In İlhan Berk’s poetry, objects often appear in the foreground, and the poet speaks of their historical residue, the ways in which they appear changed in a new historical setting and resonate with different meanings, often in conflict with each other, as a result of the changing face of Istanbul in a globalized economy. Of course, language is one such object in the world that changes. There were changes in Turkish poetry with the Second New in the fifties and sixties, the poetry of movement and also to changes in the sonic landscape, the sounds in the street, of people talking mingled with the noise of reconstruction or worse, an ominous silence; indeed, the sensual landscape, the world of objects, also changes. As a result, an air of melancholy pervades the city of Istanbul and these poems. But as I will show there is Birk’s humor which reflects a wisdom about the nature of life.

1 The poems discussed in this essay were translated by Murat Nemet-Nejat, except for “Garden” translated by Önder Otçu. All the poems are included in *Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry* published by Talisman House in 2004.

2 The Second New is a central poetic movement in Turkish poetry which began in the mid-1950s with Cemal Süreya’s *Pigeon English* and Ece Ayhan’s *Miss Kinar’s Waters* and whose main energy as a movement continued until the publication of Ece Ayhan’s *Orthodoxies* in 1968.
Berk is, above all, a sensual poet, implicitly expressing that strain of animism so unique to Turkish poetry, which derives from Sufism. Take his description of garlic in a poem titled “Garlic,” “From outside it is like covered bazaars, musk shops selling heavy, pungent perfumes; looks like pitchers which let no water ooze; a sleepy church, its windows and doors shut.” Remember, he is speaking of a sheaf of garlic. This simple, everyday vegetable is pregnant with multiple meanings, as the mind of the poet moves quickly from perception to perception, a world with pungent smells and a unique sonic landscape, the land of endless vice, now in the grips of an ecstasy of multiplicity. Berk writes, “If I hold it and pry loose its dry, dumb head with a few bites, stripping its first layer, then its second, then third, then its very thing, transparent membrane … it will suddenly [turn] into a monster. The garlic responds: I ONLY EXIST BY MY SMELL!” The “monster” is the pungent smell of the garlic after the outer layers are stripped! It is also insubstantial, a mist that appears and recedes into invisibility, refusing categorization, and appropriation. Given Turkey’s history, as a country reshaped again and gain by foreign entities, Birk can write of this garlic that it can now pass to, “the mouths of Gascony children and Fatih’s, Sultan Beyazit the Second’s, Abdulhamit’s and my kitchens, and reassuming all its shy, dignified demeanor, land itself this way before me. Notice the references to the East and the West in the poem. This is an essential aspect of Turkish culture, the simultaneous experience of different cultural and historical resonances, in objects as simple as a sheaf of garlic, which even Homer, “the expert on the aroma of meats,” celebrated. Also, the ladies of the court in the time of Henry IV used the smell to identify the king in order to run away from his sexual advances!

The experience that Birk is talking about is one that does not resemble the European experience of history or language and this is because of the unique strain of animism directly connected to a Sufi experience of the world. Some critics have invoked French surrealism, and more particularly, a poet like
Francis Ponge, in speaking of Birk’s poetry. I think this is inaccurate. This merging of consciousness and object, or expansion of consciousness does not occur in European poetry except during visionary states, say in Rimbaud, whom Birk has translated, or highly imaginative states induced by drugs, say in Michaux, or in extreme states as in Artaud. I think Michaux’s experience of the apple is typical of French subjectivity. To “enter” the apple, that is, where the self experiences the objectness of the object directly, is painful and so remains an intellectual fantasy.

In a poem called “House” in The Book of Things, Berk writes,

Our subject, you gather, is house.
So we’re going to wander around in the world of things (by world we mean no more than “the world of things”). And this world we know too. It is therefore enough for us to open a dictionary (dictionaries are the embryos of life) and to list the things we see. Everything there is arranged and neatly set out with great care.
(Isn’t everything scripted anyway?)

In Berk’s “Garden, “we see the same process of a mind moving around the garden and into the house, changing perception as it moves: “I SEE THE HOUSE AFTER I LEAVE THE GARDEN BEHIND.” In this poem, the subject is a house and a garden and their relationship to one another. The garden is a specific locus in Turkish poetry, along with the house, rooms, stairs, and so on. Berk moves blithely through the poem, speaking of the “verticality” of the house and of the garden, which does not “know the house.” Then Berk is ironic, “How Beautiful!” He continues, “What’s more, the world of objects is like this. / They all gather to enjoy the unknown.” Like men and women seeking each other! The garden is female, “full of sound and voices. Its face overflowing into the street. Offering a female reading,” but “the house has a conservative quality” and is “permeated with that despotism which wounded it long ago.” And yet “they” need each other, complement each other, are two aspects of the same continuum. In Sufism, things are sentient, animated, and in this
poem, Berk delightfully personifies the house and the garden, offering a “sexual reading.” He writes, “To compare them, it is sexual (what is not?)” And the last three playful lines show Berk at is most sensual,

Oh garden, the muddy singer of the street.
“Dirty Child.”
Hello gardens, here I am!

In these lines, the “garden” is the “dirty child” that the house welcomes, “here I am!” This charming quality in Berk’s poem, his carefree manner, is connected with the sensuality of Sufism and an ecstatic feeling. Berk exhibits a profound understanding of the dynamic between the house and the garden and that they are not separate from each other, but complementary. In Sufism there is no separation, duality dissolves in the continuum.

I would now like to examine Birk’s poem, “The Denizens of the Arcade Hristaki,” which crucially condenses the experiences of the Turkish women, mostly ethnic minorities who worked in whorehouses. Only their voices remain as echoes the poet evokes. Critics have spoken of the influence of Freud on Birk’s poetry, but I think what is more important than any assumption of the value of a Freudian reading of his work is the fact that the neurosis and anxiety that the men and women in this poem experience is a result of Western influence and dominance. In the opening line, an Armenian woman named Diran says, “I don’t love evenings anymore … once I used to love evenings so much.” The line suggests that she is feeling old and saddened about the passing of time. I read this next line as a response to Diran, “Everything has changed, everything left its place to a silence.” This is not the silence of wonder but an ominous silence. A woman speaking of another says, “She always wears high heeled shoes, she always goes out alone.” No john is interested in an aging prostitute. Diran continues, “Memories made me fat … I don’t want to touch anything any more.” To remember is now a burden on the body, only reminds one of
the passage of time. Eleni says, “I am burning all over for quite a while, I am trembling … the doctor saying I’ve got nothing,” and “I should go to bed early, get up early, be careful not to catch cold, I should take care of my health.” As one ages, there is fear of disease and a kind of paranoid relation can develop between the patient and doctor when the patient insists they are feeling sick, and the doctor tries to convince them that they don’t need to worry. Another woman writes, “Looking out of the window is enough for me. There, Eleni is returning with her new blue bag.” What is of interest is this new blue bag. About another woman, Sara, someone says, “Once she didn’t give a damn about the world, she wore yellow socks and went to bed with whoever she pleased.” This freedom harkens back to the old Istanbul, with its body of secrets and endless vice. But now there is insomnia, one is afraid of growing old; these women no longer seek out pleasures through sexual adventures: “And now, at four o’clock, I am tossing in my bed, keep tossing in it.” And what is behind this sad but poetic image, “Her silk stockings, especially her long legs, and her sleeping with a rose in her mouth the whole night.” What memory of lost love is she subconsciously lamenting? The self now turned inward without release yields to a sense that “This world is strangling me, this house, this window, these curtains, this toothbrush.” In this poem, Birk is speaking of a kind of mutation of consciousness as a result of European dominance and infection. The past is receding into oblivion to make way for the new world, “this city, these bells, these sounds from the radio are driving me crazy,” writes a woman in the poem.

Turkey, over the centuries has been shaped and reshaped by foreign influences, which it has assimilated. But as Murat Nem- et-Nejat points out in his essay, “Istanbul Noir,” this is not to be understood as a “melting pot.” This is what gives Birk’s poetry its unique character and why the various, often conflicting, historical resonances at work in his poetry, give rise to paradoxical emotions. This is why cultural and historical residue is so important, reflecting as it does such a myriad of past influences, existing simultaneously in a single object as mundane as a sheaf of garlic. As a result of Sufism, the consciousness of these re-
flections of past history is kaleidoscopic. Objects are indeed in communication, speaking with each other and with man over a wider spectrum of consciousness than was ever possible to experience in the Western Intellectual tradition. Objects in Sufism are sentient, and the Sufi experience of the world is as a continuum, where there is no separation between the subjective and objective experience of the world. Finally, the overwhelming sense one gets, in these poems by İlhan Berk, is of a melancholy deeper than anyone can express, except perhaps in poetry but also a humor that expresses a profound understanding of life.

Works Cited