

Half a Beast, But Still a God: The Duality of Pan in Victorian Poetry

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Abstract: This paper explores the multifaceted representation of the god Pan in Victorian poetry, examining shifts in his portrayal from the Romantic era to the end of the 19th century. Through a survey of key poems from E.B. Browning, Mackay, Wilde, and Swinburne, this study investigates the ongoing portrayal of Pan throughout the era. The analysis reveals conflicting perspectives, especially in contrast to original myths and poems that have been translated in this era. The study concludes that Pan's duality mirrors the internal struggle of Victorian poets to establish a cohesive identity in an era marked by industrialization, societal change, and a distancing post-Romantic relationship with nature.

"What was he doing, the great god Pan?" ("Instrument" 1). Despite appearing in dozens of published Victorian poems and being just as prominent in the preceding Romantic era, 19th-century poets cannot settle on an answer to the question Elizabeth Barrett Browning poses in the opening lines of "A Musical Instrument." In Romantic poetry, Pan is frequently mentioned but is abstract or ethereal—more of a concept than a figure—whereas in Victorian poetry he is typically a tangible entity who interacts with the world of the poem. Yet in Victorian poetry as a whole, he is still abstract: he is both feared and revered, destructive and creative, man and beast. Pan is defined by both what he is and is not in every iteration, making his most prominent feature his own duality. Pan's oft-referenced half-man, half-beast appearance lends itself to dualistic representations in which Pan represents a bridge between humanity and the natural world that the Romantics desperately clung to during industrialization. But the goat god's purpose shifts

following the Romantics, becoming increasingly inconsistent over the subsequent decades, even in individual poets' bodies of work. Browning, for example, writes of Pan explicitly in several poems that each present an account of Pan that are contradictory to each other. To Browning and the rest of the Victorian poets this paper will explore, Pan's duality is divisive. To some, he is frightful and confusing, incongruous with both himself and Victorian society. To others, he is comforting, a symbol of past times in which nature and society were not competing. While Pan's intangibility in the Victorian era may seem problematic or incohesive after his clear purpose to the Romantics, I argue that this ephemerality represents the Victorian poet's struggle for identity in the age of prose.

Considering Pan in the context of his origins in Greek myth is helpful for examining his representation in the Victorian era to examine both how he has changed and what he means to Victorians. Pan was merely a shepherd and guardian of goats until circa 500 BC when his cult reached Athens and exalted him to Panhellenic status (Larson 63). Despite his late addition to the pantheon, Pan is still revered in ancient poetry. Thallus writes of Pan's sacred fountain, whose water passers-by will "find it med'cine- if thy throat be dry" (Thallus 6). To Quintus Maecius, Pan is a reliable guardian of the vineyard; he benevolently shares fruits with hungry wayfarers, but is violently protective against thieves, threatening to rain his club "[d]own on thy skull [...] with might and main" (Quintus Maecius 7). Apollinidas admits to Pan being "rude-imag'd," yet still "[d]eems homely wines, in homely cups, good cheer" (Apollinidas 5-6). Both statements are in first-person from Pan's perspective, presenting a version of Pan that is well aware of his off-putting beastliness and trying to make up for it. Homer, in a longer hymn, talks of the god's birth and describes him as "the merriest imp" to his father Hermes, and anoints him as "the dispenser of mirth" (Homer 68; 80). It's worth pointing out that all of these poems were first translated into English in Victorian periodicals and are generally positive, presenting Pan as a merry nature spirit, protective of his domain. But,

as Larson points out, the Greeks don't have the same views of the natural world across all of time—one dominant and recurring theme being "a Hobbesian struggle between hostile natural forces and fearful humans. The natural world is inhuman and therefore without pity or compassion" (57). That said, Pan's introduction to the Panhellenic canon humanizes the natural world. But where the Greek poets saw half a man, a bridge between nature and humankind, centuries later Browning would see half a beast.

As one of the century's most prolific poets, Browning's "A Musical Instrument" is a well-known Pan poem, making its construction of Pan perhaps the most representative of the Victorians. The narrative poem opens with the inquiry, "[w]hat was he doing, the great god Pan?" ("Instrument" I.1). The poem's immediate answer to the question is that Pan is "spreading ruin and scattering ban," destroying flowers, and carving a flute out of a reed (I.2). But the narrative shifts when Pan plays his flute: the sun "forgot to die" (VI.4), and the flora and fauna return to life. But it is not all beauty as the "true gods sigh for the cost and pain" (VII.4) of the reed. The dismay of the true gods over the reed is not simply for nature's sake, but an allusion to the myth of Syrinx, the nymph that Pan attempted to rape, who fled into the river and was turned into reeds to escape. Pan's destruction of the reed is not just a bastardization of nature for entertainment but also what Browning scholar Dorothy Mermin calls "a deliberate articulation of sexual assault" (289). That connotation cannot be overlooked, but scholar Corinne Davies' reading of the poem presents a narrower conflict of whether or not Pan is immoral for his destruction if it is done for the sake of creation. Davies points out that Browning's account of the myth is about the "cost and pain involved in the sexual pursuit and the creative process," acknowledging as well that "the pursuit of artistic beauty and/or truth [...] calls for a double-perspective" (565). Browning explicitly alludes to that double-perspective, labelling Pan as "half a beast" ("Instrument" VII.I)—interestingly, not half a man or half a god, or even half a goat, suggesting that the poem deliberately draws attention to Pan's feral nature, supported

by the dismay of the true gods. That only begs the question, though, of who the "true gods" are. For that, we look further back in Browning's oeuvre.

Published 16 years earlier in 1844, "The Dead Pan" is another mythical interpretation, this time about the alleged death of Pan. While in "A Musical Instrument" Browning frequently refrains "the great god Pan," here every stanza ends with a variation of the line "Pan, Pan is dead," establishing a markedly different tone. The poem is an address to the "Gods of Hellas" ("The Dead Pan" l.1), who are silently hiding from sight of the speaker. One possible reading of "A Musical Instrument" suggests that the "true gods" are the rest of the Panhellenic pantheon, but "The Dead Pan" contradicts that notion—slowly, the poem reveals that *all* of the Panhellenic gods are fallen. "The Dead Pan" disguises itself as an elegy until its second half unfolds a Christian proclamation of victory: "O ye vain false gods of Hellas, / Ye are silent evermore!" (XXXI.1–2). The poem seems to even gloat at times with declarations that "we will weep not" (XXXIII.5) and "God himself is the best Poet, / And the Real is his song" (XXXVI.3–4). "The Dead Pan" preemptively answers an indirect question from "A Musical Instrument" as to who the true gods are—God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit—and also establishes a key perception of Pan to the Victorians (though not a universal one). Browning's treatment of Pan is contrary to the Victorian tendency to deploy Pan as a symbol of innocence and purity of nature in particular, which leads to the typical Victorian poem "lament[ing] the loss of an intuitive spirit in the Victorian technological world" (Morlier 133) frequently represented by Pan. That means that to most poets, Pan represents something that seems lost and unrecoverable, and is therefore mourned—but here, Browning celebrates his death.

The complication stems from the fact that on one hand, Pan is a nature spirit representing a pure and innocent world, but on the other hand, Pan's theriomorphism signifies chaos and hedonism that butts heads with the Victorians' dominant values of purity, reticence, and tradition, which are influenced by the dominant Christian theology.

The original myth of Pan's death that Browning recounts stems from Plutarch, in which Pan's death is not detailed, but the sailor Thamus is informed by a divine voice that Pan has died. The lack of a cause of death is evocative and, like many poems alluding to the god, the myth "presents itself as an enigma the key to which has been lost" (Borgeaud 256). However, the timeline of the myth aligns with that of Christ's time on Earth, leading to an interplay between the Plutarchan myth and Christian theology. Examining the myth, Philippe Borgeaud presents two historically dominant interpretations of the account. First, Pan's name is nearly identical to the Greek word for "all," and so Christ, living among humans, drove all demons from the world, as represented by the death of Pan. The second is quite the opposite—that the "all" referred to is the death of Christ himself, and that Pan falls at the same time he is crucified. Browning's work unequivocally leans on the first, but this mythical account presents the historically-rooted alternative that Pan is somehow simultaneously a symbol of both Satan and Christ, and that his dualism is not necessarily new to the Victorians, but an essential aspect.

Charles Mackay's "The Death of Pan," published in 1845, presents another account of the tale that's more interpretively complex. "The Death of Pan" is an elegiac dramatic lyric, featuring a first-person narrator imploring the addressee to "[b]ehold the vision of the death of Pan" (Mackay 1). Unlike Browning's account, or even Plutarch's, Mackay recounts Pan's last words: a request for the world to mourn him as he falls (8). The nymphs, dryads, and Oreads die with Pan as well, and the poem seems to mourn the nature spirits: "Never more [...] Shall we make music all the summer's day" (28-30) they cry. The speaker then recounts how the forces of Heaven descend to announce Pan's death, but is careful to not praise them, or even to speak for them. The Christian rhetoric espoused in this poem is planted in dialogue in the final lines, and the speaker's own thoughts on their announcements go unspoken. Upon first glance, Mackay presents a similar view of Pan's death to Browning, but close reading makes the speaker's true feelings unclear—

and in fact, the first line commands the reader to "behold the vision" (1) which begs the question of who the speaker even is and where the vision hails from. Mackay's careful and elusive presentation of Pan's death and the Christian involvement might be a statement against Christianity and Browning's previous account. Margot K. Louis explains that in the divisive Victorian era, "denigrating the Greek gods became a way to attack the Christian cult of transcendence and immortality, the focus on life after death" (350). Mackay does not denigrate the gods himself but instead recounts the angels doing so, making such a connection even more explicit: "Great Pan has fallen," they exclaim, "and never more his creed / Shall chain the free intelligence of man" (Mackay 68–69). While Browning presents an effusive expression of Christian dominance over the pagan gods, Mackay offers more nuance and more space for the reader to make their own interpretations, but it's clear that Pan is *not* a force of evil in Mackay's work, in contrast to Browning's.

While earlier Victorian poems present Pan as evil or morally ambiguous at best, towards the end of the century, two more key poems emerge that revere Pan as a lost figure. Oscar Wilde's "Pan" (1881) is an elegy addressed to its eponym who returns to his Romantic function with an underlying post-Victorian context. The speaker laments to the god about how "[t]his modern world is gray and old" and refrains that it "hath need of thee" (Wilde 2). Wilde rails against industrialism and the subsequent loss of nature and art towards the end of the century, suggesting that what Pan represents is the solution. With Wilde's affectionate elegy, a theory emerges as to the types of poets that praise Pan: more conservative poets like Browning see Pan as a hedonistic or even demonic patron, but socially deviant poets like Wilde speak of Pan as a lost virtue, a symbol of resistance to modernity, and a symbol of freedom from oppressive culture.

The goat god's absence is palpable even 12 years later in Algernon Charles Swinburne's "The Palace of Pan" (1893). Swinburne details Pan's palace in the woods, with almost pastoral descriptions that harken back to the Ro-

mantics. The scene is alive as the "sun-coloured lands / Smile warm as the light on them smiles" (Swinburne 6–7), personifying the sun as Browning did in "Instrument." But the scene darkens both literally and figuratively as the speaker approaches the palace: "Dim centuries with darkling inscrutable hands / Have reared and secluded [Pan's] shrine" (31–32). Even Pan's palace is overtaken by time here, and the god is forgotten to all but Swinburne's speaker who, notably, refers to the palace as housing "the *slumber* of Pan" (45, emphasis mine). The dark poem of mourning that details stumbling on the palace of a dead or slumbering god is still more hopeful than Wilde's "Pan," evidenced primarily by its final stanza:

The spirit made one with the spirit whose breath
Makes noon in the woodland sublime
Abides as entranced in a presence that saith
Things loftier than life and serener in death
Triumphant and silent as time (Swinburne 60–65)

Swinburne, one of the final voices of the era to write on Pan, does not see the goat god as gone and forgotten. Swinburne's take on Pan is distinctly Romantic. William Wordsworth writes of Pan "as though invisibility were his defining feature" (Robichaud 77), never fully present in a physical form but more so as a concept. Samuel Taylor Coleridge also treats Pan as allegory, "blending symbolism and psychology in ways that register the god's associations with lust and darkness" (79). Pan is characteristically disembodied in Romantic poetry, just as he is by Swinburne almost a century later. However, Swinburne's take is subversive of Romantic conventions at the same time, influenced by post-Victorian ideas. Swinburne does not ignore Pan's presence in favour of allegory like the early century poets—instead, Pan's palace and impacts are allegory for the god himself. "The Palace of Pan" is even more elegiac than Wilde's poem and serves as a fascinating finale to Pan's poetic presence up to this point. While his resurgence

in Romantic poetry represented an affection for the natural world, the post-industrial Victorians tried to demonize him. Swinburne acknowledges Pan's absence from the world and the desecration of the god's reputation, but with a hopeful hint that Pan, despite everything, is both triumphant and silent—not rolling in his grave but dancing in it.

This survey of Pan reveals that he is, in fact, a perfect symbol of Victorian poetry's major themes regarding identity, religion, and urbanization. The post-Romantic view did not see consolation in nature the way Wordsworth and Coleridge did, nor was it even confident in itself, as many Victorian poems carry double meanings through their "systematically ambiguous language" (Armstrong 14). To the Greek poets, Pan was a conduit between man and nature. The Romantics stripped Pan of his physicality in order to use him as an allegorical figure, ironically distancing themselves from the domain he represents as they try to connect with it. The Romantics' treatment of Pan allowed the Victorians to reinvent him, however, and as Christianity grew more dominant Pan became villainized, no longer a representation of nature and freedom but a key figure of the demons that Christ banished. It is only appropriate for his etymological sibling, the word "panic"—a feeling of sudden terror, seemingly without cause—that Pan would become a symbol of religious panic himself. But to those less favourable in Victorian society like pagan worshippers and Wilde, Pan is an icon of what was, and could be—half of one world and half of the other, proof that one need not conform. The very dualism that makes him impossible to decipher becomes his most praised trait. While "A Musical Instrument" may be the most famous poem of Pan from the era, the more favourable representations got the last word at the end of the century. Surely, as ideas of deviance slowly shrink and acceptable behaviour expands to include freedoms of sexuality, religion, and more, Pan's positive influence continues to echo through time.

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