

## The Love Triangle in Snow

Bruce Robbins

“What does this murderer have that makes everyone fall for him?” (222)

“The ‘hero’ of a Scott novel,” Georg Lukacs writes in The Historical Novel, “is always a more or less mediocre, average English gentleman. He generally possesses a certain, though never outstanding, degree of practical intelligence, a certain moral fortitude and decency which even rises to a capacity for self-sacrifice, but which never grows into a sweeping human passion, is never the enraptured devotion to a great cause” (33). In Lukacs’s view, the use of this “middling” hero is not “a symptom of Scott’s mediocrity as an artist” but on the contrary “the clearest proof of Scott’s exceptional and revolutionary epic gifts” (33). For it enabled Scott to invent the genre of the historical novel. What the historical novel needs is a “neutral ground . . . on which the extreme, opposing social forces” of the day “can be brought into a human relationship with one another” (36). To put at the novel’s center the “passionate partisans” of the respective sides, like the Robin Hood of Scott’s Ivanhoe and the Napoleon of Tolstoy’s War and Peace, would have been to create “a merely external picture of mutual destruction incapable of arousing the human sympathies and enthusiasms of the reader” (36). The reader, who probably comes from those “large sections of people who

have always stood between the camps with fluctuating sympathies now for this side, now for the other,” is less likely to identify with “the great figures of history” than with Scott’s “middle-of-the-road heroes” (37), who are less passionate and less committed. Thanks to such subdued, unimpassioned protagonists, dragged into the midst of a struggle they do not see as theirs, the historical crisis represented by the novel “is never abstract, the split into warring parties always runs through the center of the closest human relationships” (41). The mediocre hero produces a novelistic space for a “direct coming-to-grips of colliding opposites” (40) in which readers can experience history as real.

When I teach Orhan Pamuk’s novel Snow, sometimes in a lecture course and sometimes in a seminar that Pamuk and I co-teach, I begin by laying out Lukacs’s account of Scott. I propose that Ka, the novel’s protagonist, belongs to the category of the “mediocre hero.” Even if Snow is less a historical than a political novel, I suggest, this approach offers several benefits. First and foremost, it diverts attention away from Ka’s personal characteristics--evaluation of a character’s personality and likability being the default mode for undergraduates who have not had advanced literary training-- and refocuses it on his *function*: what the novel as a whole needs him for and does with him. The most obvious thing that Ka’s oscillating, uncommitted character helps the novel do, I add, is to provide a space where the rival life philosophies and social energies of contemporary Turkey can cohabit, if only briefly. This humanizes them, softening their hard propagandistic edges (terrorist! fundamentalist! fascist!), and making them seem eligible life choices or at least comprehensible attitudes. Above all, it helps students

recognize that the novel is *about them* rather than about Ka, despite the considerable quality time the reader spends inside Ka's subjectivity and the lack of any such contact with the inner thoughts and feelings of the "passionate partisans." For most students, this shift in perspective from private to public represents a major interpretive hurdle.

Lukacs's scheme might seem to imply that Snow finally espouses a balanced, middle-of-the-road, or plague-on-both-your-houses position. In my experience, many students will be tempted by this view. For them, the moral will be that all ideological investments are extreme, violent, and inappropriate and that the proper attitude toward them, both according to Snow and in general, is one of withdrawal and critical detachment. In short: don't be a hero! My goal in teaching this novel is to elicit a competing line of interpretation: the possibility that the novel does not celebrate the withdrawal into privacy and balanced impartiality, but on the contrary makes a subtle case for commitment to the public domain as such, a commitment that is also, in a sense that needs to be elaborated, politically partisan and worthy of anyone's passion.

Students will likely want to discuss whether Snow is (for example) too uncritical of political Islam or too masculine in its treatment of the headscarf girls who commit suicide. Those are valuable and perhaps even necessary conversations. The detour through Lukacs does not seek to avoid them, but it forces students who want to engage in such discussions to engage as well with the novel's form. It is in the form, I try to show, and in particular in the love triangle, that the novel's most interesting ideological investments leave their mark. Formally speaking, Ka looks like a pale go-between

shuttling between the vibrant, larger-than-life representatives of the novel's two major historical forces, political Islam and authoritarian secularism. On the secularist side, Ka meets repeatedly with Sunay Zaim, the flamboyant actor-instigator of the anti-Islamic coup. On the side of political Islam, he has a series of searching, unpredictable dialogues with the movement's charismatic underground leader, Blue. Ka's role in linking these rich, history-bearing characters, who never interact with each other directly, seems intended to enforce a balanced perspective, equidistant from both. Each has attractive things to say for himself and about the world. Each also has visible flaws, even comic ones. It's with some surprise, therefore, that one notices the asymmetry between them. In the eyes of the novel, they are not equal. There is only one Achilles in Pamuk's epic, and that is Blue.

Blue, the subject of Sunay's puzzled question in this essay's epigraph, is not the novel's protagonist. We are never granted the ample, repeated access to his consciousness that we get to Ka's. We only see him from the outside, as he is seen by others, and we don't see him very often. We do not follow his comings and goings, as we follow Ka's; in fact we only see him fixed, already in place, fully himself. He does not evolve. Lukacs, who posits that the representation of world-historical figures will necessarily be limited in just these ways, is helpful in inducing students to accept a proposition they will probably find counter-intuitive: that a character who commands so few of the novel's pages can nonetheless be central to its interpretation. And focus on the love triangle is helpful in order to see *how* he is central. Snow is remarkably uninterested

in Blue's Islamic beliefs, which are barely touched on. However, it is organized around what we might call his sexiness. At the formal heart of the novel, I suggest, is the epigraph's apparently eccentric question: why is it that so many people *do* "fall for" Blue?

The love story may look like a distraction, a concession to readerly pleasures of a vulgar sort, even (as Pamuk has suggested) a bit of casual camouflage designed to protect the novel from censorship. Censors do not tend to scrutinize stories of personal relationships as carefully as they scrutinize treatment of religious assassinations and military coups. And the same can perhaps be said of political novelists. Students sometimes complain that the love story and especially its female object of desire are depicted in only the most desultory and conventional way. Ka is entranced by Ipek's dazzling beauty; that cliché (repeated later by Orhan) is pretty much all there is to his desire. What needs to be pointed out by contrast, then, is the rich complexity of the unhappy ending-- the unhappy ending both of the love story and of the novel, since the two are roughly simultaneous.

Asked to explain the unhappy ending, students will likely answer that the key is Ka's sexual jealousy of Blue, which motivates him to betray his rival to the military. From this perspective, it is Ipek's certainty of the betrayal that keeps her from leaving on the train with Ka. This is the first unhappy ending. It is the same certainty on the part of Blue's Islamist followers that leads to Ka's assassination years later in Germany. That is the second unhappy ending. (The third is Ipek's rejection of Orhan, himself jealous of Ka

as his “more complex, passionate, authentic” original ([455]). It is important to note, therefore, that the unhappy ending has in fact been decided *before* the putative betrayal and that it depends on something more elusive: not what Ka does, but who he is--who he is in relation to who Blue is.

There are personal factors, seemingly irrelevant to the politics, that might have prevented the relationship between Ka and Ipek from working out: Ka’s mysterious melancholy, for example, which sends him to the window gazing sadly out at the falling snow only minutes after passionate lovemaking with Ipek, or Ipek’s desire to stay close to her father and sister. But what actually kills the relationship is the news that until recently Ipek has been Blue’s lover. They both recognize instantly that this news is decisive: “Despite the loss they were suffering, they’d both relaxed--as people do when they realize they’ve run out of chances for happiness” (390). In a sense, all Ka is finding out here is that Ipek is more honest about her emotions than he is--she knows, as he doesn’t, that people do not actually fall in love with each other so quickly. But the idea that Ipek will come to love Ka in the future, in Germany, cannot offset the fact that now, in Kars, even without having seen Blue in months, she still insists that he loves her and not her sister. ““The truth is, Blue doesn’t really love Kadife, he loves me!”” (391). ““You only want me because you’re trying to forget him!’ said Ka. Looking into her face, he saw with horror that he had spoken the truth” (392).

Although the affair has ended, Blue’s love continues to matter enormously both to Ipek and to the novel. In effect, it is what kills Ka’s chances of happiness well before the

plot machinery has had time to rumble into motion. It decides the ending. We are therefore obliged to ask what gives it so much weight. Blue's blue eyes cannot serve as the explanation. In a novel (where personal appearance in any case counts for less than in visual media) a love choice is really the choice of a vision of the world. What vision of the world, then?

For students who balk at the notion that a love triangle might be animated by something more public than simple jealousy, it may be helpful to recall some notable literary triangles that pit a nationalist against a cosmopolitan. In Tagore's The Home and the World, for example, the wife is seduced away from her cosmopolitan husband by a passionate anti-colonial nationalist. The ending of James Joyce's story "The Dead" might be described less as Gabriel Conroy's failure to get through to his wife Greta than as his defeat, in a sort of competition for her affections. The competitor would be the long-dead suitor she is suddenly remembering at the end of the evening when Gabriel wants her thoughts for himself. She says the young man in Galway died for love of her. This young man from Galway stands for Ireland's western, Gaelic-speaking heartland, whereas the husband is a Europe-oriented writer like Joyce himself who takes his holidays on the Continent. In the arena of the bedroom, cosmopolitanism again confronts the erotic or emotional power of the nation, and it is again the nation that triumphs.

If we think of the ending of Snow as another competition for a woman's heart, certain things fall into place. The mere memory of a former love is again enough (set against another backdrop of falling snow) to defeat the protagonist. And again Blue

seems to represent the nation while Ka seems to represent cosmopolitanism. But here the structural parallel brings out an important difference. Ka is not a real cosmopolitan. He does not claim that Blue's version of local collectivity is immoral or constraining; he does not assert against it the higher standard of Istanbul or Germany or the welfare of humanity as a whole. Ka's alignment with the West does not take the form of espousing democracy or women's rights. What he speaks up for is privacy, isolation, the right to be left alone. At the moment of his most strenuous outreach to political Islam, this is the identity he discovers in himself: the desire for poetic isolation. Arriving in a provincial, snow-enclosed Kars, he has found his dormant poetic gifts suddenly revived by contact with this artificially preserved corner of his homeland. To his surprise, he has also discovered God, whom he credits for his poems. In this mood he visits a local religious leader. He is moved, and he confesses. But in the very act of confessing, he tells the sheikh, "I want a God who understands my need for solitude" (104). "I feel guilty about having refused all my life to believe in the same God as the uneducated . . . But now I want to believe in that God who is making this beautiful snow fall from the sky . . . that God is not among you'" (104-5).

If Ka's secularism is more accurately described as a yearning for solitude, we can see more clearly what it is that decides the love triangle in Blue's favor. The only virtue of liberal democracy that Ka offers Ipek is privacy-- a Western virtue or value, no doubt, but a privative one, a mere absence. What Blue really stands for, as opposed to what he seems to stand for, becomes visible by contrast as a positivity and a presence. It's not



Islam, or political Islam, or even pride in Turkish national identity (about which the novel grants him better lines). It's none of the slogans that animate Blue's movement. The vision of the world with which Blue is most deeply associated, both more concrete and more abstract, centers on belonging, or collectivity as such. Ka's invitation to Ipek can be reduced to the proposition that private life flourishes when it is separated from public demands and engagements. Blue's counter-proposition is that private life is indissociable from public life-- that the private *is* the public.

It's as if the novel wants to take Ka's side in this debate but, pulled in both directions, cannot quite manage to. It seems significant that it is not just Blue who makes the contrary case. Both of the "passionate partisans" with whom Ka's unheroic wimpiness is contrasted, one officially representing religion and the other officially representing secularism, give Ka exactly the same advice: that what he really needs is to belong. Ka's love of God, Blue says, "comes out of Western Romantic novels . . . In a place like this, if you worship God as a European, you're bound to be a laughingstock. Then you cannot even believe you believe. You don't belong to this country; you're not even a Turk anymore. First try to be like everyone else. Then try to believe in God" (354). And when Ka, summoned to the headquarters of the coup, tells Sunay that he "may be starting to believe in God," Sunay responds that he is mistaken, but that in any case "it would make no sense to believe alone. You'd have to believe in him the same way the poor do; you'd have to become one of them" (219).

Believing the way the poor do, becoming one of the poor: here the critical pursuit of the sources of Blue's erotic dominance takes another step beyond the novel's explicit array of political slogans. What is the truth of Kars to which Ka, the educated, alienated exile, is trying to re-negotiate a relationship? What is it that he would have to belong to? The answer is not religion. The title of chapter 31, the crucial (and Dostoevskyan) chapter about the meeting at the Hotel Asia in which all the anti-coup factions try to hammer out a common statement to be published in the West, is "We're Not Stupid, We're Just Poor!" (298). No faction claims this message--a message that keeps the focus on Turkey's subordination to the West but rules out political Islam's religious, cultural, identitarian view of it. Poverty does not confer an identity that anyone wants or needs to defend to the death. It exists in the West as well as the East, though not equally. A secular fact, poverty is no more central to the platform of the secularists than to the religious party. Predictably, then, it does not figure in the final statement. Yet it hangs heavily over the dynamics of the love triangle that gives the novel its final shape and thus over the politics of the novel as a whole.

A few pages before the novel's end, Ka's friend and chronicler Orhan writes that "almost everyone I met on my walks around Kars was waiting for . . . a hero, some great man ready to make the large sacrifices that would deliver them all from poverty, unemployment, confusion, and murder" (458). Poverty is almost always the first word on such lists. Poverty and heroism are linked firmly, if also negatively. Whatever else it takes to be a hero, the suggestion is that no one can be a hero who will *not* do something

to address the fact of poverty. Blue passes this test even if he does so by speaking another language.

Of course, this sets the bar very high. Perhaps it is a reason why the novel is so willing to entertain the notion that trying to be a hero at all would be a mistake. Although Orhan modestly goes on to explain how badly he himself disappointed Kars's desire for a hero, Snow can certainly be read as dismissing the aspiration itself as deluded, unrealistic, and provincial, like so much else that is believed in Kars. We should know better than to ask for heroes, shouldn't we? The hero is someone who stages coups and assassinations; heroes get innocent people killed. Better to stay a private person--even to be "mediocre." At least then you will not be responsible for murder. This line of interpretation gets a great deal of support. "'For me, it's very simple,' Necip said with pride. 'I want to marry Kadife, live in Istanbul, and become the world's first Islamist science-fiction writer'" (144). As individuals, the suggestion goes, even these supposed fanatics share the same private ambitions as a Western-educated metropolitan like Ka. For many Western-educated students, this will no doubt be the preferred take-away. We are all Western individualists under the skin. And it is better so, is it not?

No reader will have missed how consistently the novel represents the public domain as farcical. The coup, which is "staged" during a play, is a performance that will not last and does not even seem intended to. We know in advance that it will end when the curtain of snow is lifted, and when the end does come--with the ambiguous suicide/assassination of Sunay Naim--that too happens on stage. In both cases the violence is

largely though of course not entirely absurd. Bullets hit ornamental ceiling fixtures and sleeping grandfathers; one is found buried in a hard-boiled egg. Prolepsis and analepsis distract attention from the events themselves and direct it instead first to predictions, then to reconstructions. Public events themselves seem inadvisable as sites of individual investment, on a par with the prospect that Sunay will get to play Atatürk or Mohammad. In such a world, what could possibly be done about poverty? There are no rich people in Kars--at any rate, no one rich enough to stand apart from Kars's pervasive misery, no one to stand for the machinery that divides the world into rich and poor. If there exists such a machinery, the novel would oblige the reader to imagine it as distant, invisible, and most likely located in the West. Denouncing the West, as Blue does, is as close as the novel comes to showing us a struggle against poverty--and it's arguably not close enough. Under these circumstances, it's no surprise that public action should look like farce.

The lesson students might well take away from all this, therefore, is Ka's preferred moral, repeated by Fazil: "I'm a typical atheist. I don't care about anything except love and happiness" (310). What's real, according to this view, is the unheroic domain of private feelings. Public actions are unreliable and ungraspable; they lend themselves to postmodernism. The novel can treat private relations in the mode of realism because they, by contrast, are real.

A plausible answer to this argument would have to establish that heroism-- that is, public action--is as real for the novel as private relations and indeed turns out to determine those relations. This is what is established, I argue, by the love triangle.

Blue's sexual charisma is of a piece with his Lukacsian role as a bearer of history. He is not defined by his ideas, which often seem misguided and even silly. He lies about the number of those killed in the coup. At the meeting in the Hotel Asia, he confidently vouches for what we know to be a fiction, the journalist Hans Hansen who supposedly cares deeply about the plight of the Turks. He is heroic nonetheless because he possesses what Ka's narrative function as mediocrity denies him: a personal life that is charged with public meaning. To Blue, history and politics are not intrusions from elsewhere. There is no hint of hypocrisy, of a real self lurking behind or beyond the politics; his commitments are who he is. Pamuk passes up all opportunities to present him as mean-spirited or self-interested when it counts most--for example, with regard to his personal safety or sexual pride. The novel indulges in none of that private cynicism toward the public hero that Lukacs, borrowing from Hegel, calls the *valet de chambre* view of history. This oneness of the private and public seems to be what determines his Blue's victory in the love triangle. It is what this murderer has "that makes everyone fall for him."

Blue's sexual charm could of course be reduced to an uninteresting banality: it's the hero who gets the girl, in fact gets all the girls. But the novel fills in this banality, and fills it by a detour through poverty. Necip, the young religious student who is about to be killed in the coup, lays out his argument for religion as follows: "If God does not exist, that means heaven does not exist either. And that means the world's poor, those millions who lives in poverty and oppression, will never go to heaven. And if that is so, then how do you explain all the suffering of the poor? What are we here for, and why do we put up

with so much unhappiness, if it's all for nothing?" (110). This is of course a secular theory of religion. To the extent that the novel takes sides on religion, it does so by embracing this secular view of political Islam as rooted in poverty. To do so is not however to take Ka's side. Ka is not interested in giving the old but still powerful answers to Necip's old questions: that expecting to go to heaven is not the best way of confronting poverty, that the poor should stop putting up with their unhappiness, that it's religion that encourages them to do so, and so on. "If I'm happy," Ka says, "that's all I care about."

It's a big if. What it will take for him to be happy, Ka says, is two things: poetry and Ipek's love. He will get the poetry, at least for as long as he is in Kars, but he will be denied Ipek's love, and denied it (as I've suggested) by his withdrawal from the cause of his countrymen. When the plot makes this point, it endorses the opposing view of happiness that has been articulated by Blue. In Blue's prison cell, Ka has confessed his love for Ipek and said that she is his one chance of happiness. Blue asks him to define happiness. Ka says: "Happiness is finding another world to live in, a world where you can forget all this poverty and tyranny. Happiness is holding someone in your arms and knowing you hold the whole world" (353). It's as a response to this vision of love as escape from the world, as self-sufficient isolation, that Blue delivers his own judgment: "And know this: People who seek only happiness never find it" (379). Blue may be misguided on certain subjects, but the novel shows him to be right on this. Ka cannot

expect to find private happiness by carrying off Ipek and ignoring the “poverty and tyranny” suffered by his countrymen.

Ka does not find happiness, but Blue himself does. He is eventually murdered by the military, and he seems to know in advance that he will be, but every time we see him he seems remarkably content. One might say that he finds happiness precisely because, unlike Ka, happiness for himself is not all he seeks. And this is again why the scales of the love triangle tilt in his favor. The hero in this novel is someone who seeks his happiness in the happiness of the collectivity to which he belongs. In the formal tradition of Lukacs’s historical novel, *Snow* nurtures this unfashionable and often overlooked moral by keeping it out of the center and letting it exert its subtle pressure from the margin.

The novel’s artistry can be illustrated by several small elaborations it gives to this organizing principle. One comes from its account of Turgot Bey, father of Ipek and Kadife. A Ka of the previous generation whose (rather brilliant) portrait seems there in part to warn the protagonist of what he may become, Turgot Bey upsets the novel’s apparent symmetry between the political passions of secularism and religion. He is a secularist, but he is also a former Communist who in his youth was tortured by the military. Thus like Ka he cannot be identified with the military coup any more than with the Islamists. He is counter-balanced, on the Islamist side, by his daughter Kadife, who is a kind of leader of the headscarf girls. Though she is Blue’s mistress and ally, Kadife is also the closest thing the novel offers to an independent voice speaking on behalf of

gender. Like her father, she makes entirely secular arguments for what she does. Like the ubiquitous but shadowy Kurds, women do not fit neatly into the secular/religious divide. As major characters, both father and daughter suggest how much is going on between, beneath, or alongside political Islam and secular militarism-- in other words, that the noisily opposed slogans of these two movements may not after all define the stakes of the situation as Pamuk wants us to understand it.

Yet Pamuk does not rest content with that potentially anti-political point. In the space between these movements we detect, again, the specific ideological power of the concept of poverty. Structurally speaking, Turgot Bey plays the role of the heavy father. For him, cowardice is not merely a character trait; what stands between Ka and erotic satisfaction with Ipek is, very precisely, his fearful unwillingness to leave his hotel. And *why* is he so unwilling to leave the hotel? Only one reason is given: “The poverty of Kars ruins his mood” (255). The logic is clear: once again, it is “the poverty of Kars” that helps stop Ka’s love story from reaching a successful conclusion.

In the light of that logic, we can perhaps see something more in Ka’s own psychological resistance to his love story. The most mysterious aspect of Ka’s character is his melancholy, which is also described as a fear of happiness. Fear of happiness seems to appear on its own irregular schedule, as if it existed in a purely psychological dimension that had nothing to do with the political plot. Yet on reflection its appearance makes a kind of sense. As Ka says, his desire for happiness is a desire to escape into a private, self-sufficient world of love and poetry where he can forget the misery of Kars.



If so, then *fear* of happiness would logically be a fear of succeeding in that escape--Ka's fear of what he would become if he were to succeed in forgetting "the poverty of Kars." The novel recognizes, if only obscurely, Ka's commitment to stay engaged somehow with the poverty of Kars when it shows him, for reasons he cannot understand, afraid of the (individual, private) happiness that he should not, after all, be so devoted to attaining. Ka is not the Blue that everyone falls for, but his is arguably a form of heroism nonetheless, and one that it's good to leave students meditating on.