

Using Fiction to Address the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma: Gint Aras' *The Fugue* As Healing

PAUL M. GEDO

Gint Aras (Karolis Gintaras Žukauskas)'s 2015 novel, *The Fugue*, offers a complex, multi-layered account of Eastern European émigré families living in Cicero, a working-class Chicago suburb. The story is told from the perspective of multiple characters and changes settings and times in a non-linear manner, beginning with a Soviet army or NKVD unit attack on a Ukrainian village in 1940. This savage attack severely traumatizes one character and sets the story – which involves the ways this and further trauma affect multiple generations of several families – in motion.

Using Aras' novel, I will discuss ways that traumatized persons become vulnerable to severe forms of dissociation¹ that disrupt internal coherence, and to the implication of Aras' account about ways to heal these inner breaches and reduce the inter-generational transmission of trauma. Aras' title (from the Latin word *fugere*, for "flight") refers both to a musical form,² and to a dis-

¹ "Dissociation involves entering an altered state of consciousness in which one is partially or wholly unaware of one's surroundings, thoughts, or actions" (Gedo, "Symptoms," 609).

² In a musical fugue, several musical "voices" interweave, while also retaining their individual character. There are repetitive elements for each "voice," but also development of the individual "voice" and the interwoven themes (see Merriam-Webster, *Dictionary*).

PAUL M. GEDO, Ph.D., is Emeritus Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology at The George Washington University's Professional Psychology Program. He received his Ph.D. in Human Development from the University of Chicago and completed training at the Washington Center for Psychoanalysis.

sociative state.³ The latter involves a temporary loss of the sense of who one is; in their confusion, those in fugue states sometimes create an alternate identity, without realizing they have done so.⁴ They lose awareness of their original identity and may wander or leave home in a confused and impulsive manner. Aras relates this psychological state to the musical form (with its return to the original musical “subject”) and to the post-traumatic struggles of several characters in the novel.

Aras has created a compelling novel that conveys the on-going impact of trauma from the World War II era occupations of Ukraine and the Baltic states by the Soviets, Nazi Germany, and the returning Soviet army (1939–1945). I will not try to recount the novel’s plot in a comprehensive way, but will refer to aspects of the story relevant to the fugue motifs.

Systematic study of the psychological impact of trauma began during and following World War I, whose brutal trench warfare had a devastating effect on those who endured it. While there has been some disagreement, most psychological or psychoanalytic contributors have advocated thorough therapeutic exploration of the traumatic events and their sequela, at a pace that the patient can manage. Because this re-evokes memories and feelings about the past, the person must be sufficiently grounded to tolerate and make therapeutic use of this exploration without becoming re-traumatized. The discipline required to create written, musical, or visual memoirs or art – Anne Frank’s diary, Picasso’s *Guernica*, Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony, and Spielberg’s Shoah project are well-known examples relating to the World War II era – that address the trauma may provide some of this grounding. While immersion in exploring the past is painful and sometimes frightening for the patient, the integration of the events and their emotional impact into the patient’s life narrative frees the patient from the worst consequences of the trauma and affords

³ Gedo, “To be”; Gedo, “Narrative.”

⁴ Fisher and Joseph, “Loss.”

relief and an increased ability to adapt to current life circumstances.⁵ When traumatized persons are unable to mourn their losses (including the loss of the idealized pre-traumatic living situation) and cannot or do not integrate their experiences, this creates gaps in the life narrative that paradoxically prolong the impact of what has occurred. Alternatively, the trauma victim may create a distorted narrative that misrepresents his past; he may cling to this account even in the face of evidence to the contrary, and may find any attempt to clarify actual events quite threatening. When such defensive stories crumble, the person is vulnerable to extreme disequilibrium and bewilderment. (This is what happens to the character Bronza in Aras' novel; see below.)

Those who cannot speak of their traumatic experiences, or who cling to distorted narratives, instead tend to repeat their experiences in actions – for instance, someone who was abused as a child picks abusive adult partners or himself grows up to mistreat his children.⁶ Often trauma victims use alcohol or other substances to numb themselves, and this substance abuse leaves them vulnerable to further traumatic experiences and to inflicting new injuries on their families. When they remain un-integrated, traumatic experiences also exert more impact on the person's progeny; this intergenerational transmission of trauma is particularly notable amongst victims of war, genocide, or social or intra-familial abuse or violence.⁷ Adults' silence can leave their children confused about the post-traumatic parental behavior they observe (e.g., anxious silence about the past, mood lability, substance abuse, angry or irrational outbursts, phobic avoidance of certain situations). Children then may misinterpret these behaviors as reflecting something *they* have done, rather than recognizing them as outcomes of the parents' earlier histo-

⁵ Gedo, "Narrative"; Stern, *Unformulated*; Krystal, *Integration*; Fisher and Joseph, "Loss."

⁶ Freud, "Remembering."

⁷ Akhtar, *Comprehensive*; Van der Kolk, "Compulsion."

ries. These difficulties then impact the children's development and lead to maladaptation in the next generation. As Akhtar describes it:

The parental inability to mourn, coupled with a desire to protect the offspring from the dark shadow of the past, results in all sorts of subtle and gross avenues for a transgenerational transmission of trauma. Secrets, unexplained flare-ups of temper, constant 'transposition' [...] of the past onto the present, survival anxiety [...] avoidances of topics pertaining to [the traumatic events], overprotectiveness towards children combined with covert (and, sometimes, overt) devaluation of their problems as trivial [...] all contribute to how the parental [...] trauma can be transmitted to the second or even the third generation of the survivors.⁸

Aras' novel illustrates these themes with stark clarity. In the opening scene (set in 1940), the adolescent Ukrainian Orest and his family are fleeing the Soviets, who are killing or exiling entire villages. He takes his month-old brother into a cellar to sleep and is awakened by gunfire above him. His brother begins to whimper and cry; in his panicked efforts to silence him, Orest inadvertently smothers and kills him. Orest comes up from underground to find everyone else missing or dead. Unable to bury his dead brother in the frozen ground, he enters a fugue state, wandering aimlessly up a road, believing himself to be a man named Yuri. The two elderly Dilienko sisters take him in; they adopt him and he knows himself as Yuri (Bronza) Dilienko for the next 60 years. The Dilienko sisters and Bronza emigrate to America; Bronza becomes a doctor, marries a Lithuanian émigré, Gaja, and fathers two children. He remembers nothing of his identity or history before the elderly sisters found him, so that he is unable to integrate his traumatic past, or his happier early history, with his fugue state identity. He does not know why he was on the road, whom or what he fled, or anything about his history or identity. In a sense, Bronza's 60-year fugue may serve

⁸ Akhtar, *Comprehensive*, 293.

as Aras' metaphor for the fate of members of the Baltic diaspora, wandering the world, cut off from key aspects of their traumatic past and of their identity.

While unaware of his own story, Bronza can articulate the traumas of the Baltic diaspora:

[Cicero] is a town of displaced persons. Like me. In every silent old man [...] in barroom drunks [...] there's killing. Identity protection, wife swapping. Infants left on roadsides. Men shot in the back. Women raped. People buried alive. How many of these Lithuanians ended up holding rifles in the Nazi army?⁹

The unintegrated aspects of his identity exert a powerful impact on Bronza's character and on those close to him as he struggles to navigate his post-war life. In part, I believe this is due to Bronza's lack of access to his own past, which leaves him unable to understand who he is or to master his traumatic experiences. When people cannot cope with or acknowledge past trauma, they are very likely to repeat key aspects of their experiences rather than overcoming them.¹⁰ While he is a caring and dedicated physician, Bronza has difficulty sustaining loving ties with anyone, including his immediate family. He struggles with empty depressed feelings and sometimes burns himself with cigarettes to manage unbearable tension states, or perhaps to break through states of inner deadness and feel something. When he discovers that his wife Gaja uses cigarettes to burn their son Yuri, he is unable to react or to assert himself to protect the boy. As he did in the Ukraine, he becomes emotionally flooded and is unable to protect a loved one under his care. When Gaja refuses to have sex with him, Bronza rapes and impregnates her. In part, this behavior seems to represent an unconscious identification with the brutality of the Russian soldiers or NKVD agents who terrorized his homeland and treated the inhabitants with inhuman disregard. Without any verbally-encoded memories of his traumatic past, Bronza can only represent what he endured in

⁹ Aras, *Fugue*, 184–185.

¹⁰ Freud, "Remembering"; Van der Kolk, "Compulsion."

actions, such as self-harm, psychological paralysis, or indifference and violence towards his wife. As happened during the fatal night in 1940 when (inadvertently) he too became a killer, Bronza becomes implicated in the cruelties of the oppressors.

His wife Gaja is also unaware of the trauma that underlies her life story. While she was too young to remember directly, she is aware that she was born in Lithuania in 1944, months ahead of the Soviet re-occupation that destroys her family – only she and her Uncle Benny (Benediktus) survive to reach the U.S. However, she does not know that her mother was also her sister or that her Uncle Benny put a stop to the incestuous relationship by murdering his (and Gaja's) father. While she is not angry at her father, for reasons she cannot articulate, Gaja hates her son, scapegoats him, and periodically burns his hands with cigarettes when particularly enraged with him. She then denies having harmed him and accuses Bronza of committing this abuse. The boy, Yuri, covers up the injuries and claims he must always wear gloves due to a skin allergy; he is coerced into this lie as part of a quixotic effort to assuage his mother's misery and rage. Increasingly alienated, he comes to harbor murderous hatred towards his abusive mother and the father who colludes with her mistreatment. As a young adult, he barely stops himself from burning them to death. Thus, the intra-familial hatred and violence of Yuri's maternal grandfather is evident in two succeeding generations.

Aras uses the structure and the theme of the musical fugue to weave together various characters' stories and the novel's different plot lines. Like a fugue, the novel opens with a subject – the Russian attack and Orest's inadvertent fratricide. Other sections of the book are labeled "passage," in reference to musical passages. As in a fugue, the novel contains "episodes," which modulate themes from longer sections and introduce the next such section. The book ends with an "answer" section in which Orest remembers his original, pre-trauma identity, but in a manner that leaves him exposed and vulnerable in the present.

Another central character, Lars Jorgensen, who is married to a Lithuanian émigré, is a composer who creates two musical fugues that underline crucial themes in the novel. He writes the first one soon after his wife's death – perhaps in a slightly dissociated state; for “at times it seemed that the piece was writing itself with Lars a bystander only watching in amazement.”¹¹ The fugue's two musical themes represent his wife and his daughter as individual voices who blended together in his mind. The fugue expressed his inner grief and chaos:

The music receded into painful confusion, mixed up and illogical time, a structure that seemed to move backwards and forwards at once. The chaos felt improvised but drove forward with such authority that it seemed the chaos might last forever, with no way out.¹²

That is, the musical form allowed Lars a creative avenue to express his inner rage, agitation, and confusion as he grieved his wife's death and his inability to fulfill his ambitions as a composer and musician. Paradoxically, expressing his inner chaos through his art allows him an increased sense of coherence and control. It also gives him a voice and a way to share some of his inner experience with others, who are moved by the emotions his music conveys and by its controlled expression of anger, conflict, and chaos within the ordered structure of the fugue. While each character interprets the music in ways that also reflects their inner world, each person is moved by the intense feelings Lars conveys musically. That is, the music breaks through characters' sense of isolation and facilitates empathic connectedness based on internal feeling states. The fugue provides Lars himself, and those who seek to know him intimately, with a window into his inner world.

Lars writes a second fugue later in the same year (1981). It expresses his deep pain upon learning that his wife had had an affair with Bronza; Lars' violent hostility, which led him to inca-

¹¹ Aras, *Fugue*, 311.

¹² Aras, *Fugue*, 312.

pacitate Bronza and Gaja with alcohol, spread gasoline throughout their house, and attempt to light a fire; and his complex feelings when Yuri, who was on the scene, is falsely accused and convicted of burning his parents to death. (Yuri also considered committing this murder, but stopped himself from doing so; it is Orest (Bronza) – disoriented and helpless after suddenly recovering from his dissociative fugue – who inadvertently starts the fatal blaze with his cigarette.) Lars cannot acknowledge what he has done and does not alert the authorities of their error in convicting Yuri. Thus, he allows the next generation to be pronounced guilty and punished, to bear the burden for what the older man has done; this confusion and mis-attribution illustrates the inter-generational transmission of trauma: all feel guilty, and all suffer, while the actual history of who did what to whom becomes lost in a fog of confusion.

Lars' second fugue is "a madman's rant, frightening, full of demented jealousy and pride but also terrible passion."¹³ Lars uses music to express his violent feelings towards his wife and towards Bronza, and the disillusionment and sense of personal inadequacy the affair evoked in him. (He had struggled with feelings of sexual inadequacy for years, and his wife's seeking satisfaction elsewhere exacerbated his doubts of his own potency and masculinity.) The violent musical themes echo his actual temptation to put his murderous fantasies into action by killing Bronza. The music also gives voice to Lars' internal conflicts between his sense of grievance and his own feelings of inadequacy, his murderous rage and his remorse that the sins of the father (Bronza) are to be paid by the son (Yuri); his wish to make some reparation versus his fear of punishment or condemnation; his feeling of weakness and inadequacy versus the immense power of his murderousness and of his music.

Lars' fugue resonates powerfully with Yuri. He has also become an artist, creating expressive abstract and figurative sculptures out of found metal objects. When he hears the music, he translates the feelings it expresses into images of sculptures:

¹³ Aras, *Fugue*, 32.

If he heard that fugue, he always saw multiple bands of metal [...] bronze, steel, brass, aluminum, copper [...] a choking creature kept struggling through the madness, thrashing to get out of that nest, but the metal kept growing, choking everything inside.¹⁴

The music succeeds in conveying to Yuri much that Lars cannot, or will not, tell him. It expresses ways Lars feels trapped as a man and as an artist; ways he is choked by his own rage and impulse to violence. Yuri, who struggles with similar emotions and was literally imprisoned, resonates with these feelings. His image of the choked and trapped being in a nest (a being trapped in and by the place where it was born and developed) conveys this connection. It also serves as a metaphor for those who grow up with abuse victims who remain trapped by these experiences, and who entrap the next generation by repeating aspects of the trauma experience within the family. The sense of futility and impotence is one that Lars and Yuri share and that the music and Yuri's mental images convey. The music bursts with passion, just as Lars and Yuri do.

There are parallels between Aras' and Lars' creative expressions. The novel's plot also moves both backwards and forwards in time and expresses moments of connection and (more frequent) moments of dissonance and misunderstanding between characters. There are undertones of violence, abuse, and chaos within and between characters, many of whom are chronically on the verge of dyscontrol. Yet the strong narrative and careful interweaving of the character's stories and lives lends structure to this story of trauma and chaos.

Artistic expression offers several possible ways to work through the sequela of trauma. One function that art can serve, and one that Aras seems to endorse through his novel and comments on his creative work, is to break through defensiveness or false narratives of the past.¹⁵ In the novel, Benny exposes unspoken family secrets through his art. He uses sculptures

¹⁴ Aras, *Fugue*, 32.

¹⁵ Aras, *Personal*.

to represent his parricide, carving a horse and youthful rider trampling a figure with his father's face. He also depicts the reason for murdering his father, the crime of incest, carving an older man having intercourse with a very young girl. Yuri uses sculpture to express ways he felt trapped by his abusive mother, his aloof father, and his own murderous rage, which disrupts his capacity for closeness. Lars expresses his own rage and violent impulses regarding his wife and Bronza's affair within the structure of his second fugue. In other writing, Aras has addressed ways alcoholism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and inter-generational family conflicts have impacted his own life.¹⁶ One purpose of his non-fiction as well as his novel, is to protest the tendency to approach this legacy with silence, untruths, or clinging to an idealized view of the past that does not allow critical appraisal.

Although this was not his primary purpose,¹⁷ in a novel otherwise full of violence, loss, loneliness, and despair, Aras also implicitly illustrates ways that artistic expression holds potential to enhance internal integration, offers expression of the heretofore unspeakable, and allows some way to connect otherwise alienated individuals to one another. A relationship with art connects

¹⁶ Aras, "Baptism."

¹⁷ As Aras expressed it (*Personal*): "My argument, if I should articulate one, is probably different [from your discussion of art as mode of internal integration]: Art that does not come from trauma or that does not critique and fight the universal monster just doesn't interest me, and I don't believe it has much value. The greatest art comes from that wound. This is especially true of music and sculpture, but an absolute cutting edge when it comes to literature. It's not merely that art heals. Yuri, Lars, Lita and Victoria tear holes in the space time because their pain wrestles out of a lair where it will kill its host if not released. They have no choice in the matter [...]. The amazing thing that happens when you shoot this god full of holes and watch him writhing in death, begging for mercy, is that a flower takes his place. That flower is available in every museum in every great city that has dedicated some portion of itself to the protection of universal beauty, of the spark that's inside everyone, that connects us to that power source I sit with when I create. It's life giving. It's a reason to expect yet another breath of air to be available."

many of the characters, and there are also important artistic mentor/teacher connections between characters in different generations. Characters who tend to be closed off, and to struggle with emotional expressiveness, find a voice through their art. This voice is directed both within and towards others. It establishes increased internal connectedness, expressing deep-seated feelings about the artist's situation and sense of his/her past. In this way, the artist begins to give expression to his/her traumatic history and experiences. Simultaneously, the artist's voice begins to convey aspects of that experience to others. Yuri's great uncle Benny, consumed with guilt over his parricide and over keeping the truth of her paternity from Gaia, hangs himself. Yuri creates a sculpture of Judas' suicide, giving Judas Benny's face. This conveys Yuri's sense of betrayal at Benny's abandoning him, as well as his empathy for Benny's sense of guilt and remorse. (Judas is a betrayer who ultimately hangs himself, but is also a crucial, intimate, and necessary player in Christ's passion.) Benny had also used sculptures to express one of his guilty secrets, his parricide, and Benny's father's secret crime of incest. It is these sculptures that allow the priest, Father Kilba, to infer the guilty secrets torturing Benny, who never tells anyone (even in the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation) what he witnessed or took part in before leaving Lithuania.

Lars' fugues communicate to Yuri's girlfriend Lita, who studies them with her guitar teacher. Listening to the CD, she traces the fugue's two voices, "one limp and gimpy, the other virile and violent;" she becomes aware of the two unintegrated aspects of Lars. In his composition, the voices are

extreme opposites that come together perfectly, the way a sharp knife could enter flesh and leave a perfect cut, the slice beautiful and clean as the flesh stained the blade.¹⁸

For Lita, this evokes memories of brushing her doll's hair so aggressively that it all came out, then tearing off the doll's limbs.

¹⁸ Aras, *Fugue*, 58.

She associates to these by imagining exacting revenge, stabbing the boy who impregnated and then abandoned her. Unlike other characters, however, she does not act on these impulses, instead preserving them as private fantasies while building a life with Yuri. As Yuri's art does with its more metaphoric and symbolic allusions to past trauma, Lita's ability to damage a doll, rather than hurting another person, and to imagine rather than actually exact revenge, demonstrates at least partial mastery of a painful past.

Sigmund Freud's thinking integrated scientific and humanistic perspectives. He loved literature; he read Cervantes as an adolescent and cited both Greek literature (the Oedipus myth) and Shakespeare (*Hamlet* and *Richard III*) in his scientific writings. In describing ways persons cope with (subjectively) frightening or overwhelming wishes or feelings, he argued that sublimation was the most effective defense available to us. Sublimation involves using one's creativity to re-work difficult thoughts or feelings and to express these in a less direct (and less aggressive) manner. The creative act allows the person to begin to "work through" issues that are conflictual to him or her.¹⁹ This working through process gradually impacts brain pathways, allowing the person to develop new, more adaptive responses to painful or frightening memories and feelings.²⁰ While this work may never completely render the issues 'harmless' to the person, the process does allow partial mastery of heretofore conflictual material so that it is less overwhelming, which in turn allows the person to process these matters in more nuanced and less distorted ways. Thus, an artist who uses words, movement, music, or a visual medium to give expression to his or her underlying issues begins an internal re-working which increases his or her adaptive capacities. In some instances, this touches chords in others, who find the artistic product moving or compelling. This is the process that Aras illustrates in the novel when Benny, Lars, and Yuri use artistic expression to allude to their most painful and traumatic

¹⁹ Freud, "Remembering."

²⁰ Van der Kolk, "Compulsion."

memories. At times, this allows them to avoid repeating the traumatic experience with their significant others. It also facilitates greater connection to those who resonate with their artistic creations. Based on my reading of his autobiographical writings, it seems possible that Aras has engaged in his own sublimation in writing his novel, in identification with his characters.²¹

Although this is not Aras' main conscious purpose, from my perspective, Aras' work illuminates ways that artistic expression offers a path toward integration. It is only by giving voice to the secret, the shameful, the heretofore unspeakable that internal integration can take place. Once this is achieved, there is less compulsive need to flee, to hide one's truth or avoid painful aspects of one's own identity. Addressing internal splits within the mind is a prerequisite for bridging gaps between people and ending the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Aras' bleak perspective is mitigated through the potential healing power of art.

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²¹ Aras, "Baptism."

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