

Semmelweis as Literary Hero

George Bizstray

Semmelweis, Saviour of Mothers! This epithet was coined by Jenő Rákosi half a century after the death of the famed physician.¹ While Rákosi himself was later called an "arch-conservative" and a "reactionary" by the communists, they borrowed the epithet. The life of Doctor Semmelweis reminds one of a classical Greek tragedy, for which reason the Semmelweis story has over the years been the subject of a number of films and plays. In 1939 and in 1952 films were made about him in Hungary, directed by László Kalmár and Frigyes Bán, respectively. In 1950 an East German movie celebrated "*Semmelweis, Retter der Mütter*" ("Saviour of Mothers").

In this article, I shall outline variations on a theme by three playwrights: the Norwegian Jens Bjørneboe; the American Howard Sackler; and the Hungarian György Száraz. I shall also mention an unusual lyrical prose work by the famous French author Louis-Ferdinand Céline — himself a medical doctor — in which the figure of Semmelweis is used to propagate Céline's own, distinctively Nietzschean world-view.

Who was Semmelweis, and how can we conceive him as a classical tragic hero? Ignác Fülöp (in German: Ignaz Philip) Semmelweis was born in Buda in 1818. He studied medicine in Vienna, and started his practice there in the obstetric ward of the Allgemeines Krankenhaus (General Hospital). Since well-to-do women gave birth at home, Semmelweis's patients were mostly working-class women and prostitutes. It was a matter of common knowledge, but only the newcomer Semmelweis found it significant that in the section of the ward where midwives attended the death rate from a mysterious illness called childbed fever was much lower than in the section where delivery was assisted by medical doctors. After much observation and experimentation, Semmelweis found a connection between this circumstance and another factor. Unbelievable as it sounds now, obstetricians and interns in those days also conducted dissections of and even practiced delivery on cadavers. Semmelweis eventually came to the conclusion that childbed fever was neither God's will nor an irrational event but a case of endemic poisoning caused by bacteria carried on decom-

posing particles of organic matter. He also found the remedy: thorough hand washing with a solution of lime.

As the Semmelweis myth goes, the envious medical establishment reacted disgracefully, belittling Semmelweis's finding, ridiculing his commitment to truth, eventually simply claiming his achievement. The historian, physician, and Hungarian patriot, István Benedek points out in an introduction to Semmelweis's essays, that Semmelweis was neither a martyr nor a national hero but a man of difficult nature: cantankerous, often rude, and unable to explain his theory in a voluminous, book-size work. Instead, he wasted his life writing polemic letters to colleagues all over the world.² This may have been true for the last five years of his life when, after the belated publication of his *magnum opus*,³ Semmelweis initiated a vituperate correspondence with those who were slow to accept his findings. Semmelweis the medical student and young doctor, on the other hand, was remembered as a good-natured and popular member of the Viennese Hungarian community.⁴ Long years full of disappointments, and a general embittering of his disposition, made him the man that Benedek described. Although scientifically he was right, Semmelweis tried to prove his thesis in the wrong way. He died in 1865 in the same mental hospital (in Döbling, Austria) where the great statesman István Széchenyi had died five years earlier.⁵ Semmelweis's achievement was probably never acknowledged on its own merits; medical literature attributes his method to the German Virchow, the Scotsman Simpson, and even to others.

A Hungarian fate, one may say, bringing to mind similar examples, such as János Bolyai who was ignored in favour of Karl Friedrich Gauss, or Ányos Jedlik disregarded in favour of Werner von Siemens. In the field of inventions it is, indeed, difficult to prove primacy, and the children of smaller nations feel this especially painfully. Nevertheless, a misunderstood genius always makes a good tragic figure. Semmelweis exemplifies hubris: the tragic lack of knowledge or awareness. In his case, it is knowledge of the fact that the medical institution is part of the social structure, guided not only by scientific truth but also by hierarchical individual interests, political considerations, and personal informal connections. In other words, science is practiced by human beings who are fallible. In fact, they are all too frequently vain, jealous, and often engage in intrigues. Insolence, this other definition of hubris, also holds true for Semmelweis.

Enough of the biographical facts. We have on hand three dramas about the same person. Their authors agree in many respects, almost to the point of repeating each other. Yet, the different cultures and times that produced them lends each one its distinctive character. The same hero provides an instance for the three authors to air their ideas. Thus, of equal importance with their main character are the playwrights themselves. Who were they?

Jens Bjørneboe (1920-1976) was an *enfant terrible* of post-Second World War Norwegian literature. Labelled in turn a leftist, anarchist, and populist, actually his persistent aim was to provoke the middle class. Bjørneboe also

participated in an almost forgotten trend, once somewhat naively called the Scandinavian sexual revolution, which should be mentioned because this, too, left its trace on his drama about Semmelweis.

Bjørneboe's introduction to the play is,⁶ indeed, a sort of anarchist manifesto. Looking back at the upheavals of 1968, the playwright proclaims that all present societies are authoritarian, unreformable, and therefore they have to be torn down. The play, which is not meant to be historically accurate, illustrates the conflict between independent and authoritarian thinking. It begins with a narrative frame connecting present and past: a group of radical students occupy the theatre and announce a performance about how highly educated people become the tools of oppression. As Markusovszky, a "progressive" colleague of Semmelweis explains later on: "Whores and professors have no homeland. They serve anyone who pays them."⁷

Bjørneboe insists that the conspiracy against Semmelweis was primarily politically motivated. Doctor Klein, Semmelweis's earlier supervisor and arch-enemy, calls the doctor a political rebel. Bjørneboe's hero reminds one of another, more famous Norwegian stage character: Henrik Ibsen's nonconformist Doctor Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* — especially when he says: "the whole world is wrong and I am right." Plenty of the author's own ideas are present, however: besides anarchism and the neo-Marxist illusion of leadership by enlightened intellectuals, there is a populist twist when a prostitute makes Semmelweis realize how important regular baths are in preventing sickness; and, a sanitation worker (in other words, a latrine cleaner) tells him of the antiseptic quality of lime solution. *Voilà!* The belief in proven popular wisdom winning over affected intellectual superstitions. The sexual bandwagon rolls by: Semmelweis likes the company of prostitutes, and at one point he enters into a discussion with less enlightened colleagues about female orgasm. Indeed, having fun with less than reputable women was perfectly acceptable behaviour for young men in those days — maybe this is why absolutely no reminiscences of friends and contemporaries refer to such erotic escapades in Semmelweis's youth. Precisely because it is trivial, the episode does not enrich the portrait of the protagonist.

Though naive and biased, Bjørneboe's play is anything but boring. Unfortunately, references to the development of Semmelweis's ideas occasionally serve to confuse the reader. First Semmelweis calls childbed fever an epidemic, then discovers that it is endemic. He makes hand washing with water and soap obligatory for interns; later he insists on the use of lime. Imprecisions are frequent: Bjørneboe once identifies 1850, another time (correctly) 1848 as the year of European revolutions. Also, Semmelweis once appears in revolutionary uniform, when it is well known that he stayed aloof from the revolution.⁸ We also hear the "dual monarchy" mentioned. Bjørneboe shares several misconceptions with Sackler, such as the myth that Semmelweis died of an infected sore on his hand, and, less importantly, both believe that the capital of Hungary in 1850 was Budapest.

Yet another Semmelweis emerges from Howard Sackler's (1929-1982) portrayal.⁹ (Pondering this author's last name makes us wonder whether he had Hungarian ancestry.) Sackler wrote plays, television plays, and film scripts. His placement of Semmelweis in the development of medical science is interesting. In the mid-nineteenth century, this science was just shedding its inhibitions. Among these were a fixation with diagnostics, skepticism about the possibility of prevention, and an early Darwinist-positivist determinism. A typical manifestation of this attitude was the mania to dissect. Thus, Semmelweis was ahead of his time in his ambition to prevent sepsis. Sackler mentions that not only the bacteria on the exposed and unwashed hands of the medics but also on the medical instruments, blankets, and sheets could cause sepsis. Much less than in Bjørneboe, there is a reference to the impurity of science, to social contamination by ambition and envy. Sackler also refers to the forging of statistics (which we all know well), and the claiming of other people's achievements as our own.

In Sackler's drama there is just a short reference to Semmelweis's premarital experience with women, in the form of a passing flirt with a nurse. Otherwise we learn that he lived with his widowed sister and married a well-heeled girl from Ischl. In this play Semmelweis never leaves Austria: fifteen years of his life in Pest are cut out. No reference is made to the revolution which, actually, had an important impact on academic freedom and, therefore, did influence Semmelweis's career indirectly. The hero's family name is misspelled, with a double "s" at the end, and everybody calls him by his infrequently used middle name, Philip — probably because "Ignatius" is unfamiliar to speakers of English. There are also other errors and improbabilities in the play, just some of which have been mentioned.

Sackler's piece was first staged in Buffalo in 1977, and then in two other American cities, everywhere unnoticed. In 1987 the Equity Showcase Theatre staged *Semmelweis* at Toronto's Harbourfront. This performance received laudatory reviews, which surprises one who did not see it, but has only read the play. The cast is large: thirty-seven persons, and there is much idling in the lengthy piece. Especially the directing and the performances of some of the lead actors were appreciated by critics.

György Száraz's play *Gyilkosok (Murderers)*¹⁰ won the 1980 Agria prize and was staged that same summer in Eger, site of the Agria festivals. Száraz (1930-1987) was an enigmatic figure in the last decade of the Kádár regime. He was imprisoned during the rule of Mátyás Rákosi and subsequently held modest cultural positions. In 1977 he became column editor of the cultural weekly *Élet és Irodalom* and in 1983 editor of the literary monthly *Kortárs*. While he published nothing of importance until 1976, in the last decade of his life he ground out eight volumes. Obviously, Száraz became a protege of the cultural dictator György Aczél, taking responsibility for publications about sensitive subjects that the regime wanted to vent unofficially. In such capacity Száraz wrote a polemic pamphlet against Romanian chauvinism,¹¹ and a long eulogy for the sadistic traitor Pálffy-Oesterreicher.¹²

Agents entrusted with such sensitive propaganda tasks naturally enjoyed certain liberties, as will be pointed out. At first reading, Száraz's play strikes one as the best researched and historically most authentic of the three. He doesn't kill off Semmelweis at the end but finishes the play with the hero's decision to return to his native country. There is no reference to Semmelweis's private life, and the hero's non-participation in the 1848 revolution is made explicit. The play is so balanced and smoothly flowing, it is almost manneristic — something that reviewers pointed out. With its moral message it reminds one of László Németh's psychological morality plays.

A Hungarian reader or spectator may discover an underlying message, however. Hungarian literature during the Kádár era developed its own technique of double talk (now fashionably called meta-language). Unlike Bjerneboe's anarchist antics or Sackler's philosophized search for a healing truth, Száraz critically targets a well-defined bureaucratic autocracy of a certain age. Besides the untouchable figureheads of the old regime (shall we say, the venerable lifelong party comrades?), and, an overall ideological control, truth also gets a specific meaning. What if the world realized that obstetricians literally executed thousands of women worldwide in their ignorance? Nobody would ever believe again in medical science, or — who knows? — perhaps in any authority any more! We may continue this line of thought. What if the Soviet government had accepted responsibility for the massacre at Katyn? Not to mention the unknown number of its other victims: were they twenty million? Forty million? Who would have believed in communism any longer? When Száraz's Semmelweis says; "All of us are murderers," he sounds very different from his Norwegian and American alter egos. Also, Hungarians may have recognized other analogies in the play, such as the mention of the reprisals against intellectuals who participated in the war of independence in 1848-49. Even more viciously persecuted were the participants of the revolution of 1956.

We have discussed three dramas — similar and yet different as they are. We met an erotic anarchist, a philosophical forerunner of democracy who arrived too early, and a speaker of the troubled conscience of a distant age — all called Semmelweis. Will the real Semmelweis please stand up? Actually, all three figures exist equally. We cannot learn much from comparing them, except that we know that any literary hero has more to do with the author than the real-life model, if there is one. In spite of the glaring errors of the Norwegian and American plays, and the artistic mediocrity of all three dramas, all three Semmelweises are worthy of consideration. Unfortunately language barriers and the absence of translations make it virtually impossible to do so for someone who does not read all three languages.

As a postscript, we may add yet another title to the list of literary works inspired by the life of Ignác Semmelweis. In 1924 a medical student by the name of Louis Destouches submitted a dissertation to the Sorbonne for which he received a doctoral degree.¹³ Since this slim volume is a rather rambling philosophical statement about the grim fate of the genius, presented in an

emotional, lyrical style and spiked with aphoristic banalities, one wonders what amazing criteria the famous citadel of French scholarship had in those days to grant somebody a doctoral degree in medical history. Besides the definitely unscholarly presentation, the dissertation also contained numerous inaccuracies, for instance, the often-heard myth that Semmelweis was still dissecting in spite of his mentally unstable condition, when he acquired the fatal sepsis from a self-inflicted wound to his finger.¹⁴ There are also anachronisms in the book that serve as literary embellishments. We learn that the little Ignác visited his parents on Sundays by crossing the Danube on a beautiful bridge.¹⁵ The same little Ignác liked to play on the street, because streets in Hungary are full of music and song.¹⁶

Obviously, the author knew nothing about Pest-Buda, nor would he ever in his life see Budapest. This did not keep him from becoming world famous under the assumed name Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Like Semmelweis, Céline too was a difficult and controversial figure, among other things as a supporter of Marshal Pétain. If his books prove anything, it is the curious interrelation between author and work. The Semmelweis Céline described was himself: a misunderstood, brooding, then raging misanthrope. The misunderstood genius was one of his recurring literary figures. For this reason, Céline's 1932 novel about a suburban physician, titled *Voyage au bout de la nuit* does not seem directly related to the real Semmelweis.

NOTES

1. Cf. István Benedek's introduction to Ignác Semmelweis, *A gyermekágyi lázról* [About Childhood Fever] (Budapest: Könyvértékesítő Vállalat, 1987), p. 5.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-10, esp. p. 9.

3. *Die Aetiologie, der Begriff und die Prophylaxis des Kindbettfiebers* (Pest: Hartleben, 1861).

4. Cf. György Gortvay and Imre Zoltán, *Semmelweis élete és munkássága* [The Life and Work of Semmelweis] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1966), p. 32.

5. The cause of Semmelweis's death baffles historians. The coroner's report is inconsistent and suggests the possibility that Semmelweis was institutionalized with a nervous breakdown and died due to maltreatment.

6. *Semmelweis: et anti-autoritaert skuespill* [Semmelweis: An Anti-Authoritarian Play] (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1968).

7. "Horer og professorer har intet fedreland. De tjener enhver som betaler." (p. 64).

8. This episode of Semmelweis's life was also recorded inconsistently. During the decades of communist rule in Hungary, revolutionaries automatically counted as heroes. Maybe this was why Gortvay and Zoltán took pains to find recollections of two

incidents about Semmelweis participating in revolutionary activity (p. 62). All other biographies deny this.

9. "Semmelweiss." [*sic*] Access to script courtesy of Equity Showcase Theatre, Toronto.

10. "Gyilkosok," in *Császárlátogatás* [A Visit by the Emperor] (Budapest: Magvető, 1984), pp. 103-217.

11. *Erdély múltjáról, jelenidőben* [About Transylvania's Past, in the Present Tense] (Budapest: Magvető, 1988).

12. *A tábornok* [The General] (Budapest: Magvető, 1984). "General" György Pálffy was a graduate of the Ludovika Military Academy. After the war he became a communist and was appointed to head of the Hungarian army's dreaded internal security unit (Katonapolitikai Osztály). His true character is revealed in just one page of Lieutenant General Pál Almásy's recollections of how, after his arrest, Pálffy orchestrated his torture (*Ketrecbe engem zártak* [It Is I Whom They Locked into a Cage], comp. Ferenc Kubinyi. Budapest: Holnap, 1989; p. 65.) In 1949 Pálffy himself was condemned to death by the communists and was executed.

13. *Semmelweis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936). Our source: 2nd ed. (1952).

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-5.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 28. The "beautiful bridge" must have been the Chain Bridge (Lánchíd) which, however, was finished only in 1849.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-26