Reading Derrida Against Bennington:

Bennington says "one of the challenges of Derrida's thought has always been to grasp together singularity and plurality or multiplicity..."(p.45, Interrupting Derrida). He examines this relation in the guise of the link between community and dispersion. Speaking of Derrida's references to a `community of the question', in Violence and Metaphysics, Bennington asserts "The `community of the question' announced here is nothing as concrete or socio-historically identifiable as a given `community' of philosophers, but retains a privileged relationship with philosophy which I think Derrida would not want to renounce today."(124,ID). Bennington writes,"A politics of friendship looks as though it would have to be a politics of a community marked by the interrupted teleology that defines friendship itself, saving us from fusional fantasies but allowing some thought of gathering nonetheless."(114). He then notes that Derrida, in Politics of Friendship, unravels attempts by Nancy and Bataille to assert a schema of political community as a gathering, a being-in-common or any other figure of identity. Bennington wants to understand Derrida's objections here as not a blanket denial of any concept of community, but of a particular articulation thereof. He suggests there would be a notion of `philosophical friendship' acceptable to Derrida, which escapes the problems Derrida associates with the trope of `fraternity'.

"Or does it perhaps mean that there is something sui generis about the SORT of community invoked so insistently here in `Violence and Metaphysics', as opposed to the more obviously `political' communities discussed and questioned in the friendship book? If so, if the oh so fragile `community of the question' is a community of what is still called philosophy or what are still called philosophers, does that mean that philosophers form (or could form) a sort of community which is essentially different from political communities (or politics thought in terms of communities, with the attendant suspect value of fraternity), that the friendship involved in philosophical communities (or the philosophical community) is therefore different, marking perhaps the philein of the philo-sopher, the friend of wisdom, as different from all other friendships?"(117ID). Having concluded that Derrida could endorse, within specified limitations, such a thing as a philosophical commonality, he goes on to suggest who might qualify as a `best philosophical friend' of Derrida, based on criteria he specifies (not simply a personal friend who happens to be a philosopher, not simply a philosopher who happens to agree with Derrida's work or vice versa). The particular criteria he comes up with are less important here than the fact that he is able to affirm a basis upon which two figures can be said to reside in closer proximity to each other than either is to a third; in other words, an essential difference.

What would it mean to argue that such a comparing of relative gathering cannot justify itself for Derrida when one can find so many examples in his work of declarations of apparent privileging (in comments of the unobjectionality of Deleuze's work, or of his proximity to Heidegger and distance from Sartre)? We would have to say that it is not a question of the inability to state a preference, but of the failure of such a gesture to be able to crystallize itself into a determined relationship of degree, of closer to or farther from. Each declaration of preference would have to be analyzed in its utterly singular exemplarity, so that any attempt to locate a basis on which to compare two or more authors would dissemble itself in the instant of its application. We could not say that Derrida and Deleuze are closer friends (on whatever basis we want to define such friendship, philosophical or otherwise) than Derrida and Rorty. In challenging or doubling the

basis of a being-in-common are we then falling into the thinking of pure singularity? How is such a trap avoided without recourse to something like a relative gathering of singularities? The answer, I suggest, would be that differance makes the gesture of continuity, as is the gesture of alterity, oh so slight as to be located in and only in the divided instant of a word, sense, event in the simultaneous acknowledging of tradition and its effacement. It is important to see that here both the transcendent and empirical breaths of/as this instant are utterly particular. It would always be a new past as well as a new present whose inseparability (never simply past or present but both together) marks the mark or edge of experience. It is always a new past, tradition, inheritance, transcendence which reasserts itself here as the `general', together with its always particular effacement. So a text, a history has the peculiar effect of an extraordinary sort of continuity and intimacy in discontinuity, never gathering itself into discretely identifiable modes, yet never simply opposed to, different from itself either. This notion of the singular avoids (thinks more rigorously) the violence attendant upon the thinking of relative gatherings of already-constituted singulars.

One would have to link the subject, humanism, the figure, to fraternity in order to see what prevents any community, whether named as political, philosophical or otherwise, from simply being internally united, privileged, gathered, in-common, in opposition (`essentially different', Bennington says) to another mode. One could read Derrida's comment in Violence and Metaphysics not as a privileging of philosophy, but as a locating of the `community of the question' as that multiplicity or invagination which divides the origin of any question, any event of meaning, before it can simply interrogate. This `community' would not then refer to any relatively gathered or dispersed organization nameable as philosophic or via any other appellation. It would instead disturb any such name or gathering before it had a chance to institute itself as such.
Derrida remarks

 "Perhaps even these questions [about birth, death, and future of
philosophy] are not PHILOSOPHICAL, are no longer OF PHILOSOPHY. They should nonetheless be the only ones able to ground today the community of what, in the world, are still called philosophers by a memory, at least, that we should have to question without ceasing, and in spite of the diaspora of institutes or languages, publications and techniques which pull each other along, self generate themselves and grow like capital or poverty. Community of the question, then, in this fragile instance where the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of a reply to be already invited under the mask of the question, for its voice to have already been allowed to articulate itself fraudulently in the very syntax of the question. Community of decision, of initiative, of absolute, but threatened, initiality, in which the question has not yet found the language it has decided to seek, has not yet reassured itself in it as to its own possibility"(ID116).

Rather than this passage being the affirmation of the possibility of a relative gathering of singularities under the name `philosophy', as Bennington seems to read it, it would be precisely Bennington's claim to point to an identificatory appellation such as the `philosophical community' as the locating of a language within which a questioning can reassure itself that Derrida would decenter via the community of the question. "COMMUNITY of the question as to

the possibility of the question"(117), is this division within the instant of the singular unity as a Being-in-common. Community in this sense is the co or double of equivocity, a dialogue of the singular within itself , the singular as radically plural. It would not be a community OF philosophy or any other configuration, but the repetition within the questioning which grounds experience. It would be a repetition, an affirmation as the play of `perhaps' which folds the question against itself before it knows what it formulates. A paragraph down from Bennington's quote, Derrida adds:

"Thus, those who look into the possibility of philosophy, philosophy's life and death, are already engaged in, already overtaken by the dialogue of the question about itself and with itself;they always act in remembrance of philosophy, as part of the correspondence of the question with itself. Essential to the destiny of this correspondence, then, is that it comes to speculate, to reflect, and to question about itself within itself"(80,Writing and Difference).

Bennington's Derrida:

One may locate in Geoffrey Bennington's reading of Derrida a formalization of deconstructive terms reminiscent of Caputo's thematizing of the moment of the sign. In Bennington's hands, Derrida's differance seems to be thought as a conceptual form programmatically configuring subjective, or `actual', events. Bennington reads Derrida's possible-impossible hinge, the `perhaps', as pertaining to definitive events which either conform to convention or break away from those norms.

Bennington says
"...reading has a duty to respect not only the text's `wishes' (the reading of itself most obviously programmed into itself) but also the opening that opens a margin of freedom with respect to any such wishes, and without which those wishes could not even be registered or recognized. Readers recognize those wishes (traditionally thought of as the `authors' intentions') only by opening themselves to the opening which constitutes the very READABILITY [interpretability] of the text however minimal that readability may be in fact-and that readability is, as such, already in excess of those wishes"(ID36).

He argues that due to this at least minimal readability, a text "can always be read differently with respect to the way it would wish to be read." He emphasizes the presumed formal resistance to inventive reading:

"...any reading worthy of its name must depart from the text it reads, meaning both that it must begin with it, but also that it cannot just stay with it-if Hegel is to be read rather than simply repeated, then the chance of a radically unpredictable reading must be left open even in this text which is entirely written in order to prevenir (forestall) any such reading"(ID139).
We see here features of an essentializing interpretation of Derrida. A meaning is programmed, schematized, it has a form, logic (even if only temporary and contingent); it offers a normative sense of itself (`the reading most obviously programmed into itself'). The burden of this presumed structural inheritance is such that it is difficult to alter its intended meaning (a text is `minimally readable', that is, interpretable; a promise `runs the risk of' not being fulfilled).

In attempting to account for this minimal readability of normative experience, Bennington turns differance, the promise, messianism, into a normative formula: he speaks of the "necessary possibility of the promise turning into the threat, of the best turning out to be also the worst"(DT6).

The promise is always threatened with the possibility of its perversion, which leaves open the chance that a particular event may in fact go as planned. Bennington says

"The positive necessary possibility of perjury affects, in the modality of necessary possibility, all empirical acts of promising or swearing, for example, but leaves open the singular judgement each time as to the actual perversity of this or that act"(42ID).

What would it mean to suggest that an `empirical case' or `arriving event' could possibly NOT imply a gesture of perversity? Are not all supposedly `actual', `arriving' empirical acts perverted originally, before they can ever be said to simply be actual and determinate? Isn't this dissimulation precisely the element of alterity, the gesture of the empirical itself in the transcendental-empirical instant of experience? There is no hint here of a Derridean mark or trace whose promise is also, at the same time, and in the same breath, its violation, as the very condition of the promise. And what is it that is being assumed about a formulation such as `necessary possibility of perversion' that allows it to speak to particular events from a vantage partially outside of the context of those events? Doesn't this formulation depend on faith in the abstraction of concept?(He claims that Derrida's `messianism' has `no specific content at all'(Tympanum5)).

Bennington believes he avoids reifying his general principle of undecidability by exposing it to context. He comments

"...anything like the transcendental is generated as a more or less provisional and unstable effect by a series of partially contingent and essentially singular events, whereby a given text tries to put up a transcendental term, and the deconstructive reading registers its inevitable fall back into its contingent textuality"(ID12).

To claim that the syntax, the context of the thinking of this transcendental principle destroys its attempted ideality and thus determines it as quasi is to in no way unravel the already-presumed structural integrity of the modality Bennington thinks as differance. If the transcendental has built into it the acknowledgement of the particularity of its referent in the guise of the `necessity of the possibility of its perversion', this is only an abstract acknowledgement of particularity. This necessary possibility of dissimulation is supposed to apply equally to ALL events in the abstract. Rather than being already divided within itself as simultaneously determinate and indeterminate, the transcendental is seen as `provisional'; it `inevitably' falls back into contingency. As we said of Caputo's signs-in-relation, Bennington's quasi-transcendental believes that it represents or expresses itself to itself as a determinate, if temporary structure. This explains why Bennington reads Derrida's `perhaps' or `undecidability' not as radically perturbing an event from within itself AS itself, but as a formulaic description of variable relations BETWEEN supposed selfidentical events. Bennington remarks

"For it is not enough simply to stress that undecidability is a condition of decision, or radical possibility (and therefore unpredictability), for events and decisions nonetheless occur, and must occur, and when they occur they are quite determinate"(ID27).

The contextual particularity of eventness thought in this determinate way is not allowed to disturb the presumed irreducible identity of the internal configuration that frames an event. For instance, in the case of Bennington's quasi-transcendental `necessary possibility of impossibility', what meets with or completes the particularity of actual context is a configuration of elements, a propositional logic of the order of an `either-or';either the event will occur as promised or it will be perverted. This configuration presents itself all of one piece as a principle or concept, altered AS A WHOLE by contingencies of the actual situation. This quasi-transcendental thus is assumed to stand as a unity or identity of internal propositional relation BEFORE or independent of its contextualization. The poles of this internal relation would then be presumed to form a logical complicity or identity. Bennington says

"The logic here, which is just what is elsewhere formulated as the quasi-transcendental, states in general a complicity (even an identity) between conditions of possibility and conditions of impossibility, such that the necessary possibility of the failure, compromise or contamination of the supposedly (or desiredly) pure case is sufficient to justify the thought that that purity is already compromised in its very formulation"(41ID).

Bennington's quasi-transcendental would be a device assimilating the particular event to its regulative schematic function (the necessary possibility of perversion). The event itself does not offer up this information. It isn't allowed to when its contamination is being thought here as only an abstract `possibility' rather than as implicit in the particular experience of the event. If the event itself in its singularity does not offer up the basis of the thinking of the `necessary possibility of impossibility' as Bennington conceives it, then the assumed knowledge of the possibility of contamination must come from memory-tradition in the form of a heuristic which frames and completes the particular event; the structural shaping the actual. Bennington's conception of differance, then, may be exemplary of his notion of the event itself, as a contingent self-presence which is assimilated to a pre-existing scheme even as it subtly particularizes and contextualizes that scheme. Convention programs the event via the immediate negotiated meeting or simultaneity of concept and empirical object.
The perceived conserving or framing function of normative tradition may explain why Bennington treats repetition as more often complicit with the stifling of what he considers singular invention than with its possibility. Reading and difference is opposed to `simple repetition'.
Bennington comments

"...for an event even to take place AS an event, it must already compromise its singularity with the conditions of recognizability that take the form of structures of repeatability or iterability"
(Double Tounging:Derrida's Monolinguism, p.5).

We do not seem to be able to locate in Bennington's writing the understanding of repetition as the work or gesture of differance itself, as the equivocally instituting and destabilizing double origin of an event.

Instead, there is `simple' repetition which operates to maintain a region or phase of conventional, norm-bound thinking which he opposes to moments of iconoclastic invention. As we have suggested, such a view of iteration emerges from the centering capacity given to experience as meeting between schematizing form and empirical object. For Derrida, however, the structural-transcendental and the empirical are not distinguished from each other as the encounter between self-identical moments or gestures, the transcendental `applying itself to' or framing the empirical. Derrida's differance can instead be read as revealing that pervertibility, impossibility, incompatibility always has already `occurred' in the instant, or more precisely before the simple possibility of the instituting of the instant of an event. Before there could ever be an event or its dislocation there would be the double play of presence-absence. Bennington's quasi-transcendental, in thinking itself via the pure structurality of internal relation, unknowingly succumbs to a deconstructive destabilization before it can even think the first instance of its own `contingently realized' form. An internally unitary principle or form, even if thought only in the instant of its contingent application to an empirical event, cannot justify its momentary identicality, and so the supposed determinativeness of the event as the `as such' of its internal structure is revealed as a phantasm represssing a more intimate effect.