



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 18 April 2020



1

book cover | 2020 | courtesy of the author



PAULO FARIA: THE STRUGGLE GOES ON (FIVE FRAGMENTS)

In People Waving to Someone Who Is Running Away, his second novel, Paulo Faria deals again with the question of the transmission of memories of the Colonial War, following the path of his first novel, A Strange War of Common Usage (Lisboa, Ítaca, 2016). From a perspective which is more fictional than his previous work, this second novel by Paulo Faria is structured around a journey of the narrator to Mozambique in search of a child his father had adopted during the war and left behind upon his return to Lisbon. This symbolic return to the African locations where his father fought is joined by other narrative streams dealing with the childhood, the love life and - a very significant element - the very condition as a father of Carlos, whose daughters will, in the end, also be recipients of the rags of that “apocalypse in low heat”, as the memory of the Colonial War is named.

In the five fragments reproduced here, Carlos openly assumes his condition of a son of the Portuguese empire, feeling not just as the heir of its wars, but as a protagonist of a new conflict. A more intimate conflict that, this time, is waged in the domain of writing, making use of a great number of warlike metaphors. It is through fiction that the son, knowingly usurping his father’s past, takes arms to reappropriate the memories of war, with the double goal of freeing his father and freeing himself. “The one who goes out to search for war already has a war within himself”, “it was not me who spilled blood in the first place, but now I am not capable of stopping”, says the narrator, perhaps announcing the future combats of Paulo Faria.



PAULO FARIA,
*PEOPLE WAVING TO SOMEONE
WHO IS RUNNING AWAY*

1

This land does not explain anything to me. It is a place where a thicker veil of distance isolates me from the others. A place where latent violence seems to radicalize all positions. A place where old conflicts are reenacted that time has left behind as an open wound. A place where there is no peace. Here, at first sight, everything is brutal, there are victims and hangmen. As a matter of fact, it is subtler. It is constantly necessary to decide if we want to be victims or hangmen. We may be victims now and hangmen within five minutes, or the opposite. Isabela Figueiredo says that there are innocent-innocent and guilty-innocent ones. She says there are victim-victims and guilty-victims. And she says that among the victims there are hangmen. My father was forced to come to war, but he came. The war ruined his life, but he fought the war. He hated the military, but he lay in bed with black women. He felt sorry for these people, but he went away and never came back here. He adopted Artur in the middle of the bush, but, when time came to leave, he left him behind and never, never spoke to me about him. He felt he was a victim of the war, of the military. The war stories he told were, more than narration, a long justification. It is not worthwhile to tell these people that I am the son of a victim-hangman. Here, in the eyes of these people, my father was just a hangman. Artur is a victim, there can be no doubt about that. That is why I came looking for him. Maybe I do not really want to find him. Maybe I am afraid that he has turned into a hangman. And me? I am a victim, of course. And a hangman, as well. This land, apparently so disjunctive, is, in the end, the location of the utmost dilution, the place where the superposition of the roles and the bodies, victim and hangman, innocent and guilty, catches the eye. I thought I was coming to Mozambique in search of the time when my father, hangman-victim, could still say with conviction that he was just a victim. Maybe, in the end, I came to cure myself of this longing for compartmentation. And to leave my dead here, if I can. (p. 34-35).



PAULO FARIA,
*PEOPLE WAVING TO SOMEONE
WHO IS RUNNING AWAY*

2

My brothers in arms were not the other. It was with them that I built the only complicity I am able to establish with other people, a distant, boneless and ephemeral empathy, a fixed-term esteem, a relationship where I am a beloved son who emigrated and lives far away, and they are my parents for a few hours, ties forged around a war I did not fight, but of which little by little I became a veteran by affinity. The war overseas functioned as an ideal matrix for this attachment of mine for things in second hand: an achievement of dubious glory, historically anachronic at the very moment it was taking place, with a controversial outcome - defeat by exhaustion, but no military defeat on the ground -, rejected or forgotten by those who did not participate in it, soiled by crimes of blood and lust, crucible of a not really secret fraternity, but governed by a specific language and specific codes. A melancholic and obscure saga my father chewed in solitude, refusing to take part in the battalion's reunions, not keeping contact with any of his comrades in arms. An apocalypse in slow fire of whose chronicle I became an heir. In sum, a place where I can be inside and outside at the same time, be a protagonist and an observer, leave the frontstage to others while not leaving the scene. A place where the first word is always the prerogative of others. A place where, after all, I savoured to the end the pleasure of being and not being at the same time. And, as the war it was, a fascinating and mysterious place, repelling and comfortable, a place of tyranny and sickly candour, of love, of unbridled madness, of brutality. Like my childhood, after all. And the truth is I felt wanted by the former combatants, you know, I felt they welcomed me with the joy of old craftsmen, saddlers or inlayers or knife-sharpeners, as they saw a committed new apprentice come forward, perhaps the last one to embrace that craft in the path to extinction, perhaps someone who would be capable to postpone for some more years the decay of those secrets, the fading out of the subtitles of those images. (p. 88-89).

4

3

The only thing remaining for me to explain to you is the most important reason, Amália, the reason that really made me not sleep a wink, the reason for that euphoric insomnia. It was the eager desire to outdo my father. I saw there, in that project, a possibility, out of the blue, to stand shoulder to shoulder with him, to repeat his gestures, to refine them, to take the pride of first place from him once and for all. I have photos where he can be seen vaccinating crowds of negroes, line after line of children and women, a throng of people as far as the eye can see. I know by heart how many people he vaccinated in a single day in Chicôco, in February 1968, because he took care to make a note of it in his diary: three hundred and one. Seven men, seventy women and two hundred twenty-four children. Three hundred



PAULO FARIA,
*PEOPLE WAVING TO SOMEONE
WHO IS RUNNING AWAY*

and one persons. A thing as exhausting as this had to be done, something that could translate into numbers, that would be measurable, palpable. “Don’t even think of failing”, I said to myself, in the light of the open fridge. After I had tamed my dead father in the pages of my novel, the moment had come to leave him behind in the world of the living. (p. 128-129)

4

I wrote my novel on the war to rob my father of the exclusive of the warlike narrative, to dethrone him, to write the book he was not able to write himself. To rewrite his war stories, to extirpate them from the ulterior lie. To ennoble him. I did it at the cost of the other veterans, who have seen their narratives reformulated, subordinated to the unhappiness of my father, usurped by me. I wrote my novel in order to, using the colonial war as a bait, tell the veterans another war, my war. The one who goes out to search for war already has a war within himself. Michael Herr wrote: “I think the Vietnam War was what we had, instead of a happy childhood.” (p. 156)

5

I gave the corporal Gamito a phone call to tell him I had met at the battalion’s lunch the fourth sub-lieutenant of company 121, Cristóvão Rosado, who, until that year, never had participated in those reunions and whose contact nobody had. He told me: “Is that so? You don’t say.” I asked him about my novel, if he was enjoying it. That was, after all, the goal of my phone call. I wanted to see him incarnate the character to whom I had given his name, I wanted him amazed, but happy, like someone who sees himself in the mirror for the first time after a successful plastic surgery. Instead, I was met by a heavy silence. As someone who is trying hard, he told me he had started reading the book and then had stopped. That now his wife was reading and occasionally told him certain things. There was a bitter note in his voice, a note of disgust.

– It looks as if you made some confusions in the book. My wife told me you wrote there that, in the *Vera Cruz*, in the return voyage from overseas, I wanted to buy Artur’s uniform from the captain of the company. And that he did not want to sell it to me. How can that be, if it was I who brought back Artur’s uniform? I have it here at home, I was the one who showed it to you, you must remember well.

I felt my construction cracking, falling apart. I tried to limit damage, told him that in my novel that scene takes place between Gamito and my father, not between Gamito and the captain, and that Gamito



PAULO FARIA,
*PEOPLE WAVING TO SOMEONE
WHO IS RUNNING AWAY*

does not try to buy the uniform of the boy, he tries to exchange it for something else. [...] I told him:

– I wrote a novel. I always said I was going to write a novel.

– Yes - he replied - but what matters is what remains for history. I have the impression that you did not tell things just as they happened.

I asked him to read the novel. As if the misunderstanding would result from the fact that he had heard the story second-hand, distorted by his wife's report.

– Read it, you'll see you are going to like it. You will see you are going to like your character.

He repeated to me several times:

– Please note that I do not want any central role. That is not my motivation.

He insisted:

– And you say there it was your father who convinced me not to desert, not to join the enemy's ranks? But I never spoke to your father about that, how can it be? You should know you were the first person with whom I talked about this matter.

– My method was just one - I told him, already with my back to the wall. - I didn't write anything that might not have happened. I didn't write anything that had no connection to reality.

This explanation did not convince even me. He must have sensed my forlornness, because the tone of his voice became milder. Still sounding disappointed, he said he would read the book, and, in the end, he invited me again for lunch at his home, sounding as someone who is reluctantly making up after having played havoc in a family discussion.

– I will be expecting you at my home before Christmas.

I said goodbye, I hung up. I came to the window, brooding over my novel. I do not repent anything I wrote. I am only sorry that the book did not fulfil its function. I thought it would give me peace, but the war does not stop, does not slow down, gives no truce. The only thing that remains is for me to go on telling the story, to cause new victims, to reopen old wounds, to prevent cicatrization. It was not me who spilled blood in the first place, but now I am not capable of stopping. It was not me who started the fire, I have my back against the wall. I start a counterfire, I sit down and suffocate. The struggle goes on. (p. 165-167)



PAULO FARIA,
*PEOPLE WAVING TO SOMEONE
WHO IS RUNNING AWAY*

Translated by **António Sousa Ribeiro**

Paulo Faria (Lisbon, 1967) is a writer and a literary translator. He has translated Cormac McCarthy, George Orwell, Don DeLillo, James Joyce, Charles Dickens and many others. His first novel, *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* (2016, Ítaca), addressed the deaf battles fought in the shadows of adult wars.

MEMOIRS is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624) and is hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.

