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BURSTING THE TRINITY BUBBLE: DOUGLAS HYDE'S IRISH AVANT-GARDE FARCE

Abstract
This article examines a neglected bilingual farce by Douglas Hyde, one of the founders of the Irish language revival movement in the late nineteenth century and the author of a number of Irish-language and bilingual plays in the early twentieth. This play is *Pleusgadh na Bulgóide/The Bursting of the Bubble* from 1903, set in Bubble College, reference to Trinity College Dublin, where Hyde had been a student. I examine the dispute over the Irish language that forms the background for this play, while also turning to Peter Sloterdijk's theory of bubbles as a means of understanding the linguistic and cultural issues that the play involves. Sloterdijk presents bubbles as spaces of intimate relationship to which any notion of ego-autonomy is subsidiary. He also sees bubbles as predisposed to their eventual bursting. Sloterdijk further regards bubbles as microscopic instances of much larger spaces or spheres. *Pleusgadh na Bulgóide* exemplifies these various aspects of bubbles. The linguistic anarchy of mis-communication that it unleashes arises from the bursting of Bubble College, an explosion that lends the play a radical avant-garde character. *Pleusgadh na Bulgóide* extends beyond the specific question of the Irish language to engage the modernist crisis of language in literature and drama at the start of the twentieth century. On this basis, I contend that the neglect of Hyde's play in Irish modernist studies is a significant oversight.

Key words: Irish language, modernism, bubbles, spheres, Douglas Hyde, J. P. Mahaffy, Robert Atkinson, Peter Sloterdijk, Cathleen Ni Houlihan

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1. Introduction

Douglas Hyde was born in Frenchpark, County Roscommon, in the west of Ireland province of Connacht, on January 17, 1860. He was the third son of Protestant Church of Ireland rector, rev. Arthur J. Hyde jnr. and Elizabeth Oldfield Hyde (Dunleavy 1974: 15). He became best known as the first president of *Conradh na Gaeilge* [The Gaelic League], an organization that he founded in 1893 with Eoin MacNeill, an Irish language enthusiast from County Antrim in the northern province of Ulster, to promote the use of the Irish language. The speaking of Irish had been declining throughout the nineteenth century, accelerated by the trauma of the Great Famine in the 1840s. According to figures in a 1901 census, 320,000 people spoke Irish exclusively in 1851, and 1.5 million had some knowledge of Irish (Lyons 1973: 88). The Famine of 1845–48 had a devastating effect in the west of Ireland, the region where Irish was spoken most widely. Hyde studied at Trinity College Dublin, taking the Divinity programme in 1880 and gaining a reputation as a talented scholar. In those years, Trinity College was an Anglo-Irish Protestant pro-British Unionist institution in a largely Roman Catholic Ireland. Despite the fact that some of Ireland's most revered patriots – Wolf Tone, Thomas Davis and John Mitchel – had been students at Trinity College, there was little to no Irish nationalist sympathies among its staff in Hyde's student years there. Interest in the Irish language at Trinity College was antiquarian, the object of philological and manuscript scholarship rather than a language medium to be encouraged in contemporary times (Dunleavy 1991: 8–9).

2. Hyde as Playwright

In conjunction with lectures and publications in support of the Gaelic League, Hyde wrote several Irish-language and Irish-English bilingual plays for the Irish Literary Theatre from the 1900s. His first drama was *Casadh an tSugáin* [*The Twisting of the Rope*] based on an Irish folk-story of rustic villagers in Connacht tricking a poet from the southern Irish province of Munster at a village dance. Liam Mac Mathúna argues that W. B. Yeats was the driving force behind *Casadh an tSugáin/The Twisting of the Rope*, drawing attention to a number of Hyde's diary entries from August 1900 to show the extent of Yeats's collaboration (Mac Mathúna 2023: 54). The play

was first staged at The Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, in 1901, along with a play that Yeats composed in a contentious collaboration with novelist George Moore, *Diarmuid and Grania* (Clark 2001: 923–28). *Casadh an tSugáin* was acted by Irish speaking amateurs, with Hyde himself performing the main role of the Munster poet Red Hanrahan. Theatre critic Joseph Holloway was underwhelmed by Frank Benson's English Shakespearean Company's rendition of the Yeats-Moore Irish mythological play, though he admired the solemnity of Edward Elgar's musical score for Diarmuid's funeral procession. Accepting that the amateur performance of *Casadh an tSugáin* was rough at the edges, Holloway nonetheless felt a thrill at the musical flow of the Irish language spoken in Hyde's play (Hogan 1967: 14–15).

In October 1903, members of an Irish nationalist umbrella organization performed a new Hyde play for the Irish Literary Theatre at Molesworth Hall in Dublin, location for the first performances of John Millington Synge's plays, *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea*. The name of this organization was *Cumann na nGaedhal* [the Irish Association], founded by Dublin journalists Arthur Griffith and William Rooney. This play is one of the most explosive avant-garde pieces that the Irish Theatre produced in its first years and wrongfully neglected as such. Admittedly, the play is short, with none of the character development that Synge provides in his classic *The Playboy of the Western World* from January 1907 or Seán O'Casey in his equally momentous *The Plough and the Stars* from 1926. Yet its treatment of the subject of language and translation is every bit as far-reaching as Brian Friel's world-renowned *Translations* of 1980. The play in question is *Pleusgadh na Bulgóide* or, *The Bursting of the Bubble* (hereafter, *Pleusgadh/Bursting*)

Declan Kiberd makes a compelling case for Hyde's 1893 collection, *Love Songs of Connacht*, as a species of what he terms Irish Tory Anarchism (Kiberd 2001: 302–324). Yet however various and endearing the songs and stories are; however fascinating the questions of translation are that Hyde's bilingual publication brings to the fore, the collection remains rooted in rural west of Ireland folklore and traditions. Having said this, Hyde was far from that figure of a "harmless enough […] gentleman scholar" to emerge in popular Irish imagination during the century since the Irish Revival (Dunleavy 1991: 9). Feena Tóibín gives an image of a quasi-modernist man of contrasts. Hyde was someone who professed a hatred of England in his youth and who met the Irish Fenian rebels O'Donovan Rossa and

John O'Leary. Yet he loved the quintessentially English games of tennis and cricket. As a lecturer in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, in 1890–91, he spent a lot of his spare time playing tennis and boozing with British army officers in their mess. After delivering his famous 1892 lecture, "The Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland" at Leinster Hall in Dublin, he did not retire into solemn meditation on his duty to his nation. Instead, according to a diary entry, Hyde went along to the Hibernian pub with his Trinity College friend, James Sheehan, drinking punch before moving on to the home of physician and Irish-language enthusiast George Sigerson to drink more punch until 1.30 a.m. (Tóibin 2023: 1–14). As early as 1891, Hyde took a journey by electric car from Back Bay station in Boston to Harvard University campus in the company of Fred Norris Robinson, a medievalist with Celtic interests (Uí Chollatáin 2023: 24; Dunleavy 1991: 261). An electric car was as cutting edge a mode of transport then as it has become again today.

3. Sloterdijk's Bubbles

Paige Reynolds suggests a helpful way of thinking about Irish modernism as "a subset of practices" distinguishing writers aligned with the future-driven experimentalism of Irish modernist literature from the tradition-conscious character of Irish revival literature. Key to Reynolds' idea is the contention that these subsets do not lie in absolute distinction but sometimes overlap in the manner of "intersecting circles": "We could imagine the modernist Joyce or the revivalist Douglas Hyde plucking useful practices from the subset of Irish modernism" (Reynolds 2007: 8). I contend that *Pleusgadh/ Bursting* is a striking example of this intersection. Perhaps one could venture further to claim that Hyde's play goes beyond a day of dabblement with modernist chaos aesthetics to a full immersion, performing linguistic gymnastics almost as spectacular as those of *Finnegans Wake*. The tenability of this claim appears through considering the entire bubble motif and its bursting in Hyde's play in relation to the thought of Peter Sloterdijk, as found in the first volume of his three-part study of the spherical, *Spheres*, entitled *Bubbles*. Sloterdijk's insights on bubbles as a specific manifestation of the spherical is of a magnitude that reaches beyond those subsets of avant-gardism and revivalism that Reynolds delineates, thus allowing readers and audiences to grasp Hyde's play as one of the most revelatory,

though by no means the most significant, of the early Irish Revival drama movement.

Sloterdijk attributes multiple meanings to bubbles but three carry primacy. In the first instance, bubbles are a particular manifestation of the spherical as the delineation of primordial spatial intimacy to which all notions of ego-autonomy are secondary. By way of examples, he mentions the creation myth of God-Adam, the psychoanalytical concept of the mother-child dyad, the inseparable lovers, twins or the conspiring couple. Sloterdijk proposes that "the real subjectivity consists of two or more parties", whereby when "two of these are exclusively opened towards each other in intimate spatial division, a livable mode of subjectness develops in each" (Sloterdijk 2011: 53). In a certain way, this is an updated statement of Martin Buber's proposition from 1923 concerning what Buber terms 'primary words'. The most significant such primary word is 'I-thou', within which the concept of the autonomous subject 'I' simply does not exist. 'I' only carries significance as a constituent of the primary word 'I-Thou' (Buber 1937: 3–4). The autonomous self-contained Cartesian ego is, like Sloterdijk's understanding of fundamental relations, entirely misleading as a founding concept of subjectivity.

The second point of significance in Sloterdijk's account is that these symbiotic, autogeneous bubbles are predisposed from the outset to burst: "All amniotic sacs, organic models of autogenous vessels, live towards their bursting" (Sloterdijk 2011: 64). Translator Wieland Hoban points out that the German word for the phrase amniotic sac, *Fruchtblase*, literally means 'fruit bubble'. The bursting of bubbles can be a liberating release but Sloterdijk identifies it more assuredly with the dislocation of exile. He regards the advent of modernity as a case of the spheres and orbs of classical and medieval worlds, within which human societies enclosed themselves, bursting open. Western human culture has turned humankind "into the idiot of the cosmos", exiling the human subject from "immemorial security in self-blown bubbles of illusions into a senseless, unrelated realm that functions on its own" (Sloterdijk 2011: 23). Bursting brings with it that which Louis MacNeice memorably called "[t]he drunkenness of things being various" (MacNeice 1988: 23). This bursting is as much cultural-historical distribution as it is existential shattering: "The modalities of bursting, set the conditions for cultural histories", writes Sloterdijk, whereby a host of new media, themes and multiplicities intervene within Buber's 'I-Thou' dyad. Along with a release from enclosure in bubbles, this

penetration and dispersal brings foreignness and indifference (Sloterdijk 2011: 52).

Sloterdijk's third point of departure is that bubbles are microscopic appearances of the spherical as macroscopic shape. A wide spanning sphere of an entire people or religious tradition may encompass the intimacy and symbiotic resonance of relations within bubbles. Sloterdijk thinks spherically of ethnicities as "autogenous vessels" that "live and survive only under their own atmospheric, semiospheric bell jar. Through their gods, their stories and their arts, they supply themselves with the breath – thus the stimuli – that make them possible" (Sloterdijk 2011: 59). Describing them as "successful pneumotechnic and auto-stressory constructs" or "spheric alliances that drift in the current of the ages", Sloterdijk marvels at the ability of religion-based folk traditions and cultures to survive through centuries "with impressive ethno-spiritual constancy". He takes Indo-Aryan Brahmanism as one such example, a phenomenon "which has been symbolically air-conditioning the Hindu world for millennia" (Sloterdijk 2011: 60).

4. The Vice-Regal Inquiry

Before examining how *Pleusgadh/Bursting* exemplifies and elaborates Sloterdijk's insights, it is necessary to take the immediate point of reference of Hyde's play into account. In January and February 1891, a Vice-Regal Inquiry into Irish and Intermediate Education presented The Gaelic League with an opportunity to advance the Irish language within the Irish education system. The Inquiry sparked a heated controversy between scholars at Trinity College Dublin, strongly opposed to the advancement of Irish, and advocates for the language, most notably Hyde himself. P. J. Mathews detects in the objections of Trinity College scholars a threat they felt from "a better educated, more culturally aware and self-confident nationalist population". Mathews sees this fear of a broadly Catholic educated Irish middle-class accentuated by support for Irish language revival that was offered by "the most talented of a new generation of Anglo-Irish intellectuals, including W. B. Yeats, George Russell, Lady Gregory, Horace Plunkett and Douglas Hyde" (Mathews 2003: 36). Two senior academics at Trinity College Dublin, John Pentland Mahaffy and Robert Atkinson, strongly opposed the inclusion of tales from Irish myth and legend in the

Irish education syllabus and any moves to raise the standing of the Irish language in examination to at least the same number of points allotted to French and German (Mathews 2003: 36).

Mahaffy was a Swiss-born scholar educated privately in County Donegal. He became Professor of Ancient History at Trinity College in 1869 and translated Kuno Fischer's *Commentary on Kant* (1866), before directing his attention to ancient Greece, publishing a number of important works in the 1870s (Welch 1996: 351). Richard Ellmann suggests that Mahaffy's greatest talent was making friends with people in exceedingly high places, including several monarchs (Ellmann 1988: 26).). He is perhaps best remembered as Oscar Wilde's tutor at Trinity College. Ellmann points to the temperamental clash between Mahaffy, a Tory Unionist, and Wilde, a Republican Nationalist, the playwright later complaining of "the disagreeable provinciality and violent Unionism" of the scholar (Ellmann 1988: 26, 272). Noreen Doody, however, notes how formative an influence Mahaffy was on Wilde, the two travelling together to Greece in Wilde's student years (Doody 2011: 30). In an 1893 letter, Wilde addresses Mahaffy as "one to whom I owe so much personally […] my first and best teacher, […] the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things" (Holland 2007: 165). In consequence of his cultivation of Wilde's interest in Greek civilization, Mahaffy's strident objection to the advancement of the Irish language is significant. Not only was Mahaffy defending claims for the intrinsic superiority of English over Irish, he was also defending the cultural superiority of ancient Greece over ancient Ireland.

Robert Atkinson was a much more formidable opponent of the advancement of Irish in the educational curriculum. Unlike Mahaffy, who had precious little knowledge of that same Irish language he found so odious, Atkinson was Professor of Celtic Languages at the Royal Irish Academy, as well as Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology at Trinity College. David Greene described him as "the undisputed authority on Irish in Trinity College and the Royal Irish Academy" in the last two decades of the nineteenth century (Greene 1966: 7). Greene also pointed out, however, that Professor Atkinson's interest in the Irish language was purely linguistic. Atkinson regarded his work on early Irish manuscripts as exclusively an academic concern, in no way stimulating general interest in the Irish language and Irish-language myths or folktales. This attitude appears in Atkinson's preface to his edition of the medieval volume, *The Passions and the Homilies from Leabhar Breac* [The Speckled Book] of

1887: "like every other medieval literature, Irish contains much that is not fit for general publication" (Atkinson 1887: iii). Before the Vice Regal Commission, Mahaffy claimed that Irish had no value as a contemporary vernacular and that he had been advised by experts that "where Irish literature was not religious it was silly, and that where it was not silly it was indecent" (quoted in Greene 1966: 10; Mathews 2003: 37). The scholarly credentials of Atkinson were required to back up these attitudes before the Inquiry and he duly obliged. Without naming the book in question, Atkinson lambasted a recent English translation of medieval Irish-language literature: this could only have been Standish Hayes O'Grady's *Silva Gadelica* of 1892, a translation of many tales comprising the Fenian cycle in Irish mythology. Atkinson made the following remark on Hayes O'Grady's work: "No human being could read through that book, containing an immense quantity of Irish matter, without feeling that he had been absolutely degraded by contact with it – filth that I will not demean myself even to mention" (quoted in Greene 1966: 10; Mathews 2003: 39).

Atkinson followed up this forceful objection with the assertion that all folklore was "at the bottom abominable" and that, knowing what folklore is, "I would not allow my daughter to study it" (quoted in Mathews 2003: 39).

David Greene noted how Hyde marshalled a range of eminent Celtic philologists to repudiate Atkinson, including Professors Heinrich Zimmer, Kuno Meyer and Ernst Windisch in Germany: the Commission accepted their testimonies in support of the Irish language (Greene 1966: 11). The sharpest public response to Atkinson came from Yeats, who described the Professor's opinions as betraying "a paroxysm of political excitement". On Atkinson's judgment that all folklore was "abominable", Yeats suggested that scholars outside Ireland would not argue with the proposition but merely scoff at it, remembering the name of its proponent "with a little laughter". One of Yeats's concerns was that, if some less educated Irish Catholic clergymen got wind of Atkinson's opinion on the immorality of Irish language literature, the Catholic Church in Ireland might strangle the Irish language revival movement at birth. Yeats sees Atkinson's judgment stem not from dispassionate professional experience but from the divisive political passions that the land agitation had aroused in Ireland during the 1880s (Yeats 1899: 3). Following the publication of Yeats's letter in the *Dublin Daily Express*, Atkinson was caricatured more as anti-Irish bigot than professional philologist, with his academic reputation on the line. Matters reached a critical point with Whitley Stokes' review of Atkinson's

glossary to *Ancient Laws of Ireland*. Stokes had an immense scholarly reputation, having published nine books on Celtic Studies while living in India as a legal official serving in the British Administration. These include studies of Old Irish, Breton and Cornish texts. Stokes chastised Atkinson's glossary as full of misspellings and grammar mistakes that indicated his lack of knowledge of Old Irish. In November 1902, *The United Irishman* published Stokes' review in full (it first appeared in the academic journal *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologia*), claiming that it exposed Atkinson as a fraud and demanding that he resign his position from the Academy ('All Ireland' 1902: 1). Atkinson published no more work subsequently and died five years later.

5. Bursting the Bubble

Hyde's *Pleusgadh/Bursting* emerges out of this bruising Irish language controversy: the Vice-Regal Inquiry, Yeats's public rebuke of Atkinson in the Unionist press and, most of all, Stokes' demolition job on Atkinson's glossary for *Ancient Laws of Ireland*. Greene claimed that Stokes described his review to his daughter as "an unexploded bomb" (Greene 1966: 12). If true, it is possible to receive Hyde's play as the scattering of linguistic and scholarly debris in the explosion. Indeed, the Irish word 'pléasc' denotes both 'burst' and 'explode'. Stokes and Hyde inadvertently employed the same metaphor in their attacks on Trinity College Professors: one, academic; the other, dramatic. From the very outset in *Pleusgadh/Bursting*, it is clear that the Trinity College bubble is already on the verge of bursting. Hyde introduces the College professors in the Common Room with Irish-language names, translating them for non-Irish language readers with English-language explanatory footnotes. John Pentland Mahaffy appears from the start as the character Mac Eathfaidh. Professor Atkinson, who enters the Common Room a short while into the play, is named Dochtúir Mac h-Aitcinn.

Apart from the subversive gesture of giving Irish-language names to Trinity College scholars who opposed state support of the Irish language, an immediate precedent, with which Hyde's naming of Mahaffy and Atkinson is aligned, advances the play's avant-garde pretensions. The anonymous 'Shanganagh' published a satire on the Trinity College duo in Arthur Griffith's nationalist newspaper, *The United Irishman*, in December

1902, under the title "The Voyage of Atcin, Son of Chaos" ('Shanganagh' 1902: 2). This piece is an ingenious parody of scholarly translations of early Irish myth and legend, one that sounds prescient of the parodic style that James Joyce engages twenty years later in the 'Cyclops' episode of *Ulysses* or Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. It is presented as a passage from the *Leabhar na hÉireannach Aontuighe* [*The Book of the United Irishmen*], a purely fictional invention that parodies titles of medieval Irish manuscript facsimiles for which Atkinson wrote introductions in the 1880s: *The Book of Leinster*, *The Book of Ballymote*, *The Yellow Book of Lecan*. The author employs the hyperbole typical of tales recorded in these works to mockingly inflate the magnitude of Atkinson and Mahaffey as ancient Gaelic Gods or warriors:

> One day as I, Atcin, son of Chaos, walked in the strong, high impregnable dun of my brethren, strange music fell upon my ears, and it issued not from the hall of the historians, where the wise, greatminded, very deeply-read Toni Drail blew loudly his own trumpet, nor came it from the meeting-house of the champions where the brave, bold very accurate Ma hAfi of the mighty bows chanted the tale of how he met the innumerable, shining-speared, very terrible Persian host on the Plain of Greece, and smote them with swift, keen deadly blows of his heavy long-drawn-out very awful books […]. ('Shanganagh' 1902: 2)

Atkinson is ridiculed here as the mythical Gaelic "son of Chaos", Atcin, while Mahaffy is sent up as the brave "Ma hAfi", defending ancient Greece from the "very terrible Persian host" (i.e., the Gaelic-speaking Irish), with "deadly blows" struck with his "long-drawn-out very awful books". The "deeply-read Toni Drail" refers to Dr. Anthony Traill, a mathematics and science graduate who achieved doctorates in Law and Medicine before becoming Provost of Trinity College in 1904. 'Shanganagh's' bombastic depiction of Atkinson as Atcin is significant to Hyde's *Pleusgadh/Bursting*. Not only does Atcin speak English, Sanskrit and Irish. Obviously under the influence of Whitley Stokes's critical review of Atkinson's glossary, Atcin is also a mis-speaker of the last, giving completely inaccurate translations of Irish phrases and thereby generating a Babel-state of linguistic confusion:

> For I am Atcin son of Chaos, Professor of Old Irish, Modern Irish, Religious Irish, Wise Irish, Silly Irish, Decent Irish, Indecent Irish, and the strange, marvellous, wholly incomprehensible Brehon-

> law [ancient Irish law] Glossary Irish, and the words you utter are but foolish, for *dun an doras* [close the door] means "crows have pink tails," and *imthigh leat* [get out] means "a hundred thousand welcomes." ('Shanganagh' 1902: 2)

This stinging mockery is an early instance of the polylinguistic chaos that Joyce pushes to the utmost decades later in *Finnegans Wake*.

More immediately, the 'Shanganagh' farce expresses the tone and spirit of Hyde's *Pleusgadh/Bursting*, first performed in November of the following year, 1903. Hyde accentuates the linguistic confusion at the heart of his play in showing Mahaffy speak English with a lisp. Arthur Haire Foster confirmed that this was factually accurate: he recalled that the Professor spoke with a lisp and was unable to pronounce the letter 'r' (Haire Forster 1931: 42). One might question the ablest ideology prompting this particular treatment of pronunciation in Hyde's play, but it certainly adds to the precarious nature of communicative speech therein. Indeed, the sound-effect is not simply comic. Returning to Sloterdijk's concept of bubbles, Hyde insinuates through Mahaffy's speech impediment a familiarity with the bubble world of Trinity College, having been a student there. Very conveniently for Hyde, the Irish-language name of Trinity College, Coláiste na Trionóide, rhymes with the Irish for Bubble College, Coláiste na Bulgóide: hence the title of his bilingual play. Mac hEathfaidh illustrates his sense of intimacy within the bubble world of the Trinity College Common Room in the ease with which he lambasts the Irish language at the beginning of the play, coupled with his performative elitism. He mentions to an anonymously-named "An Fear Eile" (the Other Man) of his dining recently at Dublin Castle, seat of the British Crown's representative, the Viceroy of Ireland, and the Chief Secretary for Ireland. He also speaks rather foppishly of "my friend, the King of Greece" (Hyde 1991: 136–37).

As they appear in *Pleusgadh/Bursting*, and in how they are remembered in real-life from the Vice Regal Inquiry, Mahaffy and Atkinson exemplify one of the examples that Sloterdijk gives for the primal intimacy of the 'we' in the bubble space: the conspiring couple. Out of the whole episode of the Vice Regal Inquiry, Mahaffy and Atkinson came to assume this role, perhaps even that of the evil twins, in the Irish nationalist mind. Although he does not enter the Common Room scene until after the major trauma of the play unfolds, as Dochtúir Mac hAitcinn, Atkinson is Mahaffy's primary associate: the figure who guarantees the position that Mahaffy adopts to

Irish: a dead language of no merit. The mutual ratification of Mahaffy and Atkinson as Mac hEathfaidh and Mac hAitcinn enacts and sustains the autogenous bubble of the Trinity College Common Room: like Buber's primary word 'I-Thou', there can be no Mahaffy without Atkinson, nor any Atkinson without Mahaffy. Neither can there be any bubble without this primary alliance: Atkinson and Mahaffy sustain the bubble that encloses them.

Before addressing the traumatic event in which the bubble is burst, it is worth recalling Sloterdijk's contention that bubbles are microscopic instances of larger spheres, the magnitude of which may be enormous in terms of size and duration. In *Pleusgadh/Bursting*, one such sphere appears in the form of the Lord Lieutenant and Her Excellency who visit the Common Room at Trinity College. Their visit is intended to fortify the bubble as part of the sphere of influence of British administration in Ireland and, beyond that, in the whole sphere of the British Empire. This may seem an enormous leap in perspective but not if we acknowledge that, as a Sloterdijkian sphere of power and influence, the British Empire comprised of multitudes of microscopic bubbles: the administrative and cultural institutions within which personal relationships sustained symbolically the authority, tradition and values of Britishness and the British monarchy. The bursting of these bubbles during the twentieth century generated the contraction of the British imperial sphere and its eventual mutation into the British Commonwealth. The bursting of the Trinity College bubble in Hyde's play is not just a crisis for those like Mahaffy and Atkinson living within it. It is also a threat to the British imperial sphere, a bursting that necessitates abandoning that bubble so as to absorb a newly forming one.

The Trinity bubble bursts when an old woman enters the Common Room from the street outside. As Mac Eathfaidh, Mahaffy throws Irish-language examination papers out the window as worthless trash. The old woman enters with these papers in her hand. One of the scholars describes her as an old apple-seller who speaks Irish on the street, judging her to be a "seditious" character (Hyde 1991: 138). Hyde names one of those present in the Common Room as Mac Ui Traíll, meaning 'the son of the slave', thereby implying that the British Unionist mentality at Trinity College is that of a slave towards its English masters in London. He describes the woman as "an old Irish she-rebel" (Hyde 1991: 138). The character, Mac Ui Triaill, the Irish name that Hyde gives to Dr. Anthony Traill, orders the woman to leave the grounds of the University, Mac Eathfaidh offering to

put her out. At this point in the play, the old woman issues a speech that reveals herself as Cathleen Ni Houlihan, representing the spirit of Ireland in the play by Yeats and Lady Gregory that was first performed in April 1902 (Yeats and Gregory 2009: 3–11):

> Ye miserable men who have reviled me, ye slaves who belong to no country, ye have insulted me, pushed me, despised me. I now lay it upon you by the virtue of my curse that the thing which in this world ye most loathe and dread shall instantly come upon you. (Hyde 1991: 138)

With these words, a spell descends upon the scholars in the Common Room, leaving them unable to speak anything but the Irish language, plunging them into a state of consternation as the Lord Viceroy comes to visit them.

This moment in *Pleusgadh/Bursting* strongly echoes the spell that Cathleen Ni Houlihan casts on Michael Gillane just as he is about to marry Delia Cahel in the Yeats-Gregory play of 1902. Like the old apple-seller in the Trinity Common Room, the old woman in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* announces a vision of turmoil erupting from the turn of people to her cause: many will die, many will suffer exile, many will leave behind the money they have saved and many children will be left without a father. Her words plunge Michael Gillane into an otherworldly state as his mother Bridget says to his father, Peter: "Look at him, Peter, he has the look of a man has got the touch" (Yeats and Gregory 2009: 10). Having the touch is a colloquial Irish phrase for someone whose mind is away from this world, possibly overtaken by fairy spirits or some kind of onslaught of madness. In *Pleusgadh/Bursting*, the wife of the scholar Mac Ui Fhinn (the Son of Finn) believes that the dons have all turned mad when she hears them speak Irish (Hyde 1991: 140). When Mahaffy as Mac Eathfaidh addresses the Viceroy in Irish, the Viceroy's wife is convinced that the Dublin coachman has made a mistake: instead of driving them to the University, he has brought them to the Lunatic Asylum (Hyde 1991: 142).

On the surface, this might appear as merely Hyde's comic tomfoolery. More seriously, it suggests that the Common Room of Bubble College is indeed part of a mental asylum. How might this characterization of Trinity College in *Pleusgadh/Bursting* be interpreted? One way is to view Mahaffy's attitude to the Irish language not simply as misguided but actually mad. Mad in the sense of denying what Hyde and other cultural nationalists regard as a self-evident fact of Irish life: Irish as a language that is spoken in various

regions of the country, and a language that carries a rich repository of narratives in medieval manuscripts and in oral culture. As Mac Eathfaidh, Mahaffy does not just say that Irish has no merit as a language: he denies that it exists, even doubting that it existed "a thousandth year ago" (Hyde 1991: 135). The second line of interpretation is that Bubble College may indeed be a lunatic asylum: cut off from the realities of daily life in its surrounding Dublin City Centre environment. Asylum connotes madness in this case, but also the idea of refuge for those from a Protestant British Unionist community in a country that is predominantly Gaelic and Roman Catholic.

A third line would be that the speaking of the Irish language in the play is indeed an act of madness. Most Unionists and many Irish people with no particular interest in politics most certainly considered the Gaelic League idea of reviving Irish in the country as preposterous, and speaking it on a daily basis an absurdity. Shaw strikes this note in his rough characterization of the Irish Revival from his Preface to the 1906 publication of *John Bull's Other Island*:

> Only a quaint little offshoot of English pre-Raphaelitism called the Gaelic movement has got a footing by using Nationalism as a stalking-horse, and popularizing itself as an attack on the native language of the Irish people, which is most fortunately also the native language of half the world, including England. (Shaw 1912: xxxv)

Shaw's cynicism is certainly not what Hyde's play encouraged, yet the identification of Irish with madness in *Pleusgadh/Bursting* at least opens the possibility for regarding the cultivation of Irish-language revival among the English-speaking Irish population as absurd. This is clearly the position that Shaw holds on the Irish language.

There is a fourth line of interpreting Bubble College as a psychiatric institution. Within the context of the play, Irish itself is the language of madness. It is so on the basis that the speakers of Irish, Mac Eathfaidh, Mac Ui Triaill, Mac Ui Dúidín [the son of the little pipe], do not know what they are saying, even as they say it. Foucault contends that madness always appears in the form of language; that it may be "nothing more than the strange syntax of a form of discourse" (Foucault 2015: 26). Foucault also suggests that in speech, the "rational" person allows themselves "the absolute freedom of being mad" while the person who is "mad" is cut

off from human communication as "a prisoner in the closed universe of language" (Foucault 2015: 25). *Pleusgadh/Bursting* provides an excellent example of what Foucault is talking about. Speaking Irish liberates Bubble College from self-confinement, permitting the linguistic anarchy in the play to burst open in the refined and ordered environment of the Common Room. The speakers of Irish experience not a feeling of liberation, however, but the humiliation of incomprehension from the visiting dignitaries: a striking local case of their sudden incarceration in a "closed universe of language". The play unintentionally concedes the paradox of Irish language revival as at once liberation and confinement, the bursting of the Trinity College bubble bringing to the fore another bubble on the island, the Irish-speaking community, grown isolated from the majority population, who have transitioned to English as the working vernacular.

Reviewing the play in November 1903, *The Daily Mirror* complained that "[e]xpecting a satire, one was disappointed in only finding a lampoon" ('Our Dublin' 1903: 7). This reaction overlooks the radical treatment of language behind the admittedly crude nature of the caricatures. Furthermore, this treatment concerns not only English and Irish. The Viceroy mistakes the Irish that Mac Eathfaidh speaks for Greek, apologizing that he does not follow the scholar as it has been such a long time since he left University (Hyde 1991: 142). This misinterpretation not only instantiates the linguistic confusion that engulfs the Common Room upon the descent of the old woman's curse. The inadvertent equation of the two languages also subverts Mahaffy/Mac Eathfaidh's earlier declaration of the vast superiority of Greek over Irish. In this guise, the play pre-empts by almost seventy eight years the association that Hugh, a nineteenth-century County Donegal Hedge School master, makes between classical languages and Irish in Brian Friel's 1980 play, *Translations* (Friel 1981: 23).

Atkinson enters the play as Dochtúir Mac hAitcinn in the role of translator. The aide-de-camp introduces him as such to the Viceroy, still under the impression that the dons are speaking Greek, unfamiliar as he is with the Irish language. The bursting of the College bubble takes the form of a breakdown in linguistic communication between the two men whose relationship is the primal dyad through which the bubble is sustained: Mahaffy as Mac Eathfaidh and Atkinson as Mac hAitcinn. The modernism of Hyde's play surfaces as a crisis in translation, extending the play beyond its immediate concern with the Irish language to the general modernist problem of language as such. Upon first hearing Mac Eathfaidh speak Irish,

Mac hAitcinn does not recognize what he is saying. His initial impression is that the sounds Mac Eathfaidh and the other dons make in speaking Irish are not those of any language, but merely "a kind of muttering" brought on by excessive heat. Mac hAitcinn declares to the Viceroy: "It's a disease not unusual in these climates, my lord" (Hyde 1991: 143). Denigrating Irish as such a disease, he foregrounds sounds themselves – muttering – as the original material from which speech is formed. Through Mac hAitcinn's first reaction, the problem of Irish is implicated in the problem of language: that all meaning generated through speech relies on the simple activity of making sounds, activity that is not meaningful in any original sense.

In passing, Mac hAitcinn detects a couple of Japanese sounds, though he is certain that they are not speaking Japanese either (Hyde 1991: 143). His momentary association of Irish with a distant language reflects back on Mac Eathfaidh's disclosure at the start of the play that he arranged for a Russian from St. Petersburg to be appointed as Examiner of Irish and also a "Mongolian Tartar", with the intention of failing all students and having the Irish examination discredited (Hyde 1991: 136–37). These fleeting associations between Irish and Asian worlds in *Pleusgadh/Bursting* take on an ironical aspect retrospectively, in that, after Ireland becomes an independent state later in the 1920s, the Irish language is more associated with insularity than with openness to the wider world. If allusions to Japan, St. Peterbsburg and Mongolia bring forth the irony that the Trinity College professors are more familiar with distant cultures than they are with that of the island they inhabit, they also foreshadow the contraction of the medium of Irish to a symbol of Irish tradition and independence in the 1920s and 1930s, effectively forming a new bubble as the postcolonial Irish State sought to consolidate its national identity in those decades. In the 1903 of *Plesugadh/Bursting*, however, this was all far in the future. When Mac Aitcinn realizes that it is indeed Irish that the dons of the Common Room speak, he informs the Viceroy. The King's Representative in Ireland is outraged, stating that in coming to the College, he was led to believe that the staff were loyal British subjects: "If this is Irish it simply means treason". When the dons move towards him in desperation as he departs, he is even convinced they are about to kill him. His aide-de-camp calls for the police, uttering cries of "treason" to the consternation and horror of the Bubble College dons (Hyde 1991: 144–45). Mahaffy as Mac Eafaidh is left to lament in Irish the fact that the Viceroy believes him a traitor, even though he was so loyal to Dublin Castle and the greatest conversationalist at social gatherings there.

6. Conclusion

The old woman returns to the scene of her curse at the end of the play. This time, she addresses the gathering in Irish and reveals herself as Cathleen Ni Houlihan. In unrestrained nationalist rhetoric, she declares that Bubble College is lost, God having sent "an Sean Bhean Bhocht" [the poor old woman] to tell the College dons of the ruin and grief that lies in store for them. Sean Bhean Bhocht is another name for Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the feminine spirit of ancient Ireland. Hyde's English translation does not fully capture the passion of her lament at how the College has killed the Gaelic spirit in Irish youth, as the rhythm of Irish syntax flows more forcefully in her speech: "Án t-ógánach croí-éadtrom Gaeilach a ghabhann sibh i bhfúr líonta, baineann sibh an croí amach as lár a chlé agus cuireann sí croí cloiche Gallda in a áit" (Hyde 1991: 148). Hyde translates this line from the speech as follows: "The lighthearted Gaelic youth whom ye catch in your nets ye take away the heart out of the midst of his breast, and ye place a foreign heart of stone in its stead" (Hyde 1991: 149).

The poetic power of the Irish original over the English translation is shown in "croí cloiche Gallda", that Hyde translates as "foreign heart of stone", a phrase that lacks the alliteration of the original, especially the sound-repetition of "croí cloiche" (pronounced as "kree klithe"). Part of the play's function is to illustrate for Irish audiences the poetic quality of the Irish language, even when spoken by those who scoff at the use of Irish as a living vernacular. One of the many ironies that Hyde sets up in the play is the poetry of Irish speech against the denigration of the Irish language in the comments of Mac Eafaidh and Mac Aitcinn. This irony is particularly tasty when Mac Ui Triaill, in an echo of Shakespeare's Caliban, curses the Irish language – in Irish: "an teanga mhalluighe seo" [this accursed tongue] (Hyde 1991: 143).

With the return of English speech to the dons following the departure of "the hag", the last moment of the play sees Mac Eafaidh collapsing into the arms of Mac Triaill with a final recognition that "[t]he Bubble has burst" (Hyde 1991: 149). This ending carries both an educational and a linguistic meaning. The Viceregal Inquiry concluded that the Irish language was generally favourable. The establishment of the National University of Ireland (NUI) in 1908 accentuated its standing to a higher level than before through the decision to make Irish a requirement for admission to the Universities that came under the auspices of the new University

body. Trinity College Dublin held a virtual monopoly over Third-Level education in the city. The Catholic University, inaugurated with Cardinal John Henry Newman as its first Rector in 1854, had attracted few students through the second half of the nineteenth century. This situation changed in 1882 when University College Dublin (UCD) replaced the Catholic University and numbers increased. Coming under the umbrella of the National University of Ireland along with the former Queen's Colleges in Galway and Cork, UCD grew in standing through increased state funding and stronger Government recognition. As a result, the standing of Trinity College as the preeminent institution of Third-Level education in Dublin was challenged, exposed to the presence of a University-educated Irish Catholic middle-class just over one hundred years after the Act of Union that had brought Ireland under direct rule from Westminster Parliament in London. The prominence accorded to the Irish language in the NUI underlined the success that the Gaelic League enjoyed in reviving Irish and the failure of Trinity College academics to put a brake on the movement.

Pleusgadh/Bursting is a play intimately connected with the rebel nationalist sentiment in plays of the early Irish Theatre movement. The connection with Yeats-Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is direct, the Sean Bhean Bhocht appearing in both this and Hyde's play. The Irish nationalist organization, *Cumann na nGaedhal*, produced *Pleusgadh/Bursting* in 1903, just as *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* [Daughters of Ireland] performed the Yeats-Gregory play at St. Teresa's Hall, Dublin, in April 1902. The bursting of the Trinity College bubble occurs in the context of an Irish nationalist movement that had grown more confident culturally through *Conradh na Gaeilge*. *Pleusgadh/Bursting* is a play that strives to "teach ourselves [the Gaelic Irish] not to be ashamed of ourselves", as Hyde put it in "The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland" in 1892 (Hyde 1892: 11). One Irish newspaper review described the play as a "masterpiece of satirical comedy, directed at the fossilized 'educationalists' in high places, who oppose the Irish language movement" ('Dramatic' 1905: 8). In this regard, the play can be regarded as part of a psychological decolonization of Irish mentality in its relations with Britain at the start of the twentieth century. The Irish language is not an object of embarrassment in *Pleusgadh/Bursting* but rather, the insularity of those who enclose themselves in an autogenous bubble of narcissistic superiority, sustained by desperate displays of loyalty to a Dublin Castle administration that would eventually consider them disposable.

Hyde's play is also significant in a broader sense of modernism as the bursting of linguistic and cultural bubbles. *Pleusgadh/Bursting* illustrates the Common Room of Trinity College Dublin at the start of the twentieth century as a bubble in Sloterdijk's sense: an environment shaped by intimate relationships through which individual identities are constituted. The avant-garde nature of *Pleusgadh/Bursting* emerges in the confusion that is released and the friendships that are shattered in the bursting of that bubble. As MacEafaidh, Mahaffy threatens to break MacAitcinn's head if he fails to convey to the Viceroy the depth of his loyalty to the Crown and hatred of all things Irish (Hyde 1991: 146): sentiments that he conveys through Irish. The play also illustrates Sloterdijk's observation that the bursting of a bubble leaves its inhabitants with a sense of dread at foreignness and indifference. With the intervention of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the enclosed world of the Trinity College Common Room is suddenly left exposed to an indigenous Gaelic world that is utterly foreign to it and that is at least indifferent, if not openly hostile, to the institution's values. Without the blanket of Dublin Castle to protect them because of the primeval linguistic transgression that has occurred, the Trinity College dons transition from a position of superiority to vulnerability. Cathleen Ni Houlihan's speech at the end of the play laments that it is the Gaelic Irish youth who have been the victims of an alienating or foreignizing influence at Trinity College, castigating the scholarly community at the University as devoid of any national feeling, suspended between England and Ireland. Ultimately, however, *Pleusgadh/Bursting* is an avant-garde play that is self-transcending. Its treatment of the Irish language question opens up a fundamental crisis of language itself. Inscribed in Hyde's play is the act of translation, but translation of a unique type: translation of speeches that denounce and revolt against the very language in which they are spoken. This is Foucault's paradox of the language of madness: speech as liberating madness and madness as imprisonment in speech. The ultimate nonsense of *Pleusgadh/Bursting* is thus a ridiculously neglected moment in the history of Irish modernism.

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