

Past and Present of
Autobiographical Writing
in Turkey

Autobiography in fragments: reading Ottoman personal miscellanies in the early modern era¹

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We live in an autobiographical culture. We tend to ascribe a greater degree of authenticity to the autobiographical accounts of actual persons than to accounts written about them by others. Even a novel that we read assumes an altogether new significance, when we are told that it is autobiographical. Whatever may have been written about the impossibility of autobiography or its uncertain boundaries in the last twenty or thirty years, all indicate that we are far from having lost our fascination with the autobiographical. Perhaps the latest evidence for this on the scholarly front is the ongoing search for and discoveries of autobiographical accounts that were written not only in the historical geography labeled “the West,” but also in other historical contexts from late Ming and early Qing China to the Islamic Near East before the modern era.² It is also in this conjuncture that Ottomanists have discovered that Ottoman literati left written records of their lives more often than was once thought and that the earliest of these records predated the so-called period of Westernization by at least three centuries.³

But just what did the personal narratives recently discovered in Ottoman literature mean to the people who composed them? How did Ottoman literati classify these texts and how did they read them, if they read them at all? What significance, if any, did Ottoman readers and writers ascribe to the use of the autobiographical register in different literary genres? Was there any room for the autobiographical in the mental universe of Ottoman literati before their exposure to modern European examples of the genre? We need to seriously consider these questions if we do not want to simply read the Ottoman texts in the light of our modern (or postmodern, as the case might be) notions of “autobiography,” “life writings,” or “egodocuments.”

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Jan Schmidt and Dr. Maurits van den Boogert as well as the director and staff of the Scaliger Institute at Leiden University for making it possible for me to undertake research in the Oriental collections of the Leiden University Library and to participate in the symposium “The Lives and World Views of Pre-Modern Literati: Ottoman Literary Culture and Its Sources in a Global Perspective” in January 2004. The time spent at Leiden enabled me to add both new material and new insights to the original paper I had presented at the conference “Autobiographical Themes in Turkish Literature” in May 2003.

² On Arabic autobiography, the most recent and authoritative study is Reynolds (ed.) 2001. For a sampling of the recent scholarship on East Asia, see Gyatso 1998; Wu 1990; Maraldo 1994.

³ For overviews of the literature see Olgun 1972; Kafadar 1989; Faroqhi 2000: 194-203.

In this regard, it would only be fair to acknowledge that my interest in this line of inquiry has been awakened by a number of recent studies on autobiography in early modern Europe. Responding in part to the abovementioned tendency to discover autobiographical works in other cultures and periods, a number of Europeanists such as Michael Mascuch and Nicholas D. Paige have recently sought to reframe the argument for the uniqueness of the autobiographical turn in early modern Europe by shifting attention away from the canonical texts of “Western autobiography” to the wider patterns of reading, writing, and printing, which, they argue, for the first time made autobiography “truly readable.”

For Mascuch, it is a futile exercise to try to identify the “first” autobiography in (Western) history by employing the “conventional parameters of literary genres.” He finds it much more important to examine the social, religious, and commercial nexus which enabled autobiography to become a *common cultural practice* (in the Bourdieuan sense) in early modern England. It is also on this ground that Mascuch reaffirms the conclusion of earlier scholars such as Georges Gusdorf that there was an intimate connection between the birth of autobiography and the individualist self at the dawn of (Western) modernity. He even goes further to suggest that “the individualist self is, figuratively speaking, a producer and a consumer of stories about himself and a consumer of stories about himself and other selves which place the self at the center of the system of relations, discursive and otherwise—he is literally a writer and a reader of modern autobiography.”⁴

In his exploration of seventeenth century French devotional writing, Paige similarly posits an intimate link between autobiography and modern subjectivity, but also understands that relationship to be much more fraught with tension and ambiguity. Particularly inspiring is a chapter in which Paige examines the historical context in which such earlier works as St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and Montaigne’s *Essais* came to be read (anachronistically) as precocious examples of Western autobiographical interiority. According to Paige, it was not so much the inherent qualities of these texts as the editorial interventions and marketing strategies of seventeenth century printers and the changing expectations of seventeenth century readers that enabled this reading. Once an autobiographical reading became possible and indeed privileged, on the other hand, texts subjected to and/or inviting such readings inspired others to make use of writing in a similarly introspective manner.⁵

The studies of Europeanists like Mascuch and Paige present a clear challenge to those who argue for the existence of autobiographical accounts in non-Western, and especially pre-print literary cultures. I do not believe, however, that they close the discussion once and for all. Even amongst Europeanists some medievalists and Renaissance scholars might object to their relegation of the Euro-

⁴ Mascuch 1997: 18-21.

⁵ Paige 2001: especially 1-64.

pean first-person literature that was written between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries to the “pre-history” of autobiography. Such a teleological perspective, it could be argued, does short shrift both to the multifarious nature of the earlier accounts and to the complexities of the social-historical contexts in which they were written.⁶ Some autobiography theorists might also find Paige’s insistence on interiority and Mascuch’s on individualism as the defining feature of autobiography to be overly constraining.⁷ Nevertheless, it still behooves the critics of their arguments to address the question of what the practice of writing about one’s life could possibly mean in other cultures and periods.

The present article, then, will explore this question with respect to Ottoman literary culture in the early modern period, defined here as the period from 1500 to 1800. Let me state from the start, however, that it is not my goal here (nor does it seem possible) to make a case similar to Paige’s concerning the creation of an “autobiographical mentality” in early modern Ottoman Empire. To the contrary, a central argument of this article is that a good deal of the material that we might today label as “autobiographical” was not readily legible as such, or if it was, it was not necessarily privileged for it in the Ottoman Empire at least until and possibly into the modern period. At the same time, however, Ottoman literati could be quite deliberate in their use of the autobiographical register and could manipulate it in different ways to achieve certain effects on their readers. More importantly, even in the absence of printing and the widespread circulation of books, segments of the Ottoman literati indulged in certain practices of reading and writing that were conducive to autobiography in the broader sense of writing about oneself. In the remainder of this article, I shall try to illustrate these points with respect to a type of source material that has been underutilized by Ottomanists: personal miscellanies or scrapbooks (*mecmū‘a*).⁸

Miscellanies are only one type of textual source among many in which Ottoman writers wrote about themselves. Autobiographical sketches of varying lengths and forms can also be found in Ottoman biographical dictionaries, hagiographical works, chronicles (particularly contemporary chronicles), and

⁶ Cf. Mayer and Woolf (eds.) 1995. There is also a vast literature that situates the autobiographical turn in European culture in the late medieval period. For a nuanced exploration of the meaning of autobiography in late medieval France, see Zink 1999: 157-241.

⁷ For a recent study that critiques the idea of the autobiographer as an individualistic self, see Eakin 1999: 43-98. Eakin bases his critique not only on the constructivist school in philosophy and literature, but also on recent research on identity and memory in cognitive science, neurology, and developmental psychology. For an overview of the changing trends in autobiography studies, see Smith and Watson c2001: 111-163.

⁸ For a pioneering study of the autobiographical contents of two scribal notebooks originating from the Ottoman palace, see Fleischer 1994. More recently, Maurits van den Boogert and Jan Schmidt at Leiden University have also embarked on a major research project focused on the miscellanies in that university’s Oriental collections.

travel literature as well as in the introductions or conclusions to various religious, legal, or scientific works. Likewise, Ottoman literati wrote some freestanding autobiographical accounts under such titles as *tercüme-i hâl* (biography), *sergüzeşt* (book of adventures), or *şöhbetnâme* (book of conversation or companionship). It is quite possible that the use of the autobiographical register was more clearly recognizable in some of these genres (most notably, the *tercüme-i hâls*) and served purposes different from the fragmentary notes in the miscellaneous manuscripts.

On the other hand, miscellanies offer a unique vantage point from which to approach the question of personal narratives in the Ottoman Empire for two reasons. First and foremost, “miscellaneous” seems to have been the very category under which early modern Ottomans classified many texts that we would today have little problem classifying as “autobiographical.” Second, Ottoman miscellanies, particularly the scrapbooks or working notebooks, which are full of scribbling of all kinds and many of which show signs of intensive use, offer us as close an access as we can get to the everyday practices of reading and writing in the Ottoman lands. This is important if we want to investigate the wider literary context in which the autobiographical act became possible.

Europeanists have long pointed to a link between the proliferation of more personal kinds of narrative and the increasing privatization of reading and writing in late medieval and early modern Europe. It is argued that, when starting in the late medieval period, and especially after the invention of the printing press, people began to read and write silently and in solitude rather than out loud and in public, it became easier for writers to entrust private matters to paper, while reading, thus having been turned into a more private experience, further enabled individuals to cultivate a sense of the private self. Of course, this process was neither unilinear nor without its contradictions (as when the private self was displayed through the medium of print); but then, as recent literature has made clear, a similar contradiction is built into modern subjectivity itself.⁹

Can we then find a similar space emerging for private uses of writing among Ottoman literati in the early modern era? The answer given in secondary literature is a resounding no. The few scholars who have tackled the question of “Islamic literacy” have stated almost categorically that until print became widespread in the Islamic Near East in the nineteenth century, reading and writing not only retained a high degree of orality, but also remained a deeply communal affair, with dictation and recitation in public gatherings considered to be the norm and indeed required for the accurate transmission of texts written in the Arabic script.¹⁰ While these generalizations might hold true for the juridical literature written by and for the ulema, the seamless picture that they present is

⁹ Cavallo and Chartier (eds.) 1999. Jagodzinski 1999.

¹⁰ Pedersen 1984; Nasr 1995; Messick 1993; Graham 1985; Graham 1987: 79-116.

considerably complicated by the numerous personal miscellanies or scrapbooks that have survived from the period of Ottoman rule. The reasons will be discussed in greater detail further below. First, however, a note about the chronology: There is no need to assume that within Islamdom at large such scrapbooks were a novelty of the early modern period; similar types of texts might well have existed wherever there was a substantial literate culture, as for instance, in Baghdad as early as the ninth century.¹¹ Nevertheless, the fact is that as far as the central lands of the Ottoman Empire are concerned, many more such scrapbooks have survived from after the sixteenth century.¹² Considering that the same period also witnessed the expansion of book collections and the proliferation of middle brow literature in vernacular Turkish, it is tempting to link the increase in the number of Ottoman scrapbooks from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the expansion of the realm of writing in Ottoman society.¹³ If the collection of Ottoman manuscripts in Leiden University Library is any indication, the practice of keeping personal scrapbooks may have been particularly popular with literati of a more modest sort: low-level bureaucrats, soldiers, and minor sheikhs are certainly well represented among the owners/compiler of the Leiden manuscripts.¹⁴ All this suggests that we are dealing here with a literary practice which may have been fairly widespread among the literate males of Ottoman towns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

What, then, is personal about the Ottoman personal miscellanies? As it is outside the scope of this brief discussion to venture a comprehensive answer, I will present my preliminary findings concerning nine miscellanies or scrapbooks compiled between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, when print technology played no more than a marginal role in the Ottoman world of letters, and one from the mid-nineteenth century, when both print technology and intensive interaction with Western literary models were fast transforming the literary scene. While by no means representative of the larger corpus, this sample still covers a diverse social terrain: of the ten miscellanies considered here, two were compiled by a minor scribe, two by soldiers, and six by Sufi masters. Naturally, the social, professional, or religious affiliations of all compilers were reflected in one way or another in what they chose to include in their scrapbooks.

¹¹ On the notebook culture of medieval Muslim scholars, see Rosenthal 1947: esp. 6-7; Schoeler 1997.

¹² While the rudimentary nature of cataloguing in most manuscript libraries in Turkey and the Middle East does not allow us to undertake a quantitative analysis of the entire corpus, the evidence from the better catalogued European collections of Oriental manuscripts indicates that many more such scrapbooks have survived from after the sixteenth century. For one such exemplary catalogue, see Schmidt 2000.

¹³ For preliminary investigations into the history of literacy in the Ottoman Empire, see Vatin (ed) 1996; Hitzel (ed.) 1997; Hanna 2003; Erünsal 1988: 1-136.

¹⁴ Schmidt 2004.

Religious texts were prominent in the scrapbooks of the three Sufi writers.¹⁵ The scribes wrote as much about appointments and dismissals in various state offices as about events in their own lives.¹⁶ Even the soldiers, who had little use for writing in their professions, tended to have a common preference for more practical kinds of writing such as calendars and divinatory manuals.¹⁷

These patterns notwithstanding, all of these miscellanies also comprise diverse textual materials that go beyond the “public” functions and persona of their owners. Hence the Sa’di-Rifa’i sheikh Ahmed Raşid (d. 1245/1829) recorded in his scrapbooks not only the spiritual pedigrees, prayers, and magical formulas he had inherited from his masters, but also various notes about himself and his family, and interestingly enough, excerpts from earlier Ottoman chronicles. Apparently, among other things he was an avid reader of histories.¹⁸ Likewise, we find in the scrapbook of a Salonican bureaucrat later in the same century, amongst the usual notes about bureaucratic events and the affairs of his household, excerpts from religiomystical literature. He was by all appearances a pious man who also took an interest in theoretical Sufism.¹⁹ In this sense, then, each scrapbook can be said to have been a personal document simply by virtue of representing the selections of a particular individual for his own use. At the same time, however, it is important to remember that the literati who compiled these scrapbooks were also part of a community of readers. Some apparently allowed (or even asked) others to glimpse into and/or write an entry in their scrapbooks. This seems to have been a particularly popular practice in Sufi circles. In one of his numerous scrapbooks, the Celveti master İsmail Hakkı Bursevi (d. 1137/1725) recorded the personalized notes of blessing he wrote in the scrapbooks of at least eleven different friends and disciples.²⁰ Likewise, the Halveti master Niyazi-i Mısrî (d. 1104/1694) mentions in his diary that he wrote an *ilâbî* and some words of advice in the scrapbook of a certain Fuyuzî Çelebi, a friend or disciple who

¹⁵ Niyazi-i Mısrî. Mecmû‘a-i Şeyh Mısrî. Süleymaniye Library. Reşid Efendi 1218; Mecmû‘a-i kelimât-ı kudsîyye (hereafter MKK) Bursa Library For Rare Printed and Manuscript Books. Orhan 690; İsmail Hakkı Bursevi. Mecmû‘atü’l-fevâ’id. Süleymaniye Library. Pertev Paşa 645; Mecmû‘atü’l-ḥaḳḳiyya, Süleymaniye Library. Esad Efendi 3765 (presumed to be an autograph) and Mecmû‘a-i ḥaḳḳî. Süleymaniye Library. Pertev Paşa 637 (copy made in 1217/1802-3 of a miscellany originally compiled in 1135/1722-1723); Ahmed Raşid. Mecmû‘a. Leiden University Library. Cod.Or. 25.762.

¹⁶ Leiden University Library. Cod. Or. 12.423; Mecmû‘a, Süleymaniye Library. Hacı Mahmut Efendi 6294 (compiled circa 1253/1837-1294/1877).

¹⁷ Cod.Or. 1205 and Cod.Or. 1259 in Leiden University Library.

¹⁸ Leiden University Library. Cod. Or. 25.762.

¹⁹ Anonymous. Mecmû‘a, Süleymaniye Library. Hacı Mahmut Efendi 6294. 18a, 19a.

²⁰ Bursevi. Mecmû‘atü’l-fevâ’id. 14b-15a, 16b, 99b, 100b, 103b. The references given here include only those personal notes that İsmail Hakkı explicitly mentions writing in the mec-mû‘a s of his disciples. The scrapbook also contains many other poems, letters and similar notes that İsmail Hakkı mentions writing for his friends and disciples without specifying the context.

frequently came to visit him on the island of Lemnos in 1092/1681.²¹ Sufi disciples must have cherished these notes as a memento from their masters as well as a sign of the latter's endorsement of their personal collections.

What is perhaps more difficult for us to understand is the ease with which some Ottoman literati could appropriate the scrapbooks of others. This could perhaps be attributed to considerations about the cost of paper, but it also indicates that the later owners did not necessarily regard the scrapbooks that came into their hands as the personal testaments of previous owners. One such miscellany that shows signs of reuse had originally belonged to an Ottoman scribe, probably employed by the financial department in Istanbul. The miscellany still contains some administrative and autobiographical notes which the first owner had made in the last decade of the seventeenth and the first decade of the eighteenth centuries, but much of his writing appears to have been erased (though not without leaving a trace) by a later owner. This later owner, whose identity we do not know, was clearly less skilled in the art of writing, and had considerably different literary tastes. Among the texts that he filled in the newly gained space we find tales (*hikāye*), set in pseudo-historical contexts, and a divinatory manual.²²

Given the diverse and sometimes circuitous ways in which Ottoman literati compiled these scrapbooks, it is only to be expected that they also had different motivations when they recorded what we might regard as personal information in their scrapbooks. Some of this material was probably recorded because of pragmatic considerations, as would be the case with the notes of debts, loans, and payments recorded in the miscellanies compiled and/or owned by Ottoman soldiers.²³ By contrast, we may presume that it was because Ottoman literati wanted to preserve their memory and perhaps to transmit it to their progeny that they would jot down the dates of important events in their lives: when they entered a particular branch of office, when they left their hometown, or arrived in a new place, when they got married and had children, and, alas, also when these children died, often in infancy.

Not surprisingly, there appears to be a correlation between the length and complexity of these autobiographical passages and the social status and level of literacy of the people who composed them. In the sample examined here, the scrapbooks richest in personal narrative belong to the two most literate and socially most distinguished members of the group: Niyazi-i Mısrî and İsmail Hakkı Bursevi. While low-ranking soldiers summarized the essentials of their lives in simple one-sentence notes, these two masters wrote extensively not just about what they did or witnessed on various occasions, but also about their feelings.

²¹ Mısrî. MKK. 7b.

²² Leiden University Library, Cod. Or. 12.423. The second owner erased only the later part of the writing of the first owner and thus started writing from the reverse side of the manuscript.

²³ Cod.Or. 1205, cover, flyleaf, 1a; Cod.Or. 1259, 85b in Leiden University Library.

The mystically-inclined Salonican bureaucrat was likewise quite comfortable writing about his joys and sorrows in family life, but then he was writing in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, when the norms concerning the representation of emotions had changed considerably.²⁴

Whatever their level of literacy, one type of personal narrative that all the writers examined here seem to have been capable of producing was letters. Almost all the writer/compiler examined here recorded in their notebooks drafts or copies of letters they exchanged with others. While with a few exceptions modern scholarship has focused on the “high” literary examples of Ottoman epistolary literature, many of the letters found in these scrapbooks represent a more humble, quotidian version of letter writing in the Ottoman Empire.²⁵ Compilers may have recorded these letters for a variety of reasons: to remember, to document, and perhaps also to provide themselves (and in some cases, others) with models in future correspondence.

A somewhat more complex case is presented by the poetry that some of the authors composed and recorded in their scrapbooks. Thanks to the important work done by such literary historians as Paul Losensky, we now know better than to engage in naïve, autobiographical readings of Turco-Persian poetry.²⁶ Yet in a couple of places in their scrapbooks, both Niyazi-i Mısrî and İsmail Hakkı encourage us, the readers, to read their poems in an autobiographical light by prefacing their poems with a brief discussion of when and where they had composed them. Since it was not common practice to make use of such auto/biographical notes in *divans* or poetical compilations, or in the commentaries written on selected poems, their inclusion in the miscellanies appears particularly meaningful and further points to the role these miscellanies played as personal archives.²⁷

Ottoman writers could also insert fragments of their life narratives into texts by others. In this regard, a particularly intriguing and playful example comes from a miscellany that was in the possession of an Ottoman soldier Hasan who served in Tunis as well as his hometown Sinop in the first half of the seventeenth century. The scrapbook contains among other things two divinatory manuals explaining how to draw omens from the Qur’an. One of these manuals, *Fâlnâme-i Ca’fer-i Şādık*, may have been particularly popular with soldiers, as it is also found in the scrapbook of another Ottoman officer who seems to have served in the Janissary corps in Algiers in the same period. In both scrapbooks, the manual is annotated in the margins, but it is only in the first scrapbook, belonging to

²⁴ For an illuminating study on the history of emotions, see Reddy 2001.

²⁵ A major recent exception is Murphey 2002. On the “high” epistolary tradition, see Uzun 2000; Gökyay 1974; Derdiyok 2000; Tansel 1964.

²⁶ Losensky 1998; Idem 1998: 56-99. Also see Andrews 1985: esp. 3-18, 109-142.

²⁷ Mısrî. MKK 81b-89b. Bursevi. Mecnû‘atü’l-fevâ’id. 61b. For a critical edition of their entire poetic corpus, see Erdoğan 1998; Yurtsever 2000. For Ottoman commentaries on their poems, see Çaylıoğlu 1999; Ceylan 2000.

Hasan, that the marginal comments present a parallel narrative about how the soldier/copyist and his fellow seamen had “actually” fared on the occasions that they had practiced this form of divination and drawn the omens that were described in the main text. Hence it is written next to a particular omen and its explanation: “This is auspicious. It is good. It is upon this sign that we set sail” (*Mübārekdür, eyüdüür, bu fāl ile yelken kōduķ*), and next to another, “This points to an auspicious battle. It is necessary to arrive (there) on Friday,” or “This is very auspicious. It was upon this sign that the ships carrying wheat finally arrived.” Interestingly, the soldier/copyist did not make any such self-referential comments for the negative omens, instead simply annotating them with such brief remarks as “enemy” or “enemy and patience.”²⁸ Of course, we may question whether these marginal asides indeed referred to events that took place in the life of the person who wrote them, or whether they were simply written to heighten the effect of the divinatory manual in his possession. Even if the latter is the case, however, it is still meaningful enough that the soldier/copyist found it expedient to add his own voice to that of the manual, since this would indicate at the very least a certain degree of awareness about the use of the first-person voice as an authenticating device.

These, then, were some of the different ways in which Ottoman literati engaged in the autobiographical act in the limited space of their personal notebooks. The question that remains to be answered is what the autobiographical components in these notebooks would have signified to the Ottoman readers themselves. Admittedly, the sheer heterogeneity of the corpus makes this question difficult to answer. Moreover, the fact that the vast majority of personal miscellanies have survived in unique copies means that in most cases, there will only be scant evidence for readership. Valuable insights, nevertheless, can still be gained by considering the later history of the miscellanies, where and how they were preserved, under what categories, whether they were cited in other texts, and so on. Annotations made by later owners of the miscellanies can also yield important insights. In the remaining space, I will pursue this line of inquiry with respect to two remarkably different miscellanies compiled by Niyazi-i Mısrı, one of the most autobiographical of the writers considered above.

The first scrapbook of Mısrı’s is a manuscript of 251 folios, preserved in the Süleymaniye Library as part of the original collection of the Reşid Efendi library in Istanbul. Mısrı compiled the bulk of this scrapbook between the years 1058/1648 and 1065/1654-5, when he was in his thirties and a novice undergoing spiritual initiation into the Halveti order of dervishes in the town of Elmalı in southwestern Anatolia.²⁹ He was still in possession of his manuscript and

²⁸ Leiden University Library, Cod. Or. 1259. 20b-43a. Cf. Leiden University Library, Cod. Or. 1205. 27b-65b.

²⁹ Mısrı. *Mecmū‘a-i Şeyh Mısrı*. Süleymaniye Library. Reşid Efendi 1218.

made a number of additions in the margins circa 1083/1673, when he was at the peak of his career as a Sufi master in Bursa.

When we examine the contents of the manuscript, we find a fairly typical scrapbook that reflects the religious and intellectual horizons of a learned, yet provincial Sufi. The miscellany contains texts in Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, although entries in Persian are much fewer and are interspersed with interlinear Turkish translations. In terms of their subject matter, the entries in the scrapbook can be roughly classified into three groups: 1) excerpts from the writings of Sufi masters of the past, which comprise the bulk of the manuscript; 2) excerpts from religio-legal literature, which mostly deal with controversial aspects of Sufism; and 3) a medley of Mısrî's own writings, including his earliest poems, autobiographical notes, and medical prescriptions.

From the autobiographical notes, which the Sufi master entered on folios 3a-3b nearly twenty years after he compiled the bulk of the manuscript, we learn that he married his first wife in 1064/1654, as he was nearing the completion of his spiritual training and that he had six daughters from this marriage, five of whom died within a year of their birth. A barely legible note recorded on the margins of folio 252a states that a certain "İbrahim son of İbrahim Efendi from the village of 'Arab ... in the kadiship of ... took the oath of allegiance [to Mısrî?] on 15 Şevval 1065 [1655]." This must have been one of Mısrî's earliest disciples. Another note on 250b lists the quantities of an unspecified good that was delivered to twelve men, at least five of whom are clearly identified as artisans. According to a marginal note by the Mevlevi dervish Yusuf Nesib Dede (d. 1126/1714), about whom we shall have more to say below, this was a list of the people to whom Mısrî sold candles. Since Nesib Dede writes that he never met Mısrî in person, he must have drawn this information from oral reports circulating in Sufi circles.

Mısrî, of course, could not have anticipated all the different ways in which later readers would make use of his manuscript. Rather, he must have been concerned first and foremost with compiling a handy source of reference, upon which he could draw for inspiration and instruction as well as guidance. Most likely, it was also to facilitate rapid consultation that he drew up a fairly detailed table of contents (folios 2a-2b), listing the titles of the principal texts that he included in his scrapbook and their corresponding page numbers. Still, there is reason to believe that if not at the time he compiled the original manuscript, then as he built a successful career for himself as a Sufi master, he also began to regard his scrapbook as a memento to be passed on to his progeny and disciples. This might explain why, for instance, he carefully marked the manuscript as his own and gave it a title befitting of a religio-mystical work intended for public circulation. The heading in his handwriting reads: "This is a compilation entitled *Gülşen-i tevḥīd* (The Rose Garden of the Affirmation of Divine Unity) and it belongs to Mısrî."

Evidence indicates that later readers, too, regarded the miscellany as a memento from the Sufi master. This is at least very much the case with the earliest

identifiable owner of the manuscript after Mısrî, the abovementioned Nesib Dede. It was he who already on the first page highlighted the personal quality of the manuscript with the words:

This pleasant compilation, which is full of pearl-like words of divine wisdom, was compiled by and written by the very hands of the deceased Mısrî Efendi of the Halvetî order during the early stages of his spiritual initiation. We had desired to see his beautiful and perfected face, when he was still alive, but this was not what fate decreed. Yet the Divine Lord by virtue of [our] loyalty sent this compilation to us and made us happy as if we had had the chance to converse with him.³⁰

Clearly, what lent this manuscript a personal quality in the eyes of Nesib Dede was 1) the fact that it represented Mısrî's personal selection during a particular period of his life, and 2) the fact that it had been written in the sheikh's own hand. The Mevlevî writer further highlighted the personal nature of the miscellany by comparing the experience of reading it to the imagined experience of conversing with the compiler himself. This comparison is particularly meaningful, since a great deal of the first-person literature written in this period also had a strong conversational character, and since this character was often stressed in the titles given to these works, such as *Şöhbetnâme* (Book of Companionship or Conversation) and *Mecmû'a-i kelimât* (Compilation of Words).

A text that comes much closer to our understanding of a personal narrative, nevertheless, is a second miscellany that Mısrî composed nearly thirty years after the first, when he was in his early sixties. Differently from all the miscellanies considered so far, the bulk of this 116-folio manuscript is taken up by what formally speaking can be best described as a diary, a continuous first-person prose narrative which relates the intimate details of Mısrî's daily life and thoughts in 1091-2/1680-2. At the time, Mısrî was living as a recluse in a small mosque on the island of Lemnos, where he had been exiled by the orders of the Ottoman central government in 1088/1677. All indication is that it was this experience of exile that had turned Mısrî into an inveterate diarist. In his diary, the Sufi writer marked the centrality of his exile to his life story by dating each entry by the number of days that had passed since the beginning of his first banishment. As he related how he spent each day, too, he put the emphasis on what he considered to be evidence of his ongoing persecution in the "claws of the House of Osman." More specifically, he was under the conviction that his "enemies" wanted to have him killed as well as raped; that in fact they had already violated his wives and that the two sons born by his wives in between his two exiles were a product of these adulterous relationships.³¹ Frequently, too, Mısrî interrupted the narration of his everyday tribulations to launch a vindictive criticism of the

³⁰ Mısrî. *Mecmû'a-i Şeyh Mısrî*. 1b.

³¹ On Mısrî's life and thought, see Terzioğlu 1999. For a more detailed discussion of the diary/compilation, see Idem 2002. The present author is also preparing a critical edition and English translation of the entire diary.

leading religious and political authorities of the time, including the *selefi*-oriented Kadızadeli preacher Vani Efendi, members of the Köprülü household, and Sultan Mehmed IV. Or else he engaged in an inspired discussion of his own spiritual state as a persecuted holy man or even prophet. In these passages, the Sufi writer resorted to a more exhortative style, assuming the voice, in turn, of a preacher, a public agitator, or an ecstatic mystic.

In addition, Mısrî recorded in this manuscript whole worksheets of kabalistic prognostications, which were drawn from selected verses of the Qur'an or from the writings of the famous Andalusian Sufi and philosopher Muhyiddin İbn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), and poems, mostly but not exclusively his own. While the inclusion of these disparate texts give the text the character of a compilation, it is important to point out that these writings were also closely connected to Mısrî's life story. Almost all the prognostications recorded in the manuscript referred back to events in Mısrî's own life and served to "prove" his rather peculiar interpretation of these events. Likewise, eleven of the twelve poems written and copied by him also dated from the period of his second banishment and dealt with some of the same themes as the diary entries in prose.³²

What, then, were the literary categories that Mısrî and his readers considered appropriate for this multi-layered, multi-vocal text? In the manuscript itself, Mısrî mentions two terms: *mecmū'a* and *tārīḥ*, or rather its plural form, *tevārīḥ*, histories or dates. In Ottoman literature, the latter term in both the singular and the plural form was commonly used to describe historical narratives, or chronicles. In addition, the term had been used in earlier Arabic literature to describe diaries or rather chronicles kept in diary form, and it is quite possible that this usage was also known to Mısrî who was perfectly literate in Arabic. *Tārīḥ*, nevertheless, was only one of several categories used to describe Ottoman diaries (others being *yevmiyyāt* and *soḥbetnāme*), which seem to have had more heterogeneous origins than their medieval Arabic counterparts.³³

Mısrî's text in fact had a much more personal focus than all the known examples of medieval Arabic diaries and even most Ottoman diaries before the nineteenth century. In view of this fact, it is of particular importance to determine how public or private the Sufi writer intended his text to be. The textual evidence is somewhat ambivalent in this regard. On the one hand, the Sufi wrote explicitly that God gave him permission to write but not to have copies made of his writing. He also mentioned hiding his miscellany under his head at night to prevent intruders from peeking into it without his permission. On the other hand, the Sufi master was not averse to lending some of his "*tevārīḥ*" to friends and disciples and indeed sometimes also to some of his "enemies." He usually

³² Mısrî. MKK. 82b-89b. The last of the poems is identified as having been written during his initiation in Elmali.

³³ Makdisi 1986. For a comparative discussion of medieval Arabic and Ottoman Turkish and Arabic diaries and diary-chronicles, see Sajdi 2002.

presented his decision to share his writings with others as a pre-emptive strike: rather than risk an intruder getting hold of his *mecmū'a*, he would take control and send him a copy of a certain entry.³⁴

We do not know what those few people who had a chance to peek into the diary in Mısrı's lifetime made of the text. It is clear, nevertheless, that later readers respected the Sufi master's wish that the text not circulate widely. While there are several copies of his later writings in diary format, I have not been able to locate any other copies of either part or whole of the autograph manuscript. The manuscript, nevertheless, was carefully preserved as part of the collection of the Ahmed Gazzi lodge, founded by and named after one of Mısrı's principal disciples in Bursa, until the dissolution of all Sufi lodges by the orders of the republican government in the early twentieth century. It must also have been one of the dervishes at this lodge who in 1223/1808 gave the following title to the manuscript: *Mecmū'a-i kelimāt-ı kudsiyye-i ḥazret-i Mısrı*, or *Compilation of the Sacred Words of the venerable Mısrı*. The title not only emphasized the strong vernacular, speech-like quality of the text, a common feature of Ottoman personal narratives of this period, but it also made the inflammatory contents of the diary more digestible by linking it with an age-old genre of mystical literature: the compilations of the inspired sayings of Sufi masters, which were normally put together by their disciples.³⁵

While I have not been able to find any specific references to the diary by Mısrı dervishes elsewhere, the first person to write a vita of Mısrı, Rakım İbrahim Efendi (d. 1163/1749-50), had most likely read the text, or was at least familiar with some of its contents, for he went to great lengths to whitewash some of the unsavory incidents the Sufi diarist discussed in it. According to Rakım, Mısrı had denied being the father of his legal son 'Ali, not because he actually suspected his wife of adultery but simply to protect his son from also being pestered by his enemies. Similarly, the Sufi master had claimed to be the object of rape attempts only to draw attention to the predicament of another person on the island. Interestingly, the same Rakım Efendi also found it useful to include in his hagiography excerpts from what were presumably other first-person narratives by the Sufi master.³⁶ Whether the excerpted passages were indeed Mısrı's or were simply forged by Rakım Efendi, we shall probably never know.

What the example of Mısrı's two autograph miscellanies demonstrates is the distance that separates us from early modern Ottomans in terms of literary habits and attitudes towards texts. Today, loaded as we are with various ideas about the different genres of life writing from autobiography to diary, it is easy for us to privilege the second one of the manuscripts as a diary while referring to the first

³⁴ Mısrı. MKK. 56b, 57a.

³⁵ For an illuminating discussion of this genre as employed by South Asian Sufis, see Ernst 1992: 62-84.

³⁶ Rakım. Vākı'at-ı pır-i rüşen. Süleymaniye Library. Izmir 790. 16-7, 91-2.

simply as a miscellany. Clearly, such a distinction did not hold for the Sufi dervishes who preserved and perhaps read the two texts through the eighteenth century. Moreover, while these dervishes seem to have recognized and cherished the two texts as two very personal documents of the Sufi master, it was not necessarily the fact that Mısrî had included notes about his life that made the texts personal, or for that matter valuable, for these readers. At least as important, if not more, was the opportunity that the two texts offered to be physically close to a man considered saintly through the traces of his writing and through the illusion of spontaneity created by his seemingly (perhaps rather deceptively) artless way of conversing on paper.

Of course, the two notebooks of Mısrî were circulated in a rather specific milieu: that of the Sufi orders. We cannot assume that among the Ottoman society at large, or even among Sufi circles, everyone shared these particular Sufis' attitudes towards texts and textuality. It might even be argued that questions of readership are not really relevant for the scrapbooks of minor bureaucrats, soldiers, and others whose authorial presence did not evoke the same kind of awe as did that of many of the Sufi writers. Nevertheless, the fact is that with or without a readership, a considerable number of people found it useful to keep such personal notebooks, and other people (not just in Europe, but also in the Ottoman lands) cared to preserve them for one reason or another. Thus, we need to ask why in both cases. It might just be the case that in the absence of the printing press and of autobiographical texts that circulated widely before the nineteenth century, the practice of keeping personal notebooks is as close as we get to a literary and cultural practice that sustained the autobiographical act, however ephemeral.

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