

Historical and Cultural Comparisons Between Jean Follain's "Face the Animal" and Laila Al-Sa'ih's "Intimations of Anxiety"

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Primary Assertion

Historical and cultural lenses are productive literary approaches to use, especially when analyzing literature that is inspired by a certain *chronotope*, or time and space. Specifically, it seems worthwhile to use the biographical contexts of Palestinian writer, Laila Al-Sa'ih, while comparing her poem, "Intimations of Anxiety," to French writer, Jean Follain's poem, "Face the Animal," because both writers construct their poems in a way that highlight the **postwar emotion** they personally endured.

Author Background & War Influence

- Al-Sa'ih was born in 1936 in Palestine (Cooke 16).
- "Intimations of Anxiety" is described as Al-Sa'ih's "poetic diary" of the **1982 Israeli invasion** of Beirut, Lebanon (16).



(Sabra Refugee Camp, 1982)

- Follain was born in Normandy, France, living from 1903-1971 (*Poetry Foundation*); France was a World Power in both World Wars during his lifetime.
- "Jean Follain's work is inextricably linked to Canisy, the small Normandy town where he was born in 1903... **World War I** changed the social patterns and the psychic landscape of Europe beyond recognition" (Bankier 28).



(La rue du Verger in Ypres, 1915 World War I)

The Texts

"Intimations of Anxiety" (lines 1-15)

You do not know how hard it is,
transfiguring blood into ink—
emerging from one's secret dream
to voicing the dream.

Perhaps I need years to understand
what swirls within me when we meet.
Do you know that constellations of cities and paths tangle
restlessly in the sand?
I do not know the name
for such sweet incandescence.
Even now I have not discovered all the stars
fanning out in the soul and body
like eloquent shining symbols.

Under a mass of snow
a violet is patiently waiting.

"Face the Animal"

It's not always easy
to face the animal
even if it looks at you
without fear or hate
it does so fixedly
and seems to disdain
the subtle secret it carries

it seems better to feel
the obviousness of the world
that noisily day and night
drills and damages
the silence of the soul.

Works Cited

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- "Jean Follain." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation.
- "La rue du Verger in Ypres." 1915, "Approaches to Jean Follain," Wild Court, 2020.
- "1982 Israeli Invasion." 1982, BBC News, 2008.

Analysis of "Intimations of Anxiety"

- What does the title mean?
 - An "intimation" is a foreboding sense. Al-Sa'ih explicitly suggests how overwhelming lurking anxiety can feel.
- "You do not know how hard it is, / transfiguring blood into ink— / emerging from one's secret dream to voicing the dream" (1-4).
 - "blood into ink" is a metaphor for anxiety's potential to turn into something good or useful
 - The blood directly links to the 1982 Israeli Invasion.
 - As difficult as it is to verbalize one's deepest thoughts, there is a possibility of "voicing the dream."
- "Under a mass of snow / a violet is patiently waiting" (14-15).
 - Using the concept of transfiguration again, Al-Sa'ih juxtaposes a dreary mass of snow to the beautiful and hopeful image of a flower in the springtime.
 - Like the change of seasons, there is a malleability in human emotions, even ones as perturbed as anxiety.

Analysis of "Face the Animal"

- What does the title mean?
 - More than likely, the hardship of facing "the animal" is overcoming "fear or hate" (4) as Follain writes.
- "It seems better to feel / the obviousness of the world / that noisily day and night / drills and damages / the silence of the soul" (8-12).
 - The speaker suggests that it is best to *feel* the uncomfortable and scary feelings of the world, particularly in war, though they may be "noisy" and "drill," or work, feverishly against you.

Comparing the Texts

- Similarities
 - The theme offered in both poets' first lines: overcoming anxiety or other personal feats is admittedly "hard" (Al-Sa'ih 1) and "not always easy" (Follain 1).
 - Both speakers mention "secrets," otherwise the repression of their emotions.
- Differences
 - While both poems speak to internal conflict, the struggle is more ambiguous in "Face the Animal," while the struggle in "Intimations of Anxiety" pointedly names anxiety as the primary conflict.
 - Follain envelops the message to confront whatever one's personal "animal" is—facing love, death, war, and pain, among others.
 - Tone
 - Al Sa'ih simply *suggests* her audience transform their anxiety into optimism.
 - Follain *asserts* his audience to "face the animal," a performative act.