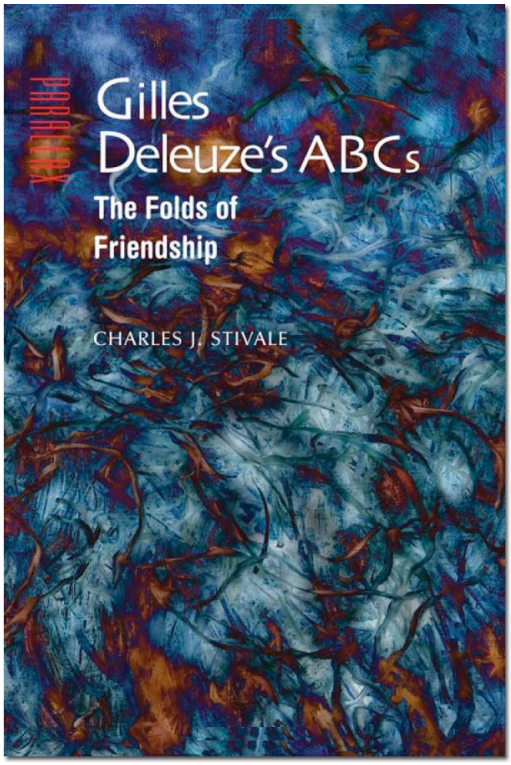
The Agonist
A Nietzsche Circle Journal

Book Review of

Gilles Deleuze's ABCs: The Folds of Friendship

by Charles J. Stivale

reviewed by Keith W. Faulkner



With this book, Charles J. Stivale sets the standard for clear and entertaining scholarship often lacking in studies of Deleuze. Among the best of his works to date, it will surely spark debate among those interested in the question of friendship. Some, however, may ask if this book is about friendship at all given that Deleuze asserts that no one ever encounters another person directly, but only another person's style. Stivale sways his readers, nonetheless, by his engaging stories of Deleuze's own friendships. He succeeds in laying out a critical issue that needs to be addressed in Deleuze's project. And, to do so, he draws from the rich resources of Deleuze's only videotaped interview: *L'Abecedaire de Gilles Deleuze*.

One of this book's strengths is that it doesn't require a deep familiarity with Deleuze's *oeuvre*. Apart from a few forays into the details of his more technical works, Stivale manages to embed his argument in the biography—what little is known—of Deleuze's life. He tells the story of Maurice de Gandillac, for example, one of Deleuze's professors at the Sorbonne, who taught him about friendship's immanence, which would later influence Deleuze's idea of friendship as an "emission of signs." Stivale also stresses Marcel Proust's central importance on Deleuze's trajectory, something with which I wholly agree. He points out that Deleuze kept returning to his book on Proust, expanding it, editing it, and even letting it spill over into his works with Guattari. Stivale's sympathetic reading unearths such influences and thereby leaves his readers with a warmer, more human understanding of Deleuze.

As a reader, I'm always interested in the question, "Why did the author write this book?" Stivale is honest about this. In his preface, he relates how he would have liked to have translated Deleuze's video interview word-for-word, instead of his internet-based summary, but Deleuze

did not want it to appear in print—a wish the publisher respected. So Stivale's book does the next best thing. It retells the stories that emerge from this interview, but with the unifying theme—that of friendship.

In chapter one, Stivale explains how, for Deleuze, creativity emerges from new links, new pathways, and new synapses, all of which form a type of friendship that embraces dissonance. This anchors Deleuze's theory of friendship: one encounters ideas, not people. When you create, you obliquely encounter someone's "charm" through many intercessors or "folds"—hence the subtitle "the folds of friendship." In this case, you are not a subject encountering other subjects, as is the case in intersubjective phenomenology. Instead, you *become* a subject by encountering the odd gestures which emit signs. This is important. Right away, Stivale challenges the Platonic union of souls. And he turns existential alienation into something joyful. If he stopped here, his book would have already been worth the admission price.

In chapter two, Stivale examines Deleuze's teaching style. Anyone who has seen Deleuze teach can testify to his seminars' intensity. And this intensity fuels thought. In fact, Deleuze says he must *work himself up* before he gives a lecture. He must create a passion, must become unhinged. Why? Whereas many philosophers waste their time analyzing texts to find what's "true," Deleuze seeks what's interesting, what arouses a passion or an interest. Nothing else is worthwhile. That's why he dislikes "schools of thought." In fact, he would rather launch a movement than a school. As Stivale points out, Deleuze writes that teachers should never say, "Do as I do," they should shout "Do with me!" In this way, Deleuze does more than teach. He inspires. Why is this important? Often scholarly circles lack true friendships. Because philosophy has been formatted to the needs of teaching, professors focus on the question "What's the correct interpretation?" This is only necessary for those concerned with transmitting information. Deleuze offers a new model: "What's the most *interesting* interpretation?" In fact, he writes in *Difference and Repetition*: "Teachers already know that errors or falsehoods are rarely found in homework . . . Rather, what is more frequently found—and worse—are nonsensical sentences, remarks without interest or importance, banalities mistaken for profundities" (pg. 153). Shouldn't this be the real concern for teachers? Moreover, if teachers adopted Deleuze's approach, the academic envy, which has existed since the first Academy in Athens, would vanish. Teachers would cease to be Platonic rivals for a true interpretation. They would become concept-creators instead. This is the second gold coin I have found in Stivale's book.

In chapter three, Stivale addresses the issue of style. Though he begins with style in literature, he ends with a discussion of style in life. Surprisingly, Deleuze finds himself attracted to an elegance that he lacks, but senses in his friend Jean-Pierre Bramberger. He doesn't *encounter* this friend, however. Instead, with his friend, he participates in the "society life" (*mondanité*) about which Proust writes. I quote from *Proust and Signs*: "Nothing funny is said at the Verdurins,' and Mme Verdurin does not laugh, but Cottard makes a sign that he is saying something funny, Mme Verdurin makes a sign that she is laughing" (pg.6). All that counts is the empty sign. And all that

matters is the joy such signs produce. And, though Deleuze admits that philosophy sometimes needs debate, he recognizes a non-philosophical side: the emitted sign's speeds and slowness. Why is this important? While the concept has a side that signifies A = B, it also has a side that changes the way you view the world. That other side is called "style." And this style has philosophical value. After all, philosophy was invented by Plato to cure sick souls. Only now, if your present view of life makes you sick, only a new style can restore your *joie de vivre*. Why not, then, add style to your concepts? That's why I say that Stivale, in chapter three, has found a pearl of great price in this theory of style.

In chapter four, Stivale delves into the *weariness* of friendship. He notes that Deleuze went out of his way to avoid debate with Derrida and Foucault. Why? Because, according to Deleuze, real philosophers "hate discussions." How strange! After all, any conference-goer knows how intellectuals love to talk their heads off. But Deleuze is exhausted. And his philosophy reflects this. For him, as ancient Greek rivalry dies off, a new model is born. In philosophy's old age, thinkers turn into old coots, waving their canes. They feel "the shame of being a man," a phrase Deleuze gets from Primo Levi. The thinker can't help but feel compromised by modern cruelty and stupidity. And, for Deleuze, this drives us to think. If Deleuze hates discussion, therefore, it's because philosophy should fight the stupidity of such discussions. Why is this important? In a word: "resistance." If one philosopher works with another, they do so to resist present-day opinions, not to reach a compromise or to form new opinions. After all, according to Deleuze, such opinions only replace real thought. They may comfort some, as does small talk, but they don't move thought into new realms. Dialogue, synthesis… dialogue, synthesis… that way of thinking is outdated. Resist! Resist! Resist! Only that will secure a friendship between philosophers. Why? "It may be that friendship is nourished on observation and conversation, but love is born from and nourished on silent interpretation" (pg. 7, *Proust and Signs*). It may be that, for Deleuze, philosophical friendships are more like a lover's quarrel than they are like a logical dialogue. Stivale's book seems to indicate this. This is the money shot of chapter four.

In chapter five, Stivale analyzes Deleuze's alliance with Parnet and Guattari. In a nutshell, he writes that, by writing a book with another person, Deleuze escapes the author's identity, for the reader never knows who wrote what. Of course, most commentators sabotage this strategy by writing "Deleuze" as shorthand for Deleuze-Guattari. But Stivale makes an important point here. The author-fetish, the idea that you can get to the author's identity through his or her works, is a quaint notion. Terribly outdated though! He highlights Deleuze's idea that, when you use a philosopher's name, you speak about a thought-plane, not about what an author intends. That is, a certain timeless effect of an oeuvre floats around an author's name. In this way, a long-dead author may become as much a friend as your neighbor—for friendship is nothing more than this sign-effect. This is the treasure trove of chapter five.

In chapter six, Stivale narrows down the point of the previous chapter and focuses on Deleuze's friendship with Foucault. What is Foucault? Deleuze calls him a "set of sounds ham-

mered out, of decisive gestures, of ideas made of tinder and fire, of deep attention and sudden closure, of laughter and smiles which one feels to be 'dangerous' at the very moment one feels tenderness" (*Dialogues*, pg. 11). What's he saying? He's talking about the pre-individual singularities that make up this Foucault-effect. After all, these singularities are what make you *fall for* someone, and a "subject" is no more than a name in which you entrap them. This can change the way we talk about friendship. For Sartre, the other-person gets reduced to the gaze—a world of possibilities and of guilt. Whereas he assumes subjects already formed, Deleuze only sees subjects in the process of forming. Thus, a friend is not someone with whom you team-up to share a common viewpoint. A friend is more like a silent interpretation—not an interpretation of conventional signs, with an agreed-upon meaning, but those perplexing natural signs. This is the rich mystery of chapter six.

In chapter seven, Stivale focuses on the plaint and the laugh. First, the plaint . . . Deleuze says that, if he hadn't become a philosopher, he would have become a complainer. The hypochondriac, for example, enjoys complaining, but doesn't want anyone to pity him. He only wants to yell "it's too much for me to bear!" Stivale notes that this "plaintive voice" is what Foucault looks for in his work on prisoner's rights. Not only do such plaints play a role in political struggles, they are also the source of poetry and song. (Hence Deleuze's love of the singer Edith Piaf.) Next, the laugh . . . Deleuze loves to laugh, as evidenced by his videotaped interview. And, for him, laughter forms part of a friend's charm. (Hence Deleuze's love of the singer Charles Trenet.) To show how this is possible, Stivale cites a few friendships built around such laughter: Beckett's Mercier and Camir, Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet. There's something mad about these pairs. And, for Deleuze, such madness is the source of friendship. Why is this important? Normally, the prisoner and the madman seem alienated from society. In a subtle way, Deleuze rehabilitates them. No longer an Other whom you must fear, you would begin to recognize the madman in your friendships and the prisoner in your words. Thus, unlike the forms of exclusion, which Foucault analyzed, these exiles become conceptual personas that can haunt your friendships. Couldn't this recognition of the mad and the prisoner *within* us do more to break down the walls of unreason and of confinement than any well-intentioned political reform? This is the golden key of chapter seven.

In the end, the *most* humble reviewer of this book—that is to say "me"—has imposed his interpretation. But isn't that the point of a review? I report on what I find interesting, not what *is* "true." That is to say, I have not given you a complete picture—no substitute for buying the book—the publisher wouldn't like that. So, I invite . . . no, I *encourage* you to read this book. Charles J. Stivale succeeds in writing an engaging story, which, I believe, will change the way you think about friendship. If not, then at least it will entertain.