

# *On the Death and Rebirth of the Great God Pan*

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Among the most enigmatic and elusive of the ancient Greek divinities was the goat-god Pan. “Of all the gods and demigods of classical antiquity,” writes Oxford classicist John Boardman, “Pan’s image and reputation are the most readily recognized in the modern world” (7). Born of the union of the trickster god Hermes and a wood nymph, Pan was the only divinity who was half-animal and half-divine in form. In contrast, the other mixed-form creatures of Greek mythology, such as centaurs, satyrs, and fauns, were created half-human and half-animal. This unique feature of Pan is an essential key to understanding his nature as a divine image. “The paradox of being half goat and half god,” observes Patricia Merivale, “is at the very core of his nature” (1).

Pan is not only half-animal and half-divine, but also reflects states of consciousness ranging from pastoral peacefulness to full-scale panic. In his most profound form, writes Merivale, Pan represents the vision of a “universal, transcendental Nature in which man ought to acknowledge his membership” (228). At the same time, she notes, this deity has also functioned as the object of mystical visions—both demonic and beatific—drawing on those instinctual forces in the human psyche which both pull us toward and chase out of that primeval world that still holds sway at the edges of civilization.

Pan is described by Yves Bonnefoy as “the preeminent pastoral deity” of the ancient Greeks. He also notes that this divinity was “very much present in the religious life of the Greeks by at least the sixth century” (202). As to Pan’s appearance, Pierre Grimal observes that, while Pan’s torso and arms were humanlike in form, “his body was hairy [ . . . ] and his lower parts were those of a male goat, his feet having cloven hooves and his legs being tough and sinewy” (349). He is typically portrayed as holding the famous reed-pipe instrument named for him, often also bearing a shepherd’s crooked staff and a branch of pine. Further adding to the animal appearance of this deity are the two goat horns which, Bonnefoy notes, “always adorn the god’s head” (202).

Mentioned in neither Homer nor Hesiod, Pan’s role in Greek literature appears to begin with the so-called *Homeric Hymn* addressed to him. This poem describes the story of Pan’s conception and birth and how his father, Hermes, brought the odd-looking infant to Olympus wrapped in the skins of mountain hares. As if in token of the paradoxical quality that would become his hallmark as a god, we learn here that, while his mother ran fleeing from him at birth in horror at his appearance, the gods of Olympus all delighted in his outrageous form and charming laughter. We also learn in the *Homeric Hymn* that Pan’s domain on earth includes the mountains, woodlands and forests, gently-flowing streams, and the open pasture of the countryside. It is as lord of this wild territory, Bonnefoy notes, that “Pan stands in opposition to the city” (142). The *Homeric Hymn* also states that Pan is a god beloved of both the shepherd and his flock and, adding even further to the mysterious and enigmatic nature of this divinity, that he is a fierce and terrifying hunter as well as a gifted musician and nimble dancer.

Pan is also the Greek divinity most associated with the demise of the polytheistic and pagan sacred traditions of the classical world. This association traces itself back to a famous and often-quoted passage section of Plutarch’s *Moralia*. In this passage, Plutarch relates the story of a ship’s pilot commanded by an unseen voice to announce the following message while passing near the Greek island of Palodes: “Great Pan is dead.” Plutarch comments that after the pilot delivered this sad communication, the air immediately became filled with a terrible lamentation. Commenting on the oracular quality of this story, James Hillman observes that it has meant “many thing to many people in many ages” (24).

Since this event is said to have transpired close to the date Christians believed Jesus died and was resurrected, early church fathers widely quoted Plutarch’s story, which signified to them evidence that paganism was doomed to extinction. Rafael Lopez-Pedraza writes that this story “has often been considered a turning point in Western history, later leading to the legend of Pan dying in the moment Jesus was mounted on the cross” (129). For many in the early church, Pan ultimately became associated with the image of Satan, a connection suggested by the deity’s goat horns and semi-bestial appearance, his

unabashed sexuality, and his profound relationship to the physical world of nature and animal instinctuality. In addition, as Boardman notes, the two gods most associated with Pan (apart from his father, Hermes) were Aphrodite and Dionysus, two gods also particularly feared and detested by early Christians for their sensuality and libidinal energies. One can easily imagine how the strange story told by Plutarch would have been embraced with particular satisfaction by early Christians and used as a rallying cry in the ruthless destruction of classical paganism that followed Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the empire's only lawful religion.

From the time of the Renaissance onward, both the paradoxical nature of Pan as a divinity and the theme of his supposed demise have repeatedly fueled artistic and literary imaginations. In particular, Pan has proven to be particularly fruitful source of inspiration for a large number of the Romantic, Victorian, and Edwardian authors, including Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Emerson, the Brownings, Saki, E.M. Forster, and D.H. Lawrence. In our own time, the study of myth of Pan has been taken up again by archetypal psychologists such as James Hillman and Rafael Lopez-Pedraza.

Typical of much of the writing inspired by the idea of the death of Pan, observes Boardman, is an equivocal frame of mind in which the passing of the classical world implies both rejoicing in the coming of the greater light of Christianity and mourning the passing "of the simple, if sometimes violent, Arcadian life." That passing of the Arcadian would sadly also mean, "notes Boardman, "the arrival of the modern world in which Pan could be remembered only as a symbol, either of rustic innocence or of the most basic and deeply felt passions" of humanity (43).

This equivocal attitude toward Pan tended to give way by the end of the nineteenth century to a vision in which Pan increasingly came to be viewed as elemental force of nature, both earthy and sexual, and a necessary counterbalance to the deadening forces of industrialization, rationality, and social rigidity. Patricia Merivale attributes much of our modern vision of Pan to the late-Victorian poet Robert Browning, who wrote of Pan "not as a goat-god outside ourselves, but as a goat-god within ourselves," a figure representing "our deepest and most instinctual animal nature" (90). It is this sense of Pan as the manifestation of an irrational and instinctual shadow quality hiding just beneath the surface of our seemingly rational, conscious lives that has provided some of the greatest inspiration for writers since the Victorians. Given Darwin's undermining of the idea that humans are somehow superior to and separate from the natural world and Freud's demonstration of the existence and enormous power of the unconscious, it is hardly surprising that such an image of Pan should have emerged to inspire and haunt the artistic imagination of post-Victorians.

In our own time, the author whose vision of the goat-god is most in keeping with the sense of Pan as a sacred manifestation of the psychic energy of the natural world is James Hillman. Hillman sees Pan as one who had served as a mediator for the ancient Greeks, "an ether who invisibly enveloped all natural things with personal meaning." From Hillman's perspective, Plutarch's announcement of the demise of Pan inevitably meant that the natural world would "become deprived of its creative voice." As a result, Hillman writes, the soul lost its "psychic connection with nature," because "nature no longer spoke to us – or we could no longer hear." For Hillman, the ultimate tragic consequence of the loss of our connection to Pan was that nature became stripped of its divinity and, therefore, could "be controlled by the new God, man, modeled in the image of Prometheus or Hercules, creating from it and polluting it without a troubled conscience" (24-5). Hillman cautions us that though Pan may be dead from the point-of-view of the conscious life of humanity, he still lives on in our panicked nightmare visions of an instinctual world free of the laws of logic and rationality. What he urges is for us to fully reawaken to the animate qualities of the natural world, thereby reestablishing our relatedness to both nature and our own instinctual inner lives.

Among all of the visions of Pan generated since the Renaissance, perhaps the most poignant, evocative, and reverent image of the goat-god was that created by the English novelist Kenneth Grahame in the classic children's novel *The Wind in the Willows*. Originally published in 1908, this book is widely considered to be a classic in the field of children's literature and has been reissued in dozens of editions, translated into most of the world's major languages, and illustrated by some of the most noted illustrators of twentieth century. Grahame's gentle and charming tale of the adventures of group of small animals living in the

English countryside has been among my favorite books from childhood onward, though I have only recently come to understand the enduring fascination of this book.

Merivale attributes much of the power of Grahame's portrayal of Pan to the fact that all of the characters in *The Wind in the Willows* are animals whose features incongruously combine a wide range of animal, human, and symbolic traits. Because these rich and complex characters are able to approach the figure of Pan with such reverence and awe, Merivale notes, "Pan becomes... a god fit for human worship again." Commenting on Grahame's vision of the god, she observes that "the Arcadian Pan, though still pastoral, still idealized, has been strengthened by touching earth with goat hoofs once more" (139).

Grahame's dreamlike vision of Pan is included in the chapter of this novel entitled "The Piper at the Gates." This scene begins with two of the novel's principal characters, Rat and Mole, rowing their boat upstream in search of a lost baby otter. Rat is the first to hear the summons of "the thin, clear happy call of a distant piping [. . .], and the call in it stronger even than the music is sweet [. . .], the clear imperious summons that marched hand-in-hand with the intoxicating melody" (104). To both of them, the meaning of the summons is immediately clear, if ultimately ineffable, and they instinctively know that when they arrive at the source of that mystical music they will be in the "holy place" where they shall find "Him." Grahame offers no antecedent pronoun to this reference to "Him" but, as Merivale notes, "it is clearly Pan, who, of course, has no special name to these animals" (141). Once on the strange island from which the music of the pipes originates, the two creatures find themselves in a clearing in the dense woods. In the scene that follows, Grahame gives us the vision of Pan as experienced through the eyes of Mole:

Perhaps he would never have dared raise his eyes, but that the piping was now hushed, the call and the summons seemed still dominant and imperious. He might refuse, were Death himself waiting to strike him instantly, once he had looked with mortal eye on things rightly kept hidden. Trembling, he obeyed, and raised his humble head and [. . .] looked into the very eyes of the Friend and Helper; saw the backward sweep of the curved horns, gleaming in the growing daylight; saw the stern, hooked nose between the kindly eyes that were looking down on them humorously, while the bearded mouth broke into a half-smile at the corners; saw the rippling muscles on the arm that lay across the broad chest, the long, supple hand still holding the panpipes only just fallen away from the parted lips; saw the splendid curves of the shaggy limbs disposed in majestic ease on the sward; saw, last of all, nestled between the very hooves, sleeping soundly in entire peace and contentment, the little, round, podgy, childish form of the baby otter. (108)

It is to Grahame's great credit that this touching scene is not allowed to descend into maudlin sentimentality. For immediately after being granted this vision of the divinity inherent in the natural world, these creatures become aware of their own fear of the awesome power of their vision. What they experience, however, is not a fear of the "august Presence" of Pan himself—as Rat tells us, "Afraid of Him? O' never, never!"—but rather of the majesty and awesome power of nature as revealed through the image of Pan. As Merivale observes of this remarkable scene: "It seems unlikely that another author could devise, outside a completely mythic world, characters who could see a Pan like this and feel any combination of fear and reverence without becoming mawkishly absurd" (142).

Merivale particularly comments on the "genuine religious feeling" of Grahame's portrait of Pan (139). Grahame's biographer, Peter Green, considers this vision of Pan to be "the supreme example of nineteenth-century neo-pagan mysticism" (253) and suggests that its source may well have been an actual "intense visionary experience of a semi-mystical nature" (84). In the end, writes Merivale, "Grahame's animals say something for humans that human beings could not say for themselves," which is that "if we were as good and simple as they, we too could worship such a god." She also goes on to observe that some part of our complex natures still yearns for a life so close to nature and that "as the goat-god is to these animals, so some deity bound in with nature is to us" (142-3).

Merivale notes that depictions of Pan in Western literature appear to have reached a peak in the world of *fin de siècle* Europe and to have more or less died out amidst the horrors of the First World War. It strikes me as interesting that this period, with its seemingly boundless, if totally blind, optimism was the last time literature was to consciously call upon the image of Pan for inspiration. Perhaps the psychic chasm of the Great War served to finally cut those few pastorally-minded threads that still wove their way through the

pattern of Western civilization in the nineteenth century. Still, if the prospect for Pan's revival as a public myth seems doubtful, as Merivale suggests, compelling private myths connected with Pan – reflective perhaps of the personal relationship Hillman advocates between each human soul and this powerful nature archetype – are emerging yet. In that sense, Pan is far from dead and “keeps on being reborn,” Merivale concludes “in all kinds of strange ways” (228).

### ***Works Cited***

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