Sympathy for the Devil
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Days later I am still enjoying the warmth of the whiskey and wassail from seeing *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*. In my previous post, I observed the play is invested in the idea that how we talk to one another, the stories we use to make sense of love and what happens after, matter. Couplet's and alliteration build relationships throughout the play by granular acts of comparison, accreting over time like the snow audiences are asked to make from bar napkins and sprinkle on Pru as she passes by. It’s a sentiment at the heart of every record DJ and stamp collector, every football fan and wine aficionado: as Nick Horby put it in *High Fidelity*, “what really matters is what you like, not what you are like . . . books, records, films—these things matter.”

For Pru, it is the border ballad, a sung narrative poem from that porous region between the Scottish south and English north, that matters. Apparently, for Lucifer, so too does the border ballad offer some satisfaction for a life exiled to a Bed-and-Breakfast overlooking the only public parking lot of a rural border town. “Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks” are Satan’s library shelves, which Pru calls a “heaven” so we don’t miss the allusion to Milton’s paradise. Like Eden, the Scottish border town is a place in-between, a neutral zone not quite heaven or earth, not quite alive or dead. As we were all asked to hold up the books strewn on our pub tables to physically embody Pru’s paradise, I realized we were becoming a part of the interiority that is the subject of her research.

All scholars are collectors by necessity. Critics and scientists alike collect as many cases of a phenomena that they can find—whether it be a recurring motif or gene anomaly—from which to build a case. In the play, Pru argues that Hell has an “inherent interiority” revealed through the ballad descriptions of the devil’s “supernatural habitat.” With that method in mind, I began to listen for the ways this ballad of Prudencia Hart (of which we were a part) described the seat of the Morning Star, called by others Pandemonium, Sheol, and Hades. In the spirit of the Christmastide’s twelve days, Hell is

- “something out of” paintings by “Pasolini” and “Bruegel,” or books by “the Marquis de Sade” and “Keats.”
- being invited to a pub “ladies restroom” orgy, and then uninvited.
- puking a “Scotch pie supper” and “Flaming Sambucas shots” “all over a lavatory bowl like a poem.”
- wanting to “punch in the throat” the yob who puts national identity and heritage art in “air quotes,” and then being unable to start.
- stuck in a “room full of sex, song, and violence” but unable to take part.
- boredom so deep you “watch rain fall in a car park.”
- a bungalow Bed-and-Breakfast with only puzzles for company.
- forced to accept the kindness of a stranger despite seeing his footprints “leave behind no tracks in the snow.”
- “locked in a library,” and locked out.
- falling in love with the devil in order to leave him.
- forgetting how “to value anything when faced with the eternity of time.”
- knowing you can only find your song when you “have someone to sing it to.”

Our “primal need to categorize” those books and ballads that matter is, the play suggests, a radical act of hope. Without all the time in the world, card catalogues and digital databases are shortcuts to help us read, listen to, and watch what we care about because death will otherwise beat us to it. The collector’s index is a short-cut through hell, from which we can choose the best bits where “meaning is still firmly attached to words.”