



# Email Romance? Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* as the Narrative of an "Unloving" Relationship

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## ABSTRACT

Batuman's debut novel *The Idiot* has garnered a great amount of critical attention for incorporating in its text emails that interweave the narrative of the first half of the novel. Taking into account both the on- and the offline intimacy depicted in the text, this article attempts to theorize the relationship initiated to a large extent through exchanges of emails between the protagonists. By drawing upon some recent sociological inquiries on digital intimacy but extensively utilizing the framework Eva Illouz offers in her recent work, *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relationships*, to explain the "negative structure of contemporary relationships", the present article characterizes the email romance in the novel as productive of an "unloving" relationship. This "negative structure of contemporary relationships", Illouz argues, is anchored in "the fact that actors do not know how to define, evaluate, or conduct the relationship they enter into according to predictable and stable social scripts" (Illouz, *The End of Love* 9). This article engages with the question of uncertainty Illouz's argument underlines and uses some of the formulations through which she conceptualizes uncertainty. By elaborating on the protagonists' suspicion about the reality of the correspondence, the lack of any distinct narrative structure in it, the unexplained and unpredictable exits of the heroine's love-interest at times, and her experience of chaotic emotions, this article demonstrates how the (presumed) love the heroine experiences is fraught with existential, procedural, normative, and emotional uncertainty.

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During their journey together through Paris, Svetlana criticizes her classmate at Harvard University, Selin Karadağ, the Turkish-American heroine of the novel, for developing intimacy with Ivan, her [Selin's] Hungarian classmate in the Russian class, largely through frequent exchanges of emails:

But you, you're so disconnected from truth, you were so ready to jump into a reality the two of you made up, just through language (...) You went further and further—and then something went wrong (...) It had to develop into something else—into sex, or something else. But for some reason, it didn't. (Batuman, *The Idiot* 250)

The attack is directed at Selin's failure to adequately take into account the actual situation due to her overmuch affinity for language, texts, and words that she assumes to be a "self-sufficient system" (250). Indeed, this fascination is revealed through her attempt to "understand" Ivan by repeatedly going through his emails. She wonders: "Why was it more honourable to reread and interpret a novel like *Lost Illusions* than to reread and interpret some email from Ivan?" (118) Although the reader can point to her immaturity, one must not lose sight of the fact that developing a relationship over the Internet mostly involves re/reading and interpreting textual materials produced on both ends. To be more accurate, the email technology works in tandem with her linguaphilia in developing her obsession with Ivan, who also intends to maintain the correspondence over the computer rather than in person but later reveals that he does not want a serious relationship with Selin. The danger was obvious from the outset as Svetlana's comment has made clear that the textual world constituted of their exchanges cannot account for the practicality of a relationship. Svetlana is right since the excitement felt during online communication often vanishes later on. The uneventful closure of the novel preceded by a series of dull, unexciting encounters between Selin and Ivan puts into question the reality of the prolonged virtual correspondence. Further, the (presumed) lovers become suspicious of the status of their past communications.

With the help of some recent sociological scholarship on intimacy, this article, therefore, attempts to understand what kind of intimate relationship—if it is a relationship at all—email communication helps shape in Batuman's novel, *The Idiot* (2017). Although Selin's attraction for Ivan does not initiate online, the thrills she experiences while drafting emails, along with a range of other emotions, especially the wild joy of receiving emails from him or the anxiety when they do not come, compounds, if not actively generates, her feel of love. The portrayal of technologies in literary texts in relation to emotion and intimacy has been subject to examination in some recent scholarship (Walton; Horton; Das). In line with these interventions, this article focuses on conceptualizing how emails impacted the very perception of intimacy during its [of emails] early days, by offering a reading of *The Idiot*. While mediated relationships are not uniquely the product of technologies, email is different from written letters in how the former induces "greater, non-bodily intimacy" (Stratton 33). Stratton continues, "the material letter reinforces the absence of bodily contact, [while] the virtual email, arriving instantaneously, emphasizes a non-bodily intimacy" (33). For him, email is more "instantaneous" than letter because there is no additional, "apparatus" involved in writing and reading of emails, whereas the involvement of pens, papers, envelopes, stamps, and post-box "formalise" and slow down the process of letter writing (33). As the present essay will demonstrate, it is precisely this non-corporeality and immediacy characteristic of email correspondence that facilitate intimacy while simultaneously making it uncertain at multiple levels.

The novel opens with Selin, eighteen, arriving at Harvard University, adjusting to the new environment, learning to use the Internet, trying to enrol in freshman seminar courses, and confronting the ideas the classes offer with the thoughts and understandings she has already developed. Thoroughly immersed in literature and thoughts on language, she constantly builds narratives in her head, occasionally takes them down on notebooks and laptops, and is determined to be a writer. Despite being a keen observer of things happening around her, compared to her garrulous friend Svetlana, she cannot easily form opinions. In the Russian class, she becomes attracted to Ivan. After some preliminary conversations in and around the class, she sends an email to Ivan. For the same course, she reads a story, "Nina in Siberia", that also features an Ivan who leaves his girlfriend Nina for another woman. Selin comes to identify with Nina and anticipates that her newfound love is doomed to failure. However, after several

rounds of confusing exchanges of emails, Selin sends an email declaring her love for him; Ivan quickly composes a reply email that simultaneously betrays his fascination with the words she writes and the self her emails embody and the fact that he has a girlfriend whom he later introduces to Selin. To spend more time with Ivan but also to do something “generous”, based on her experience as an ESL teacher, she agrees to teach for Peter an economics postgraduate student’s philanthropic teaching program that intends to globalize some Hungarian villages by enlisting several American students to teach English (Batuman, *The Idiot* 398). Despite her initial scepticism, she goes to Budapest via Paris with someone else’s ticket and stays with Svetlana at her aunt’s place. In Hungary, along with other American students assisting Peter’s program, she first stays at a hostel and is subsequently hosted by three families—those of Margit, Rózsa, and Juli. Her time in Hungary feels to her like reading *War and Peace* where “new characters came up every five minutes” and present her with ever-renewing challenges (330). Ivan, who is at the centre of her journey, however, continues to disappoint her, although his pull on her remains undiminished almost until the end. He takes her from the airport to the hostel and through the city, and when the concierge does not allow her to enter the hostel at night, he takes her to his house. He reveals himself to be cruel and shabby, and at times, Selin is afraid that he may attack her. So, towards the end, while confessing to each other, she says that she finds her real-life encounter with him almost “physically painful”. And they jointly discover that it was “fun for us to make each other suffer” (386). While Selin is extremely careful to keep her feelings to herself (perhaps to be explored and written about in the future), Ivan sees their correspondence, especially the miscommunication it has been engendering, as an expression of “a power thing (struggle)” (384). After he leaves her for Bangkok—and the teaching program is not over yet—she sets some potential goals to be gained from the program, but these goals increasingly feel like a chimera. When the program finally ends, she joins her mother in Turkey at her aunt’s place and realizes that “I really didn’t know how to do anything real. I didn’t know how to move to a new city, or have sex, or have a real job, or make someone fall in love with me” (420). However, she does not give up on her determination to be a writer until the end.

That the exchange of emails shapes the correspondence that drives the plot of the novel and helps Selin sustain, if not augment, the fantasy she has developed for Ivan is something on which most reviewers of this novel have agreed. They have commented on the attachment generated by Selin’s fondness for Ivan’s “enigmatic responses” through emails (Feigel), on the author’s incorporation of emails as a “boundary-redrawing method of communication” that is no more than a “purveyor of garbage” (Sterritt), on the heroine’s attraction for Ivan merely because “he gives good emails”, on the “playful seductions of e-mails” (Haas), and on Selin’s attempt to treat the emails as “a launch pad for thinking about what makes literature worthwhile” (Grady). Although online communication occupies only the first part of the novel, the second part should not be seen as redundant at all, since their offline encounters cannot be seen as isolated events dissociated from their online exchanges. As philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze’ev has underlined the “incompleteness” of online-only romance, the novel’s depiction of both modes of encounter can be understood as the heroine’s departure from her initial treatment of love mainly as an exercise of imagination—an assumption supported by what Malinowska calls the “imaginary hallucination” inherent in the experience of online love (Ben-Ze’ev 152; Malinowska 9). The relationship between the two modes—that is, how do the two modes complement each other? —forms a key point of inquiry while examining the actual nature of their relationship. Taking into account both the online and the offline modes of communication, the present article seeks to conceptualize what kind of love the attachment initiated by digital correspondence engenders. By utilizing the framework sociologist Eva Illouz provides in her recent work, *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relationships* (2019), to explain the “negative structure of contemporary relationships” (Illouz, *The End of Love* 18), this article characterizes the email romance in the novel as generative of an “unloving” relationship, and in doing so, it establishes the affair as an example of technology-mediated chaotic love that philosophers like Zygmunt Bauman, Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, Jean-Claude Kaufmann, and others have spoken of.

A particular line of inquiry that informs the study is the recent sociological inquiries into love and emotion that variously highlight the dissolution of romantic attachment in the advanced stage of late modernity. Sociologists like Bauman, Kaufmann, Alain Badiou, and Illouz herself in her earlier works, have emphasised how “consumer society and digital capitalism have

all but killed off romantic love in the 21st century” (Gratzke 102). Arguing in this vein, what Illouz conceptualizes in her aforementioned book as the “negative structure of contemporary relationships” is anchored in “the fact that actors do not know how to define, evaluate, or conduct the relationship they enter into according to predictable and stable social scripts” (*The End* 9). As Illouz puts it, the phenomenon of “unloving” is generated at the “intersection between capitalism, sexuality, gender relations, and technology” and consists of “*the unmaking of bonds that are close and intimate (in potentiality or in reality)*” (3; original emphasis). Drawing upon the works of the previously mentioned authors but largely framing its arguments on Illouz’s work, this article argues that Batuman’s novel forms a narrative of an “unloving” or “negative” relationship by depicting modern technologies’ interventions in experiences of love: not only does the online-turned-offline attachment generate and promote the aura of unloving in the text, but also the romance ends in the heroine’s deliberate adoption of the choice to “unlove”.

The basis of this essay’s characterization of the relationship in the novel as “negative” is that the lure of modern technologies in the late modern Western culture forms the context of both Batuman’s novel and Illouz’s work. The novel opens with a reference to the World Wide Web and depicts the heroine coming to terms with the particularities of email and Unix and wondering on the power of email to create new social relations and sustain the already-existing ones. A thread of messages, therefore, reads like “the story of the intersection of your life with other lives” (Batuman, *The Idiot* 4). In his interview with the author, Paul Laity aptly characterizes it as a “historical novel, set in the days before smartphones and Wikipedia which offers a commentary on how the world has changed since the mid-1990s” (Batuman, *Interview with The Guardian*). Illouz, too, relates the concept of “unloving” to the “massive influence of new technological platforms” that encourages sexual freedom and “creates now such a large number of possibilities that the emotional and cognitive conditions for romantic choice have been radically transformed” (*The End* 24).

Additionally, the mock-lovers of Batuman’s novel, especially Selin herself, exploit the romantic freedom, albeit not necessarily a sexual one, that underpins the unstable social non-/bonds characteristic of romantic experiences in the late modern era. To put it more succinctly, she experiences love largely as an exercise of imagination, as Elaine Margolin depicts Selin’s experience as one of “living inside your thoughts” so that “in some ways her [Batuman’s] novel mirrors a growing and upsetting trend among so many young people who seem to have given up on the possibility of love and jubilation and euphoria before they have even tasted it” (Margolin). Although she does not explicitly attribute the cause of this “trend” to technology in particular, Margolin’s observation of the novel coincides with Illouz’s claim that unloving relationships tend to “fade or evaporate before or soon after they properly started”, and that they “*are valued as ephemeral and transitory*” (*The End* 25; original emphasis). And the ephemerality of online attachment has been underlined in Zygmunt Bauman’s critique of the “frivolous interaction” that underpins “liquid”, online “unions”: “The unions have nothing to lean on but our chatting and texting; the union only goes so far as the dialling, talking, messaging. Stop talking—and you are out. Silence equals exclusion” (Bauman 34). While Bauman’s observation cannot fully account for the aspirations of Batuman’s heroine who “wants romance”, the novel highlights the unpredictability of the text-based correspondence where ecstasy resides primarily in invoking the lover through imagination, and once the lovers have a real, physical encounter outside the ritual of “chatting and texting”, the ecstasy is lost (Batuman, *Interview with The Guardian*).

A major problem of conceptualizing the relationship depicted in Batuman’s novel as per Illouz’s terminology is that in the latter’s work, email communication receives much less attention than dating apps that enable interaction mostly by utilizing Instant Message technology and furnishing the users with the possibility of finding numerous potential partners. One can assume that the possibility of what Illouz calls the “evaporation” of love is much lower in email than in dating apps (*The End* 3). Indeed, while the relationship reflects many features characteristic of courtships pursued on dating apps through IM, Selin’s chase for Ivan is not without “risk and adventure” which, Alain Badiou claims, are absent from the calculated encounters determined by algorithms (Badiou 11). This article hopes to address the contradiction by juxtaposing Illouz’s formulation with the instability and confusion resulting from online communication.

The best reason, however, for employing Illouz’s formulation is that she offers a framework to understand the online-turned-offline relationship thoroughly fraught with contradictions and ambiguity. Pertinent to our attempt to read the novel through her work is Ben-Ze’ev’s

observation: “Difficulties in maintaining long-term personal relationships have become characteristic of contemporary society in which changes are rapid and significant; in cyberspace, however, they are even more evident” (65). As Illouz specifies, the cultural condition of unloving simultaneously evolves “a form of subjectivity—who we are and how we behave” and centres on “a social process that reflects the profound impact of capitalism on social relationships” (*The End* 17). Therefore, this article will analyse how technology-mediated attachment engenders a “form of subjectivity” and facilitates the “social processes” that enact the condition of unloving in the novel. While the “social process” involved in online-turned-offline relationships manifests in the collapse of rituals and predictability in relationships, digital technology helps shape and gratify the fantasy of “self-projection” on the loved other and creates the imagined “proximate” world (Luhmann 15).<sup>1</sup>

## 2. THE SELF AND EMAILS

In Illouz’s account, “negative relationships” result from increased attention to the self. She writes: “The volatility of relationship is (...) the result of reactions and counter-reactions to perceived symbolic threats to the self” (*The End* 163). It is not enough that individuals are wary about maintaining their “self-worth” and “autonomy”, but the assertion of individuality has become a prerequisite for attracting attention since the evaluation of the potential partner’s “psychological, sexual, and social worth” depends on “whether someone acts ‘needy’ or not, whether someone acts in a way that ‘shows interest or not’” (160). The mechanism of emails allows the user to be not too needy by giving both the sender and the recipient a certain amount of privacy and thus reducing the possibility of forming an immediate emotional attachment. Scholars have observed that emailing “being less personal than a letter, it is a relatively unobtrusive form of communication” and “permits the senders to think over their words and modify their sentences” (Durscheid and Frehner 35–36). While Selin is initially attracted to Ivan, by preferring an “unobtrusive” mode of communication, she seems to protect herself from the threat of rejection. She also holds back her neediness by repeatedly “thinking over” and “modifying” the emails before sending them. When Ivan asks her to relate the plot of *Goodbye, Summer*, Selin resists the urge—the deep-felt “neediness”—to immediately get back to him with his desired answer: “I started to summarize the plot of *Goodbye, Summer*. It was a long story and, as I wrote, I could tell that I was losing some kind of political capital. *I deleted what I had written and typed instead: sure, I can tell you the story. Now he would have to ask me again*” (Batuman, *The Idiot* 92; emphasis added). Diminution of the “political capital” of the story might be a reason for her withdrawal. But, as my italicization suggests, Selin is guided by a degree of self-consciousness while typing. Unlike in offline encounters where the impression once produced by a partner cannot be undone, the provision for “deleting” and “modifying the sentences” allows the writer to control which aspects of the self she intends to disclose and thus to create and maintain a pristine idea of the self. She also resists the temptation to respond immediately even when she fails to see how Ivan’s mention of the past enmity of the Turks and Hungarians in his reply relates to her early email. To clarify this confusion, she “wanted to write him back right away” but desists herself from doing so. She preserves her “self-worth” by working out the logic that “he had waited a whole day, so I knew I had to wait at least that long” (91). And, later on, “[t]ime and again I tried to write to him, but was paralyzed by the thought that anything now depended on what move I made” (137). Selin is clearly guided by the logic that maintaining her autonomy requires writing at specific intervals as if the delay in reply would indicate that she is busy, whereas by writing to him she might expose her impulsiveness. Holding back the urge to be voluble and emotionally incontinent, she maintains (to Ivan and herself) the sense of her self-worth. Tracing back the origin of the word “idiot” to the Greek *idios*, meaning ‘own, private’, Chris Townsend argues that she embodies a “‘private’ mode of subjectivity (that) should be understood as faculties of judgment that operate independently of social convention, tradition, or external influence” (590). By guarding this “private” subjectivity that she builds by controlling her “flow of feelings”, the unique technology of email helps Selin maintain her “self-worth and autonomy” (Illouz,

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1 Defining love as a system of communication, Niklas Luhmann argues that love ushers into “the joint constitution of a proximate world of daily living and of interactional steering, of a reciprocal expecting of expectations...”. Thus, in the lovers’ world, “[t]he other’s other-oriented expectations converge with the self-oriented expectations of the Ego, with the Ego’s self-projection” (Luhmann 15).

*The End* 198). Furthermore, Selin cannot come out of this guarded, solitary mode of subjectivity while experiencing love even when she travels in Hungary with or without Ivan. Like her desire to suppress the urge to write emails him, she prefers to suffer at Rózsa's house to call Ivan to "rescue" her. She explains to Svetlana: "I don't want him [Ivan] to think I'm complaining. Anyway, I should probably be solving my problems myself" (Batuman, *The Idiot* 365). Finally, because her intimacy with Ivan goes nowhere near sex—and she certainly does not ask for it—she attempts to fill "that terrible emptiness" by running water between her legs with a handheld shower (349). Thus, the solitary practice of falling in love that she developed through writing emails to Ivan persists even when they outgrow the phase of their virtual interaction and get chances to meet in person.

The other aspect pertaining to the question of the self can be explained by highlighting the degree of autonomy that digital technology allows the self to imagine and experience. Kaufmann writes of the loving subject's psychology: "An individual armed with a mouse imagines that she is in complete and absolute control of her social contacts" and hopes to "expand our horizons to infinity" (7). The act of imagining results in "an intensification of the self" (10). And as Illouz has persuasively argued in her earlier work, *Why Love Hurts* (2012), that technologically mediated emotions are "largely self-generated", it is this intensification that encourages Selin to initially express romantic interest in Ivan through emails. Illouz shows that, until the advent of the Internet, the cultural technology that was responsible for the production of romantic fantasy was the novel and the movie which "created sentiments through strong mechanisms of identification" (Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* 236). The internet both runs in line with and complements the older technologies by invoking "a kind of interactional fictional emotion, anchored in technological objects" (236). This observation accounts for the smooth transition of Selin's fascination for Ivan from the realm of books—where she identifies with Nina in the story "Nina in Siberia" and imagines Ivan Varga to be the fictional Ivan—to the Internet. She fills up Ivan's physical absence by invoking him from the details of his journey from California to Yale. From the description in his email, she "could see it all so clearly—the traffic light changing all night for nobody's benefit, the first cars passing by as the sky grew light—and I was overcome by the sense of how much more there was in his life than in mine" (Batuman, *The Idiot* 130–1). When troubled by the thought that the whole thread of communication might be "some elaborate hoax", she reassures herself about Ivan's truthfulness of purpose. When his messages repeatedly frustrate her expectations and sound utterly impertinent, by employing her imagination, she tries to trace his purpose from the existing information available to her. She wonders: "The message had been posted at five-thirty, and Ivan had been logged on since two forty-five" as if he has spent nearly two hours thinking on and composing the reply mail. Her speculation continues: "Those were important, delicate hours. People didn't give them up so easily. Why would anyone go through so much inconvenience just to mystify me?" (122). The attempt to imagine the other's psychological state finally settles down in his favour: "In the end, I thought, I had no choice but to *assume* he was being sincere". Commenting on the role self-serving imagination plays in online romances, Lauren Rosewarne offers a rejoinder to Illouz's observation: "The properties of communicating in cyberspace—and the necessity to use imagination to substitute for a physical presence—potentially render online relationships as more romantic for some participants (...)" (Rosewarne 42). In the absence of a solid reciprocation from him and that of any material evidence of his sincerity, Selin's imagination precludes any objective examination of Ivan's mind and intention and instead gratifies the intimate wish of the self that he kept logged in the "delicate hours" because of his love for her (Batuman, *The Idiot* 122).

Yet, the self-generated and "fictional" emotion puts into question the possibility of building meaningful communication. Close attention to the emails reveals the dissymmetry of their contents. In reply to Selin's first mail, Ivan writes that he forgives her for "the 150 years of Turkish invasion of Hungary, and (...) the horrible books about it which we had to read in school" (91). These themes being unrelated to what she said, Selin evades them in her reply to him and tells how, in imagined Siberia, she is "overwhelmed by things of unknown or dubious meaning" (92). In reply, Ivan teases her by writing about the degradation of Lenin's statue in Moscow in Budapest (93–4). The incongruity of the materials makes her ponder "why he had written it" (94). Niklas Luhmann underlines the experience of love as a "medium of communication", one that necessitates "an unconditional confirmation of one's self, of personal identity" (14). What

he means is that, in love, a mutual understanding is constituted by the selective acceptance of meaning so that there is a scope for “mutual recognition”, that is, “the existence of another person and how this other person gives meaning to their own experience” (9). Similar to Luhmann’s formulation, their online correspondence indeed constitutes a shared (cyber-) world. But, contrary to his words, the expectation of mutual meaning-making is recurrently frustrated in the case of Selin and Ivan as the technology functions more as a space for venting opinions and concerns rather than establishing a two-way, coherent conversation. Indeed, as his later revelation will show, he did not want to develop a meaningful conversation, as he did not want a relationship with her, although he pretended to continue the exchange until quite late. So, the shared cyberworld Selin thinks they have constituted is shaped and sustained just by their personal imagination—or to be more specific, only Selin’s imagination—rather than an organized conversation or interactions and even far less reciprocations. As she suggests, their online communication generates both “intimacy and remoteness”, that is, it engenders a form of intimacy undercut by a sense of remoteness (Batuman, *The Idiot* 99).

### 3. EMAIL ROMANCE AND THE “MUDDLED WILL”

The foregoing discussion on the increased amount of autonomy the emailing technology ascribes to the protagonists and the imagination they (but mostly Selin) employ to build a virtual world makes one wonder how much more willing she is to carry on the presumed love. Illouz writes of the modern cultural practice of “consent giving” that often results in the “muddled will” of the partners involved in love: “Consent is conditional on the premise that the subject can and must understand the meaning and implications of her decision to let another appropriate her body (...)” (*The End* 150). While sex or body do not constitute the premise of un/love in the novel, neither Selin nor Ivan understand “the meaning and implications” of what they are doing or writing. Selin writes the first email not only out of the explicit desire to declare love but also to do some experiment with the mechanism. As she types the surname “Varga”, his full name appears “magically” on the recipient box (Batuman, *The Idiot* 88). Although she claims that her love for Ivan is directed at the person behind the screen, one wonders whether her “love” is more for the name—and later, for the words he *types* and *sends*—than for the physical being. As the exchange proceeds—and Ivan’s messages grow increasingly enigmatic to her—she starts thinking that she “loves” him. She types: “I think I’m falling in love with you”, while the verb “think” renders the question of love uncertain, thereby underlining her “muddled will” (131). Similarly, Ivan’s intentions remain vague throughout the exchange. If he had a clear decision to continue or end the correspondence, then the email in which he tells Selin about his girlfriend should have concluded the thread of exchange. Selin also assumes this confession to be the end of her imaginary relationship. However, when he gets back to her immediately after that email, it suggests exactly the opposite. Whether he gives her “consent” to “fall in love” with him or not remains unresolved throughout the online, and as we will see, the offline encounters as well. In fact, he responds to her first email because it was “refreshing, so different from all the things that people usually say” (382). It again implies that the language of the email moulded on that of the letter Ivan writes to Nina in the story “Nina in Siberia”, along with the very medium of its delivery, produces a “refreshing” effect that prompts him to respond. Although he sees through her romantic intention at this point and knows that he cannot pursue it both because he plans on leaving for California and is already in a relationship, he cannot help writing back. So, unless it had been for Selin’s creative “e-pistle”, perhaps the correspondence could not flourish as it does online (Townsend 589).

### 4. “EXISTENTIAL” UNCERTAINTY OF EMAIL ROMANCE

The digital encounter depicted in the novel departs from what Illouz terms the “existential certainty” essential to the definition of love: “Existential certainty derives from the fact that we identify the frame of meaning of an interaction and know our place and role in it” (*The End* 38). The protagonists seem to sense neither “the frame of meaning” of the relationship nor their “place and role in it”. The frame of meaning gets complicated because of the difference between the real world and cyberspace. The sense of existential uncertainty is captured in Selin’s feeling that “I was living two lives: one consisting of emails with Ivan, the other consisting of school” (Batuman, *The Idiot* 107). That the case is the same with Ivan is evident from his

activities, too: although they talk online, when Selin meets Ivan only “a few hours after getting an email from him”, “he just kept walking and didn’t say anything”. Yet he does not dismiss her approach until very late and plays the role of a pretended lover, a role that Selin’s unrequited love has ascribed to him but from which he cannot disentangle himself so easily. For Selin, the discrepancy continues to exist between reality and shared cyberspace as Ivan’s messages that “accumulate” ideas in her head “set up an unbridgeable gap between me and the rest of the world” (149). Uncertainty about their “place and role” in the relationship is highlighted by Ivan’s assertion that his “love” for Selin is directed at the person typing the emails. Although she is initially sceptical of this statement (and does not probe to find which one is more real or more embodied than the other), Selin is soon convinced of the split between his corporeal self she encounters during her offline encounters and the self that reveals itself through his emails, i.e., the virtual self, as she writes: “[although] I never thought to differentiate between you and the person who writes your letters. But I think I see your point. I send you an email: how do you know who wrote it? It could be anyone. There’s no way for me to convince you. I say, ‘It’s me!’; you say: ‘Who’s me?’” (144) Evidently, she departs from her earlier conviction she expressed to the child and adolescent psychologist that “I really do think he exists” and instead agrees on what he said: “It’s possible he doesn’t exist at all” and “exists as a series of messages” (140–1). In fact, it is the psychologist, whom Selin opposes initially, who points out the existential uncertainty of the affair. Expressing uncertainty about the reality of his existence, he highlights the absurdity of the situation and characterizes it as “a noninterpersonal interpersonal relationship”: “If he was a real person, you would have all kinds of opportunities to see the flaws in the situation (...)” (141–143). Although we need not take his cynicism for granted, quite early into the course of the events of the novel, Selin wonders that “[in] his [Ivan’s] physical presence it was impossible to believe that he had written me those emails” (99). Moreover, the numerous “flaws” Selin discovers in his character later ironically bring home the merit of the point the psychologist makes.

## 5. “PROCEDURAL” UNCERTAINTY AND EMAIL ROMANCE

The psychologist further dwells on the difference between the present case and “a real intimate relationship”. He defines the latter as a mutual “space where you’re supported and free to *make* mistakes” and one where “you don’t just blow up everything with one wrong move” (143). Underlying his idea of intimate relationships as charted through “discussion” and mutual “support” and as “a place where there are no mistakes” is his faith in intimacy based on a sense of what Illouz calls “procedural certainty” (*The End* 40). She understands the pre-modern love relation as marked by procedural certainty, that is, the presence of “the sequential order in which things are done (...) to carry forward an interaction”. She further argues that the “experience of going through different stages or sequences” would give rise to a “narrative progression”: “One moved step by step, with a sense of “direction”, and the “direction” of the interaction gave certainty to its meaning and to the part each one was supposed to play” (41–42). Overall, the relationship portrayed in the novel faintly conforms to the socially prescribed norms of love in how online exchanges end in offline encounters that are eventually followed by the episodes where they spend some time together. Yet, the process of moving “step by step” becomes complicated due to Selin and Ivan’s lack of a sense of “direction”. During their online interaction, Selin’s failure to identify a definitive “direction” and to follow a clear structure in the course of the interaction makes it difficult for her to proceed with the interaction:

I wanted to know how it was going to turn out, like flipping ahead in a book. I didn’t even know what kind of story it was, or what kind of role I was supposed to be playing. Which of us was taking it more seriously? Didn’t that have to be me, because I was younger, and also because I was the girl? (Batuman, *The Idiot* 106)

Here the absence of any “procedural certainty”— she knows that “[a]s a story, it didn’t make sense” and so she does not know what role to play in it—regarding how to communicate love through emails and then offline obstructs the interaction (138). It is because of the confusion they experience during their encounters throughout the text—at times, Selin is clueless as to whether she should chase her fantasy of love for Ivan—that the narrative of their (presumed) relationship is marked by the absence of any sense of development or progress. Procedural



uncertainty also results from the haziness of the messages Ivan writes perhaps to discourage her to think of the correspondence seriously. Having read his email, Selin wonders how to react to it and how she should proceed with the exchange:

I went running and thought about whether Ivan was saying that I was the atom, the crazy spark—the one that now had the energies to seduce people. Was he calling me, or sending me away? On the one hand, he was saying it wouldn't work to go back into the ground. On the other hand, when he talked about the way ahead being harder, that sounded like something I had to do by myself. (149)

The next “step” in the relationship will vary depending on what Ivan *means*, and what he *means* is unspecific to her—and also, probably, to himself—thus revealing their ignorance about the whole procedure.

In online-turned-offline relationships, ensuring procedural certainty requires not only that the partners should experience offline encounters but also that online interactions seamlessly segue into offline events. Kaufmann writes that the “rituals” for turning online correspondence into a real-life relationship need to be “codified”: “The transition from net to real life has to be as normal and as neutral as possible”. The “transition” must be smooth and uncomplicated because

a date is not just a follow up to their online conversation. A date brings together two people who are really different from who they were on the net. They are not more ‘real’ or more ‘authentic’, but they are different. (Kaufmann 28)

So, for Kaufmann, procedural complexities in online-turned-offline relationships are caused largely by the tension arising from the discrepancy between the two “different” selves of the individuals involved. While addressing this complexity, Ivan also points at the difference between “spoken language” and what the psychologist calls the “writing voice”. He writes to Selin that even if he sees her “in the street now, he would say hi and keep going”, and the reason he indicates is that “spoken language is so mystified, so simplistic, a trap” (Batuman, *The Idiot* 122). It is possible to read in this statement his genuine concern for the demystification of the entire correspondence. But what is also worth taking into account is his apprehension that the difference between his online and offline selves might frustrate her. The first reason Ivan’s offline self should disappoint her is that he is in a real-life relationship, whereas he can write anything online just to maintain the correspondence. The other reason for which the distinction should bother her is that the more intriguing and energetic his emails, the less attractive person he is in his real life. Ivan perhaps knows this. So, during the flight to Paris they take separately but join soon, he ends up characterizing himself as “pretty useless” (239) and as a “sadist” (235). Procedural uncertainty, or complicity or confusion characteristic of a negative intimate bond is then caused by the partners’ anxiety that the difference between their “different” selves will demystify the attraction. During their mock confession that presumably concludes their relationship, Ivan wonders why “it was so hard for us to have a conversation” (386). Selin points out that the difficulty is “specific to talking”, that is, their face-to-face conversation, as the case is different in online interactions: “We could do it over email” (386). Ivan corrects her by pointing out that their correspondence over emails was “never really a conversation” (386). As in a conversation, they “took turns, but basically you wrote something, and I wrote something else, and then you wrote something else” (386). Rather, the textual space of the internet was a space for each—constituted of and shared by both—to venture their opinions, and as Ivan claims, “it was better”, thereby implying that the virtual space, for all its failures to enact a real, live conversation, was more suitable to bring together two lovers than an offline encounter (387).

The next step in the so-called procedure, a trip together, becomes uncertain as each of them has different motives and different notions about the “procedure” of initiating and carrying on a relationship. Ivan proposes that Selin should stop attempting to fit their relationship into any existing literary narrative: “You should get over this Vanya, and these wild dreams of atom, sparks, Rolexes, and everything else”. He believes in the teleological progress of the digital romance where forgetting it will ensure her “growth and life for the future”, and his attempt to conclude the interaction through an email, rather than by an offline visitation, suggests that he does not intend to “carry forward” the correspondence offline (223). This is exactly where Selin’s

assumption of the narrative trajectory of love differs from his. When he mentions that they might not meet “if they didn’t want to”, choosing the next step becomes challenging for her: “I didn’t understand (...) whether I was supposed to not go to Hungary, or what I was supposed to do there without him” (223). Although the trip is mediated by an agency, suspiciously intent on globalizing and teaching English in the rural areas of Hungary, her decision to pursue the same is motivated by her renewed faith in the statement Ivan made earlier: “I think your atom, it will never go back to peace, to cereal or rocks or anything like that. Once it has been seduced there is no way back” (224). He seems to suggest that once an (online) interaction begins there is no other way but to carry it forward even if it anticipates a disaster.

This kind of uncertainty puts into question the sequence of “a narrative progression” as the erotic tension accumulated in cyberspace is dispersed offline. Selin’s fantasy does not develop progressively into a solid social bond with Ivan; rather she becomes increasingly disillusioned with him. Ben-Ze’ev notes:

Cyberspace lacks a closed and unitary structure. Being in cyberspace involves a perpetual state of searching, an endless chase that will rarely settle into a stable form of life. Online events often lack a stable narrative, with an expected beginning and end. Such never-ending events (...) increase uncertainty (...) (Ben-Ze’ev 226)

Although this email-mediated love does not involve connecting with and dating numerous partners, the present case depicts the heroine’s “endless chase” in how its allure is never lost on her. When an email seems hopelessly incomprehensible, she searches for an explanation by composing a second one. Her inability to conclude the relationship—both on- and offline—by sending an email can be explained by the fact that email romance may not contain a “closed structure”. The ending is suspended and refuses to “settle into a stable form of life” when Ivan promises to switch to the online mode of correspondence once again. He says: “My email account will be active a little while longer. And yours will be active for a long time. So we could be in touch” (Batuman, *The Idiot* 389). When entirely predicated on the existence of email accounts which can be deactivated and deleted at any time, romantic experiences become unpredictable and fizzle out into an unexpected ending, thereby failing to “sustain meaningful interaction” and crystallize into an identifiable, “stable framework” (Ben-Ze’ev 227). Rather, it evolves “without a conscious, purpose-oriented, or declared decision” (Illouz, *The End* 178). Although, as Townsend shows, the narrative progresses in terms of Selin’s gradual maturation and the growth of her aesthetic sensibilities, to my mind their courtship remains thoroughly unstructured and inconclusive (Townsend 2022).

## 6. “NORMATIVE” UNCERTAINTY

Relatedly, Ivan’s decision to follow the existentialist dictate that “you couldn’t make decisions based on pre-existing norms or codes, which were always too general for any given case” and subsequently to break up the correspondence by sending an email also implies that digital intimacy liberally breaks with given norm or convention (Batuman, *The Idiot* 223). This situation is contrary to what Illouz calls, the “normative certainty” that characterizes the pre-modern courtship. She continues: “The easier it is to identify (consciously or not) the norms present in an interaction, the more forceful the norms are and the more predictable that interaction is (...)” (*The End* 36). In online romance, on the other hand, “rules may be more flexible than in offline activities”, and “every decision you made create you” and, we can add, your love story, too (Ben-Ze’ev 227). It is because of the flexible and uncodified rules that Ivan deceives Selin so easily, first by continuously engaging in conversations with her and then sending an email titled “byselin.txt”, and later by encouraging her to go to Hungary, bringing her to his place, and leaving again (Batuman, *The Idiot* 222).

## 7. “EMOTIONAL” UNCERTAINTY AND EMAIL ROMANCE

The correspondence between Selin and Ivan verges on a negative relationship in how it engenders confusion in the realm of emotions and feelings. Illouz writes of the sense of “emotional certainty” characteristic of pre-modern love where the “actors acted as if they knew the nature and intensity of their own emotions and could easily ascertain those of

others" (*The End* 60). However, predicting and ascertaining the intensity of feelings become increasingly obfuscated in the present days as the "relations with others are constantly being (...) dated" (4). As Illouz elaborates, negative relationships are marked by "a deep, nagging *uncertainty* about emotional life, a difficulty to interpret our own and others' feelings, knowing how and what to compromise about, and a difficulty in knowing what we owe others and what they owe us" (13). When Ivan mentions his present girlfriend in an email, Selin has a strikingly ambivalent, almost flat, reaction to it. She first eludes the fact: "The fourth time I read the email, I stopped at the sentence about his girlfriend. Was it possible that *that* was the most important sentence?" Yet, she is astonished at her inability to feel any negative emotion in particular: "But to me, the idea of the girlfriend didn't carry that same feeling of direness as the feeling that he didn't actually want to know me, or know anything" (Batuman, *The Idiot* 133). One of the reasons for this unclear emotion has been provided by the narrator herself: "The role of a suspicious woman seemed like a cliché having nothing to do with me or with the time that we lived in" (191). What she means by "the time" is the one that has witnessed sexual revolutions and the collapse of the traditional family structure and monogamous, heterosexual relationships that have a space for "suspicious" women. Since her generation has already witnessed the sexual revolution, she is not hugely depressed when she learns about Eunice. Yet, technology has an important role to play in creating emotional ambivalence. As Ben-Ze'ev observes, "the fact that there are fewer practical implications [of love in cyberspace] (...) weakens the impact of a negative event perceived as undeserved"—and the reality of their relationship is still questionable to her—the existence of a flesh-and-blood girlfriend does not have much impact on her, and their online correspondence continues even after that declaration (Ben-Ze'ev 67).

Selin's uncertainty about her own romantic feelings heightens when their offline encounters turn out to be awkward and flat. Whereas his physical absence—and later, his decision to not communicate offline—renders him into an enigmatic "love interest", during the offline courtship, Ivan "felt to me [Selin] increasingly like the parody of a love interest" (Batuman, *The Idiot* 191). Despite the absence of any powerful emotion in particular, the process of sending and receiving emails is often streaked with some hope and excitement. Apart from the mention of Eunice, which has a vague impact on her, the elaborate exercise of the correspondence itself, although not the information of the messages, produces some kind of emotions typically associated with love. Ivan's physical company outright negates most of them. Whether her feelings for Ivan can be categorized as "love" becomes questionable as she is simultaneously drawn towards and confused by the slightest mention of words like "boyfriend" or "husband" during her stay and travels in Hungary and on her way from there to Istanbul. The embarrassment is distinctly articulated in her confession: "sometimes after I see you, I feel really bad. It's almost physically painful" (386). One wonders how to relate her earlier statement "I think I'm falling in love with you" with the feeling of pain. Is the pain the inevitable consequence of what she took for virtual courtship, or was her "love" one-sided, an illusion, nothing but momentary attraction, from the very outset? Both options are plausible. Contrary to the expected trajectory of online romance that ends with offline dating and reconciliation, the protagonists remain unconvinced about their feelings for each other from the beginning to the end. Finally, Selin chooses to end the pain by attempting to forget him. Waiting for an email, without a promise of an offline interaction, is, in Lauren Berlant's phrase, a kind of "cruel optimism".<sup>2</sup> By deciding to remove—both offline and online, the space that occupied her mind—the object of pain, she self-consciously embraces the end of love. While their on- and offline correspondences do not wholly exclude an affective involvement—Selin indeed experiences moments of intense excitement and dejection—the presumed relationship itself does not witness much emotional maturation in the course of the novel. Rather, it is a narrative of Selin's "ungrounded longing (...) around Ivan" (Batuman, *The Idiot* 349). Ungrounded—because, on one hand, the unrelatedness of the content exchanged over the Internet ruins the communication online while, on the other, Ivan's callousness and the mismanagement of Peter's teaching program at some rural areas of Hungary foreclose the possibility of the offline development of the initial correspondence.


2 Lauren Berlant argues that while all attachments are "optimistic", they "become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it" (Berlant 1–2).

As Marshall McLuhan once famously claimed, “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human associations and action”, the introduction of emails, indeed, impacts the kind of “association” our protagonists develop (McLuhan 8). The increasing digitalization of culture is congruent with the individualization encouraged in contemporary Western, if not global culture. While email as well as other communication technologies certainly help maintain and, at times, even strengthen already existing relationships, in those cases where the partners meet or initiate courtship virtually, intimacy becomes heavily dependent on the partners’ subjective fantasies about each other. Imagination and fantasy, in such instances, put a strain on conversations that eventually end up collapsing once the correspondence goes offline. As Margolin succinctly puts it, “The magic exists, it seems, only in their email exchanges” (Margolin). The online exchange between the protagonists of their private thoughts and fantasy renders it affective but fails to concretize a “conversation” per se, a failure their actual encounter brings out. There is an encounter thoroughly undercut by disjointed conversations in shared cyberspace resulting in an increasing obfuscation of the question of “consent” and of the possibility of developing a mutual agreement regarding the status of the relationship. Moreover, in Illouz’s formulation, the culture of negative relationships is characterized by the collapse of certainty in the feeling and experiences of love. As the above discussion has demonstrated, the relationship is fraught with uncertainty in different ways. Emotional uncertainty generates from the difficulty to decipher other’s feelings, which are mediated by technology, and that of her own, as the shift from online to offline is accompanied by fluctuations in their emotional involvement. The absence of any codified rules in the pursuit of the courtship puts into question normative certainty. Apart from the uncertainty about the reality of the relationship, the absence of any proper direction results in procedural uncertainty that entails a narrative trajectory of both “positive and negative choice, which intertwine bonds and non-bonds” (Illouz, *The End* 33). Although emails do not outright foreclose the building of affective relationships, the cyberspace where they operate distances the users from the practical world, inserts anxiety and uncertainty into communication, and thus renders it fragile. By depicting digital romance and the feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability it ensues in the 1990s context, the instance offered by Batuman anticipates the chaotic love that prevails in postmillennial cyberspace due to the massive usage of dating and hook-up apps.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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