CHAPTER 1

On the Finster Trail

The Business of Howard Finster's Divine Busyness

You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.

—William Blake

They always say that time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.

—Andy Warhol

If I could only be a sign upon that trail
If I could only be a sign upon that trail
In this rugged world of time . . .
I would point them to the right,
To the morning star so bright.

—Howard Finster

SIGNS UPON THE TRAIL

Twenty-four years after my first encounter, I'm back on the Finster trail in north Georgia during the late summer of 2009. It's hot, as August in Georgia tends to be. Really hot! And the air conditioner in my rented Hyundai is struggling to keep up with the blazing, macadam-melting heat. I had flown into the Hartsfield-Jackson airport in Atlanta several days earlier. Having established a base of operations at the house of my brother Steven, in the felicitously named town of Flowery Branch, just north of the city, I'm on the road again. I'm headed more or less north-

west, toward Summerville and Pennville, towns sequestered in the Appalachian foothills in the northwest corner of Georgia. Several months earlier, I had received a contract to write a book about the Southern Baptist preacher, well-known folk-visionary artist, and provocative cultural figure Howard Finster. With Finster running around my brain as I drive, I find myself passing through pine-covered hills into Chattooga County on Route 27, right past the Sloppy Floyd State Park and on into the county seat of Summerville and, farther down the road, the town of Pennville, site of Finster's Paradise Garden. Intimations of strangeness shimmer in the heat. Feeling a little nervous but also exhilarated, I'm on a mission to revisit the Finster family and to seek some signs to help me make sense of Finster's astonishing personality and perplexing career.

BRUT AFFINITIES

I begin with a general account of the almost impossibly broad and unwieldy category "outsider art" and its relation to Finster's multiple identities as a preacher, tinkerer, storyteller-performer, visionary, and so-called contemporary folk, self-taught, or outsider artist. Historically, what in 1972 came to be called outsider art in English derives from a not very literal translation, by the British scholar Roger Cardinal, of a reference that the maverick French artist and cultural critic Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) made in the 1940s to an "art brut" that displayed a kind of primal and unfettered creativity.[1] Given Dubuffet's upbringing in the wine trade, there is an intriguing metaphorical linkage of *art brut* with what the word *brut* meant when found on a bottle of French Champagne. That is, *méthode champenoise* produces something that derives its refined and expensive elegance from a taste that is dry and fresh. More interpretively, this could be called a taste that is savage, original, natural, and somewhat astringent. Not brutal, but raw and distinctive.[2] It is a kind of paradoxical refinement that is primitive (in the sense that it reflects the regional earthiness of the grapes) without any sweetly effete or sentimentalized middle-class flavor.[3]

Brut refers to the result of a secondary process of fermentation in making champagne, in which vintners add a dosage of sugars and yeast, yielding alcohol and gas. It is this that produces the characteristic fizz and more acerbic taste. It could, therefore, be said (especially with regard to certain self-styled refined palates) that there is an elite presumption that brut champagne has passed through the stage of sweetness only to return to some primordial condition before any kind of sentimental distortion

or corruption. Nothing saccharine is left to mask the earthy character of the grapes. It is an end process that reverts to, or re-creates, the raw beginning of things alive with the original effervescent spirit of life. This kind of sophisticated taste for the ironic brut, or original primitive, condition of things—which is itself a kind of ultimate or transcendental cultural refinement—is not at all limited to the art of making and appreciating good champagne. It is also an oxymoronic cultural trait of the whole self-designated "anticultural" fascination with art brut or outsider art going back to the time of Dubuffet—or, even earlier and more dramatically, to the surrealists.[4]

For Dubuffet and his followers, art brut referred primarily, but not exclusively, to the vivid and often disturbing "art of the insane" discussed in early psychiatric writings about European asylum patients.[5] Said to be cut off from the sweet, asphyxiating influences of normalcy, these artists obsessively expressed themselves visually in ways that were often unsettling but also surprisingly creative and strangely compelling. But the idea that psychiatric patients were totally oblivious to, or uncontaminated by, the surrounding culture is an impossible proposition. As with the secondary refinement necessary to produce a brut wine, psychosis could be said to represent a particular kind of consequential reaction to cultural impingements, a later fermentation that leads to a withdrawal away from the sweet comforts or repressions of mainstream cultural conformity. It represents a reversion to something more basic, primitive, anarchic, subversive, and unruly. For the insane, as with anticultural sophisticates, an unknowing or consciously ironic view of reality—where the rude or crude has value precisely because it goes against the grain of, or shocks, conventional sensibilities—becomes an all-encompassing belief system and way of life. The designation of some artists as visionary or outsider artists—as especially associated with some kind of creative insanity—is in fact the product of an elite cultural judgment that, in the spirit of the surrealist and spiritualist movements, involves artificially privileging various kinds of unconscious mentality or acutely self-conscious marginality.

The English term *outsider art* as used by Roger Cardinal in the 1970s and 1980s came to include a broad, even a wildly expansive, range of meaning that went well beyond Dubuffet's original, and rather dogmatic, criteria. As a repository for all sorts of antimodernist and antibourgeois sentiments in art and larger cultural circles, the category of outsider art in recent history gradually embraced whatever was not typically seen as part of the mainstream, and self-referential, art school

tradition. This involved especially the progressive elevation of low, pop, or mass cultural images and artifacts to the plane of high art. Mental illness was no longer the primary principle of inclusion, and all sorts of art by people partially marginalized in some psychological, physical, social, ethnic, religious, or cultural fashion were brought under the sideshow banner of outsider tradition. The outsider category came, therefore, to include—in differing degrees, and depending on who were the arbitrators—such things as Paleolithic cave art, tribal or aboriginal art, traditional folk art, children's art, surrealist art, prison art, naive art, tramp art, circus art, visionary art, spiritualist-mediumistic art, tourist art, tattoo art, and so on.

The one term that was largely taboo in this loose litany was *primitive art.* Pejorative, simplistic, and colonialist uses of the *primitive* label have had a long and controversial history in academic disciplines going back to disagreements over whether humans had evolutionary origins as "noble savages" or as "childish brutes."[6] African and other tribal art was, in fact, an influential factor in the emergence of modern art at the beginning of the twentieth century. But in the late 1930s in Nazi Germany, and as related to some currents of the eugenics movement, this kind of modern, art brut, and primitive art was condemned as a particularly brutal, degrading, decadent, or "degenerate" art associated with retarded races and minds.[7]

FOLK, VISIONARY, SELF-TAUGHT OUTSIDER

Howard Finster was first identified as a "contemporary folk artist" who drew upon Southern, evangelical, and craft traditions, although in a idiosyncratic and often visionary way. In later years he especially became labeled a visionary artist, but also a grassroots, vernacular, self-taught, marginal, and outsider artist.[8] For better or worse, and roughly since the 1980s, the terms *self-taught, outsider,* and more recently, *vernacular* have proven to be the most generously overlapping, popular, and lasting designations. The label *visionary art,* which loosely includes shamanistic, prophetic, mystical, surrealistic-automatic, trance, occult, and hallucinatory imagery (obviously, not all of which can be equated)—as well as a subgenre of fantasy/science-fiction-influenced imaginings—is even more problematically related to these categories.[9]

With regard to some consistency of content associated with these labels, and in relation to those trained artists and other opportunists who have brazenly appropriated a faux-outsider persona in response to the

trendiness of outsider tradition, I can report only that there is no compelling consensus at this time concerning what constitutes an authentic outsider artist. If anything, the field tends to revel in the ambiguity of the nomenclature. The qualifications of this principle include the belief that "real" outsiders should not be too blatant in adopting an outsider identity or care about how their work fits into the lineage of mainstream art. Moreover, culturally marginal self-taught artists may start out as oblivious to being called outsiders, but after being discovered and sought after by collectors and dealers, they gradually if reluctantly embrace this label. Finster, for example, did not at first understand his activities as being art, folk, vernacular, or necessarily outsiderish. In the spirit of biblical prophecy, he always preferred being called a visionary artist, and he signed many of his paintings as "Man of Visions." However, after he began to be publicly celebrated in the mid- to late 1980s, he tended to go along with the outsider terminology as an effective marketing tool to promulgate both God's and his own messages. Finster repeatedly declared that he didn't put any stock in the outsider label. For that matter, he did not really even care if he was called an artist. Yet he clearly relished and cultivated the attention and remuneration that such designations brought him.

Throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s Finster was a kind of folksy pop superstar of the burgeoning outsider art movement. Although by definition he was outside the prevailing art circles in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, he had been embraced by many elite art patrons, dealers, and institutions. Hip New York artists and designers like Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Todd Oldham, and Mark Kostabi sought him out, as did avant-garde bands such as R.E.M. and Talking Heads. In most cases, he knew what he was getting himself into (as in his appearance on the Johnny Carson show), but there were times that his growing hunger for fame got the better of him. One egregious example of this was Finster's brush with the sleazy side of Hollywood in the late 1980s, when, led by suggestions that his visions about space travel would be made into a movie (that is, *The Vision of 1982*), he was taken to Los Angeles by the convicted con man Peter Paul to win a specious Spirit of America award and to be gawked at by aging celebrities.[10] Finster always called such celebrity acquaintances his missionaries. The reality was always more complicated and ambivalent.

The difficulty with Finster—that is, a born-again good-old-boy Baptist preacher with a sixth-grade education who created a couple of road-

side parks and then suddenly became famous while painting tens of thousands of "nasty" apocalyptic scenes of earthly mayhem and outer-space salvation—simply did not fit comfortably into any ordinary interpretive categories in art history. Neither did Finster as a visionary, eccentric artist-preacher fit easily into American Protestant church history or into the comparative history of religions. Part of the core meaning, therefore, of the designation "outsider artist" is that it refers to someone who is an unschooled artist and is generally unaware of, and largely uninfluenced by, prevailing mainstream artistic styles and movements. The self-taught outsider is also someone who is generally ignored by the art establishment (critics, galleries, museums) and academic traditions of understanding. While these individuals are at first generally oblivious to prevailing art fashions and unaware of being an outsider or an artist, their sense of identity and destiny significantly changes if there is any special recognition of them and their work. An outsider is, then, mostly "self-taught" and is someone who feels compelled, often late in life and sometimes after an important illness or crisis, to express his or her altered relationship to the ordinary world in some artistic way, often in a two- or three-dimensional visual medium.

Whereas all real visionaries can be said to be outsiders in relation to the common worldview of the dominant culture, not all outsiders are necessarily visionaries in the full-blown sense of a Howard Finster or a William Blake. For visionaries like Blake and Finster, extraordinary visionary experience of other celestial and remarkable worlds becomes a regular and often intense aspect of life, accompanied by a pressing need to communicate those visions to others. Whether visionary outsiders or outsider artists with other passions, such individuals have a common need to define themselves through their work and to labor incessantly toward creating a meaningful alternative to the dominant culture and their own personal difficulties.

WHO IS HOWARD FINSTER?

This is not a biographical study, but it is helpful to set out the rough narrative outline of Finster's rural Southern upbringing and subsequent international notoriety. Mystery is present right at the outset, since there is still some ambiguity about when Finster was born: 1915 or 1916. He was himself somewhat ambivalent about this issue, and there have been arguments for the year 1915. With Pauline Finster's blessing, the family had long settled on December 2, 1916. And it is 1916 that

appears on the tombstone.[11] Finster grew up relatively poor—the last of thirteen children, and with only a sixth-grade education—on a "hog, corn, and pea-patch" farm in northern Alabama (see figure 4). He said over and over again that his first ecstatic experience, at the age of three, was a vision of his dead sister, Abbie Rose, an event that in hindsight seemed to hint at his later prophetic career. This haunting event fit into a larger boyhood pattern of persistent dreams of flying and various vivid "out of body" experiences. He was admittedly a thoroughly strange, boundlessly curious, and surprisingly resourceful boy who, despite the irreligion of his father, was powerfully drawn to the raw revivalist Christianity in the hills of the Southern highlands. After a transformative born-again experience in his teens that he would theatrically and repeatedly recount in later life, he soon married Pauline Freeman and had five children in quick succession. Among many other odd jobs he held at this time was that of itinerant Baptist preacher in various small towns in northern Alabama and Georgia, an area that combined aspects of rural Southern culture with aspects of Appalachian culture.

Leaving formal preaching in the 1960s to take up the life of a rustic entrepreneur and jack-of-all-trades in Pennville, Finster worked tirelessly on his Paradise Garden, a much more elaborate version of an earlier outdoor attraction he built in Trion, Georgia. A second born-again event occurred when he was sixty years old, at a time when areas marginal to the "New South" of prosperous sunbelt cities like Atlanta were experiencing severe economic hardship. Finster described having had a revelatory vision of a face (some kind of visionary or hallucinatory personage) in a smear of white tractor enamel on his finger, which commanded him to paint "sacred art." He started compulsively and often sleeplessly to paint what he thought of as burning end-time messages from God that progressively stretched the boundaries of conventional Baptist theology and his preacher's repertory of timely Bible stories. During the late 1970s and throughout most of the 1980s, he experienced increasingly vivid and crowded visions of images and words, which he displayed on myriad eccentric, and meticulously numbered, plywood "cut out" artworks, makeshift signs with biblical and homespun admonitions, unusual junk-tower assemblages made up of all manner of scavenged materials and recycled bicycle parts, and concrete sculptures embedded with recycled debris. All of these activities and objects came together most dramatically in his Paradise Garden, a sprawling environment that also included the ramshackle multitiered World's Folk Art Church and the elevated rolling-chair gallery.

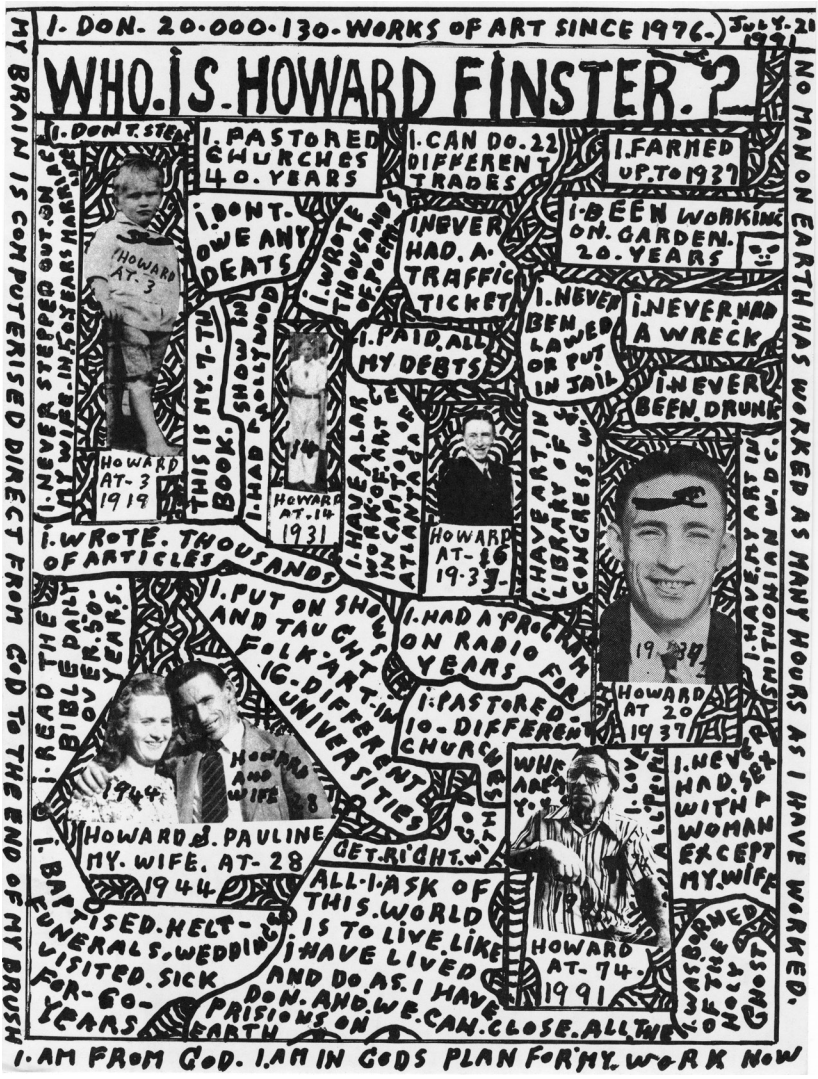

FIGURE 4. Howard Finster, *Who Is Howard Finster?* 1991. Printed poster on cardboard, 11.5 x 8.5 inches. Artwork no. 20,130. Girardot/LaBelle Collection. Photograph by Steven Lichak. © Finster Estate.

Finster had discovered his full-blown destiny as the Man of Visions. He not only could vault in spiritual cartwheels among the clouds and talk to animals but also could see that the clouds themselves glowed with winking faces and hinted at wondrous unseen sights. For Finster these were sure signs of the storied nature of reality told of in the Bible and in his own, curious, painted and text-encrusted visions. As the self-declared Second Noah, and as a kind of Baptist Buck Rogers, his visionary vehicle, launched in Paradise Garden, became a kind of otherworldly spaceship-ark made of words and multiple painted images that incessantly delivered variously urgent, funny, and bizarre messages from God's mother ship.

It has been said that at the height of his renown in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Finster had more one-man exhibitions at galleries and museums than any other living artist at the time.[12] The point is that during the waning years of the twentieth century, Howard Finster was a shooting star who lit up the cultural firmament with a charismatic personality and amazing art that appealed to the masses while charming a variety of intellectuals, collectors, and art mavens. There was, if truth be told, a certain degree of unsustainable and even faddish infatuation associated with the Finster phenomenon during these years. And toward the turn of the century, there were indications of a somewhat lessened enthusiasm by fans, a depleted energy on the part of Finster himself, and a diminished creativity and quality in the artwork.

AFTERLIFE

The once heady accolades about Finster as a superstar visionary or outsider artist are fewer now. And as I head down state Route 27 to the Finster homestead in Summerville, Georgia, during the summer of 2009, I cannot help but reminisce about my many years of involvement with Finster, his incredible achievements, and, toward the end of his life, various difficulties involving his health and his squabbling family. Although Finster's fame had faded and the future of the Garden was uncertain, his spirit in 2009 still lingered upon the earth and his art continued to astonish and bewilder new generations of seekers after a rough-and-ready creativity. Finster's art was, and still is, too unruly and evangelically garish for most of the sterile, white display chambers of mainstream museums and galleries. However, whether exhibited within an urban gallery or auctioned in rural Buford, Georgia, Finster's better work has significantly escalated in value—at first (the decade after his

death) not as dramatically as that of some other "classic" outsiders, but much more spectacularly in recent years (2013–2014).[13]

When this "well-known stranger" died in 2001, a month after the cataclysmic events of 9/11, he had attained an unlikely artistic fame and pop celebrity status as a prolific self-taught visionary or outsider preacher-artist.[14] Always flamboyant in the best Southern Appalachian evangelical sense, he had spectacularly transcended even the more outrageous aspects of Southern religious hyperbole. Indeed, the stories by and about Finster were legion and often improbable—ridiculous and touching, sad and joyous, charming and off-putting, strange and mundane, exhilarating and depressing, conservative and radical, and especially both serious and funny, all at the same time. His personality and career were almost always elusively suggestive of something simultaneously whimsical, remarkable, and just possibly profound.

Encountering Finster—especially in his white-hot years in the 1980s, when he was hitting his stride as an outsider artist and pop celebrity—was to respond to his riotous theatrical charm and, at the same time, to feel sporadically energized by some larger spirit that dwells in all things, especially those odd and lowly fragments of worldly matter and human emotion that had been largely discarded and despised in the mainstream urban salons of Atlanta, Chicago, and New York. To contend with the simultaneous familiarity and mystery of Finster's incandescent personality and passionate production of a garbage-art of words and images was to dimly acknowledge something deep down in the raw matter and human grain of things.

SEEING PAULINE

Having arrived in Summerville on a hot August day in 2009, I had two specific appointments with Finster's family. At noon I was supposed to meet Finster's daughter Beverly at Paradise Garden in Pennville, but on that morning I purchased a bouquet of flowers at the local Walmart and went to visit with Finster's ailing ninety-one-year-old widow, Pauline, who lived in Summerville at the family "executive mansion" (as Howard Finster was proud to call the substantial complex of houses and outbuildings he was able to buy with funds from his art). Ever since Howard's death in the early hours of October 23, 2001, the family fortunes had become increasingly caught up in financial difficulties and personal disputes. Unfortunately, many of these problems revolved around the progressive deterioration of, and infighting over, the patriarch's surviving

artworks and his environmental masterwork, Paradise Garden. Moreover, as Pauline entered her tenth decade, there was the added sorrow of her growing physical and mental frailty.

When I saw Pauline that morning, she was wearing a pale blue smock and seemed quite alert. Even better was that her eyes suddenly sparkled when I presented her with the bouquet of flowers and gave her an old photograph I had taken of her and Howard back in the glory days in the mid-1980s. Pauline was clearly pleased to see this happy image from the past before decline and death had taken their toll on Howard. Smiling, she said that she had found some old family pictures which she wanted to share with me. After several determined but faltering attempts to find the photos in the front parlor and dining room, she took me to a back bedroom, where from a corner cabinet she triumphantly produced a packet of old black-and-white, and mostly faded, box-camera snapshots.

I was delighted to see pictures from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, a few that had not yet been published in books and articles about Finster. I was especially struck by two images, one of which was a somewhat overexposed photo of a young Finster, face partially obscured and right arm uplifted, baptizing a group of women (figure 5). The women are shown from the back and apparently have the wet, stringy hair of the freshly dunked. They appear to be in a hilly grotto or, most probably, because of the swirling murkiness of the picture, in some watery baptismal hollow.[15]

The drama of this image seemed to capture much of the intense religious aura of Finster's early career as a passionate itinerate preacher and purveyor of the life-giving sacrament of baptism. His partly occulted face hinted at a life of multiple personalities. I recall thinking that I would certainly want to use this photo in my forthcoming book. Whatever it lacked in clarity it more than made up in its cloudy, spirit-filled atmosphere and suggestiveness. This was a Finster powerfully moved by the Holy Ghost to give these women the intense amniotic experience of drowning and emerging into a new Christian life. There is even a vague sensual intimacy hinted at by the regenerative power that flows out of Finster's body into the rapt women surrounding him.

The other old photo that stood out (figure 6) seemed also to be from the same early-1940s era, and even the rocky backdrop looked similar (perhaps a location on or near Lookout Mountain, where the Finsters lived in the early 1940s).[16] Most poignant, especially as Pauline sat on her bed silently watching me, were the two figures in the center of the picture. There was Howard neatly dressed in his Sunday best with

FIGURE 5. Finster baptizing women in a grotto, c. 1940s. Girardot/LaBelle Collection. © Finster Estate.

white shirt, striped tie, and Brylcreemed hair, looking vigorous and cocky with his left foot set on an outcropping of rock and, most conspicuously, displaying a knowing, even slightly sexy, grin on his face. Equally compelling was the other person in the picture. We see Howard's right arm embracing a strikingly attractive and smiling Pauline dressed in a pretty, flowery dress and white high-heeled shoes with straps. Scrawled on the top right corner of the picture are the words PAULINE and HOWARD, with a curious torn patch between the two names. Was this written by Pauline, and could it be that what was missing was "loves"?

FIGURE 6. Pauline and Howard Finster, c. 1940s. Girardot/ LaBelle Collection. © Finster Estate.

It is impossible to know, and I was not about to ask Pauline at that time. Whatever the case, those alterations had been added at a later date, and the original photograph plainly depicted a confident and proud woman who was most likely, given the religious and social conventions of the period, "biblically submissive" to her flamboyant husband (see, for example, Ephesians 5:21–32 and Philippians 2:3). In this

picture taken during the tough post-Depression and wartime days, Pauline seems very much a full partner with Howard, someone who is as strong as her husband if not as brashly ambitious. This was surely an exceedingly suggestive image of a young man and woman, a loving couple, certainly, united in their struggle to make their way together in a dark, dangerous, and sinful world. The picture exuded marital strength and pride, erotic energy and religious conviction.

Finster's extraordinary physical vigor included a palpable sexual energy displayed throughout his life. As he once said in one of his thought-card "comics": "I guess I am just about the most sexiest man around when a spell [of lustiness?] hits me." He wrote here that he often had to struggle to "wiggle around the monster" of sexual desire, but he was proud that "so far" he had managed to avoid entanglement in the sexual "dream land"—that is, as long as he "don't get raped." In another delightfully whimsical comic thought-card, he fantasized that he once "took a huge spoon rounded it up with peanut butter and licked it into a plump round faced girl and kissed its gentle soft lips." Smiling, he said that this kiss was tasting so good that he ended his reverie by declaring that this "should teach" Pauline "not to give [him] a cold shoulder."[17]

THE BUSINESS OF DIVINE BUSYNESS

My other distinct memory from this encounter was Pauline's abrupt yet telling response to my repeated query about what she most remembered about Howard. It is worth remarking that aside from a few other family photos and a semisecret stash of cheap cardboard prints produced by Howard for those who could not afford his handmade art, the house was almost entirely devoid of any significant objects or artworks made by Howard. Everything had been sold off, and even heirloom pieces of Howard's handcrafted wood-burned furniture had been taken away for safekeeping. Losing her smile and looking straight into my eyes, Pauline bemusedly declared, and then more forcefully said again: "He was the busiest man I ever met . . . the *busiest* man I ever knew." Silence! Then there was only continued silence. Her face was mostly deadpan with a tiny bit of a pursed smile.

Pauline had nothing else to say. I said nothing. But I quickly realized that her singular observation, or abrupt judgment, was absolutely correct. Howard was an incredibly industrious and driven man, even obsessively and perhaps almost divinely or extraterrestrially so. As he

would frequently and dramatically recount as part of his own evolving life-story, the first clear sign of his future destiny came when he was age three. While lost and looking for his mother in the family 'mater patch in Valley Head, Alabama, he had a vivid vision of his older sister—Abbie, who had died of complications from rabies—descending from the sky on a celestial escalator similar to Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:10–19). It was this haunting incident—celebrated and mythologized in words and paint in his later years as the self-styled Stranger from Another World—that certified his fate as a man on a heavenly mission from God. And as Howard saw it, God didn't want any slackers when it came to getting his divine work done.

Finster said that Pauline was the only woman he ever loved. As much as he was a devoted family man with four daughters, a son, and multiple grandchildren, he was always bristling with a restless evangelical vigor that put him on the road to spread the good news of salvation. This physical and spiritual force was channeled beyond his wife and family into pastoring at multiple churches (some forty churches, he would say), frequent tent revivals conducted with several preaching colleagues, multiple baptisms, marriages, and various itinerant preaching activities. Amid all these religious occupations, he was also constantly involved with dozens of full- and part-time secular jobs, as well as all sorts of other crafts, moneymaking schemes, flea market sales, and diverse small and large building projects. According to Finster, he took up and was successful at more than twenty-two different trades.[18] Moreover, all these activities were tirelessly undertaken before his definitive transformation in the 1970s into an "Outer Space" Baptist commissioned to produce rough-and-ready sacred artworks by the thousands.

Many of these activities were undertaken to make enough money for a struggling family to survive in the economic hard times after the Great Depression and during the Second World War, particularly by those living in that starkly impoverished southeastern corner of the United States defined by the Appalachian foothills in northern Alabama, Georgia, and eastern Tennessee. Despite these difficult circumstances, Finster would declare that it was the Spirit of God—the avian Holy Ghost who passed back and forth among the heavenly and earthly planets—who called and moved him. As he realized when he was born again—that is, spiritually regenerated and saved in the Christian evangelical sense (see John 3:3)—at the age of thirteen, it was the ghostly Spirit that allowed him to fly in swooping loops and turns in the sky above all of the mundane and fallen concerns of those back on earth.[19] It was the Spirit, and

the "seven invisible members of the Holy Ghost," that gave him the grace that enabled him to preach to, baptize, and convert sinners. So also did this spectral entity give him his ability to be God's garbage collector and create aesthetic and monetary value out of the castoff junk of the world. Always the most insightful commentator on his own spiritual and material reclamation activities, Finster memorably declared in a painted sign in his Paradise Garden:

I took the pieces you threw away
And put them togather by night and day
Washed by rain, dried by sun
A million pieces all in one.[20]

THE RHYME AND PATTERN OF THINGS

Such seemingly spur-of-the-moment and charmingly misspelled productions of loosely rhyming folk poetry and songs were very dear to Finster. These rhymed refrains were also deeply attractive to Finster's growing number of fans and collectors. "I like my fans," he once noted. Then whimsically searching for a rhyme in the manner of a rural white hip-hop artist, he hoped that "maybe someday" these "fans" could all "play in the sand."[21] Sensitive to what did and did not work, he was quick to recognize and replicate a sermon, artifact, image, saying, poem, song, or performance that proved to be a hit with his various early church congregations or with his later fans and collectors. On the other hand, many of his most touching and lasting creations were hardly spontaneous. For example, there is evidence that his most remarkable and characteristic of poetic sayings about his recycling philosophy ("I took the pieces you threw away") went through several drafts. On the back of a Tru-Life Bait order form dating to sometime in the 1970s (presumably the earlier if not the earliest version of the "million pieces all in one" poem), he says,

i took the pieces you threw away
and put them together by night and [by] day
~~They are~~ washed by the rain ~~and~~ dried by the sun.
~~it will take~~ a million pieces just to make one.[22]

Finster is here actively and skillfully refining his verses, especially subtracting various words and phrases in the interest of poetic economy and achieving a certain biblical cadence. Noteworthy also is that in this draft he correctly spells "together" which may or may not suggest that,

when he realized that many of his fans were enamored of his fractured spellings, he would deliberately make charming mistakes. What offsets this cynical interpretation is simply that in later painted versions of his sayings he was acting with such furious haste that creative accidents must have frequently and unwittingly occurred. No doubt there were both unconsciously fortuitous and carefully planned elements in Finster's later artistic career. The scrap of paper with these lines contains two other short rhyming sets of four verses, but neither one has the poetic felicitousness of the "million pieces" stanza, and he seems to have dropped them from any further consideration.[23]

It is clear that Finster was his own best editor in these matters of written and oral craftsmanship. His talent for poetic verse and rhyme involved a deliberative process of revisionary trial and error not dependent on any schooled principles of formal versification. If anything, his basic model or template for crafting verse was almost always the one book he knew by heart and by its resonant sound—the King James Version of the Bible.[24] These speculations are reinforced by the existence of another hand-printed thought card found in proximity to the Tru-Life Bait order form and seemingly from the same time period. This card was probably drafted somewhat after the visibly edited version when he was making, as he often did, a duplicate copy of his notes. In this version, we have something close—although still without the misspelling and having several other curious discrepancies—to what became the definitive version in the evolving Finster mythology. It reads as follows:

I took the pieces people
Throw away. Put them
Together by night and
Day. They are washed by
The rain and dried by the
Sun a million pieces all
In one.[25]

This version, unlike the other earlier draft, was cursively signed with the phrase "Composed by Howard Finster." And this signature suggests that at that time he viewed it as a kind of finished version. Finished for Finster was, however, only a relative state of affairs. Even though we know about this poem's later transmutations, it can nevertheless be said that by the time of this signed version he had perfected the basic theme, rhyming structure, or templatelike format of the poem. From this point on, the poem would stay essentially the same, though often with tiny alterations. All the known drafts and later published versions are basi-

cally similar—making them infinitely replicable yet at the same time slightly different depending on the particular circumstances of their production. Let me also draw attention to Finster's increasing devotion to the sign and signage of his own signature. This busy obsession would only intensify in his later years as an artist, when he knew full well that his handwritten signature instantly increased the value of the artwork.

CRAFTING WOOD AND WORDS

Finster was forever busily working, skillfully experimenting with, gradually refining, constantly repeating, and carefully perfecting his multiple linguistic, material, and artistic crafts. Of course, knowing when he had a hit depended on whether something sold and was popular enough to create a demand for more. But there really was more to his passion for hewing words and matter than the pressure of the market. With Finster, as with any accomplished craftsman and jack-of-all-trades, it was the experiential and temporal process of being in the thick of things that fueled his busyness. His ability as a craftsman is what the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss calls the "science of the concrete" associated with the odd-job man or jack-of-all-trades (in French the *bricoleur*) who has a "mytho-poetical" talent for taking advantage of whatever is at hand in the interest of completing a task.[26] And Finster, as a master handyman with wood and words, was also a skilled storyteller and mythmaker who used the narrative patterns of words, images, and actions in ways that communicated significant messages. For Finster, concrete material things—whether wood, written words, sounds, paint, or (literally) concrete—were always potentially signs when expressively crafted in the right and ritual manner. Matter matters when it is given the symbolic power to do so.

The medium and matter of whatever Finster was doing made all the difference. Words, especially those in poems and songs, were in this way like wood for Finster. You had to handle words, sonorously whittle them, and even playfully fondle their infinite rhyming possibilities to make something beautiful and memorable out of them. The rule of his mind, hand, and mouth was always to follow the inner grain of wood and words—of all things. In this vein, the pre-1976 Finster often pondered the special process and joy of working with "Gods great trees" and with the related sound, signs, and storied flow of words. He never left a scrap of wood or a clump of words uncaressed. He says that he "took the wood from Gods great trees and shaped it in a thousand

ways." After recounting the "manny" ways he crafted wood, including his numerous unique designs for clock cases, he was reminded that his love for God's timber "looks back" to the biblical tale of Joseph and Jesus, who also both worked with wood.[27] There was, in other words, an underlying narrative that grounded Finster's sacred craftsmanship and biblically inflated sense of self.

Finster's obsessive, and biblically framed, concern for finding the grain, pattern, or design of things is displayed by his lifelong attraction to the rhyme, rhythm, and narrative structure of oral and written words. And again I draw specific attention to how his early career as a preacher of the Word of God as expressed in the rhythmic English pulse and structured cadence of the King James Version of the Bible would have been central to his acute sensitivity to the rhythmic and narrative power of words. In his later life as a visual artist, this talent is also suggested in his creative mastery of intricately patterned line drawings, ingenious graphic designs, and complicated image-word compositions.

GOD'S SIGN MAN

Finster's later artistic and graphic works often harbor multiple embedded Bible stories and images, as well as conjoined layers of hand-printed text laden with scriptural quotations and personal homilies. This aspect of Finster's craft and art was certainly originally rooted in his performative practice as an evangelical preacher of the biblical word, which depended on his talent for moving his congregation as much with his rhythmic emphasis and ritual theatrics as with the actual content of his sermons. These were often sermonic performances visually augmented with chalk-talk diagrams, scriptural charts of the roads to salvation or perdition, and strategically employed revival-tent props.[28] Indeed, the aural and visual theatricality of evangelical preaching—a dramatic performance art designed to market salvation to the masses of the damned—resonated with the emergence in the 1940s and 1950s of a mass advertising business of roadside signage and attractions crafted to sell the commercial bounty of industrial America.

The point was to use every means possible, whether sacred or secular, to communicate and sell the life-enhancing advantages of the Holy Ghost's amazing grace, Jesus's saving cross, Coke's healing elixir, Burma-Shave's wondrous salve, Ripley's wondrous oddities, or the miraculous view of seven states found at the tourist attraction Rock City. While not specifically religious like the ubiquitous Jesus saves

signs in the South, even the original Rock City signs had something vaguely mythic and ritualistic to say about American life that went beyond their simple commercial message. They told of a paradisiacal time in a post–World War II America when the medium of the open road pointed to the possibility of infinite freedom and wondrous discovery. Furthermore, slick signs made of words and images sell, particularly the ones that manage to tell or suggest a story and a slogan. Get right with the Lord for tomorrow you die! A Man a Miss/A Car a Curve/He kissed the Miss/And Missed/The Curve/Burma-Shave! The impact of this upon evangelical tradition and Finster is suggested by the increasing popularity throughout the mid- to late-twentieth-century South of advertising slogans or "attention-getting sayings" for church signs, bulletin boards, and newsletters.[29]

As Finster would often say about his myriad patchwork words, images, cutouts, and constructions, all his work represented multiple "signs and messages from God." His work in this way harkened back to his early experience as an itinerate roadside preacher who traveled the byways of the South, which were increasingly lined with both commercial and religious signage.[30] It appears that Finster was fully aware of the maker of the most famous of these early roadside religious signs, Henry Harrison Mayes (1898–1986). Mayes was known as the evangelical Sign Man, Cross Builder, and God's Own Messenger and was especially active during the 1940s and 1950s throughout the Appalachian region. Mayes was also someone who made his home (in Middlesboro, Tennessee) into a religious environment and attraction. He called it his House of Many Crosses, and this structure resonates with, and perhaps influenced, Finster's religious-themed parks in Trion and Pennville.[31]

MANY SIGNS AND PATTERNS

The more signs the better, which to Finster meant that as he neared his end of days, almost 50,000 works of art produced at his easel in the Garden or while reclining on what he called his "vibratin' bed" in his Summerville sanctuary. If we accept the relative accuracy of Finster's own numbering system, he died having finished his 46,991st painting. This last work was a rather dispirited cutout image of the country singer Hank Williams done with muddled Sharpie paint pens and given a lopsided face and messy angels, reflective of the pain and ill health Finster was experiencing at the time.[32] The reality is that Finster produced many other unnumbered artworks both inside and out of Paradise Garden—

some going back to before 1976 and the divine directive to produce sacred art.

It may well be that Howard Finster was the most amazingly prolific American artist of the twentieth century. If all his myriad self-printed works, handouts, tapes, and other ephemera were counted, he might even be the most productive artist of all time, a temporal triumph of his furious busyness that he would certainly cherish. It is true, of course, that most of these works were his production-style "multiples" and dimensional "cut-outs," but the fact is that, unlike Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Damien Hirst and their works, he had a hand in finishing every single one of the works he produced. Putting aside for the time being the issue of the quality of his work in relation to its prodigious quantity, Finster's need to count and record his artistic output was very much an aspect of his marketing savvy, heroic industry, and self-affirming sense of sacred destiny.

For Finster, it never was only the beauty of his signage art that counted. It always seemed that sheer quantity mattered more than quality and testified to the superhuman nature of his labor. These numbers—as much as his growing fame, financial success, hoards of adoring collectors, and celebrity admirers—were the ultimate proof of his prophetic destiny. As in a good advertising campaign, it was repetition and quantity that got the message out to the multitude. The power of roadside signage never depended only on the beauty of the images or their folksy-poetic cleverness. It was also intrinsically linked to the overwhelming ubiquity of the signs, their inevitable reappearance on the next stretch of road. Wherever you turned, there was another sign calling attention to itself. Then another. The inexorable power of multiples. Drink a Coke and be refreshed! See Rock City and see the whole country! Accept Jesus and be saved! Over and over again. The raw power of larger and larger numbers of images and words. The brute power of excess.

The preacher, craftsman, sign maker, and phenomenal multiplier Howard Finster clearly had a gift for language, patterns, and narrative form that, like all good advertising, attracted an audience. Moreover his honed-on-the-Bible feel for the aural rhythm of words, the power of images, and the framing potential of stories was also graphically rehearsed and visually objectified by his early habit of constantly jotting down, preserving, and even making careful duplicate copies of his copious notes, records, account ledgers, journals, stories, songs, observations, poems, thoughts, plans, and so on—all repetitiously and meticulously transcribed on whatever scrap of paper or cardboard was at hand. Many of these transcriptions—frequently found jotted on his thought cards or vision

cards (the latter were cards or scraps of paper that primarily contained descriptions of his visionary travels and experiences)—were embellished with small sketches or diagrams setting out some schematic insight.

Finster's many biblical and made-up stories, song compositions, and poems often combined an acute penchant for drawing out or visually extracting verbal patterns as well as the poetic structure and beat of oral rhymes. In one of Finster's notes to himself, regarding the rhyming blueprint for one of his poems, "A Peep at His Power" (the poetic template is shown in the right hand column: night:might:things:sing:day:play: sun:done:sea:me:ways:days:light:sight), we also see his growing fascination with the graphic flourish and potency of his own signature, a telltale sign of his lifelong project of constantly reiterated and expanded self-construction.[33] In a manner suggestive of his later practice on his paintings, he makes a point of noting the exact time that he completed this poem: "Composed and written 11:37 AM Sept. 13, 1970." The message of these habitual activities is that Finster clearly understood that his own life had a special energetic tempo and a narrative pattern or plot informed by biblical rhythms, stories, and images. A master craftsman who trimmed and plumbed his woodwork, and a carpenter-painter who made his own handcrafted frames for his paintings, Finster was forever shaping and defining his life in increasingly extravagant narrative frames of biblical bric-a-brac. He was a man with a growing sense of his own sacred mission in life—a destiny that he fully comprehended only when its complete design was unveiled in his later life: his destiny as a visionary artist and outer-space prophet.

Finster's experience as a visionary artist in his later life (especially after his finger-face vision in 1976) represented the visual fulfillment, or divine extension, of biblical patterns he had already started to recognize and embellish in his earlier life. In many ways, therefore, it was the self-styled convergence of his life's story with biblical narratives, prophetic dreams, TV programs, Cold War history, nuclear fears, and his own quirky visions that led to his final career as the Second Noah, apocalyptic visionary, outsider artist, and pop celebrity. Finster himself—his incessant busyness, multiple biblical and personal stories, dreams of flying, odd visions, and endlessly repeated artworks—collectively became a potent sign upon the long trail of cultural life in the last quarter of the twentieth century. As he reminded us in one of his drafts for a poem or song from the late 1960s (see the "If I could only be a sign" epigraph to this chapter), his very presence on earth was a sign of the times. And in that "rugged world of time," when American culture was dramatically

changing, he had the herculean strength, visionary audacity, and "super brain" to embrace the darkness while at the same time always pointing toward the possibility of a "morning star so bright."[34]

CLOCK TIME AND FINSTER'S TIME

The "rugged world of time" was always a pressing issue for Howard Finster. At the end of his life this rugged time became the issue of an impending end-time; but, as seen from the very beginning, there was never enough time to accommodate all that he wanted to accomplish. As suggested by the scriptures that tell of God's hidden blueprint in time, Finster was forever and sometimes frantically seeking out the concealed patterns of life, a story or stories that increasingly seemed to involve him as a central protagonist. When Finster took some rare time off from his regular church work and his many other vocational activities in the early days before he became God's chosen sign painter, he still felt compelled to show off his extraordinary energy and his ability to make something attractive, useful, and valuable out of whatever was at hand.

During sporadic summer vacations in Florida, he was even driven to produce gigantic sand castles all over the beach, to the delight of not only his family but also the crowds of onlookers.[35] As has been noted, these trips to coastal Florida were also occasions to stop en route "at roadside tourist museums, zoos, and alligator farms. In St. Augustine, Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum and the Fountain of Youth were family favorites."[36] This endemic fascination with roadside attractions, like his incessant attention-seeking and epic industriousness, was rooted in Finster's playful yet always self-promoting sense of mission. But it also reflects the work ethic of his rural German-Celtic Appalachian heritage, in which one—especially when relatively impoverished in relation to the greater world—proudly and productively used what others took for granted, even junk, and made the most of every waking hour. Howard and Pauline Finster never considered themselves poor or lower class, since they always held on to a faith in their ability—through hard work, persistence, and creative resourcefulness—to craft their lives together and to overcome all hardships.

Finster's superhuman labors, although often self-aggrandizing, were also undertaken for the benefit of his family, his church, and the larger community of neighbors and friends; and ultimately, as he would say, they were for all of God's people. Using time therapeutically, profitably, and mischievously was a special passion for Finster throughout his life.

This is apparent in, for example, his early dedication to tent revivals, which renewed the spirit and temporarily reversed the sinful condition. The same motivations were present in the construction of his first museum park, in Trion, Georgia, in the 1950s. There he created a miniature world of heavenly, tiered mansions for children and adults (the "tiered" architectural template runs through much of his work, from painted images to sculptures and to the World's Folk Art Church). A similar kind of temporal theme is evident in numerous reflections on the thought cards he made throughout his life, as well as in his efforts to give renewed vitality to what was old and decrepit by refurbishing discarded bicycles for the poor children in his community in Pennville in the 1960s and 1970s. For all of Finster's honest concern for family and community, there was also the reality of his character as an inveterate show-off and braggart.

This tangled self-centered and altruistic busyness was also materially and characteristically displayed in the way Finster's very popular handcrafted wooden clocks produced a significant monetary return on his investment of energy and time. His unremitting attempt to build perpetual-motion machines likewise dramatized his consuming passion for salvifically overcoming the entropy of the temporal condition by constant work. It was never the not-quite-perfected end product that counted, but rather the process of using time to lose time. To be always absorbed in the process, flow, and trance of work was for Finster a way to be totally, semiecstatically disassociated from the banality and weariness of time, at least temporarily. Time on earth in this sense was transcended by Finster via his own enraptured hyperproductivity, and it would ultimately come to permanent rest in God's clockless realm in the outer space of heaven. As Finster once noted,

> In my Fathers mansion theres no clocks on the wall
> you wear your parts down thin counting time to an end
> But for me I've hardly begin.
> Oh clock of time who chimes.[37]

Some of Finster's multifarious reflections on time, along with his related sketches and constructions, express a homespun kind of existentialist philosophy of temporality. Among many possible examples, two thought cards, probably from the late 1960s or early 1970s, record some particularly fascinating Finsterian musings on time. The first of these is a sketch of a tiny clock (a "little three legged tick tock" showing the time as a quarter after twelve) drawn with a spiral array of sayings like: "You could never be my clock for you don't run eturnal" and "I

will be living when your gear wheels are wore t[o] a frazil. . . . Don't think you will count all my time away no sir my time is for ever." The other jotting is less whimsical and more dreamily suggestive about "breaking loose from clock time." As he breathlessly and almost philosophically notes, "I have used up my past days every one of them waiting for coming time which continually appears out of the unknown stream of tomorrow which never gets here breaking aloose from clock time to you and me from daylight to darkness from darkness to light."[38]

FINSTER'S "BRAIN CELL WAREHOUSE"

Howard Finster was always a remarkably active and preoccupied man. He ardently refused to submit to the boredom of merely passing time, to the terror of history, or to the accidents of his social and economic condition. These were, after all, issues that he would have called the sinfulness that defines the "rugged world of time." He constantly used time creatively, craftily, and constructively for himself and others, rather than letting random circumstances determine his fate. For Finster, the externally difficult and sometimes distressing aspects of his life—the devil's work of relative social and cultural marginality, economic difficulties, family friction, minimal formal education, bodily disease, and old age—were to be confronted with a realistic optimism, constant industry, resourceful courage, and transformative joy.

This saving grace resulted from his conviction in the regenerative powers of his creative spirit, his physical energy, and his own special mission as a conduit of that energy and spirit to others. It was all due to what he called the invisible members of the Holy Ghost. As Finster himself said, he had the ability to regenerate the skin in his worn-down paint-fingers like a lizard or snake can periodically renew its overall integument. Furthermore in his evangelical and visionary self-understanding, Finster believed that he had a special destiny told of in many different biblical, popular, and interplanetary stories about a man, like the prophet Noah of old or Buck Rogers of the future, on a heroic mission to confront the inevitably destructive flood of time. This was a man with a born-again, interplanetary calling. This was a man, like himself, who possessed superhuman strength and a saving vehicle (ark or spacecraft, garden and church). Although having only a sixth-grade education, Finster was blessed with a "brain cell warehouse" and a "computerized brain from God" (see figure 7).[39] He was someone with a mission to show all of us the signs of the times.

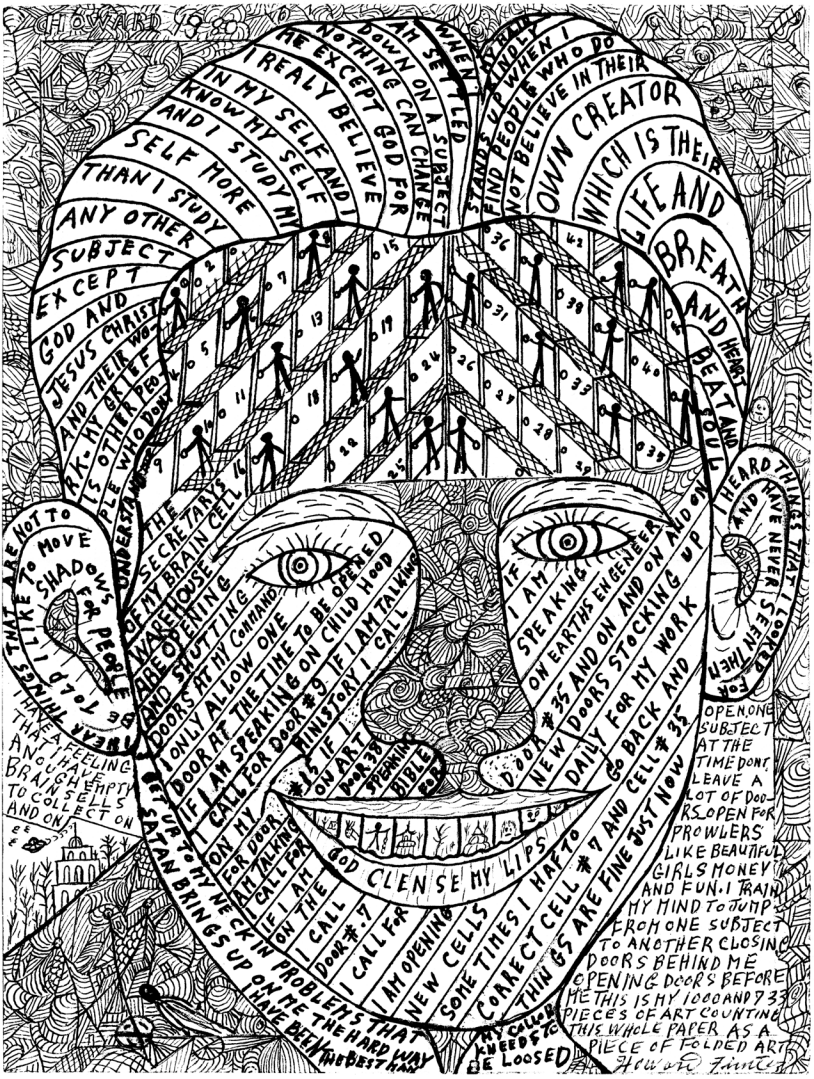

FIGURE 7. Howard Finster, *Brain Cell Warehouse*, c. 1979. Print on paper, 15 x 11.5 inches. Artwork no. 1440. From *Folk Image* (Tappahannock, VA: American Folk Art Co., n. d. © Finster Estate). Girardot/LaBelle Collection. Photograph by Steven Lichak. © Finster Estate.

Finster once said there was "no doubt in my mind that I have had the greatest working strength of any man who has been on earth's planet except Jesus Christ."[40] Here his ostentatious business of busyness was clearly motivated by a progressively messianic self-inflation, and the quietly domestic Pauline must have found it ever more challenging to simultaneously love, support, and tolerate her husband's celebrity and constantly frantic activities—whether eccentrically religious, weirdly artistic, often improbable, or sometimes simply silly. The problem for someone close to—*even* worse, married to—a person like Finster on a self-proclaimed, intense mission from God is that it is often difficult to distinguish between godliness and narcissism, between compulsive visionary saintliness and simple self-centered folly. Pauline's silence after she told me what she remembered most about Howard—and which initiated these extended reflections—was a sign. But it was only one among many signs along the Howard Finster trail.

Among self-proclaimed God-touched visionaries or outer-space heroes, this kind of spousal frustration is not an uncommon state of affairs. For example, Catherine Sophia, the supportive yet long-suffering wife of the eighteenth-century English visionary artist and poet William Blake, was wont to remark that it became increasingly difficult to see her husband because he spent much of his time by himself up in the heavens communicating with the spirits.[41] Blake too, it must be said, was an exuberantly busy man on a celestial mission.[42] Like Finster, he fully embodied the principle that the "road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."[43] Distinguishing between the creative ecstasy of a visionary and the delusional mania of a madman, as associated with maverick figures like Blake and Finster, is not an easy matter, and how you distinguish between them depends on whom you ask. Thus wives and patrons, neighbors and friends, artists and psychologists, and religion scholars and sociologists will no doubt come to different conclusions.

SAINT, SHAMAN, OR SHYSTER?

Regarding Howard Finster's artistic-religious passion and formidable busyness, there is surely a significant difference between a visionary sacred madness and a socially dysfunctional psychosis, albeit often an uncertain distinction. Both states of mind are culturally conditioned, but that does not mean these are forms of altered consciousness that differ only in terms of their degree of trancelike disassociation, absorptive intensity, or alienation. Unfortunately, there is still little real consensus

on the nature of the difference.[44] An examination of Howard Finster may lead to surprisingly divergent assessments. One of the important issues continuously pondered throughout this book is whether Finster was a visionary mystic, an opportunistic showman, or just a crazy old coot. Was he a visionary artist or a con artist; was he a saint, a shaman, or a shyster?

It's not an easy matter to choose either one or the other. The point is, Finster was a visionary artist with a religious message who was fully functional in the everyday world. Indeed his visions, as materialized in his art and Garden, often had a transformative, even healing, effect on those who had eyes to see. And in this sense of his miraculous energy and therapeutic power, we might think of Finster as an evangelical and artistic saint. But such designations of earthly holiness are almost always compromised. As Christopher Hitchens once maliciously said of Mother Teresa, it was her popular self-made myth that beatified her even before any official action by the Catholic Church. But never is such mythmaking a one-way enterprise. "In the gradual manufacture of an illusion," says Hitchens, "the conjurer is only the instrument of the audience. He may even announce himself as a clever prestidigitator and yet gull the crowd. *Populus vult decipi—ergo decipiatur* [The people want to be deceived and so they will be]."[45]

The nature of visionary or ecstatic experience—as well as the question of artistic creativity and its relation to insanity, duplicity, or the strategic arrogance of "genius"—remains ambiguous. Many examples are possible, running the gamut from Leonardo da Vinci to Vincent van Gogh. In fact, similar questions surfaced quickly after the death of the Apple guru, nominal Zen Buddhist, absent father, flawed cultural hero, and self-styled designer-artist Steve Jobs. Bluntly put, was he a creative genius or simply a lucky shit?[46] Of course, entrepreneurs, geniuses, gurus, saints, and artists frequently absolve themselves of any bad behavior precisely on the grounds that that is just the way it is for truly exceptional individuals. Certainly such designations are elastic and often self-validating.[47] So maybe the contradictory qualities associated with especially creative people—or truly gifted tinkerers or tweakers such as a Howard Finster or a Steve Jobs—are to at least some significant degree interrelated?[48] As the history of religions has amply documented without any help needed from Hitchens, saints are not always saintly.[49] But this does not mean they are not real saints.