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Dealing with Double Binds. Letters on Derrida's Geschlecht III, Swedishness and the Animal Rationale

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Dealing with Double Binds. Letters on Derrida's *Geschlecht III*, Swedishness and the *Animal Rationale*

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Abstract

In this paper we relate to the question about “the use of Derrida’s work as a political tool for understanding the present.” It is of course impossible to use Derrida’s thinking as we usually understand the meaning of use. It resists instrumentalisation. This text is an exchange of letters and a collective work of thought concerning different approaches to Derrida Today. The initiative for this letter exchange arose when we read Derrida’s *Geschlecht III* together. Our discussions around that book led to the question of how the hardening identities and sharper conflicts in our time appear in contemporary Swedish poetry. We read and listened to the song “Sverige” (a well-known song in Sweden by the Swedish rock group Kent), to see what would happen if we departed from Derrida’s question concerning nations and communities in *Geschlecht III*. Could Derrida help us see or hear something in the song that we hadn’t heard before? Perhaps we could twist and turn both Kent’s and Derrida’s lyrically musical words to use them as uncontrollable, but at the same time inescapable, analytical and political tools? The text became, for us, a starting point to discuss the double binds of contemporary environmental politics, nationalism and our positions as researchers. *Geschlecht III* has inspired the analytical process in two senses: first, in terms of form and in allowing poetry to be an object of analysis, and second, through acknowledging the link between poetry, nationalism and ideology. We have wanted to initiate a deconstruction and to *think beyond* some of the corner stones in Sweden’s national identity.

The CFP for this issue asks the question about “the use of Derrida’s work as a political tool for understanding the present.” Inevitably, one must then ask whether it is at all *possible to use*, as a *tool*, a philosophical way of thinking that has devoted itself to scrutinising the desire for control that characterises Western instrumental reason, a thinking for which an act is ethical only if it is (im)possible, for which political decisions cannot be grounded in theory, and which therefore seeks to open itself to the unpredictable and the unaccountable by not being satisfied with practical solutions, but by offering hospitality to aporias. Could it be important today to read a text like Derrida’s *Geschlecht III* (2020), which devotes itself to the twists and turns of Heidegger’s different way of thinking about *Geschlecht*, *Versammlung* and *Schlag*? And how relevant is it to read poetry, engage in rhythm as a way of being in and changing the world? Can we, through poetic rhythm, find ways to approach the great problems of our time, such as the climate crisis, war and the spread of fascism?

It is of course impossible to use Derrida’s thinking as we usually understand the meaning of use. It resists instrumentalisation. But now, in a present characterised by the fact that instrumental reason’s belief in itself has demonstrably become irrational—see UN climate reports, which *proves* that *scientifically*—perhaps we have to use thinking in *non-usable* ways, not following rules, not considering verifiable method to be everything, not starting from a pre-given view of what reason might be—not thinking that we are the only ones with rational capability.

This text is an exchange of letters and a collective work of thought concerning different approaches to Derrida in our time. We, who participate in the conversation, have our roots in different academic disciplines. Our voices are heard in the text, but we believe that we do not need to define whether it is the historian, the social scientist or the literary scholar who is speaking. We will relate to each other and to Derrida but also allow our thoughts to wander, not letting either Derrida or our different starting points control where we are moving and where we will end up. The initiative for this letter exchange arose when we read Derrida’s *Geschlecht III* together. Our discussions around that book, in which Derrida dwells on the relation between Heidegger’s nationalism and his reading of Georg Trakl’s poetry, his *gathering* poetry, as Heidegger views it, led to the question of how the hardening identities and sharper conflicts in our time appear in contemporary Swedish poetry. After we had discussed some well-known poets, someone mentioned Kent—a Swedish rock group whose song “Sverige” (“Sweden”) has

become a regular feature at national day celebrations, school graduations and other ceremonial occasions.

We decided to read and listen to “Sverige,” to see what would happen if we departed from Derrida’s question concerning nations and communities in *Geschlecht III*, that is, the question if it is possible to easily distinguish between a good and an evil gathering around something like the nation. Could Derrida help us see or hear something in the song that we hadn’t heard before? Perhaps we could twist and turn both Kent’s and Derrida’s lyrically musical words to use them as uncontrollable, but at the same time inescapable, analytical and political tools? What is happening—or has happened?

Our reflections on the two texts run side by side in two separate columns which, hopefully, speak to each other. Written one after the other it’s an uncertain, disarming and tentative conversation. In the two columns, unequal and uneven, we try to remark, overlap and see in new ways. We have written, one after the other, or sometimes together and in this way we have put our signatures to the text. However, this is not a letter conversation in terms of having clear senders and receivers. Senders and receivers form an open circle in which any message that might emerge comes from groping. Perhaps the ‘letter’ never was received or perhaps it’s already there?

Maybe the text reflects our times, that it is impossible to find a unifying solution to the challenges of our world, and that, sometimes, it feels impossible to understand anything at all. Climate change and mass extinction also lead to a hermeneutic crisis. As citizens and researchers, we stand before our society and its institutions like children caught in aporetic and painful *double binds* to their parents. A situation that comes to mind when Swedish politicians claim that they are creating a sustainable society, while at the same time they obviously, without saying it, make decisions which show that by sustainability they mean nothing other than continued growth (for us) at the price of mass extinction and loss of biodiversity. Gregory Bateson’s conclusion about how double binds characterise evolution seems applicable: if the environment a species lives in becomes toxic, that species will die out unless it transforms into another species, and then it will become extinct anyway. If the species itself has poisoned its environment, perhaps the hope for transformation is not very great? That our thinking would have any kind of significance in such a context reflects, obviously and at best, a naive feeling of omnipotence that might be allowed in a letter exchange.

*

Note: Page references given in parenthesis are to *Geschlecht III*.

Thinking in step and out of step

Let me begin with the question from which we started our conversation, a question that is even more relevant after the summer of 2023, when the forecasts from the UN climate panel came true with heat waves, droughts, forest fires, rain and floods: How should we relate to the fact that what we consider to be good also turns out to be evil? As researchers, we are part of the enlightenment project, we believe in thought and reason. But when empirical evidence shows that all these aspects of our identity are simultaneously complicit in causing nature's suffering, our society's autoimmunity, that they prove to be pharmakons, both medicines and—increasingly—poisons, we must, once again, think not only about what is to be done, but also what it, if at all, means to think and act. So, shall we just begin?

“Sverige” by Kent

Kent (1993–2016) was an all-male rock group that counts among the Swedish indie rock bands which formed during the 1980s and 90s. Musically, the group moved between alternative rock, pop and synth, with a sound that broadened and turned more folk towards the end of the band's career. The lyrics are gritty and touch on feelings such as alienation/being on the sidelines, meaninglessness, indifference, self-loathing, loneliness and love, often from a teenage perspective. Even if the band is not overtly political, there are song sequences that in various ways provoke or highlight a prevailing, skewed order. In “Socker” (Sugar) (2002), Jesus appears as a lit guest on a TV sofa; in “Kungen är död” (The King is Dead) (1999), the king's passing is made into a metaphor for freedom, and, in “La Belle Epoque” (2014), Sweden is described as “the country that God forgot.”

“Sverige” (2002), the song around which half of this exchange of letters revolves, relates to national identity, but without praising the nation as such. The song was released at a time when nationalism was in various ways a current topic in the social debate.

— Derrida uses different terms to denote this kind of indissoluble contradiction of terms, one of which he has taken from Gregory Bateson: double bind. Derrida's *Geschlecht III* is characterised by such a double bind. Despite Heidegger's affiliation with the Nazi Party, Derrida neither asserts to defend nor completely disavows Heidegger's philosophical thought. Instead, he deconstructs it both critically and lovingly, carefully following concepts important to Heidegger throughout his writing,

Five years earlier, the Nazi Swedish Resistance Movement was formed, and in 2000, the Salem march was organised for the first time, a Nazi manifestation in the small community of Salem that gathered between 1,000 and 2,000 Nazi demonstrators over a period of ten years. Although these demonstrations were condemned in the general political debate there were other discussions rife with racist and xenophobic features. Two murders of women led to a debate about honour-related violence, and the September 11 attacks gave rise to an international debate about terrorism. In these cases, Muslim migrants were singled out as threats to Swedish equality and security. Against this background, the song "Sweden," with the recurring stanza "Welcome, welcome here, whoever you are, wherever you are" could be understood, and has been understood, as an alternative portrayal of the nation, in which an alternative possible national identity is presented.

The song is the last fine-tuned track on the album *Vapen och ammunition* (Weapons and Ammunition), whose cover shows a white tiger. The record release was followed by a large and

concepts such as “place,” “gathering,” “meaning,” “metaphor,” “neighborhood,” “proximity,” “promise” and “rhythm,” but at the same time wrenching them out of Heidegger’s conceptual framework. We must read Heidegger in step and out of step, “simultaneously regulate our steps with his and deregulate them” (2), since all thinking has its eclipses and blind spots, if not, it is just calculation, as Derrida puts it (142).

— If that is so, this exchange of letters constitutes an attempt to think in step and out of step with a reason that has proven unsustainable—unaccountable to pragmatism that often passes as reason. The form of conversation allows us to feel our way around the double binds that characterise our lives as researchers, as political beings, as people. How should we relate to the tradition, the lineage we belong to, which carries a lot we don’t want to give up—enlightenment, science, democracy, and more—when we know that the communities formed around these, in the name of instrumental rationality and human exclusivity, have also considered themselves entitled to exploit everyone and everything, thereby nurturing also their own antitheses time and time again: deliberate anti-rationalism, the cult of violence and authoritarian communities, not least

celebrated concert at the Stockholm Olympic Stadium during the Swedish National Day the following year. Before the concert, visitors were asked to dress in white, which is why it was called “the white concert.” (The band had previously always dressed entirely in black.) Instead of a traditional introductory supporting act, the poet Bruno K. Öijer read the band’s lyrics, and the event was later described as showing Kent’s new desire to “speak about (and perhaps for) the nation” (Johansson 50). The concert has also been described as the “greatest nationalistic manifestation in Swedish rock music history” (Strage 262). There was a display of a Swedish flag on stage (in black and white, though) as well as Swedish flags and banners in the audience.

Most people probably perceived the concert as a manifestation against bad forms of nationalism, a recapture of a community that has been kidnapped by xenophobic groups with Nazi overtones during the 1990s. The community that the song “Sverige” forwards has very little to do with bigoted national chauvinism (the band have made it clear that it should not be seen as a tribute song), and yet, it has become a common feature of an

in the form of the Nazism that Heidegger stood behind?

“everyday” nationalism, even designated as an alternative national anthem. So, what does that mean?

Sweden, tip of the place?

— Derrida says in *Geschlecht III* that Heidegger does not follow any method when he reads, that he is consciously a bad researcher (60). And the reason for this is because researchers only see what they expect, what their methods allow them to see, therefore he follows no method. He wants to get in touch with, approach or engage with something else, wants to pay attention to things that are usually not considered important, and

— So, is it possible to distinguish between a bad and a good gathering in the name of a nation? Derrida’s criticism of Heidegger in *Geschlecht III* maintains that it is not possible to set up rules for how such boundaries should be drawn, in the way that Heidegger believes the case to be when he affirms the gathering of poetic song but distances himself from vulgar racism. Instead, we must deal with words that may seem self-evidently good, such as “gathering,” “community,” “together,” and examine what double-binds they carry with them. Reading carefully in that way is therefore not about distinctions and definitions to realise distancing or belonging, to criticise or to approve, but it is about paying attention to connections that are not visible if we believe in advance that we can identify and keep apart what is good from what is evil. We always already find ourselves, even from the beginning, thrown into the middle of a context which is impossible to control, and therefore we have to grope for, without believing that we already know

which we do not notice if we assume what method is—or what man or ... or ...—is. Even if a certain blindness is an unavoidable consequence of every insight, it can also, always, become different.

— And the same goes for concepts like “family,” “nation” and “humanity.” According to Heidegger, they require the detachment of the thinker, or the alienation of the poet, when they, from the true place of the poem (29), marks anew, stamps a place (33) that promises gathering and accommodation (35).

— This shows, despite Heidegger’s anti-modernity, his closeness to the view of art that is born in romanticism and which leads to modernism and avant-garde art—and to Kent. Derrida is also very dependent on that line of tradition. In general, it is a distinctive feature of Derrida’s generation of thinkers that they bring this tradition’s methods of art into the academic disciplines. A bit of a fulfillment of the dreams of the Jena romantics almost two hundred years earlier.

— But then it also becomes important to see the double binds which characterise the tradition of modern art vis-a-vis nationalistic identity politics. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have followed in

what is important and right. It is such a “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) that the singer, Jocke Berg, gives words to when, on the recording, before the song begins, he is heard saying: “So, shall we just start?”

Sverige, Sverige, älskade vän
En tiger som skäms
Jag vet hur det känns
När allvaret har blivit ett skämt
När tytnaden skräms
Vad är det som hänt?

Sweden, Sweden, beloved friend
A tiger that is ashamed
I know how it feels
When seriousness has become a
joke
When silence frightens
What has happened?
(translated by us)

— Following the idea that it is not possible to easily distinguish between a bad nationalism and a good nationalism, I stop at the phrase “Sweden, Sweden beloved friend.” The opening strikes a melancholic tone musically, at the same time that the phrase likens the relationship with the nation to that with a close friend, a personification of the country Sweden that gets to represent a special community. What does such a line presuppose, what does it mean, where does it come from and

the footsteps of Derrida in their analyses of why German thinkers from Fichte to Heidegger saw Germany as the place for a new gathering. Germany does not exist in 1800, and the German people can therefore be seen as creating itself and its nation as a political subject during the 19th century, in accordance with the German romantic poets and idealist philosophers' view on the self-creating, self-realising subject. It constitutes a performative and poetically created subject. This is the special situation that allows Germany to be the place for the birth of a new authentic community.

What Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy point out, especially in *Le mythe nazi* (1991) is that this figure of thought also forms the basis for Nazism's view of the German people and its assignments. Here there is a double bind to deal with that connects progressive art and nationalism, and that imprints itself on Derrida's relationship to Heidegger.

who is it speaking to? Or, what are its conditions of possibility? That something has happened becomes obvious later in the stanza, "the seriousness has become a joke." What form of being is presupposed in the self that knows how it feels?

— Your questions relate to how "Sverige" uses words that are already deeply embedded in certain meanings and contexts. The beginning is a travesty of the poem "Sverige" ("Sweden") by Verner von Heidenstam, the national poet in his time, a poem which was written for a national song competition in 1899, set to music in 1901, and then became part of the suite "Ett folk" ("One People"), published in 1915. The poem begins like this in the version that is set to music:

Sverige, Sverige, fosterland,
vår längtans bygd, vårt hem på
jorden!

O [...] Sweden, Sweden, native land,
The home and haven of our
longing!
(translated by Charles Wharton
Storck)

The lines were satirised in 1916 in a lightly expressionistic form by Pär Lagerkvist:

Ångest, ångest är min arvedel, min
struples sår, mitt hjärtas skri i
världen.

Anguish, anguish is my heritage,
the wound in my throat, my heart's
scream in the world.

— It is not about condemning either Friedrich Schlegel, Heidegger or Kent, but about thinking further in awareness of the contradictions, the double binds. What Derrida finds in Heidegger are contradictions that matter, that articulate double binds that characterise Western society. Heidegger believes he can control his relationship to nationalism and Nazism by demarcating, categorising and drawing boundaries, by distinguishing between, on the one hand, a bad biological and racist nationalism and, on the other, a good nationalism, a reflective, poetic and universal nationalism.

Derrida shows that it is not possible to anchor the difference between bad and good nationalism in such a way. And to understand why, we can't remain within our conventional definitions of either

— Kent's allusion is not at all satirical or critical in the clearcut way that Lagerkvist's is. Rather, the melancholic tone—the music is important—reinterprets nationalism, lets the air out of Heidenstam's grandiosity and turns nationalism into something much more ambivalent.

— The quoted stanza also points to the song's collage-like form. The lines are disjointed, it is difficult to put them together into a meaningful whole. The choice of words in this first stanza seems to depend as much on the assonances of the recurring “ä” (a very Swedish letter) as on coherence of meaning. The indeterminacy is also due to this.

— I imagine that what has happened is that the notion that it would be easy to distinguish between good and bad nationalism no longer holds, that the relationship with the “beloved

nationalism or Nazism; we have to deconstruct them to access their conditions of possibility, conditions that conventional definitions may hide. We must, for example, and Derrida returns to this several times, think about what something that seems as seemingly good as *Versammlung* (gathering) actually means (10).

friend” Sweden has become ambivalent.

— The framing, the song title and the allusions that the text provides make me read the text in all the details in relation to nationalism. Kent tentatively moves around the words, the quotes and the contexts they bring, presenting them to the listener, and leaving them there, emptying them of meaning and content by decontextualising and recontextualising them, interrupting their conventional associations. Take the second line as an example. It alludes to how the tiger was used during the Second World War to symbolise the Swedish will to defend. When it is said that the tiger is ashamed, this obvious—for Swedes—context collapses.

— It must also be said that the tiger appeared in a propagandistically very poetic pun. Posters with a picture of a tiger were carrying the message “A Swedish tiger,” that could be interpreted both as “a Swedish tiger” or “a Swede keeps silent,” since, in Swedish, “svensk” is used both as an adjective and a noun, and the word “tiger” is both a noun denoting the animal, a tiger, and a verb meaning that someone keeps quiet. During World War II, these double meanings were used

— Heidegger certainly tries to think of origin differently, not as a biological or nationally unified identity, but Derrida maintains it is still the case that the concepts associated with this kind of origins, characterised by gathering within “the indivisibility of the place,” depends on a certain unity, with certain consequences, namely, the unit of the tip (18).

— And this also applies to Heidegger’s view of the poem, according to Derrida. Admittedly, the poem is both “unsaid” (20) and a source that cannot be reached, but nevertheless, through poetic rhythm comes the *Einklang* and “the fundamental tone (Grundton),” with their “unique unison, consonance, resonance” (27). Poetry’s musical rhythm strikes a path towards the place and the dwelling, and thereby guarantees gathered meaning, orientation and protection,

by the Swedish State information agency in a campaign to raise awareness about not revealing defence secrets. During the post-war period the poster came to symbolise a Swedish will to defend the nation based on neutrality. The policy of neutrality has also (until 2022, when Sweden applied for membership in NATO) formed a basis for the Swedish self-image. However, the Swedish realpolitik has, in fact, been characterised by Nazi appeasement during the war (see Vetenskapsrådet 2006), and by the cooperation of the state with NATO in the post-war period. This might explain why Kent’s tiger is ashamed (Johansson), and why the silence is frightening.

— Although the information agency’s poetical use of ambiguity, aided as they were by an advertising agency, and brilliant as it is, has become the most important symbol for the preparedness of Swedish defence during the war, it is not used in that way in the song. Poetic word play may be used to gather, to create common identities, as the cases of Heidegger and the Swedish information agency show, but here, in the Kent lyrics, the tiger is said to be ashamed, the Swede is ashamed, and being ashamed here means that you acknowledge that you, at least temporarily, are excluded from a

based on the origin, the tip of the place. But “[o]riginally...the noun ‘Ort’ designates the tip of the sword, spear or javelin” (16)—and in tips such as spearpoints violence lurks:

The truth of the sword, as with that of the poem, that which guarantees sense, orientation, guarding and the origin, is the extreme tip of the place (17).

It is thus concepts such as unity, community, care, sense, orientation, protection, origin, which Derrida believes must be thought of in other ways.

— Thus, double binds can be found within words that we usually think of as good, for example in the kind of categorisations that allow us to believe that we can control our relationships to nationalism and Nazism. When I sum up how Derrida describes good nationalism according to Heidegger, it is not entirely easy not to agree.

community. There is a wound in society that can, perhaps, only be healed by a scapegoat, someone who can carry the guilt away from the community.

— Is it not the case that the nationalism of our time, which may not even want to call itself nationalism, establishes itself as good by being ashamed of earlier, evil, nationalism? Elisabeth Povinelli has described the Australian state’s recognition of shame over its racist past as a way of preserving its order: “Past uses of cultural discriminations were held up as shameful, though excisable, cancers on the root good of the common law.” Now the nation is said to be “fully conscious of its past mistakes” (263; 264). Our evil past is being used as a scapegoat.

— The feeling that the poem’s I identifies with, that “seriousness has become a joke,” follows the line stating the tiger’s shame. And shame is serious. Isn’t it even the case that shame requires seriousness to be shame? One who is ashamed without seriousness is not ashamed, she or he is shameless. Nor is an apology an apology if it is not meant seriously. Therefore, it is not possible to be ashamed on someone else’s behalf, or to apologise for something that

- It is critical from the perspective of the stranger. (Germany is a foreigner.)
- It expresses, not least in art, the free universal man. (The Enlightenment Heritage)
- It constitutes a free and creative self-realised “we,” a nationally unified subject, which constitutes the realisation of humanity’s potential, her *telos*, the formation thought.
- The genus formed in and by the German language should therefore not be exclusive but inclusive. It just so happens that the German situation and its particular location make this possible. The German language is performative, carrying the promise of home.

Derrida means that Heidegger sees the German situation as an opportunity to strike a path towards universal and cosmopolitan spiritual freedom (100). He concludes that cosmopolitanism and nationalism actually share the same logic of homecoming and that it also appears in the ideas of many radical thinkers (132). And, as I myself might add, in the self-image of liberal democracy.

— But then the question is what happens to those who do not want to or cannot gather within the frames of this good political subject, those who are excluded because they have no

others have done. (Although we do that, and maybe one has to do that, all the time.) As Derrida has taught us, in that case it is not about asking for forgiveness in any deeper sense, but about acquitting oneself, creating one’s good identity in the form of the one who has now realised that they *have been* wrong. And then, seriousness has become a joke, hasn’t it?

— “Good” nationalism can also take yet another turn in the spiral of enlightenment; it can accept that it is only a joke, become an ironic nationalism, a reflexive nationalism that has seen through not only the bad nationalism, but also the good and can keep a distance from both.

— It is quite uncontroversial to say that there is no good Swedish nationalism, or that Swedishness is entirely a historical and social construct. This is done quite often in Sweden, thanks to the fact that Swedish nationalism and Sweden as a state are so unthreatened. And although there are of course examples when this is stated based on the premise that all national and ethnic identities are changeable and contingent, I think that it is often done—and certainly often unconsciously—based on something that perhaps should still be best described as a kind of

papers and consequently are not citizens. After all, Heidegger's exclusion was applied to the Jews, as the Black Notebooks evince.

— Based on Derrida's analysis, there is no uniformly good nationalism. Throughout history, "good" nationalism has claimed to be something completely different from the warlike, racist or xenophobic evil nationalism. Good nationalism has claimed to be internationalist, reflexive, ironic, and so on. This has not only been noted by Derrida, but also by a long line of researchers who have studied and theorised nationalism and ethnicity. But perhaps what we can take with us from Derrida in particular is what we make of it in its full range: the realisation that there is not a truly easy way out of this. Namely that there is no free and enlightened space outside of nationalism, at least not in our time and space, which for a couple of hundred years' time and space has been completely permeated by nationalism as an overarching logic. The position outside of nationalism has tended to be taken by an intellectual elite, usually materially well off, who not infrequently have looked down on the unenlightened nationalists. A critique of nationalism must therefore be performed inside

Swedish nationalism. During the 20th century, the dominant Swedish nationalism changed to emphasise progress, development and modernity. Sweden was seen as a peacemaker and a leading country, which can teach less developed peoples to become more peaceful, to compromise and have sane discussions. In some ways, this quite self-conscious and self-righteous Swedish self-image has even led to a notion that Sweden has become a role model that has left nationalism and ethnic thinking behind. What Josip Kešić and Jan Willem Duyvendak have said about what they call the anti-nationalist Dutch nationalism, might also apply to Swedish nationalism: "[I]t is important to acknowledge the possibility that a constructivist or even postmodern outlook is not necessarily at odds with national essentialism or chauvinism...In general, people are both essentialist believers and sceptical, postmodern constructivists" (595).

— However, irony can function both as contextually determined or as uncontrollably disseminated, either gathering a community or constituting a "permanent parabasis," that is, constantly and uncontrollably undermining itself, in Friedrich Schlegel's sense. The question is what Kent's song does.

those parameters. One must constantly be on one's guard so that one thereby does not create a new "we" consisting of us who single out nationalists—in Sweden or other countries—as "the others" from whom we, good and enlightened people, separate ourselves—without recognising that we share the same logic of being together.

— It may not be possible, but not trying is not possible either. In any case, it is easy to point out how this kind of anti-nationalist community is created all the time. Usually, it is made by referring to all kinds of examples of "evil nationalism" in the present and in the past: those who pushed through Brexit, the various right-wing nationalist parties around Europe, and so on. Today and before,

The hermeneutic dream found in Heidegger is, according to Derrida, a dream of unity created through diversity:

It gathers itself. Plurality gathers itself, the polysemy converges, and it is on this a poetic place, a *Gedicht*, that is, this *Ort*, this tip of the spear toward which all tensions meet. It is even from this gathering that the plurality of poetic tones takes its source and comes to harmonise in a unique resonance (71).

Is "Sverige" an *undecidable* or a tip that gathers? You might have good reasons, contextual or otherwise, to gather the meaning of a text, but that doesn't mean you can control what the text does. And that furthermore means that the readers have to be even more careful when reading a text as self-deconstructing as "Sverige." Whether the White Concert, in which "Sverige" played an important part, as an event succeeded in creating another kind of national community (even if only for a brief moment), whether it was politically important, perhaps even necessary—something one cannot not support—is difficult to determine. But, although it has a strong affinity with Heidegger's hermeneutic dream, the question

many people have created a cosmopolitan political community that is characterised by a position thought to be outside and above nationalism. However, from day one, nationalism has created its antithesis, cosmopolitanism, within a common logic (which is also Heidegger's, according to Derrida)—based on the idea that we are all citizens of the world, gathered within all national, ethnic and other barriers. A slightly more limited format of this idea is the idea of Europe today, materialised through the EU.

— If Sweden, Germany and other nations and ethnicities are constructs, can we also say with the same emphasis that the ethnicities and nations whose identities are threatened or oppressed also constitute similar constructs? In theory, yes. But not all ethical choices can be made based on theoretical insights. They must be negotiated in each individual situation. Telling

remains whether it can still imply *another* departure.

— If seriousness has become a joke, and “silence is intimidated,” as the song says, there is very little left of the meaning-making community that nationalism believes in, be it racist or postmodern.

— The terrifying silence can also be read as an ironic nod to the national anthem's lines about the Swedish north as quiet, joyful, beautiful. Thinking about the role of silence in establishing Swedishness today, where white lowkeyness (which is also connected to the white tiger on the cover of Kent's album, isn't it?) stands out against the noisy Other (maybe an immigrant, but also maybe a drunk). A kind of lowkey racism? Perhaps it is not the silence, the absence of community, that frightens, but the silent community that has seen through the so-called Swedish, but still continues to exclude, silently, in the small.

— What silences are required for such a self-image to be maintained? The place, *der Ort*, the gathering of what remains and what has been lost, speaks to us through the song, and points to the question that ends the stanza: “What has happened?” Kent gropes for the historical

oppressed peoples that their national or ethnic identities are not natural, but a historical construct would therefore be unethical in most cases. Only those who belong to the privileged have the opportunity to choose their identity. However, they constantly need to be reminded of that, despite the very real benefits. This is of course an illusion.

Of course, Roma, Palestinians, Kurds or Samis, for example, are not more “real” as nations or ethnic groups—but the national or ethnic oppression that has existed and exists is an extremely tangible reality. And at the same time, when what we call evil or bad nationalism is cultivated in Sweden by people who feel they are neglected or oppressed as Swedes, that experience is real, whatever we may think of its plausibility. The mechanisms are fundamentally the same, but the discursive/ideological as well as material contexts are radically different.

— There is no overarching manual which—as so often, for example in the Leninist tradition—makes it possible to sort out nations and national movements into two compartments, reactionary or progressive. What we can take from Derrida is that there is never a patent solution on how to navigate these issues, either ethically or intellectually.

remains and ruins in the form of poetic phrases and posters. Opening them up poetically to new meanings. And we read the traces, both the historical ones and those left by Kent. (And now, when Sweden has become a member of NATO following with the war in Ukraine, what happens then?)

— But the chorus, should it be taken seriously? Can it be taken seriously? Is it possible *not* to take it seriously?

Välkommen, välkommen hit
Vem du än är, var du än är

Welcome, welcome here
Whoever you are, wherever you are

The chorus rests on the promise of a welcome, but the repetition is a little insistent, as if it needs to be said twice. To welcome someone “here” should mean that there is something to be welcomed to. What if it’s empty?

— But even if the promise is false, the human need to be welcome is real. It is impossible not to take the chorus seriously. It is *true*. In the manner of Don Quixote. It presents the absolute requirements of hospitality. It applies to everyone—as Derrida so often pointed out. Deconstruction problematises the

arrival and welcome of the other because it constantly points away from the sovereign self towards absence and otherness. It welcomes the excluded other in advance.

— If we decide that the invitation of the chorus must be taken seriously, even if the invitation is to an empty space, then the clichés and rites of the following verse become interesting:

Duka din veranda till fest
För en långväga gäst
I landet lagom är bäst
Vi skålar för en midsommar till
Färsk potatis och sill
Som om tiden stått still

Set your porch for a feast
For a long-distance guest
In the country of reasonableness
We toast to another Midsummer
Fresh potatoes and herring
As if time stood still

Midsummer has for a long time (that is, since the nationalism of the late 19th century) been the central rite of Swedishness. The question “What are you going to do in Midsummer?” actually constitutes a finely calibrated test of belonging and status.

— The good nationalism welcomes the stranger, “lets in” a long-

Mankind

— Derrida was not only interested in the dividing lines between different kinds of people, but also in the

construction of the human and how it gives rise to the notion of the other: non-human animals, nature and the dehumanised human. These dividing lines often presuppose ideological double binds. During the 20th century, for example, despite protests from the environmental movement, it was possible to manage the conflict, to love the forest as a forest owner and at the same time deforest it. (Ideology is what allows us not to see double binds.) When the Swedish government today claims that we need not change our lifestyles at all, because technological development should stop climate change, it is hard not to see how this is based on an unspoken political choice to sacrifice all nature that is not useful for man. The government and the forestry industry claim that there have never been so many trees in Sweden, while researchers believe that there is only a maximum of five percent of forest left, the rest being human plantations. When the Government talks about sustainability, they actually mean, without saying it, that we, humans, have the right to exterminate everything that stands in the way of our welfare.

distance guest to the midsummer celebration, potato- and herring-eating part of the population.

— And there is the phrase “landet lagom” (country of reasonableness)—normally used ironically in Sweden reflecting the established notion of Sweden being a land and culture of moderation, choosing the middle way instead of extremes.

— The middle way as the tip of the place? The idea of “lagom” as the unifying spearhead of the idea of Sweden as *ein Ort*?

— Why should one welcome the guest just at midsummer? If we take the chorus lines at face value, the conditional in this stanza’s welcome emerges clearly. Is it into the ritualised idyll that the guest need to be allowed, should the guest be integrated into Swedishness? Is belonging something good, something aspirational? Is it the most important thing? To be welcomed into the *nation*?

— The last line makes that reading inescapable. Time *has not* stood still. We know from the previous stanzas that the traditions are already empty, but the “as if” of the perceptive postmodern identity is

not innocent. It has extremely real consequences.

— Why is it that as soon as we set the table for a party, it's as if time stood still, we set the table with lilacs and nationalism. Sweden, Sweden, dear friend, you should be both seen and sensed, whether it's midsummer, a birthday party, a student party or an examination at the university. We ourselves become part of reproducing, repeating, clinging to something recognisable; to toast to midsummer, fresh potatoes and herring. *But...*

— In Derrida's work, non-human life is used to theorise the construction of the absolute other—one that is different from the extent to which violence and exploitation can be legitimised. The trees in the forest are seen as homogenous entities at the opposite end of the humane, and so are also all non-human animals. In trying to understand the construction of the animal other, Derrida focuses on the process of controlling and labelling (naming) animals—a process which, he underlines, is about building an anthropocentric subject. From this viewpoint, eating meat and the industrialisation of animals can

Regnet slår mot rutorna nu
Men natten är ljus
I ett land utan ljud
Och glasen glittrar tyst på vårt bord
Lika tomma som ord
Visst är kärleken stor

The rain is hitting the windows now
But the night is bright
In a land without sound
And the glasses glisten quietly on
our table
As empty as words
Surely love is great

— A land without sound—here I think of the white quietness again. The glasses sparkle quietly, gossiping about a temporary break

appear as rational, even ethical, practices.

— Derrida's perspective about ethics, assuming that acting according to rules can never be to act ethically, also relates to his writings about the relationship between humans and animals, in which he concludes that morals and ethics are attributed to the humane. When he reflects on how we, as humans, relate to animals, Derrida centers on the question about seeing, being seen, and seeing oneself being seen (*Politics* 11). These are all perspectives that can be adopted to ourselves as humans, and to the animal; for example, do we only see the animal from our perspective, or do we see it as someone who can see us and contemplate us and our treatment of it.

in the drunkenness? (Also, a cornerstone of Swedishness.)

— Isn't it the case that an *outside* makes itself felt? The rain, the night, the land? "Land" in Swedish is etymologically the same word as the English "land," and it has the meaning of the nation as a cultivated place (*landet Sverige*, the Swedish country), but also denotes *mark* (ground, soil, earth) as nature, as uncultivated land. Here, *nature* hits the window of the room within which the feast is over, where everything is quiet and empty.

— By coincidence, let's remark that the rain is said to *slå mot fönstret* (hit the window). "Slå" is the verb form of "slag" and means to hit something; it is also originally the same word as the German "Schlag"—found within the word "Geschlecht" and therefore part of the carefully spun thread of *Geschlecht III*. For those who want to delve deeper into the etymology, I can refer you to Derrida's text. Here it is enough to remind the reader of the fact that "slag" in Swedish, like "schlag," in German, forms a context that translated into English would include words like "hit," "strike," "blow," "stamp," "kind," "type," "genus," and so on. Identity is, thus, as well as so much

else, something punched out,
stamped, marked.

The rain strikes, however, another tone when it hits the window, something else. Another departure? It is difficult at the time of writing of this text—a time marked by rain and floods caused by global warming all over Sweden—not to see the silent and empty glasses and words as signs that the national idyll has turned out to be not only mendacious but also poisonous.

— There is a phenomenon called “kosläpp” (releasing the cow out of the shed in springtime). It’s an absurd phenomenon if you think about it. People book a place to watch the frisky cows being let out for summer pasture. Celebrating the cows being freed after having been locked up all winter—if we stop and wrestle a little with the concept of the cow-release, we can take a new direction, by highlighting the absurdity of the situation. Western man’s rationality and belief in technology, have made us lose a part of being in the world. We need to go back and ask ourselves the basic questions again: What is nationalism? What is humanity? The

— The song “Sverige” is in sharp contrast to other Kent songs, as the setting is seemingly an idyllic summer Sweden. Kent, known as observers of the dark side of life, often portray winter landscapes in their songs. However, that winter is more than a setting; the environment is a metaphor for discomfort and troubled emotions. The winter in Kent songs stands in contrast to the general tendency in Swedish music to romanticise nature by evoking pleasant, rural, and idyllic summer settings (see Johansson).

— It is often said that the Swedes are a nature-loving people and that the forest and the lakes are important symbols of Swedish nationalism. However, modernity, not least in Sweden, has always

animal ethics and the animal perspective can enable us to reflect on how animals are treated in the food industry, how they are used as entertainment, or—as in the case of “kosläpp”—as both. So many phenomena require that we close our eyes...

— Växa Sverige (Grow Sweden), a farmers’ association, recently applied for and was approved permission to initiate an experiment where 1,500 cows were to be kept inside for 1.5 years, in order to study if they can be well (enough) inside. This could be a first step to overturn the legal protection of cows’ right to pasture. The purpose of this test says something about the (rational) human; we make this 18-month experiment, when we just could study a 30-minute “kosläpp” to draw the conclusion that the cows prefer the latter.

been marked by the double bind consisting of an idealised and romanticised image of nature, which hides the ruthless exploitation, the wiping out of everything that is not useful to man. The Swedish nationalist approaches to nature are at the same time both romantically influenced and highly technically rationalist. Sweden loves its forests, but we argue, above all, its Swedish forestry. This provides another double bind, as such European cooperation is praised, but not precisely when the EU criticises the Swedish clear-cutting model. “Our forestry” should “not be regulated in detail in Brussels” as declared by the Swedish Social Democrat prime minister in her presentation of the government in 2021.

— The contradiction is hidden and as Swedish you can at the same time question deforestation and advocate for it, all for the sake of the two good causes. “Lyssna till den granens susning, vid vars rot ditt bo är fästat” (Listen to the rustling of the fir tree, at whose root your nest is fixed). Generations of Swedish schoolchildren received this line by Zacharias Topelius on the front page of *Läsebok för folkskolan* (Reading book for elementary school), made from spruce trees. A corresponding train

of thought would still today be considered typically Swedish. We close our eyes to the contradictions.

— Using (?) Derrida's way of thinking means to take a different look at a text, to look for something else. A critical position that can mark anew, allow thinking to hit new paths, heading for something else. So, what could this something else be?

— Words are not only carriers of meaning. When we deal with them, twist and turn them, we also twist and turn the world. Language is part of the world, how we come to be in the world. Words are never just words, they are performative, they create reality, they are political. “The place is not a spot, a location one settles into, a place of stability, it is a departure, already a difference” (103). Is it possible to think of Sweden like this, not as a location but as a departure, a promise of an always different future?

— For Derrida, the deconstruction of the anthropocentric subject was central and examined as the only way to put an end to human violence against animals. While it is sometimes argued that human rights are to be extended to also include animals (or

— “Så, då bara börjar vi?” (“So, then we just start?”). Jocke Berg's question before the song starts—not really belonging to the song, but still recorded, and thus archived and striking a certain tone—to me says something important about what to do. Just beginning. So,

at least some categories of animals), Derrida wanted to move away from the focus on rights, stressing that such a perspective is rooted in the exact anthropocentric discourse that is the foundation of violence against animals. One way to deconstruct and think outside the anthropocentric subject is to acknowledge the animals' ability to observe us and return the gaze. In attributing a gaze to the animal, a gaze which can be perceptive and evaluating, the animal becomes a species with a life for itself, of its own, who does not exist for the human. Another way of deconstructing the anthropocentric subject is to leave behind the focus on humane abilities, such as rational thinking and communication through language, abilities that are usually highlighted in debates on the human/animal divide. Instead, we should focus on suffering, as undoubtedly animals can experience suffering. The recognition of suffering, Derrida noted, also implies an obligation to act.

what to do with the end of the song? It says: "Visst är kärleken stor" (Surely love is great). Not necessarily a statement. Without the help of punctuation marks in the printed text accompanying the record, it would be just as true to say that the song ends with a question. A question which, as we have seen, concerns the whole song, not the least the certainty of "visst" (surely). We don't know if Kent are serious, notwithstanding the quietly beautiful music. It is like being with Mahler, where the only certainty is that not only the idyll, but also the beautiful, will be interrupted by comedy, violence, death, or something else that is uncontrollable.

Read as a question, the last line interrupts our shared belief in community and love, interrupts the certainty that we know what love is and know that it is good in order to create fissures, gaps, openings. The line asks: Is it great? Really? Love can be evil, empty, a joke, terrifying, shameful, silent, as Kent often teaches us. Love is *an undecidable*. It is not possible to decide whether the approaching of Sweden as a beloved friend in the opening line is ironic or not; it is both.

—What is important is not to decide what love is, to decide whom one

loves (and, thus, whom one does not love). But—and this despite the fact that we will love *someone* or a *few*—to stay in a questioning openness that lets the other come first. Let the other one surprise us instead of fitting our expectations and plans. In short, to let love be an event that just starts? Derrida emphasises the importance of love (like hospitality) standing before an absolute requirement not to exclude anything or anyone in advance. In *The Politics of Friendship*, he argues that in order to “declare love, declare friendship, one cannot know [overdetermine, calculate, program] the *who*” (220-221).

Impossible, but we must try. Kent’s song, the white concert, the music, the vocals, the lyrics are impossible, indeterminable, uncontrollable actions, and yet we cannot not interpret the chorus of “Sverige” as welcoming *everyone*. How else could we read it, and still believe in equality?

Välkommen, välkommen hit
Vem du än är, var du än är

Welcome, welcome here
Whoever you are, wherever you are

Impossible promises, and therefore inescapably demanding. That is what makes us rigorously and tentatively careful. Our readings follow the song’s careful groping

Although Derrida argues that the act of trying to interpret the animal’s behaviour at the same time constitutes a form of violence as it reproduces anthropocentric discourses, he stresses that the ignorance of not even trying to understand the animal’s perspective is nevertheless more violent. Thus,

Derrida's reflections on the human-animal relation do not constitute a consolidated position but a position from which it is possible to deconstruct hierarchies built around otherness, and to challenge the anthropocentric paradigm.

— It is worth noticing that a revolutionary renegotiation is now taking place within biology and ecology regarding the boundaries between humans and animals. From the perspective of this renegotiation, it might be fruitful if we did the impossible and tried to see ourselves through the gaze of the animal or maybe the mushroom. From this decentered perspective, what could we learn?

around the question of what has happened. It is precisely when we do not think we already know the meaning of an event that we become attentive to it.

— Kent's song is ambivalent, stays in its ambivalence right up to the closing question, if it is a question. It remains aporetic, even if the last line is not meant to be a question. As researchers, we have, thus, failed to reach a conclusion in our discussion, failed to answer the crucial question of politics: What should be done? However, Kent's thoughts and actions have had significance, in uncontrollable ways, as have Heidegger's thoughts and actions. *Geschlecht III* is proof of how events and texts can always be opened in new ways. We are not sure what meaning "Sverige" has had and what meaning it will acquire over time, because it is poetry, song, music, that resists all explanatory and contextualising attempts to control it, including our hermeneutic effort so far. (Although it, at the same time of course, depends on genres, traditions and interpretations. Simple relativism provides no way out.)

— Today more than ever, researchers are expected to provide an answer to the question "What should be done?" When we read

“Sweden,” we are reminded that research (not only within the humanities and the social sciences but also *science* research) might have a greater affinity with the question of art—What is this? How is it?—than with being a useful helper for a society where politics has been turned into a predictable and populist administrative planning based on given facts and taken-for-granted values. The UN climate reports are both science and precise art when they show that the world is something other than the kind of world such a society thought it could control.

— So, the non-answer to the question of how we can use Derrida is summed up by Kent: “So, then we just start?”

By way of conclusion

Reading *Geschlecht III* and engaging it and the lyrics of the song “Sverige” by Kent in a contrapuntal and rigorous manner, and then reconstellating our thoughts, reflections and revolutionary questions in a mail correspondence has for us been a starting point to discuss the double binds of contemporary environmental politics, nationalism and our positions as researchers. *Geschlecht III* has triggered the analytical process in two senses: first, in terms of form and in allowing poetry to be a critical means of theoretical and political analysis, and second, through acknowledging the link between poetry, nationalism and ideology. We have wanted to initiate a deconstruction and to think beyond some of the corner stones in Sweden’s national identity. As we have stated more than once in this text, deconstructing might be hard work as we may be inclined to maintain certain consolidated structures and their

architectonics of reason. Yet, it is necessary to try. We have therefore devoted our correspondence to trying to understand how or if it is possible to broaden the use of Derrida's work and apply it as a political tool to understand the present. And our answer is "no" as a matter of course. Instead, we have tried to think with Derrida in order to approach the different contemporaries that we live with, without presenting any simple or clear solutions. The conversations we have had, deriving from Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, and Kent, symptomatically betray how we are all part of imagined communities that are created within macrostructures configured at the national level. They have put a focus on relatively ordinary, dull, practices in daily life which amount to what may be perceived as a banal or innocent nationalism. The contemporary reproduction and identification of the Swedish nation is an ongoing iteration of such banal and mundane practices and structures. They may appear to be contemporary but are not detached from the past. Through Derrida, we illuminate some of our contemporary dilemmas while trying to open up to different readings and to open a new path. Because surely is it always the case that as we try to protect nature, love it and want to spend time in it, we damage life in all its forms without exception? Is humanity a killing machine wherever it goes, or can it change? The extinction of homo economicus may enable the emergence of a homo naturalis. So, then we just start?

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