

AN ESSAY · ON NARRATIVE STYLE

THE REMEMBERING VOICE

Narrative style in the short fiction of James Mulhern — the adult cadence and the child's uncorrected eye, and the discipline of refusing to explain.

SILVER CURRENT PRESS

authorjamesmulhern.com

ABSTRACT

Accounts of Mulhern's style tend to begin with subject matter — Boston-Irish Catholic families, illness, secrecy, small mercies. This essay begins instead with the narrating position. It describes the retrospective first person filtered through a child's understanding, the plain declarative texture broken by lyric lift, the transitions that refuse to signpost themselves, recurrence as structure rather than habit, the doubling that lets a word hold an ordinary and a sacred sense at once, the vertical staging of ascent and descent together with breath as the movement of spirit, and an allusive practice that stays deliberately unmarked. Read together, these amount to one discipline: the withholding of interpretation, and the trust that detail will disclose its own significance.

I. The Remembering Voice

The dominant mode of James Mulhern's short fiction is retrospective first person, and its distinguishing feature is a deliberate mismatch between the age of the voice and the age of the eye. The cadence is adult — measured, unhurried, capable of the well-placed lyric sentence. The understanding is frequently that of a child or an adolescent, and the narration declines to correct it. What the young narrator sees is reported with fidelity; what it means is left standing in the room, unclaimed.

The result is a controlled unreliability quite different from the unreliability of deception. Nothing is concealed from the reader that is not also concealed from the speaker. The gap is one of interpretation rather than information, and it is the reader who closes it. On a second pass the adult reader can see the shape of an event that the narrating child registered only as weather in the house. The mechanics of that gap — and the difference between perception failed and affect withheld — are examined in detail in *Unreliable Child Narrators and the Limits of Innocence*.²

Speech reinforces the effect. Boston-Irish Catholic inflection arrives unglossed and unapologized for, in diction rather than in description. Characters are not introduced; they are overheard into existence. A phrase such as "For Christ's sake" does duty as ordinary exasperation while retaining, in a Catholic household, the shape of an invocation, and the prose rarely stops to point this out.

II. Sentence Texture

The prose baseline is plain declarative: concrete sensory nouns, short to medium sentences, a matter-of-fact tone that refuses to editorialize. Against that baseline the sudden lyric lift acquires force. A paragraph of kitchen business — a cup, a window, a smell of onions — will resolve without warning into a cadenced sentence carrying the emotional weight the scene has been withholding.

Transitions are seamless rather than signposted. Movement between present scene, remembered scene, dream, and reverie tends to occur inside a paragraph, sometimes inside a sentence, without the conventional machinery of “I remembered” or “years later.” The reader is carried across the seam and only afterward notices having crossed it. This is not carelessness but the formal expression of a conviction about time: the past is not a separate room to be entered by a door.

Reviewers have praised the descriptive power and emotional directness of this style and have occasionally flagged tonal excess and structural repetition. The second charge is worth answering precisely, because the repetition is not inadvertence.

III. Recurrence as Architecture

Characters return. Scenes return. A grandmother’s kitchen, a hospital corridor, a mirror, a bath, a Marian statue, a sunlit yard: these reappear across stories in altered hands and altered faces. Read as realism, the pattern looks like a narrow inventory. Read as design, it is the load-bearing structure of the work.

The governing premise is that nothing loved is finished happening. Truths return in new incarnations; persons and conflicts are never wholly original; what is lost is not annulled but carried forward and lived again. The short story, which can hold a single scene at full pressure, is unusually well suited to registering the return. The sustained argument for recurrence as a non-dogmatic mode of resurrection is made in *What Is Laid Down Is Taken Up*, and its operation within a single collection in *Repetition as Theology*.³

Six permeable boundaries drive the pattern: living and dead, past and present, thought and feeling, self and other, sleeping and waking, sacred and ordinary. None is presented as a mystical claim. Each is enacted at the level of technique — in a transition that will not announce itself, in a dream that supplies information the waking scene withheld, in a dead relative who continues to occupy a room in the present tense of the narration.

IV. Doubling and the Sacred Substructure

The signature operation of the prose is conversion without erasure. A word or gesture holds an ordinary and a sacred sense within the same clause, and the mundane explanation is never withdrawn to make room for the other. Allegory, in the strict sense, spends the literal in order to purchase the figurative; the object becomes a token and stops being itself. This doubling refuses the exchange. The cup stays a cup.

Because nothing is spent, the sacred does not arrive as a message imposed on a domestic scene; it is discovered already resident in it. The ordinary is not a vehicle for the holy but the place where the holy has been living. Beneath the realist surface runs a vertical axis of ascent and descent — stairs, second floors, cellars, raised arms, lowered eyes, bodies taken up and bodies laid down — and Marian dogma supplies the grammar of that axis without ever being argued for. The mechanism is traced word by word in *Conversion Without Erasure*, and its inverse — the sacred vocabulary the work refuses to use — in *The Words It Never Says*.

V. Vertical Space and Breath

That vertical axis is more than atmosphere; in places it is engineered. In “Molly Bonamici” the grandmother’s dying is staged on descending and ascending planes, so that she falls toward the descent of her ending in a hospital elevator while Molly, later in the book, rises from the sea. Ordinary architecture carries the argument. A lift is a lift, with its indicator lights and its shuddering stop, and it is also the direction a body is taken.⁴

Breath performs the parallel office. The Holy Spirit moves through this work as air rather than as doctrine: an instruction to breathe in and breathe out, a wind at the characters’ backs, the labored breathing of the dying read as a Pentecost run backward — a spirit going out of a room instead of descending into it. The poems keep the same figure, a speaker seeing his own breath and imagining he sees another’s, turbulence felt as a plane rises through cloud. Nothing in the staging announces the analogy, which is why it survives the scene.⁴

The names carry weight on the same axis. Read through its Irish etymologies, the surname Callaghan casts Gabe as a contender and a would-be priest, a luminous inversion of the figure O’Connor sends to the roadside; the reading is set out in *the allusion study for “Molly Bonamici”*. Guides of descent and ascent borrowed from Dante, a Sacred Heart locket, sisters named for the sisters of Lazarus: these are placed without explanation and left to accumulate, in the manner the previous section describes.

VI. Dialogue, Beats, and the Em Dash

Conventional explanatory tags are minimized. “He said sadly” and its relatives interpret a line before the reader has heard it, and the fiction consistently declines that service. Attribution is carried instead by physical action, by positioning in a room, and by the rhythm of the exchange. A beat performs three tasks at once: it identifies the speaker; it embodies the speech among objects and hands and small domestic tasks; and it supplies subtext, since a gesture may qualify or expose what

the sentence is trying to manage.

The third element is the em dash, used for self-interruption, abandonment, and evasion — for speech cut off before it becomes fully intelligible. Accusation, grief, restraint, or a decision not to expose the truth: the force of such a line remains unsettled, and the reader supplies the pressure from the circumstances of the scene. The passage-level evidence for all three devices, quoted from “A Bath” and “Myra Bocca,” is set out in [The Grammar of Interruption](#).¹

VII. Intertextual Method

The stories are allusive by design and elusive by temperament. They work in dialogue with Joyce — “Molly Bonamici” carries the structural echo of “The Dead” — and with Yeats, Dante, Chopin, Poe, Dickinson, O’Connor, and Fitzgerald. The characteristic mode is pastiche rather than quotation: cadence, situation, and image are absorbed and re-voiced instead of cited. Those parallels are documented in [the allusion study for “Molly Bonamici”](#) and, for the poetry, in [The Slant of Kitchen Sun](#).

The allusions are load-bearing but unmarked. A reader who does not catch them loses nothing of the surface story; a reader who does finds the domestic scene suddenly standing in a much larger room. That asymmetry is the intended one, and it accounts for the preference for suggestion over stated meaning.

VIII. What the Style Asks of a Reader

Taken together, these techniques constitute a single discipline: the withholding of immediate interpretation, and the trust that concrete detail will disclose its significance in its own time. The child’s uncorrected perception, the unsignposted transition, the untagged line of speech, the interrupted sentence, the unwithdrawn literal object — each is a refusal to explain.

What is asked of the reader is not decoding but attention. The stories are written on the assumption that a person can be shown a kitchen, a hand, a pause, and a slant of light, and be trusted to understand what has happened in that house. That assumption is itself a kind of mercy, and it is the most consistent moral gesture in the work.

— *Silver Current Press*

Notes

1. Passage-level evidence for the dialogue mechanics summarized in section VI is quoted and sourced in “[The Grammar of Interruption](#)”.
2. The narrator-position argument in section I is developed with quoted passages in “[Unreliable Child Narrators and the Limits of Innocence](#)”.
3. The recurrence argument in section III, including the concordance evidence, is set out in “[What Is Laid Down Is Taken Up](#)”.
4. The vertical staging of the grandmother’s death and Molly’s rising from the sea, and the reading of breath as the Holy Spirit — including the dying breath as an inverted Pentecost and the corresponding lines in the *Crossings* poems “Leaves” and “Turbulence” — are author-confirmed readings rather than editorial speculation; they are offered here as interpretation and not as quotation. On the Marian and Pentecostal frame more broadly, see “[Altogether Beautiful](#)”.

Works Quoted

This essay is a synthesis rather than a fresh collation: it states the shape of the style as a whole and does not quote from the fiction directly. Every technical claim above is supported by quoted, verbatim-checked passages in the linked essays — [The Grammar of Interruption](#), [Unreliable Child Narrators](#), [What Is Laid Down Is Taken Up](#), [Repetition as Theology](#), [The Words It Never Says](#), and [Conversion Without Erasure](#).

Where a connection here is inference rather than direct quotation, it is offered as inference.

Prefer to read or teach this off-screen? The full essay — abstract, notes, and works quoted — is available as a typeset PDF.