

## Preface to the paperback edition

The whole place always seemed to be in the dark. It was as if the electric lights were turned off, always turned off, even though dusk was over so they should have been turned on yet nobody was turning them on and nobody noticed either ... part of normality here was this constant, unacknowledged struggle to see.

—Anna Burns, *Milkman*<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, the Belfast-born, Glasgow-based artist Cathy Wilkes represented Britain at the Venice Biennale. The exhibition – a series of cryptic sculptural tableaux, extending through the six rooms of the British pavilion – was an especially haunting manifestation of Wilkes’s demanding, enigmatic art. Entering the first of the adjoining galleries, visitors encountered a group of ghostly figures: pale, plastic-and-plaster statues, gaunt approximations of child-height human forms, each one with a pronounced, pregnant-looking belly. The significance of these strange, frail presences was not clear; their apparent, shared focus, however, was a broad, semi-transparent cuboid at the centre of the space, an austere object fashioned from light timber beams and fine muslin fabric – a simple structure that might have been a large, raised bed or a modest, makeshift sepulcher. On and around this plain, partially see-through box, assorted found and prepared objects had been placed like votive offerings: twigs, berries, dried flowers, a preserved dragonfly, blank pages. This low-key evidence of idiosyncratic accumulation was consistent with Wilkes’s ongoing artistic interest in collecting and re-contextualising non-precious, everyday things; but the installation’s overall appearance was, at the same time, stringently minimal, its abiding atmosphere suggestive of loss and absence. Notably, no lighting was used in the pavilion’s galleries. Depending on the time of one’s visit, or on a particular day’s weather, the rooms might have been brightened by Venetian sunshine or cast in crepuscular gloom. Under these shifting conditions, Wilkes’s ascetic scenes variously evoked tender togetherness or funereal sorrow. The spectral figures seemed petrified in a state of silent mourning, perpetual striving, or unending, submissive observance. Moreover, almost everything presented in the refined exhibition spaces was displayed below eye level – so, inevitably,

directing our gaze downwards. In the context of the building's high-ceilinged grandeur – Britain's neo-classical Pavilion is a converted nineteenth-century structure, perched on a commanding, elevated site in the Venice *Giardini* — Wilkes's installation implicitly pledged allegiance to the lowly and the homely. Her work appeared to attend, with meditative intensity, to situations of domestic love and labour, to the struggles of mothering and care-giving, just as it also alluded, in elliptical, poetic terms, to both the pains of grieving and the oppressive predicament of those who remain marginalised, forgotten, anonymous and invisible. (As Laura McLean Ferris has written, Wilkes's art 'elicits a deep form of attention that defies the tyranny of forgetting, overlooking, not noticing'.<sup>2</sup>)

Ascending into the British Pavilion on this occasion – walking up the hill on which the building sits, climbing the steps towards the gallery entrance, passing between tall Roman columns and beneath the imposing, imperial 'GRAN BRETAGNA' sign – was, then, to be brought down to earth. This was an exhibition characterised by melancholic gravity: its mood a mix of mysterious, unsettling sadness and troubled, repressive silence. Typical of Wilkes's work to date, but conceived and curated with acute sensitivity to its architectural and institutional context, this 'national' representation – one of the few British pavilion exhibitions ever to have featured a non-*English* artist – was powerfully resonant and discreetly subversive as an artistic and ambassadorial 'statement'. The discomfiting modesty and tense, perplexing intimacy of Cathy Wilkes's work – with its vision of stripped back, eked-out, barely-there existence, a state of reality suspended between life and death – transformed the established, genteel setting of the British Pavilion into an ambiguous, haunted place. It became a home for lost, sorrowful spirits and quietly uncanny objects, a zone of eerie uncertainty and anxious, negative space. 'Great Britain', thus represented amongst the national pavilions, became a peculiarly uncomfortable, *unheimlich* realm. If, in broad terms, the purpose of the national pavilions is promotional and celebratory, advancing the cultural reputation of an individual nation on an international stage, Wilkes's installation participated in this diplomatic endeavour by focusing, obliquely, on Britain's ghosts: on the figures and forces of repression that might complicate any confidently declared vision of nationhood and trouble any restrictive, exclusive construct of national identity.

At the official launch of the pavilion in May 2019, Wilkes and her curatorial team welcomed Northern Irish writer Anna Burns to formally open the exhibition. Burns is the author of the 2018 Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Milkman*: a remarkable, *sui generis* account of Belfast life in the late 1970s. Focusing on a young woman's struggle to sustain an independent sense of self within a claustrophobically close-knit community – while being stalked by a sinister older man, a leading figure within a locally dominant, though un-named, paramilitary organisation – *Milkman* develops a uniquely disquieting, artistically courageous vision of Northern Ireland during the Troubles. At the novel's narrative heart is the extreme, exhausting absurdity – the routine horror and maddening comedy – of everyday reality in this society of incessant, micro-political pressure and unrelenting sectarian suspicion. But *Milkman* is also – in a manner that might correspond with the

oblique, insistently uneasy art of Cathy Wilkes – a story of reality transformed. *Milkman* both augments and abandons the familiar history of the Troubles. The book imaginatively revises the remembered, day-to-day experience of living in a Republican area of Belfast – not named in the narrative, but based on Ardoyne, where Burns grew up – in part by rejecting accepted Troubles terminology and instead adopting an alternative lexicon of personal and political reality: a new, idiosyncratic vocabulary, at once oddly precise and appropriately evasive. Characters are assigned plot designations and social roles rather than actual names: ‘Middle Sister’; ‘Maybe Boyfriend’. Republican paramilitaries and their supporters become ‘renouncers of the state’. Loyalists become ‘defenders of the state’. The story’s most threatening character, the main figure of intimidating, abusive male power, is known only by the benign, misleading nickname of ‘Milkman’. It is, thus, a work of disconcerting literary invention: estranging and exciting in its audacious transformation of vernacular conventions. Equally, of course, it is a book borne from an historical situation characterised by traumatised evasion and enforced reticence: it hints at the infinite dangers of daring to speak, act, think or see freely; it explores the risks of transgressing – intentionally or not – within a community defined by paranoid and punitive monitoring of speech, behaviour, point-of-view. The defining principle of daily survival in this environment is, as the often-quoted Seamus Heaney poem has it, ‘whatever you say, say nothing’. (In 2018, the US writer Patrick Radden Keefe published a history of the Troubles years that contained new reporting on unsolved cases such as the abduction and murder of mother-of-ten Jean McConville in 1972; the book’s title, prompted by the socio-political conditions of the conflict and the drawn-out silences of its aftermath, was *Say Nothing*). In *Milkman*, the strain of saying nothing is intensified by the anxiety of *seeing nothing*: The normality of the Troubles, the narrator tell us, involved, a ‘constant unacknowledged struggle to see’.<sup>3</sup> This enduring difficulty, this ‘distorted quality to the light’ was, she says, ‘to do with the hurts that had come’; it was related to ‘the loss of hope and the absence of trust and with a mental incapacitation over which nobody seemed willing or able to prevail’.<sup>4</sup> If this struggle is, as Burns so beautifully and frighteningly relates, one essential story of the Troubles, it is also an emphatic feature of the painful, prolonged aftermath – and of the anxious artistic responses to that problematic predicament, to that condition of coming after without ever quite moving on.

By asking Anna Burns to speak at the launch of her traumatically tight-lipped presentation at the Venice Biennale – an installation designed to be seen without customary, comforting levels of illumination – Wilkes and team may have sought, implicitly and partially, to locate the anxieties of *representing Britain* in relation to the lasting silences and historical erasures of the Northern Ireland conflict. In her opening speech, Burns expressed her excitement at ‘being able to celebrate ... the work of a fellow Belfast woman’<sup>5</sup>; Wilkes’s Northern Irish background was thus brought, briefly, into the foreground of a downbeat and challenging, but deeply humane, British Pavilion exhibition: a solemn display of artworks that invited empathy towards those who have been, or might yet be, *forgotten, overlooked, not*

noticed. The presence of Anna Burns – inspired, no doubt, by the phenomenal public impact of *Milkman* – signaled an appreciable artistic affinity. But this might also have been understood as an occasion of unspoken, non-specific political solidarity at a time of deepening, Brexit-related division and dangerous, xenophobic belligerence across the UK. (Both of these Belfast women have lived for many years on the other side of the Irish sea: Wilkes in Scotland and Burns in England). In that moment, in front of the stable, establishment structure of Britain’s permanent, neo-classical pavilion in the Venice Giardini – at the unveiling of an exhibition that was, in Burns’s words, ‘haunting and powerful and full of mystery’<sup>6</sup> – it was possible to see, or to imagine we could see, lingering after-effects of the Troubles, fraught legacies of Britain’s complex cultural and political relationship with Ireland, coming into newly sensitive, suddenly urgent visibility.

In the wake of the Brexit vote – amid the ongoing storm of its confusions and corruptions – there have been other such high-profile examples of post-Troubles reflection, direct and indirect, in contemporary art and culture. Helen Cammock’s *The Long Note* (2018) – an ambitious essay-film commissioned by Derry’s Void Gallery, focusing on the under-recognised contribution of women to Northern Ireland’s civil rights campaigns – was, for instance, chosen as one of the four winners of the 2019 Turner Prize. Once again, as with *Milkman*, a major British-based prize for ground-breaking art was given to a work concerned with revisiting the history of Northern Ireland and with revising that history in feminist terms. Significantly, moreover, the decision to award the 2019 Turner Prize to all four shortlisted artists came about in response to a request from the artists themselves that they be considered as a collective – so that ‘at this time of political crisis in Britain and much of the world, when there is already so much that divides and isolates people and communities’, they could ‘use the occasion of the prize to make a collective statement in the name of commonality, multiplicity and solidarity’.<sup>7</sup> Helen Cammock’s film – her subjective artistic attempt to make visible experiences of solidarity that have too often been overlooked – has achieved valuable prominence at a time when ‘political crisis’ in the north of Ireland is, once again, the disturbing norm. In 2019, progress seems terminally suspended – and devastating regress feels increasingly inevitable. More than twenty years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, many of the unresolved disputes that lay buried beneath the ambiguous language of that precious and precarious multi-party accord have resurfaced and intensified. The shock and chaos of Brexit has made productive dialogue between Northern Irish politicians, and between elected leaders in Britain and Ireland, significantly more difficult. The questionable role adopted by the Democratic Unionist Party since the 2017 Westminster election – as confidence-and-supply upholders of a fragile, riven, substantially unscrupulous Conservative government – has served to further unbalance and impede negotiation back in Belfast. Other issues, other disasters, have – perhaps permanently – damaged power-sharing relationships. Ongoing political dysfunction has had, nonetheless, diverse and unpredictable consequences. In October 2019, with no active Stormont administration in place – following the breakdown

of devolved institutions in 2017 – the cross-party majority of socially conservative Assembly members was unable to prevent the implementation of British government legislation bringing the region's outdated, reactionary laws on marriage equality and reproductive choices into alignment with the rest of the UK. Suddenly, at this point of relief and renewal for those whose rights and identities had long been aggressively overlooked, a light was turned on. At other times, of course, the lights have dimmed – and many have found themselves returning to the darkness described by Anna Burns, experiencing a 'loss of hope and the absence of trust', sensing 'a mental incapacitation over which nobody seemed ... able to prevail'.<sup>8</sup> Writing in 2016, the journalist Lyra McKee highlighted the mental health repercussions of political entropy, noting that in the extended period of supposed 'peace', the suicide rate across the North of Ireland had doubled. McKee's work as a reporter and commentator focused on the troubled lives of the post-Troubles era: on the lost, sorrowful spirits of her own historical moment. Her peers, born in the 1990s, she said, were 'the Ceasefire Babies': 'the Good Friday Agreement generation, destined to never witness the horrors of war but to reap the spoils of peace. The spoils just never seemed to reach us'.<sup>9</sup> On one of the darkest days of recent years, 18<sup>th</sup> April 2019, Lyra McKee was shot and killed by a dissident Republican gunman while reporting on a riot in Derry. Her funeral was attended by the Irish President and Taoiseach, by the British Prime Minister and by the leaders of all the local political parties. In the months since, despite renewed pressure on these political representatives to properly honour the death of this brilliant young woman, little progress has been made. Life in Northern Ireland remains in a state of suspension: caught in a time of coming after, without quite moving on.

—Declan Long, December 2019

### Notes

- 1 Anna Burns, *Milkman* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 89.
- 2 Laura McLean Ferris, 'Cathy Wilkes: MOMA Ps1', *Artforum*, January 2018.
- 3 Burns, *Milkman*, p. 89.
- 4 Burns, *Milkman*, pp. 89–90.
- 5 Anna Burns, speech given at the opening of the British pavilion exhibition, Venice Biennale, May 2019.
- 6 Burns, British pavilion speech, 2019.
- 7 Statement by the artists shortlisted for the 2019 Turner Prize; see Mark Brown, 'Turner Prize awarded four ways after artists' plea to judges', *Guardian* (3<sup>rd</sup> December 2019).
- 8 Burns, *Milkman*, p. 90.
- 9 Lyra McKee, 'Suicide of the ceasefire babies', *Mosaic* (19<sup>th</sup> January 2016), Available at <https://mosaicscience.com/story/conflict-suicide-northern-ireland> [last accessed 03/12/19].