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 centre stage 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 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 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 (I Bamforth, Knock [English translation], unpublished document, 1999) It is a motto about the unwitting patient in all of us, and it turns out, ominously, to be the most telling line in the play.

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 “saw 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 clientelle 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 ruthlessly 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”. 
Knock arranges for the other members of the cabal, the teacher and the pharmacist, to visit him. His language is fulsome and ingratiating, he bewitches the former with the modern horror of microbes. As physician-magus, he consigns the latter to the role of marchand-d'apicier, one of those money-hungry apothecaries and suppliers of unicorn's horn who inspired Molière to create Purgon and Fleurant. 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 soubriquet—Ravachol. Romans is enjoying a little joke with his audience. Ravachol: the Doctor's Dilemma (1906). The description of Walpole in France (his actual name was Königstein) who ended up losing his head to the guillotine. His name marks Dr Parpalaid out as an old-fashioned believer in anarchism as against the power of capital and the state, though it has to be remembered that nineteenth-century anarchism was not irrationalist: it was utopian. It is an attitude still quite common among French doctors who, rather than acknowledge the unwelcome fact that doctors need the state to protect their monopoly, champion what they call “liberalism” as a solid defence against the intrusions of government into private life. Romans defined his philosophy of unananimism as “a natural and spontaneous harmony within a group of people who share the same emotion”. The very fact that Kropotkin's cooperatives and Proudhon's theory of “mutual aid” derived 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 mote: 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 formula: theoretical research plus application of acquired knowledge makes for general wellbeing.

Medicine, for the nineteenth-century French, was the advance post of Progress. Such was its prestige that Zola made its novels case-histories: he anticipates one of Knock's lines in advance post of Progress. Such was its prestige that Zola made his novels case-histories: he anticipates one of Knock's lines in The Story of San Michele (1929), in which he tells how, when working in private prac-
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 ministry of what is essentially a prospect of salvation, plumbing that part of the mind that is inedible, a metaphor but no less fatef ul 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 Duca” 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 constipation”, 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 discovering whether the townspeople go regularly to Mass, white or black). Knock lacks any sense of scruple or limit, though he repeatedly claims he is the servant of a higher amour propre, while drastically curtailing their freedom. Sacrifices there will have to be. Soon his patients are running after something they already have. Mark Twain noted, with his usual pawky humour, how little of substance is actually offered by health messiahs: “There are people who strictly deprive themselves of each and every eatable, drinkable and smokeable which has in any way acquired a shady reputation. They pay this price for health. And health is all they get out of it. How strange it is. It is like paying out your whole fortune for a cow that has gone dry.”

Or it could be that Knock is in thrall to an impersonal will-to-diagnosis: in the last scene of the play he tells Dr Parpalaid that his “involuntary diagnosis-making” has become so highly developed he dare not look in the mirror. Not, at any rate, with his tongue in his cheek.

Romain was surely aware of Nietzsche’s visionary portrait of the “great deceivers”, written forty years before his play:
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” abstractions: “This particular kind of secrecy is wonderfully effective scenario, the belief in themselves overcome 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.”

Exactly a decade later German doctors were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the social mutations of Hitler's New Republic, servants of a Medicine whose aim was ideological, over and above the interest of individuals. Doctors were feted as warriors in white coats, for National Socialism was nothing else but “applied biology”. The Nazi ethos was actually based on a sacred biology, its internal logic consistent with the Nazi belief that the party had been ordained to shape the world's destiny, a destiny which itself would be biological. Science wrote the libretto, Wagner provided the orchestration. Robert Proctor's recent study of public health policies during that period categorises Nazism as “a vast hygienic experiment... paranoia about contamination and pollution wasn’t just metaphorical, but served as a literal spur to concerted efforts at engineering the health of the German population. Studies were launched into environmental hazards, and efforts were made to improve the German diet and reduce alcoholism. Hitler, as everyone knows, was a non-smoking teetotaller. The Nazi example is extreme, but it reveals the metaphorical, but served as a literal spur to concerted efforts at engineering the health of the German population. Studies were launched into environmental hazards, and efforts were made to improve the German diet and reduce alcoholism. Hitler, as everyone knows, was a non-smoking teetotaller. The Nazi example is extreme, but it reveals the...
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.