# EXCURSIONS WITH KIERKEGAARD

## Others, Goods, Death, and Final Faith

Edward F. Mooney

BLOOMSBURY

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BLOOMSBURY
NEW YORK • LONDON • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

**Bloomsbury Academic**
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

175 Fifth Avenue
New York
NY 10010
USA

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

**www.bloomsbury.com**

First published 2013

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
Mooney, Edward F., 1941-
Excursions with Kierkegaard : others, goods, death, and final faith / Edward F. Mooney.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4411-9034-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-4411-4632-8 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Kierkegaard, Søren, 1813-1855. I. Title.
B4377.M655 2012
198'.9--dc23
2012022572

ISBN: 978-1-4411-2882-9

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN

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*I saw the world as the unimaginably layered thing it is, full of strange likenesses, but also impenetrable, available to comprehension in the merest flashes, if at all.*

SVEN BIRKERTS

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book is a solo. It's a pleasure here to name colleagues and friends who have helped these excursions along paths from passing thoughts to passages on the way to chapters – chapters then stopped, somewhat arbitrarily, I confess, midway in the arcs of their potential, their aspiration. Kierkegaard sets us on paths of unending thinking stopped only by the need to move on. One might, of course, have said more. And what one writes in excursions with him lives on after the walk is done and the pen, set aside.

Alastair Hannay, George Pattison, and Patrick Stokes gave unstinting attention, critical and encouraging, to these chapters separately and to the flow from one to the next. Some of their remarks immediately altered a step in a particular exposition or prompted a revised sequencing. Others were harder to assimilate into the body of the texts, and live on in footnote reminders of work to be faced later. I thank them for sympathetic insight into what I was doing, and for their helping hands. For encouragements and assistance great and small, I also thank, in particular, Tony Aumann, Dana Barnea, Jack Caputo, John Davenport, John Lippett, Gordon Marino, Rick Furtak, Haaris Naqvi, Tyler Roberts, Marcia Robinson, Anna Strelis, Joe Westfall, and Clark West. Of course, there are unnamed others to thank, as well. Their cumulative and singular support has memorably cheered the labor of this writing.

* *

The chapters that follow have evolved in bulk or in part from the following sources: I am happy to acknowledge their role in the genesis of this book.

"Kierkegaard on Self, Others, Goods, Final Faith", *The Graduate Faculty Journal of Philosophy*, Fall 2011.

"Kierkegaard's Mirrors: Interest, Self, and Moral Vision", *Kierkegaard Newsletter*, 56, Nov. 2010

"Style and Pseudonymity in Kierkegaard", *Oxford Handbook to Kierkegaard*, ed John Lippitt and George Pattison, Oxford, 2012.

"Transfigurations: The Mysterious Agency of Death," *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben, Indiana, 2011

"Hidden Inwardness as Interpersonal," *Why Kierkegaard Matters*, ed. Mark A. Jolley, Mercer University Press, 2010

"From the Garden of the Dead: Climacus on interpersonal inwardness", *Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide*, Rick Anthony Furtak (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 2010.

"What is a Kierkegaardian Author?", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 35, no 7, 2009

"Julia Kristeva: Tales of Horror and Love," *Kierkegaard and the Social Sciences*, ed. Jon Stewart, Ashgate, 2010

# AN INVITATION

Final goods, embraced for their goodness alone, not for what they otherwise achieve or buy, easily pass by unnoticed. One final good is the wonder of communicative mutuality, where shared words seem part of a couple's dance flowing flawlessly in ways that would seem, were we to notice, infinitely apt and pleasing. When this happens with colleagues or friends, with children or lovers, it marks an instant of faith not just as promise (we *do* strive to connect) but as harvest. It's not the shared achievement of a negotiated settlement or new piece of observational knowledge or interesting philosophical result, important as these may be, but rather a wedding of persons, words, and worlds, grounded experientially, radiating the sense that we belong to each other and belong to the world.[1]

Whether or not we find such mutuality in philosophy, we are happy to find it *somewhere* – perhaps in music, sport, companionship, love, or frolicking with pets. When he plays with his cat, Montaigne famously wonders whether his cat isn't just as much playing with *him*.[2] Of course, it is – in a wonderful rapport! Communicative rapport with my cat, when it happens, just *is* my cat's communicative rapport with me – a dance of hand and paw declaring indubitable reciprocal understanding. Yet Montaigne shares his thoughts in an age tilted toward skepticism and worry over connection. For an instant he plays with the voice of disconnection or difference (between human and other animals) and of doubt (about communicative connection). Yet in the long run, I'm sure, he lets himself marvel. He knows his cat plays with him, and reclines in that finality – we need nothing deeper.

It is subjectivities, face to face, hand to hand, voice to voice, eye to eye, that undergo and constitute moments of communicative mutuality. Kierkegaard defends subjectivity as a first-personal stance from which we meet others and the world and even

ourselves – insofar as we are issues, or marvels, to ourselves. To endorse the truth of subjectivity is to endorse the truth – the conviction – that to live is to assume such a first-personal stance. This is not the adolescent mantra that if I believe something then it's true, and that the opinions of others are superfluous. "Truth is subjectivity" claims a stance we assume as we meet the demands of the day, as we weigh in, now and again, on whatever we say, do, or feel. To be subjectively alert is to refuse being always on automatic pilot, to refuse conceding all authority for the way things go to the stream of social reality. Subjectivity needs continual affirmation for we habitually flee its fragile alertness to self in its openness to itself and to otherness.

Kierkegaard invites us to acclaim subjectivity-as-stance, and live out that stance in our own particular ways. Imagine the opposite. As Kierkegaard deploys the subjective/objective idiom, to live under the truth of objectivity would be to bury any personal urgency in the question how I should live or where it is, at the moment, I stand. It would be to attend dispassionately, mechanically, to the way anyone else in my position would live – and leave it at that. Objectively, professors live thus and so; therefore I fall into living thus and so. From another angle, to live under the lights of objectivity could mean to pursue only objective truths. Kierkegaard ridiculed these substitutes for living and knowing. We need something more intimate and heartfelt than just "doing what is (objectively) done," "doing what, in this milieu, one does," acting always "*comme il faut*," as one "must." We are certainly more than clerks collecting and sorting objective knowledge into academic or bureaucratic bins, awaiting distribution and consumption by anonymous others, or aligning facts with the latest theory, or just distributing theory itself.

We must take time – subjective time – to decide, one by one, minute by minute, how we will shape or receive or reject a life, in its many phases, down to its tiny temporal moments. "How should I live?" and "Am I what I seem to be?" are as inescapable as "What should I – or in fact do I – feel, right now?" For Kierkegaard as for Socrates, these are subjective questions, with answers that, so far as we form them, are also subjective. That doesn't mean they are mere fluff or opinion. On the contrary, they are the truths of our living and dying, moment-to-moment, decade-to-decade. They possess us as the convictions, the struts and beams, of a terribly vulnerable life that would be more so without them.

Our "essential truths," the distillate of our wrestles with claims on our heartfelt embrace, appear in our living them out. They answer to the insistent plea that we take our subjectivity as non-trivial, as truth, as truly valuable. My "essential truths" might be on the order of "Care for your family" or "I am, after all, a teacher!" – or "Care for the poor" or "I know, after all, I'm in love." These are truths to be endlessly explored and revised in the living of them, for although I may have deep convictions, I may still ask, who are my poor, how much care is enough to count as care, by what marks do I know I'm in love, am I sure I'm a teacher? These truths are demands that endlessly explore and challenge us, each "solitary individual," as Kierkegaard would say, one by one. They are truths of subjectivity.

*

Kierkegaard deploys various genres, some of which he invents, as frames to bring out truths that might properly matter for us. He varies the mood and tenor of his writing in the conviction that thinking close to experience, from the variety of angles that different genres of experience afford, will give us fresh looks. Sometimes he writes in the manner of a poet, at others, in the manner of a philosopher or religious thinker – often in a parody or burlesque of a pastor or professor or man-about-town. Varied styles carry varied pedagogical powers. Yet why do we need the fruits of his pedagogy? Why do we need his instruction?

Our deepest need, he holds, is for a personal sense in one's life of what matters (and what doesn't) – a sense we can believe in, stand by, pledge as our own. His different genres apply pressure towards recognition of the personal dimensions of experience and sense, and against cultural forces that subvert these dimensions: the imperium of science and technology, of instrumental thinking and careerist strategies, of consumerist hunger, celebrity gossip, entertainment distraction, and a politics of rancor and despair. These familiar forces promising connection with goods in fact disengage us from meaningful life. They fail to answer our need, Kierkegaard holds, and only *increase* the urgency for subjective attention to richer and deeper goods.

Writers in the tradition of what Stanley Bates calls "great moral philosophy" (Schopenhauer, Carlyle, or Nietzsche – not

to mention Plato and Kierkegaard) deserve the widest possible hearing.[3] Kierkegaard wrote before philosophy became an academic specialization with endlessly proliferating sub-fields. Whatever ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, social philosophy or political philosophy mean today, before specialization set in a century and a half ago, their meanings were skewed differently. The outcome is that Kierkegaard (and others) disappear from view for lack of a "place" in the current warren of sub-disciplinary philosophical apartments; and his fate is no better in the warrens of religious studies or of languages and literatures.

It is a telling curiosity that one of the best Kierkegaard commentators in the last decade writes from a department of sociology. Another fine commentator relies on his experience as a practicing psychotherapist (as well as a philosopher).[4] In an earlier decade, this would not have been a "curiosity." In the United States in the 1960s, one could read Rollo May, Eric Erikson, Carl Rogers, Martin Buber, or Eric Fromm without being a specialist in psychology or philosophy or literary studies. Each of these writers relies heavily on an understanding of Kierkegaard, and each is unabashed in venturing forward with him without concern for establishing credit as a full-time Kierkegaard scholar. I would praise them as non-specialists (though thank God for specialists, too).

In the chapters that follow I crisscross through landscapes that are at once literary, psychological, religious, and philosophical, each site of interest developed to call out for first-person response. Each prospect calls on readers to join, not through the compulsion of reason, but through the allure of invitation and promise. Like the poetry of Rilke or the prose of Melville, the essays of Montaigne, or travels of Thoreau, this writing becomes irresistible.

Kierkegaard has an uncanny ability to call his reader into question. This locates his impact in the peculiarities of my position and stance. If his aim is to agitate, then his aim is not primarily to argue for an abstract principle or a particular way of faith, but to make his reader disquiet regarding her own principles or faiths. We might say tentatively that he works from a position that is Christian and Socratic, Romantic and Ironic. He can be Poet or Philosopher, Preacher or Pundit, at a moment's notice, or all rolled into one. We should not anticipate his thought to be a well-organized system. It is thought on the move, changing, to be savored and wrestled with,

each reader monitoring her or his individual response, gaining something new or forgotten – then sharing it, perhaps, with others.

*

The excursions I include in these pages open on prospects that hang together as aspects of a continuous and varied landscape – not, say, as views of different cities in different parts of the world. What matters most is the almost visceral feel of the view, and the way it confirms or inspires us as viewers. We are walking with a sharp and often silent guide, not for insights that are poststructuralist or existentialist, continental or analytical or phenomenological, but for shared moments that have the power to startle or unsettle. Sometimes moments are strung into tableau or scenes. Aspects are evoked – they ring true – that's it! – at least for the moment. Then for longer stretches, we settle in to absorb. Thoreau or Montaigne write this way, Rousseau does in *Reveries*, and a stricken Gillian Rose does in *Love's Work*.[5]

We should not discount insight lodged in what Kelly Jolley calls "the considered experience of its author" (rather than exclusively in meticulous reasoning or argument). A writer gives out a prospect we're invited to share, all the while knowing that it is, in due time, "open to analysis and to disagreement."[6] Therein we encounter "experience as something to which we can be loyal, something to which we can rally, something that can obligate us, something that can be educated, … [experience] as accumulating, as having weight."[7] If the upcoming excursions lead us to memorable prospects caught in an ephemeral glance, this is as it should be, for starters. Kierkegaard's is not school philosophy, but it is none-the-less philosophy, artful and alluring.

The essays ahead feature particular themes: subjectivity, the maternal, faith as assurance, irony and self-deception, pseudonyms and the elusiveness of selfhood, genres from burlesque to analytical, the enigmas of authorship, how to think about death (… just as a start).

We move with the modulated stance of any "I" – open to any "you" or "it" – open to any "we" or "they," even to any other "me." The immeasurable importance of this subjective stance has been lost in the wake of ever-colonizing cognitive styles that groom the sciences and their allied technologies, styles that further

bureaucratic-administrative idioms that dismiss both commonplace sentiment and deep passion (something murky and dangerous) – that refuse instruction from the personal idiom that is a power of literature, philosophy, and the arts. Artistic, literary, or philosophical production and reception are relegated to the provinces of entertainment or pastimes. After all, there is no yardstick to measure the social or career benefits of loving Shakespeare or Wallace Stevens or wondering at the genius of Ella Fitzgerald, Basho, or Kierkegaard.[8] But why should there be?

These are final goods.

# Notes

1 See Cavell's words which mine echo here, Chapter 2, p. 28.

2 See Michel de Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, trans. M. A. Sreech (Penguin: 1988), p. 17.

3 See Stanley Bates, "Stanley Cavell and Ethics", *Stanley Cavell*, (ed.) Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: 2003), p. 39.

4 See Harvie Ferguson's *Melancholy and the Critique of Modernity: Søren Kierkegaard's Religious Psychology* (Routledge: 1994), and *Modernity and Subjectivity: Body, Soul, Spirit* (Virginia: 2000), and Jonathan Lear's *Happiness, Death and the Remainder of Life*, (Harvard: 2002), *Therapeutic Action*: *An Ernest Plea for Irony* (Other Press: 2003), and *A Case for Irony* (Harvard: 2011).

5 See Gillian Rose, *Love's Work, a Reckoning with Life* (New York Review Classics: 2011) and Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker,* trans. Peter France (Penguin: 1979).

6 See "A Philosophy of Considered Experience?" Quantum Est In Rebus Inane, January 12 kellydeanjolley; http://kellydeanjolley.com/2012/01/12/a-philosophy-of-considered-experience/

7 Ibid.

8 Stanley Fish has recently argued that the only justification for teaching literature, philosophy, and the arts is that professors find them pleasing. The argument is simple and cynical. Since there is no utilitarian justification (better jobs, better citizens), then the only alternative is imagine them as pursued only for private and sophisticated pleasure – as if, after we subtract utility, pleasure is the only remaining good: " … the humanities 'don't do anything,' if by

'do' is meant bring about effects in the world. And if they don't bring about effects in the world they cannot be justified except in relation to the pleasure they give to those who enjoy them. To the question 'of what use are the humanities?', the only honest answer is none whatsoever." "Will the Humanities Save Us?," *New York Times*, January 6, 2008.

# 1

# Subjectivity: Exposure, Care, and Response

For many, "Kierkegaard" is synonymous with a pair of catch phrases – words we think we understand but don't. There is the notorious "truth is subjectivity" and then the oft-cited reference to a "passionate leap of faith." Setting aside the popular confusions around "leaps of faith," what is Kierkegaard promoting under the heading of subjectivity? My aim here is to bring alive its proper grip and bite against the pressure of counterfeits, and to fill in some of the cultural contexts that have made subjectivity of any sort suspect. I try a retrieval of Kierkegaard's worthy notion, a sort of subjectivity to welcome in from the cold.

Kierkegaard's subjectivity is a variant of an ordinary subjectivity that may go unnamed but should be familiar in the back and forth exchanges between subjects, between persons, that ravels out the weave the everyday world. It does not exclude objectivity but enables it. It is because we expose ourselves to ongoing passionate exchange with others in a mutuality of subjectivity that we come to embrace objective truths and realities. As subjectivities in pursuit of what's real, we become initiated one by one into the protocols of objective reporting, of objective lab testing or measurement, and so on. It is only certain sorts of objectivity that Kierkegaard shuns, and only certain sorts of subjectivity that he pleads with us to embrace.[1]

For Kierkegaard subjectivity is prominent in faith or in ethical judgment but it is fully evident in less contested domains as well. It is present in ordinary life as an everyday background, silently entangled in a person's sense of agency and passivity in a nexus of relations to herself, others, and an environing world. It is caught up

in the daily stream of walking and hearing, cooking and dressing, paying bills and running for the bus. It is opening ourselves, exposing ourselves, to the endless realities, aspirations, and dreams of the everyday.

This sense of subjectivity should be distinguished from the idea of a judgment that is "merely subjective" – one that is defective. In this narrow use, "subjectivity" attaches to instances of error, miscue, and mere fantasy. It then marks a person's unfortunate distance from the real. But everyday subjectivity has a different and wider reach. It affords fortunate and flowing contact with the real.

# An overview

## Contact and immersion

Let's set textbook definitions and discussions aside and start afresh with an evocation of my immersions in life. Say I read a passage from Heidegger (a philosopher, as we know, who is harsh with specifically Cartesian subjectivity). After a difficult stint with *Being and Time*, I'll want to know where to shelve Heidegger's tome, whether to loan it, whether its call to resoluteness means staying in or out of politics – and of what stripe. Answering the phone, I won't mimic the text to chirp "Dasein here!" I'll think of myself as someone in this town, at this address, happy or unhappy within this family and this job, disgusted or delighted by this evening's news. There's nothing tendentious in my thinking of myself *as* a self, a "me," a subjectivity of some sort.

Perhaps at other moments I'll succumb to reverie. I'll picture myself walking with Dante, a soul mid-way in the journey of my life, lost in a dark wood. Or in less reverie, I'd think of myself as subject to the allure of philosophy and French cuisine and the crushing glory of Leontyne Price. Or perhaps I'd think of myself hard at work to become a successful writer. Long after the collapse of atomistic Cartesian subjectivity – an influential configuration to which I'll return – I'll think that Heidegger addresses me as a subjectivity in his writing, even as he avoids any picture of subjectivity as isolated, atomic consciousness – isolated from others, isolated from the world. I might find that he calls me (as a subject, from his subjectivity) to monitor technological imperialism. If I return the

favor, addressing him as a receptive subjectivity, I might tag him for avoiding his implication in political realities between the wars. Yet I'd also think of him as deeply, "subjectively" concerned with the roots of Greek culture and with Hölderlin's poems.

Subjectivity is an animated field already inhabited precisely by we who are openness to that field. Yet this reciprocal openness-to-otherness – an inestimably worthy subjectivity – gets occluded by cultural regimes that slide into taking the objective deliverances of science as all that's needed for the world (and ourselves) to be intelligible. Or such subjectivity is occluded by administrative, bureaucratic regimes that reduce selves or souls to numbers or exchangeable parts in economies of production or consumption. Or such openness gets blocked and denied by self-refuting "theory" – in disquisitions on the death of the author, of the human, of ethics, of philosophy, not to mention the long-heralded yet still lingering death of God.[2] Kierkegaard sets to revive lost subjectivity, and so sets out to mark limits to science and scholarship as sole paths to intelligibility of things human and personal, and to mark the error of living one's life swallowed by the human *en masse*, or by mindlessly consuming fashion, gossip, or shallow opinion. I'll bracket popular academic pronouncements of multiple deaths from the 1980s and beyond, pronouncements that have shifted recently to advocate anti-humanism.[3] Whatever the virtues of these fashionable academic trends, their object should be exposing bad theories of human existence, not a frontal attack on explorations of authorship, say, or of a self's agency or passivity at an experiential level. Why reduce persons, viable meanings and successful communications, to ghostly after-images that intellectual sophisticates urge us to set aside? As I see it, these suspicions of fraud at the root of subjectivity, whatever their kernel of insight, quickly approach over-kill. They become hyperbolic and theatrical, hiding essentials from view. Living uncritically with fashionable critique is, one needn't point out, uncritical.

Of course, there are real-enough fissures and enigmas at the edge of self- understanding, and of shared meanings and communications. In the pages that follow I return time and again, in a Kierkegaardian vein, to these enigmas and fissures. But the bare fact of anomalies in our understandings of authorship, writing, or death is no reason to jettison these realities, or to censor our talk of them: quite the contrary. The surfacing of anomalies ought in

many cases to trigger the question, how can we fruitfully live with such fracture or discordance? This is something quite other than discarding or scorning it.

There's no way (and no need) to banish pedestrian subjectivity – the idea that we are individuals who are responsive to each other, that we are subject to each other's help and hindrance, responsive to aesthetic, political, ethical, and personal invitations and demands. The challenge is to welcome ordinary subjectivity and to disable a specific Cartesian picture of knowledge and consciousness that distorts it. I take Kierkegaard's role to be a fierce critique of trends converging on the weakening or elimination of pedestrian subjectivity. To have a grip on Kierkegaard's sort of subjectivity is to acknowledge selves as caring, responsive participants in a field of reciprocal psychic and social exchange – all sorts of misfires included; it is to enter a vibrant space of conversions, of delight in marriages, of enjoyment in morning tea (sunlight streaming over the desk).

## Truth and subjectivity

Kierkegaard's improvisations on "subjectivity" will reappear from several angles in chapters ahead, but let me prepare the ground with these introductory strokes. To say that truth is subjectivity is to emphasize the worth and inescapability of personal immersion in life. The dictum is less an epistemological insight than a practical appeal, a plea that I turn away from those public distractions that take me to a no man's land of impersonal non-existence – a place of barely conscious despair. It is a plea to return to myself, to others, and to a world, a return that with luck will expose what matters to me – as I expose myself to *it*.

There is a mistaken view that subjectivity, passion, concern, and immersion will always mark misalignment and distortion in our effort to attain an accurate sense of what comes to pass. This denigration of passionate immersion or subjectivity is only reinforced by the imperatives of an administrative culture that closes down the intimate and personal. Front and center are institutional imperatives: career advancement, bureaucratic progress reports, preparation of tax returns, endless "objective," quantitative performance evaluations. Anything we'd call personal, intimate, or subjective gets buried under protocols of administration. What matters is not the pleasure I take in my kids but whether they

qualify for scholarships, not devotion to classical music but whether better "time management" will save the day. Intimate, subjective space then shrinks in importance. For Kierkegaard this loss is disastrous.

The region of non-institutionalized "privacy" diminishes as it comes under attack by the public and political. All that we hesitate to own as intimate or personal gets ceded to an institutionalized "public" space and style of critique and comprehension. My subjective "feel" for my world and convictions, and my attempts to communicate my intimate immersions, insofar as they lack admission to respected modes of public articulation, lie fallow or die. They resist the coin of the academic realm. The journalism of "true confessions" and intimate scandal, replace nuanced accounts of our complex embeddedness in an intimate social world. Rather than embrace our subjectivity in resistance, we collaborate in its silencing. Rather than trace out the lineaments of ordinary subjectivity and affect, or following Kierkegaard's ventures in this regard, we fall back on the safer ground of the "objective." The "objectivity" that Kierkegaard finds so ridiculous and dangerous is not the world of objective news or research. It is in part what he calls "the public," a transpersonal force that feeds on and reproduces for mass consumption reams of impersonal gossip and chatter, reminders of "what one must do" in one's objective roles, or under administrative edicts. To absorb without reserve the objectivities of disciplinary and professional pursuits buries our more personal, private selves – our spans of pedestrian subjectivity.[4]

Closer to home, a fragmented university, especially in its pre-professional programs, serves as an impersonal training school for assimilation into wider political and economic structures. Even in graduate programs in the humanities, the professoriate is self-replicating, producing new scholars to replace departing ones. The university takes pride in the production and distribution of objective knowledge of utility to outside institutions, or as often, of utility to other academic institutions. Professors write for other professors and deans in efforts to validate each other's merit for corporate advancement. All this has its legitimate purpose, but a cost is exacted if the intimate or personal is utterly suppressed. Excluded are central virtues of the humanities: cultivation of sensibilities, engagement in self-reflection and Socratic exploration,

and husbanding poetic expression. Practices of producing and consuming data, method, and theory leave out evocations of simple things of great depth or radiance we might otherwise encounter experientially, to our betterment: quietly bringing the intricacies of my specific immersions in life to bear on my reading and viewing and teaching, letting that reading, viewing, and teaching realign my desires (and aversions) and inviting students to feel how that realignment works. Under the restrictive prompts of a preemptive and all-consuming objectivity, my writing can't reveal what it's like to let a poem or a philosophical meditation look into my soul, and make it come alive, or blush in shame. Yet I know that a paragraph from Emily Dickinson or Kierkegaard takes my subjectivity in earnest: I can be swept away, and called up short.

Kierkegaard refused to embark on a university career in part because he wanted knowledge that would let him come alive, that would quicken his sense of the inescapably human, and of intimate self-recognition. He wanted knowledge that would key him to dimensions in his complicated, singular existence that *he* should attend to (alone, and with books). A tepid interest in tracing the objective footprints of world-historical figures – their texts, and the trails of their promoters and detractors, was not enough, and existentially, irrelevant. With regard to his readers – in particular, let's say, his regard for my reading – Kierkegaard prods me to set aside the objective world-historical and impersonal and take up with *my* subjectivity, even as I do this in tandem with a mentor: say, Socrates, Cervantes, Gillian Rose – or that marvelous writer, the immortal Johannes de silentio, who pens *Fear and Trembling*.

## Wounds of subjectivity

We can illuminate subjectivity by tracing its roots to Plato's account of Socrates, and pause with a new conception of Socratic irony. Kierkegaard loved Socrates, and averred, late in life, that his thinking was always as much Socratic as Christian.[5] He learns from Socrates how to keep subjectivity alive, and what is at stake in doing so. It will repay us to see Socrates as someone who values