Ágnes Darab
University of Miskolc
boldarab@uni-miskolc.hu

From the *Satyr's Skin* to the *Stuffed Barbarian*

Versions of the Marsyas-Myth in Hungarian Literature

SUMMARY:

The tragic myth of Marsyas challenging Apollo was eternalized in Ovid's wonderful works (*Fasti, Metamorphoses*). To this day, the archetypical Ovidian story has attracted the attention of Hungarian literature. The essay proceeds from the interpretation of the original narrative, which has become an unavoidable point of reference for contemporary Hungarian works. These texts enter into intertextual dialogue with each other not only because of the similar topic. It is the meaningfulness of the body, the body as a textual representational strategy that becomes the common point which joins these texts into the discourse about the body. This approach from the side of corporeal narratology invites a reading of Gergely Péterfy's *The Stuffed Barbarian*, which can be interpreted as the most special rewriting of the Marsyas narrative.

KEYWORDS: Marsyas, reception history, otherness, difference, *corpus*, corporeal narratology

STRESZCZENIE:

Od „Skóry Satyra" do „Barbarzyńcy wypchanego".
Wersje mitu Marsjasza w literaturze węgierskiej.

Tragiczna historia pojedynku Marsjasza z Apollinem uwieczniona została przez Owidiusza w jego arcydziełach: *Kalendarzu poetyckim* i *Metamorfozach*. Utrwalony przez poetę mityczny archetyp cieszy się po dziś zainteresowaniem literatury węgierskiej, niespotykanie silnym zwłaszcza po II wojnie. W niniejszym szkicu wskazano drogę od interpretacji pierwotnego mitu jako nieuniknionego punktu odniesienia dla omawianych współczesnych tekstów literatury węgierskiej – ku intertekstualnemu dialogowi, w jaki wchodzą one pomiędzy sobą, nie tylko ze względu na wspólny temat, ale także włączenie ich w dyskurs o ciele. Proponowane przez Autorkę spojrzenie od strony narracji korporalnej pozwala odczytywać *Barbarzyńcę wypchanego* (Kitömött barbár / Stuffed barbarian) Gergely'a Péterfy'ego jako najbardziej swoistą wersję opowieści o Marsjaszu.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Marsjasz, historia recepcji, inność, odmienność, ciało, narracja korporalna

1. From Myth to Poetry: Ovid's Marsyas

Marsyas's myth got its eternal form in Ovid's works:[1] the satyr who – because of his pride in his musical virtuosity in playing the *aulos* – challenged Apollo for a competition only to lose and have his skin flayed in the process, has prompted Hungarian authors to retell the story from time to time. However the critical discourse interpreting these works did not consider the Ovidian pretext. They interpret the works only in the context of the oeuvres, or in a dialogue with each other, but without any mention of Ovid. If there is any reference to the antique origins, criticism usually cites Apollodoros's mythographical handbook (Szigeti 1994: 65, Kenyeres 2013:

1 About the transformations of the myth in Greek literature and art, and an interpretation of the narratives of the *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses* in a wider and narrower context, see Darab 2015. and Darab 2016. I only give the summaries of my interpretations here, especially the ones that proved to be significant in the reception history of the episode.

237).[2] However only Ovid gave significant attention to the satyr's narrative, which got its canonical form in 1st century AD: both *Fasti* (6, 695-710) and *Metamorphoses* (6, 382-400) relate the story in a different context.

Ovid in *Metamorphoses* took the origin myth of the Phrygian river and the *aulos*, and explored new artistic possibilities in the narrative, which – thanks to the hidden potentials that reside in it – rose to the status of an archetype. Ovid was the first to allegorize the satyr's tale as the existential condition of people / artists who are defenseless against power. This interpretation has surfaced in many newer adaptation of the tale – that is why it becomes important in what cultural-political context Marsyas appears in. Furthermore with the *Metamorphoses*[3] and especially with the Marsyas--narrative, Ovid projected the body as an anthropological and an ideological construction into cultural discourse. The auctor's poetic world shows the body as permeable, defenseless, vulnerable and prone to destruction (Segal 1998: 10). The violence against the body always arrives from the higher levels of the hierarchy, from the almighty gods, which prompts us to see that what is at stake here is the integrity (Leach 1974: 127, Theodorakopoulos 1999: 154-155) and the autonomy (Segal 1998: 32) of the individual: Ovid only reconceptualized this as poetry through the body--metaphor. The reception also recognized possibilities that Ovid suggested but left unexplored. The conflict of the half-animal satyr and Apollo regarded as ideal masculine beauty gives an opportunity to see the tale as the clash of barbarity and culture, and to touch upon the notion of otherness and difference as well. The immense significance of the Marsyas-narrative in *Metamorphoses* lies in the fact that through the reinterpretation of the myth, Ovid invited his narrators and readers to reflect upon their own situations. By unfolding some of the artistic possibilities residing in the theme, he paved the way for the reception history of the Marsyas-topic.

2. 1947: The Reception of the Marsyas-narrative in Hungarian Literature

Postwar Hungarian literature gave a lot of attention to the Marsyas--narrative. Oszkár Gellért's poem about *Marsyas* was published in 1947. In this year Sándor Weöres also wrote a poem entitled *Marsyas and Apollo*,

2 Judit Kónya finds the prefiguration of Apollo's cruelty in the role of Dionysus in Euripides's *The Bacchae* (Kónya 1971: 82).

3 It is enough to refer to the proposition found in the first line of the epic prologue: *In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas/corpora* (emphasis mine).

which appeared as one sonnets out of the forty in the *Metamorphoses* cycle that appeared in the volume *Tűzkút* (*Firewell*).[4] Imre Sarkadi also debuted as a short fiction writer in 1947. Sarkadi was already known as a publicist writing sociographical portraits, and he drew upon his cultural experience as a writer (Juhász 1971: 44). He wrote three mythically inspired short stories in 1947, which he published in 1948: *Oedipus goes Blind*, *Duel for Justice*, *The Satyr's Skin*.[5]

The unprecedented intensity of the Hungarian adaptations of the Marsyas-topic in this single year fits into that narrower and wider context, which was drawn up by literary historians of the period. Sarkadi and his contemporaries face the traumatic experiences they lived through during the war (Pomogáts 1977: 123). In the texts of Gellért, Weöres and Sarkadi, Apollo plays the role of the executioner, while Marsyas is the symbol of values, rationality, and he is powerless against aggression. In the descriptions of the physical destruction of Marsyas, we can sense references to the perversity of fascism and the Holocaust (Juhász 1971: 45-47, Szigeti 1994: 66):[6] for example Apollo plans to keep the skin to use it as a disguise or as an ornament. All of the texts offer the possibility to interpret them in a wider context, as well as depicting an absurd situation that goes beyond the concrete historical situation: powerlessness in the face of aggression that threatens to devour identity and to destroy the body (Juhász 1971: 45, Pomogáts 1977: 123, Szigeti 1994: 70). Ovid was the first to rewrite the Marsyas myth in such a way that it becomes actual in every historical period. The Hungarian adaptations appearing in 1947 also partake in this always valid interpretation, however, they communicate it differently and enrich the parable with newer layers of meaning.

The difference in poetic style can be seen mostly in the fact that in these narratives, the *corpus* gets an overwhelming emphasis: the body, the skin, the process of flaying, or the flayed body itself. Ovid's description of the

4 In the first Hungarian edition of *Tűzkút* (*Firewell*, 1964, Magvetö, Budapest), the *Metamorphoses* cycle – as opposed to Lajos Szigeti's claim (Szigeti 1994: 71) – only contained thirty sonnets, and *Marsyas and Apollo* was not included. That poem appeared as part of the forty sonnet long *Metamorphoses* in 1970 when the second volume of Weöres's poems was published (Magvető, Budapest). For a detailed and documented treatise on the publication history, see Domokos 2002: 67-84.

5 I am quoting *The Satyr's Skin* from Sarkadi 1975: 99-111.

6 Sarkadi himself makes this obvious in a letter to his mother written in February 1948 (Márkus 2001: 35): "… I will try to sum up the essence of *The Satyr's Skin* in two sentences. That the superior person – Apollo – feels morally entitled to commit the most cruel and the most vile acts against the inferior – Marsias. To destroy and to flay the inferior, that is only a task, an artistic task for him, not a moral question." Despite these passages it would be oversimplifying to limit the interpretation of the short story only to this "antifascist attitude" like Hajdu does (Hajdu 1973: 35-36).

quivering sinews and pulsating veins[7] went so much against the aesthetic principles of his age – that is, classicism – that it amounted to such a self--destructive bravery similar to his hero, Marsyas' courage who dared to compete against the god of art. The newer narratives emphasize this aspect of Ovid's text, how the body turns into a living wound, *corpus* to *vulnus*, and its outcome. The act of narration is rendered nearly insignificant by the representations of the body. In order to interpret this tendency, we should turn to one of the newest methods in narratology, *corporeal narratology* coined and conceptualized by Daniel Punday.[8] Following Nietzsche and Foucault, the postmodern notion of the body regards it as not a biological, but a social construction (Csabai and Erős 2000: 42). According to corporal narratology,[9] the body is always inscribed into a discourse or a narrative, which means that it is a linguistic construct, hence there is no such thing like an objective representation of the body. The body always enters a system of signs,[10] yet it always points beyond the text: it bears the traces of cultural, thematic, sociological and anthropological influences. One of the main questions of corporeal narratology is how the body can partake in the story, and how the representation of the body constructs the narrative. What does the body need to become more than a textual object, how can it turn into a significant and meaningful object? Another important question would be to trace how the narrative body contributes to our discourses. As representations of the body are historically determined, and thus they are mutable, it would be illuminating to contrast the various interpretative horizons (Földes 2011: 3, Jablonczay 2011: 101, Földes 2013: 163).

3. Dénes Krusovszky: Marsyas Polyphone

We might recognize the Foucauldian interpretation of the body in the texts of Ovid, Sarkadi and Oszkár Gellért, which claims that the body is

7 *Metamorphoses* 6, 387-391: "nec quiquam nisi vulnus erat; cruor undique manat, / detectique patent nervi, trepidaeque sine ulla / pelle micant venae; salientia viscera possis / et perlucentes numerare in pectore fibras".

8 Daniel Punday advanced his theses in an essay (Punday 2000) and a monograph (Punday 2003). Literary theory thinks of these texts as the pragmatic works of corporeal narratology. For an excellent Hungarian summary of the topic, see Földes 2015: 5-29.

9 The Hungarian *Helikon* periodical devoted two thematic volumes for the introduction of the topic: *Testírás* (*Writing the Body*, 2011/1-2) and *Corpus alienum* (2013/3).

10 The identity of body and text has already been recognized by antique theories of rhetoric. This resounds in the metaphor of the *corpus* used for a body of texts since Cicero. For a detailed analysis of the topic see Farrell 1999: 128-133, Acél 2012: 43-50.

a significant area of the workings of power (Foucault 1999: 316). However Weöres's poem *Marsyas and Apollo* has an aesthetic reference, despite the historical-political overtones of power above and the crowd below.[11] The most basic tenet of Weöres's poetry is "the emphasis on higher spirituality instead of the turbulent world of the man of the crowd" (Tamás 1978: 102-103). *Marsyas and Apollo* is to be interpreted in this wider context – and the fact that, except for the title, the whole poem is devoid of subjectivity, points us in that direction.[12] The "*hordes of dwarfs*", the maddening crowd cheering above the bleeding body of the poet-Marsyas, the *vulgus mobile* is to be interpreted not as a political allegory, but as an embodiment of the values consistently repeated and defended in Weöres's poetry. The aestheticizing ideal of free spirited poetry, which is suggested by his sonnet through staging its tragic opposite (Kenyeres 2013: 238-242).

The process in which narration is taken over by visuality reaches its peak in contemporary art. The narrative dissolves and is replaced by the narrative body. This tendency is palpable in Ovid and Weöres as well, because their stories begin with their end: the flaying, or the sight of the flayed body. The preceding events are only suggested, or – like in Weöres's poem – left out. This tendency is carried to the extreme in Dénes Krusovszky's *Marsyas Polyphon* cycle published in *A felesleges part* (*The Useless Beach*, 2011), and in Anish Kapoor's *Marsyas*-installation (2002), which was put on the covers of the Krusovszky volume, foreshadowing and supplementing the interpretation of the poems. The leitmotifs of the volume that comprises of three cycles, are Chris Burden's performances, the story of the modernist poet Hart Crane's ship voyage and suicide, and the references to the myth of Marsyas' flaying – thus the volume is built around questions about the borders of art, the body and its pain, and the human body as a penetrable boundary (Horváth 2012: 37, Bodnár 2013: 101). The middle cycle, the 11 poems of the *Marsyas Polyphon* completely fragments, de-subjectivizes and de-mythicizes the mythic narrative. The name of the satyr only occurs once, in the title of the cycle, and in my interpretation, its only function there is to facilitate the understanding of the text's highly intellectual allusive network.[13] The relation of the 'I' and the 'you' steals some subjectivity into the asubjective world of the dominant

11 As Péter Balassa writes about the whole *Metamorphoses* cycle, "in this view of being, history is only one element of the series, and the *Metamorphoses* is aware of that, more than half of the cycle introduces a catastrophic, chaotic, tragic, cruel and historical world in its archaic-mythic form, and it also refers to what it says about modern civilized mankind." (Balassa 1996: 20)

12 The omission of mythic names and thus the severing of the poem from Greek mythology is a recurring feature in Weöres's poetry, see Bartal 2014: 197-202.

13 Zoltán Boldog criticizes this aspect of Krusovszky's texts: "they throw the reader into deep water, to drown in the textual world full of references" (Boldog 2012).

objects – especially the knife and the pine tree – and the sounds – especially the howl / scream. The episodes of the myth are spread across the 11 poems, devoid of chronology, stripped of their original context. For example in poem VI. (*Megfelelő szégyen*, *Appropriate shame*):

> It might as well be that the howl is right,
> Yet it only arrives too late.
> They tried in vain to tell him not to reach down
> for it, he took
> the flute, and there was no turning back anymore.

We still can see – if not mythic or any kind of narrative, but – a certain view of being. Poem I. (*Akár egy fenyőléc*, *Like a Pine Tree Stave*) and Poem XI. (*A tisztogatáson túl, Beyond the Purification*) records in the representation of drying flayed human skin[14] and the sound of the howl[15] what survived from what Marsyas, that is, the symbol he became. Not only the satyr's name is missing from the poem cycle, but his body as well. The two monumental poems of the cycle have the body as their subject, but without any corporeality. Poem II. (*Szellős, árnyékos, Breezy, shady*) gives an anatomically precise and cold-blooded description of how skin can be flayed from the human body and the way the skin is then prepared. Poem IX. (*Az egész szerkezet, The Whole Structure*) is a professionally precise and dry description of how the elements of Kapoor's installation were transported to the Modern Tate Gallery in London, and how they were assembled there. In the whole cycle only the skin and the howl is present and living. The body is plastic and membrane, its name is *structure*, which only resembles living meat:

> (1) In Kapoor's concept the membrane
> Fastened between the rings had to float
> Above the visitor like a giant, flayed body.
>
> (2) he designed a special material for the sculpture,
> which resembled humiliated human flesh
> both in color and touch.
>
> (3) If observed from close enough
> it was claimed that the material was constantly trembling.

14 "The human skin hanged to the pine branch / has gone wholly dry, but, / as many claimed, the simplest / sound of the flute made it quiver, / some saw this as dance, / others suspected the wind."

15 "Out of the shade of the essential howl / you can no longer drag me."

The only thing that remains of Marsyas's story in Krusovszky's cycle is the body's eternal defenselessness, which is present not in the figure of the satyr, but in the representation of the flayed human skin and the sound of the howl. The world of the *Marsyas Polyphone* blurs the boundaries of body and identity, and eliminates temporality, subjectivity, and narratability. In this textual world bodily beauty is replaced by humiliated human flesh, while musicality symbolized by Marsyas is replaced by the howl. And this challenges our traditional concept of beauty as well. *Marsyas Polyphone* thus stretches not only the boundaries of body and identity, but aesthetics, too. The pervasive cold asubjectivity, the menace and the aggression against the body amounts to the elimination of harmony. But not in the name of negation, but in the name of a different aesthetic, because

> Anyway, the lack of harmony
> does not mean that what you are hearing is not music. (X. *Idekintről nem, Not from outside*)

4. Gergely Péterfy: The Stuffed Barbarian

These texts of Ovid, Sarkadi, Weöres and Krusovszky enter into dialogue not only because of the common theme. The common point between them is the significance of the body, the body as one of the textual representational strategies, that introduces these texts into the age old discourse about the body. Such corporeal narratological approach enables us to interpret the 2014bestseller, Gergely Péterfy's *The Stuffed Barbarian*, which can be read as the most special rewriting of Marsyas's story.

That narrative that was overwritten in Weöres and Krusovszky by the representation of the body, is written back into *The Stuffed Barbarian*. "*As the skin was his story*" (Péterfy 2014: 433) – says Gergely Péterfy's Kazinczy, in this way delineating the interpretive horizon of his novel, which deals with the story of the black Angelo Soliman. Interpretations of the novel inevitably agree on their conclusions regardless of their different approaches. The novel is the story of difference, barbarity, disgrace, and homelessness (Ùjvárosi 2014, Nemes Z. 2014, Balajthy 2015: 122, Deczky 2015: 51, Györffy 2015: 584).

However Angelo's story can be placed within the context of Marsyas adaptations because of the opposition between the difference signified by black skin and civilized life, learnedness and knowledge attributed to white skin; and because of the strategy of the novel demonstrating the meaning constructive potential of the narrative body. After Angelo's initiation as a freemason

> he felt that he reached the point where his body can feel satisfied: after the Palermese uncomfortable and tight sacksuit, the Lobkowitzian and Lichtensteinian servant uniform, the everyday clothes of the pater familias, his body felt happy wearing this apron, gloves and shirt. (342)

This sentence can be regarded as the summary of the Saracen's life, which ends in his (dead) body being flayed, and the significance of this conclusion rhymes with the antique story:

> From the part of the court it was a matter of obvious arrogance, an intoxication with power: they had no other aim but to humiliate through Angelo everyone who believed in Enlightened ideals, and to demonstrate their power over our bodies. (431)

The preparation of Angelo's body alludes to the fate of Marsyas not only because of the mere fact of flaying, but how detailed and significant that episode is within the narrative (Péterfy 2014: 437-440), and how consciously constructed the fiction is that frames the story. Angelo's last will and Kazinczy coming out of the prison to witness the unimaginable act is the author's invention.[16] This narratorial fiction becomes the culmination of the whole story:

> He left his skin to me, because he hoped that I will understand the moral of the case, and do what must be done: tell everybody what happened to him. This is a scandal to such a degree that cannot be left unsaid. (436)

The significance of the flaying within the novel shows the most in the techniques the narrator relates this scandal.

There is another peculiarity of the text beside the thematic and motivic analogies. The narration alludes to the antiquity again and again through different methods. The antique references are the most obvious in the images that become the basis of similes and metaphors. It was as if Angelo's body stepped out of the cupboard like Orpheus (14). Ravaged by the epidemic, Sátoraljaújhely was "like Pompei in flames, or Troy destroyed." (18) Sophie Török leaves the city like Hector's widow in Euripides's *Women of Troy*: It was an Iliadian scene how the cart shuffled its way through the familiar rows of houses, carrying me, Andromache in mourning. (19) Angelo and Lobkowitz was using the toy soldiers to stage the "exact copies of the battles at Cannae, Philippi or Carthage." (164) The name of prince Lichtenstein is Strabon (179), and Carlo Radi, the architect of the house

16 The novel is not afraid to overwrite historical facts, see Szilágyi 2014 for a detailed analysis.

at Széphalom is "a disappointed demiurge." (201) Kazinczy's adoration of classical antiquity and German Neoclassicism, the works and aesthetics of Sallustius, Pausanias, Goethe and Schiller, imitating them in his way of life is an important technique of characterization in the novel. The examples above do not create a context, and have no other function but to build and maintain the continuous presence of antiquity in the text.

We find a more gentle and meaningful way of antiquization not in the allusions within the text, but the discourse. *The Stuffed Barbarian* is epic in the Homerian sense, because it is thoroughly determined by orality. Sophie Török relates what his husband told her about what Angelo told him about his life. "He said" (11), "related Ferenc" (13), "when Angelo shared these details" (352), "the reason I needed to tell all this" (361), "then he told the end of the story" (421) – these formulas invoke the antique way of remembering, the oral heritage, which is referred to in the text:

> Ferenc told that I need to endure the story he is going to tell, ... He has to talk. ... He hopes that talking might help him to trace and capture what is throbbing in his mind, what he desperately tried to put into sentences, but the sentences always refused to formulate this alien matter. Now we will try to make my memory the page, and his words will be the pen, perhaps it will work this way. (95-96)

The most peculiar trait of antique epic discourse is the repeated use of certain formulas. Whenever they appear during the narration of the complex plot, they evoke an aura of familiarity, of homeliness that pulls back the act of remembering to a secure point. *The Stuffed Barbarian* uses only one repeated formula, rarely making any changes during the repetitions:

> As I stood in the attic storage room of the Museum of Natural History, with the black body in the red cupboard facing me, I remembered (9)

– this is the first sentence of the novel. Except for chapters five and six, all the chapters begin with the same formula.[17] It also echoes in the last sentence of the novel, where remembering is taken over by knowledge and recognition:

> because as I stood in the attic storage room of the Museum of Natural History, facing the black body stepping towards me from the searing depths of the cupboard, I knew (448).

17 The formula appears in the text fifteen times, in the following pages: 9, 18, 24, 26, 59, 69, 89, 139, 201, 240, 271, 286, 362, 416, 448.

The understanding that happens during remembering and relating leads to knowledge. The repeated formula gives an epically sublime frame to the process of recognition, self-recognition, which concludes in the Greek tragedies' *anagnórisis*. From the amalgam of antique Greek drama and epic narrative the novel conjures up a narrative antiquity.

In Péterfy's novel the antique names never include that of Marsyas, yet the tragic story of the satyr's difference is present all throughout the text. The structuring principles of narrative antiquity and narrative body evoke the antique pretext of *The Stuffed Barbarian*: the flaying of Marsyas. Thanks to this unsaid but palpable pretext, the historical case gets entangled with the archetypical. The continuous evocation of antique texts builds up and upholds an image of antiquity, and it juxtaposes the historically documented event of Angelo's flaying with its mythical pretext, the flaying of Marsyas. When Angelo's skin is put onto the cedar body, and Stützt fixes the tightened skin at the back, "*with this fixture ends this black gospel*." (442) The barbarian Marsyas was flayed by the pagan god Apollo. Angelo was born a barbarian, and regarded as one even after his baptism; his body is flayed by his Christian, Enlightened freemason fellows, in this way serving the show-off of worldly power built on Christian principles. With the evocation of the antiquity and the antique pretext, we witness the pagan and the Christian variant of the same scandal. The myth becomes reality.

Forming an equal relationship is not possible with an objectified Other, he has to stand before us as a real subject. One of the preconditions of this is the mutual nature of the gazes: the Other needs to interact as an active subject, and the gaze on him should not become objectifying, dehumanizing. (Földes 2013: 176). The most extreme type of this gaze was the most popular in the 1880s when stuffed exotic animals, handicapped and colored bodies were exhibited as a spectacle in the Viennese Museum of Natural History. One of the most special of these bodies was the flayed and exhibited skin of Angelo Soliman fixed to a cedar body. The objectification of the Saracen's body was the culmination of the revenge of power. Yet it cannot be regarded as a Triumphus. As Marsyas's name and his *aulos*--tunes were eternalized in the sound of the river named after him, so has Angelo's body survived the fire in the attic room of the Viennese Museum of Natural History. The word, the narrative guards its memory, because

> words exist not merely for giving us a picture of the world, but they indeed have the ability to become flesh. (413)

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Ágnes Darab – Associate professor at the University of Miskolc, Hungary, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Hungarian Language and Literature.