

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir:

On the interplay of the senses.

Κρητη τις γαι μεσω ενι σινοπι πομτω

(Od. xix: 172)

Your beautiful new journal stimulates me to come in with a letter to the editor, referring to the article by Pavlović and Štuk [1] on the synaesthesia between colors, tastes, and the perception of the colour of the sea and its relevance to the people ashore.

What is the colour of the sea? Green, blue, slate-grey, or what? Obviously this depends on a plethora of factors, latitude, time of the day, season, wind, precipitation, angle of observation, plus some factors in the mood and eye of the beholder, and on the type of conceptual context, poetry, epics, novels or weather forecasts.

Homer [1] in his epic, praised the island of Crete, as "handsome country, fertile, thronged with people well past counting - boasting ninety cities..." - (as the modern and praised translation of Robert Fagles [2] puts it). He uses the adjective *oinopis*, wine-coloured, in song nineteen of the *Odyssey*. Well, what colour has wine then? Red, white, rosé, golden, ruby, tawny, purple - you name it. And, surely synaesthesia takes place with the latter shades of colour, paralleled by many of the nuances our geusic system can produce.

And the olfactory sense, does it lag behind *visus* and *geusis*? Most certainly not. Perhaps this sense is more powerful than all the others. Phylogenetic factors could point to that. How does it read in Süsskind's novel of *Grenouille* [3]? "Tout cela, il le pouvait, pour peu qu'il le volut. Il en avait le pouvoir... un pouvoir plus fort que le pouvoir de l'argent, ou que le pouvoir de la terreur, ou que le pouvoir de la mort: le pouvoir invincible d'inspirer l'amour aux hommes... car moi je savais que je désirais le parfum et non la jeune fille."

Kipling wrote "smells are surer than sights and sounds to make your heart-strings crack" [4], a capacity that links our behaviour to the outside world [5].

All of the above should be before us in our minds, especially as physicians, the more so because the present-day world seemingly (and wrongly) insinuates that vision is all- and over-important for our impressions, motives and actions.

[1] Pavlović E, Štuk A: Certain colours match with certain tastes, seen through a prism of phenomena of synaesthesia and symbolism of Mediterranean colours and tastes. AMHA 2003; 1: 41-43

[2] Fagles R: The Odyssey, Penguin, New York 1996 p.396, v. 194 ff

[3] Süsskind P: Le Parfum. Histoire d'un meurtrier. Fayard, Paris 1986, p.276-277

[4] Kipling R, quoted by Diane Ackerman: A natural history of the senses, Vintage Books Edition, San Francisco 1990

[5] Cromie WJ in, Sexual ID switch is found, in, The Harvard University Gazette 7 February 2002, reporting on research in mice by Catherine Dulac

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