

BREAKING UP

The Transformative Force of Ruptures

Claire Marin

We are tough
and we won't be broken in one night.

—Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*

Introduction

Life is made up of ruptures

We like our break-ups clean. One fell swoop of the sword, like a decapitation. But ruptures rip. Unlike separation, that allows each individual part to become as whole again as it was before, rupture (as its etymology reminds us) creates a tear. Clean contours rarely re-emerge after rupture. The act of breaking up is not like carefully cutting along a perforation, following the dotted lines around exact shapes. Instead, when we break up, we rip into the fabric of a communal life, where our identities were so irretrievably intertwined that no one knows anymore, where one ends and the other begins. Only the person who wants the break up, wanting to be rid of the indecisive blur of cumbersome presences, the ties that prevent him from really being himself—he alone thinks he can outline the shadow of his own silhouette.

True rupture, like a number that can be perfectly divided into whole numbers, is undoubtedly impossible. We cannot “reduce ourselves in time, similar to a number, without leaving a strange fraction,” to cite Nietzsche.¹ Even broken ties are witnesses to a former life, as sensitive as phantom limbs. Every trace that that former life inscribed in us—all that has infiltrated us, engraved itself on our skin, our thoughts, our ways of apprehending and of being, all that lingers and endures, the undefined tail of the comet, what remains in progress, despite us—remains. Impossible to truly turn the page, when the page’s transparency shows us all that had been previously written, the life before persisting in filigree. The stylus leaves its mark on the surface of the magic chalkboard, traces from erased drawings that can be divined under new sketches. The unconscious recalls these fantastic traces, making perfect division impossible.

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Untimely Meditations*, Trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 61.

Is burning bridges actually possible? Moving on, to something else? How can we undo the attachments that have come to seem like second nature over the course of time? How can we break the habit of the other's presence, body, and voice? How can we break out of our milieu, change our posture, learn how to stand up straight, speak the language of others? Breaking with one's former life means changing not only a way of seeing, but also changing bodies, changing forms—changing the modality of presence, the tonality of affirmation. Rupture implies a profound mutation, in which the body plays a central role.

Rupture is a physical, corporeal experience. Being ripped apart is a form of suffering, the concrete experience of philosopher Merleau-Ponty's "flesh of the world,"² a concept that previously seemed poetic and abstract. Our ties to others and to the world around us are most sensitive in the moment they break—more precisely, in the moment we're torn away—from those who matter, from familiar contexts, from the incarnation of the communal life that was inscribed in us. Your body, absent when I wake, your voice, silenced, but also: the house destroyed, the sky devoid of light. When we miss a child, when are homesick for our cocoon, we are as if hungry or thirsty. Life has been broken, interrupted: the violence of missing keeps us from sleeping, from eating, from working, from living. We were once intertwined but from this point forward, we are distinct from one another, mutilated after being uprooted, ripped apart. Too vivid memory is our executioner. We must describe all these painful "shards of memories,"³ the acid of the break-up, the white-out of depression, the slowing down, the disappearance, the subject's erasure. Evaporation. To lose our density or, on the contrary, to be entirely constituted by acute feelings, flashes of pain without respite.

Even when rupture is a voluntary decision, in the service of self-affirmation, self-

2. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern UP, 1968.

3. Delecoix, Vincent, *Ce qui est perdu*, Gallimard, 2006. Our translation.

liberation or the revelation of a previously suppressed identity—it remains painful. Becoming other is never easy: facing up to the disavowal or violence that forced us to leave and that, despite ourselves, undermines our loved ones. It's never easy to return to Reims.⁴

And it's just as difficult to return to Algiers, or to Phnom Penh. The pain of exile and nostalgia is another trace profoundly anchored in the ruptures caused by war. The man who returned—the “homecomer”—has lost the country he left and become a stranger.⁵ Strangeness is doubled: leaving means breaking up twice, first with the person you were, and second with the particular illusion of feeling you belonged somewhere. It means renouncing the psychological comfort of being legitimate in the eyes of others and breaking with the hope of recognition. Exiles, class traitors, homosexuals, we did not leave room for you. You'll have to shack up wherever you can.

We're all wounded by our life experiences, we all have experiences that torture us, but we don't all react in the same way. Some respond with fragility, others with internal strength. Torture is a contortion, as the word's etymology reminds us. Whether rupture is chosen or imposed, it forces us to endure an intolerable psychic and physical contortion, resulting in the deformation of our identity and of our existence. Thus deformed by unhappiness, the shame of being rejected, and the violence of being unloved, we become monstrous beings, despite ourselves. Or, on the contrary, we become those cruel beings who leave, never coming back, abandoning wives and children, repudiating our parents and our ancestry, flouting values, religion, the law. Only if your spinal column is at once solid and flexible can you tolerate rupture and survive.

4. See Eribon, Didier, *Returning to Reims*, Trans. Michael Lucey, Semiotext(e), 2013.

5. See Schütz, Alfred, “The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology” and “The Homecomer,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 49, no. 6, 1944, pp. 499-507 and vol. 50, no. 5, 1945, pp. 369–76.

Whether we choose them or are subjected to them, ruptures belong to us. Ruptures—breaking up with your family, your friends, your lover, your milieu; changing careers, countries, languages—constitute us, perhaps even more than ties. We are as defined by bifurcations as we are by straight lines, by going off-road, by the loopholes in the contract, rather than by the contract itself. What does this “drifting” teach us about ourselves? In what way is it revelatory or foundational? To the extent perhaps that it interrogates the subject, obliging her to redefine herself or even to renounce the very idea of a definition of self, whether in celebration of new liberty or in painful solitude.

Rupture is not necessarily visible, earth-shattering. Sometimes it occurs via internal decisions, new orientations, letting go of certain aspects of life that are no longer vital, rather than through obvious change. Modes of existence, of being, fade away, without explanation. We desert places, we leave people, we establish a new style of living. Is this really rupture or simply an evolution, an internal modification, a mutation? The very idea of breaking with the person we had been is perhaps only an illusion. When the subject’s actions and thoughts are systematically, profoundly transformed, true rupture has occurred—when we break with what we could call our “habit of being.”⁶ But to what extent can I become someone other than myself? And to what extent do I need to do this? Perhaps it’s a vital necessity, a matter of psychic survival. I extricate myself from the other so that I can at last be myself. Rupture is the condition of my birth and of my rebirth.

Sometimes a break is necessary to “save” yourself, in other words, to escape and to save your skin: to save yourself by breaking with what threatens you or prevents you from existing. I

6. O’Connor, Flannery, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988.

can be censured or held back by others, but also, sometimes, by myself. Through rupture, one must create the conditions for appearance and self-realization. To break is to reveal the person you want to be, to exist in the first person, no longer as a marionette or a fetish. To fully assume one's identity in all its disturbing, disappointing or impossible qualities in the eyes of others, especially those close to you. Accepting the risk of becoming the other, whose emergence requires rupture.

But what happens when rupture is involuntary, simply endured, experienced as accident, catastrophe or tragedy? What we sometimes call the “parentheses of existence”—illness, depression, mourning—are not mere parentheses, but most often profoundly modify our way of thinking and of living. In themselves, they constitute a principal of rupture that I can either recognize and reclaim with a view to a new life, as I'd if been purified through trial by fire, rid of the dregs of existence—or that I can deny and shut down, as if they were experiences of no consequence. Case closed, without further action. But the rift that appeared as a result of this drama continues to widen in silence, and the rifts within us are the presages of ruptures to come. The wounded child creates vulnerabilities in the adult she will become.

If certain events provoke ruptures, perhaps they are only triggers, or pretexts. Hadn't the crack within the self already been present long ago, ready to proliferate and to shatter the self's unity?

Often we consider the new subject that emerges from an existential rupture as if it had sprung from a jack-in-the-box. We speak of “rebirth,” of “a new start.” We have innumerable expressions to exalt the subject's second chance to be more intensely or more authentically herself. As if rupture allowed us to approach the true self, from which we had been distanced by society, family, the world. Within this positive dialectic, where rupture reveals us to ourselves,

lies a fundamental illusion: essentially, we take it for granted that a “self” exists, a true identity in which the subject can be realized and fulfilled in its singularity, expressing its individuality.

But is this metamorphosis of the subject, this “new life,” anything more than a consolation, an *a priori* reconstitution that is necessary to endure drama, to give meaning to the absurdity of death, illness, and accident?

The idea of revelatory rupture presupposes the existence of a sketch of the self, of an essence that could be actualized, of a vocation, a destiny. By putting me to the test, rupture would allow me to reach the heart of my identity. Suffering would have meaning, and each of us our own, solid identity. But am I anything more than the ruptures themselves? Am I not simply the effect of accidents, of chance, modeled by the exterior world? Is it not the sum of these incessant and imperceptible little ruptures that make me who I am? Are we not more “broken” than “breakers,” passive and submissive to the fractures of existence that reshape our lives?

But what does it mean to be “broken”? Am I passive only when I endure a blow, when I tolerate a rip? Am I weak when I endure? Here, the dictionary is of more help than self-help books. It reminds us that we can also be “broken *in*.” Something in us resists annihilation by rupture. The “broken in” being discovers his or her strength of resistance. What I can tolerate says something about my strength. What remains to be understood is why some cede and collapse under the violence of being ripped apart, while others are surprised to have remained alive, even after a part of their life has been amputated. What causes me to be either broken or, to the contrary, reinforced by challenge? What can we learn from our ruptures? And what do they make of us?

After Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, must we still think about rupture?⁷ Undoubtedly, yes, because it has changed form, because it is more present, because rupture could be the new form or the form to come of our existence, generally speaking. Perhaps we're now entering an era or an age of rupture. From an ecological (and consequently economic and political) perspective, we must urgently rethink the way we live, communicate, and move, as well as our habit of monopolizing wealth, and stop denying the depletion of resources to which our behavior leads. To recognize rupture would then be proof of our maturity, as we face the necessity of a vital change, whether on the level of individual existence or of collective survival. Rupture expresses our coming into awareness of our responsibilities. But we must also intellectually absorb the idea of necessary change, the coming catastrophe, and stop believing in the permanence of the world, the indefinite recreation of nature. We must accept that we are no longer in a cyclical configuration, but rather confronting a moment of ecological rupture. This demands that we work on our spontaneous tendency toward denial, when faced with the prospect of great ruptures that consist of alteration (whether of nature or of men) or of definitive loss. We must confront our great fears and reflect on a pedagogy of rupture.

But we are also in a moment of rupture because, for several decades now, rupture has been inscribed into the horizon of the quotidian, by articulating itself (misleadingly?) within a certain idea of liberty, or of caprice and inconstancy; couples shift, families reconstitute themselves as if shuffling cards, minimizing the suffering and seriousness of rupture. One can separate with "consent." Rupture, become banal statistic, would speak to individualism, and every person's claim to "happiness" and "fulfillment." In the universe of work, to change the

7. Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard approached the question of rupture from a cultural and historiographic or a moral and personal perspective, respectively. See Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling, Repetition*.

paradigm, especially when driven by technological innovations, has become the criteria of a kind of natural selection. In the time it will take to publish this book, the examples I could give of technological mutations will already be obsolete. To adapt, to be flexible, nomadic, and unattached. To pass from one idea of comprehension to another. To invent new codes for interpreting and, especially, for taking advantage of the world. But also, to release ballast, to be rid of what slows us down, of those who can't keep up. The ruptures of our era are ruthless.

But if contemporary ruptures are visible, identifiable, nevertheless the cracks of existence are not new. They have always punctuated human lives. Bifurcations, holes, detours, blanks in history, what life does not know them? Not to mention invisible parentheses and hidden betrayals. Isn't every life, as Deleuze writes, "...an almost mad sentence, with its changes in direction, its bifurcations, its ruptures and leaps, its prolongations, its sproutings, its parentheses"⁸? Sometimes an initial rupture is necessary, in order to be able to observe and endure the others. As is often the case, illness functions as a magnifying glass. What it permits us to see in close-up exists on a more discrete scale in everyday life: the discontinuity of our existence and maybe even, profoundly, of our identity. Even if the official narratives of our lives, the novels of the self, or everyday storytelling work to smooth out the rough edges of existence, there are no lives without breaks. Illness makes visible these painful chasms, these holes in our existence, but there's strength in recognizing that we each experience them, sometimes in secret and in shame.⁹ Life is neither logical or coherent, made up of well-drawn lines, obvious paths

8. Deleuze, Gilles. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Michael A. Greco and Daniel W. Smith, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 58.

9. Olivia Rosenthal says it well in her book on Alzheimer's: "To recreate the progression of a life, you have to take into account the vagaries, the cracks, the weaknesses it's made of, breaks, weaknesses, cracks that you don't always

and destinies... It is much more indecisive, unpredictable, uncertain, levity is brutally beaten by storms, tragedies occur and repeat themselves until they are commonplace.

As in previous books, I'll resist the temptation of optimism in this essay, through either stubbornness or conviction, pushing past simplified, positive readings of rupture and new beginnings. We'd prefer to see rupture as the opportunity for a new life, a blank page, and to give a retrospective value to failure by transforming it into knowledge, richness, and experience—failure's virtues. But are they really? Sometimes rupture is simply a waste, a lack of courage, a cowardice. An acknowledgement of failure, on the part of a couple, of a family—of friendship, politics, a project. And failure is often nothing more than itself, poor, deceptive, a complete miss. Most failures teach us nothing. Worse, often we get bogged down by the same mistakes, as if they were inevitable and as if, paradoxically, we almost enjoyed their reassuring repetition. Psychoanalysis has something to say about this. We must stop hoping that experience makes us better, when so few examples seem to confirm this hope: "Since the Greek physicians, there are but philosophers who believe that life is learned through trial and error."¹⁰ On the eve of a new adventure, I am not toughened up by previous defeats, but rather susceptible to losing myself again at the same crossroads.¹¹ It's possible that, in the end, I learned nothing after all.

Claire Marin. *Ruptures. Comment les ruptures nous transforment.*

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read in official biographies. Life is in fact full of holes and uneven, as those suffering from A.'s disease know better than anybody else." *We're Not Here to Disappear*, Trans. Béatrice Mousli, Otis Books Seismicity, 2015, p. 56.

10. Potte-Bonneville, Mathieu, *Recommencer: notes pour une reprise*, Verdier, 2018, p. 35. Our translation.

11. "Each new departure re-awakens the beginner's hesitations, that we thought we'd left behind." Potte-Bonneville, Mathieu, *Recommencer: notes pour une reprise*, Verdier, 2018, p. 37. Our translation.