Edmond Jabès opens his little book, *Desire for a Beginning, Dread of One Single End*, in characteristic style:

…a book – he said – that I'll never write because nobody can, it being a book:

– against the book.

– against thought.

– against truth and against the word.

– a book, then, that crumbles even while it forms.

– against the book because it is incapable of thinking its totality, let alone nothing.

– against truth because truth is God, and God escapes thought; against truth, then, which for us remains legendary, an unknown quantity.

– against the word, finally, because the word says only what little it can, and this little is nothing and only nothing could express it.
The fragments collected below are an attempt to develop what might be called, adopting Maurice Blanchot’s turn of phrase, a “philosophy without philosophy,” that is to say, a philosophy that chooses to go without the metaphysical support of objective, supra-perspectival truth and without the institutional backing of the academic establishment. A philosophy of this sort is a “weak philosophy” in Vattimo’s sense, as it has given up the traditional philosophical ambition of providing a systematic, precise and thoroughly “rational” account of the fundamental features of the world. What emerges, then, is a way of thinking and writing which, in the manner of Jabès, produces books “against the book,” “against the word” and “against truth,” and thus looks towards literary and artistic exemplars for its inspiration. The exemplar I put forward here is Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel, *The Poor Man of God* (first published in Greek in 1956).2

* * *

I hesitate to write, to add a single word or an iota more, as if anything needed to be added to this wonderful myth, “this legend, which is truer than truth itself” (3).

Kazantzakis frames his story with a short Prologue, and so will I.

Every so often we come across something or someone – a Gospel, a poem, a novel, a film, an extraordinary saint or an extraordinary sinner – that completely changes the course of our life. Some sixteen years ago, as a naïve first-year undergraduate student at university studying the great texts of philosophy and religion, I felt deeply unimpressed and alienated by the secular and materialistic culture of the academy, manifesting itself in an almost exclusive reliance on scientific modes of thinking with little appreciation for the dimensions of spirituality and faith. At least that’s the way things struck me then. And so I returned to Kazantzakis, for I had already begun reading many of his writings in my last year of secondary school and, especially, over the summer break before the opening of the first university semester. But what I returned to was Kazantzakis’ *The Poor Man of God*. I would skip lectures and tutorials, forget to have lunch and tea, miss my bus rides home, because I was totally enthralled and engrossed in this novel.

Sitting under the shade of a tree on a bright autumn day, surrounded by yellow and brown leaves and the wide green expanse of the campus lawns, almost on my own while everyone else was busily taking notes in the classrooms and lecture theatres or playing cards and chasing boyfriends or girl-
friends, I would be pouring over the pages of Kazantzakis’ record of the life and times of this fool for Christ, Francis of Assisi. I must have appeared strange, if not mad, to my classmates, to my family and relatives, for the more I would feed upon and assimilate Francis’ words, the more my soul would be nourished and grow aflame. I was gradually coming to life, and I knew things would never be the same again.

As I would read, I would imagine Kazantzakis in his Villa Manolita in Antibes, bent over his desk writing with a Giotto reproduction of Francis behind him. This was to be his last novel, assuming that the semi-autobiographical Report to Greco – his last major work, completed the year before his death – does not count as a novel. The seventy-year-old author of The Poor Man of God was by then a widely travelled as well as a widely acclaimed writer, with a store of novels, travelogues, essays and plays behind him that had already begun to attract an international following. He had also begun to attract the ire of the religious authorities. In the same year he wrote The Poor Man of God (1953), the Orthodox Church in Greece sought to prosecute him for sacrilege owing to the content of Freedom or Death and The Last Temptation, while the following year the Vatican placed The Last Temptation on the Index of Forbidden Books.Ironically, in the midst of such ecclesiastical opposition, Kazantzakis would reignite his love for Francis, one of the most venerated saints of the church. With his wife, Eleni, he would spend the summer of 1952 in Italy, retracing the steps of his beloved Poverello in Assisi, where the couple “wandered in shady lanes singing the Fioretti”.

On his return home to Antibes, Kazantzakis would write in a letter to Börje Knös:

In Assisi I lived once more with the great martyr and hero whom I love so much, Saint Francis. And now I’m gripped by a desire to write a book about him. Will I write it? I don’t know yet. I’m waiting for a sign, and then I’ll begin. Always, as you know, the struggle within me between man and God, between substance and spirit, is the stable leitmotif of my life and work.

The sign, as happened often in Francis’ life, appears to have come by way of illness and suffering. Kazantzakis was soon beset by various physical ailments requiring hospitalisation, including a severe eye infection, perhaps like the one that afflicted Francis (323). Although he had already begun writing the novel on Francis in late 1952 from Antibes, he left the manuscript half-finished in order to undergo medical tests in Holland for a prior condition. In the months that followed, however, Kazantzakis experienced a
harrowing series of medical problems, particularly with his right eye (which he was eventually to lose altogether). It was during this time that the novel on Francis took an entirely new shape:

Now, in the course of my illness, this work has been growing steadily richer inside me. I took notes, wrote Franciscan songs, created scenes, and the work kept constantly expanding with the great wealth [of new material]. I shall rewrite it from the beginning with new impetus... As much as I could, I've tried to take advantage of the illness to rewrite it inside of me; and so I hope that I transformed the illness into spirit. (Letter to Börje Knös, written from Paris on June 12, 1953.)

But it was not in spite of his illness that Kazantzakis' created this powerful work, but because of it. As he himself pointed out some years later to his long-time friend, Pandelis Prevelakis, who was bedridden at the time: “This immobility may prove fruitful. Whatever is best in The Poor Man of God, I dictated to Eleni at the time of the fever.”

Creativity does not come from well-planned and efficiently run think-tanks, seminar workshops, conferences or projects headed by professional, highly-trained academics and business leaders. Creativity comes, like an unmerited gift of divine grace, to the ‘loser’ relentlessly working away at some obscure problem, hidden from view and derided by all.

It is only the creative genius who has “poetic license,” and this because such a person has suffered more than any other for what they have accomplished.

Critics have not failed to notice connections between Albert Camus’ apparently dispiriting thoughts about “the absurd” and his recurrent physical illnesses. But attempts to “psychologise away” Camus’ philosophy of the absurd are misguided, for what they overlook is the fact that it is primarily through pain and suffering that the truth of the world is revealed – something known to artists of all times.

The best philosophy is always borne out of great suffering, not comfortable and relaxed armchair theorising. Wittgenstein recognised this well, and also embodied this principle in his own life and thought, as Norman Malcolm has highlighted:
As he [Wittgenstein] struggled to work through a problem one frequently felt that one was in the presence of real suffering. Wittgenstein liked to draw an analogy between philosophical thinking and swimming: just as one’s body has a natural tendency towards the surface and one has to make an exertion to get to the bottom – so it is with thinking. In talking about human greatness, he once remarked that he thought that the measure of a man’s greatness would be in terms of what his work cost him. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein’s philosophical labours cost him a great deal.9

I look into those black, beady and piercing eyes of Kazantzakis that are painfully strained over his manuscript, and notice large tears blurring his sight and smudging the ink on the pages. Just as Brother Leo, when recounting the life of Francis, would be guided by the tender hand of his spiritual father, so Kazantzakis tells us that “everywhere about me, as I wrote, I sensed the saint’s invisible presence” (3). And we, too, when reading this work, feel that whispering to us in one ear is Brother Leo, whispering in another is Kazantzakis, while right before our very eyes stands a pale and emaciated figure, with bare, bloodstained feet, wearing a dirty coat that has been patched and repatched a thousand times, and who is joyfully dancing and singing in a rapturous voice: Francis, God’s sweet little pauper.

I have never met another person such as him, no matter how hard I have looked since I first laid eyes on him. Tears would also roll down my cheeks as his great humility and gentle kindness would transform whatever they touched, both friends and (especially) enemies, the poor as well as the rich, the wicked as well as the righteous, both humans and animals, from the most fearsome snake to the least significant ant.

The truth is, though, that the truth about Francis, the truth that is Francis cannot be described and explained in a way that adequately captures his “essence,” that which makes him utterly unique. “Francis runs in my mind like water,” admits Brother Leo. “He changes faces; I am unable to pin him down… How can I ever know what he was like, who he was? Is it possible that he himself did not know?” (25, 30).

Truth is like that. And the ultimate truth, Truth Itself, that is, God, always evades neat and accurate formulations, much to the consternation of philosophers and theologians.
Indeed, I have never heard a philosopher or theologian describe God as precisely and clearly as Francis:

“Brother Francis, how does God reveal himself to you when you are alone in the darkness?”

“Like a glass of cool water, Brother Leo…I’m thirsty, I drink it, and my thirst is quenched for all eternity.” (26)

Other times, Francis would say:

“God is a conflagration, Brother Leo. He burns, and we burn with him.” (27)

And Francis would indeed catch fire: “Put yourself out, Brother Francis,” poor Leo would cry, “put yourself out before you burn up the world!” (26)

These metaphors and images are immediately understood by the heart, but are reluctantly admitted, if they are at all, into the intellect.

Hence Francis’ advice: “The heart is closer to God than the mind is, so abandon the mind and follow your heart: it and it alone knows the way to paradise,” (209, cf. 356) advice not easily accepted by the more learned brothers of Francis’ group, such as Ruffino and Elias.

Pascal, Pensées:

“Le coeur à ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.”

“All of his works,” Anselm Kiefer explains, “are but aspects or traces of a theme that in human concepts, in language, is not representable. All of painting, but also literature and everything that is connected to it, is always but a circling around something unsayable, around a black hole or a crater, whose centre one cannot penetrate. And whatever one takes up for themes has only the character of pebbles at the foot of the crater – they are path markers in a circle that one hopes gradually closes in around the centre.”

The mind, with its sophisticated proofs and refutations, wishes to augment its authority, to “spread itself out and
conquer the world not only by means of heaven but also by force" (300), whereas the simple, illiterate heart has no such ambitions, but desires only love and peace.

“But isn't this taking things too far?” protests the scholar. The same question could be asked about virtually anything Francis does. The path of learning, however, is not necessarily rejected outright, but nor is it advocated as a path that is as valid as any other.

*Man’s knowledge is nothing but ashes.* (361)

Francis, therefore, angrily seizes a book he sees a young novice poring over and throws it into the flames, telling the novice that the only Easter day on which his (Francis’) congregation did not see the Resurrection was when a visiting theologian from the University of Bologna came to deliver the sermon. (357)

The learned Germans, Kazantzakis wrote in one of his travelogues, if presented with the choice between two doors, on the one written ‘Paradise’ and on the other written 'Lecture about Paradise,' would unhesitatingly rush to the latter.¹¹

Francis: “Instead of being crucified, I simply think about crucifixion” (211).

The same novice is given permission (by Brother Giles) to preach a sermon, but on one condition: “You must mount the pulpit and start crying Baa! Baa! like a sheep. Nothing else – just Baa! Baa!” (358)

Had he followed this advice, Francis no doubt would have said to him what he had said some time earlier to Brother Leo, after the latter had risen to speak during a meeting of the brethren. Some of the brothers had already spoken eloquently against the Rule that Francis had drawn up, but when Brother Leo rose to speak he could only stammer a few words, became completely confused and then burst into tears:

“No one else spoke with such skill, such strength,” Francis said. “Brother Leo, you have my blessing.” (305)
…and it won’t do harm if your words are broken with weeping – tears on occasion carry the weight of speech.
– Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto* 3.1.158

The loquaciousness of the scholastic brethren compared to the silent, wordless communication between Francis, Bernard and Pietro (404): the difference between the God of the philosophers and scholars and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

When Francis breaks the silence, he does not reach for lengthy tomes and tractates, but for the lute: song and dance.

*Music:* the greatest and most mysterious force in this world; no other form of expression or communication even comes close in potency and poignancy.

Music as the most important source of religious experience.

It has often been said that music provides the most cogent proof of the existence of God. But nothing could be further from the truth *in the case of much music*. No greater truth, however, could be told of music at its best.

God is a fire that burns but also purifies. Like the scorched landscapes in Anselm Kiefer’s paintings, the destruction is never entirely negative, but always holds out the promise of renewal and re-creation.¹²

*The God of Kazantzakis – a philosopher’s God?* In light of the recent proliferation of attempts to interpret Kazantzakis’ fiction through the lens of Whiteheadian process theism (led by Daniel Dombrowski and Darren Middleton¹³), it should be recalled that Kazantzakis was consistently opposed to the kind of “logocentric” language found in much process theology. The writings of leading process philosophers and theologians, including A.N. Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne and David Ray Griffin, read like most other works in speculative metaphysics: the language is abstract and propositional, there is an emphasis on precise definitions and distinctions as well as on dense and rigorous argumentation, and in short the aim is the systematic elaboration in as literal a way as possible of a worldview in consonance with the latest findings of science. But all this is foreign to Kazantzakis: his works (particularly his novels and plays) are passionate narratives infused with poetry and paradox, analogies and parables, dreams and symbols, thus yielding multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings.
Even his most overtly philosophical work, *Salvatores Dei*, resembles a lyrical poem more than a metaphysical tractate. It is not so much that Kazantzakis chose to express himself in this way, but that he felt compelled to do so: the deepest reaches of reality, and the reality of God above all, could not be expressed otherwise without distortion. There is a danger, therefore, in speaking of “Kazantzakis’ narrative fiction as a mythopoesis of process thought”, as Middleton does. For this gives the impression that the literary fiction of Kazantzakis can be “translated,” “formalised” and indeed “purified” without remainder into the system of process philosophy. Middleton is too astute a reader of Kazantzakis to succumb to this fallacy: “process theology,” he notes, “may not with impunity be spoken of as the kernel trapped inside the husk of Kazantzakis’s fiction”. Others, however, have not been as careful, and it is unfortunately not uncommon to find philosophers using works of literature as nothing more than sources for abstract principles or doctrines. But this is reductionism of a very crude kind, attempting to still the dance and song of a Zorba or a Francis into something mechanical and monotonous.

There is, in addition, that famous letter Kazantzakis wrote in January 1908, soon after arriving in Paris to pursue postgraduate studies:

> At present I am studying philosophy and literature at the Sorbonne, the Collège de France, and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes.

> I want to formulate an individual, personal conception of life, a theory of the world and of human destiny, and then, in accord with this, systematically and with a specific purpose and program, to write – whatever I write.

As is well known, Kazantzakis found just such a “theory of the world and of human destiny” in Bergson’s account of evolution as the product of a dynamic impulse, the *élan vital*. However, as Bien points out, Kazantzakis’ attraction to scientific rationalism did not last long: “His [Kazantzakis’] mystical temperament, his aestheticism, and his intellectual quarrel with science [as expressed in his 1909 essay, “Has Science Gone Bankrupt?”] all kept impelling him increasingly toward intuitional rather than scientific language, faith rather than proof.” And so, although Kazantzakis initially (that is, up till 1913) sought to buttress Bergson’s speculations with empirical evidence, he quickly came to think of Bergsonian vitalism in more mystical fashion whose ‘truth’ is not amenable to scientific confirmation and disconfirmation. Indeed, it was the anti-intellectualist tendencies in Bergson’s own
philosophy that influenced Kazantzakis to elevate art above both science and philosophy, to think of art (as he put it in an interview in 1935) as “the only ‘human method’ that can...suddenly reveal life’s mystery to human eyes.” The mature Kazantzakis, then, would have repudiated the kind of ‘rational’ philosophical system developed by process theists, and to ‘translate’ Kazantzakis’ fiction into such a system is to attempt to do what that very fiction claims cannot be done.

A disparity therefore exists between literature and theology (or at least the sort of theology that seeks to systematise, explicate and precisify the language of faith), as Middleton highlights when comparing the theologies of process thinkers with the fictional works of Kazantzakis. The discourses of literature and theology represent, in Middleton’s view, “competing” and “conflicting” voices, “they appear to trespass upon one another’s ground”. But these two ways of thinking and writing, adds Middleton, can be brought together into a mutually enriching, albeit uneasy, alliance. Like Apollo and Dionysius in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, literature and theology may represent “the dynamic collusion of two complementary yet antagonistic forces or activities, with each being responsible for creating, destroying, and re-creating the other.” In this dialectical relationship, each discipline needs and feeds off the other. For one thing, literature cannot do without theology, for “without ‘theology’s’ disciplined ordering of experience, fiction has no guard against the dangers of practicing a ludic randomness by which it is impossible for us to live.” There is much to be said for this view. The quest for discipline, however, has a habit of arresting the play of our structures of signification and succumbing to our craving for the kind of stability and security that can only be supplied by a transcendental signified. This is not necessarily an objection, at least if a creative imagination requires the very tension produced by placing the desire for coherence, order and rational systematisation in opposition with the desire to trespass these constraints.

The visible as the surest sign of the invisible. “The only way we can divine the appearance of God’s face,” says Francis, “is by looking at beautiful things” (60). God condescends to our material limitations, appearing to us in the form of a beautiful night sky, a glass of refreshing water, or a consuming fire.

But do we have any material limitations? We are given to believe that nothing is more real than the matter we are enclosed within: the stars, mountains and rivers, our bones, hair and skin. We are imprisoned in this world
of matter, and there may well be no escape. We are given over to doubt as to whether there truly is any such thing as “the spirit” or “the soul,” these being remnants of medieval metaphysics and psychology that have been overturned by the investigations of science. But what if, at least for a moment, we were to consider something utterly heretical: nothing material exists, everything is spirit!

Francis whispers to us, as he did to his constant companion, Brother Leo: “The canary is like man’s soul. It sees bars round it, but instead of despairing, it sings. It sings, and wait and see: one day its song shall break the bars.” (69)

It is as flame that God appears to Francis’s mother, Lady Pica, a flame that once burned within, making her feel like bursting into tears, dancing in the middle of the yard and rushing into the street, taking to the road and never returning to her parents’ house (62-63).

When Francis would pray, a great flame would lick his face. (184)

Abba Joseph said to Abba Lot: “You cannot be a monk unless you become like a consuming fire.”

Anselm Kiefer, the alchemist, knows this well. He shows how creation and destruction are one and the same in bringing forth powerful symbols and imagery by cracking, breaking apart and scorching the canvas and other materials; seeking and liberating the spirit within matter by applying the fire of purification.

*Aperiatur terra* “Let the earth be opened and bud forth a saviour and let justice spring up at the same time.” (Isaiah 45:8)

Destruction and re-creation

violent upheaval and spiritual renewal

Fire

apocalyptic and redemptive
haunted by memories of the past...the tragic in history...time, history, and memory...celestial metaphysics...mythic journeys...charred landscapes...struck with wonder at the horrors we are capable of inflicting upon each other...heavy, daunting, uncomfortable, grandiose, melancholic, deeply disturbing...

Like the alchemists of old, Kiefer searches for the philosopher’s stone which transmutes the basest metals into gold and gold into spirit. Kiefer attempts to achieve this transmutation through the use of lead, one of his favourite materials: “I feel closest to lead because it is like us. It is in flux. It’s changeable and has potential to achieve a higher state of gold.” 24 Lead, he adds elsewhere, “has a life of its own. It’s a quite spiritual material. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that lead has a spirit. Whatever material I work with, I feel I’m extracting the spirit that already lives within it.” 25

The living God, the eternal flame that scorches the earth and lights people’s souls on fire. Francis’ painful “nights of fire” – shivering with a raging temperature and wrestling at night with all manner of demons and saints – were to deliver him from his prodigal past and set him on an extraordinary new path. This fiery experience would be consummated with the words that Francis asked his mother to write on the back of a painting of the Crucified:

On Sunday,

the twenty-fourth day of September

in the year 1206 after the birth of our Lord,

my son Francis was reborn. (75)

I am reminded of another great soul, Blaise Pascal, a remarkably gifted man who lived only to the age of 39 but made many important contributions to mathematics and the physical sciences. Like Francis, Pascal was both deeply human, often succumbing to frivolous and worldly pursuits, and deeply religious: always struggling to reform his ways, suffering terribly from physical ailments (and from persecution by civil and religious authorities) but convinced that suffering is the natural state of the Christian. Most memorable, however, was his “night of fire.” After narrowly escaping death from a horse-carriage accident on November 23, 1654, Pascal underwent an intense religious experience (“light flooded his room”, according to some accounts). He would not breathe a word of what happened to anyone, but instead recorded the experience on a piece of parchment and had the note sown into the lining of his coat, thus keeping it close to his heart wherever he went. The note began with the following words:
The year of grace 1654.

Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr and others in the martyrology.

The eve of Saint Chrysogonus martyr and others.

From about half-past ten in the evening

until about half-past midnight.

FIRE

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.

Not of the philosophers and scholars.

Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace.

From then on Pascal renounced mathematics and science, devoting himself passionately to religious contemplation and writing. He would on occasion slide back into the study of mathematics, but whatever he wrote during this time he chose to write anonymously, employing pseudonyms so as to avoid the reprehensible desire for reputation that marked the life of the scientist even in his own day.

Francis’ burns, the effects of his intimate contact with God, were nevertheless painful and the cause of much suffering. Francis’ body would become one open wound as a result of his ascetic struggles. Brother Leo, himself no stranger to the harsh realities of a beggar’s life, was astounded by the lengths Francis would go to. In reference to Francis’ feet, for example, Brother Leo states: “Never in my life had I seen feet so distressed – so melancholy, feeble, gnawed away by journeys, so full of open wounds – as his. Sometimes when Father Francis lay sleeping I used to bend down stealthily and kiss them, and I felt as though I were kissing the total suffering of mankind” (27).

*The Two Ways*. One is to suffer; the other is to become a professor of the fact that another suffered.

– Søren Kierkegaard, journal entry for 1854.26

Francis not only patiently endures suffering, but also *seeks it out*: he incites people to attack him by telling them that the more stones they throw at him, the more blessed by God they will be (110); tormented by demonic
thoughts, he beats his flesh mercilessly all night long with a knotted cord while sprawled out on top of bitterly cold snow (340); and he implores Christ: “Let me feel thy sufferings and holy passion in my body and soul; let me feel them as intensely as is possible for a sinful mortal” (496). But he is not driven by vanity or arrogance to attain new heights (as the bishop and others claimed: 118, 242), nor is he driven by an inhuman masochistic temperament, as some contemporary critics have thought. Rather, Francis is motivated by the conviction that only through suffering can redemption be found. For Brother Leo and the common man, pain is nothing more than a physical sensation to be avoided: “I was a man,” Leo reflects, “a reasonable man, and a wretched one. I felt hunger; and the stones, for me, were stones,” while “the stones that people threw at [Francis] were like a sprinkling of lemon flowers” (155). For Francis, in other words, pain and suffering are a providential sign that one is on the road towards fulfilling the supreme obligation to “transubstantiate the matter that God entrusted to us, and turn it into spirit” (4). Tom Doulis, in an article on “Kazantzakis and the Meaning of Suffering,” put it well:

Whereas for the ancient tragedians suffering meant wisdom, and for Dostoyevsky it meant pity and love, for Kazantzakis suffering means certitude in being chosen for salvation by the love of a compassionate and interested Creator. It exhibits to man the strength and resiliency of his nature by showing him how little he needs comfort and security.

However, this is not to engage in theodical “justifications” of suffering, a project I argued against in Chapter 2. Rather, it is to point to a practical response that can be made to the vicissitudes of life, one in which it is the sufferer himself who confers meaning onto his suffering, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, as it were (as opposed to attempting to decipher the “objective” value or meaning of his suffering).

Ascent. To climb a series of steps. From the full stomach to hunger, from the slaked throat to thirst, from joy to suffering. God sits at the summit of hunger, thirst, and suffering; the devil sits at the summit of the comfortable life. Choose.

However, pain, in Francis’ view, also affords an opportunity to identify with the sufferings of Christ and of every human being: he takes their sufferings upon himself, not to lighten their load (or not merely for this reason), but as an expression of a profound sense of solidarity and responsibility. Francis
recognises, as did Father Zosima (in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*) that, “In truth we are each responsible to all for all, only people don’t realize it, but if they did, we should all instantly be in paradise!” This is why, when Francis’ brotherhood fell into disarray, Francis could sincerely say, “It is my fault. I am the one who sinned, who craved women, food, a soft bed, and who filled his mouth with the goat’s flesh” (278). And when Brother Leo confesses his sins to Francis, Francis punishes *himself* (484). That is also why, according to Francis, paradise cannot exist as long as hell exists, for “how can anyone be completely happy when he looks out from heaven and sees his brothers and sisters being punished in hell?” Therefore, if one is saved all are saved, and if one is lost all are lost (390).

Francis’ logic is impeccable.
Solidarity in suffering, solidarity in sin.

God is the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands.


And then
that great little sparrow from Assisi arrived
playing his lute Merrily
and seeing me
immediately shrunk to the ground with a sigh.
He did not tell me
what to do and what not to do
where to go and where not to go
how to do this and how to do that
– he just sighed and sat next to me.

Identification with
the defeated
the forgotten
the excluded
and reverence for all life
was also the legacy of Albert Schweitzer
– “the Saint Francis of our era” (in Kazantzakis’ dedication).

Contrary to the common perception of Kazantzakis as an otherwise pro-
gressive thinker who was unfortunately unable to come to terms with the
modern egalitarian ideal of women as having equal value and status to
men, Kazantzakis has Francis furthering the aspirations of his mother, not
father (172); he has Francis overcoming his initial reservations in welcom-
ing Clara into the life of poverty, and then helping her find a hermitage
(353-54, 359); and, most of all, he has Francis conversing lovingly with Sis-
ter Clara and the other sisters at the convent of San Damiano’s in an at-
mosphere “overflowing with sweetness and compassion,” making Francis’
heart “blossom luxuriantly in the feminine air,” and giving outsiders the
impression that the convent had gone up in flames. “It was the first time,” we
are told, “the sisters had felt what an infinitely divine gift it was to be a
woman, and also what a responsibility” (384-95).31

Closer to the divine than the masculine, is the feminine.

Another heretical hypothesis: By the time Kazantzakis had completed this
last novel of his, he was well on his way towards making a radical depart-
ture from the philosophical theories of his past. To be sure, the
Nietzschean and Bergsonian ideas that informed much of his earlier work
remain present in The Poor Man of God, but the concepts and slogans
have now been emptied and are filled with new content, this time the con-
tent not coming from a preconceived and systematically worked-out phi-
losophy, but from the flesh and bones of Francis himself. The vision that
Francis, the Lamb of God, dictates to his biographer is one of perfect love
and peace, a love that prays for the forgiveness even of Satan (391), and a
love infused with a humility and gentleness that runs counter to the “Life is
war, toil, violence!” doctrine often espoused by Kazantzakis in the past (cf.
280-81).32 Francis, not surprisingly, had a deep effect on Kazantzakis, and
it appears that Kazantzakis had begun in the final years of his life to move
away from the “heroic nihilism” of Salvatore Dei – “We come from a dark
abyss, we end in a dark abyss”33 – even though this nihilism was always
tempered by a Bergsonian activism that challenges us to fashion meaning
in an otherwise meaningless world (hence the qualifier “heroic” in “heroic
nihilism”).34 Kazantzakis, in other words, was making steps towards a more
optimistic vision, though perhaps one that continued to be tinged with the
tragic in light of the blood-drenched ascent that it involved. This is rarely
recognised by commentators who persist in taking Kazantzakis at his word when he wrote to Max Tau in 1951 that *Salvatores Dei* "is my credo, the core of my work, and even more, the core of my entire life".  

Note that the nightmare of absolute nihilism comes to Brother Leo one night only after he had deserted Francis and spent the evening with the bandit, Captain Wolf, greedily eating food and guzzling wine. (473-80)

Despite the above comment to Max Tau, Kazantzakis did not view his novels as simply variations on the one theme, but as successive attempts to reach further and break new ground: *aperiatur terra*.

Letter to Börje Knös, January 30, 1952:

I am obliged to see to it that each book of mine will be one step further ahead and higher. *The Last Temptation* took such a step. The new book must advance yet another stride. And this responsibility is a very heavy one…

And after *The Poor Man of God* was completed, the author himself was surprised at what he had given birth to. In a letter to Prevelakis, dated December 6, 1953, Kazantzakis wrote:

*[The Poor Man of God]* is one of the works you won't like, and I'm puzzled as to how I wrote it. Well, is there a religious *mystique* inside me? Because I felt great emotion when I wrote it…

Brother Leo, like Nietzsche’s madman, spends his life searching for God. But the fact of the matter is that God is also searching for us. Francis cries out towards the heavens:

“All day long I search desperately for You;

all night long, while I am asleep, You search for me;

when, O Lord, when, as night gives way to day, shall we meet?” (28)

But the search for God is not open to just anyone. Special qualities are required, the most important of which is laziness. Yes: laziness! Forget about what you’ve heard and been taught by well-intentioned but ignorant priests and theologians, the route to God is laziness. And here’s the proof, if proof is needed:
The labourer who lives from hand to mouth returns home each night exhausted and famished. He assaults his dinner, gobbles up his food lickety-spit, then quarrels with his wife, beats his children without rhyme or reason simply because he’s tired and irritated, and afterward clenches his fists and sleeps. Waking up for a moment he finds his wife at his side, couples with her, clenches his fists once more, and plunges back into sleep... Where can he find time for God? (39)

But the lazy person, as Brother Leo goes on to explain, has all the time in the world. He doesn’t bother looking for a job, he doesn’t bother looking for a wife, and so he avoids all the troubles that come with work, marriage and children. Instead, he can simply sit in the sun during winter, lounge in the shade during summer, and at night stretch out on his back on the roof of his house, gazing at the moon and the stars, while wondering: Who made all this? And why? (39).

Inevitably, however, curiosity turns to anguish, and the search for God takes on the importance of life and death. Upon this search hangs the salvation of one’s soul.

But where do we start? What road should we take in our search? In fact, as Augustine (following Plato) noticed, how can we search for something if we do not know what we are searching for? And how, if we do not know what we are searching for, can we be said to be searching for it at all? Self-proclaimed spiritual guides are not troubled by these questions, as they confidently claim to know the surest path to God. According to Brother Leo, however, it was only an obscure holy man living in a cave and blinded by weeping who could give the answer that was “both most correct and most frightening”:

“Holy ascetic, I have set out to find God. Show me the road,” Brother Leo asked.

“There is no road”, he answered, beating his staff on the ground.

“There is no road! What then is there?” Brother Leo asked, seized with terror.

“There is the abyss. Jump!”

“Abyss!? Is that the way?”
“Yes. All roads lead to the earth. The abyss leads to God. Jump!”
(41)

This is the only way to God.
The divine descent.

We don’t wish to admit that this is the only way to God, for we always try to take the easy way out. But there is a simple way to determine which is the way to God: the one that’s most difficult, the one that both descends and rises.
Initially, Francis recognised this, and sighed (129). Later, with experience that only suffering could bring, he would make the same point, but fervently and without dejection (325).

Trans-descendance: turning flesh into spirit.

There are two paths available to us, one entirely different from the other but perhaps both leading to the same destination. There is the straight and reasonable path of the respectable man, where God is found in marriage and children, in good food and wine, in cleanliness and health. And there is the crooked and incomprehensible path of the disreputable saint, where God is found in homelessness and poverty, in sickness and solitariness.

Which path to take? (165-66)

Francis’ answer:

“Good God, to marry, have children, build a home – I spit on them all!”
(165)

Few ears would wish to listen.

One winter morning, Francis creates seven snow statues, each representing a member of his would-be family (including a wife with “huge pendulous breasts,” two sons and two daughters), and when the sun rose he commanded it to “beat down upon my family and melt them!” (341)

Ordinary happiness: the last temptation.

“To have nothing, absolutely nothing: that is the road that leads to God. There is no other,” Francis says to his bishop. (220)

“The kingdom of heaven is at hand…Take no gold nor silver nor copper in your belts, no sack
for your journey, nor an extra tunic, nor sandals, nor a staff…” (Matthew 10:7, 9-10)

Absolute poverty: to have nothing – not even God?
Meister Eckhart: “Therefore I pray to God that he may make me free of ‘God’.”
Brother Francis: “Lord, give me the strength to enable me one day to renounce hope, the hope, O Lord, of seeing thee.” (244)
(Poverty as a matter more of metaphysics than economics.)
From being to nothingness.

But to have nothing, to become nothing is at the same time to have everything, to be everything (and anything), because absolute poverty brings absolute freedom. (242)
Augustine: “Love, then do what you will.”
From nothingness to being.

The ascent: from one abyss to another, and dancing and weeping in between. (284)

But it is the uphill path that brings perfect joy.
A constant “No!” to the small, insignificant joys (or temptations), so as to be able to reach the “Great Yes!”.
And what does this “Yes!” look like? Well, take a look for yourself:
Hungry and cold, Francis and Brother Leo find themselves caught in a rainstorm during one of their nightly sojourns, and so they rush towards a nearby monastery to seek temporary shelter. They are met, however, by a gigantic doorkeeper who not only refuses them entry, but also beats both of them to a pulp, leaving them half-dead. They lie asleep near the gates of the monastery till dawn, when they hear the doorkeeper approaching. The door is opened. They now have the opportunity to go in, to find a place to warm up a little and eat, but instead they decide to head off once more on their journey. “Francis was so happy, he flew.” (160)
Herein lies genuine freedom, the “Great Yes!”. 38
A hard lesson, and so it is not surprising to find a reviewer of Kazantzakis’ novel passing the following judgement:
“Recommendation: Beware of Nikos Kazantzakis bearing gifts.” 39

Look at me, I am without a country, without a home, without possessions, without a slave; I
sleep out on the ground; I have no wife, no children, no fine residence, but only earth and heaven and one sorry cloak. And what do I lack? Am I not without sorrow, without fear? Am I not free?

– the Cynic, as quoted by Epictetus

But there is always something, no matter how trifling it may seem, that prevents us from embarking upon this uphill path. For some it might be the weight of books and theological questions that prevent us from ascending (187-88). For others it might be some prized possession that one cannot let go, whether it be a house, a car, a wife, or even a small, richly decorated pitcher (200).

Unless these idols are smashed into a thousand pieces, one can never see God.

“Name your idol, and you will know who you are.”
– Jean-Luc Marion

Francis dares to do what he finds most difficult to do: He finds a leper, embraces him and kisses him on the lips. (135)

He then carries the leper in his arms, covering him with his robe. When he later draws the robe aside, the leper has disappeared. It was Christ himself all along.

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25:35-36)

“This, Brother Leo, is what I understand: all lepers, cripples, sinners, if you kiss them on the mouth – they all become Christ.” (138)

Searching for God high and low, by day and by night, we soon forget what we were looking for, and then a flash of insight: “Who knows, perhaps God is simply the search for God” (43). God in all his fullness was always there, the voice within, closer to us than we are to ourselves. “It is unnecessary for us to run to the ends of the earth in his pursuit. All we have to do is gaze into our own hearts” (148, cf. 434).

This hidden and abysmal God that is sought but never found should not be confused with the garden-variety gods we are taught to believe in from
childhood.

In a delightful book, entitled Kids’ View of God, Candice Dunn and Rebecca Mann present many interesting, humourous and even insightful perspectives on God and religion that are had by children from four to nine years of age. What is most interesting, however, is how closely some of the children’s quotes resemble the thoughts found in the dense and technical writings of highly trained philosophers of religion: “If you’re naughty God curses you with a punishment from your mum” (Vivien, aged 7); “God knows everything that you do before you do it ’cause he’s hiding behind the door” (Alex, aged 5); “God has a special tracking device that beeps when you’re naughty and he knows who’s done it” (Jonathan, aged 9); “You know when God is around because you get a nice feeling in your heart” (Saskia, aged 9). I am afraid that many philosophers have not grown out of the religion they were taught as children.

This is the very religion we find practiced by many of Francis’ family and friends. Before setting out on one of his expeditions to sell various goods at a nearby city, Francis’ father, Pietro Bernardone, would customarily attend Mass and attempt to strike a deal with the local saint, Saint Ruffino. “You protect my merchandise,” he would haggle with the saint, “and I’ll bring you a silver lamp from Florence, a heavy embossed one that will make you the envy of the other saints, who have nothing but tiny lamps made of glass” (33).

This calculative, means-end rationality is widespread in moral thinking today, but was also not unknown in Francis’ time. “Why shouldn’t I eat, drink and be merry,” a villager challenges Francis, “for if I don’t get into heaven, I will have lost only one life, while if you don’t get into heaven you will have lost two” (458). How can one argue with that?

One more remarkable quote from Kids’ View of God. Children were asked to put a question to God, and along with some typical responses (e.g., “Can you help my grandpa get better?”), there is this gem from Eve, aged 4: “Dear God, I haven’t thought of a question yet. I will probably think of it when I’m dead.” That is precisely what Francis would say.

The impoverished doctrinal gods of the philosophers and the living God who grabs his followers by the scruff of the neck, and tosses them from peak to peak until they break into a thousand pieces (73). Initially, however, the demands are small and seemingly easy to fulfill. Later, more difficult
and arduous demands are placed on one, and eventually nothing less than the impossible becomes one's mission (84). “Go there where you cannot go, to the impossible, it is indeed the only way of going or coming” (Derrida). 43

To begin with, Francis is given the task of rebuilding the dilapidated chapel of San Damiano. But afterwards he understood that much more was demanded of him: he was now to rebuild himself: “Francis, Francis – make Francis firm, rebuild the son of Bernardone!”, the voice commanded him (102). But how was he to rebuild himself? By demolishing his self, the self that was preventing the union with the divine; by kenotically emptying his self of pride, making a fool of himself, for Christ’s sake.

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Absolute poverty: not so much having no possessions, but not being possessed by anything, above all, not being possessed by the “ego” and its hopes and fears. As Lewis Owens explains,

This ‘perfect poverty’…is in fact the only road that leads to ‘God’ and is achieved by overcoming an attachment to the ego. Self-overcoming and consequent self-realization therefore leads to ‘God’. This self-realization is achieved via a process of detachment from inauthentic attachment to the individual self-will, which harbors hopes and fears for immortality or extinction after death. 44

There once was an ascetic, Francis tells his brothers, who upon dying, ascended to heaven and knocked on the gates. “Who is there?” came the reply. “It’s me!” answered the ascetic. “There isn’t any room for two here,” said the voice. “Go away!” (309-310)

To forget who you are and what your name is, not to have any will and not to say “I” – that is true freedom! (427)

And so, at the very place where he grew up and where everyone knew him well, at the heart of Assisi, in the middle of the town square, on a Saturday evening when the citizens were beginning to gather outside, Francis rises up and shouts: “Come one, come all! Come to hear the new madness!” (109). And what was ‘the new madness’? “Love! Love! Love!” Francis
would proclaim, while dancing and jumping, and covered in blood from the stones and other missiles thrown at him by the jeering crowd (111).

Humiliation as the path to humility.

Each step in the ascent is one more attachment loosened, if not completely severed. Francis begins with the most powerful ties that bind us to earth, those of mother and father, lover and wife, friends and acquaintances. Having divested himself of these attachments, Francis removes the very clothes he is wearing and returns them to his father. Standing “naked as the day his mother brought him into the world,” in front of his father, the local bishop and a throng of curious citizens, he says to the bishop: “Until now I called Sior Pietro Bernardone my father. Henceforth I shall say: ‘Our Father who art in heaven’.” (117)

Reading the texts of the early ascetics, I have come to realize that perhaps the most essential lesson learned in life is the lesson of surrender, of letting go. It is a hard lesson, and one that is only reluctantly embraced by most of us. But I am convinced that this life is given to us in order to learn how to lose.

– John Chryssavgis

But as Bernardone himself wonders: What kind of God is it who separates sons and daughters from their fathers and mothers? (168)

An unfathomable abyss: a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

the Insatiable
the Merciless
the Indefatigable
the Unsatisfied
...the bottomless Abyss (173)

Love of God: divine madness.

Intoxicated with God
He would pray and pray
but every now and again
he would reach a dead-end
and what he could not pray
he would sing
and what he could not sing
he would dance
and what he could not dance
he would cry
but what he could not cry
would only die.

To those on the outside looking in, sanctity is indistinguishable from madness (122). Consider, for example, the comments of Kazantzakis scholar, Morton Levitt: “The ascetic strictures he [i.e., Francis] offers are so opposed to normal living that they are bound to repel us; we suspect that no sane man would follow such a fanatic and that no sane age could produce one.”

Abba Antony said: “A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, ‘You are mad, you are not like us’.”

Francis, God’s beloved buffoon.

2 + 2 = 22 (Kazantzakis’ formula for Francis)

“If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise,” wrote Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:18. And the fools for Christ’s sake followed the apostle’s exhortation to the letter. The holy fool would pretend to be mad or immoral, doing things that would be regarded as incompatible not only with an ascetic life, but with a Christian life in general. Thus, that wonderful holy fool from Emesa in Syria, Symeon, would do such things as take on the blame for the pregnancy of a young girl, even pretending to be ashamed of what he had supposedly done; and visiting a prostitute, giving everyone the impression that he had slept with her, when in fact he had only brought her food since he knew that she was starving. (One can imagine this prostitute reacting in the same way the prostitute in Damietta reacted after her failed attempt to seduce Francis [326-27].) During the day, Symeon would roam the streets, playing the madman, the fornicator, the glutton, the drunkard, the fool – and he would be treated accordingly. But after dark he would completely disappear from view, praying to God all night long in total secrecy and silence.
Abba Macarius said, “If slander has become to you the same as praise, poverty as riches, deprivation as abundance, you will not die.”

All this, nonetheless, is not enough. It is never enough. We protest, “Enough is enough! I can’t go any further!” But God demands: “You can! You must!”

Our body is the bow, God is the archer, and the soul is the arrow.

There are three kinds of souls, three kinds of prayer:

“I am a bow in your hands, Lord. Draw me, lest I rot.”

“Do not overdraw me, Lord. I shall break.”

“Overdraw me, Lord, and who cares if I break!” (270)

You are the crucified who crucifies
– Geoffrey Hill, “Lachrimae”

The perpetual ascent. Francis realises that we are to save not only our souls, but also the souls of our fellow brothers and sisters – in fact, we cannot do the former without doing the latter. Francis therefore sets out to go from town to town, preaching to his fellow Christians to return to Christ, for “the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”. (178-79)

But even this is not enough: Always attentive to the voice (or Cry) within, Francis casts his net wider as he is called to save the infidel Muslims, and he therefore sails to Damietta and preaches fearlessly to the Sultan. (315-319)

But this too is not enough: Francis fears that he is still not on the right road (332). He realises, with much sorrow, that he must surrender the reigns of the brotherhood he established to other hands (370-73), and he must even surrender the hope that after he has departed the brothers will continue in the path of total poverty and simplicity (399-400).

“But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone.” (John 16:32) The journey upward is lined with Judas kisses.

Francis exemplifies “the transformation of material defeat into spiritual victory”: success breeds satisfaction and
stagnation, whereas Francis’ failures (in converting the Sultan, in preaching to the crusaders, in keeping the friars united) spurs a restless but liberating struggle that enables him to remain faithful to the Cry within.

God calls us to go beyond our selves.

Ultimately, however, God calls us to go beyond God: “Brother Leo, to be a saint means to renounce not only everything earthly but also everything divine” (20).

It is terrifying to see how quickly the divine ascent can turn into a descent. Francis briefly leaves his brothers in order to travel to Rome to seek papal approval for his new order, and in no time the brothers are quarreling, rebelling against Francis’ teachings, visiting houses of pleasure, eating and drinking to their heart’s content, even going so far as hunting down a goat on Good Friday, tearing it limb from limb and greedily devouring it: “They chewed hurriedly, swallowed, grabbed a new mouthful; then, as though they had become drunk, they began to dance round the severed head and twisted horns, blood and fire dripping from their mouths” (277). The human soul is a battleground between light and darkness, divinity and bestiality, and even one who has reached the heights of divinity – especially such a one – can, like a flash of lightning, fall into the mire of the inferno.

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” (Luke 10:18)

The ascent continues. Obedient to the Cry within, Francis decides to marry. His bride? Lady Poverty.

The borders are being overrun: hungry but full and rich in poverty, the brothers cheerfully celebrate a wedding feast without a wedding, a bridegroom without a bride.

The new divine madness. (225-26)

Love is never “rational,” how much more an excess of love.

The new divine madness: Francis talks and communes with nature, conversing with birds, swallows and doves as though he were talking with his own biological brothers and sisters (290-91; cf. 522-23). And he can hear what the birds have to say to him in return.

In Francis’ heart, an old chronicler has it, the whole world found refuge:
the sinner, the poor, the sick, the birds, 
the wolves, the flowers.

“The swallows beat their wings happily, the doves cooed, and the sparrows came close to Francis and began to peck tenderly at his robe.” (292)

Before heading off, Francis makes the sign of the cross over the birds, blesses them, and then bids them farewell.

A tender and overflowing love for every living and breathing thing, for everything that suffers and even for everything that doesn’t: “God bless Brother Water,” Francis says as he sips a cup of water (367). One is reminded of his “Canticle of Brother Sun,” where he sings the praises of the Lord for creating Brother Sun (“radiant with great splendour”), Sister Moon and the stars (“precious and fair”), Brother Wind, Sister Water (“humble and dear and pure”), Brother Fire (“strong and merry”), Sister Mother Earth (“who sustains us and holds us to her breast, and produces abundant fruits, flowers, and trees”), and even Brother Death (“whom no living person can escape”). (563-64, 575)

Communion with nature is communion with God.

Spinoza: “deus sive natura”. 52

Australian newspaper cartoonist and artist, Michael Leunig, in a “Confession” published on his website, describes his sudden impulse one Saturday morning in the midst of the Vietnam War in 1969 to depart from serious political commentary in his drawings and instead to present his editor with “an absurd, irresponsible triviality” in the form of a man riding towards the sunset on a large duck and with a teapot on his head. This was to change Leunig’s approach forever:

In the wake of this drawing I at once began to express my most personal self with less embarrassment; to play with my ideas more freely; to bring warmth into my work; to focus on modest, everyday situations and nature as sources of imagery and to see my work as nourishing rather than mocking or hurtful. 53

This turn to personal expression and the free play of ideas, to a spirit of warmth and modesty, to a natural style that seeks to sustain and uplift rather than to outdo or defeat – why have philosophers been unable to
make such a turn?

What are these quirky characters and animals that Leunig draws all about? What does a picture of a teapot-wearing duck-riding man mean? Like Francis’ ravings, this is just stupid sentimentalism, childish and immature, even dangerous for a rational and intelligent person. Thus speaks the modern mind.

From an interview with Andrew Denton on the ABC show, “Enough Rope” (aired on May 8, 2006):

*Andrew Denton:* Now once more for the beginners, what was the duck about?

*Michael Leunig:* Well, I don’t know. I thought everybody would understand what a duck is about, and it’s just, there is the duck. And suddenly the whole nation seems perplexed about what does a duck mean? I think a nation is in trouble that cannot accept a duck.54

Out of touch with the world of nature, out of touch with themselves and their humanity, people must now be reminded of who they really are and where they really belong. Leunig therefore sees it as his duty to not so much point out the absurdities in contemporary social and political affairs, as may have been the duty of a cartoonist in days gone by, but to point out what is human. And as he notes, “it’s rather odd that I would have to do that, or feel compelled to do that. It’s as if I feel we’re losing our humanity all the time, and so you’ve got to keep trying to rescue bits of it to the extent you can, and that’s odd when you think about it.”55

Camus’ description of New York during a trip to the United States in 1946 – “the hundreds of thousands of high walls,” a “desert of iron and cement,” “a hideous, inhuman city”56 – brings to mind my first impressions of central Melbourne as I was being led by my father through the city streets as a seven or eight-year-old. I recall the feeling of being surrounded by enormous buildings that block out the sunlight, casting a gloomy, greyish haze around the thousands of pedestrians and cars. I can relate to Camus, then, when he writes in his journal: “Impression of being trapped in this city, that I could escape from the monoliths that surround me and run for hours without finding anything but new cement prisons, without the hope of a hill, a real tree, or a bewildered face…Terrible feeling of being abandoned. Even if I hugged all the beings of the world to my breast, I would remain unprotected.”57 (One of my recurrent dreams is exactly as Camus describes it: entrapment within the cement city walls.)
Michael Leunig presents a similar picture when describing his departure from his farm house, where he would feel rested and hopeful, to an inner-city hotel room in preparation for his television interview with Andrew Denton: “Soon I am funnelled away from my pastures of doddering wombats and installed in a cell in a concrete tower overlooking a Sydney expressway.” Later in the same article Leunig recounts how, immediately prior to the interview, he felt his memory “dismantled by expressways and sleepless nights in concrete towers.” Such dehumanising buildings are a regular feature of major cities, and even the outer-city suburbs – with their nameless neighbours, giant shopping malls, polluted roads and artificial lawns – are often inimical to a life of spirituality and reflection. Leunig summarised the matter perfectly when he said,

The city to me is developing problems which I can’t much deal with anymore. I feel too cramped and violated somehow when I see these great monuments to a kind of crass commercial greed. Life’s just becoming too hard in the city for me and for many others. I think we haven’t made our cities very well at all. I don’t think we know how to take care of ourselves as well as we perhaps once did.

A brilliant idea from Camus, which occurs to him upon entering his room at a small inn located “a thousand miles from everything”:

During a business trip a man arrives, without any preconceived idea, at a remote inn in the wilderness. And there, the silence of nature, the simplicity of the room, the remoteness of everything, make him decide to stay there permanently, to cut all ties with what had been his life and to send no news of himself to anyone.

The ascent continues, the long ascent of a wild, inaccessible mountain, at the summit of which, amidst cold, rain and snow, awaits God. (443-44)

“To increase by nothings.

Lightweight. Lightweight,” he said.

“What nothings are you talking about?” asked, one day, a disciple.

And the sage replied: “The mind sets its goal ever farther.
O vertiginous push upward; but what is up unless a perpetual denial of down?"

And he added: “Down here was nothing and up there is nothing – but between, light strains through.”

...I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.  
– Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Carrion Comfort”

at the summit  
of the holy mountain  
after sleepless nights and incessant struggles  
to transmute darkness into light  
Francis is consumed by fire  
Mount Alvernia is ablaze  
hands and feet bleeding profusely  
a deep open wound in his side  
gasping for breath  
crucified  
and resurrected  
at the same time  
for crucifixion and resurrection  
are one and the same (498-503)

Like Brother Leo, I too peer  
out of my window, feeling despondent and sad,  
and then notice a sparrow  
making its way towards me:

And it was you, Father Francis, it was you dressed as a tiny sparrow. (598)
NOTES


2 The novel was entitled in Greek *O ftohúlis tu Theú* (The Little Poor Man of God), and was published in Athens by Difros. Kazantzakis, however, had originally proposed the title, *Pax et Bonum*, this of course being a favourite expression of Francis’. Although the work was first released as a book in 1956, it had already been published in a series of instalments by the Athenian newspaper *Elefthería* from June 1954. The novel was translated into English by Peter Bien and the translation was published in 1962 as *Saint Francis* in the United States (by Simon and Schuster) and as *God’s Pauper* in Great Britain (by Cassirer). I prefer the title of ‘Poor Man of God’, as this is closer to the Greek original. Generally, I follow Peter Bien’s translation, and the in-text page references are to the 2005 Loyola Classics edition (published by Loyola Press in Chicago, with an introduction by well-known Catholic troubadour, John Michael Talbot). Occasionally, however, I depart from Bien’s rendition, particularly when a more literal translation has seemed preferable. The Greek text I rely upon is that published in Athens by Helen Kazantzakis in 1981.


4 I say ‘reignite’ as Kazantzakis had already fallen in love with Francis during visits to Assisi in the 1920s, though at that time he tended to view Francis through a political lens as “a great, idealistic communist” who recognised “that the source of every evil is private ownership and forbade…his disciples to have any property whatsoever, small or large” (quoted in Peter Bien, *Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit*, vol. 1, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p.82). Kazantzakis recounts his impressions of Assisi in *Report to Greco*, trans. Peter Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), pp.177-87, 374-82, and in *Journeying: Travels in Italy, Egypt, Sinai, Jerusalem and Cyprus*, trans. Themi Vasils and Theodora Vasils (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), pp.9-13 – the latter was written as a newspaper correspondent during a trip to Assisi in 1926 when Italy was under fascist rule. However, Kazantzakis’ earliest contact with the Franciscan tradition may have occurred during his brief stay (in 1897-1898) at a school run by Franciscan friars on the island of Naxos (see *Report to Greco*, pp.92-103), or even before that, during his upbringing in Crete, where Saint Francis was a popular object of devotion.


7 Quoted in Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters*, p.519. The material that Kazantzakis would have drawn upon in his novel would doubtlessly have included his very own translation, completed in 1943, of the biography of Francis written by the Danish poet and writer, Johannes Jorgensen. (Jorgensen’s biography was originally published in 1907, while Kazantzakis’ translation was published in 1951.) Kazantzakis describes an encounter with Jorgensen in Assisi in *Report to Greco*, pp.377-82.


12 See Lewis Owens, *Creative Destruction: Nikos Kazantzakis and the Literature of Responsibility* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), where the central theme in Kazantzakis’ later fiction is said to be “a dialectic of destruction and creation; a dialectic which, modelled on the process of Bergson’s *élan vital*, sees destruction as a necessary prerequisite for renewed creative activity” (pp.7-8).


15 Middleton, *Novel Theology*, p.45; see also pp.98-106, 151-61, 212-17. In resisting such a reduction to metaphysical first principles, Kazantzakis’ fiction has much in common with recent work in postmodern and postmetaphysical theology, as Middleton indicates in *Novel Theology*, pp.38-47, 192-98, and especially in his more recent *Broken Hallelujah: Nikos Kazantzakis and Christian Theology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), ch. 6, which includes a comparison between Kazantzakis and Caputo.


23 This is the title of a recent exhibition of Anselm Kiefer’s works at White Cube Gallery in London, 26 January – 17 March 2007. For the catalogue to this exhibition, see *Anselm Kiefer: Aperiatur Terra* (London: Jay Jopling/White Cube, 2007).


27 See, for example, the highly unsympathetic reading of *The Poor Man of God* in Morton P. Levitt, *The Cretan Glance: The World and Art of Nikos Kazantzakis* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1980), ch. 7, which describes the novel as “the least successful of Kazantzakis’ fictions” (p.142) owing largely to the presumed extreme, life-denying asceticism of its protagonist. A similar criticism is made by Knut Walf, “‘My’ Francis of Assisi?,” trans. David Smith, in Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristán (eds), *Francis of Assisi Today* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), pp.65-72, esp. pp.68-69.


31 This is not to deny that there are traces of male chauvinism in Francis or in Kazantzakis’ other works, but it is to reject as hyperbolic and unjustified Morton Levitt’s view that, of all the protagonists in Kazantzakis’ major novels, “Francis is probably the worst male chauvinist of them all, the one whose attitudes toward women are most unnatural” (*The Cretan Glance*, p.146).

32 James Lea concurs in seeing a progression in Kazantzakis’ political views from the defence in the 1920s of an amoral and violent approach where the end justifies the means to a position which places spiritual revolution above violent revolution and is expressed best in the novels of the 1940s and 50s. See James F. Lea,

This is the opening to Kazantzakis’ The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises, trans. Kimon Friar (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p.43. This was first published in Greek in 1927.

Peter Bien emphasises the dialectical relationship between the Buddhistic or nihilistic and the Bergsonian or life-affirmative elements in Kazantzakis’ Salvatores Dei and in his oeuvre more generally: see Bien, Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, vol. 1, pp.133-43.

Nikos Kazantzakis, “Six Letters of Nikos Kazantzakis to Max Tau” (in Greek, trans. Helen Kontiadis), Nea Estia 102 (Christmas 1977), p.308. This letter was dated 15 September 1951, and was originally written in German.

Quoted in Helen Kazantzakis, Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters, p.509. The novel Kazantzakis wrote after completing The Last Temptation was none other than The Poor Man of God (at least according to the chronology given in Peter Bien, Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, vol. 1, p.xiv).

Quoted in Helen Kazantzakis, Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters, p.549. A word of caution: unlike Middleton, I am not calling for a ‘rehabilitation’ of Kazantzakis as someone whose thought can be placed within “the permissible limits of Christian reflection”. Nevertheless, I think Middleton is correct to reject Bien’s ‘post-Christian’ interpretation of The Poor Man of God as embodying a purely immanent conception of deity, and to see the novel instead as working out a panentheistic view of God as transcendent-yet-immanent. See Middleton, Novel Theology, pp.113-117, 220-21, and for Bien’s most recent statement of his post-Christian interpretation of Francis, see his Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, vol. 2, pp.498-99.

Peter Bien takes freedom, and in particular the process by which freedom is obtained, to be the central theme of the novel. See Bien, Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, vol. 2, pp.454-56.


p.61.


59 Interview on “Compass”, ABC TV, 25 December 1997; transcript available

60 Edmond Jabès, Desire for a Beginning, Dread of One Single End, p.43.