Knock: a study in medical cynicism

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French literature has shown an enduring fascination with the social figure of the doctor. In Jules Romains’ amusing play Knock (1922), and in its later film version (1951), the doctor as deceiver returns to centrestage with a flourish. Motière’s seventeen-century figures were mostly quacks and mountebanks; Knock is something new: he is a health messiah. By enforcing a mental and social hygiene based on fear, Knock brings a small rural population under his sway. Insouciance is banished by artful consciousness-raising. A society mobilises under the banner of medicine. But who is Dr Knock?

In August 1923, Jules Romains (Louis Henri-Jean Farigoule), PEN activist, friend of Stefan Zweig, and one of France’s most famous and popular writers between the wars, wrote a play in three acts called Knock. It was to prove his most enduring literary creation. In the 1920s Romains was, along with Luigi Pirandello and Bernard Shaw, one of the most staged dramatists in the world, which goes to show that no literary reputation is ever entirely vouchsafed. Perhaps the only other work Romains is remembered for today is the 27 volumes of his colossal “unanimist” fiction Les hommes de bonne volonté, published in instalments between 1932 and 1946, when Romains had returned from war exile in New York and Mexico. It runs to 8,000 pages; Richard Cobb assures us, in his essay Maigret’s Paris, that it contains some finely evocative scenes of the outskirts to the French capital.

Romains first thought of asking the Comédie-Française to stage his piece. That idea came to nothing, but a copy of his play ended up in the hands of the actor Louis Jouvet who was bowled over by its “formal perfection”. A pharmacist before he became an actor, Jouvet was for three decades one of the best-known actors of the Parisian theatre-world, a star of many classic French films, including the famous Hôtel du Nord. With his widow’s peak and suave demeanour, he looks like a svelte version of Jack Nicholson; one of his witicisms has deservedly been anthologised: “there are performances where the public is quite without talent”.

After several rehearsals, Romains insisted that Jouvet play the character close to his own persona, without caricature—“Vous avez une occasion magnifique d’être vous-même”—but with a gloss of courtesy, sarcasm, and self assurance. Jouvet worried that it was going to be too “black” to attract the public. He was wrong. On the first night at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées the play was such a success that André Gide went backstage to congratulate Jouvet on his performance. From then on Jouvet was Knock. He played the role throughout his acting life, and after the war went on stage as Knock at the Athénée no fewer than eight hundred times. Two film versions were made; one in 1933, and a better known version, directed by Guy Lefranc, in 1951. Such was Jouvet’s status that he was allowed to supervise casting. In the event, his brilliant performance proved to be the ultimate film record of a remarkable acting career: he died on stage rehearsing Graham Greene’s The Power and the Glory in 1951 just months after the film’s release.

THE FARCE AND THE FARCEUR

The film opens in the early years of the 20th century with Knock, the aspirant to a medical practice, sitting in the back of an old jalopy—what the French used to call a torpédo—with Doctor Parpalaid and his wife. Knock has just purchased Dr Parpalaid’s practice in the small town of Saint-Maurice, which, from the references to hilly country and the nearby presence of Lyon, would seem to indicate a sleepy hollow somewhere in the French Alps. Somewhere deep in dear old France. All the business has—unusually—been concluded in advance by letter, and Knock is exercising his right to be introduced to the clientele. Dr. Parpalaid is a decent old duffer—an homme de l’art as the French used to say of their doctors, or a man of “good intent” in Romains’s term; his wife a formidable matron with a better sense of business than her husband. They have decided, after careful consideration, to move on to better things in Lyon—she has rheumatism and his wife “swores he would finish his career in a big city”.

Urban aspirations notwithstanding, they extol the virtues of the canton to Knock: a railway far enough away for the clientele to stay put, no competitor, a chemist who doesn’t try to do the doctor’s job, no major overheads. Knock seems uncommonly interested in what kind of diseases his prospective clients might suffer from, and is put out to discover that the local people generally come “only for a single consultation”. There are no regular patients: it’s not like the baker or the butcher, exclaims Madame Parpalaid, who takes him for a bit wet around the ears. Knock is forty; Faust’s age; though he admits to having completed his thesis only the summer before: Sur les Prétendus États de Santé (On Imaginary States of Health), with an epigraph from Claude Bernard: Les gens bien portants sont des malades qui s’ignorent. Well people are sick people who simply don’t know it—yet. (I Bamforth, Knock [English translation], unpublished document, 1999) It is a motto about the unwitting patient in all of us, and it turns out, ominously, to be the most telling line in the play.

There are already some subtle worrying signs about Knock. He doesn’t know the church feast days, not even Michaelmas, which is when Dr Parpalaid’s patients are in the habit of paying him. (Dr Parpalaid has rogously sold the practice just after this date, thus giving Knock grounds for accusing Parpalaid of attempting to fleece him—but when did a doctor ever buy a practice without seeing it first?) As a child he was apparently an avid and precocious reader of the information slips tucked around bottles of pills: at nine he could recite entire pharmacopoeias of side effects. He has already been a ship’s doctor, he informs Madame Parpalaid, and for the duration of the voyage had crew and passengers confined to the sick bay: only the expediency of a roster kept the ship manned and the engines running. In short, Knock has a vocation and no ordinary one at that; and he has a “method”.

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Knock arranges for the other members of the cabal, the teacher and the pharmacist, to visit him. His language is fulsomely metamorphosed—spread like wildflowers in the modern horror of microbes. As physician-magus, he consigns the latter to the role of *marchand-dipicier*, one of those money-hungry apothecaries and suppliers of unicorn’s horn who inspired Molière to create Purgon and Fleuriart. He engages the town crier to tell the country folk that consultations are to be given free of charge at the surgery on Monday mornings. When he asks the town crier what the townspeople used to call his predecessor, he discovers it was never “Monsieur le docteur”, but often a sobriquet—Ravachol. Romans is enjoying a little joke with his audience. Romans and his character’s friendship with the town crier was a general observation of government with life: Romans defined his philosophy of unaniimsim as “a natural and spontaneous harmony within a group of people who share the same emotion”. The fact that Kropotkin’s cooperatives and Proudhon’s theory of “mutual aid” derived from Darwin’s law of natural selection as effortlessly as did Spencer’s competitive model, which provided a foundation for eugenics, suggests there can be no straightforward leap from scientific to political ecology. Indeed, this kind of anarchism—of the non-bombing, moralistic kind exorted by Tolstoy—looks mostly like a philosophy for smallholders.

This is all to the good to Knock. His ideal of social organisation is a form of hygiene organised around himself as “continual creator” and saviour. His plan for conquest is clearly of long standing and carefully organised. He assiduously acquaints himself with the incomes of his clients. Patients are ruthlessly stripped of their defences, beginning with the flimsy mantle of insouciance which has protected them from worrying about their health. The Lady in Violet, a certain “dame Pons, née Lempossoums”, gets the shock treatment: her insomnia, which Dr Parpalaid had never taken seriously—he used to tell her “to read three pages of the civil code every evening”—may now be the result of a “pipestem deformity” of the intracerebral circulation or perhaps even a “sustained evening”—may now be the result of a “pipestem deformity”. The following passage was actually omitted from the French translation of *San Michele*, presumably because its hint of diabolism failed to flatter the reputation of the Maître who had dominated French medicine for more than a generation: “Charcot for instance was almost uncanny in the way he went straight to the root of the evil, often apparently only after a rapid glance at the patient from his cold eagle eyes”.

Once Knock has made it explicit, danger is like the house-dust mite: everywhere. One might call it “Getting the Fear”. Knock encourages the local schoolteacher, Mr Bernard, to indulge his little obsessive-compulsive tic: “Do you think, doctor... I may be a carrier of germs?” Mr Bernard’s phobic reaction testifies to the power of a mystery—the invisible germ—caught in the full glare of scientific explanation. No other scientific figure stands with such emblematic clarity in republican France’s sense of itself as the bacteriologist Louis Pasteur—“le bienfaiteur de l’humanité”. It was after all the French Revolution which gave rise to the belief that where a physician worked his miracles there could be no clergy, and that illness was a matter for the common weal. The evil of profiteering doctors would disappear once equality, freedom, and fraternity had been established. Diseases would be classified; statistics collated; clinics built. Pasteur is emblematic because he embodies so well the due process of the positivist science? It is the instinctive hankering after the Lie which created human credulity.

Medicine, for the nineteenth-century French, was the advance post of Progress. Such was its prestige that Zola made his novels case-histories: he anticipates one of Knock’s lines in his novel *Lourdes* with the query: “Supposing that after all there is a Power greater than that of man, higher than that of science? Is it the instinctive hankering after the Lie which created human credulity?” In Zola’s literary world, the pharmacy is on a level with semiology. While flattering Mousquet, the only chemist in town, Knock astutely promises to triple his income within a year. Besides, aren’t they partners in the great fight against disease? When Mousquet points out that people have to fall ill first, Knock retorts with a policy statement: “Fall ill—that’s an old-fashioned idea! It has been completely overlaid by modern scientific medicine. Health is a word which could just as well be struck from the dictionary. What I see are people variously affected by a various number of diseases of varying virulence. Of course, if you insist on telling them they’re well, they’ll be only too happy to believe you. But you’re leading them on your own peril: you can be that you already have too many patients to take on new ones.”
So effective is Knock in medicalising the town that when Dr Parpalaid returns three months later to collect the outstanding payment for the sale of the practice, he finds the local Hôtel de la Clef full of patients. The chambermaid (now nurse assistant) fails to recognise Dr Parpalaid and innocently insults him by adding that she hadn’t known there was a doctor in town before Dr Knock. Mousquet is run off his feet with work, and loving it: “it’s not the old cabbage patch life of the old days”. Mr Bernard, the schoolteacher, has moved on to giving illustrated public lectures on the need for perpetual readiness against the menace of the microbe. Public health was a major concern in the France that had lost ten per cent of its male population to the first world war; even Louis-Ferdinand Céline—aka Dr Destouches, urban nihilist and Proust’s closest rival for the title of the greatest French novelist of the century—did his stint to improve the stock of future generations, touring Brittany in a Rockefeller-funded campaign against tuberculosis in the period in which Knock was written, when he would sing, to presumably startled schoolchildren, “va-t-en, va-t-en microbe!” to the tune of “Il pleut, il pleut, bergère.” (These campaigns against the unseen menace in the midst of the French population evidently had an effect, as can be surmised from the habits of an unquestionably intelligent middle-class family of the period: Simone Weil’s biographer reports that her entire family, in the 1910s, lived in fear of microbes, obsessively washing hands, opening doors with elbows and generally shunning physical contact.)

Knock astounds his predecessor with his figures for the last three months, and not just the consultation rates: he knows the incomes of every household in the canton. But it’s not their money he’s after; he assures Parpalaid: he has brought people to medicine, he has given their lives a medical meaning. In the long monologue at the end of the play he introduces the pathos of 250 households où quelqu’un confesse la médecine, not to mention the climactic prospect of 250 rectal temperatures about to be read simultaneously. He asks Dr Parpalaid to reconsider the view out of the practice window:

You were contemplating a wild landscape, barely cultivated by human hand. Now I offer it to you impregnated by medicine, fired by the spirit of our subterranean art. When I stood here for the first time, the day after my arrival, I wasn’t too proud: I realised my presence didn’t count for much. This vast expanse of France had the temerity to sum me up and condemn me. But now, I’m much at ease here as an organist sitting down to play his instrument. In two hundred and fifty of these houses—not all of which are apparent because of the distance and the greyness—there are two hundred and fifty bedrooms where someone’s confessing the power of medicine, two hundred and fifty beds where a recumbent body attests that life has a purpose, and—thanks to me—a medical purpose. At night the view is even more beautiful, for then their lights shine out. And almost all these lights are mine. Non-patients sleep in the outer dark. They cease to exist. But patients leave on their night-lights or their lamps. For me, night banishes everything that remains outside medicine, wipes away its irritation and provocation. Instead of the district we know there is a kind of framework of which I am the continual creator. And I haven’t mentioned the bells. Their first office for all these people is to call them to my prescriptions; the bells intone my orders. Think of it: in a few moments, ten o’clock is going to sound, and for all my patients ten o’clock is when they read their rectal temperature for the second time: just think, in a few moments, two hundred and fifty thermometers will be inserted at the same time...

Knock is acting not in his own good, he tells Parpalaid, nor even that of his patients, but in the interests of that third thing: la médecine. Parpalaid is struck dumb, bereft of argument. There can be only one possible conclusion: soon the old doctor, who has already had to suffer the ignominy of his less than rapturous welcome by the hotel/hospital staff, and who would seem the person best armed through his culture and experience to recognise Knock for what he is—an agent of the great lie—and thereby resist his blandishments, is being invited by his successor to take a rest cure himself. Knock’s medicalisation of the canton is complete.

Progress has come to Saint-Maurice, so it believes, and it is a collective progress which nobody has the power to resist, not even Dr Parpalaid. A self-contained society forms as the spectator watches; it shares the same hopes and fears, its solidarity is such, even after three months, as to repulse Dr Parpalaid when he comes to collect the remainder of the payment on his old practice. Whatever fails to fit this world-as-interpreted-by-medicine is suppressed or rejected: medicine for the inhabitants of Saint Maurice becomes the very content of their lives. They offer Knock a seller’s market. He leans on what he is expert at inducing—fear: a contrived dart of panic among the cast that can make laughter from the auditorium sound oddly complicit or uneasy. The inhabitants of St Maurice might be suffering from maladies imaginaires, but Knock is a master at the art of reinforcing that particular form of fright. His strategy is simple but effective: he defines the bad, and dictates the good. He invokes a cosmic principle, subjecting the horizontal society of supposedly autonomous subjects to the vertical idea—of divinity. Perhaps he is a latter-day Dr Mesmer, a mesmeriser who puts the instruments of reason to the minis-
The point of honesty in deception: In all great deceivers there takes place a remarkable process to which they owe their power. In the very act of deception with all its preparations, the dreadful voice and face and gestures, amid the whole effective scenario, the belief in themselves overcomes them; and it is this belief which then speaks so miraculously, so persuasively, to their audience... For men believe in the truth of all that is seen to be firmly believed.

In 1923, Knock's claims to effectiveness were mostly laughable. The farce was still a game. Medicine lacked sufficient prestige for its authority to be recognised as a law of nature, as Simone Weil, pointed out in her essay The Power of Words. She comments specifically on the power of institutions to “secrete” comments specifically on the power of institutions to “secrete” and its strategies, astounding advances and violent new mentality was going to take... This mentality was Infor... the farce—except that the farce comes first and the tragedy later. The villain of the piece allows himself a smile just once in the play, while reading the town crier's mind. He has made a discovery, and it isn’t medical, but mythic. In the “Big Lie”, in reference to Hitler, there is always a certain force of credibility. Knock has found a way to deflect hubris. By deflecting it from himself, he obliges Nemesis to visit those who take him at his word. Nemesis is user-friendly and not at all dramatic, ladies and gentlemen, for these are modern times—Nemesis is the realisation that desire is both prerational and manufactured... People start to visit the doctor not so much because they are ill, but because they can’t be healthy. Soon doctors start to resemble lawyers, who also owe their livelihood to an evil, but not a natural one. And before we know it, we are opening the door on the world of Knock’s higher cynicism: with his right hand he accepts the fee for illness refuses to disappear. It takes on new forms; it turns up acted upon. Just look around. Despite all our best efforts the realisation that desire is both prerational and manufactured... People start to visit the doctor not so much because they are ill, but because they can’t be healthy. Soon doctors start to resemble lawyers, who also owe their livelihood to an evil, but not a natural one. 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We have to go back to the beginnings of Enlightenment and the twilight of the traditional world from which doctors derive their magical aura as healers to find out why. The first realisation that the equation “knowledge is power”—Knock’s equation—could turn in on itself, through the force of imagination, is to be found in the work of one of the Wittiest and most perspicacious philosophers of the Enlightenment, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–1799). Around the time of the French Revolution, that historical rupture that changed the role and status of the medical profession for better and worse, he wrote a short but pregnant aphorism. “Health”, he told his scrapbook, “is contagious”.

REFERENCES AND NOTES
1 Romains J. Knock ou le triomphe de la médecine. Paris: Gallimard, 1924.
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