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The work of representation and representations of work: the feminist experimental poetics of Catherine Walsh and Ellen Dillon

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses how Catherine Walsh and Ellen Dillon employ a shared feminist experimental poetics to address notions of female labour in contemporary Ireland. It argues that both subscribe to a contemporary feminist consensus, outlined in Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism*, that neoliberalism has co-opted the ideals of second-wave feminism, and redeployed them as spurious evidence that "there is no longer any place for feminism in contemporary political culture." Both poets challenge this latter assertion, positioning a distinctly female form of traditional Irish labour – butter-making – as a site in which to reclaim lost feminist ideals and forms of social solidarity. Beginning with an account of how Ireland has transitioned to the logic of capital while paradoxically exploiting the ideals of the social movements it necessarily suppresses, it then shows how Walsh uses a feminist experimental poetics in *Optic Verve* (2009) to simulate the experience of the Irish female subject in a harsh "post-feminist" neoliberal landscape, while gesturing towards lost female forms of labour and commoning. It then posits that Dillon's *Butter Intervention* (2022) seeks to expose the neoliberal erasure of feminist labour struggles from Irish history, as well as present ways to repatriate them within a contemporary social consciousness.

KEYWORDS

Catherine Walsh; Ellen Dillon; post-feminism; labour; experimental poetry; Celtic Tiger

Neo-liberal consensualism [. . .] has voided the public sphere in Ireland of dissenting voices.
Michael Cronin, "Speed Limits," 65

the liquid voice flows clear, almost
imperceptibly, intangibly, immaterially into
the open channels of our ears. It does all it
can to effect frictionless transmission / to
slip down easy / sourceless evanescent

Ellen Dillon, *Butter Intervention*, 129

The first decade of this century saw the emergence of a consensus within the field of Irish cultural theory, captured in the above Cronin quotation. Ostensibly, it consisted of the assertion that the modernising Irish state's adoption of a neoliberal economic system, and its success in manufacturing consent for such a system among the populace, led to the effective silencing of adherents to alternative ideological positions. Cronin calls it "neoliberal consensualism," while Conor McCarthy offers further insight into how, as Dillon

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puts it above, it “flows clear, almost/imperceptibly, intangibly, immaterially into/the open channels of our ears:” “the blockage to critical views of Irish modernisation has worked on the level of ideology, where a particular set of ideas has been accepted as ‘common sense,’ and very little space is available in which to assess the adequacy of this theory to the Irish case, or to suggest alternatives.”¹ Extending the persistence of such “common sense” into the cultural sphere specifically – culture, in this instance, defined parsimoniously as “the way people represent the world in which they live” – Michel Peillon argued in 2002 that in Ireland “culture no longer provides the basis for the critique of society.”²

This essay argues that in recent years, and particularly on the far side of the financial crash of 2008, female Irish poets have avoided this neoliberal gag of “common sense,” innovating aesthetic methods of not only critiquing contemporary Irish society, but also reclaiming hitherto obscured female labour traditions in Ireland which directly contradict the neoliberal economic model. Specifically, it analyses the ways in which these poetries expose within neoliberal Ireland the machinery of what critics like Angela McRobbie have dubbed “post-feminism.”³ McRobbie characterises post-feminism, or “the undoing of feminism,” as “a ‘double movement,’ [whereby] gender retrenchment is secured, paradoxically, through the wide dissemination of discourses of female freedom.”⁴ It entails a neoliberal sleight-of-hand: the co-option of once radically oppositional feminist ideals by the state into its regime of tacit acquiescence and “common sense.” As McRobbie writes, the “political issues associated with feminism are understood to be now widely recognised and responded to (they have become feminist common sense) with the effect that there is no longer any place for feminism in contemporary political culture.”⁵ The poetry under scrutiny in this essay recognises and challenges this paradox in contemporary Irish society, seeking by turns to articulate it and generate counterpoints to it. As such, I begin with an account of how neoliberal consensualism operates in Ireland, how it thrives on such paradoxes, and how it subtly maintains its consent.

From there, I compare the feminist poetries of two contemporary Irish poets, Catherine Walsh and Ellen Dillon, as representatives of a contemporary Irish aesthetics which looks beyond the facile “common sense” of post-feminism in search of a renewed, viable brand of Irish feminist praxis. I argue that Walsh’s 2009 book-length poem, *Optic Verve*, is designed to simulate the experience of womanhood within the post-feminist landscape of neoliberal Ireland, replete with all the incumbent if subtle hindrances and micro-aggressions which accompany it. Building on this idea, I then contend that Dillon’s 2022 book of interspersed prose and poetry, *Butter Intervention*, contests the logic of post-feminism by repatriating within an Irish cultural and social consciousness a buried history of “women’s work” predicated upon notions of solidarity. Walsh’s *Optic Verve* assesses the adequacy of common-sense post-feminism in Ireland, measuring it against the subtle but persistent gender injustices experienced by contemporary Irish women, while Dillon’s *Butter Intervention* uses Walsh’s foundation to “suggest alternatives” in the form of “COMMUNITY [...] SHARED DIFFERENCE, NOT ENFORCED SAMENESS.”⁶ The common denominator to both – aside from sharing an “experimental” poetics, to be defined later – is a preoccupation with an obscured legacy of community and solidarity enshrined in a form of historically female work in Ireland: butter-making. Whereas Walsh incorporates such work into *Optic Verve* as a lost repository of anti-capitalist and feminist solidarity, Dillon explores ways of reclaiming it as a bulwark against the neoliberal realities of contemporary labour in Ireland.

The paradoxes of Irish modernisation

In the preface to his monograph *Inside the Celtic Tiger: The Irish Economy and the Asian Model* (1998), Denis O'Hearn highlights the proliferation of a misleading "received wisdom:"

namely, that the southern Irish economy became a miracle economy during the 1990s and was practically transformed, in half a decade, from one of the most peripheral and poorest regions of the European Union to a fully participating and wealthy member of the European core.⁷

Within this "miracle economy" thesis, he argues, exist "many associated assertions that have also, too often, been taken as social fact," chief among them the meritocratic principle that economic change created "so many high-tech jobs and opportunities that prosperity was there for the taking – if one was willing and motivated enough to garner the necessary skills."⁸ Post-crash hindsight thoroughly debunks such a myth and reveals the extent of the social inequality which persisted beneath this thin veneer of financial prosperity. The question that remains, however, is how was such a utopian, superficial impression of Celtic Tiger Ireland allowed to take root in the first place? Emphasising the peculiar dearth of critical thought surrounding such received wisdom, O'Hearn points out that

Many former radicals, trade unionists and social activists either became swept up in the "feel-good factor" or became resigned to the inevitability of it all after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of history and the global failures of national liberation movements. For Ireland, neoliberalism and European membership were now simple facts of life where a decade before they had been the focus of struggle.⁹

Whether through complicity or apathy, the socially active sections of Irish society, whose struggles depended upon networks of solidarity, became neutralised and isolated by encroaching neoliberalism and its attendant cult of individualism. As Joe Cleary corroborates, the "miracle" of the Celtic Tiger was "accompanied by an increasing subordination of society on the island as a whole to the cultural norms of a neo-liberal economic order that has actually hollowed out democracy, [and] aggravated social inequality," rendering "the constellation of forces that constitutes the left [...] compelled to assume a completely defensive posture, its energies almost entirely devoted to conserving social democracy and public provision from further neo-liberal assault."¹⁰ This subordination of Irish society to a neoliberal economic order has led to a number of intriguing paradoxes.

Firstly, as O'Hearn points out in 1998, "Ireland, too often familiar with poverty in the past is, ironically, now facing some of the worst problems of inequality and alienation *because* of prosperity."¹¹ This is perhaps best explained by recourse to another, more local irony entailed in the rise of the Celtic Tiger. One of the most important events in the prelude to Ireland's economic prosperity in the 1990s was the multilateral adoption of a policy of social partnership by the state, major employer groups, and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). Enshrined in the first instance in former Taoiseach Charles Haughey's *Programme for National Recovery* (1987), social partnership mandated strike and wage moderation (pay increases below inflation), and the freezing of collective bargaining as necessary evils in the resuscitation of an ailing economy, effectively defanging the Irish labour movement and thereby ensuring "the increase of social inequality."¹²

The “myth” of social partnership is that it was marketed as “a system whereby dynamic economic growth can be reconciled with a policy that advocates social justice and equity,” when in practice the result was anything but reconciliation. As Kieran Allen puts it, “social partnership was highly successful in co-opting potential sources of opposition to the growing inequality in the Celtic Tiger [...] a more appropriate way of carrying through a neo-liberal project in a country with strong unions.”¹³ What appears to be a genuinely benevolent social initiative turns out to be just another example of how “neo-liberal consensualism [...] has voided the public sphere in Ireland of dissenting voices” – this time by wresting bargaining power from the unions via empty promises of social equality, all in the name of so-called “prosperity.”

As for other dissenting voices in contemporary Ireland, McRobbie and other feminist theorists have detected a similarly pernicious, paradoxical subversion of contemporary feminism under the aegis of neoliberal consensualism. Much like the “feel-good factor” of apparent prosperity and the empty “promise” of social justice and equality entailed in the subordination of social activist groups in Ireland to a neoliberal economic order, the “feminist common sense” that McRobbie identifies allows for the persistence of gender injustices and patriarchal norms:

These are easily overlooked, or else a blind eye is turned to them, by those who are well versed in sexual politics, but who are now weary and perhaps persuaded by the high-visibility tropes of freedom currently attached to the category of young women.¹⁴

This weariness or tacit acceptance by those “well versed in sexual politics” – not unlike O’Hearn’s complicit or resigned “former radicals, trade unionists and social activists” – is what has ushered in the “double movement” of post-feminism. Rosalind Gill, Elisabeth Kelan, and Christina Scharff frame such a paradox as the process through which “neoliberalism may in fact be colonizing feminism, ‘making it over’ in ways that render it safe and unchallenging for corporate culture,” emphasising the extent to which economic advancement is once again the sole objective, masquerading as a campaign for social justice.¹⁵ The procedure and objective here is the same as those hidden behind discourses of universal opportunity and social equality within the Celtic Tiger economic model: namely, to absorb and thereby render redundant those aspects of social democracy which stifle the bald pursuit of profit.

It is fitting, then, that Sinéad Kennedy should interrogate “the realities of the Celtic Tiger for Irish women,” effectively unearthing from a buried narrative of social “progress” the overlooked and counterintuitive traces of post-feminism in action in the newly prosperous state.¹⁶ Just as McRobbie emphasises that the most damaging if subtle effects of post-feminism are achieved “in the name of modernisation,” specifically neoliberal or late capitalist modernisation, Kennedy foregrounds a “consensus among political commentators and academics that the shift towards a more liberal and secular Ireland is the inevitable result of the process of modernisation or a result of the liberalisation inspired by the European Union.”¹⁷ In both cases, “modernisation” is nothing more than a buzzword like prosperity, opportunity, or social partnership, a smokescreen deployed to make economic policies which promote individualism look like socially democratic, community-oriented initiatives. Kennedy offers a perceptive alternative to such evasive logic:

the changes that have occurred in Irish society over the past ten years [1993–2003] can be better understood if they are viewed in terms of the shifts in patterns of economic production. Changes in capitalism have resulted in a transformation of [...] the lives of Irish women.¹⁸

The implication here is that such changes and resultant transformations, when viewed as modalities of neoliberal economic production, are a far cry from feminisms' liberatory ideals, or what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the "pretences of equality," entailed in the "liberal and secular" narrative of Irish modernisation.¹⁹

What sets the post-crash work of Walsh and Dillon apart from that of many of their peers is the extent to which it registers the subtle distinction that Kennedy establishes here. It recognises the fine line between economic and social advancement and understands that one is achieved in contemporary Ireland at the expense of the other. While this dichotomy informs the content of both Walsh and Dillon's poetry in important ways, it is also fundamental to the formal decisions taken by both. It dictates what is and is not available to each – be it certain linguistic registers hijacked by what Walsh calls the "language [...] of commerce and international trade," certain speaker positions, or certain forms of political reclamation.²⁰ For want of a better term, it is what makes the post-crash work of Walsh and Dillon "experimental."

An "experimental" feminist poetics

Both Walsh and Dillon work within what is often termed an "experimental" tradition in contemporary Irish poetry. Although such nomenclature often obscures more than it clarifies, its use in the context of this essay is very specific. David Lloyd contends that the term "all too easily suggests an arbitrary play with formal possibilities for their own sake, abstracted from any motivating engagement with the social conditions that shape its essential material, language, in both its sensuous and its signifying aspects."²¹ I retain the term experimental on the basis that it encompasses both sides of Lloyd's definition simultaneously: namely, the play with formal possibilities as part of an engagement with the social conditions that shape both poets' essential material – language. What makes this work experimental, in other words, is how it enacts formal play to emulate the complex role assumed by language within contemporary society – reflected in the feminist theories that both poets are drawing from in their writing.

Linda Kinnahan's retention of the term experimental in her own literary criticism is instructive on this front. For her, the experimental mode exists as one side of a binary, the other being what she calls the "expressive mode," which bespeaks a female lyric tradition made possible, she contends, by the advances of second-wave feminism. The basis of the latter is the communication of "women's experiences in women's voices," insofar as such perspectives have until recently been suppressed in patriarchal society.²² This is contrasted with an experimental mode which is sceptical of such an "accessible language of reportage." The hallmark of such a poetics is its explicit alignment with the rubric of a more contemporary feminist praxis predicated on linguistic scepticism: "language and its representational norms and structures become sites of investigation, resulting in poetics that necessarily put the authentic self under question [...] mediated and determined by the linguistic and cultural codes available."²³ Rather than assuming rightful

ownership and use of a previously denied register of expression, this experimental poetics instead interrogates the possibility that such use is a trap – a new and subtle way of reclaiming ownership of its user.

The dichotomy between these two female poetic modes – between that which takes language as pre-given on the back of the achievements of second-wave feminism, and that which warily extends a feminist poststructuralist theory of language into a poetic medium – mirrors the juxtaposition of post-feminism and feminism in contemporary society. On the one hand, the expressive poetic mode bases its “assumptions” around the availability of “an accessible language of reportage” capable of “expressing authentic womanhood” on the fact that feminism has effectively served its purpose and therefore run its course. On the other hand, the experimental seeks to maintain sensitivity to the possibility of persistent “re-instatement of gender hierarchies through new and subtle forms of resurgent patriarchal power,” in spite of the saturation in contemporary culture of “discourses of female freedom.”²⁴ We might even call the former mode a poetics of post-feminist common sense, when contrasted with the latter’s rigorous insistence on framing “language and its representational norms and structures [as] sites of investigation,” as opposed to undisputed sites of female reclamation and empowerment.

An analysis of Walsh’s book-length poem *Optic Verve, a commentary* (2009), as well as some of her earlier work, reveals an experimental poetics of this nature which translates certain precepts of feminist theory into poetic devices. *Optic Verve* is a generally unstructured diatribe which code-switches between, among other things, social commentary and the private anxieties of “an artistic self and its importance to mind in a/world before ever actually beginning to get near/producing something.”²⁵ Its dominant mode is a febrile and unrelenting collision of linguistic fragments whose sense is perpetually disrupted: “a scarcely partitioned jumble of genres and languages” which Lloyd calls “stutterance.”²⁶ As Claire Bracken derives from the text holistically, “one of the main targets of *Optic Verve* is the narrative of neo-liberal progress so central to Ireland’s twenty-first century political economies,” insofar as it is a “narrative,” a convenient fiction designed to replace “community [. . .] a functioning thriving way of life” with the modern female neoliberal subject, an individualised “cul/tivated product.”²⁷ In Bracken’s words, *Optic Verve* powerfully enacts “an exposure of the hypocrisies of Ireland’s neo-liberal politics, with its aggressive exclusions of [. . .] communities from conceptualizations of what constitutes the nation.”²⁸ Walsh’s work simulates the female experience of life constrained by such aggressive exclusion which, according to Kinnahan, is rendered via “the theoretically informed rejection of the lyric speaker [which] is tested through centralizing gender’s relationship to language, representation, and form, enacting a feminist experimentalism.”²⁹ The deft balance and interplay between these elements – the idiosyncratic experimental form, the wider social backdrop only intermittently perceptible, and the mediation of carefully considered feminist theory – is what unlocks entirely novel depictions of female work in contemporary Ireland in *Optic Verve*.

The loss of whole languages: Walsh’s *Optic Verve*

Out of one of the early blocks of incongruous linguistic fragments of *Optic Verve* emerges the following “luminous moment” of near clarity: “—world of want and world of plenty – she was/consequently free to live, naturally—”³⁰ This rather sets the tone of *Optic Verve* in

one regard, insofar as this notion of freedom, and particularly female freedom (“she”), is one which suddenly flickers from within the text time and again:

I remember that feeling, excitement,
discovery, speculation. The realisation that the world I knew was not
a fixed unit in stasis, or the same as anyone else’s. Freedom.³¹

Both of these early invocations share a sense of naivety and childlike wonder, from the half-rhyme, nursery-rhyme quality of the first to the implication that the second is a distant memory. Isolating and following this thread of freedom through the text – following Walsh’s assertion that “[a] writer draws webs of connections,/interconnections” – we find that the innocence of these fragments very quickly gives way to experience, however.³²

Midway through the work we find the following passage, which develops this freedom theme while also affording a glimpse of the formal play entailed in the text’s “stutterance:”

advantage as women	expanded
of the workforce	better benefits
enables	children to school;
a fact	facilitates
in the service sector	represented
significantly	no change ³³

Resembling a collage of words and phrases cribbed from a boastful government report on women in the workplace, any degree of sense in this passage only accrues by a kind of haphazard word association. Emphatic terms like “advantage,” “expanded,” “enables,” and “facilitates” constellate around “women” and “workforce” to adumbrate a sense of opportunity and enhanced female freedom. The only piece of relational or continuous sense across the divide of this passage, however, is the closing sentiment: “represented/significantly no change,” which undermines the already tenuous construction of a positive image of increased representation of women in the workforce. This speaks to McRobbie’s theory of “the visibility of the well-educated working girl” as an exemplar of post-feminist logic ironically undoing the hard-won achievements of feminism: “employment play[s] this role of re-designating young women as subjects of capacity who will refrain from challenging existing gender hierarchies as they come forward to occupy a position of visibility.”³⁴ The fact that increased “visibility” via employment is predicated on tacitly allowing for the persistence of “existing gender hierarchies” ensures what Walsh refers to as “no change.” Such freedom is, once more, merely a neoliberal illusion.

This critique of post-feminist logic carries over onto the following page in *Optic Verve*:

language of regression shored up
under authoritarian banners
of liberation movements liberating
forces hardly a misnomer while a
contradiction in terms misinformed workers
abused workers regimes running on
the poverty of masses the
ignorance of underdeveloped
mind fears difference
identity politics needing redressing
readdressing soundbites³⁵

Yet again, the syntax of this passage does not ensure immediate comprehension, but certain ideas do stand out. The first is this notion that the “language of regression” is “shored up/under *authoritarian* banners/of liberation movements liberating,” which carries over Walsh’s sceptical view of contemporary post-feminist conceptions of women’s freedom as papering over a policy of “no change” to existent gender hierarchies. The incongruity between regressive language emblazoned on “authoritarian banners” on the one hand, and the platonic ideal of the liberation movement on the other—“a/contradiction in terms”—reiterates the sense that what McRobbie calls “high-visibility tropes of freedom currently attached to the category of young women” are instrumentalised by the neoliberal state as a means of ensuring “no change.” These are the “regimes running on/ the poverty of masses,” preying on their “ignorance” of what is really going on. The result is “misinformed workers” and “abused workers” who have put their faith in “soundbites” instead of organised ideological struggle. This is how post-feminism works within the neoliberal economic model, blocking women from meaningful gender equality via the compelling lie of “freedom:” “fouling in the guise/of fair play,” as Walsh puts it.³⁶ Such is the inevitable result when “[m]uch needed and campaigned for policies of social inclusion and equal rights are being implemented here via government departments,” as Walsh renders it more explicitly later in the text.³⁷

This transition from innocence to experience under the sign of female “freedom” exemplifies the attempt in *Optic Verve* to represent and simulate the travails of a committed feminist as she moves through a contemporary post-feminist and neoliberal Ireland. The content addresses the post-feminist process of individualisation while the form, with its radical attenuation of linguistic coherence and eloquence, enacts a kind of disarticulation. Such a feminist experimental poetics did not originate in *Optic Verve*, however, but was already in development in Walsh’s earlier work, *Pitch* (1994). Similar to *Optic Verve* in its longform structure, wide-ranging subject matter, and resistance to easy comprehension in narrative terms, *Pitch* is equally committed to developing and problematising a poetic means of representing women in Irish society. One passage in particular indicates Walsh’s early sensitivity to the process of individualisation as a mode of post-feminist mastery over the female subject:

losing prove
worth

her name mud
[. . .]

returned ticket less losing her
name instance failure a cul
tivated product

constraints placed upon an individual reluctance
to undertake what do not appear to have been
choices rightly termed as such³⁸

This operates almost as a microcosm of the neoliberal technology of female subject production in post-feminism. As per the logic of neoliberalism and by extension post-feminism, the female subject here marks out a site of loss – of name, of entitlement (“ticket less”), of choice – which in turn, paradoxically, “prove[s]/worth.” The surrender of

agency is reconfigured as a means of imbuing value – as Walsh renders it in the stammer of *Optic Verve*, “wives and daughters a value.”³⁹ McRobbie writes of the post-feminist subject who “has benefited from the equal opportunities now available to her” and is thereby “mobilised as the embodiment of the values of the new meritocracy:” “[t]he girl emerges across a range of social and cultural spaces as a subject worthy of investment.”⁴⁰ In Walsh’s phrase, she becomes similarly monetised: “a cultivated product,” using the enjambment here as a provocative suggestion that such commodification is either a dead end or a kind of genocide. As the concluding fragment illustrates, it involves a coercive substitution of genuine agency and free will with external “constraints” which force the unwilling female “individual” into undertaking “what do not appear to have been/choices rightly termed as such.” Down to the very terminology itself, this anticipates exactly what McRobbie refers to as “choice,” via “individualisation,” as “a modality of constraint:” “The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the *right* choices.”⁴¹ What is the difference, after all, between the *right* choices and what do not appear to have been choices rightly termed as such?

The commodification of the female neoliberal subject is complemented in *Optic Verve* by the commodification of femininity in contemporary Ireland. Once again this has precedent in Walsh’s oeuvre from as early as *Pitch*, glimpsed in momentary, luminous moments of clarity such as, “a/magazine – a women’s magazine(/MY magazine they wrote it for the likes of/me,” an obvious acknowledgement of “[t]he authoritative voice of consumer culture [which] is intimate, cajoling and also encouraging.”⁴² In *Optic Verve*, Walsh contrasts her own writing practice, “an attenuated waffling/of the day. Faffing about one way or the other,” with the “slogan type diary style” characteristic of saleable contemporary “female” literature or “sentimentalised chick-lit.”⁴³ Focusing on the extent to which such literary products exploit the “psychological verification of character’s female/credentials” as a “narrative hook,” Walsh attains another rare moment of consistent clarity in her censure:

I regard those books as just another expensive package I don’t buy. Neither a personal nor a collective insult. Simply boring, derivative, unimaginative marketing of a very basic, practised, similar style of writing. Not good. So why waste time? Not a contender. That’s how hard-nosed it really is if you take away the money out there. So work.⁴⁴

This is hardly revolutionary in its sentiment, but it does betray a profound understanding of the processes through which post-feminism sells itself, and in so doing commodifies the whole ideal of contemporary femininity under neoliberalism. It also posits a clear power imbalance in favour of financial worth over artistic worth, in the sense that if you were to “take away the money out there,” such “derivative” writing would be revealed for what it really is: “unimaginative marketing [. . .] Not good.” Yet, in spite of this revelation, the final sentence implies an ambivalence towards or at least an inability to change the conditions of how art communicates, or *sells*, in neoliberal conceptions of culture. Playing with the term’s manifold connotations, work – in the sense of creative work – remains labour at the end of the day. This is the law governing contemporary society: “So work.”

In an earlier fragment of *Optic Nerve*, which rises and falls away with the characteristic dexterity of the text as a whole, there emerges a description of another “writing style” which is deemed comparably “curious:” “An uninhibited assertion of feeling couched in the narrative phrases of a kind of middleclass everyday shop speak. Utilitarian entirely functional, as opposed to, say, abstract, poetic.”⁴⁵ Such a writing style is joined with, or exemplified by a depiction of a woman imbued with “[f]reedom to move, where, when she wants,” reprising the ideal of post-feminist freedom which has already been thoroughly and consistently problematised in the text, consumed and subsumed by the logic of neoliberal individualism. This is yet another instance in the text in which a language “claiming to communicate women’s experiences,” to quote Kinnahan’s account of the non-experimental poet, is glossed for ulterior motives: “unimaginative marketing,” “shop speak,” “utilitarian,” “functional,” as opposed to something which exists outside the realm of profit and utility. Elsewhere in the text Walsh calls this “hope crippled by/rhetoric we could advertise.”⁴⁶ As an idea which accrues over the course of the work, it finds concrete expression in a long, unexpectedly fluent prose section towards the very end of the text: that which Walsh calls “[t]he loss of whole languages as the few associated with more economic power [...] demand their language be that of commerce and international trade.”⁴⁷ In other words, in lieu of lost poetic and abstract languages, neoliberal power standardises all language as something “[u]tilitarian entirely functional;” “unimaginative marketing.” Walsh even gives a taxonomy of the “banal clichés of our current times” characteristic of this colonisation of language: “Think outside the box,’ ‘imagine,’ ‘innovate,’ ‘promote a new, previously non-existent framework.’”⁴⁸ This is what Bracken refers to when she signals in *Optic Nerve* “an exposure of the hypocrisies of Ireland’s neo-liberal politics:” the ways in which the neoliberal state – “the few associated with more economic power” – hypocritically kowtow to contemporary discourses of female liberation and “freedom,” entailed in the paradoxical “language of regression shored up/under authoritarian banners/of liberation movements,” while simultaneously colonising the domain of language itself. This linguistic paradox becomes a leitmotif of the text over the course of its 130 pages.

Furthermore, Bracken identifies the impetus behind these hypocrisies of Ireland’s neoliberal politics as “its aggressive exclusions of [...] communities from conceptualizations of what constitutes the nation.” So, too, does Walsh:

The leaching process has perhaps irreparably changed the more traditional Gaelic modes of social interaction, particularly over the last ten years. As if somebody were giving, throwing away, ancient heirlooms whose provenance alone made them interesting, beautiful, and hence once so prized.⁴⁹

By far the most exemplary or privileged of such traditional Gaelic modes of social interaction which have been “leached” by this neoliberal economic order in Ireland in the text is butter-making: “After thousands of years of butter, even in the bog, preserved, why should we give up so easily? Cowed by money. Cramped by modern circumstances. Rendered obsolete, outmoded by commercialisation.”⁵⁰ Walsh freights the very idea of community surrounding the traditionally female practice of churning butter with this heady concept of “the loss of whole languages” to the logic and rhetoric of commerce: “community (that word now used as disparagement, our socio-linguistic inheritance

recolouring tonalities, shifting register, how *modern* are we) [...] troughs/sinks, milk churns/creamery vans, bunches/gangs."⁵¹ As the word "community" becomes "used as disparagement," so too is the community formation of butter-making reduced to its bare means of production, a sterile collection of tools (troughs, sinks, churns, vans) mobilised to generate profit. Simultaneously, however, Walsh recognises within this ideal of community exemplified by the female work of churning butter the fleeting potential for a reclamation of language itself:

These matters are not just still within living memory or oral testament here in Ireland as in so many parts of the world, they are a crucial determining factor in how people choose to interact socially, what they aspire to attain, how they use language and how they view language.⁵²

Walsh aligns herself with this mode of social interaction directly, calling it a "meta-language I grew up in, learned to speak in,/or not. Such voices practically elusive now;" the person who taught her this "meta-language" of community was her grandmother: "my grandmother's voice was [...] where I learnt to talk."⁵³ Crucially, it was also Walsh's grandmother who taught her how to churn butter, thereby investing in her this anti-capitalist, traditionally feminist, quintessentially Irish ideological position: "churning butter[,] practiced by generations of rural women and learnt by Walsh from her own grandmother, [...] as a refusal of subsumption into capitalist labour processes."⁵⁴ In other words, Walsh grasps in fleeting glimpses in *Optic Verve* a female meta-language rooted in a traditionally female mode of labour which itself entails a viable alternative to the logic of capital and profit.

Butter-making, and the socialist community formations that it almost preternaturally engendered in a bygone Ireland, are thus designated as the exemplary sites in the text in which language is protected from the onslaught of neoliberalism, if only "within living memory or oral/testament." As Lloyd notes, "[s]uch practices were not understood as separate economic functions [...] but an integral element of a community still grounded in the moral economies of communing that turn out to be inseparable from a vital, subversive language practice."⁵⁵ Still, though, the text is marked (as has been illustrated by quoted examples of its "stutterance") by what Walsh terms, in typically frantic fashion, "the unbelievable lack of ability to/cohere to pronounce to be stylistically or hey lets not ask for too/much even grammatically cohesive."⁵⁶ Walsh elsewhere calls such a disposition "this/rattled/subjectivity/I I I."⁵⁷ This is what Kinnahan means when she highlights within Walsh's work a "theoretically informed rejection of the lyric speaker [...] tested through centralizing gender's relationship to language, representation, and form, enacting a feminist experimentalism." Although it may adumbrate from living memory or oral history an Irish female labour tradition predicated on "a vital, subversive language practice," ultimately *Optic Verve* is about "the loss of whole languages" for the feminist speaker in a post-feminist, neoliberal Ireland.

As per Kinnahan's account of feminist experimental poetics once again, Walsh's inability to sustain stylistic or even grammatical cohesion in *Optic Verve* is informed by feminist theory. To quote Judith Butler,

it is clearly not the case that "I" preside over the positions that have constituted me [...] the "I," this "I," is *constituted* by these positions, and these "positions" are not merely theoretical products, but fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and

institutional arrangements, that matrix of power and discourse that produces me as a viable subject.⁵⁸

Here, once more, is Walsh's female subject as "a cul/tivated product," rendered by the neoliberal state ("power") and its colonisation of language ("discourse"). The subject, or subjects, in *Optic Verve* can record the loss of whole languages in concert with the "leaching" of whole female labour traditions of community in Ireland, but their ability to reclaim or reinstate them is circumscribed by their being "constituted" or prescribed by "fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements" – that is, by neoliberal power. This is precisely the limit at which Walsh's feminist experimentalism ends, and the threshold upon which Ellen Dillon's begins.

A commodity doesn't trade itself: Dillon's *Butter Intervention*

In his blurb on the back cover of *Butter Intervention*, the poet Kit Fryatt describes the text as "[n]othing less than a history of Ireland sculpted in semi-solid emulsion."⁵⁹ As such a broad and unorthodox undertaking might suggest, Dillon's text is unconventionally structured as a series of interlocking prosaic and poetic variations on a theme, namely the female labour of butter-making in Ireland over the course of millennia: "For thousands of years, butter-making was women's work in both domestic and industrial settings."⁶⁰ The term Dillon uses herself is an "essay," an "effort to understand my country, or the part of it that is mine, through sustained focus on the product that has a uniquely unbroken history of manufacture here."⁶¹ It is effectively "a story of how butter made the land I'm standing on" but immediately such a story is established as a project of salvage rather than a reiteration of canon:

This essay tries, as much as possible, to build itself from the words and voices of those who lived through its moments or studied them closely. Its documentary poems attempt to make a space, within a flexible framework of citation from literature and scholarship, for voices silenced by official and accepted stories to whisper their counter-stories.⁶²

The juxtaposition of "official and accepted stories" with the whisper of "counter-stories" from "voices silenced" in popular historiography returns us to the quandary that Kinnahan raises between "expressive" and "experimental" modes of female poetry. Broadly speaking, if the one entails the availability of "an accessible language of reportage" deemed sufficient to "communicate women's experiences," while the other exudes a scepticism towards such a possibility, how can an experimental feminist poetics like Dillon's sustain "documentary poems" which are predicated on communicating women's experiences?

As Susan Stanford Friedman implies, this experimental trait of linguistic scepticism defers the possibility of Dillon's proposed project: "it serves little purpose as an "end point" for groups whose subjectivity has been historically denied and "whose survival depends upon the reconstruction of their own histories, the reclamation, through language, of their experience of the 'real'."⁶³ Far from either capitulating to the "expressive" mode or muddying the reconstruction of an Irish history of female labour by couching it in linguistic non-sense, however, Dillon innovates a third way which extends the feminist theory that underpins Walsh's earlier work. Walsh's female subject in *Optic Verve* is reduced to "this/rattled/subjectivity/I I I," a speaker which struggles to maintain stylistic

and grammatical coherence against a neoliberal backdrop of “the loss of whole languages,” becoming a poetic embodiment of the “constituted” “I” that Butler positions as the female neoliberal subject. However, Butler also offers a counterpoint to the perceived inevitability of such “rattled/subjectivity,” asking questions of how it might be manipulated to subvert the power structures which create it: “what possibilities of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations of power and discourse? Where are the possibilities of reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted?”⁶⁴ For Butler, a less prescribed notion of the subject and a more fluid sense of agency itself might offer a site for ideological “resistance:” the formation of a subject that is “neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process, one which gets detoured and stalled through other mechanisms of power, but which is power’s own possibility of being reworked.”⁶⁵ In other words, the subject becomes much more dynamic when rigid ideas of agency are jettisoned, and it is instead viewed both as a “product” of existing power structures, as well as a concept within which to challenge such power structures directly.

Dillon assimilates the same idea into *Butter Intervention* via a seemingly rather simple device: “Throughout, I cede my voice to that of butter.”⁶⁶ The reason that she deems butter to be “well placed to tell a story of a thousand years of this island-full of people” is precisely because, on the one hand, it is a manifestation of “existing configurations of discourse and power:” a “commodity,” the logical conclusion of neoliberal power, which quite literally *speaks back*.⁶⁷ And yet, on the other hand, it is also the fruit of thousands of years of specifically “women’s work.” In transferring her female voice to the neutral voice of butter, in a “country [which] has always preferred not to hear its women,” and particularly as neoliberal post-feminism has augured the end of feminism altogether, Dillon finds a way to smuggle the experiences of Irish women back into a cultural consciousness by placing them in the mouth of something which unfailingly captures modern attention: a benign commodity.⁶⁸ Butter therefore becomes a site of collision in the text, between the commercial and the communal, profit and the commons, the authoritarian and the liberatory. By containing these two mutually exclusive ideals within its multitudes, this outsourcing of voice to butter successfully reconfigures our readerly expectations of poetic agency entirely: as Dillon reiterates throughout, “[a] commodity doesn’t trade itself. It also doesn’t make and mould itself. It endures the forms and functions imposed on it.”⁶⁹ This is a poetic rendering of “power’s own possibility of being reworked.”

Circumventing the technology of subject production that prefigures Walsh’s poetic speakers, Dillon ostensibly establishes a kind of roving agency in the text – that which butter calls “my *mist of chaos*. This agent [which] is dispersed and moves those it comes in contact with.”⁷⁰ Because butter is itself an inert, neutral vessel containing traces of both its humble creation as well as its less humble commodification in the text, it is in a sense a free agent, capable of seeing its own history from the points of view of those who churned it and those who profited off of it simultaneously. The reason Dillon belabours this point, enshrined in the constant refrain that “[a] commodity doesn’t trade itself,” is in order to expose an important facet of contemporary Irish social and economic historiography. To quote the butter speaker,

I have never once spread, whether on toast or rolls or spuds, without a hand to hold the knife and do the spreading. Yet so much history seems to be written in this agentless way, with ideas and practices spreading like airborne particles. But even airborne particles are spread by the people doing the coughing, and ideas can only be turned into practices through the actions of bodies. So, who spread me?⁷¹

Such history prefaces an ongoing attempt throughout the text to account for the many elisions and simplifications which are entailed in the “official and accepted stories” of Ireland’s economic development, at the centre of which stands butter itself: “the shiny, ersatz Ireland that is marketed abroad, a uniform product with all particularities smoothed away.”⁷² Elsewhere in the text, the butter speaker elaborates on this idea, further aligning this agentless history with the neoliberal “common sense” analysed at the beginning of this study:

We love to find a single phenomenon that explains everything here, always some sort of inexorable external force. We rush to paint our small island as a leaf adrift on currents it and we cannot control. [. . .] We love a single storyline with no subtext.⁷³

A “single storyline with no subtext” is precisely what the likes of O’Hearn, Allen, Kennedy, and McCarthy attribute to Ireland’s received-wisdom view of its own rapid economic development or “miracle economy” status. The “single phenomenon” that is used to “explain everything here” is the theory of “modernisation,” the belief that all forms of ideological struggle have become unnecessary in an apparently equal, modern society like Ireland. As was argued earlier, this is nothing more than a convenient fiction which masks the transition in Ireland from social democracy to advanced capitalism, and its attendant erasure of the basic nature of democratic society in the name of economic checks and balances. In this regard, *Butter Intervention* is precisely that – an “intervention” into this “single storyline” in search of lost subtext, undertaken not by those human groups and social activists which have been erased but by a neutral and dynamic agency: butter.

The most important piece of elided subtext which would expose the grave inconsistencies within this single storyline is the centrepiece of the text also: the story of the Knocklong Soviet of 1920, “the only red wave to/sweep through Ireland’s rural industries.”⁷⁴ Told, once again, by the butter speaker, as the neutral barrier which stands between the female workers and the male employers, it is the tale of how “in May/1920 the CMCI central creamery at Knocklong/and its twelve auxiliaries were taken over by the/ workers,” and “in July the Tipperary Central was/occupied by striking women workers.”⁷⁵ The operations were organised and conducted by the female workforce, and were a roaring success; to quote one of those passages “[built] from the words and voices of those who lived through its moments:”

the five days we took over the creameries, in the wave of soviets that had rippled out from Limerick, were a whirlwind and a triumph. good line girls that we are, we held the line and won ourselves a raise and two weeks holiday. two months later the condensery girls in Tipp town did the same. we raised the red flag and a banner reading “Knocklong Creamery Soviet: we make butter, not profits.”⁷⁶

The nature of how the movement was eventually quelled once again reprises that paradox of modernisation reiterated often throughout this study that “freedom,” within a conservative, capitalist model, is actually about imposing limits: “they/could not prosper long in the face of a/strengthening nationalist conservatism that had/very distinct ideas about what ‘freedom’ was all/about and what limits needed to be imposed.”⁷⁷ The longer-term effects of the movement’s suppression were only further proof that an economic regime had overtaken social issues such as gender equality and labour rights in the fledgling Irish state, even down to its appropriation of the very language of cooperation, community, and resistance:

In championing a particular co-op model whose remit was sketched in purely economic terms, the new nation chose to neglect the potential for social and cultural renewal latent in that movement. It prioritised the interests of larger landowners over those of rural workers. It evacuated the word “co-operative” itself of meaning.⁷⁸

Despite the ranging scope of this distinctly female labour dispute, and despite its verifiable success, in contrast to the storied Dublin Lockout of just seven years previously, the Knocklong Soviet has all but disappeared in Irish history behind the “single storyline” of Irish economic development. The implication is clear: canonical versions of contemporary Irish historiography only reserve room for ideological struggles which can either be shown to be failures or can be co-opted by the state as examples of its impeccable history of “progress.”

Such a fact is powerfully represented in one of the few passages in the text which is decidedly not attributable to the butter speaker:

in the glow of the story
we will tell ourselves then
about the origins
of our national
prosperity in systems built
on reciprocity & mutual concern
we will linger on
the links back to the *meitheal*
rushing over any knottier bits threatening
to sharpen this soft-focus image⁷⁹

In the unmistakable register of the capitalist state here, we are confronted once again with an account of that carefully manicured single storyline which bespeaks modern Ireland. As is expected of a neoliberal regime, the ideals of now redundant social and ideological struggles – “reciprocity & mutual concern” – are co-opted as the very fabric of “the origins/of our national/prosperity.” In other words, the long since thwarted aspirations of social democracy, if not socialism, are paradoxically groomed into representing historical stepping-stones towards “prosperity” and capital accumulation. Even the idiosyncratic layout of the words on the page is emblematic of the single storyline it peddles: the text is right-justified to stretch across the breadth of the page, as if to veil the “knottier bits,” the unpalatable examples of ideological struggle in Irish history, from the reader’s view. It seeks to quite literally cover up contradictory *sub*-text. Of particular significance here is the invocation of “the *meitheal*” as the exemplar of such reciprocity and mutual concern as a diversion from such “knottier bits threatening/to sharpen this soft-focus

image." The *meitheal* was an old Irish tradition which fostered "mutual aid groups/who shared the summer work/of haymaking and footing turf."⁸⁰ The reason to "linger on" such a phenomenon, at the expense of other forms of proto-socialism in Ireland, is because it has already been co-opted and harnessed by the state as an emblem of its economic agenda. Not only is it tightly wound up in the agricultural policies which had sustained widescale rural support for the fiscally conservative politics of Fianna Fáil throughout the twentieth century, it has in more recent years been evacuated completely of any of its original syndicalist sentiment as the namesake of Fáilte Ireland's "largest Annual Global Travel Trade Fair."⁸¹ Transmogrifying a traditional and primitive form of socialism into a business opportunity for the tourism industry is a perfect encapsulation of "the hypocrisies of Ireland's neo-liberal politics" highlighted by Bracken; its subtle presence in Dillon's text is no coincidence.

The reason to include, even celebrate such an emptied symbol as the *meitheal* and exclude the likes of the Knocklong Soviet from your institutional "soft-focus" history is because the latter retains its potency as a viable and successful social movement which directly challenges the logic of capitalism while the former has been co-opted and redeployed as *part* of that logic. Moreover, the Knocklong Soviet represents not one but two ideological struggles in Irish history at once: the pursuit of labour rights, and the undoing of gender hierarchies. As Dillon puts it in *Butter Intervention*, referring to the male builders of the modern Irish state and its economic obsession, "[t]heirs was no country for workers or women."⁸² The determination to distinguish even between a worker and a woman illustrates just how deep the lines of entrenchment really are within the Irish social landscape, inscrutable in the "soft-focus image" of Irish modernity. If the Irish neoliberal project has endeavoured to obscure this radical disarticulation and isolation of working women in Irish history behind the modern image of an equal and prosperous society, Ellen Dillon's experimental feminist poetics serves to reclaim and reverse the process. As the Knocklong Soviet workers put it, "underneath our/joyful noise and radiant flag we all knew we/packed crates of purest profit."⁸³ By substituting for her own voice, or the proxy of an anonymous female speaker, the voice of a commodity bound up in a strong tradition of female labour, community, and activism, *Butter Intervention* repatriates a base of strong feminist ideals within a contemporary Irish poetics via the only available means of capturing the attention of a neoliberal audience: by making money, "purest profit," do the talking.

Notes

1. McCarthy, *Modernisation*, 15.
2. Peillon, "Culture and State," 39, 47.
3. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 55. See McRobbie, *Aftermath*; Gill, Kelan, and Scharff, "A Postfeminist Sensibility"; and Braidotti, *Transpositions*.
4. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 55. See McRobbie, *Aftermath*; Gill, Kelan, and Scharff, "A Postfeminist Sensibility"; and Braidotti *Transpositions*.
5. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 55.
6. Dillon, *Butter*, 59.
7. O'Hearn, *Inside*, x.
8. *Ibid.*, x.
9. *Ibid.*, x – xi.

10. Cleary, *Outrageous*, 96.
11. See note 7 above.
12. Arqueros-Fernández, "Lessons," 220.
13. Allen, "Neither Boston nor Berlin," 66, 71.
14. See note 5 above.
15. Gill, Kelan, and Scharff, "Postfeminist Sensibility," 231.
16. Kennedy, "Irish Women," 95.
17. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 24; and Kennedy, "Irish women," 95.
18. See note 16 above.
19. Qtd. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 56.
20. Walsh, *Optic*, 123.
21. Lloyd, *Counterpoetics*, 187.
22. Kinnahan, "Experimental Poetics," 620.
23. *Ibid.*, 620–1.
24. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 47.
25. Walsh, *Optic*, 79.
26. Lloyd, *Counterpoetics*, 192.
27. Bracken, "Nomadic," 75, Walsh, *Optic*, 109, *Pitch*, 11.
28. Bracken, "Nomadic," 76.
29. Kinnahan, "Experimental Poetics," 622.
30. Lloyd, *Counterpoetics*, 192; and Walsh, *Optic*, 20.
31. Walsh, *Optic*, 22.
32. *Ibid.*, 109.
33. *Ibid.*, 59.
34. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 72.
35. Walsh, *Optic*, 60.
36. *Ibid.*, 61.
37. *Ibid.*, 124.
38. Walsh, *Pitch*, 11–12.
39. Walsh, *Optic*, 28.
40. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 57–8.
41. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 19; and my emphasis.
42. Walsh, *Pitch*, 9; and McRobbie, *Aftermath*, 62.
43. Walsh, *Optic*, 101; and McRobbie argues compellingly that this "slogan type diary style" plays an integral role in aiding the process of coercing women from a feminist to a post-feminist sensibility – as a tool of "individualisation" (see *Aftermath*, 18–9).
44. Walsh, *Optic*, 101.
45. *Ibid.*, 94.
46. *Ibid.*, 67.
47. *Ibid.*, 123.
48. *Ibid.*, 122.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Walsh, *Optic*, 120.
51. *Ibid.*, 108.
52. *Ibid.*, 124.
53. *Ibid.*, 104.
54. Lloyd, *Counterpoetics*, 195.
55. *Ibid.*, 194.
56. Walsh, *Optic*, 65.
57. *Ibid.*, 62.
58. Butler, "Contingent," 160.
59. Fryatt, qtd. Dillon, *Butter*, back cover.
60. Dillon, *Butter*, 9.
61. *Ibid.*, 8.

62. See note 60 above.
63. Qtd. Kinnahan, "Experimental Poetics," 635.
64. Butler, "Contingent Foundations," 163.
65. *Ibid.*
66. Dillon, *Butter*, 8.
67. *Ibid.*, 11.
68. *Ibid.*, 100.
69. *Ibid.*, 89.
70. *Ibid.*, 11.
71. *Ibid.*, 57.
72. *Ibid.*, 101.
73. *Ibid.*, 31.
74. *Ibid.*, 77.
75. *Ibid.*, 73.
76. *Ibid.*, 73–4.
77. *Ibid.*, 75.
78. *Ibid.*, 79.
79. *Ibid.*, 85–6.
80. *Ibid.*, 81.
81. Taken from the Twitter bio of @Meitheallireland.
82. Dillon, *Butter*, 10; and my emphasis.
83. *Ibid.*, 74.

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