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It is difficult to read past Hassan Khan's preface to his *Nine Lessons learned from Sherif El-Azma* (2009). It is as difficult not to return to the preface once, and if, the concise and dense 33 pages of the book are read through. Difficult because there is a weight to the many qualifiers and cautionary phrases that riddle the preface for it to simply be a preliminary statement that sets forth purpose and scope. Rather, it reads like a tortured attempt to urgently speak before the text proper speaks, to want to say much, and linger before the nine lessons are explained. It does so because before the stated task of the text is set forth, before Khan tells of his relationship with El-Azma, and before the nine lessons elaborate the complex network of an anxiety of influence, a friendship seems to be at stake.

In the preface Khan is aware that his book could damage, could possibly do wrong. For the attempt to come "to terms with a friendship" runs the risk of enfolding a friendship, that is of giving it a shape, one that could stand in its stead. As aware as any writer can be, Khan organizes the *nine folds* of his relationship with El-Azma within an agonistic space which sets up the two subjectivities relatively apart even if drawn together within a contentious space. The nine lessons build a tangle of near-paradoxes, and inconclusive insights, which tell us much about Khan, the nervous and attentive writer, and of El-Azma, the uneasy video maker. But aware as the author is, and interesting as the lessons are, the book has an exposed nerve and it is elsewhere. To be precise, it lies in what the preface toils at mitigating (this is just beautifully stated). Bluntly said, the preface intimates the knowledge that a friendship cannot survive a dissection, even one as nuanced and indefinite as Khan's with El-Azma: a friendship, when given a shape must already be written following a death. Could the preface therefore begin, as it does, with anything but the negative "This is not an homage"? In the preface, the tone of the book is already set and the nerve exposed: Khan is embarking on a costly journey, divulging what makes, or at least made a friendship. Costly, because in divulgement there is a precipitation of an end, an abrupt assessment of what in principle circumscribes the two friends, the assessor and the assessed or, as in Khan's preferred but incomplete dyadic terminology, the antagonist and the author, allegedly a protagonist. The stated aim of coming "to terms with a friendship" is therefore beset in the preface with thinking belatedly, as all prefaces come after the act, the costly act of articulating a set of terms for a friendship.

Yet Khan's book is more complex or rather less controlled than one might assume. The preface, in as much as it wants to linger, cannot but lead into the mains of the text. It is a speaking that is already entangled in a forward course. Cautious as he is to embark, Khan's careful reconstruction of El-Azma as a *dear* antagonist throughout the nine lessons harbors a contrary

movement. For in several of the lessons, a representation of El-Azma is punctuated by a search for, or affirmation of, a presence. This is done through the deployment of portentous, conceptual terms which send the writer, against the general grain of his own text, in search of a disappearing friend whose tangibility is increasingly abated by his shaping as an antagonist within the formalized conflict of a literary agon. We read of “the space of epiphanies”, of “the voice tainted by its very own presence”, and perhaps most noticeably of El-Azma who “secretly subscribes to an animism where the figure of the signifier is implicitly possessed by its function – by what it signifies”. Conceptual terms which, even if not inadvertent, erupt nevertheless in the text as if in an attempt to safeguard what is offered for exchange, to retract what has already been said, and said too well.

From within the folds of the nine lessons, a friendship appears, one that is tested and interrogated to the point of misgiving. On whether a friendship should either be kept or told, Khan answers with a complex disruption. The resultants are lessons haunted by the teacher.

--Walid Sadek

Walid Sadek is an artist and writer living in Beirut. He is currently associate professor at the Department of Architecture and Design at the American University of Beirut.