

**Review of Charles J. Stivale *Gilles Deleuze's ABCs: The folds of Friendship* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) pp 1-180**

When teaching Gilles Deleuze's concept of singularity it is sometimes helpful to contrast a biography based around the facts of a life - dates, achievements, beginnings and ends – with a narrative sensitive to the singular inflections of the life, when told by a literary friend, for instance. The singular calls for an aesthetic expression respecting its fragility and variance; it is neither general nor public, but a matter of events, discordant perspectives and shifting encounters. Singularities resist representation and are often approached negatively or metaphorically in order to respect their resistance to fixity. Perhaps then the untouchable superiority of pop over biography for our moments of longing, as opposed to our sad needs for confirmation and admiration, lies in its power to capture seemingly private singularities for others without ever, or only rarely, giving them something concrete to go on: a mere sketch on which to hang our own biased, cherished and inaccurate memories. The three minute song might have the upper hand over philosophy in this evocation of singularities, since it passes away leaving only an emotional impression, the deep secret of its resistance to the base generalities of biography. To the cringing embarrassment of students (Deleuzians are often shameless for lack of fear of good sense) I like to claim Dexys Midnight Runners caught the power of this elusiveness in “This is what she's like” their dissertation on the pop song as renovation of the Shakespearean description of a lover to an old friend or confidant: ‘She would never say that. She's totally different in every way...’<sup>1</sup> ‘... as rare as any she belied with false compare...’<sup>2</sup> Singularities can only be alluded to and then only creatively, in an ephemeral gesture communicating affect yet destroying the representation carrying it.

This superiority of impressions of the singular over enumerations of the factual or romanticised schlock creates a fearsome set of traps and threats for any thinker wishing to convey the living Deleuze along with his thought. How not to sink into the wretched betrayals of Deleuze biography, Deleuze romance, or prurient photojournalism? Silence would always be better. How to write of the singular in an academic genre where negative theology and poetic metaphor are, if not forbidden, then at least cause for the deepest suspicion? In response to this challenge, Charles Stivale has achieved the most difficult task of sketching Deleuze for us without ever fusing the man or thought into the commonplace of a life reduced to facts, to characteristics, or to retouched snaps. He achieves this task thanks to very different but mutually supportive strategies. First, the Deleuzian singularity of friendship has been selected as a way of coordinating other apparently more corporeal affects such as laughter and desires. Stivale's book offers a detailed reflection on the concept of friendship in relation to Deleuze. It will allow for intriguing assessments of the differences and overlaps between Deleuze's work and other philosophical and literary studies, including Derrida's studies of the politics of friendship.<sup>3</sup> Second, the lines running between these connected zones of affective inflection are given just enough consistency to provide a frame for the book through a sustained reading of Deleuze's ABC, his television interview with his friend the journalist Claire Parnet (*L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze, avec Claire Parnet*, 1996). Students of Deleuze's work have long relied on Stivale's version of the ABC on his

website 'Deleuze and Guattari: web resources'.<sup>4</sup> It is a delight to discover the research and detailed reflection behind his account of the interview. This book is the definitive reading of the *Abécédaire*. Third, we now discover that Stivale's earlier reports on the ABC were far from a mere retelling. In the new book he traces the different cameos from the interview through Deleuze's oeuvre but also through its connections to the works of his contemporaries and to his sometimes profound, sometimes passing friendships. These connect Deleuze to a surprising number of the writers who made his age one of the most flourishing in French culture. Stivale's accounts of Deleuze and Derrida (pp 69-83), Deleuze and Foucault (pp 99-117), Deleuze and Guattari (passim) and Deleuze and Châtelet (Deleuze's colleague at the University of Vincennes, pp 138-40) are each important additions to current research. Many others could have been named here, notably Deleuze's passions for earlier writers, such as Proust (pp 87-8), or for poets and artists, such as Michaux (pp 111-12).

I have highlighted these lines of the intricate structure of *Gilles Deleuze's ABC* to illustrate its strongest sources of consistency, but this does not capture the value of its fine texture. Thanks to a style owing more to the literary salon than the academic treatise, Stivale has managed to touch on an astonishing number of important and fascinating points of contact around Deleuze's work but without making them impenetrable or facile. The book is therefore a generous resource for Deleuze readers. Few will fail to discover new and valuable insights for their interpretations of Deleuze. While researching on Deleuze and Prigogine and Stengers' theories of time in *Entre le temps et l'éternité*<sup>5</sup>, but also worrying about Deleuze and the political in the context of May 68 (*Don't ask...*) I came across this generous prompt and suggestion: 'Another direction to pursue from the final paragraph in chapter 2 of *Foucault* is the reference to May 1968 therein, which I connect to the 1984 essay by Deleuze, authored with Guattari and entitled "Mai 68 n'a pas eu lieu" (May '68 did not occur, or more literally, did not have a place). Only five paragraphs in length, the essay's starting point is inspired by Prigogine, that any event as such cannot be reduced to social determinism or causal linkages, but rather constitutes a bifurcation or deviation in relation to laws, opening on to "a new field of the possible" (p 106) Note the manifold layers of Stivale's conversational style here: scholarly exposition (Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the event is about departure from outdated views of natural law); textual analysis (tracing routes through many different and at first sight unrelated works); scholarly tutoring (the opening up of multiple paths for further research – hence the generosity of a work providing the careful guidance of a good tutor); and elements of a new kind of biography of friendships (the political and intellectual strands running through friends: Foucault-Deleuze-Guattari).

When an academic field such as Deleuze studies becomes as congested but also as popular as it has we often search for the 'essential' around a given topic. Indeed, cash-strapped libraries and presses insist on the supreme category of 'essential reading'; no doubt to the detriment of innovative thought which, by definition, is not yet essential. This reaction is a damaging response to congestion, since it seeks a solution to the morass within the very reasons for its confusion, rather than seeking a new form of thought beyond those original causes. *Gilles Deleuze's ABC* is rewarding exactly because it is inessential reading, or rather because it is a reading of the inessential. I use the word here

in its important Deleuzian sense, related to his concept of singularity: inessential like a passing event setting out a new becoming, or the charm that ‘creates a friendship’ (p 81). I flirted with the dangerous idea of describing this book as a Deleuzian ‘treasury’ but fortunately I held back, or it rebuffed me, since such a book ought never to hold essential valuables, unchanging and dead under a superficial glint. Instead we should find strangely enticing novelties and hidden secret passages opening on to new worlds – like Alice’s, as followed in Deleuze’s Logic of Sense. Charles Stivale has written a manifold book, valuable (essential) exactly because it is worthy of the celebration of the inessential and the multiple in Deleuze’s philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-avJdGnHe0>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.blight.com/~sparkle/poems/mistress.html>

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, Trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/CStivale/D-G/>

<sup>5</sup> Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers *Entre le temps et l'éternité* Paris: Flammarion, 1992