



44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World

Zygmunt Bauman

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the Liquid Modern World**

**Zygmunt Bauman**

polity

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## ***On writing letters – from a liquid modern world***

Letters from the liquid modern world ... This is what the editors of *La Repubblica delle Donne* asked me to write and send to its readers once a fortnight – and what I have been doing for almost two years (2008 and 2009; they are collected here in an edited and somewhat extended version).

From the ‘liquid modern’ world: that means from the world you and I, the writer of forthcoming letters and their possible/probable/hoped for readers, share. The world I call ‘liquid’ because, like all liquids, it cannot stand still and keep its shape for long. Everything or almost everything in this world of ours keeps changing: fashions we follow and the objects of our attention (constantly shifting attention, today drawn away from things and events that attracted it yesterday, and to be drawn away tomorrow from things and events that excite us today), things we dream of and things we fear, things we desire and things we loathe, reasons to be hopeful and reasons to be apprehensive. And the conditions around us, conditions in which we make our living and try to plan our future, in which we connect to some people and disconnect (or are disconnected) from others, keep changing as well. Opportunities for more happiness and threats of misery flow or float by, come and go and change places, and more often than not they do all that too swiftly and nimbly to allow us to do something sensible and effective to direct or redirect them, keep them on course or forestall them.

To cut a long story short: this world, our liquid modern world, keeps surprising us: what seems certain and proper today may well appear futile, fanciful or a regrettable mistake tomorrow. We suspect that this may happen, so we feel that – like the world that is our home – we, its residents, and intermittently its designers, actors, users and casualties, need to be constantly ready to change: we all need to be, as the currently fashionable word suggests, ‘flexible’. So we crave more information about what is going on and what is likely to happen. Fortunately, we now have what our parents could not even imagine: we have the internet and the world-wide web, we have ‘information highways’ connecting us promptly, ‘in real time’, to every nook and cranny of the planet, and all that inside these handy pocket-size mobile phones or iPods, within our reach day and night and moving wherever we do. Fortunately? Alas, perhaps not that fortunately after all, since the bane of insufficient information that made our parents suffer has been replaced by the yet more awesome bane of a flood of information which threatens to drown us and makes swimming or diving (as distinct from drifting or surfing) all but impossible. How to sift the news that counts and matters from the heaps of useless and irrelevant rubbish? How to derive meaningful messages from senseless noise? In the hubbub of contradictory opinions and suggestions we seem to lack a threshing machine that might help us separate the grains of truth and of the worthwhile from the chaff of lies, illusion, rubbish and waste ...

In these letters, I'll try to do just what the threshing machine (absent now, alas, and probably for some time) would have done for us had it been in our possession: to begin, at least, to separate the important from the insubstantial, things that matter – and are likely to matter more and more – from false alarms and flashes in the pan. But since, as mentioned before, this liquid modern world of ours is constantly on the move, we all are willy-nilly, knowingly or not, joyfully or plaintively, perpetually carried along in travel even if we try to stay still and hold on to one place. The letters, therefore, could not be other than 'travel reports' – even though their author has not budged from Leeds, the city in which he lives; and the stories they will be telling will be travelogues: stories from and of travels.

Walter Benjamin, a philosopher with an eye uniquely sharpened to spot any hints of logic and system in apparently diffuse and random cultural tremors, used to distinguish between two types of stories: sailors' stories and peasants' stories. The first are tales of things bizarre and unheard of, of far-away places, never visited and probably never to be visited, of monsters and mutants, witches and sorcerers, gallant knights and scheming evil-doers – people jarringly different from the people listening to the story of their exploits, and doing things which other people (particularly those who listen, enchanted and bewitched, to the sailor's tale) would never contemplate or imagine doing, let alone dare to do. Peasants' stories, on the contrary, are tales of ordinary, close-by and apparently familiar events, like the ever-repeated annual cycle of seasons or the daily chores of the household, farm and field. I said *apparently* familiar, since the impression of knowing such things thoroughly, inside out, and therefore expecting there to be nothing new to be learned from and about them, is also an illusion – in this case coming precisely from their being too close to the eye to see them clearly for what they are. Nothing escapes scrutiny so nimbly, resolutely and stubbornly as 'things at hand', things 'always there', 'never changing'. They are, so to speak, 'hiding in the light' – the light of deceptive and misleading familiarity! Their ordinariness is a blind, discouraging all scrutiny. To make them into objects of interest and close examination they must first be cut off and torn away from that sense-blunting, cosy yet vicious cycle of routine quotidianity. They must first be set aside and kept at a distance before scanning them properly can become conceivable: the bluff of their alleged 'ordinariness' must be called at the start. And then the mysteries they hide, profuse and profound mysteries – those turning strange and puzzling once you start thinking about them – can be laid bare and explored.

The distinction made by Benjamin almost a century ago is no longer as clear-cut as it originally was: sailors no longer have a monopoly on visiting bizarre lands, while in a globalized world in which no place is really separate and secure from the impact of every and any other place on the planet, however far away it might be, even the tales told by an erstwhile peasant may be difficult to distinguish from a sailor's story. Well, what I am going to try for in my letters will be, so to speak, *sailors'* stories as told by *peasants*. Tales drawn from the most ordinary lives, but as a way to reveal and expose the extraordinariness we would otherwise overlook. If we wish them to become truly *familiar*, apparently familiar things need first to be made *strange*.

This is a difficult task. Most certainly, success is anything but guaranteed, whereas full success is, to say the least, highly doubtful. But this is the task which we, the

writer and the readers of these 44 letters, shall try to pursue in our shared adventure.

But why 44? Does the selecting of this number rather than any other have a special meaning of its own, or has it been an accidental, arbitrary decision, a random choice? I suspect that most readers (perhaps all of them, unless they are Polish ... ) would ask the question. I owe them some explanation.

The greatest of Polish romantic poets, Adam Mickiewicz, conjured up a mysterious figure, a blend or a hybrid of, on one hand, a plenipotentiary of Freedom, its spokesman, holder of its power of attorney, and, on the other, its governor or vice-regent on earth. 'His name is Forty-Four': this is how that recondite creature was introduced by one of the characters in Mickiewicz's poem in his announcement/premonition of its imminent arrival. But why that name? Many historians of literature, immensely better equipped to find an answer than myself, have tried in vain to crack that mystery. Some have suggested that the choice is the sum of the numerical values of the letters in the poet's name if written in Hebrew – perhaps an allusion, simultaneously, to the poet's high stature in Poland's struggle for liberation and the Jewish origin of the poet's mother. The most widely accepted interpretation, though, thus far has been that Mickiewicz chose that sonorously, majestic-sounding phrase (in Polish: *czterdzięsci i cztery*) simply in the heat of inspiration – motivated (if not altogether unmotivated, as most flashes of inspiration tend to be) by a care for poetic harmony rather than an intention to convey a cryptic message.

The letters collected here under a single cover have been composed over a period of almost two years: How many of them should there be? When and where to stop? The impulse to write letters from the liquid modern world is unlikely ever to be exhausted – that kind of world, pulling ever new surprises out of its sleeve, daily inventing new challenges to human understanding, will see to it that it isn't. Surprises and challenges are scattered all over the spectrum of human experience – and so every stopping point for reporting them in letters, and by the same token limiting their range, must inevitably be arbitrarily chosen. These letters are no exception. Their number has been arbitrarily chosen.

Why this number, though, and not any other? Because the 44 figure, thanks to Adam Mickiewicz, has been made to stand for the awe of, and hope for, the arrival of Freedom. And so this number signals, if in an oblique manner and only to the initiated, the guiding motif of these missives. The spectre of freedom is present in every one of these 44 otherwise thematically varied letters – even when, as is the nature of spectres true to their name, invisibly.

## ***Crowded solitude***

On the website of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.com>) you could read recently about a teenage girl who sent 3,000 text messages in one month. That means she sent on average a hundred messages a day, or about one every ten waking minutes – ‘morning, noon, and night, weekdays and weekends, class time, lunchtime, homework time, and toothbrushing time’. What follows is that she’s hardly ever been alone for more than ten minutes: that means she has never been just *with herself* – with her thoughts, her dreams, her worries and hopes. By now, she’s probably forgotten how one lives – thinks, does things, laughs or cries – in one’s own company, without the company of others. Or, more to the point, she has never had a chance to learn that art. As a matter of fact, it is only in her incapacity to practise that art that she is not alone ...

The pocket-size gadgets sending and receiving messages are not the sole tools needed by that girl and others like her to survive without that art. Professor Jonathan Zimmerman of New York University notes that up to three out of four American teens spend every minute of their available time glued to the websites of Facebook or MySpace: chatting. They are, he suggests, hooked on making and receiving electronic noises or screen flashes. The chat websites are, Zimmerman says, new potent drugs to which teens are now addicted. You’ve heard about the withdrawal torments of people, young and not so young alike, addicted to other kinds of drugs; you can therefore imagine the agony those teens would go through were some virus (or their parents, or their teachers) to block their internet connections or put their mobiles out of operation.

In our unpredictable, constantly surprising and stubbornly unfamiliar world, the prospect of being left alone may indeed feel horrifying; one can name a lot of reasons to conceive of solitude as a highly uncomfortable, threatening and terrifying condition. It would be as unjust as it is silly to blame electronics alone for what is happening to people born into a world woven from cabled, wired or wireless connectivity. Electronic contraptions answer a need not of their own making; the most they could have done was render a need already fully formed yet more acute and salient, as the ways of acting on it have come tantalizingly within everybody’s reach, and call for no more effort than pushing a few keys. Inventors and sellers of ‘Walkmans’, the first mobile gadgets allowing you to ‘hear the world’ whenever and wherever you wished, promised their clients: ‘Never again (will you be) alone!’ Obviously, they knew what they were talking about, and why that advertising slogan was likely to sell the gadgets on offer – as it did, in uncounted millions. They knew there were millions of people in the streets who felt lonely, and who detested their solitude as painful and abhorrent; people not just deprived of company, but grieving over its absence. With ever more family homes empty during the day, and with family hearths and dining tables

replaced by TV sets in every room – with people, we may say, ‘each trapped in their own cocoon’ – fewer and fewer people could count on the enlivening and invigorating warmth of human company; though without company they did not know how to fill their hours and days.

Dependence on uninterrupted Walkman-emitted noise only deepened that void left behind by the vanishing company. And the longer they stayed sunk in that void, the less they were able to use the means before high-tech, such as their own muscles and imagination, to climb out of it. With the arrival of the internet, that void could also be forgotten or covered up, and thereby detoxified; at least the pain it caused could be assuaged. That company that had all too often been missing, and was increasingly being missed, seemed to have returned, though through electronic screens rather than wooden doors, and in a new analogue or digital – but in both cases virtual – incarnation: people scrambling out of the torments of loneliness found this new form to be a considerable improvement on the vanished face-to-face and hand-in-hand variety. With the skills of face-to-face interaction largely forgotten or never learned, all or almost all of what might have been resented as a shortcoming of online, virtual ‘connecting’ was widely welcomed as an advantage. What Facebook, MySpace and their like offered has been greeted as the best of both worlds. Or so, at least, it seemed to people who longed desperately for human company yet felt ill at ease, inept and hapless when they found themselves among it.

To start with, there is no longer any need, ever again, to be alone. Every minute – 24 hours a day, seven days a week – it takes just one push of a button to conjure up company out of a collection of loners. In that online world, no one is ever away, everyone seems to be constantly at one’s beck and call – and even if she or he accidentally falls asleep, there are enough others to send a message to, or just twitter for a few seconds, for the temporary absence to pass unnoticed. Secondly, ‘contact’ may be made with other people without necessarily initiating an exchange that would threaten giving hostages to fate, taking a course one might not enjoy. ‘Contact’ can be broken at the first sign of the exchange taking a turn in an unwelcome direction: no risk therefore, and also no need to find excuses, apologise and lie; a gossamer-light touch of the finger, totally painless and risk-free, will suffice. There is neither any need to be afraid of being alone, nor a threat of exposure to other people’s demands, of a demand for sacrifice or compromise, of having to do something you don’t feel like doing just because others wish you to do so. That comforting awareness can be retained and enjoyed even when you are sitting in a crowded room, loitering in the densely packed passageways of a shopping mall, or strolling on the street among a large pack of friends and fellow-strollers; you can always ‘make yourself spiritually absent’ and be ‘on your own’, as well as notify the others around you that you are willing, here and now, to stay out of touch; you can put yourself outside the crowd by keeping your fingers busy kneading a message to someone who is physically absent and therefore momentarily undemanding and unengaging, safe to ‘contact’, or by glancing over a message just received from such a person. With such gadgets in your hand, you could even make yourself alone inside a stampeding herd if you wished to; and instantly – the moment the company crowds you and gets too oppressive for your taste. You don’t swear loyalty till death do you part, and you can expect everyone else to be ‘available’ whenever you need them, without, however, having to bear the

unsavoury consequences of being constantly available to others ...

So paradise on earth? Dream coming true, at long last? The admittedly haunting ambivalence of human interaction – comforting and exhilarating, yet cumbersome and full of pitfalls – finally resolved? Opinions on that matter stay divided. What seems beyond dispute, however, is that there is a price to pay for all that – a price that may prove, if you think about it, too high to be willingly paid. Because once you are ‘always on’, you may never be fully and truly alone. And if you are never alone, then (to quote Professor Zimmerman once more), ‘you’re less likely to read a book for pleasure, to draw a picture, to stare out the window and imagine worlds others than your own ... You’re less likely to communicate with the real people in your immediate surroundings. Who wants to talk to family members when your friends are just a click away?’ (and they come in inexhaustible numbers and fascinating variety; there are, let me add, five hundred or more Facebook ‘friends’).

Running away from *loneliness*, you drop your chance of *solitude* on the way: of that sublime condition in which one can ‘gather thoughts’, ponder, reflect, create – and so, in the last account, give meaning and substance to communication. But then, having never savoured its taste, you may never know what you have forfeited, dropped and lost.

## *Parents and children conversing*

On the origins of one of his remarkable short stories, ‘Averroes’ Search’, the great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges said that in it he tried ‘to narrate the process of failure’, of ‘defeat’ – as when a theologian seeks the final, irrefutable proof of God’s existence, an alchemist seeks the philosopher’s stone, a technology buff seeks a perpetuum mobile, or a mathematician searches for the way to square a circle. But then he decided that ‘a more poetic case’ would be one ‘of a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to others, but is to him’. He picked the case of Averroes, the great Muslim philosopher, who set out to translate Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but ‘bounded within the circle of Islam, could never know the meaning of the words *tragedy* and *comedy*’. Indeed, ‘without ever having suspected what theatre is’, Averroes would be bound, inescapably, to fail when trying ‘to imagine what a play is’.

As a topic for a wonderful story told by a great writer, the case finally selected by Borges proves indeed ‘more poetic’. But if looked at from the less inspired, mundane and rather humdrum sociological perspective, it looks, rather, fairly *prosaic*. Only a few intrepid souls try to construct a perpetuum mobile or find the philosopher’s stone; but trying in vain to understand what others have no difficulty in understanding is an experience we all know only too well from personal observation, and learn again daily – more perhaps now, in the twenty-first century, than our ancestors did in times past. Look at just one example: communicating with your children, if you are a parent. Or with your parents, if you haven’t yet missed that chance ...

Mutual incomprehension between generations, ‘old’ and ‘young’, and the reciprocal suspicion that follows it have a long history. One can easily trace symptoms of such suspicion to quite ancient times. But intergenerational suspicion has become much more salient in our *modern* era, marked by continuous profound and accelerated changes in life conditions. The radical acceleration of the pace of change characteristic of modern times, in stark opposition to centuries of interminable reiteration and sluggish change, allowed the fact of ‘things changing’ and ‘things being no longer as they used to be’ to be experienced personally and personally noted, in the course of a single human life. Such awareness implied an association (or even a causal link) between changes in the human condition and the departure of older generations and the arrival of newer ones.

And once that implication existed, it became noticeable and was presumed to be obvious that (at least since the beginning of modernity and through its duration) age cohorts entering the world at different stages of the continuous transformation tended indeed to *differ* sharply in the evaluation of the life conditions they *shared*. Children as a rule enter a world drastically different from the one their parents remember from their own childhood years and which they were trained and accustomed to take as a

standard of ‘normality’; they, the children, will never visit that other, vanished world of their parents’ youth. What may be seen as ‘natural’ by some age cohorts, as ‘the way things *are*’, ‘the way things are *normally done*’ and thus ‘*ought to be done*’, can be viewed by another as an aberration: as a departure from the norm, bizarre and perhaps also as an illegitimate and unreasonable state of affairs – unfair, abominable, contemptible or ludicrous, and crying out for a thorough revision. What to some age cohorts may seem a comfortable and cosy condition, allowing learned and mastered skills and routines to be deployed, may appear odd and off-putting to another; whereas people of a different age may feel in their element in situations which make the other people feel ill at ease, baffled and at a loss.

The differences of perception have become so multifaceted by now that, unlike in premodern times, younger people no longer are cast by older generations as ‘miniature adults’ or ‘would-be adults’ – not as ‘beings not yet fully mature but bound to mature’ (‘mature’ being read as ‘being like us’). Nowadays, youngsters are not hoped or supposed to be ‘on the way to becoming adult *like us*’, but viewed as a rather *different kind* of people, bound to *remain* different ‘from us’ throughout their lives. The differences between ‘us’ (the older ones) and ‘them’ (the younger ones) no longer feel like temporary irritants destined to dissolve and evaporate as the youngsters (inevitably) wise up to the realities of life. They are bound to stay; they are irrevocable.

As a result, the older and the younger age cohorts tend to eye each other with a mixture of miscomprehension and misapprehension. The older ones will fear that the newcomers to the world are about to spoil and destroy that familiar, comfortable, decent ‘normality’ which they, their elders, have laboriously built and preserved with loving care; the younger ones, on the contrary, will feel an acute urge to put right what the ageing veterans have botched and made a mess of. Both will be unsatisfied (or at least not fully satisfied) with the current state of affairs and the direction in which their world seems to be moving – and blame the other side for their discomfort. In two consecutive issues of a widely respected British weekly, two jarringly different assertions/assessments were made public: a columnist accused ‘the young people’ of being ‘bovine, lazy-arsed, chlamydia stuffed and good for nothing’, to which a reader angrily responded that the allegedly slothful and uncaring youngsters are in fact ‘academically high-achieving’ and ‘concerned about the mess that adults have created’.<sup>1</sup> Here, as in uncountable other similar disagreements, the difference was clearly between *evaluations* and subjectively coloured *viewpoints*. In cases like this, the resulting controversy can hardly be ‘objectively’ resolved.

But let’s also remember that the bulk of the presently young generation have never experienced real hardship, long and prospectless economic depression and mass unemployment. They were born and grew up in a world in which they could shelter under a socially produced and communally serviced, waterproof and windproof umbrella that seemed to remain forever at their disposal and within their reach to protect them against inclement weather, cold rains and freezing winds – and in a world in which every next morning was hoped/expected to be a day sunnier than the last and more lavishly sprinkled with pleasant adventures. As I write these words, however, dark clouds gather over that world, getting darker by the day. The happy condition,

sanguine and full of promise, which the young came to believe to be the ‘natural’ state of the world, may not last much longer. The sediment of the last economic depression – protracted unemployment, rapidly shrinking life chances and darkening life prospects – may refuse to be washed away quickly, if ever; and sunny and consistently sunnier days are not at all certain to return fast – if at all.

And so it is too early to decide how the ingrained worldviews and attitudes of the present-day young will eventually fit the world to come, and how that world will fit their ingrained expectations.

## **Note**

[1](#) *Guardian Weekend*, 4 and 11 Aug. 2007.

## *Offline, online*

Ann-Sophie, a 20-year-old student at the Copenhagen Business School, replied to questions set by Flemming Wisler: ‘I don’t want my life to control me too much. I don’t want to sacrifice everything to my career ... The most important thing is to be comfortable ... Nobody wants to be stuck in the same job for long.’<sup>2</sup> In other words: Keep your options wide open. Don’t swear loyalty of a ‘till death do us part’ kind – to anything or anybody. The world is full of wondrous, seductive and promising chances; it would be a folly to miss any of them by tying your hands and feet with irrevocable commitments ...

There is no wonder that *surfing* figures high on the list of basic life skills which the young are prompted to acquire and seek, and are eager to master, above the increasingly old-fashioned ‘sounding’ and ‘fathoming’. But, as Katie Baldo, guidance counsellor of the Cooperstown Middle School in New York State, has noted, ‘Teens are missing some major social cues because they are too engrossed in their iPods, cell phones, or video games. I see it all the time in the halls when they can’t voice a hello or make eye contact.’<sup>3</sup> Making eye contact and thereby acknowledging the physical proximity of another human being spells waste: it portends the necessity of spending a portion of precious yet loathsomely scarce time on deep diving (something which the exploration of depths would most certainly demand); a decision that would interrupt or pre-empt surfing over so many other, no less, if not more, inviting surfaces.

In a life of continuous emergency, *virtual* relations easily beat the ‘*real* stuff’. Whereas it is primarily the offline world that prompts young men and women to be constantly on the move, such pressures would be to no avail were it not for the electronically based capacity to multiply encounters between individuals by making them brief, shallow and eminently disposable. Virtual relations are equipped with ‘delete’ and ‘spam’ keys that protect against the cumbersome (above all, time-consuming) consequences of in-depth interaction. One can’t help recalling Chance (a character played by Peter Sellers in Hal Ashby’s film of 1979, *Being There*): having emerged into a busy town street from his protracted and exclusive *tête-à-tête* with the world-as-seen-on-TV, he tries in vain to remove an unnerving and discomforting bevy of nuns from his vision with the help of his hand-held pilot.

For the young, the main attraction of the virtual world derives from the absence of the contradictions and cross-purposes that haunt offline life. Unlike its offline alternative, the online world renders an infinite multiplication of contacts conceivable – both plausible and feasible. It does this through reducing their duration and, consequently, by *weakening* such bonds as call for, and often enforce duration – in stark opposition to its offline counterpart, which is known to find its bearings in a continuous effort to *strengthen* bonds by severely limiting the number of contacts

while extending and deepening each of them. This is a genuine advantage for men and women who would torment themselves with the thought that a step they have taken might (just might) have been a mistake, and that it might (just might) be too late for them to cut their losses. Hence the resentment towards everything redolent of a 'long-term' commitment – be it planning one's life, or one's engagements with other living beings. Evidently appealing to the younger generation's values, a recent commercial announced the arrival of a new mascara that 'vows to stay pretty for 24 hours', and commented: 'Talk about a committed relationship. One stroke and these pretty lashes last through rain, sweat, humidity, tears. Yet the formula removes easily with warm water' – 24 hours already feels like a 'committed relationship', but even so brief a 'commitment' wouldn't be an attractive choice if its consequences weren't so childishly easy to remove.

Whatever choice is eventually made will be reminiscent of the 'light cloak' of Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology; it could be shaken off the shoulders at will, instantly and without much ado – unlike his 'steel casing', which offered effective and lasting protection against turbulence but was also difficult to get rid off, as well as cramping the movement of the person it protected and severely constricting the space for the exercise of that person's free will. What matters most for the young is to retain the ability to *reshape* 'identity' and the 'network' the moment a need (or, indeed, a whim) to reshape them arises or is suspected to have arrived. The worry of their ancestors about their one-off *identification* is increasingly elbowed out by a worry about perpetual *reidentification*. Identities must be *disposable*; an unsatisfying or not-sufficiently-satisfying identity, or an identity betraying its advanced age, needs to be *easy to abandon*; perhaps biodegradability would be the ideal attribute of the identity most strongly desired nowadays.

The interactive capacities of the internet are made to the measure of this new need. In their internet-enabled rendering, it is the *quantity* of connections rather than their *quality* that makes all the difference between the chances of success or failure. That rendering makes it possible to stay *au courant* with the latest talk of the town, and the choices made into 'musts' by that talk: the hits currently most listened to, the latest T-shirt designs, the latest exploits of the hottest celebrities of the day, the most recent and most commonly talked about parties, festivals and events in focus. Simultaneously, it helps in updating the contents and redistributing the emphases in the portrayal of one's self; it also helps in swiftly effacing the traces of the past, the now shamefully outdated contents and emphases. All in all, the internet greatly facilitates, prompts and even necessitates the incessant labours of *reinvention* – to an extent unachievable in offline life. This is arguably one of the most important reasons for the time spent by the 'electronic generation' in the virtual universe: time steadily growing at the expense of time lived in the 'real' (offline) world.

The referents of main concepts known to frame and map the *Lebenswelt*, the world as lived and lived-through, the *personally experienced* world of the young, are gradually yet steadily transplanted from the offline to the online world. Concepts like 'contacts', 'dates', 'meeting', 'communicating', 'community' or 'friendship' – all referring to interpersonal relations and social bonds – are the most prominent among such concepts. One of the foremost effects of the new location of referents is the

perception of current social bonds and commitments as momentary snapshots in the ongoing process of renegotiation, rather than as steady states bound to last indefinitely. (But let me note right away that a ‘momentary snapshot’ is not a wholly felicitous metaphor: though ‘momentary’, snapshots may still imply more durability than the electronically mediated bonds and commitments possess. The word ‘snapshot’ belongs to the vocabulary of photographic prints and photographic paper, which can only accept one image in their lifetime – whereas for electronic ties *effacing* and *rewriting* or *overwriting*, inconceivable in the case of celluloid negatives and photographic papers, are the most important and most resorted to options; indeed, they are the only indelible attribute of electronically mediated ties.)

## Notes

<sup>2</sup> See ‘The thoughtful’, *FO/futureorientation*, Jan. 2008, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> At [www.wxii12.com/health/16172076/detail.html](http://www.wxii12.com/health/16172076/detail.html).

## *As the birds do*

‘Twitter’ is what birds produce when they tweet. And as the experts in bird life will tell you, tweeting plays two roles in the life of birds, apparently at odds, but equally vital: it allows them to keep in touch with each other (that is, prevents them from being lost, or from losing track of their partners in the nest or the rest of the flock), and to prevent other birds, and particularly other birds of the same species, from transgressing on the territory they’ve made or intend to make their own. Birds’ twitter has no other message to convey, and so its ‘contents’ (even if it had any, which it does not) would be irrelevant; what counts is that the familiar sound has been made, and could be (hopefully *will be*) heard.

I can’t say whether Jack Dorsey, who founded the website called ‘Twitter’ in 2006, when he was still in his student years, did or didn’t take inspiration from a bird habit hundreds of millions of years old. But the 55 million monthly visitors to that website seem to have followed that habit – knowingly or not. And they seem to have found it quite useful for their own needs and purposes. As Peder Zane of the *News and Observer* calculated on 15 March 2009, the number of Twitter users grew last year by 900 per cent (while the number of Facebook users grew, according to Wikipedia, by ‘only’ 228 per cent). The managers of the Twitter website invite and encourage newcomers to join the 55-million strong army of present users by pointing out that ‘Twitter is a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?’ Answers, as you surely know, must be not only quick and frequent, but easy to digest, and that means very, very compact and short (just like the tunes of a bird’s twitter) – no longer than 140 characters. So that ‘doing’ on which you can tweet may mean not much more than ‘having a quattro formaggio pizza’, or ‘looking through the window’, or ‘feeling sleepy and going to bed’, or ‘being dead bored’. Courtesy of the Twitter management, our notorious yet shameful reticence and awkwardness in reporting the motives and the goals of our actions, and the feelings that accompany them, have been acquitted of being a handicap and promoted to the rank of a virtue. What we, along with all the other people like us, are told and given to understand is that the only thing that matters is to know and to make others know what we are doing – at this moment or any other; what matters is ‘to be in view’. Why we are doing it and what we are thinking, aiming at, dreaming of, enjoying or regretting when we are doing it, or even the other reasons that inspired us to tweet apart from wishing to manifest our presence, do not really matter.

Once face-to-face contact is replaced by a screen-to-screen variety, it is the *surfaces* that come into touch. Courtesy of Twitter, ‘surfing’, the preferred means of locomotion in our hurried life of instantly born and instantly vanishing opportunities, has finally

caught up with interhuman communication. What has suffered as a result is the intimacy, the depth and the durability of human intercourse and human bonds.

The promoters and enthusiasts of faster, easier, trouble-free ‘contacts’ (more precisely: the reconfirmation of ‘being connected’) try to convince us that the gains more than compensate for the losses. Under the heading of ‘uses’ (of tweeting) we learn, for instance, from Wikipedia that ‘during the 2008 Mumbai attacks, eyewitnesses sent an estimated 80 tweets every five seconds as the tragedy unfolded. Twitter users on the ground helped in compiling a list of the dead and injured’; that ‘in January 2009, US Airways Flight 1549 experienced multiple bird strikes and had to be ditched in the Hudson River after takeoff from LaGuardia Airport in New York City. Janis Krums, a passenger on one of the ferries that rushed to help, took a picture of the downed plane as passengers were still evacuating and tweeted it via *TwitPic* before traditional media arrived at the scene’; or that ‘in February 2009, the Australian *Country Fire Authority* used Twitter to send out regular alerts and updates regarding the *2009 Victorian bushfires*’. But expounding on such cases is like trying to convince would-be lotto punters of the universal benefits of buying lottery tickets by publishing from time to time the smiling likenesses of the few jackpot winners – while avoiding mentioning the millions of frustrated losers ...

Let’s face it: the impact of the changing technology of human communication is like the accomplishments of the bank-led economy in that gains tend to be privatized while losses are nationalized. And in both cases, ‘collateral damage’ is likely to be disproportionately more widespread, profound and insidious than the rare, occasional benefits.

There is, though, a benefit of a different kind, a much more widespread benefit, which seems to be the prime attraction of using the Twitter website. For some time now, Descartes’s famous ‘proof of existing’, ‘I think therefore I am’, has been elbowed out and chased away by a version updated for our era of mass communication: ‘I am seen, therefore I am’. The more people can (and may choose to) see me, the more convincing is the proof of my own being here ... The pattern is set by celebrities. You do not measure the gravity and the weightiness of celebrities’ presence by the gravity of what have they *done* – the weightiness of their *deeds* (you wouldn’t anyway be able to properly evaluate those qualities and to sufficiently trust your results to hold to the opinion you’ve formed); you can be sure that ‘celebrities’ matter only because of the obtrusiveness of their presence: they must be looked at and be seen by myriads of people – on every news-stand, the front pages of tabloids, the covers of glossy magazines, TV screens ... If so many people look at them, watch their every step, listen to every bit of gossip about their latest exploits, mischiefs and pranks, talk about them, then there must be something ‘in it’ – so many people can’t be simultaneously wrong! As Daniel Boorstin memorably summed it all up: ‘The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness.’ Conclusion (not necessarily true, but credible all the same)? The more frequently I tweet, and the more people visit the site on which my tweeting is done, the more chances I’ll have of joining the ranks of those well-known. As in the case of celebrities, it is really irrelevant what my tweeting is about. After all, what we read and hear about celebs is more often than not the latest news about their breakfasts, dates, one-night stands and shopping escapades. And since the