

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Sep 28, 2022

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/old-age-suspended/>

Giampaolo Lai

Old Age Suspended

1. Overture

Teresa (lying on the couch, silently, for three minutes, before starting to speak with a plain voice, a slow rhythm, and long intervals between words): This morning, Dr. Lai, when I got up, I realized I didn't feel like getting up, and I noticed that this was happening to me a lot lately, just as it often happens that, coming home, I feel like staying in the dark and going to bed to rest. It occurred to me that my father, when he was depressed, did likewise, he didn't get up, withdrew, and kept silent. It also occurred to me that he stopped working just as I have done in this period, that is, I go to work, although my tendency would be, is, to avoid it, or at least not give it any value. This gets me into a little trouble. And always brings me to the inside of things, inside the house, inside my stories. I wonder how I can get out of it, and see that I cannot. I also remembered that, when my father did come out of his depressions, it was when he essentially re-found an interest, in his case, farming. On Saturday and Sunday, when I went to see my mother and found her depressed, among other things, I suddenly had a sort of flash, that I didn't want to become like her, even if I know that, being so depressed, I already am.

Lai: You saw your mother depressed.

2. The assault of images

Teresa: Yes, I saw her depressed, suffering, but less serious than what I had expected. She was already starting to get up, to stay on her feet. I saw her depressed, and I heard from my brother, and perhaps he is right, that she is afraid of dying. Anyway, I have also seen that the presence, the simple presence, of me or of others, relieves her. And I realize that in this period I resemble her very much. In this period, which has been going on for some time, not only I am depressed, but I have had some fantasies, some dreams which I wouldn't say give me difficulty, but do wound me, depress me. All I can do is tell you them. I am also a bit fed up with these images. They have been small things. For instance, yesterday afternoon, I dozed off for half an hour. And I had two fantasies. In the first, I saw my mother, an old woman, with long clothes though, which made me think of my mother, I was half asleep, she was hanged, but there was no rope, nevertheless, it was as if she were hanging dead from a tree. I couldn't see the face, she was dressed like an old aunt of mine. And this image came two or three times. And afterwards I had another image. Then (silence of 15?), it upsets me, but these images come to me, come to me when I am drowsy, these and others that, if I can manage, I'll tell you (silence of 30?). In this period I don't feel any particular resentment toward my mother. And yet, when these images come to me, I feel, I feel bad. I would gladly do without these images.

Lai: You hinted at another image.

Teresa: Yes, in the other image, soon afterward, I see my nephew, a tall, strong young man, I see him half undressed, I don't see his genitals, but I do see some blood oozing from his groin, as if he had been wounded. Another image that struck me so much, but I can't. This was yesterday afternoon. Both are images, but anyway, I have to reckon with the effort of telling you, with the fact that I'm on the verge of

crying. Crying makes the depression even worse. I think that perhaps I feel wicked when I have these images. On the one hand, I wish they weren't there, I would prefer not to think of them, but on the other, it seems that I have committed myself here to give some meaning to things.

Lai: Well, since they've been brought up, perhaps it is better to draw them out.

3. The hanged mother suspended under the tree

Teresa: Only, doctor, it is as if I had hoped that these images, how can I put it, would fade, or that I would be able to accept them, or not think of them. But instead, it is as though there were a fury of these images and dreams.

Lai: These images jump at you with a fury.

Teresa: Yes. And now it comes to my mind that this hanged woman whom I took for my mother, this old woman whose face I don't see, there comes to mind my mother as she is in her photographs, young and beautiful, and I prefer to see my mother like that, just as she prefers to remember herself. My mother told me recently that though she accepts old age, it was still awful being old. For many years my mother has refused to be photographed. Which made me think, when taking a look at myself this morning before going out, that I really wasn't bad-looking (she cries), that I looked pretty good. And, nothing, I thought about how bad I feel inside (silence of 40?). Putting these things in order a bit, and thinking of this image of my mother, whom I now think of more as suspended in the air than hung dead, there was no rope, there was this figure, like the figure of those old women who wore long dresses, and this image vanished, and most likely it was not my mother, it was rather the image of an old woman who is and isn't there. She's there, but not her face.

Lai: You see, with this image, somehow or other you fulfill your desire to suspend old age, to suspend, hang, the old woman.

Teresa: Yes, yes. I was wrong to think... (she cries). Indeed she wasn't there. It's a moment of suspension. Because I'm afraid for myself. I'm also afraid for my mother. Because I can't bear the thought of not having my mother. She is the only strong bond I have (silence lasting about one minute).

4. The results of the shift from the old mother hanged to old age hung

Teresa (after one minute of silence): If I come back to the image of the dream, detaching myself from the fear, from my sense of guilt for having thought of the hanging of my mother, if I think of the suspension of old age, I think of my fear of getting old without having lived the relationship with Anthony. (Silence of 20?) This kind of consideration, doctor, of hanging old age apart from the fact that it makes me feel better compared to the meaning which I had attributed to the other image gives me a boost of energy, like other times after I've been here.

Lai: It gives you energy.

Teresa: Yes. I realized, several times, when I've come here, in this state of exhaustion, I realized, even last time, that when I return home I start doing a few practical things. But this lasts only a very short time. I can't manage to sustain an interest. But now, after discovering this, about the hanging of old age, I feel like running (she laughs) in order not to waste time, I feel like telling myself, come on, get going. But instead, I notice that after a first start, I fall back heavily on the images, the emotions, the stillness, the removing myself from the world, from work. Yes, I get something from it, indeed now having discovered this I really do get something, yes, but it is as if these little bursts of energy could not combine to prevail upon the incapacity, upon the indifference, upon the return of the images.

5. The eidetic imagery

This recorded fragment of conversation transcribed here shows some particularly interesting elements. First of all the assault of images on Teresa. Traditional psychiatry has studied the phenomenon of images that burst onto the visual field of a person, using the term eidetic imagery, from the Greek eidesis, 'knowledge', and that referred to cognitive, logico-intellectual activity based on visual perception. Other terms were hypnagogic images (if the images appeared when falling asleep) or hypnopompic images (if they occurred upon awakening). Whatever Teresa's case, what is the most interesting for the development of the conversation is that they are visual perceptions, localized in space, whose description and interpretation, at least for Teresa who bears them, belongs to visual semantics.

These images come and go beyond Teresa's choice and will. They come repeatedly, even "two or three times", and leave her hurt, sad, confused. Teresa would like not to think of them but feels compelled to do so. They are images that impose themselves upon her, that come from outside, sent by the Cosmos and by the gods, that generate confusion, fear, panic. They are fragments of Chaos fallen from nothingness. They are not constructed by Teresa, who is merely an astonished onlooker.

6. An unreliable testimony

The main investigative curiosity in this fragment of conversation lies perhaps in questioning the shift in a visual image from that of the hanged mother to that of old age suspended brought about by an acoustic sentence. On second look, we immediately become aware that these expressions are quite approximate. To make them clearer, let us pose the following questions: what is the relationship between what we see and what we say we see? what is the relationship between perceptive structures and linguistic structures? how is it possible to pass from a personal, private, visual experience to its interpersonal communication?

Teresa has passed from a visual representation an object of her private, visual universe to an acoustic representation an object of the interpersonal acoustic universe through a series of modifications of the original visual object. Teresa says: "I saw my mother...hanged." Had Teresa's speech act been restricted to the sentence just quoted, the listener Lai would have felt himself authorized, from the literal use of the past participle, hanged, to construct a visual object in which a woman is hanged by a rope around the neck. But Teresa had used a whole series of parenthetical sentences which, while obliging the listener Lai to modify the visual object he might reasonably have built, also modified the visual object about which Teresa was speaking, i.e. the image by which she had been assaulted. Indeed, no sooner has Teresa specified the visual object: "my mother", than she hurries to retract her perception with some corrections: "my mother, well, an old woman with long clothes, and I thought of my mother." Thus Teresa did not actually see her mother. She saw the figure of an old woman who might perhaps be her mother, but with a long dress, a style not usually worn by her mother. Indeed, Teresa at once explains that, "she was dressed like an old aunt of mine". Moreover, Teresa does not see the face of the old woman: "of this old woman whose face I don't see." Finally, unequivocally, Teresa says: "she probably was not my mother".

So Teresa has seen a composite figure in which the old aunt with long clothes, and a generic old woman whose face is not seen, converge. Upon this composite and not easily identifiable figure, Teresa has built a series of mental constructions: "and I thought of my mother"; "that hanged woman I took for my mother"; "this old woman whose face I don't see, I think of my mother". It is unthinkable that in a trial, either the defender or prosecutor would accept Teresa's testimony of having seen her mother.

But Teresa not only says she has seen her mother: she adds that she has seen her mother hanged: "I saw my mother...hanged." Here too, Teresa's testimony on her visual perception is anything but certain. After having said she has seen her mother, who perhaps is not her mother, but an old aunt, or a generic old woman, whose face she does not see but only the long dress like those worn by old women, and after having provided the dramatic detail that her mother was hanged, Teresa adds some apparently contradictory parenthesis even about the very fact of the hanging: "there was no rope, nevertheless it was as though she hung dead from a tree"; "my mother, whom I now think of rather as suspended in the air than hanged dead, there was no rope". In our fictional trial, Teresa would surely have been considered an unreliable witness.

Luckily, we are not at a trial where the exercise of suspicion dominates, but rather we are following a scientific argument where the exercise of respect [for every witness's word] prevails.

7. The relationship between visual perception and language

But let us come back to our previous question, the relationship between what one sees and what one claims to see, and in particular, the relationship between what Teresa has seen and what Teresa tells Lai she has seen. We could say, from a very general point of view, that Teresa had seen a visual object the image which assaulted her and had then presented to Lai an acoustic object that refers, perhaps, to some visual object different from the original one. Or better, that Teresa had presented not one, but several, acoustic objects, each of which referred to a different visual object (the mother and the old woman, the hanged [dead] and the [hung] suspended, and so on). Going more into detail, we might say that Teresa probably saw an image, a visual object, pictographically representable by a small figure dressed in long, turn-of-the-century clothes, glimpsed from behind, whose legs do not touch the ground, yet with hands that do not cling to anything, like Chagall's images. This is probably the eidetic or hypnagogic image sent to Teresa by the gods. But why, then, did Teresa change this image into the form of another, different, visual object, corresponding roughly to the acoustic object: "I see my mother hanging dead"?

7.1. The normalization of Chaos

A visual object, in Teresa's case, a human body, suspended [hung] in the air, against the laws of gravity, is a chaotic object. We call it chaotic object because it is situated outside the realm of signs which convey a meaning to our habitual objects, deprived of the reassuring direction that allows us to move in the world. It is a chaotic object because it arouses confusion and chaos; more properly, because it is a fragment of Chaos, the Directionless. It seems that every time a human being finds himself in the presence of the chaos that assaults him, threatens to throw him into the abyss, he builds up a series of webs within which to capture Chaos itself and so to normalize it, render it harmless. The operation performed by Teresa upon her visual chaotic object the image of a woman [hung] suspended in air, without any support, uncomprehensible for its absurd lack of sense, of direction, an image which becomes that of the hanged mother [hanged dead], full of tragic sense is part of the phenomenon that may properly be called the cognitive correction of perception. For instance, speeding at 200 kilometers an hour down the highway, we perceive the road coming up fast before us, and the trees racing by, like in Macbeth's realized prophecy. At the same time, we perceive ourselves, as well as the car, as motionless. And yet we know that we are moving together with the car, and that the ground and the trees are motionless.

Here we have the phenomenon that we may call cognitive-perceptive dissonance. Yet, in our ordinary highway driving, we perform a complex, and at the same time simple, operation, which leads to a correction of our perception of being still and makes us perceive what we know, i.e., that we are moving. To paraphrase the philosopher, perception tells us that we are still, knowledge tell us that we are moving and in the end, knowledge wins. All of of this to avoid the unintelligible abyss of Chaos.

Teresa's cognitive-perceptive dissonance leads her to two acoustic objects, and to two corresponding visual objects. It is not easy to establish whether the procedure we have tried to show develops from a primary visual object successively corrected through a cognitive argument, in the form of a verbal hypothesis, or whether there is a two-way exchange between the acoustic object (which derives from the visual one), and the visual object which is modified by the acoustic one (which modifies itself with the telling of the acoustic object). In other words, it is not at all easy to establish which comes first (the visual perception or the acoustic representation). In Teresa's case, it seems that at first there stands the visual object, from which the acoustic object originates, even if, afterwards, the acoustic object can modify, to a certain extent, the original visual object.

8. A play on words

After this long parenthetical digression surrounding the passage from the visual object to the acoustic one (how can one pass from a visual, private, personal experience to an acoustic, public, interpersonal communication?), we come back to the crucial question posed in Section 6, on the problem of a shifting of a visual image produced by an acoustic sentence. The passage, in other words, from the image of the hanged dead mother to that of hanged old age a passage enhanced, as we have seen, by Lai's phrase to Teresa: "You see, with this image, somehow, you fulfill the desire to hang [suspend] old age, hang [suspend] the old woman". We could skip over any complicated research by sustaining that this is just an amusing and clever play on words, which might also explain Teresa's sense of well-being after a witty word game [aesthetic pleasure]. But what is of interest in this conversation from both the theoretical and, even more, from the practical, technical point of view, is: through which mechanism was the pun in question realized? When Teresa poses her central narrative plot "I saw my mother hanged, suspended under the tree" she orients the reference of her story upon a visual object, situated in a visual universe, as her opening speech explicitly announces: "I saw my mother." In other words, Teresa, to account for her perception, uses a pictographic key. Thus the image assumes, for Teresa who is speaking and for Lai who is listening, a visual semantic value, immediately adherent to the object represented by the very same image itself, with the shape of an old woman hung under a tree, perhaps the mother, and perhaps, but not surely, hanged dead.

But, even if the reference of Teresa's spoken words (what she says she has seen) focalizes the perceptual attention upon a visual object (what Teresa has seen), this reference to a visual object nevertheless passes through an acoustic channel and takes the form of an acoustic object the words pronounced by Teresa and heard by Lai in the acoustic universe. In this shift between a visual object and an acoustic one, a break in the conversational convention may, as indeed does happen here, take place. In other words, as conversational rules require, Lai ought to have utilized the acoustic object (what Teresa says she has seen) as a translation, as a simple and not subsequently questionable indicator of her [visual] reference object (what Teresa has seen). Instead, Lai's operation consists in escaping from the conversational convention and in bringing into question the acoustic object. The very word "hanged" [sospesi], in Teresa's sentences, is no more the acoustic univocal signifier that opens the visual channel at the end of which lies the visual object of the hanged mother, suspended in a void. "Hanged" [sospesa] remains in the acoustic object, within which it travels in order to open a conceptual channel at the end of which, thanks to its polysemy, we find the meaning of hanged/suspended, in the sense of interrupted. So, the old woman hanging [suspended] in the void is no longer the hanged mother but old age hung, suspended, interrupted. The passage from the quantifiable particular of Teresa's visual image to the universality of Lai's conceptualization is certainly facilitated by Teresa's description, which speaks first about her mother, then about her aunt, and then about an old woman in general. All of which fosters the passage to a propedeutical generalization and universalization of the concept: "Old age suspended."

9. The happiness effect following the shift in the image

In conclusion, what interests us uppermost is the happiness effect following the shift in the image, presented by Teresa as a visual object the mother hanged dead and restituted by her interlocutor Lai as an acoustic object the verbal description of old age hung (suspended, interrupted). Teresa speaks of this result in explicit terms: a detachment from guilt feelings, a sense of greater well-being, an escape from the deadly stillness which engulfed her before the shift: "detaching myself from the fear, from the guilt feelings which I had from thinking about the hanging of my mother, if I now think of the suspension of old age"; "such a consideration, doctor, of hanging old age, apart from the fact that it makes me feel better with respect to the meaning I had attributed to this image.... gives me a bit of energy"; "so now, having discovered this, about suspending old age, I feel like running (she laughs) in order not to waste time, I feel like telling myself, come on, get going". Let us recall that Teresa had started off by telling me of her difficulty to move, to do things, to work; of her reluctance to get out of bed, out of the house; of her need to stay at home, in bed, in silence, in the dark, far from all activities. Let us refer to all this as the departure situation, S1. Let us call the arrival situation S2 at time T characterized by Teresa's willingness to move, to start running. Well, from all this we can see that the result, in terms of the difference between S1 and S2, using the formula $S1 - T - S2$, can be considered nothing less than having made a very happy difference.

Summary.

We have presented a recorded fragment of a psychoanalytic conversation between the patient Teresa and the therapist Lai. The conversation is characterized by the shift from Teresa's visual object the hanged mother to a conceptual object old age hung (suspended, interrupted) through Lai's play on the polysemic word "sospesa", which can mean either hanged dead, hung, suspended, or interrupted. A shift which brought about an immediate well-being in Teresa. Can the play on words used in this conversation be considered an interpretation? a psychoanalytic interpretation?