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Reading Response 11: Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* Portrayal of Love and Language

In *The Idiot* by Elif Batuman, two of the main characters, Selin and Ivan, communicate their thoughts through email in a fragile effort to form a romantic attachment. In the words of Marshall MacLuhan, 'the medium is the message,' and the novel establishes early on a context in which Harvard students in the 90s considered e-mail a novelty.

Selin grapples with her cultural differences as a Turkish-American student, with the newness of living alone, of having a romantic crush, of trying to discover what she wants to study while having to apply to Harvard's freshman seminars, and of studying Russian literature and flying to Hungary in an effort to "find herself." Selin's arc reflects the realism and the fragility of a young adult relationship.

At first, Ivan and Selin begin their romantic entanglement through email, the modern new platform, popular at Harvard. They interchange introspective thoughts and hide their feelings behind existential crises. For instance, Ivan sent this email after Selin begins to ignore them: "Why would you trade wine and cheese for vodka and pickles? Why does a Greek hero have to fight his fate? Are dice a lethal weapon? Is there a way to escape the triviality-dungeon of conversations? Why did you stop coming to math?" Here, the most important question is the last one, because it is the most personal, even though it does not have the greatest philosophical meaning. The rest of the questions are a prelude for Ivan to figure out why Selin drifted away.

In their email conversations, they try finding meaning in the ordinary. Like Selin's mother explains, Selin does not experience Ivan as a real person. Instead, "he exists as a series of

messages, he's *always* there, every time you turn on the computer." By reading and rereading those messages, Selin both idealizes and romanticizes her relationship with Ivan. This way, Ivan becomes Selin's ideal companion, allowing her to fill in the blanks.

Ivan and Selin's relationship does not move past infatuation and flirtation. In her disillusionment, Selin seeks comfort in language, in the idea that beauty can help you forget about love, that sunflowers can act as the five fingers of God, and that words could allow Ivan and her to invent an alternative semiotic reality, that eventuality did not culminate in anything tangible.

Selin's and Ivan's story reflects the reality of modern dating, except that most of their flirtation happens through email rather than through a dating app. In *The Idiot*, Batuman uses Ivan's and Selin's anticlimactic romantic encounters to portray the failings of language. Selin says she thinks differently in Turkish than she does in English. Selin falls in love with Ivan's letters and feels disappointed when Ivan in the flesh becomes a reality. She eventually decides to become a writer, because she realizes she needs language to make sense of the subjectivity of the real world: "She talked about a poem she had written, in which she dropped her laptop in the rain and swallowed the universe."

By the last line of the book, Selin changes her major away from linguistics, claiming she had not learned what she wanted from language, and proceeds to walk around "looking for beauty." Perhaps, her journey to self-realization and learning to appreciate the tangible beauty of everyday life—more than her journey with Ivan or semiotics—culminates in the novel's greatest love story.