

AN ESSAY · ON DIALOGUE MECHANICS

The Grammar of Interruption

*In the Fiction of James Mulhern — how missing tags,
action beats, and the em dash render interruption and
withheld speech without a word of narratorial comment.*

SILVER CURRENT PRESS

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of Mulhern’s dialogue often focus on what his characters say — the dialect, the dark humor, the confessions extracted at kitchen tables. This essay instead considers how the dialogue is assembled: where tags fall, how often they are omitted, how interruption is rendered typographically, and what happens syntactically when one character cuts off another. It identifies recurring technical choices — limited explanatory dialogue tags, action beats in place of “he said”/“she said,” and em dashes for interruption — and considers how they can let scenes carry emotion without extensive narratorial commentary.

I. A Craft Element Hiding in Plain Sight

Discussions of Mulhern’s dialogue often focus on what his characters say — the dialect, the dark humor, the confessions extracted at kitchen tables. This essay instead looks at how the dialogue is assembled: where tags fall, how often they are omitted, how interruption is rendered typographically, and what happens syntactically when one character cuts off another. It identifies recurring choices — limited explanatory dialogue tags, action beats in place of “he said”/“she said,” and em dashes for interruption — and considers how they can let scenes carry emotion without extensive narratorial commentary.

II. The Vanishing Tag: “A Bath” as a Case Study

“A Bath” is instructive because it sustains long stretches of two-person dialogue with almost no attribution at all, relying entirely on alternating turns and the reader’s ability to track voice by content. Consider the exchange in which Billy asks his mother about his father:

“Why don’t you ever talk about my father?”

She lit a cigarette and opened the window a crack. I smelled wet leaves before the smoke overpowered the space. “It’s complicated.”

“How complicated could it be?”¹

Only one line in this sequence receives any attribution at all, and even that attribution (“She lit a cigarette”) is an action beat, not a tag — there is no “she said” anywhere in the passage. The technique intensifies as the scene turns toward its confession: “Did he ever hit you?” my mother said. / “Who?” / “Dad.” / “Why would you ask such a thing?”¹ — four consecutive lines of dialogue carry exactly one

attribution between them, and that single “my mother said” exists only because the speaker had briefly changed from the preceding exchange between Billy and Nana; once the two-person volley resumes, tags disappear entirely for the rest of the confession: “Well, did he?” / “A few times. When he was drunk. Men were different back then.” / “Not so different.”¹ The absence of tags here is not a labor-saving shortcut; it produces a specific reading experience of overhearing rather than being told — the prose refuses to insert an authorial presence between the reader and the confession, mimicking Billy’s own position as a silent witness whose only participation is listening.

III. The Action Beat as Silent Attribution

Where Mulhern marks a turn, he often uses a physical action performed by the speaker in the same sentence or immediately before the dialogue rather than a speech verb. In “Myra Bocca,” a scene of introduction and provocation uses this method: “She turned around and saw that I was reading a sign... Both Gabe and Myra laughed. She nodded at the sign, then said, ‘Yes, Molly. I’m Italian just like you.’”² Even here, where “said” appears, it follows physical actions (turning, nodding) that help identify the turn. The same story renders a rapid comic exchange through beats: “‘Whadaya say?’ She smiled. ‘Sure. Why not?’ Gabe answered.”² The tag “Gabe answered” arrives after context has identified the turn. This beat-first pattern recurs in the examples considered here, placing speech alongside gesture, glance, and posture.

IV. Interruption as Syntactic Violence: The Em Dash and the Cut-Off Clause

When Mulhern’s characters genuinely interrupt one another — rather than simply alternating turns — he reaches for a specific and recognizable device: the em dash breaking a clause mid-word or mid-thought, frequently nested inside a single speaker’s own self-interruption rather than between two speakers. Brian’s extended monologue about Myra in “Myra Bocca” is built almost entirely from this device: “Those stepchildren — great people by the way — wanted nothing more than to settle the trust as it was designed”; “This after he treated her like a queen their whole marriage. Not only did he take care of her, but he took care of all her kids — bought them cars, gave them money, paid for their schooling”; “There’s two other things I want to tell you about what she did, though... These things will let you know just how

bad she is. She fired an older woman salesclerk... And the most heinous thing — is that the right word?”² The final example is the technique at its most self-conscious: the speaker interrupts his own accusatory momentum to interrogate his own diction, a hesitation rendered entirely through the dash rather than through any narratorial comment on his uncertainty. The effect across the monologue is of a man whose outrage keeps overtaking his syntax, each dash marking a place where indignation outpaces the sentence’s original plan.

V. Withheld Speech: What the Grammar Omits

The essay’s title names interruption and withholding as a single phenomenon because Mulhern frequently uses the identical toolkit — action beat, missing tag, clipped line — to mark not an interruption but a refusal to answer. In “A Bath,” Nana’s evasions about her late husband’s violence are rendered with exactly the same sparseness as the story’s ordinary small talk, so that the reader must notice the withholding by its brevity rather than by any signal of reluctance: “‘Did he ever hit you?’ my mother said. / ‘Who?’ / ‘Dad.’ / ‘Why would you ask such a thing?’”¹ Nana’s “Who?” is not confusion; it is a stalling tactic disguised as a one-word answer, and the prose refuses to gloss it as such — no “she said, evading the question” — leaving the reader to infer evasion purely from the mismatch between a simple question and a needlessly obtuse response. The technique recurs in “Myra Bocca” when Molly deflects a direct personal question with a bare declarative rather than an explanation: “‘Why aren’t you married?’ ‘Because I don’t want to be,’ I said. ‘Men are a pain in the ass.’”² The clipped answer forecloses further inquiry by its very brevity; Mulhern lets the shortness of the line itself perform the work of a door closing, without narration describing Molly’s tone or intent.

VI. Conclusion: A Prosody of Speech

Tag omission, action-beat attribution, dash-driven self-interruption, and clipped withholding all reduce explanatory mediation between the reader and spoken exchange. Where a more conventional prose stylist might use “she said hesitantly” or “he interrupted, flustered,” these examples rely on syntax — the presence or absence of a tag, the placement of a dash, the length of a line — to carry emotional information that adverbs and narratorial commentary might otherwise supply. The result can make dialogue feel overheard rather than fully explained, with the

mechanics of a sentence helping readers infer who has been cut off, who has evaded, or who has momentarily lost control of their syntax.

Appendix: Notes for Writers

The techniques described above are teachable, and the essay is used in workshop for that reason. What follows states them as working practice rather than as description. They are not rules; they are the questions the passages quoted here appear to have been asked.

1. Keep “said” when a tag is genuinely invisible and the exchange needs speed. Delete the adverb that follows it, and let the line carry its own weather.
2. Give a speaker one small physical task and let attribution fall out of it. Prefer an object already established in the room over one imported for the purpose.
3. Allow a gesture to contradict the sentence it accompanies, and leave the contradiction unexplained. The discrepancy is the information.
4. Reserve the em dash for speech the speaker abandons, not for speech the writer abandons. The break should read as a decision made inside the scene.
5. Let brevity perform refusal. A one-word answer to a direct question needs no gloss; the mismatch between question and answer does the work that “she said, evading” would otherwise do.
6. Test each beat by deletion. If the paragraph loses only decoration, cut it. If it loses attribution, embodiment, or subtext, it has earned its place.
7. Read the exchange aloud with every tag removed. If the speakers remain distinguishable by diction alone, the dialogue is carrying its own weight.

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Notes

1. James Mulhern, “A Bath,” in *All We Ever Needed* (Silver Current Press, 2026).
2. James Mulhern, “Myra Bocca,” in *All We Ever Needed* (Silver Current Press, 2026).

Works Quoted

Quotations are drawn from “A Bath” and “Myra Bocca,” both collected in *All We Ever Needed* (Silver Current Press, 2026).

Related essays on this site: [Domestic Violence and Silence](#) reads the same story’s withholding thematically; [The Unreliable Confession](#) examines what dialogue leaves unsaid in a related register.

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