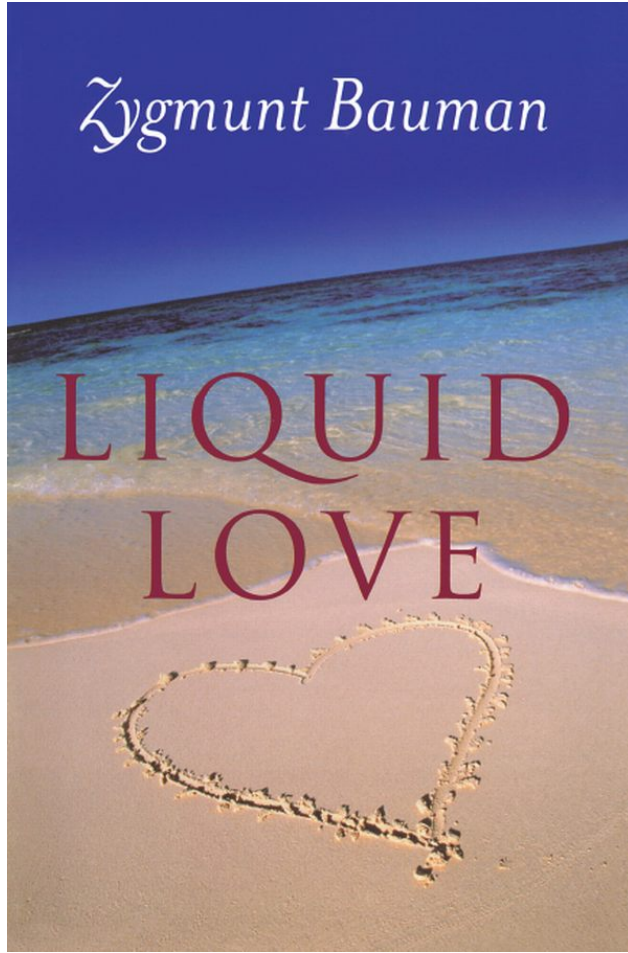


Zygmunt Bauman

LIQUID
LOVE



LIQUID LOVE

On the Frailty of Human Bonds

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

polity

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Contents

Foreword

- 1 Falling In and Out of Love
- 2 In and Out of the Toolbox of Sociality
- 3 On the Difficulty of Loving Thy Neighbour
- 4 Togetherness Dismantled

Notes

Foreword

Ulrich, the hero of Robert Musil's great novel, was – as the title of the novel announced – *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*: the man without qualities. Having no qualities of his own, whether inherited or acquired once and for all and undetachable, Ulrich had to compose whatever quality he might have wished to have by his own effort, using his own wits and acumen; but none of these qualities were guaranteed to last indefinitely in a world full of confusing signals, prone to change fast and in a way no one expected.

The hero of this book is *Der Mann ohne Verwandtschaften* – the man with no bonds, and particularly no bonds as fixed as the kinship bonds used to be in Ulrich's time. Having no bonds that are unbreakable and attached once and for all, the hero of this book – the denizen of our liquid modern society – and his successors today must tie together whatever bonds they want to use as a link to engage with the rest of the human world by their own efforts with the help of their own skills and dedication. Unbound, they must connect... None of the connections that come to fill the gap left by the absent or mouldy bonds are, however, guaranteed to last. Anyway, they need to be only loosely tied, so that they can be untied again, with little delay, when the settings change – as in liquid modernity they surely will, over and over again.

The uncanny frailty of human bonds, the feeling of insecurity that frailty inspires, and the conflicting desires

that feeling prompts to tighten the bonds yet keep them loose is what this book tries to unravel, record and grasp.

Lacking Musil's sharpness of vision, richness of palette and subtlety of brushstrokes – in fact any of his exquisite talents that made *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* into the definitive portrait of the modern man – I have to confine myself to drafting a portfolio of rough and fragmentary sketches, rather than try a full, let alone the definitive likeness. The most I can hope for is an identity kit, a composite picture that may contain as many gaps and blank spots as filled-up sections. Even that final composition, though, will be an unfinished task, left to the readers to complete.

The principal hero of this book is human *relationship*. This book's central characters are men and women, our contemporaries, despairing at being abandoned to their own wits and feeling easily disposable, yearning for the security of togetherness and for a helping hand to count on in a moment of trouble, and so desperate to 'relate'; yet wary of the state of 'being related' and particularly of being related 'for good', not to mention forever – since they fear that such a state may bring burdens and cause strains they neither feel able nor are willing to bear, and so may severely limit the freedom they need – yes, your guess is right – to relate...

In our world of rampant 'individualization' relationships are mixed blessings. They vacillate between sweet dream and a nightmare, and there is no telling when one turns into the other. Most of the time the two avatars cohabit – though at different levels of consciousness. In a liquid modern setting of life, relationships are perhaps the most common, acute, deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence. This is, we may argue, why they are firmly placed at the very heart of the attention of liquid modern individuals-by-decree and perched at the top of their life agenda.

'Relationship' is these days the hottest talk of the town and ostensibly the sole game in town worth playing, despite its notorious risks. Some sociologists, used to composing theories out of questionnaire statistics and the commonsensical beliefs such statistics record, hurry to conclude that their contemporaries are all out for friendships, bonds, togetherness, community. In fact, however (as if following Martin Heidegger's rule that things reveal themselves to consciousness only through the frustration they cause – going bust, disappearing, behaving out of character or otherwise belying their nature), human attention tends nowadays to be focused on the satisfactions that relationships are hoped to bring precisely because somehow they have not been found fully and truly satisfactory; and if they do satisfy, the price of the satisfaction they bring has often been found to be excessive and unacceptable. In their famous experiment, Miller and Dollard saw their laboratory rats ascending the peak of excitement and agitation when 'the advance equalled the abatement' – that is, when the threat of electric shock and the promise of tasty food were finely balanced...

No wonder that 'relationships' are one of the main engines of the present-day 'counselling boom'. The complexity is too dense, too stubborn and too difficult to unpack or unravel for individuals to do the job unassisted. The agitation of Miller and Dollard's rats all too often collapsed into a paralysis of action. An inability to choose between attraction and repulsion, between hopes and fears, rebounded as an incapacity to act. Unlike the rats, humans who find themselves in such circumstances may turn for help to the expert counsellors offering their services, for a fee. What they hope to hear from the counsellors is how to square the circle: to eat the cake and have it, to cream off the sweet delights of relationship while omitting its bitter and tougher bits; how to force relationship to empower

without disempowering, enable without disabling, fulfilling without burdening...

The experts are willing to oblige, confident that the demand for their counsels will never run dry since no amount of counselling could ever make a circle non-circular and thus amenable to being squared... Their counsels abound, though more often than not they do little more than raise common practice to the level of common knowledge, and that in turn to the heights of learned, authoritative theory. Grateful recipients of advice browse through 'relationship' columns of glossy monthlies and weeklies and weekly supplements of serious and less serious dailies to hear what they have been wishing to hear from people 'in the know', since they were too timid or ashamed to aver it in their own name; to pry into the doings and goings on of 'others like them' and draw whatever comfort they can manage to draw from the knowledge endorsed-by-experts that they are not alone in their lonely efforts to cope with the quandary.

And so the readers learn, from other readers' experience recycled by the counsellors, that they may try 'top pocket relationships', of the sort they 'can bring out when they need them' but push deep down in the pocket when they do not. Or that relationships are like Ribena: imbibed in concentration, they are nauseating and may prove dangerous to their health - like Ribena, relations should be diluted when consumed. Or that SDCs - 'semi-detached couples' - are to be praised as 'relationship revolutionaries who have burst the suffocating couple bubble'. Or that relationships, like cars, should undergo regular MOTs to make sure that they are still roadworthy. All in all, what they learn is that commitment, and particularly long-term commitment, is the trap that the endeavour 'to relate' should avoid more than any other danger. One expert counsellor informs readers that 'when committing yourself, however halfheartedly, remember that you are likely to be

closing the door to other romantic possibilities which may be more satisfying and fulfilling.' Another expert sounds blunter yet: 'Promises of commitment are meaningless in the long term... Like other investments, they wax and wane.' And so, if you wish 'to relate', keep your distance; if you want fulfilment from your togetherness, do not make or demand commitments. Keep all doors open at any time.

The residents of Leonia, one of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, would say, if asked, that their passion is 'the enjoyment of new and different things'. Indeed - each morning they 'wear brand-new clothing, take from the latest model refrigerator still unopened tins, listening to the last-minute jingles from the most up-to-date radio'. But each morning 'the remains of yesterday's Leonia await the garbage truck' and one is right to wonder whether the Leonians' true passion is not instead 'the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing themselves of a recurrent impurity'. Otherwise why would street cleaners be 'welcomed like angels', even if their mission is 'surrounded by respectful silence', and understandably so - 'once things have been cast off nobody wants to have to think about them further.'

Let us think...

Are not the residents of our liquid modern world, just like the residents of Leonia, worrying about one thing while speaking of another? They say that their wish, passion, aim or dream is 'to relate'. But are they not in fact mostly concerned with how to prevent their relations from curdling and clotting? Are they indeed after relationships that hold, as they say they are, or do they, more than anything else, desire those relationships to be light and loose, so that after the pattern of Richard Baxter's riches that were supposed to 'lie on the shoulders like a light cloak' they could 'be thrown aside at any moment'? When everything is said and done, what sort of advice do they truly want: how to tie the relationship, or how - just in case - to take it apart without harm and with a clear conscience? There is no easy answer

to that question, though the question needs to be asked and will go on being asked, as the denizens of the liquid modern world go on smarting under the crushing burden of the most ambivalent of the many ambivalent tasks they daily confront.

Perhaps the very idea of 'relationship' adds to the confusion. However hard the hapless relation-seekers and their counsellors try, the notion resists being fully and truly cleansed of its disturbing and worrying connotations. It stays pregnant with vague threats and sombre premonitions; it tells of the pleasures of togetherness in one breath with the horrors of enclosure. Perhaps this is why, rather than report their experience and prospects in terms of 'relating' and 'relationships', people speak ever more often (aided and abetted by the learned advisers) of connections, of 'connecting' and 'being connected'. Instead of talking about partners, they prefer to speak of 'networks'. What are the merits of the language of 'connectedness' that are missed by the language of 'relationships'?

Unlike 'relations', 'kinships', 'partnerships' and similar notions that make salient the mutual engagement while excluding or passing over in silence its opposite, the disengagement, 'network' stands for a matrix for simultaneously connecting and disconnecting; networks are unimaginable without both activities being simultaneously enabled. In a network, connecting and disconnecting are equally legitimate choices, enjoy the same status and carry the same importance. No point in asking which of the two complementary activities constitutes 'the essence' of network! 'Network' suggests moments of 'being in touch' interspersed with periods of free roaming. In a network, connections are entered on demand, and can be broken at will. An 'undesirable, yet unbreakable' relationship is the very possibility that makes 'relating' as treacherous as it feels. An 'undesirable connection', however, is an

oxymoron: connections may be, and are, broken well before they start being detested.

Connections are 'virtual relations'. Unlike old-fashioned relationships (not to mention 'committed' relationships, let alone long-term commitments), they seem to be made to the measure of a liquid modern life setting where 'romantic possibilities' (and not only 'romantic' ones) are supposed and hoped to come and go with ever greater speed and in never thinning crowds, stampeding each other off the stage and out-shouting each other with promises 'to be more satisfying and fulfilling'. Unlike 'real relationships', 'virtual relationships' are easy to enter and to exit. They look smart and clean, feel easy to use and user-friendly, when compared with the heavy, slow-moving, inert messy 'real stuff'. A twenty-eight-year-old man from Bath, interviewed in connection with the rapidly growing popularity of computer dating at the expense of singles bars and lonely-heart columns, pointed to one decisive advantage of electronic relation: 'you can always press "delete"'.

As if obedient to Gresham's law, virtual relations (renamed 'connections') set the pattern which drives out all other relationships. That does not make the men and women who surrender to the pressure happy; hardly happier than the practising of previrtual relations made them. You gain something, you lose something else.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out, when skating on thin ice your salvation is in speed. When the quality lets you down, you tend to seek redemption in quantity. If 'commitments are meaningless' while relations cease to be trustworthy and are unlikely to last, you are inclined to swap partnerships for networks. Once you have done it, however, settling down turns out even more difficult (and so more off-putting) than before – you now miss the skills that would or could make it work. Being on the move, once a privilege and an achievement, becomes a must. Keeping up speed, once an exhilarating adventure, turns into an exhausting chore.

Most importantly, that nasty uncertainty and that vexing confusion, supposed to be chased away thanks to speed, refuse to go. The facility of disengagement and termination-on-demand do not reduce the risks; they only distribute them, together with the anxieties they exhale, differently.

This book is dedicated to the risks and anxieties of living together, and apart, in our liquid modern world.

1

Falling In and Out of Love

'My dear friend, I send you a small work of which one could say, not unjustly, that it has neither head nor tail, since everything in it is on the contrary a head and a tail, alternatively and reciprocally. Consider, I beg you, the admirable convenience such a combination offers to all - to you, to me, and the reader. We may cut short - I my musings, you the text, the reader his reading; because I do not hold the tiring will of any of them endlessly to a superfluous plot. Take out one disc, and two pieces of that tortuous fantasy will fall back together without difficulty. Chop out many fragments, and you'll find that each one can exist on its own. Hoping that some of its stretches will please and amuse you, I dare to dedicate to you the whole snake.'

This is how Charles Baudelaire introduced *he spleen de Paris* to his readers. What a pity that he did. Had he not, I myself would have wished to compose the same or a similar preamble to what is about to follow. But he did - and I can *only* quote. Walter Benjamin, of course, would strike out the word 'only' from the last sentence. And so would I, on second thoughts.

‘Chop out many fragments, and you’ll find that each one can exist on its own.’ The fragments flowing from under Baudelaire’s pen did; whether the scattered thought-snippets collected below will – is not mine, but the reader’s right to decide.

In the family of thoughts, there are dwarfs aplenty. This is why logic and method were invented, and once discovered were gratefully embraced by the thinkers of thoughts. Midgets may hide, and in the end forget their puniness amid the mighty splendour of marching columns and battle arrays. Once ranks are closed, who will notice how tiny the soldiers are? You can make an awesomely powerful-looking army by lining up in fighting order rows upon rows of pygmies...

Perhaps, if only to please the methodology addicts, I should have done the same with these chopped-out fragments. But since I do not have enough time left for the finishing of such a task, it would be foolish of me to think of the rank order first and leave the call-up for later...

On second thoughts: perhaps the time at my disposal seems too short not because of my old age, but because the older you are the better you know that however big the thoughts may seem, they will never be big enough to embrace, let alone keep hold of, the bountiful prodigality of human experience. What we know, wish to know, struggle to know, must try to know about love or rejection, being alone or together and dying together or alone – can all that be streamlined, put in order, match the standards of consistency, cohesiveness and completeness set for the lesser matters? Perhaps it can – in the infinity of time, that is.

Is it not so that when everything is said about the matters most important to human life, the most important things remain unsaid?

Love and death, the two principal characters of this story, with neither a plot nor a denouement but condensing most of life's sound and fury, admit this kind of musing/writing/reading more than any other.

Ivan Klima says: there is little that comes so close to death as fulfilled love. Each appearance of either of the two is a one-off, but also once-and-for-all appearance, brooking no repetition, allowing no appeal and promising no reprieve. Each one must, and does, stand 'on its own'. Each one is born for the first time, or born again, whenever it enters, always sprouting from nowhere, from the darkness of non-being without past or future. Each one, each time, begins from the beginning, laying bare the superfluity of past plots and the vanity of all future plotting.

Neither love nor death can be entered twice; even less so than Heraclitus' river. They are, indeed, their own head and tails, being dismissive and negligent of all others.

Bronisław Malinowski used to sneer at the diffusionists for mistaking museum collections for genealogies; having seen cruder flint implements put in glass cases before the more refined ones, they spoke of 'tools' history'. That was, Malinowski jeered, as if one stone axe begat another in the same way as, say, *hipparion* gave birth, in the fullness of time, to *equus caballus*. The origins of horses can be traced to other horses, but tools are not ancestors or descendants of other tools. Tools, unlike horses, have no history of their own. They, one may say, punctuate human individual biographies and collective histories; they are effusions or sediments of such biographies and histories.

Much the same can be said of love and death. Kinship, affinity, causal links are all features of human selfhood and/or togetherness. Love and death have no history of their own. They are events in human time - each one a separate event, *not* connected (let alone connected *causally*) to other 'similar' events, unless in human

compositions retrospectively eager to spot – to invent – the connections and comprehend the incomprehensible.

And so you cannot learn to love; nor can you learn to die. And you cannot learn the elusive – the non-existent, though keenly desired – art of avoiding their grip and keeping out of their way. Love and death will strike, come their time; only you have no inkling when that time is. Whenever it comes, it will take you unawares. Into your daily preoccupations, love and death will rise *ab nihilo* – out of nothingness. We are all likely, of course, to lean over backwards to become wise after the fact; we will try to trace back the antecedents, deploy the foolproof principle of a *post hoc* surely being the *propter hoc*, try to map a ‘making sense’ lineage of the event, and more often than not we will succeed. We need such success for the spiritual comfort it brings: it resurrects, even if in a roundabout way, the faith in the regularity of the world and the predictability of events, indispensable for sanity. It also conjures up an illusion of wisdom gained, of learning, and above all a wisdom one can learn, as one learns to use J. S. Mill’s canons of induction, drive cars, eat with chopsticks instead of forks, or make a favourable impression on interviewers.

In the case of death, learning is admittedly confined to other people’s experience and so it is an illusion *in extremis*., Other people’s experience cannot be truly learned as experience; in the end-product of learning the object, one can never separate the original *Erlebnis* from the creative contribution of the subject’s imaginative powers. Experience of others can be known only as a processed, interpreted story of what the others lived through. Perhaps some real-life cats have, like Tom of *Tom & Jerry* cartoons, nine lives or more, and perhaps some converts can come to believe in being born again – but the fact remains that death like birth happens only once; there is no way one can learn to ‘do it properly next time’ from an event never to be experienced again.

Love seems to enjoy a different status from the other one-off events.

Indeed, one can fall in love more than once, and some people pride themselves, or complain, that falling in and out of love comes to them (and some others they came to know in the process) all too easily. Everyone has heard stories of such particularly 'love-prone' or 'love-vulnerable' persons.

There are solid enough grounds to see love, and particularly the state of 'being in love', as – almost by its nature – a recurrent condition, amenable to repetition, even inviting repeated attempts. When pressed, most of us would name a number of times when we felt we had fallen in love and were in love. One can guess (but it will be an informed guess) that in our times the ranks of people who tend to attach the name of love to more than one of their life experiences, who would not vouch that the love they are currently experiencing is the last, and who expect there are more such experiences yet to come, is growing fast. If the guess proves right, one should not be amazed. After all, the romantic definition of love as 'till death us do part' is decidedly out of fashion – having passed its use-by date because of the radical overhaul of the kinship structures it used to serve and from which it drew its vigour and self-importance. But the demise of that notion means, inevitably, the easing of the tests an experience must pass to be assigned as 'love'. Rather than more people rising to the high standards of love on more occasions, the standards have been lowered; as a result the set of experiences referred to by the love word has expanded enormously. One-night stands are talked about under the code name of 'making love'.

This sudden abundance and apparent availability of 'love experiences' may (and does) feed the conviction that love (falling in love, soliciting love) is a skill to be learned, and that the mastery of the skill grows with the number of experiments and assiduity of exercise. One may even (and

one all too often does) believe that love-making skills are bound to grow as the experience accumulates; that the next love will be an experience yet more exhilarating than the one currently enjoyed, though not as thrilling or exciting as the one after next.

This is, though, another illusion... The kind of knowledge that rises in volume as the string of love episodes grows longer is that of 'love' as sharp, short and shocking episodes, shot through by the *a priori* awareness of brittleness and brevity. The kinds of skills that are acquired are those of 'finishing quickly and starting from the beginning', of which, according to Søren Kierkegaard, Mozart's Don Giovanni was the archetypal virtuoso. But guided as he was by the compulsion to try again, and obsessed with preventing each successive attempt in the present from standing in the way of further trying, Don Giovanni was also an archetypal 'love impotent'. Were love the purpose of Don Giovanni's indefatigable searching and experimenting, the compulsion to experiment would defy the purpose. It is tempting to say that the effect of the ostensible 'acquisition of skills' is bound to be, as in Don Giovanni's case, the *de-learning* of love; a 'trained incapacity' for loving.

An outcome like this – the vengeance of love, so to speak, on those who dare to challenge its nature – could have been expected. One can learn to perform an activity where there is a set of invariable rules corresponding to a stable, monotonously repetitive setting that favours learning, memorizing and a subsequent 'going through motions'. In an unstable environment, retention and habit acquisition – the trademarks of successful learning – are not just counterproductive, but may prove to be fatal in their consequences. What, over and over again, proves lethal to the rats in city sewers – those highly intelligent creatures able to learn fast how to sieve out the nutritious snips from among the poisonous baits – is the element of instability, of

rule defiance, inserted into the network of underground troughs and chutes by the irregular, unlearnable, unpredictable, truly impenetrable 'alterity' of other – human – intelligent creatures: creatures notorious for their penchant for breaking with routine and playing havoc with the distinction between the regular and the contingent. If that distinction is not upheld, learning (in as far as it is understood as the acquisition of useful habits) is out of the question. Those who persist in binding their actions by precedents, like the generals known to fight their last victorious war all over again, undertake suicidal risks and invite no end of troubles.

It belongs to the nature of love that - as Lucan observed two millennia ago and Francis Bacon repeated many centuries later - it cannot but mean giving hostages to fate.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima of Mantinea (that is, in English translation, 'prophetess Fearthelord of Prophetville') pointed out to Socrates, with the latter's wholehearted agreement, that 'love is not for the beautiful, as you think'; 'It is for begetting and birth in the beautiful.' To love is to desire 'to beget and procreate', and so the lover 'seeks and goes about to find the beautiful thing in which he can beget'. In other words, it is not in craving after ready-made, complete and finished things that love finds its meaning – but in the urge to participate in the becoming of such things. Love is akin to transcendence; it is but another name for creative drive and as such is fraught with risks, as all creation is never sure where it is going to end.

In every love, there are at least two beings, each of them the great unknown in the equations of the other. This is what makes love feel like a caprice of fate – that eerie and mysterious future, impossible to be told in advance, to be pre-empted or staved off, to be speeded up or arrested. To love means opening up to that fate, that most sublime of all