ingrained and solidified its place within popular culture, inventing a new ‘always southern’ identity wrapped in pleasant nostalgia, masking the pecan’s more western Mississippi River origins and associations with native cultures.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to the newly invented identity surrounding pecans, popular literature about them and the nut’s inclusion in well-known holiday deserts, like pecan pie, did not occur until the early and mid-twentieth century. Even the well-known holiday staple of pecan pie did not take off until well into the twentieth century.<sup>56</sup> Though a few older pecan-centric deserts existed prior to the takeoff of the modern pie, such as an 1885 recipe for pecan cake<sup>57</sup> or a 1914 recipe for the original version of pecan pie, which included custard in place of the modern molasses-like syrup,<sup>58</sup> such recipes were hard to come by and not frequently made. Nevertheless, their inclusion into cookbooks at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century provided the middle class with the sense that pecans were an

homes across America. The success of the pecan pie thus carved out a place for pecans in the agricultural market and paved the way for later best-sellers such as butter-pecan ice cream and pecan turtles.<sup>60</sup>

Today, in spite of the fact that over 270 million pounds of pecans<sup>61</sup> are produced each year in highly mechanized orchards and shelling plants, producers and sellers continue to market pecans as nostalgic, communal, and family-centric, especially around Thanksgiving and Christmas. Moreover, a small but growing demand for pecans in nations outside of the United States and Mexico, and the pecan's unique place as "one of the few indigenous U.S. food crops that is commercially cultivated outside the U.S." in countries such as Brazil and Argentina, demonstrates the growth of the pecan's cultural and economic power.<sup>62</sup> Still, pecans are marketed as products of family businesses owned by hardworking Americans,<sup>63</sup> reinforcing the narrative that the pecan is a nut for the average American, rather than for the Native American or the planter aristocrat.

This contrast between reality and constructed image demonstrates how the pecan's southern homeyness is not natural and was not inevitable, but instead was actively built and continues to be intentionally preserved. Even as the industry has become increasingly mechanized, mass-produced, and corporate, with the value of pecans produced in 2023 standing at \$460 million, modern branding continues

to rely on a recently fabricated nostalgia. Pecans now grow throughout the southeast, far beyond their native range, and yet their sheer abundance makes them appear seamlessly natural within the landscape so that it feels only right to imagine that pecans and their trees have always been there.<sup>65</sup> That calm sense of natural belonging masks a past that was shaped by indigenous tribes, settlers, planter elites, underpaid workers, government campaigns, culinary literature, and commercial advertising, creating a hidden yet ever-present dissonance.



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