

One Habit, Two Theologies

Correlating James Mulhern's Craft with Flannery O'Connor's Mystery and Manners

The useful comparison between James Mulhern and Flannery O'Connor is not the comparison that flatters either of them. It is true, and it is easily made, that both are Catholic-adjacent American writers of a particular region; that both make comedy out of the terrible; that both believe the concrete detail is the one available doorway to whatever is not concrete; that both treat the ordinary object as charged with more than itself. But to stop there is to mistake a shared vocabulary for a shared argument. The deeper fact is that the two work the same premises toward opposite conclusions, and that the divergence — not the resemblance — is where Mulhern's work is most recognizably his own.

The same premise: manners before mystery

O'Connor's essays in *Mystery and Manners* return again and again to a single, almost ascetic insistence: fiction begins in the senses and ends there only if it fails. "The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched."¹ Against the novel of ideas, or the novel of earnest didacticism, she argues that "the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions."² Art, for her, is finally a "habit" — "a way of looking at the created world and of using the senses so as to make them find as much meaning as possible in things."³ The "manners" of her title are not etiquette; they are the dense, specific, material texture of a place and a people, and they are, in her account, the only handhold the writer has on the "mystery" that manners conceal and reveal.

Mulhern's working premise is the same premise, restated as an instruction he has given about his own method: "watch the shabby detail long enough to see what else it may contain."⁴ The sentence is a small manifesto, and it is O'Connor's doctrine of manners

¹Flannery O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 84.

²Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 67.

³Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 101.

⁴James Mulhern, "A Working Philosophy", authorjamesmulhern.com.

compressed. Where O'Connor speaks of "things," Mulhern speaks of shabbier things — the teapot, the folded robe, the shoe, the hand at a crossing, the kitchen light, the water in a glass — but the claim is identical: the abstraction is a dead end, and the sacred, if it is anywhere, is inside the ordinary noun. In the poetry and the prose alike, grief and grace are almost never named; they are carried by objects that keep their own dumb materiality. This is the strongest, most genuine point of contact between the two, and it is worth stating plainly because it is real.

The same device: the comic-terrible

The second shared premise is tonal. O'Connor is the great theorist of her own grotesque, and her account of it is inseparable from her account of comedy. The serious grotesque character, she writes, is "comic though [it] may be," yet "not primarily" comic; such figures "seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity."⁵ Fiction built on "prophetic vision" — her term for the writer who sees the near thing in its far extensions — "is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic."⁶ And in a letter she frames the fusion as a law: "everything funny I have written is more terrible because it is funny, or only funny because it is terrible, or only terrible because it is funny."⁷

Mulhern's fiction answers this almost point for point. The narrator of *Molly Bonamici* registers a corpse and a shop display in the same flat breath — "maggots are a good source of protein ... do you sell word processors?" — a sentence that is funny, grotesque, and alarming exactly at once, and that works precisely because the expected emotional response is withheld. The deadpan is not the opposite of O'Connor's grotesque; it is the same device run at a lower temperature. Where O'Connor's cast of "large and startling figures"⁸ is flamboyant — the grandmother preening for a highway accident, the Bible-reader hurling *Human Development* — Mulhern's is tonally quiet, an Italian-American household and a girl whom a faith healer has named an "Angel of Death." Both writers place horror and humor on the same face of the coin. The likeness is technical and it is considerable.

⁵Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 44.

⁶Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 43.

⁷Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 105.

⁸Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 34.

The fork: what the comedy is for

It is at this point that the correlation begins to break, and the break is the interesting thing. For O'Connor, comedy is a *consequence* of certainty. "The maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy," she writes. "Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe."⁹ The sentence contains her entire warrant: because the world is fixed, and because human creatures are perpetually, comically out of true against that fixity, the discrepancy is available as comedy. Her grotesque is a method of *judgment* — a way of making the reader see what is "repugnant" in a culture that has learned to call the repugnant "natural." The shocks, the violence, the "large and startling figures" drawn for the almost-blind, exist to break through complacency, because "reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost."¹⁰

Mulhern's comedy is a consequence of the opposite condition. It issues not from doctrinal fixity but from doubt and from grief — from, as he has said, a single year in which five people close to him died, an experience he transposed into a character "surrounded by death" who turns her face into a deadpan. His comedy is not a judgment passed on a fallen world; it is a defense raised against an unbearable one. The flatness in *Molly Bonamici* is, on the critical reading of his own work, "not apathy but a coping mechanism." Where O'Connor laughs because the world is *finally known*, Mulhern laughs because it is *not* — because the comic is the last posture available to a narrator who declines to explain what she feels.

This is the crux, and it should not be softened. O'Connor's stated subject is "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil"¹¹; grace in her fiction arrives, characteristically, as violence, as the shock that returns a complacent soul to the truth of its condition. Judgment is real for her, and it is the engine of the comedy. Mulhern's creed runs the other way. He has described writing "from mercy rather than judgment," each story "a small act of faith," with an explicit obligation not to "write characters off."¹²

⁹Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 167.

¹⁰Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 112.

¹¹Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 118.

¹²James Mulhern, "The Artistic Creed", authorjamesmulhern.com.

His deepest philosophical statement dissolves the very axis O'Connor's fiction turns on: "judgment does not exist; love in any form is one."¹³

The warrants they exchange

Seen this way, the two writers are not two instances of the same Catholic grotesque. They are two writers who share a complete set of technical convictions — the sensory concrete, the habit of art, the regional particular, the fusion of the comic and the terrible, the prophet's way of seeing "near things with their extensions of meaning"¹⁴ — and who then supply those convictions with opposite warrants.

O'Connor's "realist of distances" measures the distance from the ordinary thing to *judgment and grace*, and the comedy is the sound of the discrepancy. Mulhern's "realist of distances" measures the distance from the ordinary thing to *recurrence and transfiguration*, and the comedy is the sound of an affect displaced. Where O'Connor's sacred breaks in from outside — the knock on the head, "the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially"¹⁵ — Mulhern's sacred works from within, arriving through the ordinary noun and "keeping a mundane explanation in the same clause." The clearest formulation of his operation is the phrase his own criticism uses for it: canonization rather than catharsis, "conversion without erasure," in which "stain becomes stigmata, baldness a crown, hellfire sunlight, and crossed arms an embrace."¹⁶ Nothing is expelled, nothing is judged, nothing is returned-to-reality "at considerable cost" from the outside; the whole world is quietly, immanently converted.

There is a further, sharper division beneath all this, and it is the one that most thoroughly separates them. O'Connor was, by temperament and by doctrine, anti-Emersonian; the "inner light," the self-reliance of the Oversoul, the warm immanence that dissolves the gap between the soul and God, was to her the precise form of the complacency her violence existed to puncture. Mulhern is avowedly the thing O'Connor wrote against: a Transcendentalist in self-description, for whom the single life "contains multitudes," for whom "nothing loved is lost but changed, carried forward, and lived

¹³James Mulhern, "*Mulhern's Transcendentalism*", authorjamesmulhern.com.

¹⁴Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 44.

¹⁵Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 113.

¹⁶James Mulhern, commentary on "Assumptions" (authorjamesmulhern.com).

anew,”¹⁷ for whom recurrence and resurrection and the Oversoul are not metaphors but the machinery of the work. The same habit of attention that made O’Connor a Catholic realist makes Mulhern a Transcendentalist one; the fork is not in their craft but in what their craft believes.

What the correlation yields

The value of setting Mulhern beside O’Connor is therefore not that O’Connor would have admired him — on the evidence of her own essays, she would have respected the technique and then trained her strongest objection on the metaphysics. The value is that she is the sharpest available instrument for seeing what his work actually is and, more importantly, what it refuses.

O’Connor, read closely, supplies the vocabulary — manners and mystery; the habit of art; the senses against abstraction; the comic and the terrible as one; prophetic vision as the sight of the near thing’s far meaning. Mulhern answers that vocabulary in every particular and signs a different name beneath it. He keeps the concreteness, and empties the judgment. He keeps the grotesque, and removes the terror’s sting, because his terror has a different source and a different name. He keeps the comedy, and relocates its warrant from certainty to doubt.

This is not a lesser version of O’Connor’s project. It is a distinct one, conducted with a poet’s eye and a survivor’s restraint, whose interest lies exactly in what O’Connor would have found unsatisfactory about it — the refusal to judge, the refusal to shock, the insistence that the ordinary is not fallen but holy, and that love, in whatever form, is the whole of the accounting. One habit, two theologies. The correlation is real; the divergence is the work.

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¹⁷James Mulhern, “A Note on My Philosophy of Writing”, authorjamesmulhern.com.