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What to expect of Turkey? And what to expect of Turks at university reading Thoreau's *Walden*? In some respects the equation is perfect: the land that nourished Diogenes the Cynic is one of many layers. As recognized by one of his early reviewers,¹ Thoreau had a strong vein of philosophical cynicism²—sturdy common sense, representative actions that speak for themselves, aphoristic expression that finds things to be the opposite of what they appear, a call for simplicity, and even a partially submerged excremental vision as when, in the opening pages of *Walden*, he metaphorically describes the human animal as dung beetle, pushing his bolus of possessions, including a 40-foot barn, ahead of him down the road of life. Indeed, “the better part of a man is plowed into the soil for compost.” There's even a match of curmudgeonliness between the two thinkers (Emerson once remarked that he would as soon take Henry by the arm as take an elm tree by the branch).

And as for “layers,” Thoreau's polyvalent universe at least seems to have met its match in Turkey: the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara goes back to the oldest human settlements and counts some two dozen distinct civilizations, while the Istanbul Archaeological Museum goes back further still, well into the stone age. Add to this cultural richness an interplay between and within the layers, as events and institutions shade into and metamorphose into each other—Byzantine priests becoming imams during the Ottoman transition, or the developing mix of orthodox Sunni traditions with heterodox Shi'a traditions (many with connections to earlier Christian shrines and beliefs). And then there is Rumi, the thirteenth-century sufi whose poetry has become increasingly recognized in modern Western popular culture. Surely Thoreau, like Emerson, was aware of Rumi and felt an affinity for his Neoplatonic thought.³ So one might expect that Thoreau's *Walden* might be a good “fit” for Turkey. There are even some heterodox Shi'a traditions, especially those held by the large Alevi minority in Turkey, that have some affinity with the antinomianism that was so familiar to Emerson and Thoreau.

During a two-year stint as a Fulbright Professor in the mid-1980s in Ankara, and an additional year in the mid-1990s in İstanbul, I taught *Walden*, among a good many other things, to Turkish university students—from undergraduate survey courses through doctoral seminars, and from teacher-training institutes to Bosphorus University, where only the top 1/10th of 1% of the students who pass the Turkish university entrance exams are admitted.⁴ With rare exceptions, my students were quite at home with Thoreau, as were the general public as when, in the fall of 1985, I participated in a panel discussion on *Walden* at the American Library in Ankara that was attended by students and academics as well as the public at large. The discussion was lively and enjoyable, and there was no sense that Thoreau's ideas were exotic or unusual. And during the spring of 1996 I gave a couple of guest lectures at Hacettepe University—one on Thoreau's use of stylistic modulation as a consciousness-raising device, and the other on some similarities between Thoreau's portrayal of Being in *Walden* and Heidegger's portrayal of Being in some of his early works. In the latter lecture, I suspect there was more interest in Heidegger than in Thoreau, but my audiences were not only comfortable with Thoreau but were well conversant with his work and thought. Perhaps some of this easy familiarity reflects an adaptability bred of centuries of nomadism and migration— I believe the Turks are more open to other traditions, including American traditions, than are any of their continental European neighbors.

So Thoreau is alive and well on both sides of the Bosphorus—in both Anatolia and European Turkey. At the present time I am embarking on another adventure, this time teaching as a senior Fulbright Professor in a Moroccan University during the 2003-2004 academic year. Like Turkey, Moroccan culture is a complex mixture with its own kinds of historical “layers,” including languages and races—a true multicultural society where Berber, Arab, Negro, Andalusian, French, and Jewish traditions exist in harmony. The Sunni tradition of Islam is more institutionalized here than in Turkey (despite Shi'a roots in the early Idrissid dynasty), and the society is on the whole less secular than Turkish society—the King, who is a sharif or descendent of the Prophet, is generally careful to accommodate religious leaders and maintains a balance between religious and secular attitudes. I am looking forward to experiencing the reactions and attitudes of my Moroccan university students as they encounter Thoreau's radical and individualistic version of being and identity as expressed in *Walden*.

Notes

¹See Charles Frederick Briggs, “A Yankee Diogenes” in the Norton Critical Edition of Thoreau’s *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government* (Second Edition) edited by William Rossi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), pp. 314-17

²What’s missing in the cynicism of Diogenes, of course, is an *aesthetic* vision that is used to express a quality of being; and what’s missing in Thoreau is the unadulterated primitivism of Diogenes—Thoreau didn’t want to live like the natives of Tierra del Fuego, he merely wanted to combine their hardihood with his own intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual values.

³Although a specialist colleague insists that calling Rumi “Neoplatonic” is an egregious “orientalism,” the term nevertheless has some usefulness as a generic term of classification. I doubt Thoreau would have a problem with such usage in any case.

⁴One can’t get special dispensation because one’s daddy is rich and the president or the head of a ‘security’ agency as in the United States. My niece matriculated at Johns Hopkins and was astonished to find that Johns Hopkins was the ‘fall back’ school for a Turkish classmate who couldn’t get into Bosphorus [Boğaziçi] University. Also of interest, in Turkey the university entrance requirements for teacher training programs are higher than the entrance requirements for regular literature majors.