Sheridan Hough, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector* Oxford University Press. 2015.

**Form and Faith in *Kierkegaard’s Dancing Tax Collector***

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**1. Form**

Most novels are narrated by someone other than their author. *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector* is not a novel, but it shares this feature. This marvelous book by Sheridan Hough has the same literary form as a novel narrated in the first person by a speaker who rarely discusses herself. Nearly all of the book is narrated by someone distinct from Hough with a similar (and informative) name: Sheridan Hough, Lover of the Tax Collector (hereafter SH-LTC). The only exception comes at the very end, in the "First and Last Explanation", which is narrated by Hough herself.

Hough and SH-LTC are related. Hough invented SH-LTC, as an author creates a fictional narrator.

SH-LTC exists only as a creature with a task. Her task is to show the reader the nature of Kierkegaardian faith. There is nothing more to SH-LTC than her explication of Kierkegaardian faith. Explication, for these purposes, is illumination using explanation plus whatever else may be needed to illuminate the matter at hand.

The Kierkegaardian variety of faith is something that has to be at least partly shown, not merely explained. That's because of its practical nature. It is a way of moving through the world. It's a practice.

How do you show a practice? You could instantiate yourself, by acting it out. So demonstration is a first option. You could also respond to someone else who acts it out, and in your response, bring the nature of the thing you are responding to more fully to light. This second option is dyadic. It is explicitly inter-subjective.

SH-LTC and her partner jointly illuminate Kierkegaardian faith. Her partner is the Kierkegaardian figure of the Dancing Tax Collector, a paragon of Kierkegaardian faith. SH-LTC's loving explication of him brings his faith into the light for us, her readers. And in bringing it to light we also witness her faith, one level up, in her apprehension of him through her loving engagement.

In one of the many moments of incidental poetry that grace this book of philosophy, SH-LTC describes the Nietzschean canon as "peopled with doubles who are fruitful only in the tandem of tension". Peopled with doubles. I don't think there is exactly a "tandem of tension" between SH-LTC and the dancing tax collector. But I see them as a kind of fruitful double. SH-LTC is a being who is purely, lovingly explicative.

Why does the book have this literary-philosophical form? Is it dispensable?

Couldn't Hough herself have done the explicating directly?

Not lovingly, no. One fictional character can love another. But love across the line of fiction and creator would be at best a simulacrum or a metaphor. Exactly why is this? We can admire a fictional character, or despise him, or worry what will happen to him next. But can we fall in love with him, as we would with someone who shares our spatio-temporal world? This seems highly doubtful. If someone told me they were in love with Anna Karenina I'd think they were nuts.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But what if Hough herself just left out the love part, and focused entirely on the rest of explication? Why does an illuminating response to Kierkegaardian faith have to be performed? The mere fact that it is a practical embodiment does not on its own answer this question. Philosophy and the human sciences have produced plenty of illuminating theories of sensory-motor embodiment and skilled actions, and these theories tell us a lot without having to be performed. They don’t have to show up as an interpretive or narrative dance, for example. Why is the practically oriented Kierkegaardian faith any different, if it is? Why couldn't mere explanation capture the phenomenon?

I think the answer is that for Kierkegaard, the faithful life is a practice of love. It can only be revealed in practice, it can't be fully revealed in explanation. To reveal faith, what's needed is for faith to be figured in the faithful. That's the role of the dancing tax collector, and it's also the role of SH-LTC in recognizing his practice. If the dancing tax collector were left unloved by SH-LTC, as he is in the universe of Kierkegaard's text, then God would recognize his faith. But in Hough's book, he is part of Hough's narrative device, on loan from Kierkegaard. For him to shine through to Hough's readers, he needs the light of SH-LTC. Someone is needed to love the knight of faith for him to become illuminated. That is the role of SH-LTC, the explicator.

But here another question arises for the authorial trio of Hough, SH-LTC, Kierkegaard.[[2]](#footnote-2) Doesn't love require silence? Don't the four of them all agree that it does, given how love simultaneously shapes the silently inward and the inter-subjective parts of existence? And yet it is logically impossible for SH-LTC to be silent. She literally exists only on the page, between the beautifully painted covers of this book.

I can think of two answers here. Perhaps they're both wrong, but if either is correct, it wouldn't stop the other from being correct as well.

Answer 1. SH-LTC actually has her own silences. They are evident in the many things about the dancing tax collector she doesn't say, but can be presumed to feel inwardly. Silences are not out of bounds for fictional characters - think of all the fictional jerks who forget their partner's birthdays and can't even remember their favorite type of jam!

Answer 2. SH-LTC is metaphysically dependent on Hough - as any fictional character is on the author.[[3]](#footnote-3) So the lover of the dancing tax collector is actually a metaphysical complex of Hough and SH-LTC, but in this explicative complex, SH-LTC does all the talking. Hough herself is silent. She speaks to us only in the part of the book she narrates, the First and Last Explanation, which is a meta-explanation of the explication of practical faith - not strictly part of the explication.

These considerations suggest to me that to reveal Kierkegaard's picture of faith, Hough was forced into creating SH-LTC. There was no way around it. The book is therefore not 'playful' or 'whimsical'. It has been called such things, but those adjectives at best are misleading.[[4]](#footnote-4) I'd go farther and say that such descriptions of the book are false. Playfulness or whimsy would be contingent guises under which Kierkegaard's serious picture of faith was presented. The feature of the book that elicits these descriptions is its structuring by an avowedly loving narrator distinct from Hough. And this feature is not dispensable. Given that its focus is the practical nature of Kierkegaardian faith, the book needs to have this structure to do full justice to its subject-matter.

**2. Faith**

Faith is practical, says SH-LTC. It is enacted. These characterizations rule out that faith is exhausted by a kind of belief. "Faith is a doing, and not a thought about what one does," she writes (p. 124).

But what kind of enactment is faith? It is depicted in two contexts: in the dancing tax collector’s joyful perception of the sublime in the pedestrian (9), and in the responses of those who have been held at the mercy of human horror. Just as we shouldn't characterize faith as a belief, we shouldn't characterize it as any other mental state, either. It is not an emotion per se - not even joy. It not a form of hope, and not a thought. Faith is a response to a situation that precedes it.

SH-LTC clears up one thing right away: even though the dancing tax collector is both joyful and an exemplar of faithful practice, joy is not a fitting response to horror, and Kierkegaard never said it was. (Or at least, he sometimes makes clear that he knows it isn't).[[5]](#footnote-5)

So what is it to respond faithfully to catastrophe? "It is often heard from those who have endured terrible trauma and loss: objectively it was impossible to survive but 'somehow' that person managed to keep going," SH-LTC writes, in emphasizing that the status as faithful is found in the subjective realm. (125).

Is merely enduring human horror by "putting one foot in front of the other" sufficient for faith? If it is, then anyone who survives catastrophe (resisting any urge to end their own existence) thereby moves faithfully through it. On this picture, however awful the loss might be, so long as you don't hurl yourself into eternity, you are faithful. There are then a great many faithful who may not recognize themselves as such - even if the rest of the time, they are colorless and bland, and would never dance to the scurry of rats.

SH-LTC rejects this picture. Faith requires more. When people say that somehow they managed to carry on, "their reports can sound like numb endurance", whereas "faith", says SH-LTC, "is inherently joyful." (125). But if you can't fittingly feel joy in response to catastrophe, how can you move faithfully through it?

I think SH-LTC’s main concern may be mainly with the relationship between forging a self (an “achievement” that there’s no guarantee of completing) and the disposition to respond joyfully to non-catastrophe. Is that point of focus different from an attempt to analyze faith per se, in a way that would clarify how moving faithfully can be “intrinsically joyful”, if it is possible to move faithfully through catastrophe. In that context, does faith require joy? If so, what kind?

As I read it, SH-LTC has an answer to this question to offer us, even if answering it is not the main item on her agenda. Whether you move faithfully through catastrophe depends not on how you respond to the catastrophe, but on how you are disposed to respond the abundance of non-catastrophic things. In the throes of misery, I may find it hard to keep in view the fact that anything can be joyful - let alone that plain bread can be as joyful as stew. I may in the moment lack epistemic flexibility: rats will scurry by but leave me numb, I will not even be disgusted, and I will definitely not stop to smell the jasmine. Even though I love jasmine. Grief will put me in a stupor.

But for all my stupor, I might still be *disposed* to find the sublime in the pedestrian. My disposition is a bit harder to activate in grief, but that's to be expected. It will come back. So long as the fact remains that it will come back, I count as having the confidence that "every good and every perfect gift is from above". And if I lose the disposition, then in losing it I have lost faith as well.

But suppose I don’t lose faith, because I stay disposed to find joy in non-catastrophic things. I might have this crucial disposition, while not knowing whether or not I have it. (In tense misery, I might ask myself if the world will ever seem charming again). I might even consciously doubt that I have it. But for all that, I might be more confident than I realize I am. That's because Kierkegaardian confidence, as SH-LTC explicates it, is not a felt attitude. It's a disposition to enact the joyful responses to non-catastrophic things.

The enactive analysis of confidence entails that you can have introspective errors: you might actually *be* confident in the sense that matters for practical faith, without *feeling* confident, and without believing you are. (Compare the nervous but studious person who gets all the answers right on an exam because she studied hard, yet feels uncertain when producing them. She is enactively confident, but phenomenally under-confident).

"Faith is inherently joyful", writes SH-LTC. As I interpret it, this remark means that while faithfully facing non-catastrophic things is joyful, faithfully moving through catastrophe requires only the disposition to react with joy to non-catastrophic things. Endurance may be both numb and faithful, or it may be numb and faithless. Whether it is faithful depends on how you're disposed to react in other situations.

This interpretation of "faith is inherently joyful" respects the fact that when the dancing tax collector dreams of stew, joy is not a contingent part of his response. Remove his joy and pleasure, and you'd have a different kind of character - possibly someone innocuous, colorless and bland, or maybe a bit melancholic. This subtracted character could still have other charms, as people usually do. But SH-LTC, as the designated illuminator of faith, is keyed into the dancing tax collector’s affability. This is what she loves about him: he'd dance to the scurry of the rats! He finds everything intrinsically pleasing, because for him life is immediately abundant and satisfying (14).

Is there, then, a generalization that captures both the joy and lightness of the dancing tax collector, and the faithful responses of those facing catastrophe? What makes these two illustrations of practical faith instances of the same thing? The responses have little in common, other than that they are both fitting responses to the situation at hand. But if the subject who manifests them has an underlying disposition that she retains in catastrophe, even though the disposition is not manifested in those cases, then these reactions are both manifestations of faith. On this picture, what unifies the joyful and non-joyful faithful movements is a disposition to find the abundance of gifts intrinsically pleasing, when the gifts are not occluded in the hall of human horrors. Bullets and bouquets need not be met with the same affect - only with the same underlying disposition to take joy in the bouquet.

I’ve focused on the idea that a person could retain a disposition to find the sublime in the pedestrian, and that such a disposition would make it the case that they move faithfully through catastrophe. Faith could then be inherently joyful. This picture assumes that it is possible to move through catastrophe faithfully. It treats faithfulness in the way Aristotle treated character traits: as habitual responses that a person manifests across a wide range of circumstances.

On an alternative picture, faith doesn’t consist in a disposition to respond joyfully to non-catastrophic things, and it isn’t possible to remain faithful in the face of catastrophe. The only thing to do in the face of catastrophe is lose faith, because that is what the situation calls for. The question about a person facing catastrophe – which may be all of us, if we face the catastrophes that surround us – is not whether they are faithful across a wide range of circumstance, in the way a kind person is kind to many different people in a host of different situations. But whether their situation allows them to find respite from catastrophe. And that may be in part a matter of a different disposition: the disposition to picture how the world could be, if it wasn’t in the throes of catastrophe.[[6]](#footnote-6)\*

**Works cited**

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1. The limitation on love here may come from the fact that it would be an inter-personal relationship, not from the nature of love relations per se. Nehamas (2007) discusses the possibility of falling in love with art as such, but that seems different from bearing such a relation or attitude toward fictional characters, if you are not one yourself. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Is it a trio, or a tetrad if we include Johannes de Silentio? “Johannes de Silentio” is the pseudonym under which Kierkegaard published *Fear and Trembling*. If we take the pseudonym to introduce a narrator distinct from the author, then the structure of *Fear and Trembling* mirrors the structure of *Kierkegaard’s Dancing Tax Collector*, and we will have a tetrad rather than a trio. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Compare A. Thomasson (1999) on fictional characters as artifacts of authors. *Fiction and Metaphysics*. Cambridge University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nowachek (2017) and Krischek (2016) call the book “playful”, and Kirschek adds: “Hough consciously echoes Kierkegaard's literary devices and idiosyncratic formulations. This attests the author's literary talent, but may sometimes give the impression that rather than serving to advance the discussed ideas, the style itself is in the spotlight.” In discussing the formal feature, Edwards (2018) says “One wonders if it is mere icing”. As I see it, these responses miss the substantive point of the form, by overlooking its substantive relationship to the practical nature of Kierkegaardian faith as both SH and SH-LTC’s understand it. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. p. 120. From Upbuilding Discourses: "We are not saying that their wrong thereby ceased to be wrong - what would be the use of such pernicious and foolish talk" [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. \* I thank Sheridan Hough for truly illuminating discussion, and most of all for writing such an important, buoyant, fruitful and insightful piece of philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)