

The Force of the Intoxic – *The Addict Saint*¹

R. Shields, University of Alberta



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This paper sets out to discover the intangible complement of toxic material that is felt through its effect. It begins from the qualities of the toxic and considers the historical conception of the toxin as an external substance that brings benefit and illumination but is lethal in larger doses. The pursuit of transcendence is a common benefit illustrated in the addicted and the saintly. They share a pursuit of the 'intoxic,' a force that mediates between the body and transcendence, whether spiritual or social.

The Toxic

The toxic and toxicity involves elements of intensity, emergence and interactivity. These three aspects point to a fluid, unstable aspect of toxins and hint at the social, creative and medical importance and benefits of substances consumed in below-toxic doses. To begin, let us treat toxins as material and the adjective, toxic, as a class of agents, thus as an abstract category. Toxins are well known to have different effects at different doses. Conversely, any beneficial drug becomes toxic above a certain dosage. However, toxicity is also emergent and raises questions of Becoming: exposure over time to toxins may result in their accumulation to toxic levels. Toxicity is thus an effect, a real change in materiality from some point or over time. However it also involves a capacity to be toxic, thus implying a virtual, ideal-real quality of toxicity that I will examine under the label of the 'intoxic', below.

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What creates toxicity? Contact with toxins or their use is a matter of a calculation of risks and benefits. We may attempt to benefit from producing and consuming, or even simply admitting toxins into our environments. However we run a risk of developing diseases that manifest at a much later date. For an emergent temporality is a key character of many toxic and carcinogenic substances. Toxicity has an emergent temporality that is a key character of many toxic and carcinogenic substances. The effect of toxicity is also contextual. For example, we don't tend to think of x-rays as toxic, but exposure to them is both helpful in preventing ailments and dangerous in causing a certain percentage of cellular transformations in a given population. Further, benign substances may become toxic in combination with other substances. Their interaction alters their potency. Intensity and interactivity is thus a key aspect of toxicity as the effect of relations that may be either beneficial, or toxic, or both. Quantitatively, toxicity results from the dose, but qualitatively toxicity is contextual. It arises in conjunction with circumstantial and mediating factors.

Much of this is understood according to the probabilities of risks and benefits, blurring and extending the categorical quality of 'toxic' from simply being a broad abstract class of phenomena that are possibly toxic to the cases of predictable, actual levels of toxicity. This is an unusual case where it is not simply a question of material effects but the otherwise abstract class or category of toxicity is an effect or result of other capacities or qualitative interactions and forces. The ambiguous quality of these component elements of the toxic – at times material, at other times predictable but still latent, and still at other moments known as an abstract classification of toxicity as the 'possibly toxic' - is also echoed in the manner that discussions of toxic substances and wastes blur the line between the rational and affective. Buell notes:

Contemporary toxic discourse effectively starts with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). In contemporary toxic discourse, furthermore, victims are permitted to reverse roles and claim authority. It is plainly a discourse of allegation rather than of proof. Its moralism and intensity proceeds in good part precisely from the awareness that its

charges have not yet been proven, at least to the satisfaction of the requisite authorities (Buell 1998:659).

As an organizing concept for victims' discourses, allegations of moral corruption, unethical behaviour and social and environmental injustice, the toxic and the toxicity of unethical behaviours, asserts a moral claim. It thus offers an alternative logic against science, prevailing common sense, what is legally permitted, expert risk assessments, and defensive responses. Buell argues that the fear of a poisoned world is being increasingly pressed, debated, debunked, and reiterated from many disciplinary vantage points. However toxicity is rarely assessed as discursive as well as material. Nonetheless, 'the sociological evidence of the emergence of toxicity as a widely shared paradigm of cultural self-identification and of toxic discourse as a commensurately influential force continues to accumulate' (Buell 1998:665).

As a portal to the incommensurable, toxicity is influential in discourses of allegation (for example of pollution). It steps around logic and reasoned argument to insinuate passion and affect into public discourse. The implications of Buell's observation about the force of the toxic in discourse are important in the contemporary context of 'post-truth' media discourse. The reversal of authority from the externally positioned, objective expert to an implicated, involved and bodily-compromised victim can be analysed using the image of a folding over of logic to induce reversals and the possibility of jumps between strict deductive steps.

An impasse is created which makes one confront the irreconcilable poles of logical and affective reason. Impasses trouble methodical approaches (Berlant 2007) and claims to knowledge as they force an unlearning of taken for granted certainties (Stewart 2013). What is this discursive force of the toxic? It is not only a condition or victim status but something that troubles both evidentiary logic and calculative, rational discourse. It therefore implies a challenge to the entire edifice of established and legitimated logics. These logics are not only the logical results of scientific evidence but extend to trust relations

and power structures. To the extent that the toxic concerns an interactivity, it involves relations that may be emergent or latent and whose intensity reflects an imbalance of power. Discussions of the toxic easily open up issues of the ethics of power relations inherent in the toxic as an effect of an externality, a substance consumed by a body, perhaps unknowingly. To the extent that toxins are created by others, these discourses also bear on questions of the justice of the relationship between the creator or provider and the consumer or victim of the toxic.

The toxic is not only a paradigm in discourse, but mediates and assembles collectives of those affected or at risk, of victims, or perpetrators and agents who administer toxins and wider audiences who are witnesses. This mimetic process of assembling those who share a position, against others is a form of social cleavage that crosses class lines. For example, air pollution unites the powerful and the powerless because it affects all who breathe (Beck 1992). Toxic drugs such as fentanyl affect both vagrant addicts of opioids and wealthy recreational consumers of drugs such as Viagra and cocaine (for example, see news report Lakusta 2017).

Understood as having the characteristics of media, a toxin acts a medium in which bodies are drawn together polarizing relationships of dependence, implication and witness. Toxicity may emerge over time or through the over use or overindulgence in consumption or a practice. This is often due to a reliance on the perceived benefits of the toxin. Such dependencies also characterize the toxic effect of parasites on a host. Witnesses are assembled through the affects of the loss of stability of a victim or situation. They are often a moral chorus that marks the horrors of the toxin and the hubris of protagonists who think they can control the toxic. Those implicated in the sources of the toxicity may be vilified or derive social power and prestige from their association with the benefits and danger of the toxic.

Does the source of the power of toxic discourse not inhere in its combination of intensity and its mobility, or more precisely, the apparent fluidity and reversibility of its discursive effects. The toxic is a

mobility in other ways as well. Toxins set an equilibrium body or ecology into a dynamic, mobile, non-equilibrium state. Persson gives a phenomenology of drugs as embodied processes that reconfigure bodies and diseases in multiple ways at once – beneficial and detrimental to the same person at the same time (2004). Rather than recoil or attempt to resettle the relations destabilised or set in motion by toxins, is it possible to work with the logic of these dynamics. This involves integrating both the negative sense of the toxic and its potentially useful or positive usages or effects.

Despite its ambiguity and its relational qualities as a media, toxins ultimately concern bodies and the health of living systems, generally organisms. This is a further essential quality of the toxic. While toxins focus the attention and behaviour of individuals aggregated into groups, this quality of a social medium requires the organic canvas of a body or bodies as a substrate on which it becomes apparent to the senses and experienced. Intoxicated and poisoned bodies are those that have lost their agency and semblance of independent volition. The poisoned is helpless in the face of their symptoms and has no way to eliminate the toxin or avoid the effects once poisoned unless an antidote is provided from an external source. Where toxins are the material cause (and there is no doubt of their materiality), organic bodies are the material medium by which they are apprehended and known through their effects. In a discussion of the intoxic, below, I will return to this veiled quality of the toxic, the way in which it is not known directly but as a set of effects in the flesh, almost after it has taken effect, rather than actually and directly as a material phenomenon. The toxic thus also brings a problem of knowledge, highlighting not only the vulnerability of the body once poisoned but the inefficacious indirectness of knowledge as almost hindsight.

Pharmakon

Given the risk posed by the toxic, it is surprising to note that, whether in the wild or in the laboratory, 'almost every species of animal has engaged in the natural pursuit of intoxicants' (Siegel 2005:114). For example, toxic angiosperms evolved chemical protection against herbivores so that their food and what is healthful (or in

other cases, is beneficial for example as a sedative or a painkiller), is also poisonous. A toxic angiospore is, of course, pleasurable to consume. Chemicals designed to protect plants are sought by animals to procure the pleasures of transcendence.

Thus the famous oxymoronic sense of the ancient Greek, *Pharmakon*, an ambivalent word meaning 'drug,' as both remedy and poison but also 'scapegoat' (Rinella 2010). In his deconstruction of several of Plato's works, Jacques Derrida (1981:99) has offered a famous commentary on the ambiguity of writing as *Pharmakon* which creates an internal circularity and undecidability within Plato's texts and more importantly within critical understandings of rational knowledge and communication (cf. Stiegler 2010; 2011). Derrida's description is worth recalling:

If the *Pharmakon* is 'ambivalent,' it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/ body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.)....The *Pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the *différance* of difference. It holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the differends that the process of discrimination will come to carve out. Contradictions and pairs of opposites are lifted from the bottom of this diacritical, differing, deferring, reserve. Already inhabited by *différance*, this reserve, even though it 'precedes' the opposition between different effects, even though it preexists differences as effects, does not have the punctual simplicity of a *coincidentia oppositorum*. It is from this fund that dialectics draws its reserves (Derrida 1981:127).

An older meaning, *Pharmakos*, 'scapegoat' designated a person offered in sacrifice or sent into exile. This ritual produced a catharsis and cleansing in times when the *polis* suffered crisis or calamity. Persisting as an annual ritual on the first day of Athens's festival of Apollo, two male *Pharmakoi* were led outside of the city walls not knowing their exact fate – to be thrown off a cliff, burned, beaten or

exiled, literally or symbolically. This political, ritual and sacred ceremony of ambiguity purified the interior of the city, the *polis*. The scapegoats, *Pharmakoi* 'produce' the effect of cleansing (cf. Liddel-Scott-Jones *Greek-English Lexicon*). We might speculate that the terrifying ambiguity of not knowing their fate is an important aspect of this ritual. The catharsis of the ritual expulsion of the *Pharmakoi* is an example of the positive face of an otherwise negative phenomenon. Girard (1977) finds in this cathartic release, a generative violence that assembles the rest of the people into a community; that is, they share in the collective guilt for the arbitrary violence.

In as much as the negative impact is also accompanied by a positive impact, 'The inescapable implication of these facts is, of course, that 'saying no' is not really an option: intoxication is a biological imperative quite comparable, if not identical, to the other two: hunger and love. So what really moves the world is a triad: get fed, get laid, get high' (Siegel 2015:114). Milton, in his *Areopagitica* noted that, the principle that goodness and badness do not inhere in things themselves, but are consequences of how they are used:

They are not skilful considerers of human things, who imagine to remove sin by removing the matter of sin; for, besides that it is a huge heap increasing under the very act of diminishing, though some part of it may for a time be withdrawn from some persons, it cannot from all, in such a universal thing as books are; and when this is done, yet the sin remains entire (Milton 1644).

How a thing is used, is not simply a functional matter, but relational. This is a question of the relations entered into with the *Pharmakon*. Effects arise from the capacities that these relations produce. For example, on the one hand, bodies have varying abilities to metabolise *Pharmakoia*, and on the other hand, these have different capacities to affect bodies.

Toxins are conceptualized and represent a mode of externality and 'outsidedness' (cf. Bakhtin 1973 *Vnenakhodimost*). The external, destabilising source of the toxic becomes clearer in the etymology of

the term, that follows an objectifying and externalizing logic to imagine the strike of an arrow that poisons a prey. Outsidedness reminds a body of its vulnerability and also the limits of its ability to know and command its environment, sparking the social need for collaboration.

'Toxic' (adj.), 'containing poison' (*potare* 'to drink'), a deadly potion or substance that is consumed, was imported from the French *toxique* (1690s) and the ancient Greek *toxikon*, 'for use on arrows' and Persian *taxša*, 'bow'. 'Toxin' (noun) appears to be only a late nineteenth century addition to English. Thus, where Shakespeare has 'poisons', 'potions' and 'venom', he does not deal in the pharmacological ambiguity of toxins or the toxic. Instead he offers the antidote of critique-as-cure:

*Give me leave
To speak my mind, and I will through and through.
Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world,
If they will patiently receive my medicine.
(As You Like It II, vii, 47-61)*

The Intoxic

In contrast to the Mediterranean world's sense of the toxic as a poisonous drink since before the time of the Greek physician Galen (2 CE), I would like to turn to the Germanic terminology for poison that is the equivalent to the English 'gift' from Old High German and Scandinavian sources, *gift*, a giving or prescribed dose (see also Galen 1821-33).

Where Western pharmacology labels toxins as destructive Indigenous ritual and medicinal use of hallucinogens treat them as not only curative but enlightening. We can treat the stem *intoxic* as a label for this side of the toxic *Pharmakon* as potential and capacity. The *intoxic* is not the opposite but the complement to the toxic – found, for example, in its pleasures, and importance as a source of liberation from the mundane world of need and imposed routine.

Bateson points out the curative qualities of alcohol for the alcoholic dependent on it (Bateson 1978:317). Considering the toxic from the vantage point of the intoxic raises new questions. The intoxic manifests itself affectively in delight in the experience of non-equilibrium states of mind and body that offer a promise of transcendence, liberation or even just distraction. It involves risk, submission to external agency of the toxin and the subjugation of the critical subject or ego in the name of pleasure, enlightenment and transcendence. The condition of the loss of sense of self, offers an encounter with the dependence of the individual on the environment (Callois 1984), and potentially a realization of the socially-mimetic quality of the individual (Tarde 1890) hence of transcendence of the isolated individual subject. While the subject may lose their sense of self, their corresponding, oceanic, sense of transcendent relatedness represents and expansion of the capabilities of cognition, an experience that can later be remembered within the narrower demands of everyday life and the strictures of cognitive 'normality'. This relational quality makes the intoxic more difficult to pin down than the toxic as a category or toxins as materiality. While the toxic nearly always refers to a material object (toxin, poison, dose, arrow), whether toxin or intruder, *the intoxic is a force*, an intangible virtuality that is real but ideal and refers to a capacity or relation, as in the sense of 'to intoxicate.'

The outcome of the intoxic is not simply intoxication but intensity and interaction between self and other, inside and outside, mundane and extraordinary. The intoxic is manifest in the experience of transcendence as a 'going beyond,' 'surmounting,' 'transgression' of the everyday present and presence. We might suggest that the intoxic gives access to an experience of the incommensurable that is independent of a functional goal and thus exceeds representation. The intoxicated entertains a relation to the *Pharmakon* that does not conform to utilitarian rationality of cost versus reward, risk versus benefit. However, To be intoxicated, is to stand at the precipice of the unrepresentable. There is a monstrous, unnameable quality to the experience and practice. This is the horror of the position of the addict.

Why horror. The excess of intoxication is *ex-stasis*, the ecstatic. This excess defies the everyday basis of language and meaning-making. The challenge of representing the intoxicant as an outside to the everyday falls to creative poets, artists and performers who may communicate by allusion and demonstration rather than representing. In the absence of their creative mediation, the intoxicant is formless in its unrepresentability, monstrous (*monstrere*). Horror in this case comes from the monstrosity of formlessness that is at the base of the challenge to conventional representation.

As such, the intoxicant shares in the logic of the incommensurable, of the sacred and of sacrifice. But should the drug-addicted not thus be treated as not only self-sacrificing but in their relation to an incommensurable, are they not also to be sanctified. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille understands this urge, reaching beyond the mundane, in explicitly political terms,

If the worker treats himself to the drink, this is essentially because into the wine he swallows there enters a miraculous element of savour, which is precisely the essence of sovereignty. It's not much, but at least the glass of wine gives him, for a brief moment, the miraculous sensation of having the world at his disposal. The wine is downed mechanically (no sooner swallowed than the worker forgets it), and yet it is the source of intoxication, whose miraculous value no one can dispute. On the one hand, to freely take advantage of the world, of the world's resources, as does the worker drinking the wine, partakes in some degree of the miraculous. On the other, it is the substance of our aspirations. We must satisfy our needs, and we suffer if we fail, but where the necessities are at stake we are only obeying the animal injunction within us. Beyond need, the object of desire is, humanly, the miracle; it is sovereign life, beyond the necessary that suffering defines (Bataille 1988:199).

Any appreciation of the intoxicant requires a position that avoids the dualism of positive and negative. Beyond good and evil, Bataille argues that a true ethics takes place 'independently from a moral goal' (2015:4-5) in that it can have no future orientation. The intoxicant is an

ethical force. It is a pure Simmelian sociality, a *communitas* and a loving engagement with intoxicants that depends on the negativity of intoxication to indulge its positive effects (Shulgin 1995). The toxic thus violates the dualisms that Western civilization has been built on and gives rise to a corresponding horror at the collapse of categories. Bataille develops exactly this position as a conscious contradiction, an irresolvable antagonism between antitheses, each of which are impossible extremes (cf. Bataille 2016:140ff.).

The refusal of the right-wrong distinction of moral reason is the basis of the argument that the *Pharmakon* and the intoxic cannot be resolved into an either-or dualism. The result is to defy logical structures which demand this distinction $a \neq b$. The resulting paralogical structure is not the fallacious position of a mistaken identity but rather contests the basis for making the distinction between a legitimated knowledge *a* and an illegitimate or repressed knowledge *b*. There is some similarity and crossover between Derrida and Lyotard, who trade in the same terms, *differend*, 'that which does not have the punctual simplicity of a *coincidentia oppositorum*' (as above, Derrida 1981:127 compare and contrast Lyotard 1988) but spurs further dialectic. This can be understood in a minor version of paralogy as simply the ongoing creation of meaning, reflected in the way one comment to a person inspires them to say something, possibly unrelated, in return. The ongoing process binds us to the process of dialogue in an ongoing spiral of new ideas (cf. Shawver 1996). Lyotard is one recent philosopher who has explored the possibilities of a major form of paralogisms as a move beyond Habermasian universal consensus via local exceptions and imaginative recasting of ideas, such as with puns and jokes or deliberate new (mis-)uses. This can be seen to be productive of new concepts, new horizons for thinking and living. Lyotard identifies paralogy with a postmodern condition in thought (1984). Fritzman describes paralogical thought as 'imaginative moves which directly contest the procedural rules that claim to regulate and adjudicate conflict' (1990: 380) based on the necessarily local, contextual character of dialogue.

How is this different from the *Pharmakon*? The intoxic adds to these commentaries on the differend and paralogical qualities of the *Pharmakon*. Rather than a 'reserve' or mobility of 'differance', in Derrida's terms, or a conceptual 'move' to open the boundaries of dialogue and interaction, in Lyotard's terms, the intoxic is a force that assembles, mediates and inter-elates ethically and socially as well as through the materiality of the toxin. Like the *Pharmakon*, while it is neither necessarily positive nor negative, the intoxic is unlike the *Pharmakon* in that it is a virtuality, limited to the force of the phenomenon. The intoxic is not material, abstract or probabilistic, but a capacity. As such the focus on the intoxic highlights the operation of power between and into bodies whether abstractly in discourse or actually in its effects of social engagement and toxicity.

Saintly Addicts, Sacred Addiction

Although the intoxic itself is a pharmako-logoico outside, the force rather than the material substance of the toxic, the next section examines its long and diverse history of appropriation as an interface to insight and social structure. Institutionalized within ritual forms of intoxication (Guerra-Doce 2014), the intoxic ruptures the limits of ecological continua and equilibria to produce the toxic. This is not only a spatial relation to an exterior but a temporal operation that changes the poisoned or inebriate's relations with the present, for the toxic is dependent on time (frequency of administration) as well as quantitative dosage. It also has a limited temporality, its effects fading as the body eliminates toxins that have been metabolised. The effect is to create a liminal time-out from everyday life that is not sustained although it can be integrated into cultures through repeated routines. This temporal-spatial topology further defines the intoxic: A toxin is external and enters the space of the body, it is not immanent nor an auto-immunity, and untreated it is terminal. But by contrast the intoxic establishes a temporary but repeatable relation between the body interior and the external context or world. Like a natural season, the intoxic can become a psychosocial rhythm of periodic liminality (Turner 1969) or a suspended, time-out-of-everyday-time.

In Western cultures, addicts are often treated as indulgent escapists from the challenges of everyday life or weak dependents on intoxicants. They are morally toxic. Alcohol, for example, may impede the struggle to follow a moral life, even if by relieving the moderate drinker of everyday stress for a moment. The ruination of addiction is that it not only enslaves the body but reduces the transcendent moment of the intoxicant. The desire for this 'miracle' becomes an enslaving, omnipresent demand and irresistible need. The situation of the addict is tragic and transitive: in it we see the possible route of all intoxicants. As tragedy, the addict plays out a fall from grace. They reduce the heroic dream of exceeding the conditions of life to the *pathos* of enslavement. Desire for the sublime, the divine, excess beyond relations of existence, causes them to lose their sovereignty as human. Here may be one reason why addicts are both stigmatized and shunned. Medicalized under capitalism as unproductive and incapable, the dysfunctional inebriate disrupts the flow of social normalcy. In addition, they impose an ethical demand, calling on our care for their condition and imposing social costs as a result.

However, the undecidability and fraughtness of the *Pharmakon* requires that the toxic be treated with veneration, with ritualized rigour that gives its practices a quasi-religious quality. Christian tradition recognizes intoxication, even while it has preached against it. Specific Catholic Saints of the intoxicated, addicts both, include St. Mark Ji Tianxiang and St. Maximilian Kolbe. In intoxication and addiction, there is an engagement with the incommensurable that is the deeper subject of Christian mystic tradition and iconography (see Figure 1). Beyond mere escapism, do not addicts share in the saints' search for transcendence from the mundane, insight and truth. Could addiction not be treated as a symptom of a sacred questing? This would challenge the secular economy typical of contemporary societies. Perhaps the addict is not unfit but holy. Within the habits of the addict and the experience of intoxication lies an alternative to the productive rationality that turns bodies toward relations of maximum utility under capitalism. Is the addict not only holy but one who should be understood as resisting social and economic norms?

Refecction: *The Addict Saint* - Addiction and Transcendence

The etymology of the toxic indicates an intense external force, a 'giving' that fundamentally alters the status of the receiver, destabilising the healthy functioning of the body. As gift, as giving, the toxic is relational and presumes not only the effect of the toxin but the agency of the giver of the dose whose power or authority overcomes that of the subject. This image of the intoxicated as victim is contrasted by the force of the intoxic.

Their emergent qualities in combination with other substances pointed this article toward the fluid, mobile and ambiguous and interactive qualities of toxins as *Pharmakoi*. They are used for both rational and affective ends in complex calculations of risk and benefit. Discursively they appear as paralogical, challenging simple rational assessments of risk with an affective politics that reverses authority from the scientific to the terms and contextual vantage point of the affected body. Fundamentally, the toxic is a question of the body and its vulnerability to invasion, penetration and occupation.

Yet, this potential for reconfiguring social alliances indicates a less-analysed, relational aspect of the toxic as a medium through which differentiated and opposing collectives are drawn together. Victims, the intoxicated, witnesses, health professionals, perpetrators share common positions thanks to the toxin. Therefore, not only is the toxic in discourse but it has mediating qualities itself. It has assembling, constitutive power on bodies, recalling the catharsis of the expulsion of the *Pharmakoi*.

The intoxic is the gift of the toxic, a complement to the physiological elements of the toxin. It puts the materiality of the body into a non-equilibrium state, a n x-stasis or mobility that transcends the mundane and breaks the bonds of social and economic governmental rationalities. It refers to a capacity or relation, creating a second mediating moment at which the social is split and distinct communities assembled in relation to the poisoned body, to the addict. Witnesses, victims, perpetrators... these are recast beyond the dualism of positive and negative. This allows the toxic to function paralogically: sov-

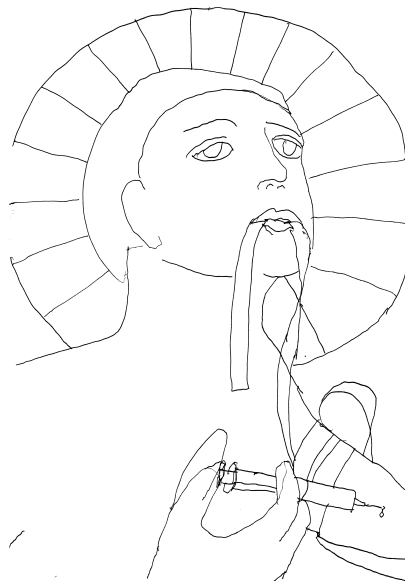
foreign life displaces discipline and governance; the *non sequitur* complement in discourse opens new dimensions for engagement.

All these inhere in the body of the icon of *The Addict Saint* painted in 2016 and exhibited at Latitude 53 Gallery in Edmonton, Canada. The seeker of transcendence who enters the tragic, but often ends in pathos of addiction, is the *figure of the intoxic*. An image of an addicted saint presents an embodiment of the intoxic as a reminder not only of the humanity and material suffering of the addict but our mutual entrainment together with them in the logic and force of the intoxic.

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*Figure 1: Cartoon: The Addict Saint.
The Sacred Intoxic (Icon. R. Shields
2016)*