

March 15, 1987 (vol. 2, no. 16)

Dear Colleague:

In 1950, as a young college student, I went to a play performed by the Comédie Française. I can no longer remember what I saw--probably a Molière piece. My French was certainly not good enough to appreciate the flow of sparkling dialogue or the subtleties of a classical performance. But I do remember one thing, vividly--and I am more than a bit ashamed to confess what it was. It was the tension, the delicious feeling of excitement as the lights began to dim, and in the darkened hall, total silence, until it was broken into by three heavy thuds, paced with genius, made as though with the felt-wrapt end of a cricket bat; and then the slow rise of the curtain, producing a shushing noise as it rose, to reveal the illuminated stage. After this sheer drama, the rest (so far as my memory goes) is silence.

Mary Lydon will no doubt disown me as a colleague after this confession. But I feel free to tell all, because when a person reaches a certain age society grants him the prerogative to speak again with the bluntness of a child. I have also a somewhat more serious purpose in mind, which is to reflect on the human need to raise the curtain and to bring it down at the appropriate moment--in life as well as in the theatre. Let me illustrate with an anecdote. I was still teaching at Minnesota. A few of us were giving a lunch party at the Campus Club in honor of a colleague who was about to go to Austria on a two-year leave. At the end of lunch, we approached our guest to say goodbye, and each of us managed to deliver a few appropriate words. The curtain should have descended at this point, to rise again two years later to reveal us greeting the returned hero. But, alas, this did not happen. After making individual trips to the coat room to pick up our gear, we found ourselves once more facing each other at the elevator. For lack of a prepared script, we were reduced to silent embarrassment until one quick-witted fellow saved the day by saying, "This could never have happened on stage!" He saved us by returning us to the stage where we belong.

The baby's first words are greeted with delight, and our last words--if we are in any sense famous--will be collected and anthologized. One reason why we believe in ghosts is the feeling that some individuals have never had the chance to say the last word. They need to re-enter life to say the last word and take a last bow.

Best wishes,

