Preface: From Memory to History... and Back

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When memory ceases to be omnipresent, it ceases to be present at all unless some isolated individual decides to assume responsibility for it. The less collective the experience of memory is, the greater the need for individuals to bear the burden...

Pierre Nora
Les Lieux de mémoire

In Journey to the Morea, the great Cretan writer Nikos Kazantzakis tells a moving story about a visit he once made to Sparta with the poet Angelos Sikelianos:

A curious flower upon a fence had caught our eye; we stopped to pluck it. Children clustered around us.

“What do you call this flower?” we asked.

No one knew. Then a dark-haired little boy jumped up: “Auntie Lenio will know!” he said.

“Run and call her!” we told him.

The little boy ran off toward the town, and we waited, holding the flower. We admired it, sniffed it, but were impatient; we longed for the word. And then, in a short while, the boy returned.

“Auntie Lenio,” he said, “died the other day.”

Our hearts constricted. We sensed that a word had perished; perished, and now no one could place it in a verse and render it immortal. We were terrified. Never had death seemed to us so
irrevocable. And we left the flower spread out on the fence, like a corpse.¹

As the pace of change has quickened in the last century, many others have shared the fate of this now nameless flower. And in countries where rejection of the past has been raised to the status of a state creed, this has happened all the faster, and with greater vigor.

Therein lies the significance of our friend and mentor Üğur Derman. He is, to be sure, an important scholar whose encyclopaedic knowledge and prodigious productivity are matched only by his highly refined connoisseurship. But more important still, he is one of the precious few who still remember the names of those flowers so many have seen fit to forget. Like the “Book People” in Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451—who wandered about the forest repeating their chosen texts to themselves in anticipation of the day when they would each be called in to recite them so that they could once again be set in type—Üğur Derman has been a living vessel through which much knowledge on the Islamic arts of the book has been conveyed to the present. Having had the good fortune of apprenticing himself to the great calligrapher and polymath Necmeddin Okyar, he has spent his life repaying his debt to his master by sharing his knowledge with the rest of the world. And for this, more than anything else, we owe him a debt of gratitude.

Yes, Üğur Derman remembers. Those who have had the pleasure of knowing him personally cannot have failed to marvel at his extraordinary powers of recall. But does everyone also appreciate the fact that remembering, in this case as in many others, is a politically committed act? The exercise of power over a society is, in part, contingent upon the control of its memories; as Paul Connerton writes,

The attempt to break definitively with an older social order encounters a kind of historical deposit and threatens to founder upon it. The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more inimically will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting. ... The mental enslavement of the subjects of a totalitarian regime begins when their memories are taken away. ... The struggle of citizens against state power is the struggle of their memory against forced forgetting.²

Thus, memory is always politically contested territory, and by refusing against all odds to forget, Üğur Derman has done more than just burden himself with loads of officially sanctioned facts: he has also quietly waged a battle against misguided policies that have equated modernization with the wholesale abandonment of cultural heritage.

It is in a way ironic that a volume on the arts of the book should begin with words extolling the virtues of a man’s memory; after all, memory has always been viewed with considerable suspicion in literate societies. “Hafiza-i beşer, nisyan ile malûlmir” (Human memory is afflicted by forgetfulness) runs a well-known Ottoman proverb. Indeed, going back several centuries, it is related that Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyân said: صاحب الحفظ مغفور وصاحب التفاؤل مسروور (He who relies on memory is misled; and he who relies on the record is happy),³ and that ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib likewise said: علوم و حكمة هما بيتها بالكتابة (Sciences are fugitive; tie them down with writing).⁴ But there are special circumstances surrounding the case of Üğur Derman and the Islamic arts of the book. Although involved in the production of the written record, the arts of the book—including even calligraphy itself—were paradoxically deeply imbued with memory in both their transmission and their practice. On the one hand, they were learned not from textbooks, but rather through strongly ritualized, performative social processes involving student and teacher; on the other, artists honed their skills by ceaseless repetition, to the point where the shapes and proportions of letters became second nature to them, depending more on force of habit than on conscious action. In other words, what was—to use Connerton’s terminology—an inscribing practice was sustained primarily through incorporating practices, challenging his assertion that “the transition from an oral culture to a literate culture is a transition from incorporating practices to inscribing practices.”⁵

In 1928, however, a continuous oral tradition passed from master to apprentice with such care and scrupulousness that entire artistic genealogies can now be reconstructed, was brought to an abrupt end. With the switch to Latin script, and the cultural repression that accompanied it, the incorporating practices that had sustained the arts of the book for centuries stopped being viable. Some calligraphers, notably the great Hamid Aytaç, died in penury; others, like the virtuosic Halim Özyazi⁶

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¹ Nikos Kazantzakis, Journey to the Morea (New York, 1965), pp. 89-90.
⁴ Ibid., p. 32.
⁵ Connerton, p. 75.
who became a gardener, put their skilled hands to hard labour in order to 
subsist. A few were able to hang on, because their jobs did not directly 
conflict with their practice of calligraphy; Necmeddin Okyay, who held a 
 quasi-hereditary position as prayer leader at an Üsküdar mosque, was one 
of those. Still, it was obvious that the art could not continue in the same 
mode as it had for so many generations. The time had come, for better or 
for worse, to commit it—at least in part—to writing. Uğur Derman rose to 
the challenge.

It has been argued that history begins where memory ends.6 As the 
French historian Pierre Nora writes,

Memory is life, always embodied in living societies and as such in 
permanent evolution, subject to the dialectic of remembering and 
forgetting, unconscious of the distortions to which it is subject, 
vulnerable in various ways to appropriation and manipulation, and 
capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly 
reawakened. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always 
problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is always a 
phenomenon of the present, a bond tying us to the eternal present; 
history is a representation of the past.

Indeed, Nora qualifies history as the way in which “modern societies 
organize a past they are condemned to forget because they are driven by 
change.” In living memory, “every one of our acts, down to the most 
quotidian, would be experienced, in an intimate identification of act and 
meaning, as a religious repetition of sempiternal practice. With the 
appearance of “the trace,” of distance and mediation, however, we leave 
the realm of true memory and enter that of history.”7

Clearly Nora over-romanticizes the role of collective memory in 
so-called “traditional” societies; the degree of commonality of thought 
and singleness of purpose that he envisages has arguably not existed since 
homo sapiens. He also universalizes conclusions based upon the study of France to a degree that has been 
justifiably challenged since the publication of his seminal essay. Still, it is 
no doubt true that modernity has reduced the role of societal memory in 
everyday life; our existence is now governed by a fast changing set of 
stimuli that call for improvisational prowess much more than for a vast 
and intimate fund of shared memories, common practices, and collective 
beliefs. To compensate for this loss, we have greatly accelerated the 
establishment of archives, the construction of monuments, the observance 
of commemorative rituals—the invention of traditions whose novelty 
believes their avowed timeless; we have produced, in short, what Nora 
calls “realms of memory”: as he has famously written, “there are sites, 
lieux de mémoire, in which a residual sense of continuity remains ... 
because there are no longer any milieux de mémoire, settings in which 
memory is a real part of everyday experience”8 No more than a 
“prosthetic memory,” these sites 
are fundamentally vestiges, the ultimate embodiments of a 
commemorative consciousness that survives in a history which, having 
renounced memory, cries out for it. The notion has emerged because 
society has banished ritual. It is a notion produced, defined, established, 
constructed, decreed, and maintained by the artifice and desire of a 
society fundamentally absorbed by its own transformation and renewal. 
By its very nature that society values the new over the old, youth over 
old age, the future over the past.

Sites of memory come to be as “moments of history are plucked out of the 
flow of history, then returned to it—no longer quite alive but not yet 
entirely dead, like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory 
has receded.”9 They are marginal to society, akin to places one visits, but 
not places in which one lives.

There can be little doubt that pre-Republican artifacts, and 
especially Ottoman script, are in this sense “sites of memory” in 
contemporary Turkey. In spite of the omnipresence of calligraphy in the 
urban fabric of old cities like Istanbul, in spite of all the much-visited 
museums and exhibitions, in spite even of a tremendously inflationary 
antiques market where works of calligraphy can command top prices, 
such works represent something very different today: an En'âm copied by 
Şeyh Hamdullah or a monumental panel composed by Mustafa Rakim 
simply do not have the same meaning for our contemporaries as they did a 
century ago. Nor is this difference due simply to the fact that most modern 
Turks do not read Ottoman script; after all, the majority of Ottomans were 
iliterate. Rather, the difference between people’s experience of Islamic

6 See, for example, Maurice Halbwachs, La Mémoire collective, ed. Gerard Namer and 
Marie Jaussi (Paris, 1997).
7 Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between Memory and History,” Realms of 
owe my introduction to the work of Nora, not to mention my interest in memory in 
general, to Hélène Lipstadt.
8 Ibid., p. 1.
9 Ibid., p. 6-7.
calligraphy today and in times past has to do with the place it holds in the popular psyche, in the collective memory. For all the commercial and scholarly attention directed to it nowadays, calligraphy is at present no more than an inert historical artifact; like an insect preserved in amber, it is admired for its beauty, but it is lifeless nevertheless.

Uğur Derman gives us a way out of this impasse. The more than twenty years he spent with the last great traditional master, not to mention his many interactions with Dr. Şüheyl Ünver, Macid Ayral, Halim Özyazıcı, and so many others, have endowed him with a unique perspective into the days when the Islamic arts of the book were something more than merely the object of dispassionate scholarship. And the path to that unique perspective goes through his memory. It is little wonder, then, that the Arabic root حفظ - حافظ - حافظ - yields the words for both remembrance and preservation, both memory and standing guard; indeed, while حافظ is one who has memorized the entire Qur’an “the protector,” is one of the ninety-nine names of God. Memory is preservation, remembrance is protection. To be sure, the practice of historiography does not rely on social memory, and long-forgotten events can be reconstructed many years after the last eyewitness has vanished. Archival research may recover many facts about the arts of the book, some no doubt unknown even to Uğur Derman, and this is certainly an avenue to pursue most vigorously; but he, personally, is a bridge that gives us passage to a milieux de mémoire not accessible through even the best of scholarship. The year 2000 marks his sixty-fifth birthday, the year 2001 the fortieth anniversary of his first publication on the subject of calligraphy. Both occasions very much merit celebration; yet, though I cannot speak for all the other contributors to this volume, I, for my part, wish to salute him first and foremost for being an “honne-mémoire.” He has taught us so much; may he continue to do so for many years to come.18

18 I am grateful to Nihat İovan and Selim Derman for their invaluable assistance with the preparation of this volume.
Uğur Derman, kendisinden faydalanabileceği üç muhterem hocasyyla. Uğur Derman with his three eminent teachers. Mâhir İz, Necmeddin Okyay, Sühely Ünver. (Koşuyolu, 31 Temmuz/July 1963)

Hattat Mâcid Ayral’ın defnedildiği gün. On the day of the funeral of the calligrapher Mâcid Ayral. Süheyl Ünver, Necmeddin Okyay, Uğur Derman. (Kasıkköy, 19 Mart/March 1981)

Hattat Hâmid Aytac ve Halim Özyazıcı'yla birlikte Uğur Derman. The calligraphers Hâmid Aytac and Halim Özyazıcı with Uğur Derman. (14 Ağustos/August 1963)

Uğur Derman, Necmeddin Okey ve Halim Özyazıcı hocalarıyla. Uğur Derman with his teachers Necmeddin Okey and Halim Özyazıcı. (1963)

Necmeddin Hoca, Neyzen Niyazi Sayın ve Uğur Derman'la. Necmeddin Okey with the ney player Niyazi Sayın and Uğur Derman. (1966)
Halim Hoca'yla Uğur Derman İstanbul Üniversitesi merkez binası bahçesinde. Halim Orayancı and Uğur Derman on the campus of Istanbul University. (Yüllü/September 1960)

“Bu da geçer, yâ hâ.” Uğur Derman hattı (1380/1960-61). Tezhih, İnci A. Birol’a aiddir (1984); ara suyu ise Mustafa Düziğerman’ın kumu ebrüübüler. “This too shall pass, O Lord.” Calligraphy by Uğur Derman, 1380/1960-61, Illumination by İnci A. Birol (1984); the marbled paper of the inner border is by Mustafa Düziğerman. (İnci A. Birol koleksiyonu, Collection of İnci A. Birol.)

“Barakallâh Te’alâ.” Uğur Derman hattı (1387/1967). “The blessing of God, may His name be exalted.” Calligraphy by Uğur Derman (1387/1967). (Mustafa Düziğerman koleksiyonu, Collection of Mustafa Düziğerman.)


Edirne'de Meriç nehri üzerine Sultan Abdülmeclid tarafından 1258/1852'de yaptırılan köprüün, Bulgarlar tarafından kazımış kitabesinin, Uğur Derman hatlarıyla yemelimesi halı (1386/1966). Dedicatory inscription on a bridge constructed by Sultan Abdülmeclid in 1258/1852 across the river Meriç in Edirne, rewritten by Uğur Derman after being destroyed by Bulgarians (1386/1966).

Uğur Derman'ın hatib ve çiçekli ebru çalışması (1958). Marbled paper in the hatib (corolla) and çiçekli (with flowers) style (1958).

Uğur Derman 65 yaşında. Uğur Derman at 65.