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Richard Haslam

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- 1 Many reviewers of *Walking the Dog* (1994), Bernard MacLaverty's fourth short-story collection, were captivated by the title-story, whose ten fast-paced pages depict a man's abduction and interrogation. The narrative is set on the outskirts of Belfast, at an unspecified point during the Northern Irish "Troubles," which flared up in the late 1960's and persisted until the start of an uneasy peace process in the late 1990's. The two abductors pretend to belong to the Provisional IRA, the Irish republican paramilitary organization, in order to trick the protagonist into declaring himself a Catholic. As we later discover, they are actually loyalist paramilitaries, who wish to assassinate Catholics. However, the captive hinders his captors—declaring that he is neither Catholic nor Protestant and eluding various ruses to make him reveal his allegiances. After the man unexpectedly denounces the IRA, his abductors release him, believing that he must be Protestant and unionist. At the conclusion, we learn that the ordeal has taken only ten minutes, about as long as it takes to read the story, and this correlation between event-time and reading-time contributes significantly to the resonance of the narrative.
- 2 In addition to praise, the story has provoked disagreement about crucial plot elements. For example, several reviewers mistakenly identified the abductors as members of the IRA.<sup>1</sup> However, questions concerning what the protagonist conceals from his abductors and what the author conceals from his readers have created a more complex discrepancy in readings. The following essay traces this critical divergence through the lens of rhetorical hermeneutics, which Steven Mailloux defines as "a version of cultural rhetoric studies that focuses on the tropes, arguments, and narratives constituting the interpretations of texts at specific times and places" (41). In addition, this analysis of the antithetical readings of "Walking the Dog" contributes to the debate about the particular properties of the short-story form.

## AN UNACCEPTABLE GENUS

- 3 “What’s your name?” the captive is asked, but his reluctant self-identification obstructs the abductors, since “John Shields” is not a denominationally distinctive name, and it also obstructs the reader, who has no access (at this moment) to the protagonist’s consciousness and therefore does not know whether the man has spoken truly or seized the “shield” of a neutral-sounding alias (6). Nonetheless, a page later, the story’s third-person narrator begins to call the protagonist “John.” Because John claims he has no middle or “Confirmation name” and refuses to identify his former school, he is pistol-whipped by the gunman, who poses a question central to the later critical debate: “Are you a Protestant or a Roman Catholic?” (6-7). After further prevarication, John states that he is “nothing” (7). The paramilitaries regard this as an unacceptable genus and demand that John recite the alphabet. The narrator comments that “John knew the myth that Protestants and Catholics, because of separate schooling, pronounced the eight letter of the alphabet differently...[b]ut he couldn’t remember who said which” (8). Thus, John supplies both pronunciations—“aitch, haitch”—once again angering his captors and risking further assault (8). The paramilitaries’ final test is to solicit John’s opinion of the IRA. Because the narrative occasionally provides access to John’s thoughts, we know that he believes his abductors’ lie about belonging to the IRA: “They’d be heading for the Falls. Some Republican safe house” (7). Thus, when he announces his hatred of “the Provos,” John knowingly puts his life in peril (10). Yet, ironically, his declaration guarantees his release, since it confirms the paramilitaries’ assumption that John is a Protestant “nothing.”
- 4 Michael Storey claims that John is “[n]ot at all certain” the paramilitaries are from the IRA and that he is “fearful that they might [...] be Protestant extremists [...]” (*Representing* 222). According to Storey, this is why John “thwarts” their interrogation (222). However, as noted above, MacLaverty clearly shows that John believes the paramilitaries are “Republican” (*Walking* 7).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Storey observes insightfully that by the story’s conclusion readers “know nothing of” John’s real “identity”: “We do not know whether he is Catholic or Protestant, nationalist or unionist, or if what he suggests is true—that he has no sectarian affiliation” (*Representing* 223). As Storey states, we cannot even be sure about his name, since the narrator refers to the protagonist as “he” for the first four pages and only switches to “John” a page after the protagonist has supplied that name (223). (The narrator’s first use of “John” also connects the protagonist to pretence: “John pretended to concentrate on the back of his neck” [*Walking* 7].) In addition, Storey fruitfully analyzes John’s initial rejection of denominational labeling: “I’m...I don’t believe in any of that crap. I suppose I’m nothing” (*Walking* 7). According to Storey, “[t]he ellipsis marks in the text indicate a careful hesitation in an effort to say the right thing but perhaps also imply a repudiation of whichever tradition he has belonged to, while the word ‘nothing’ reverberates with multiple meanings including the idea that he now claims to be a kind of cultural and sectarian non-entity” (224). Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that Storey’s interpretation is connected to his choice of “Walking” as the final text for his book-length study of a century’s worth of Irish short fiction representing political violence; he thereby grants the story an iconic role for his overall critical narrative: “MacLaverty’s protagonist may very well now be a man with no cultural identity. But he may also be the future citizen of Northern Ireland—in which case, and in a kind of

perverse irony, the Troubles might expire for a lack of sectarian identity in the citizens" (224).<sup>3</sup>

- 5 In his book-length study of MacLaverty's fiction, Richard Rankin Russell challenges Storey's reading, asserting that "Shields is clearly Protestant at least in heritage, but so unattached from a cultural or religious community as to be a bland cipher... [or] 'nothing'" (87). Russell does not explain why he believes that Shields has a "clearly Protestant...heritage," but he may be swayed by the paramilitaries' response to John's claim that he works as an "E.O." in "the Gas Board": "There's not too many Fenians in the Gas Board...If there are any they're not E.O. class" (*Walking* 9). Nevertheless, readers do not know whether John actually works there, any more than they know whether his name is actually John. This is due to MacLaverty's deliberate decision to restrict access to his protagonist's consciousness. And, just as Storey's larger critical narrative may have shaped the contours of his interpretation, so too with Russell: in the introduction to his book, he argues that "Walking" and two earlier stories by MacLaverty, "A Happy Birthday" and "Some Surrender," form a group, in which "Protestant characters are portrayed as geographically and psychologically marginalized in Belfast" (23).

## WATCHING THE DETECTIVES

- 6 In adjudicating these opposing interpretations, we may find it helpful to consult other commentators, including the author. In an interview, MacLaverty revealed that "Walking" originated in a neighbor's experience "in the early 1970s," but the account he heard "so terrified" him that he "didn't write it down" ("Writer's Corner" 45):
- Many years later it had still niggled with me. I wondered what ever happened to the dog. A kind of crazy piece of logic like that is what led me into writing that story to answer that question. If you're kidnapped, does the dog run away or does it bark or does it try and bite them or does it come into the car? And then the dog took on a bigger value—it's there as a presence, and you're afraid for the dog as well. Are they going to shoot the dog? That helps build the tension. ("Writer's Corner" 45-6)<sup>4</sup>
- 7 In a different interview, MacLaverty categorizes the "aitch-haitch" test as a "shibboleth" (McGinty).<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, he claims he cannot remember which denomination is supposed to use which pronunciation (Ross). When the interviewer points out that "A Silent Retreat," another story from *Walking*, solves the puzzle (*haitch* for Catholics, *aitch* for Protestants), "MacLaverty pushes aside his mineral water to study this passage of his own prose with apparent surprise. 'Oh! Yes, I suppose that's the answer'" (Ross). The interviewer's phrase "apparent surprise" implies a suspicion that MacLaverty—much like John Shields—is reluctant to give too much away under questioning.<sup>6</sup>
- 8 However, although MacLaverty's observations provide insight into the story's technical and thematic development, they do little to resolve the conflict between Storey's and Russell's interpretations. Other readers have taken stances similar to that of either Russell (we can determine John's background) or Storey (we cannot). For example, Denis Donoghue gravitates towards the first stance, claiming that the protagonist is "some sort of Protestant or no-religion-at-all," since John Shields is "not a Catholic name if my recollection of years in the North is accurate" (47). Similarly, Marianne Elliott parenthetically describes the protagonist as "apparently Protestant"; nevertheless, as with Russell, she does not explain her reasons for this judgment (438).<sup>7</sup>

Contrariwise, Michael Molino argues that “[l]ike the loyalist interrogators, the reader never learns the man's identity, but the reader does experience his terror.” And, in his essay-length examination of “Walking,” Jerzy Jarniewicz also takes the position that John's identity is indeterminate. Through MacLaverty's technique of “cognitive parallelism,” Jarniewicz argues, “[t]he protagonist's experience is [...] not reported, but mirrored in our experience of reading the story: his cognitive recognitions and misapprehensions run parallel to our recognitions and misreading of the details of the narrative” (499). As a result, “John's uncertainty: finding himself in a world without center, with no points of reference, immersed in the darkness of the night, and furthermore being forced to keep his head down and eyes closed, is also the uncertainty of the readers of the story [...] His desperate search for meaning will also be our search” (501).

- 9 In support of his argument, Jarniewicz astutely highlights one of the story's moments of access (via free indirect discourse) to the protagonist's consciousness: “...he saw a Juicy Fruit chewing-gum paper under the driver's seat. What was he playing the detective for? The car would be stolen anyway” (*Walking* 6; Jarniewicz 502). As Jarniewicz notes, the reader too must “reconstruct the story from the random multitude of details and collected evidence, bringing to mind detective work” (502). Like Storey, Jarniewicz recognizes that among the story's “key uncertainties” is the main character's “identity” (503). Readers do not know his real name, type or place of employment, “age, physical appearance, family, or background,” nor whether he is “someone who wants to stay outside the conflict, refusing to be categorized in terms of either of the two camps,” or “a man who has erased his identity...” (504). Nonetheless, like Storey, Jarniewicz mistakenly suggests that John might have “well-grounded suspicions that the terrorists” are concealing their identity, a possibility that (as noted) John's thoughts rule out (Jarniewicz 504; *Walking* 7).
- 10 Despite claiming erroneously that the protagonist suspects the abductors might not be IRA members, Jarniewicz and Storey do establish that John chooses his words circumspectly: his “long silences” and “slow responses” suggest that he is “calculating carefully his answers, so as to avoid any traps that might have been set against him” (Jarniewicz 504). However, both critics omit the story's most dramatic event, which occurs after the paramilitaries (still masquerading as IRA men) ask John for the second time “what he thinks of us” (9). The narrator states that “John cleared his throat—his voice was trembling” (10). Since he believes his captors are from the IRA, John's reply is extraordinarily brave (or foolish): “I hate the Provos. I hate everything you stand for.’ There was a pause. ‘And I hate you for doing this to me’” (10). In a moment of intense situational irony, the loyalist gunman responds, “Spoken like a man,” and the driver remarks, “He's no more a Fenian than I am” (10).
- 11 Given his earlier caution, why does John now risk his life? Since Storey and Jarniewicz overlook the incident, they ignore this question; Russell mentions the incident but not the question it raises (86). John's voice is “trembling”—he knows the risk, but his revulsion for the Provos seems to overwhelm his sense of self-preservation. Although we do not know much about him, we know at least what he thinks of this organization. Concurrently, the narrative censures the loyalist paramilitary groups represented by the abductors. Such combined critique occurs in other stories by MacLaverty, like “On the Roundabout,” from *Matters of Life and Death* (2006), which juxtaposes an incident of loyalist violence with a reference to Bloody Friday, the IRA's series of coordinated

- explosions on 21 July 1972 that killed 9 people and wounded 130. So too, in “A Trusted Neighbour” (also from *Matters*), the retrospective account of a malicious unionist policeman is framed by images of a young girl wounded in a more recent IRA explosion.
- 12 However, the story that best elucidates John’s outburst and the story’s associated hermeneutic puzzles is “The Daily Woman,” from MacLaverty’s *A Time to Dance* (1982). Fleeing from her republican husband’s physical abuse and her unionist employer’s sexual harassment, Liz ends up having dinner in a Belfast hotel with a visiting American journalist, who is reporting on the political conflict. Asked “which side” she is “on,” Liz replies that she is “sort of in the middle”: “Well I was born nothing—but a Protestant nothing and I married a Catholic nothing and so I’m now a mixture of nothing. I hate the whole thing. I couldn’t give a damn” (*Time* 114). Undergoing questioning, exasperated with the conflict, experiencing abuse from partisans, and identifying herself as “a mixture of nothing”—in many ways, Liz prefigures John.
- 13 Nevertheless, the characters and the narratives do differ. For example, Liz’s questioner is considerably more sympathetic than the gunman. And, unlike “Walking the Dog,” “The Daily Woman” ends with its protagonist anticipating further violence. In the last sentence, Liz falls asleep, trying “to forget the fact that” her husband “for the loss of her weekly wage, would kill her when he got her home—if not before” (118). The most significant difference is that Liz welcomes the reporter’s questions, and her answers help us to better understand her character. Why, in contrast, does MacLaverty repeatedly withhold access to John’s consciousness? Here, Jarniewicz’s concept of “cognitive parallelism” (499) is especially helpful: by placing the reader partly in the interrogators’ position, MacLaverty prompts us to consider what we share not only with the captive but also the captors. Do we, too, desire to label the protagonist? <sup>8</sup>
- 14 The self-reflexive dimension in “Walking” becomes more noticeable when we recall the miniatures that border the text. “On the Art of the Short Story,” which opens the collection, contains only two sentences: “This is a story with a trick beginning.’ Your man put down his pen and considered the possibility that if he left this as the only sentence then his story would also have a trick ending” (*Walking* 1). In “The Voyeur,” which follows “Walking,” “your man” uses the pretence of nighttime jogging to spy upon people in the act of reading and writing: “To see the reader or the writer interrupted—for the man or woman to be absorbed in what they’re doing and be disturbed by their partner or spouse or friend—that, for him, is something special” (13). *Walking* contains ten of these micro-narratives, interspersed among nine short stories of more traditional length. Through the persona of “your man,” they archly explore literary conventions and apprehensions, including pseudonyms, censorship, stories within stories, titles without stories, writer’s block, and anxiety about both critics and correct punctuation placement. MacLaverty describes these pieces as “something comic” to counterpoint the “bleak stories,” a “playing about with technique and the life of the writer” (Ladrón 204-5). Thus, the fact that these miniatures highlight ludic and self-reflexive possibilities within “Walking the Dog” gives greater force to the position taken by Storey, Molino, and Jarniewicz, who argue for the protagonist’s indeterminate identity.

## A SUPERCHARGED PRESSURE

- 15 “On the Art of the Short Story” shows that MacLaverty is intrigued by questions about this literary form. How short can a short story be—so short that its opening sentence is also its closing one? How much knowledge of short-story conventions (“a trick ending”) can authors presume readers have, in order to surprise them with convention reversals (“a trick beginning”)? And what is the relationship between the inner story of the first sentence of “On the Art...,” phrased in the indicative mood and enclosed in quotation marks, and the framing story of its second (and last) sentence, phrased in the subjunctive mood and without quotation marks? The relationship between “On the Art...” and “Walking” presents other puzzles. Is “Walking” another “trick” story, with a protagonist more mysterious than “your man”? The relationship between “Walking” and “The Voyeur” raises a further conundrum—do the former’s hermeneutic riddles stage an “interruption” of the reader’s experience similar to that depicted in the latter?
- 16 Through “On the Art...” and the other miniatures, MacLaverty provokes such questions, encouraging us to locate “Walking” within debates about the short story’s distinctive qualities.<sup>9</sup> Charles May argues that “[i]n their very shortness, short stories have remained close to the original source of narrative in myth, folktale, fable, and fairy tale” (xxvi). This directs us to the gunman’s threat, as he releases John: “Listen to me. Careful. It’s like in the fairytale. If you look at us you’re dead” (*Walking* 10). May also argues that the short story’s mythical origins connect it with “the original religious nature of narrative” (xxvi). This claim harmonizes with Jarniewicz’s observation that the gunman’s opening query “Who are you?”—which the protagonist finds himself “incapable of answering”—has “philosophical echoes” (*Walking* 5-6; Jarniewicz 503). However, May’s claim that “the tradition of the short story as descended from myth, folktale, fable, and romance forms, drives it toward focusing on eternal values rather than temporal ones and sacred/unconscious reality rather than profane/everyday reality” is less persuasive, not only with respect to “Walking the Dog” but to most of MacLaverty’s fiction (xviii). In her study of the Irish short story, Heather Ingman disagrees with May, arguing that “[a] historical survey allows us to see that while in Ireland this definition may hold true for writers of the Irish Literary Revival and for some contemporary writers such as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Angela Bourke, it does not suit the mimetic fictional worlds of mid twentieth-century Irish writers like Frank O’Connor, Seán O’Faoláin and Michael McLaverty” (8). Nevertheless, Ingman accepts May’s claim that short stories “focus on basic desires, dreams, anxieties, and fears...and are more patterned and aesthetically unified than novels are” (May xxvi). According to Ingman, May’s “characterization of the short story as an intuitive form dealing with the subconscious, operating through dreams and metaphor, foregrounding style and rejecting chronology in favour of artistic patterning, suggests an alliance with modernism,” of the type exemplified in James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and developed subsequently in the work of John McGahern and William Trevor (8).
- 17 Drawing on these critics, we can recognize that “Walking” creates a “mimetic fictional world...” that is also “patterned and aesthetically unified,” one that is simultaneously mythical, existential, and quotidian (Ingman 8; May xxvi). MacLaverty alludes to such simultaneity in his claim that fiction provides “a way of telling the truth”:

One day when I was teaching I tried to come up with a definition for fiction. It was a class of third year [students] and this wee girl said: “Sir, sir, it’s made-up truth,”

and I thought that was just the best definition of fiction I had heard. But the final product must have the possibility of being true. And yet into that truth and that very specific story you must in some way conceal the universal. (McGinty)

18 Upon such combinations of the “specific” and “universal,” the concision of a short story like “Walking the Dog” exerts a supercharged pressure.

19 The issue of duration highlights another critical convergence—the continuing relevance of Edgar Allan Poe’s definition of short fiction (May xvi, xxiii; Ingman 6-7). According to Poe, “the short prose narrative requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal,” unlike a lengthy novel, permits “the author...to carry out the fullness of his intention” and so achieve “the true unity” of “a certain unique or single effect,” one that draws its “immense force” from its “totality” (61). Poe recommends that “[i]n the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one preestablished design” (61):

...[B]y such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed: and this is an end unattainable by the novel. (61)

20 MacLaverty describes the author-reader relationship in terms similar to Poe’s “kindred art”:

You build up narratives to be convincing and acceptable to the reader. Initially you the writer visualises and writes it down in words [sic], and then the reader comes along and reads the words and then visualises what you’ve written. It’s like converting it back, but it never really ends up in the same place. It’s an approximation. (Fernandes)

21 However, Poe warns that “a poem too brief” or a story of “[u]ndue brevity” might “produce a vivid, but never an intense or enduring impression” (60-1). The ten pages of “Walking the Dog” approach but do not cross the boundary of unproductive concision. In fact, as noted earlier, the synchronicity between event-time and reading-time augments the story’s “intense” and “enduring impression.”

22 In addition, May’s reworking of Poe’s insights into a modern theoretical idiom is highly relevant for an understanding of the “unity of effect” in “Walking”:

...[T]he process of deriving systematic texts from narrative texts—that is, meaning from a mere series of events—involves stripping away the irrelevant and moving more and more towards compression, thus focusing on the obsessive core of the story. It follows that the primary way that short stories “mean” anything is to become more and more compressed, more and more restricted only to those details that are relevant to the systematic theme or purpose underlying the narrative. (xxii)

23 MacLaverty similarly emphasizes the importance of including only “significant detail... the kernel of the thing” (Fernandes). He also acknowledges the relevance of Poe’s poetics:

[MacLaverty] But somehow a short story might be defined as something that you can sit down and read in one go. It might take you three hours.

[Interviewer] The famous Poe formula: “To be read in one sitting.”

[MacLaverty] Oh yes.... (Ganter 317)

24 In the same interview, MacLaverty cites another short story theorist (and practitioner)—Frank O’Connor (Ganter 317). Explaining his concept of “submerged population groups,” O’Connor states that the “population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation,” whether it “be Gogol’s officials, Turgenev’s



serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, [or] Sherwood Anderson's provincials, always dreaming of escape" (18, 20). According to O'Connor, "[a]lways in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo—Christ, Socrates, Moses" (19). Thus, he argues, "there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness" (19).

- 25 Linking onto O'Connor, MacLaverty remarks, "Somehow the novel deals with people in society, but there are outsiders in the short story" (Ganter 317). MacLaverty's short stories repeatedly foreground these "outsiders": in "Between Two Shores," "Hugo," and "A Present for Christmas" (Secrets [1977]); in "My Dear Palestrina" and "Eels" (*A Time to Dance*); in "In Bed" and "Just Visiting" (*Walking the Dog*); in "The Assessment" and "Up the Coast" (*Matters of Life and Death*); and in almost every story in *The Great Profundo* (1987).<sup>10</sup>
- 26 The protagonists of "The Daily Woman" and "Walking the Dog" are outsiders too. Yet, their rejection of tribalism risks being misunderstood. Referring to John, Richard Russell argues that "MacLaverty surely does not valorize characters that are utterly solipsistic and so completely detached from community" (87). However, MacLaverty does celebrate a very particular "submerged population group"—the "nothings" who defiantly reject the lethal reductiveness practiced by some of the "somethings." This is the explanation for John's courageous denunciation of his abductors and interrogators (whom he believes to be the IRA). And, through the concentrating structure of the short story form, MacLaverty evokes "a kindred art" that subtly draws readers into acknowledging our own inquisitional impulses.

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## NOTES

1. MacLavery has mentioned these misreadings, although without supplying any names (Ganter 313). For examples of erroneous readings, see Burton, Hutchison, Ross, Saddler, Selway, Wormald, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review's* anonymous reviewer ("Notes..."). The latter two are also noted by Russell (87, 156).
2. In his review of *Walking*, Philip Marchand also claims erroneously that "the hero knows... [the abductors] could be Loyalists pretending to be IRA in order to trap potential Catholics" (my emphasis).
3. Storey also foregrounds the story's iconic potential in his review of *Walking* (528) and a subsequent essay ("Postcolonialism..." 77).
4. In Ganter (313), MacLavery provides a similar account of the story's origins.
5. On the origins of "shibboleth" in the Book of Judges (12. 5-6) and its relevance to "Walking," see Jarniewicz (504-5).
6. In yet another interview, MacLavery says, "When I was writing the story, I couldn't remember myself"; after laughing, he continues, "I think it's the Catholics who say 'haitch,' and the Protestants who say 'aitch'" (Marchand).
7. Elliott notes that "Walking" is "a chilling—and all-too-true—version of how the everyday social codes of Ulster so easily adapt themselves to terror," and she cites the example of "a Quaker social worker, with an address in a Catholic block of flats, wrongly identified by a loyalist assassination gang as catholic and murdered as such" (438). A less grim outcome occurs in Robert Johnstone's (possibly apocryphal) anecdote about an abducted "English academic"; asked for his religion, he replied that "while he respected the Christian religion, he was personally an agnostic, as his parents had been" (78). According to Johnstone, the abductors let him go, remarking "with a laugh, 'These bloody agnostics are the worst'" (78).
8. Discussing whether one of his works should be categorized as "a novel...a novella...[or] a very long short story," MacLavery claims that "[t]he label does not matter, the work exists" (Ganter 317). For his further opposition to literary critical labeling (for example, terms like "metafiction" or "Ulster Literature"), see the interview in Saá and MacCarthy (57, 59-60).
9. For a challenge to the notion that the short story possesses distinctive qualities, see Suzanne Ferguson's essay.
10. In "Character and Construction in Bernard MacLavery's Early Short Stories about the Troubles" (forthcoming in *Irish University Review* in 2011), I explore the relevance of the short story theories of Poe, O'Connor, May, and Ingman for MacLavery's stories "A Happy Birthday" and "Between Two Shores" (*Secrets*) and "Father and Son," "My Dear Palestrina," and "The Daily Woman" (*A Time to Dance*).

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## ABSTRACTS

De nombreux critiques du recueil de nouvelles *Walking the Dog* de Bernard MacLaverty (1994) ont été captivés par la nouvelle éponyme qui raconte l'enlèvement et l'interrogatoire d'un homme durant le conflit nord-irlandais (les Troubles). « Walking the Dog » n'a pas seulement été acclamée par les critiques, elle a également provoqué un désaccord sur ce que le protagoniste cache à ses ravisseurs et ce que l'auteur cache à ses lecteurs. L'essai suivant retrace cette divergence critique par le prisme de l'herméneutique rhétorique, que Stephen Mailloux définit comme « une lecture des études de la rhétorique culturelle ». Celle-ci se concentre sur les tropes, arguments et formes de narrations qui constituent l'interprétation des textes en des lieux et époques spécifiques. De plus, cette analyse des lectures antithétiques de « Walking the Dog » participe au débat sur les caractéristiques générales de la forme de la nouvelle.

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