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**Synesthetic Traits in the Perception of Language in  
Stephen Dedalus considered as an avatar of James Joyce**

Informe de Seminario para optar al grado de Licenciado en Lengua y Literatura

Inglesas

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*To Alejandra and Francisco, my parents, for their invaluable support and care. To my family, friends, and all the people who have rode with me along this long path, and especially to all the people who has made this more difficult than it should have been, for giving me the strenght to overcome them.*

*“Per aspera ad astra”*

*Stephen Dedalus, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

# 1. Introduction

Throughout his works, James Joyce proved to be very fond of words because of their form rather than their content. This has been explained by referring to his proneness to re-symbolize words, i.e. to reassign or to make displacement of meanings to them, which would be the reason why for him words are so important. Now, what is the source of that ability to play with words that Joyce has? We will try to add a new facet to these explanations: In Joyce's love for words and proneness to re-symbolization there is a notorious synesthetic component which is the one that in effect allows Joyce to make such re-symbolizations.

In a stricter sense, in relation to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce is not exactly the one that is fond of words, experiencing meaning displacement or shift and experiencing synesthetic perception, but the character, Stephen Dedalus. A character that is actually representing him, in a sort of fictionalized autobiographical view of the artist. Stephen Dedalus is a distorted mirror to Joyce, which somewhat reflects Joyce's development as an artist. In this sense, we can refer to a Joyce/Dedalus compound entity, when talking about perception of reality. No one can say with certainty that Joyce had the same sensory experience that Stephen had. But we can easily think of Joyce as having the ability to sense and experience things, the same way Stephen does. This hypothesis considers Stephen as mirroring Joyce in these aspects.

## 2. Hypothesis

The hypothesis this report is based on is that in Joyce's love for words and proneness to re-symbolization there is a notorious synesthetic component which is the one that in effect allows Joyce to make such re-symbolizations, and that this ability is reflected in Stephen Dedalus, the most recurrent character in Joyce's work, who is, at the same time, a representation of Joyce himself.

### 3. General Objective

The general objective of this work is to analyze the work of James Joyce, specifically, the analysis of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

## 4. Specific Objective

The specific objective of this work is to try to find and prove the existence of synesthetic traits in Stephen Dedalus' perception of language as a mirror of James Joyce's own perception of language.

## 5. Organization of the analysis

The following analysis was carried out through selective recollection of bibliography and resources on synesthesia for its later study and application of the findings to the content of the work of James Joyce *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As bibliography on synesthesia is actually inexistent in the different libraries of this university, the author of this work had to rely almost only on electronic publications found on the Internet. To support this analysis, this work also relied on previous analysis on Joyce's high interest in language. The analysis itself consisted in searching for instances where synesthetic traits in Stephen's perception of words and language were perceived, and then proceeding to analyze them according to the information previously compiled.

## 6. Analysis

Stephen Dedalus is a recurrent character throughout the work of Joyce: According to Joseph Prescott, he is the narrator of the first three stories in *Dubliners*<sup>i</sup>, he is the main character in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and one of the main characters in *Ulysses*. Through this character, Joyce tries to show the development of a person into an artist, a writer, specifically. But the character is a little more than that. This character is an avatar<sup>ii</sup> of Joyce, a reflection of his own development as an artist, though slightly different, as every avatar is, ornamented and endowed with different characteristics, but, in the end, a representation of himself. This avatar shows a progression from an early interest in words to an excessive fondness of words in old age, through the three works cited. This vision of Stephen as an avatar of Joyce avoids the danger of identifying the character with the author, while playing right at its edge. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus our analysis on *A Portrait*.

### 6.1. What is synesthesia?

Synesthesia (Greek, *syn* = together + *aisthesis* = perception) is the involuntary physical experience of a cross-modal association. That is, the stimulation of one sensory modality reliably causes a perception in one or more different senses. The word *synesthesia*, meaning "joined sensation", shares a root with *anesthesia*, meaning "no sensation." It denotes the rare capacity to hear colors, taste shapes, or experience other equally startling sensory blendings whose quality seems difficult for most non synesthetes to imagine. A synesthete might describe the color, shape, and flavor of someone's voice, or music whose sound *looks like* "shards of glass," a scintillation of jagged, colored triangles moving in the visual field. Or, seeing the color red, a synesthete might detect the "scent" of red as well. The experience is frequently *projected* outside the individual, rather than being an image in the mind's eye. This last point is one of paramount importance when referring to the analysis of Stephen's perception, and it will be explained in the following paragraphs.



## 6.2. Synesthetic traits in Stephen's perception of Language

Since early childhood Stephen seemed interested in words and their sound. Words started forming patterns in his mind as a result of their sound. As for instance when he was being taught the meaning of an apology

His mother said:

-O Stephen will apologize.

Dante said:

-O, if not, the eagles will come and pull out his eyes.-

*Pull out his eyes,*

*Apologize,*

*Apologize,*

*Pull out his eyes*

*Apologize,*

*Pull out his eyes,*

*Pull out his eyes,*

*Apologize.<sup>iii</sup>*

Or when he started reading, at Clongowes College, as the following paragraph demonstrates:

And there were nice sentences in Doctor Cornwell's Spelling Book. They were like poetry but they were only sentences to learn the spelling from.

*Wolsey died in Leicester Abbey  
Where the abbots buried him.  
Canker is a disease of plants,  
Cancer one of animals.'*

It would be nice to lie on the hearthrug before the fire, leaning his head upon his hands, and think on those sentences<sup>iv</sup>

It is important to note that although he was fascinated with word patterning, these two examples do not belong to him, they are borrowed from somewhere else. The first example is from the twenty third song of Isaac Watts' *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*, based on Proverbs 30:17; and the second example is part of a schoolboy textbook. In spite of this fact, we can easily see the nature of this early fascination with the sound of a simple pattern of words, or the reading of a set of unconnected sentences.

Form rather than content. This is a fact we can extract at this stage. In evocating the form of an array of words, either written or spoken (either way produces a *sound* either a physical sound, or a sound in the mind's ear) Stephen found relish. Even to think of the possibility of evocating such arrays was delightful for him, as shown in the example above (*It would be nice to lie on the hearthrug before the fire, leaning his head upon his hands, and think on those sentences*). This might be true for all of us: words are first sounds that later become symbols. Sounds are of paramount importance for us, but as we grow in articulation their importance as sounds is gradually superseded by the representative quality of words. But Stephen continued to be sensitive to the sound of words. For him, the sounds of words were a hint to their meaning. These hints allowed him to devise their dictionary accepted meaning, but also to add some meaning of his own, to dye their meanings with the tint of his personality. The first attempts to do so refer only to words or learned string of words, which have a strong appeal to him, such as the already mentioned, or single words like *kiss* or *suck*, whose sound evoked the sounds they refer to, in an onomatopoeic manner:

-We all know why you speak. You are McGlade's suck.

Suck was a queer word. The fellow called Simon Moonan that name because Simon Moonan used to tie the prefect's false sleeves behind his back and the prefect used to let on to be angry. But the sound was ugly. Once he had washed his hands in the lavatory of the Wicklow Hotel and his father pulled the stopper up by the chain after and the dirty water went down through the hole in the basin. And when it has all gone down slowly the hole in the basin had made a sound like that: suck. Only louder.<sup>v</sup>

Here, the word "suck" is a slang word to refer to a servile flatterer, but Stephen overrides this meaning and refers directly to the sound this word evokes, as if wondering why it is assigned that meaning. Starting from that point he starts an elaborate account of the queer experience that evokes that queer sound, almost forgetting the meaning of it. His interest was only on the sensations it evoked in a particular experience, and in the queerness of the sound. Since early childhood, Stephen shows this ability to generate accounts based on a single word (sound, more accurately). This, according to specialists<sup>vi</sup> is a well-known characteristic of synesthetes, prodigious memory. Synesthetes cite their parallel sensations as the cause, saying for example, "I know it's 2 because it's white." Conversation, prose passages, movie dialogue, and verbal instructions are typical subjects of detailed recall. The spatial location of objects is also strikingly remembered, such as the precise location of kitchen utensils, furniture arrangements

and floor plans, books on shelves, or text blocks in a specific book. Perhaps related to this observation is a tendency to prefer order, neatness, symmetry, and balance. Work cannot commence until the desk is arranged just so, or everything in the kitchen is put away in its proper place. Synesthetes perform in the superior range of the Wechsler Memory Scale<sup>vii</sup>.

In this early stage Stephen shows a somewhat normal development of linguistic abilities. He, of course, is not constantly in a world of sound association, neither this feature of his perception interferes with his linguistic performance. He can easily communicate with other children and with his family, leaving these sound associations to himself. In a sort of a double-standard, he gives his own flavor to words, but he is able to use them the way everyone does. Moreover, he shows no special pragmatic development. As every child his age, he sometimes can not understand irony, as shown in the scene of the Christmas dinner discussion about politics, when Mr. Casey is telling a story to annoy Dante O'Riordan. In the climax of the story, Mr. Casey tells of his spitting tobacco in a woman's eye, after she insulted the figure of Kitty O'Shea:

Dante looked terribly angry and repeated while they laughed:

- Very nice! Ha! Very nice!

It was not nice about the spit in the woman's eye.<sup>viii</sup>

This last comment comes from Stephen, and it clearly shows that he can't recognize irony, neither in the situation nor in the story nor in the comment of Dante. Here, he shows himself as a normal child.

This is not the only instance where we can see that. In fact, in this whole stage Stephen is shown as a child, a child that is clearly more inquisitive, more aware of things and more self-questioning than a common child, but a child anyway. A child that begins to be filled with strange sensations produced by words as he grows older. This might be also seen in *Dubliners*, if we consider the theory that Stephen is also the narrator of the first three stories in that work, in his curiosity about the nature of the sickness of Father Flynn in *The Sisters*

Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word paralysis. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.<sup>ix</sup>

Back to *A Portrait*, as Stephen grows further, this fascination with words experience continuous increases and decreases, influenced by his life experiences. While still in Clongowes, Stephen starts making interesting parallels between sounds and other sensory stimuli, as for instance, the parallel sound/pain:

The fellows laughed; but he felt that they were a little afraid. In the silence of the soft grey air he heard the cricket bats from here and from there: pock. That was a sound to hear but if you were hit then you would feel a pain. The pandybat made a sound too but not like that. The fellows said it was made of whalebone and leather with lead inside: and he wondered what was the pain like. There were different kinds of sounds. A long thin cane would have a high whistling sound and he wondered what was that pain like. It made him shivery to think of it and cold: and what Athy said too. But what was there to laugh at in it? It made him shivery: but that was because you always felt like a shiver when you let down your trousers. It was the same in the bath when you undressed yourself. He wondered who had to let them down, the master or the boy himself. O how could they laugh about it that way?<sup>x</sup>

This example takes place during a conversation between Stephen and some of his classmates on the topic of a possible punishment other group of classmates would receive for having incurred in homosexual practices within the college, and the sound *pock* can be heard because they are near the cricket court. A short while before this example, Stephen refers to the sound of the cricket bats as “pick, pack, pock, puck: little drops of water in a fountain slowly falling in the brimming bowl”<sup>xi</sup>; showing us that the sound of those sounds is already important to him in some extent. But the important point here is the parallel Stephen makes between the quality of the sound and the quality of the pain inflicted. It is not the cane that will produce the pain, but the sound itself is painful. In the case of the cricket bat, it will also produce a pain in the case you were hit with it, but the sound will produce the pain, not the actual object. This is the first instance in which we can clearly witness Stephen’s synesthesia. As noted before, for synesthetes the stimulation of one sensory modality reliably causes a perception in one or more different senses, being in this example the cross sensory experience relates sound and pain, being much more than a simple parallel but an experience in which one *is* the other.

Moreover, later on, Stephen continues giving examples of this cross sensory ability, but this time, showing a little disassociation of the experiences, in the scene in which he is pandied by Father Dolan:

A hot burning stinging tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick made his trembling hand crumple together like a leaf in the fire: and at the sound and

the pain scalding tears were driven into his eyes. [...] The soutane sleeve swished again as the pandybat was lifted and a loud crashing sound and a fierce maddening tingling burning pain made his hand shrink together with the palms and fingers in a livid quivering mass.<sup>xii</sup>

Here, although the sensory experience is shown slightly more separately, we can still witness a display of his synesthetic abilities.

Some other instances of synesthetic experience during childhood are those in which he assigns a color to a word, like for instance the word 'wine':

But to drink the altar wine out of the press and be found out by the smell was a sin too: but it was not terrible and strange. It only made you feel a little sickish on account of the smell of the wine. Because on the day when he had made his first holy communion in the chapel he had shut his eyes and opened his mouth and put out his tongue a little: and when the rector had stooped down to give him the holy communion he had smelt a faint winy smell off the rector's breath after the wine of the mass. The word was beautiful: wine. It made you think of dark purple because the grapes were dark purple that grew in Greece outside houses like white temples. But the faint smell of the rector's breath had made him feel a sick feeling on the morning of his first communion.<sup>xiii</sup>

In this passage, Stephen conjoins three different kinds of sensory input: hearing, sight and smell, though this mixture can be seen as being of a different kind. It might appear to us that the mixture between sound and color is not of an actually synesthetic kind. But if we look at the comparison between the beautifulness of the color of the word and the distasteful experience he experiences when smelling its smell we arrive at the conclusion that the color belongs to that word for Stephen, and we can see "a nice color to a bad smell".

These two examples help us to assess the discussion that has been generated on the issue of diagnosing synesthesia to a patient, i.e. in the case of artists if the artist is effectively a synesthete, or if he is only making a contrived exercise of sensory fusion. For Cytowic<sup>xiv</sup> synesthesia is 1) involuntary but elicited (i.e. It is a passive experience that happens to someone. It is unsuppressable, but elicited by a stimulus that is usually identified without difficulty. It cannot be conjured up or dismissed at will, although circumstances of attention and distraction may make the experience seem more or less vivid.); 2) projected (i.e. It is perceived externally in peri-personal space, the limb-axis space immediately surrounding the body, never at a distance as in the spatial teloreception of vision or audition, as projected on a screen near the person's body); 3) durable, discrete and generic ("Durable" means that the

cross-sensory associations do not change over time. This has been shown many times by test-retest sessions given decades apart without warning. “Discrete” means that the synesthete always picks (involuntarily, unconsciously) one experience, whereas non-synesthetes (voluntarily, consciously) pick diffusely over different available selections. “Generic” means that while a non-synesthete might *imagine* a pastoral landscape while listening to Beethoven, what synesthetes experience is unelaborated: they see blobs, lines, spirals, and lattice shapes; feel smooth or rough textures; taste agreeable or disagreeable tastes such as salty, sweet, or metallic.); 4) memorable (i.e. the synesthetic experiences are easy to remember, in fact, is very probable that hypermnemonic people have a high synesthetic component in their ability. The ability to remember things and events is only surpassed by their ability to remember the synesthetic perception itself, e.g. “She had a green name - I forget, it was either Ethel or Vivian.”); 5) emotional and noetic<sup>xv</sup> (i.e. The experience is accompanied by a sense of certainty (the “this is it” feeling) and a conviction that what synesthetes perceive is real and valid. This accompaniment brings to mind that transitory change in self-awareness that is known as ecstasy. Ecstasy is any passion by which the thoughts are absorbed and in which the mind is for a time lost. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James spoke of ecstasy's four qualities of ineffability, passivity, noesis, and transience. These same qualities are shared by synesthesia.) (Cytowic, 1993); Artists (musicians, painters, and, what is relevant for this work, writers, etc.), according to Cytowic, normally do not fulfill these requisites by already failing at the first one, i.e. their synesthetic experiences are not involuntary, neither are they projected outside the individual, and are unstable, irregular and non-generic, probably memorable and emotional but not noetic, that means, they actually don’t know firsthand what the sensation is, they just figure out what it might be like. Summarizing, for authors on synesthesia like Cytowic, artistic displays of synesthesia are all fake synesthesia, and might be better identified as experiments on sensory fusion. Metaphor, literary tropes, sound symbolism, and deliberate artistic contrivances that sometimes employ the term *synesthesia* to describe their multisensory joinings fall into this category. For some authors, this is not unequivocally true. In spite of the fact that many artists (and probably the majority of them) experimented with sensory fusion, without being real synesthetes (for example, color organ musicians at the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>xvi</sup>) it is not absolutely true that all artistic displays on synesthetic experience are fake synesthesia. Some researchers on this field have widened the criteria to define synesthesia. Concerning the first criteria, that of involuntariness, it has been noticed that some synesthetes argue that some of their synesthetic experiences

become more intense when they are more emotionally involved with them. This indicates a more gradual characteristic than the dichotomous criterion that Cytowic suggests. But anyway it continues to be an involuntary experience, which the experiencer does not control. The second criterion on projection has also been widened, to the extent that many synesthetic experiences can occur as an internal mental process, and that some synesthetes have both kinds of experiences. However, the rest of the criteria proposed have proved to be fairly accurate.<sup>xvii</sup>

In the light of these facts, the last example might seem to be failing to the criterion of genericness in the extent that it associates a color to the word *wine* because of the color of the raw material which it was made with. But the association here is an association of the color and the smell, so this non-generic association is irrelevant.

Further on, in chapter two, we can witness another aspect of Stephen's fascination with words:

Trudging along the road or standing in some grimy wayside public house his elders spoke constantly of the subjects nearer their hearts, of Irish politics, of Munster and of the legends of their own family, to all of which Stephen lent an avid ear. Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learnt them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world about them. The hour when he too would take part in the life of that world seemed drawing near and in secret he began to make ready for the great part which he felt awaited him the nature of which he only dimly apprehended.<sup>xviii</sup>

Here, Stephen shows us again his ability to recreate the meanings of words from their sound. Learning unknown words by heart, for later assigning them a meaning and using those meanings to acquire a "dim knowledge" of what waited for him in the real world is not actually a synesthetic trait, but as we have said before, it is a common trend in Stephen's attitude to words. In late childhood and early adolescence this fascination with words experiences a gradual decrease, specifically after one of the most spectacularly long experiences triggered by a word in this work, when the familiar *sound* of the word "admit" uttered by his friend Heron brings up a three-page long passage referring to a past experience he had with him, when Heron forced to admit that Lord Byron was not a good poet and at the same time that he was a heretic poet<sup>xix</sup>. Furthermore, within this very passage we can find a

negative aspect of his word-fondness and his liberal meaning association: He may sometimes not be understood:

On a certain Tuesday the course of his triumphs was rudely broken. Mr Tate, the English master, pointed his finger at him and said bluntly:

– This fellow has heresy in his essay.

A hush fell on the class. Mr Tate did not break it but dug with his hand between his thighs while his heavily starched linen creaked about his neck and wrists. Stephen did not look up. It was a raw spring morning and his eyes were still smarting and weak. He was conscious of failure and of detection, of the squalor of his own mind and home, and felt against his neck the raw edge of his turned and jagged collar.

A short loud laugh from Mr Tate set the class more at ease.

– Perhaps you didn't know that, he said.

– Where? asked Stephen.

Mr Tate withdrew his delving hand and spread out the essay.

– Here. It's about the Creator and the soul. Rrm... rrm... rrm... Ah! *without a possibility of ever approaching nearer*. That's heresy.

Stephen murmured:

– I meant *without a possibility of ever reaching*.

It was a submission and Mr Tate, appeased, folded up the essay and passed it across to him, saying:

– O...Ah! *ever reaching*. That's another story.<sup>xx</sup>

This somewhat funny episode is a display of the difficulties that a person with Stephen's characteristics might face when confronted to real world situations. In assigning his own meaning to words, Stephen is at risk of being misinterpreted, which in some contexts, such as this, might be very dangerous. This is not an inherent characteristic of synesthetes, though, because, as recorded by Dr. Cytowic synesthetic perception does not normally interfere with normal life. But the problems associated to Stephen's fondness of words, if regarded as a result of his synesthetic abilities might be referred to as a somewhat odd example of synesthesia interfering with normal life.



From this passage on, Stephen start showing a constantly decreasing rate of synesthetic experiences. The lowest point of this decrease can be seen during the period his life was ruled by the fear to go to hell. During that retreat period, Stephen shows almost no single instance in which a word evokes a passage of his life, or that a word/sound produces an effect of abstraction in him, except for two references to metaphorical experiences that are not especially synesthetic, rather, they are analogies, of a very ironical nature:

His life seemed to have drawn near to eternity; every thought, word, and deed, every instance of consciousness could be made to revibrate radiantly in heaven; and at times his sense of such immediate repercussion was so lively that he seemed to feel his soul in devotion pressing like fingers the keyboard of a great cash register and to see the amount of his purchase start forth immediately in heaven, not as a number but as a frail column of incense or as a slender flower.

The rosaries, too, which he said constantly –for he carried his beads loose in his trousers' pockets that he might tell them as he walked the streets –transformed themselves into coronals of flowers of such vague unearthly texture that they seemed to him as hueless and odourless as they were nameless.<sup>xxi</sup>

Towards the end of his retreat though, in the episode in which he is going to be offered to take the Jesuit vows, the director of Belvedere tries to probe Stephen's piousness by mentioning the name of a woman's article of clothing people in Belgium name in a mocking way the capuchin priests: *Les jupes* (the skirts). Stephen is aware that he is being probed, and he knows exactly the reason he is being probed for. And he can skillfully conceal that:

The names of articles of dress worn by women or of certain soft and delicate stuffs used in their making brought always to his mind a delicate and sinful perfume<sup>xxii</sup>

Even having passed this test, Stephen refuses to take the vows, not without seriously questioning this decision. It takes a considerable amount of time for him to decide, and during this time of decision he makes another display of his synesthetic experiences. But again, this seems somehow odd, in the sense that it seems not to happily fulfill the definition of a synesthetic experience mentioned above:

“The Reverend Stephen Dedalus, S.J.

His name in that new life leaped into characters before his eyes and to it there followed a mental sensation of an undefined face or colour of a face. The colour faded and became strong like a changing glow of pallid brick red. Was

it the raw reddish glow he had so often seen on wintry mornings on the shaven gills of the priests? The face was eyeless and sour-favoured and devout, shot with pink tinges of suffocated anger. Was it not a mental spectre of the face of one of the jesuits whom some of the boys called Lantern Jaws and others Foxy Campbell?”<sup>xxiii</sup>

Here Stephen himself starts questioning about the nature of his color experience. Undoubtedly, the projection of characters is a synesthetic trait. But the nature of the color association seems somewhat forced, even for Stephen, being referring to the kind of color *glow* a newly shaven face has. Moreover, he has the *mental impression* of a face right after the leaping of the name in front of his eyes. The full concept here, seems to be an idea of what his future life as a Jesuit might be, on the external layer, a projection of the pain such a life might inflict him (a glowing-red newly shaven face is a sure sign of pain for a man); and it has real synesthetic components occurring together with apparently *unconsciously* contrived sensory associations.

This appears to be the point in the novel at which Stephen returns to his previous attitude toward words, this time occurring as a general and violent change, not as gradual as when he turned to that spiritual retreat, but quick and sudden, as the change from a pious and religious boy afraid of going to hell to a bold, fearless and religion-free (almost a self-outcast external observer to religion) adolescent. From this point on, it seems much harder to determine if he is having synesthetic experiences or if he is just using his previous synesthetic experiences to play with words as with the strings or the keys of an instrument, turning his “word treasure” into his own *clavier à lumières*<sup>xxiv</sup>:

He drew forth a phrase from his treasure and spoke it softly to himself:

–A day of dappled seaborne clouds.

The phrase and the day and the scene harmonized in a chord. Words. Was it their colours? He allowed them to glow and fade hue after hue: sunrise gold, the russet and green of apple orchards, azure of waves, the grey-fringed fleece of clouds. No, it was not their colours: it was the poise and balance of the period itself. Did he then love the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their associations of legend and colour? Or was it that, being as weak of sight as he was shy of mind, he drew less pleasure from the reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of a language many-coloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose?”<sup>xxv</sup>

Within this single paragraph Stephen reveals to us all the reasons of his love for words, by means of questioning himself about the source of it. Here we can see his synesthetic color associations explicitly mentioned (*Was it their colours?*); and also the pleasure that the only act of repeating and hearing them produces in him. But most important of all: “*He drew forth a phrase from his treasure and spoke it softly to himself*”. Here, it is explicitly noted that Stephen treasures words and phrases, maintaining them in the vault of his mind to access them at will and play with them whenever he wants to.

Probably, from now on, the approach should be different: Where once was synesthesia, now there is contrived sensory fusion. It appears to be that Stephen starts losing his synesthetic abilities, and transforms them into displays of synesthetic metaphors. In order to do so, he bases them on his prior experiences of actual synesthetic perception during his childhood, assuring thus an accurate recreation of synesthetic experiences. But these, being conjured up at will, as if playing with an instrument cannot be regarded as synesthesia, even if they are based on actual synesthetic experiences. Therefore, at this point we can not still be treating him as a synesthete, because he is actually managing his cross-sensory associations at will.

According to Baron-Cohen<sup>xxvi</sup>, synesthesia might be an ability present in all new-born children, which is either lost gradually or becomes fixed, in the case of adult synesthetes. This has a plausible anatomical basis, if one looks at the transient connections between neural structures in neonates of other species. Thus, the neonatal hamster has transient connections between the retina and the main somatosensory and auditory nuclei of the thalamus, and the kitten has similar transient connections between visual, auditory, somatosensory, and motor cortex. Evidence suggests the same could be true of human neonates. Some evidence suggests this may be true:

During early infancy - and only during early infancy - evoked responses to spoken language (are recorded) not just over the temporal cortex, where one would expect to find them, but over the occipital cortex as well. There are similar reports of wide-spread cortical responses to visual stimuli during the first 2 months of life (e.g., Hoffman, 1978). Results such as these suggest that primary sensory cortex is not so specialized in the young infant as in the adult<sup>xxvii</sup>

As the child grows, the different sensory modalities become increasingly modular presumably because modularity leads to more rapid and efficient information processing, and is therefore highly adaptive. Adult synesthesia might therefore be a failure of the process of

modularization of the brain such as during infancy the modularization process was not completed. And there are reasons to believe that there might be delays in this process and that, therefore, synesthetic abilities are lost in a much later stage. Stephen as an avatar of Joyce probably falls in this last category, i.e., he was a synesthete during childhood, but he lost this ability in some point towards the end of his infancy. But as Cytowic states, synesthesia is *memorable*, that is, synesthetic experiences become fixed in the brain, and they always remain the same.

Therefore, it appears to be that Stephen loses his synesthetic ability in the end, but he remains able to elaborate cross-sensory metaphors, based on the reservoir of synesthetic perception he has at his disposition in his brain, which, in a superficial reading successfully deceives us into making us believe we are faced with displays of synesthetic experiences, but when analyzed slightly more deeply they evidently show their contrived nature, for example, when talking about the word *ivory*:

The word now shone in his brain, clearer and brighter than any ivory sawn from the mottled tusks of elephants. *Ivory, ivoire, avorio, ebur*. One of the first examples that he had learnt in Latin had run: *india mittit ebur*; and he recalled the shrewd northern face of the rector who had taught him to construe the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid in a courtly English, made whimsical by the mention of porkers and potsherds and chines of bacon. He had learnt what little he knew of the laws of Latin verse from a ragged book written by a Portuguese priest.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Ivory, as a shining word. It might even seem a cliché. But it successfully deceives the reader by means of appealing to his complicity. It's very easy to imagine *ivory*, a name to refer to a material possessing a color near to white, and also to such color; as a clear shiny word, because of a simple association of colors, which is not at all synesthetic, but as said before, a cliché.

Some examples of this ability are more refined than others, as the beautiful and subtle image Stephen's boredom in page 149 of *A Portrait*:

The droning voice of the professor continued to wind itself slowly round and round the coils it spoke of, doubling, trebling, quadrupling its somnolent energy as the coil multiplied its ohms of resistance.<sup>xxix</sup>

Here, in spite of the refinement of the metaphor used, it is still only that, a metaphor, and has nothing to do with synesthesia. And, even when some instances of arguably synesthetic

experiences continue to appear, towards the end of the book these are almost inexistent, replaced by this ability of Stephen/Joyce of playing with words and phrases as if they were the strings of a subtle instrument.

As a final remark, it might be interesting to note that at this stage, the young artist is aware of his own fascination with words, and that he tries to find the precise source of the power they exercise over him. But it eludes him. He can not understand why some words seemed to him so vivid and some others seem like dead:

and he found himself glancing from one casual word to another on his right or left in stolid wonder that they had been so silently emptied of instantaneous sense until every mean shop legend bound his mind like the words of a spell and his soul shrivelled up sighing with age as he walked on in a lane among heaps of dead language. His own consciousness of language was ebbing from his brain and trickling into the very words themselves which set to band and disband themselves in wayward rhythms...<sup>xxx</sup>

Shop signs as dead language, as having been emptied of instantaneous sense. The commercial district being considered as a lane filled with heaps dead language. This feeling probably arises as a contrast against the vividness of the words and phrases in his “treasure”. For Stephen, if the language is not used for poetry, it becomes dead, insufficient. When used for billboards it loses its reason to be. And furthermore, the language as it is, is insufficient for his needs of expression. Therefore, useless.

## 7. Conclusion

Although Stephen (as an avatar of Joyce) clearly shows traits of synesthetic abilities, in early childhood, he gradually starts losing them as he grows up and is subjected to different experiences in his life. This is when we can see the beginning of his real passion for language. Before, in childhood, it was only an attraction, but later on, this fascination becomes a passion, when Stephen became able to play with language at will. Probably, as we have seen in this work, the love that Stephen has for words and language stems directly from his early synesthetic perception abilities but only as he starts losing this ability, does he begin to take advantage of this ability, by means of playing with synesthetic metaphors willfully, creating self-convincing cross-sensory associations that cause in him a rapture similar to an instance of synesthesia. But that can not be considered as synesthesia anymore, as long as these new experiences are conjured up at will, a fact that nullifies any possibility of synesthetic perception experiences, it being unconscious, uncontrollable and involuntary. Summarizing, Stephen was a synesthete, but, by the end of *A Portrait* it is very hard to continue classifying him as such.

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<sup>i</sup> Joseph Prescott, James Joyce, a study in words. Appearing in page 80 of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man Notes, Coles, 1970.

<sup>ii</sup> Avatar: n. 1. Hinduism. The manifestation of a deity in human or animal form. 2. a visible manifestation of an abstract concept. (Collins Shorter English Dictionary. Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994). By extension, in some circles, nowadays the word avatar is used to denominate a somewhat



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distorted representation of someone, which is meant to represent the person within an environment, usually virtual, but at the same time, hide his/her actual self from others, as a safety measure. An avatar shares several characteristics with the person represented by him, but the represented person chooses to modify, magnify, diminish, or invent characteristics of his/her personality in order to make the avatar a representation of what he/she wants other people to think he/she is like. Very similarly to the concept of alter ego.

<sup>iii</sup> A Portrait, page 4. All the quotations from A Portrait are extracted from the Wordsworth Classics edition (2001).

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., page 5.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. p.6.

<sup>vi</sup> Richard Cytowic: Synesthesia: Phenomenology and Neuropsychology A Review of Current Knowledge, Washington, 1995. (Electronic edition <http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v2/psyche-2-10-cytowic.html>).

<sup>vii</sup> A memory evaluation method which consists of seven subtests measuring background information of the patient, his current mental state, a characterization of eventual post-traumatic memory defects, the retention of logical and non-logical material, the recall and reproduction of geometric forms, and the learning and repetition of a series of words.

<sup>viii</sup> A Portrait. p. 27.

<sup>ix</sup> Dubliners, The sisters, p. 5. Orange Street Press (1999) Adobe PDF format electronic edition.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid. p. 37.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>xiv</sup> Richard Cytowic: Synesthesia: Phenomenology and Neuropsychology A Review of Current Knowledge, Washington, 1995. (Electronic edition <http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v2/psyche-2-10-cytowic.html>)

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<sup>xv</sup> "Noetic" is a rarely used word that comes from the Greek *nous*, meaning intellect or understanding. It gives us our word "knowledge," and means knowledge that is experienced directly, an illumination that is accompanied by a feeling of certitude. James spoke of a "noetic sense of truth" and the sense of authority that these states impart. Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time (Cytowic, Richard: *Synesthesia: Phenomenology and Neuropsychology a Review of Current Knowledge*, Washington, 1995. (electronic edition <http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v2/psyche-2-10-cytowic.html>)).

<sup>xvi</sup> A family of instruments like the *Tastiera per Luce* or the *Clavecin Oculaire* which emitted different strong color lights, together with the musical notes played in them. Each key of the keyboard had a different color associated; therefore, each note had a different color as well.

<sup>xvii</sup> Crétien Van Campen: *Synesthesia and Artistic Experimentation*, Utrecht, 1997. (Electronic edition available at <http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v2/psyche-3-06-vancampen.html>).

<sup>xviii</sup> *A Portrait*, p.46.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.* p. 59-62.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.* p. 59-60.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.* p.113-114

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.* p. 119.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.* p.124.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Another musical instrument that intends to fuse the senses of hearing and sight (and sometimes, smell); by associating the notes to beams of light, cloud-like shapes and other shapes.

<sup>xxv</sup> *A Portrait*, p.128.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Baron-Cohen, Simon *Is There a Normal Phase of Synaesthesia in Development?*, Cambridge, 1996 (electronic version available at [http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v2/psyche-2-27-baron\\_cohen.html](http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v2/psyche-2-27-baron_cohen.html)).

<sup>xxvii</sup> Dehay, Bullier, and Kennedy, 1984; and reviewed by Maurer, 1993, as cited by Baron-Cohen, 1996.

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<sup>xxviii</sup> A Portrait, p. 138.

<sup>xxix</sup> Ibid. p. 149.

<sup>xxx</sup> Ibid. p. 137.