Flannery O’Connor’s Misfit and the Mystery of Evil

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It is not difficult to label the agent of evil in Flannery O’Connor’s signature story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” An escaped convict, self-named the Misfit, dispassionately orders the murder of a Georgia family—everyone from grandmother to baby—after coming upon them when their car overturns along a dusty country road. The Misfit orders the murders because the Grandmother has, foolishly, recognized and named him, and also to steal the family’s car. But as in all of O’Connor’s stories, the violent surface action only begins to suggest the depths and complexities of meaning embedded in the story. This is especially true when considering the mystery of evil and its relation to the action of grace.

On one level the story’s title refers to the words of a popular song—“A good man is hard to find/ You always get the other kind.” But on another level it also suggests Christ’s rebuke to Peter when Peter tried to call him good, and Jesus responded that no one should be called good (Mark 10:18)—a mistake the Grandmother makes repeatedly in her encounter with the Misfit. At the same time, it is also true to say that, excepting Satan, no one should be called totally evil, certainly not in any absolute sense. Good and evil, as potentialities and as actualities, are inextricably intertwined in human beings, and this is true for both the Grandmother and the Misfit. It is more accurate to speak of gradations of human good and evil, and of the drama of choice in the face of competing moral options. O’Connor’s story explores a range of these options and their consequences, as well as suggesting the mysterious invisible forces beyond personality and circumstance that help to shape human destiny.

A central principle of O’Connor’s Catholic theology, expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas and other theologians, is that evil has no being, and that evil always appears as a good to the one who commits it, i.e.,
as something good for him. Granted this principle, one can see that the Misfit’s murderous actions are committed under the delusion that somehow they will reap some good for him, and somehow answer to his need. But stealing the family’s battered car, while important, is only the immediate goal of the Misfit; it is not the locus of his inner energy and desire. His conversation with the Grandmother reveals many things about his deeper desires, the most important of which is that the Misfit wants some rationale and justification for his spiritual predicament. He wants an understanding of what he sees as the disproportion between the personal suffering he feels afflicted with and the actions he has committed. As he tells the Grandmother: “I call myself ‘The Misfit’... because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.” The Misfit feels the mystery of evil in his bones, and he finds it incomprehensible. While there are surely elements of self-pity and self-justification in his statement, his mental suffering, his sense of guilt, and his questioning cannot be ignored or dismissed, because it reflects a spiritual condition that is both fundamentally human and conspicuously modern in temper. Though he commits evil deeds, the Misfit is also a seeker who wants some answers to the mystery of evil he feels both in himself and witnesses in the world. His keen sense of evil suggests implicitly that he also has an appreciation of the good, however distorted or misguided it may be.

The Misfit openly acknowledges his own evil. When the Grandmother tries to type him as a “good” man, i.e. a gentleman, he answers: “Nome, I ain’t a good man...,” and then adds: “but I ain’t the worst in the world neither” (148). He admits that “somewhere along the line” he has “done something wrong” and been sent to prison. Subsequently, he has “forgotten” what he has done wrong, yet he feels the weight of some indefinable original sin. He also acknowledges that the punishment was “no mistake.” The punishment is justified, he recognizes, but he still finds it incommensurate with his life. So now his rational solution is to sign for everything he does and get a copy of it. That way, he says, “you’ll know what you done and hold up the crime to the punish-