

something like that—or this splendid story, sent my way by Laurie Hibbett of Nashville (whom regular readers will recall as a runner-up in our “Poetic Gems” competition of a while back).

Seems there was something of a parking problem last June in Estill Springs, Tennessee. It was caused by several thousand people who came to see the face of Jesus revealed on the side of a General Electric deep-freeze located on the front deck of Luther and Arlene Gardner’s mobile home. What local journalists took to calling “Jesus-on-a-freezer” appeared each night when the Gardners’ neighbor turned on his porch light, until said neighbor tired of devotees dropping film wrappers in his yard and removed the light. At last report, the Gardners were thinking about moving their home and their freezer to a new location and setting up their own light. (And people thought Flannery O’Connor made this stuff up.)

The Estill Springs apparition naturally occasioned jeers from secular humanists, of which even Middle Tennessee has a few. According to the *Nashville Tennessean*, one Audrey Campbell performed her song “Porch Light Jesus” to laughter and applause at the Unitarian Universalist First Church of Nashville. “Some people get the Shroud of Turin and some get a freezer,” she explained. “You make do with what you’ve got.” Ms. Campbell reportedly hoped to sign a recording contract.

Tennessean news editor Dolph Honicker poked fun, too. He claimed the face was that of either Willie Nelson or the Ayatollah Khomeini, and said he could also make out a large, slanted capital-letter N and the letters *v r y* or *v k y*—in either case, he admitted, a message that was Greek to him. But Honicker had the grace to observe that the Gardners were behaving admirably. At a time when everybody from Jim Bakker to a Unitarian folksinger is figuring how to make a buck off of simple faith, all the Gardners wanted was to share freely what they believed they had been given. No parking fees, or lemonade stand, or tee-shirts—just an invitation to come and marvel at this marvelous thing.

And, as Mrs. Hibbett wrote, “There is an awful sincerity about the lady

who owns the freezer that makes it seem sinful to ridicule this small claim to fame, perhaps the nearest thing to achievement she’s ever had. We Bible Belters—and I do not use the phrase pejoratively—have a certain zaniness that goes with the territory. She’s nearer to me religiously than a whole heap of seminarians wining and cheeing up there at [the Episcopal seminary at] Sewanee.”

Luther Gardner, told of Ms. Campbell’s song about his freezer, said simply: “This is something from God. It’s not something for people to make fun of. I’m sorry. It’s just not the right thing to do.” He’s right, of course—at least about our snottiness.

And just think: if God really did manifest Himself on a major appliance—well, let’s just say that He has a puckish sense of humor I hadn’t suspected, and He isn’t making it easy for us smart alecks.

Despite writing this column for Chronicles every month, John Shelton Reed was recently elected president of the Southern Sociological Society.

Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

It’s 10 A.M. on a School Day—Do You Know Who Has Your Child?

Americans generally agree that our public schools are not what they should be, but the strongest resistance to improvement comes from the jokes some people refer to as “teachers’ unions.”

Take the strange case of a Minneapolis nonprofit corporation, Public School Incentives (PSI), which has proposed some interesting measures for public schools. PSI’s founder, Ted Kolderie, says that one of our biggest problems is that we don’t give teachers any *motivation* to excel: no money and no appreciable amount of autonomy. In old-fashioned free-enterprise terms (and the brevity necessary here doesn’t do justice to the ideas), he suggests that we allow teachers to operate as the professionals we expect them to be, as

free agents in what he calls “private practice,” who contract with various schools (rather than working *for* one school) and have control over curriculum, methods, and aids, colleagues and compensation.

He’d also like to see students and their parents have the chance to choose among public schools and school districts, a luxury now available only to people with money. Under such a system, “Every school will become a school of choice,” Kolderie writes in a public memo. “With choice *among* schools there can be more coherence *within* schools. Schools will be more responsive. And parents and students will begin to share with the schools the responsibility for performance.”

Under his proposed system, a school—and the teachers in it, individually—will be “at risk as to performance.” If the school is bad, parents can easily move their kids to a different one. And if enough dissatisfied parents take their kids out of Mr. Jones’s French class, Jones-the-free-agent’s salary will decrease proportionately, and he’ll either improve or quit teaching. Teachers’ salaries, under PSI’s plan, would be determined by class size (reflecting the quality of their teaching) and by their use of time and materials budgets.

Ruth Anne Olson, a self-employed educational evaluator and program designer who had been working with PSI, started her own business last year. Private Practice Advisors has, for example, helped interested teachers develop a contract with the Shrine Hospital in Minneapolis, teaching kids in grades K-12 who are long-term patients there and whom the local school system could not or would not take on. Other private-practice programs are being designed or are already in operation in Minnesota and Wisconsin classrooms.

But the most daring program Olson is working with may be the one in North Branch, Minnesota, where superintendent of schools Jim Walker proposed in the summer of 1985 that two fourth-grade teachers be responsible for teaching 90 children. They would receive the same budget as usual, would have to comply with all the district’s curricular and instructional policies, and would be evaluat-

ed like all the other teachers in the district. Parents, however, could choose to enroll their children in, or withdraw them from, the teachers' class, and the teachers' compensation would reflect those changes. Walker left all other options open. The teachers could, if they wanted, use part of their budget to pay aides or specialists in music, art, and phys. ed. They could buy materials from the district or elsewhere. They could, in short, spend their budget as they thought appropriate.

It would be logical for the teachers' unions to turn handsprings over such a proposal, which removes any arbitrary ceiling in teachers' pay, increases teachers' professional prestige, and generally advances the concept of giving teachers the freedom to do what they're supposed to do best. But *because the teachers' unions objected to it*, the brave experiment in North Branch never took place during the 1985-86 school year. Eventually the school board (which had liked Walker's plan) and the union compromised on a more traditional two-year version during 1986-87 and 1987-88. One major change, an important deviation from the original private-practice concept, was that the teachers were not allowed to profit monetarily by increased class size and smart budget decisions; they simply receive the district's usual salary for their level, and their budget is decreased by a like amount. According to Ruth Anne Olson, *the unions' objection to Superintendent Walker's proposal was not that the three teachers might make less than other teachers at their level but that they might make more.*

The National Education Association (NEA), whose 8,000 members make it the nation's largest teachers' union, meets every year, and they met this July. Unworldly parents might expect that they spent their four days in Los Angeles discussing how to increase teacher responsibility, pensions, and classroom success, since NEA President Mary Hatwood Futrell has sworn to use the NEA to help elect a Democratic "pro-education" president after she boots Reagan the antiabortion child-hater out of office.

But no. Concerned above all with children, the group voted to endorse distribution of contraceptives at school

health clinics after a Raleigh, North Carolina, elementary teacher declared, "Information does not cause pregnancy. Lack of information causes pregnancy." (These people know a revolutionary scientific breakthrough when they hear one.) A social studies and Spanish teacher from Lehi, Utah, reminded them that as educators they were "trained to dispense knowledge, not contraceptives" and added that "teen pregnancy goes up where clinics exist"; he was booed.

His testimony, however, did serve to remind the group that they were there to talk about *education*, for Heaven's sake, so the logical next step was to vote for AIDS education courses; specifically, the material should include information about "abstinence and medically accepted protective devices." The 8,000 teachers then voted to fight the Supreme Court nomination of Robert Bork; "He's a compulsory pregnancy man . . . too conservative on race, women's rights, and reproductive freedom," one teacher told the remaining 7,999, and apparently they believed her. Another vote fought the move to make English the official language of the United States. Then these elementary and high school teachers wrapped up their 125th annual convention by *rejecting* a wacko resolution to support U.S. economic reconstruction aid to the Communist government in Nicaragua (it was near the end and they were weary; the vote was obviously a mistake) and voting to oppose laws requiring school buses to have seat belts. Exhausted, the group left it to the nine-member Executive Committee to decide whether to endorse a gay rights march in Washington.

Jane Greer was briefly a card-carrying NEA member but pleads the ignorance of youth.

Letter From Albion

by Andrei Navrozov

The Craft of Art

If in political and social terms the diminishing role of the aristocracy in Europe was, in the historian's view, inevitable, in cultural terms its dissipa-

tion was not really felt until the turn of the century. Indeed, the intellectual history of our time is a record of careless exploitation and ruthless expropriation of what had once been an aristocratic preserve, with the consequence that it has become increasingly difficult to draw the property line between the high and the low. The book I have before me is a fascinating case study of the universal cultural enfranchisement witnessed by our century, a glimpse of the social processes by which high culture was cut off from its aristocratic past and made to fill the growing demands of common consumption. It is a life of Salvador Dali, by Meryle Secrest.

While still a child in the home of his kind, middle-class parents in a provincial Spanish town, Salvador Dali grasped the fact that bad behavior, when it is presented as eccentricity and even remotely connected with art, is not only tolerated but richly rewarded. Between temper tantrums, the young artist sported "an ermine cape . . . and a matching gold crown studded with topazes." "Before long," observes Miss Secrest, "it became a kind of deadly game, which he played with increasing skill."

The world at large was no less receptive, and by the time Dali had emerged from his indulgent family's cocoon into the macrocosm of Paris in the 1920's, it must have been obvious to him that the game in question was being played throughout Europe by a vast number of artistically inclined men and women. While some had talent and others only ambition, all shared a fondness for the game of *épater le bourgeois*. A 1929 photograph shows Dali, then 25, with Tristan Tsara, Paul Eluard, René Crevel, and André Breton, his newly found intellectual milieu. That year, the film *Un Chien Andalou*, on which he collaborated with Luis Buñuel, depicted the slashing of a human eye with a razor. That same year, Dali exhibited a picture with the scrawled words "*Parfois je crache par plaisir sur le portrait de ma mère*" ("Sometimes I spit with pleasure on my mother's portrait").

It is not surprising that among his contemporaries in Paris Dali became known as "the most important literary painter," the title awarded him by David Gascoyne in 1934. It was Dali