Knock: a study in medical cynicism

I Bamforth

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. Molière’s seventeenth-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 volume 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 Jack Nicholson; one of his witticisms has deservedly been anthologised: “there are performances where the public simply don’t know it—yet.” (I Bamforth, Knock [English translation], unpublished document, 1999) It is a motto about the most telling line in the play.

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 onstage 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 her husband “swore 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: “V ous 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 onstage 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.

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Knock arranges for the other members of the cabal, the teacher and the pharmacist, to visit him. His language is fulsome and ingratiating. He tells the former of the former with the modern horror of microbes. As physician-magus, he consigns the latter to the role of marchand-splicer, one of those money-hungry apothecaries and suppliers of unicorn’s horn who inspired Molière to create Purgon and Fleuran. 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. Ravachol. Roms is enjoying a little joke with his audience. Ravachol. Ravachol. Ravachol. 

All this would hat 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 insurance which has protected them from worrying about their health. The Lady in Violet, a certain “dame Pons, née demoiselle Lempoumès”, gets the shock treatment: her insomnia, which Dr Parpalaid had never taken seriously—he is a word which could just as well be struck from the dictionary—has suddenly turned into a “sustained neuralgiform crisis of the substantia nigra”. Or perhaps, as Knock quickly adds, it’s just a big black spider sucking on her brain.

Knock’s use of “big words” to terrorise the Lady in Violet is one of the oldest medical tricks: think of Molière’s cod Latin-spouting Sganarle in the most famous predecessor farce le Médecin Malgré Lui (1666), or the nuciform sac, a structure unknown to any anatomy textbook but wielded to good effect by the surgeon Mr Cutler Walpole in George Bernard Shaw’s play The Doctor’s Dilemma (1906). The description of Knock’s stage directions even resembles Jouve’s portrayal of Knock in the film: his face, according to Shaw in his stage directions, looks “machine-made and beewaxed; but his scrutinising, daring eyes give it life and force. He never seems at a loss, never in doubt; one feels that if he made a mistake he would make it thoroughly and firmly...”. It may be scandalous to admit it, but dissembling has long been part of medicine’s therapeutic arsenal: Knock proffers big words, not for the sake of the cure, but for the rather more pertinent issue of reinforcing his authority.

The nuciform sac turns up in another guise in Axel Munthe’s hugely successful if self-regarding volume of reminiscences from the same decade, The Story of San Michele (1929), in which he tells how, when working in private prac-
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 society of supposedly autonomous subjects to the vertical idea—of divinity. Perhaps he is a latter-day Dr Mesmer, a magnetiser who puts the instruments of reason to the ministry of what is essentially a prospect of salvation, plumbing that part of the mind that is ineducable, a metaphoric but no less fateful terra incognita the French psychologist Pierre Janet termed “the subconscious” five years before Freud.

HYGIENE AND POLITICS

What gives pause in Romain’s brilliant farce is that, in the 1930s, that politicised and polarised decade, Knock was interpreted as a parable about demagogues able to capture the public imagination and mould entire populations to their will. Knock was a type of Great Dictator, the politician without principles: 1922, the year before the play was written, was also the year “Il Duce” came to power in Italy.

There are parallels. The more daringly absolute Knock’s demands on the Saint-Mauriciens—he even gets the Lady in Black, who exudes “peasant avarice and constellation”, to renounce what is clearly her only real passion in life, la bouffe—the more certain they are of his authority to impose such strictures upon them. Their microcosm, even though it is rural, has no socially cohesive institution to counteract medicine’s explaining power (hence Knock’s interest in Act I in presenting 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 morality. He plays up to his patients’ amour propre, not comparing them with the standards of a collective progress which nobody has the power to resist, not even Dr Parpalaid. A self-contained society forms as the spect-actor 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 view is such, even after three months, as to repulse Dr Parpalaid.

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 call them to my prescriptions; the bells intone 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 morality. He plays up to his patients’ amour propre, not comparing them with the standards of a collective progress which nobody has the power to resist, not even Dr Parpalaid. A self-contained society forms as the spect-actor 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 morality. He plays up to his patients’ amour propre, not comparing them with the standards of a collective progress which nobody has the power to resist, not even Dr Parpalaid. A self-contained society forms as the spect-actor 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 morality. He plays up to his patients’ amour propre, not comparing them with the standards of a collective progress which nobody has the power to resist, not even Dr Parpalaid. A self-contained society forms as the spect-actor 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
of new needs, new ways of breakdown; the exalting of fresh anxieties that humankind would feed upon. Jules Romains anticipated, though we didn’t yet know it, the mad-cap mechanisms that were going to rule the world, suggestion and self-suggestion. In Knock, like a prophet at the gates, Jules Romains suddenly shone a light on power, the upsurge of paradigms (idées-forces) and collective theories. Humankind is a machine to make gods and every leader of men a creator of myths. Jules Romains, philosopher, moralist and dramatist, provided an admirable advance warning of the modern and all-encompassing mechanism of cohesion and conviction..."

Romains's play is still read and studied by French schoolchildren, which is interesting. But it has had a little effect as critique on the original experimental society: France is now one of the most highly medicalised countries in the world. The postwar period saw the medicalisation of France in the grand style, a process dramatically accelerated by the events of summer 1968. "Knockisme" has entered the French language, and is used occasionally in medical anthropology as a descriptive term for popular credulity and gullibility. Yet the play is more than a study of duperies: the Italian philologist Guido Ceronetti noted that all the old satires on medicine and doctors (and there is no shortage in French literature) look backwards, over their shoulder; Knock, on the other hand, steps confidently into the future. It is a play that capitalises on Marx's idea of tragedy reinstated as 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," according to Hitler, there is always a certain force of credibil-

ity. 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 to the highest quality standards. Nemesis is the actor upon. Just look around. Despite all our best efforts illness refuses to disappear. It takes on new forms; it turns up where nobody left it; it gets invented by the political and social relations of civilisation itself, which includes the medical pro-
fession. Then the misfortunes to which doctors owe their livelihood—illness is, at least, a natural evil—become morally ambiguous. 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 stilling the devil he set loose with his left...

But that left hand has created a community of interests. Knock treats the people of Saint Maurice coldly, like an anthropologist. He simplifies what he says, then he repeats himself. Isn't it that people ask to be deceived? All right, he will deceive them. Order requires domination, and domination requires a lie or two. So he gives their lives a medical meaning. That is: he extends the bounds of the biological, of whose oracles he is the interpreter, so as to make illness not just a bodily phenomenon but an organising principle for the effective administration of society itself. His argument is life, for that is what a doctor defends. His tools are ideals, seduction, fright, and, if necessary, the threat of violence. His power is his com-
mand of language; in that respect nothing has changed since Molière's day: Knock is every bit as much a storyteller, raconteur, bluffer, salesman and "habile homme" as Sganarelle, who was a subservient valet and sham doctor. But who's talk-
ing sham? Knock gives everyone the fever. He inoculates his patients with the one idea: self preservation, at all costs. And even more disturbingly, as Nietzsche's insight suggests, he might not be a cynic at all: he might be the Lie in person, someone who lies not, as it were in the detail but in his very mode of existing.

KNOCK AND THE FUTURE

After the war, Romains's prescience about the great dictators was acknowledged in the breach, though any comfort it might have brought him—vitified in the collaborationist press, witness to the disgrace of France and deprived of the moral support of his friend Stefan Zweig, who committed suicide in 1942 in Brazil—must have been slight. Cold-war Europe was no longer the continent he had striven to save. He ended his days, some of them at least, in that famous retirement home for distinguished Frenchmen, the Académie Française.

It was left to Louis Jouvet, in an article published to conclude a conference at the Université des Annales in 1949, to show how well he understood the ambiguous appeal of the play and its eponymous character: "Twenty-five years ago, in a penetrating act of inspiration, Knock revealed the direction a new mentality was going to take... This mentality was Infor-

mation and its strategies, astounding advances and violent dramatisations; abrupt and terrifying revelations; the invention of 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 persuas-
ively, 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 laugh-
able. 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 "secret" abstractions: "This particular kind of secretion is wonderfully from the source?"

Soho to Broad Street so that they might take a drink directly

Times conditions? A compulsion: in a sense, public health is medicine's "original teetotaller. The Nazi example is extreme, but it reveals the alcoholism. Hitler, as everyone knows, was a non-smoking efforts were made to improve the German diet and reduce Studies were launched into environmental hazards, and paranoia about contamination and pollution wasn't just

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"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 persuas-
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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 Romain J. Knock ou le triomphe de la médecine. Paris: Gallimard, 1924.