Auto-immunity, Sexual Violence, and Reproduction:
Response to Michael Naas, *Miracle and Machine*

Penelope Deutscher
Department of Philosophy, Northwestern University, USA
p-deutscher@northwestern.edu

Derrida expanded the twenty-six propositions of “Faith and Knowledge”1 with a post-scriptum at double their length, with twenty-six further propositions. Now these propositions have been amplified by Michael Naas into a work of some three hundred pages, *Miracle and Machine* (2012),2 an expansion sufficiently generous to allow Derrida’s brief remarks on sexual violence to be revisited in two chapters by Naas: “Mary and the Marionettes,” and “Pomegranate Seeds and Scattered Ashes.” Yet “Mary” and “Pomegranate Seeds” can be amplified still further to find some additional meanings for the sexual violence and the sexual difference mentioned by Derrida.

I. Sexual Violence and Auto-Immunity

Derrida refers, in “Faith and Knowledge,” to forms of sexual violence pretending to defend certain principles. At this point in the text, he has already identified some defenses of religion as involving forms of linguistic and cultural originalism, culturalism, or nationalism, as when the aspiration to “religious indemnification” occurs in relation to “forms of property—linguistic idiom, . . . blood and soil, . . . the family and the nation” (FK, §37). It is in this context that he is also stressing a number of turns to violence in religious contexts. He refers to attack, murder, and barbarous crimes—mentioning the phenomenon of (sometimes heavily mediatized) beheadings, but not omitting the violent military interventions sometimes pursued by the West in the name of humanitarianism.

“Faith and Knowledge” is also the essay in which, as Naas elaborates, Derrida most fully develops the logic of the auto-immunity of the unscathed. This refers to safeguarding mechanisms intended to defend against what is figured as contamination—of what is holy, for example, or what is natural, or the “sanctity of life,” or the language or culture considered to properly or originally belong to one’s identity, race, or land. The phenomenon of interest to Derrida concerns the use of an artificial or non-original means “to restore the unscathed that it threatens” (FK, §29). An obvious example of the term auto-immunity in this sense would be the use of technology to proliferate a message concerning the dangers of technology or the use of technology by religious movements that might more generally oppose religion to technology. This occurs in a context where Derrida’s reference to technology is broadened to the point that there are no people, humanity, language, subject, life (let alone religion) that could be considered “pre-technological,” an argument to be found in texts from Of Grammatology to Echographies.

These themes interconnect when Derrida describes not only the turn to what is considered in a more literal sense technology (television, the internet, other forms of media) by religions but also the turn to forms of violence to defend the unscathed. Again, these are defenses analyzed by Derrida as also constituting forms of auto-attack. It is in this context that Derrida will stress, as Naas notes, that “in our new wars of religion, . . . women are so often the primary victims,” with Naas presenting as a “crucial moment in the essay” (MM, 215) Derrida’s comment that

> in the most lethal explosions of a violence that is inevitably ethnico-religious—. . . on all sides, women in particular are singled out as victims (not “only” of murders, but also of the rapes and mutilations that precede and accompany them). (FK, §39)

As Derrida’s reflections on violence and on sexual difference have not always included reflections on sexual violence, I would like to think about the difference this makes to the development of auto-immunity in “Faith and Knowledge,” and then about how this is read by Naas.

II. Sexual Difference: Safeguarding and Sacrificing the Female Body

For Naas, then (and perhaps for Derrida), the cited passage is clearly a remark about the role of sexual difference and about the sexual thing. In his commentary on the passage, Naas sees Derrida articulating: