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LITERATURE OF ADDICTION

Or: Struggle, Adventure, Ecstasy, Depravity, Torment, Denial, Oblivion, and Redemption
in the Classical & Modern Arts

I was driven thence by foul winds for a space of nine days upon the sea, but on the tenth day we reached the land of the Lotus-eaters, who live on a food that comes from a kind of flower. Here we landed to take in fresh water, and our crews got their mid-day meal on the shore near the ships. When they had eaten and drunk I sent two of my company to see what manner of men the people of the place might be, and they had a third man under them. They started at once, and went about among the Lotus-eaters, who did them no hurt, but gave them to eat of the lotus, which was so delicious that those who ate of it left off caring about home, and did not even want to go back and say what had happened to them, but were for staying and munching lotus with the Lotus-eaters without thinking further of their return; nevertheless, though they wept bitterly I forced them back to the ships and made them fast under the benches. Then I told the rest to go on board at once, lest any of them should taste of the lotus and leave off wanting to get home, so they took their places and smote the grey sea with their oars. (*Odyssey*, IX)

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the effect of the narcotic is not simply one of sensuous delight: there is a social, psychological, and spiritual power granted to those who partake. The cost, however, is steep: lotus-eating is a lethal threat to the larger Greek mission. Surrendering to the "honey-sweet" of the lotus causes the crew to "leave off wanting to get home," to lose their purpose, their will to communicate, their memory, perhaps even their identity. But to forgo the substance, once tasted, is to suffer a profound wound. The destiny of these men can never be the same. The notion of home, of an awaiting Ithaca, has been transformed.

This class will first consider antiquity's tragic, philosophic, and epic representations of addiction to drugs and drink, and then proceed through various literary and artistic traditions. In the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, we'll see drunkenness as a kind of sloth, but one which held a mysterious power, a secret knowledge often associated with political cunning. Something of the Dionysian madness of Euripides' maenads can be seen in the practice of the Native American shaman, whose ritual practices as seer and healer are requisite to the tribe's survival. We'll consider whether Rimbaud's "deliberate derangement of the senses" transformed our idea of the poet or simply posed old problems in a new way for the modern artist. We'll ask whether Malcolm Lowry's consular is heir to Shakespeare's Porter in *Macbeth*, or whether he can be redeemed by seeing in him something of Falstaff or Barry Hannah's Ray.

Looking to the 20th century, we will encounter the question, Can art itself be drunk? Is there a connection between the destructive swerve of Denis Johnson's characters and the aesthetic

intoxication of his sentences? Between Sherman Alexie's wandering tribesmen and Barry Hannah's speed-balling Southern doctors? And what do we make of David Foster Wallace and *Infinite Jest*--the great postmodern novel of addiction, whose plot revolves around a work of art so entertaining it is lethally addictive--in a novel whose form and sheer length requires its reader to become "addicted" to the act of reading it?

We will consider addiction from a variety of angles: as both a shortcut to ecstatic reality and a denial or flight from reality; as an inward journey of consciousness and an obliteration of the authentic self; as decadence and moral shame; as adventure and tragic flaw; anaesthetic and occult possession; as mode of prophesy and *duende*, as assignation and deliverance. Finally, we will look at the science of addiction and consider the current DSM-V "disease" model of addiction as a paradigm of mental illness, take a look at new reporting on the "epidemics" of pharmaceutical addiction and alcoholism, and consider various therapies and redemption narratives from antiquity to our present time.

Student work will include weekly critical responses to the reading as well as two major assignments: a comparative literary analysis of two or more works on the reading list, and a multi-genre/media project which explores some aspect or manifestation of addiction in modern culture and incorporates student field research.

This course will feature instructional guests from Houston's artistic, medical, and recovery communities, and include field trips to local art spaces and the Texas Medical Center.

Reading List:

Homer, *Odyssey* Book IX
Euripides, *Bacchae*
Shakespeare, *Macbeth*
Coleridge, poems
Rimbaud, poems
De Quincy, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*
Jean Rhys, *Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*
Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*
Leslie Harmon Silko, *Ceremony*
Barry Hannah, *Ray*
Denis Johnson, *Jesus' Son*
David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*