

Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the *PMLA* authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Submissions of more than one thousand words are not considered. The journal omits titles before persons' names and discourages endnotes and works-cited lists in the Forum. Letters should be addressed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789.

What Orhan Pamuk Meant by “Disform”

TO THE EDITOR:

I am concerned about an apparent mistake in transcription made in Z. Esra Mirze's interview with Orhan Pamuk, “Implementing Disform” (123.1 [2008]: 176–80). While a simple typo wouldn't normally be enough to raise any hackles, in this case it seems that the title of the piece is drawn from the mistake. I was intrigued when I saw the title, listed under Theories and Methodologies. I began to envision a sort of literary strategy of subversion, where formal innovation serves a possible political end. However, when I read through the interview, I was disappointed to find what by all appearances was a simple error, provocative though it might have been. The transcription of Pamuk's response to Mirze's question on the “dismantling of Turkish literary traditions” reads, “Is that difference so much that my attempt to implement disform in my part of the world is worth thinking about?” (177). It seems obvious from the context of Pamuk's rhetorical question that he is speaking of his “attempt to implement *this* form [the novel].” The transcription appears to have been mangled because of the author's Turkish accent.

Unfortunately, this errant neologism now stands at the head of the interview and, as you can find with a simple Internet search, is now attached to the author as one of his signature methodologies. In a somewhat more troubling vein, this label seems to push against the flow of the interview, in which Pamuk resists the leading questions Mirze asks as she attempts to characterize the Nobel Prize-winner as a formal subversive (see especially the first four questions and responses, 176–77). Please clarify this matter with the author before we see the first article in praise of “implementing disform in the postcolony” listed in *PMLA*. Pamuk should at least be offered the choice of whether he would like to

be considered the progenitor of this new literary strategy.

Lucas H. Harriman
University of Miami

Reply:

After reading my interview with Orhan Pamuk, Lucas Harriman has concluded that the word “disform” is “an apparent mistake in transcription” resulting from “the author’s Turkish accent.” Harriman writes that Pamuk should be “offered the choice” to respond to the interview. It is important, first of all, to speak about the process by which this interview reached its final, published form. Not only did Pamuk sign an Institutional Review Board consent form at the time of the interview, he also had to review the final version of the interview and sign an additional release form, prepared by *PMLA*. In my e-mail correspondence with him, he expressed his pleasure with the final version of the interview. It would be naive to assume that Pamuk, who has had his fair share of trouble with interviews in the past, did not bother to examine this one, let alone glance at its title, which, as Harriman points out, contains the word in question.

Harriman attributes this error to the author’s accent—an assumption I find condescending and somewhat offensive. As a Turk myself, I can attest to the fact that both Pamuk and I are able to differentiate between “dis” and “this.” And why question only this one word if mispronunciation or “mangled” transcription is an issue? The implied reason for Harriman’s suspicion here, it seems, is the notion that “disform” (which Harriman incorrectly labels a “neologism”) is too difficult a word for Pamuk to use. But Pamuk—a Nobel laureate in literature—is perfectly capable of employing surprising and ambitious vocabulary.

More intriguing here is Harriman’s inadvertent engagement with a much larger, theoretical issue: dialogic interactions. For Bakhtin, for example, verbal “utterances” gain their meaning not merely from authorial intent but from the way they respond to previous utter-

ances, from the speech genre, and from the author’s position. Harriman insists that Pamuk’s meaning “seems obvious,” but it is not: perhaps Pamuk was picking up on my use of the word “dismantling” in the question (177); perhaps he wished to respond to an academic question with academic vocabulary. We cannot know, which is why critics from Aristotle to Žižek have focused on the differences in construction between oral and written meaning. All we know is that by giving consent to the text as it was printed, Pamuk opened up questions about formal textual meaning. Harriman laments that “disform” could have been a “provocative” term, but he is also concerned about all the silly things his colleagues will do with it. So perhaps the word can be seen as legitimately provocative after all.

Finally, Harriman is troubled by my “leading questions,” which he suspects might be an attempt “to characterize the Nobel Prize-winner as a formal subversive.” As to asking leading questions, some might say this is the point of conducting an interview. As to the idea that Pamuk is a formal subversive, I confess that I would find it difficult to argue that he is not one. Anyone familiar with the tradition of the Turkish novel before Pamuk could hardly consider *My Name Is Red* or *White Castle* anything other than revolutionary. Disforming is what he does.

Z. Esra Mirze
University of Tampa

Wordsworth the Environmentalist?

TO THE EDITOR:

Given the nature of the times, it is not surprising to find critics who depict Wordsworth as a “green” poet. Adam Potkay characterizes him this way in “Wordsworth and the Ethics of Things” (123.2 [2008]: 390–404). Potkay asserts that Wordsworth’s poetry is EPA approved because it gives human beings and things equal status. But arguing equality makes no sense, for it implies that people and other things have an obligation to be ethical toward each other. If that were true, hurricanes, earthquakes, epidemics, and bear attacks on humans would have