Discussing the Discipline

Reproaching the Divine: Poetic Theologies of Protest as a Resource for Expanding the Philosophy of Religion

Mikel Burley*

Engaging with works of poetry is one effective, yet hitherto underdeveloped, means of diversifying the philosophy of religion beyond the standard preoccupations with narrow formulations of theism. This article explores and exemplifies this potential in relation to two major poetic figures, namely R. S. Thomas and Rāmprasād Sen. Despite their locations in very different religious contexts—Anglican Christianity in twentieth-century Wales, in the one case, and Hindu Goddess devotion in eighteenth-century Bengal, in the other—each of these poets voices sentiments that are redolent of a theology (or thealogy) of protest. Such protest is exhibited not in an outright rejection of the divine but in a troubled relationship through which the deity is questioned, reproached, and sometimes railed against. Attending to such materials affords the philosophy of religion, and the study of religion more broadly, an enriched appreciation of the possibilities both of religious viewpoints and of conceptions of divinity.

AS PART of the ongoing project of expanding the purview of philosophy of religion beyond a stifling concentration on narrow and

*Mikel Burley, School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom. E-mail: m.m.burley@leeds.ac.uk.

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, December 2021, Vol. 89, No. 4, pp. 1229–1255
https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab101
Advance Access publication on December 8, 2021
© The Author(s) 2021. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Academy of Religion.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

decontextualized versions of "theism," it is important to seek fresh resources with which to engage from philosophical perspectives. Hitherto underexplored resources include ethnographic studies, which make available for philosophical reflection the many aspects of lived religion instead of, or in addition to, the rational justification of doctrinal beliefs (Burley 2020a). Other resources include various forms of narrative, such as novels, films, and myths (Burley 2020b; Schilbrack 2002) or works of theater and drama (Burley 2017). A further resource is poetry, which is the principal focus of the present article. For my purposes here, *poetry* will be understood broadly enough to encompass both the genre of literature that is commonly published in the form of written collections of poems and also poetic compositions that are more characteristically recited or sung, sometimes to musical accompaniment. The recommendation that philosophers of religion should embrace poetry as a means of expanding the conceptual and imaginative scope of the field will come as old news to scholars and practitioners of certain non-Western philosophical traditions, not least the traditions of India, where poetry has been especially prevalent as a vehicle for philosophy.[1] But the relation between poetry and philosophy has been more troubled in the Western academy.[2]

A significant benefit of drawing upon poetic works consists in the variety of modes of religiosity and conceptions of divinity that may thereby be brought into view. All too often in the philosophy of religion the imagination is constrained by the parameters of existing debates. In Western academic philosophy, these debates frequently deal with pared-down formulations of theism, conceived of in terms of belief in the existence of a "being" to which, or to whom, a set of "divine attributes" is ascribed. Within these debates, the most common means of impugning the credibility of theism remains the appeal to some rendition of the problem of evil, which is treated as a theoretical challenge—that is, a challenge to explain how, despite the prevalence of evil or suffering in the world, there could nonetheless be a deity with the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence (Peterson 2017). Rather than attending to how religious practitioners actually struggle with or through religious commitment in the face of suffering (whether their own or the suffering of

[1]Renowned examples from the Indian context include ancient verse Upaniṣads such as the *Kaṭha*, *Īśā*, and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*s, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and other philosophically and poetically rich components of epic and mythic narratives, as well as more systematic philosophical treatises such as the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa (c. fourth or fifth century CE), *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* of Gauḍapāda (c. sixth century CE), and the *Īśvarapratyabhijñā Kārikā* and *Śivastotrāvalī* of Utpaladeva (tenth century CE). For discussion of the relation between Indian philosophy and Indian poetics, see Christie 1979; Sreekantaiyya [1953] 2001, 106–7, 178–79.

[2]See my references to Plato in the concluding section.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

others), debates in the philosophy of religion routinely proceed at a higher level of abstraction, making reference to real-life horrors only to the extent that these can be adduced to illustrate the philosophical point that the proponent of a given argument is making. Heedfulness to poetry is one means of awakening the philosophical imagination, enabling alternative understandings of the divine to be heard and diverse lines of inquiry to be pursued. Moreover, encounters with poetry can themselves constitute an implicit critique of philosophy of religion as standardly construed, since poetic treatments of religious themes are capable of disclosing the constricted assumptions under which philosophers labor.

Naturally enough, exceptions do occur in the philosophy of religion. Indeed, we need only define the category of *philosophy of religion* in sufficiently capacious terms to appreciate that there are prolific traditions of inquiry, both inside and outside the Western academy, that bring philosophical methods to bear on many religiously relevant topics that exceed the limits of a narrow theism.[3] Furthermore, approaches exist that are productively informed by narrative materials, whether from scriptural or other sources (Phillips 2006; Stump 2010). These tend to be more imaginatively rich and conceptually nuanced than approaches that rely exclusively on forms of argumentation that operate at a distance from the tangled details of lived realities.

One such imaginatively and conceptually sophisticated approach has been termed by John K. Roth (2001) a *theodicy of protest*, which overlaps with what others have used the term *theology of protest* to denote (Blumenthal 1993). These terms, *theodicy of protest* and *theology of protest*, identify an extensive class comprising different variants.[4] Roth himself, although writing from an overtly Christian perspective, draws heavily upon Jewish sources, and it is to a large extent with Judaism that the tradition of "arguing" or "wrestling" with God has been associated (Laytner 1990; Katz et al. 2007). Characteristic of this tradition is, first, the refusal to accept apparent injustices in the world as simply part of some higher divine purpose, and, consequently, the readiness to reproach God for causing or allowing such injustices to occur. What distinguishes the tradition from atheism is that, although reproaching God is liable to put

[3]Consider, for instance, the burgeoning literature in which Buddhist themes are subjected to rigorous philosophical scrutiny (e.g., Arnold 2005; Burton 2017; Patil 2009; Sharma 1995).

[4]Another related term is *misotheism*, recently revived and explicated by Bernard Schweizer 2002 and 2011. Meaning "hatred of God," this term is too aggressive in its intimation to cover the range of attitudes that I explore in this article. Closer to the mark is Schweizer's subcategory of *agonistic misotheism*—"characterized by an ongoing internal struggle and by the agony over one's negative relationship with God" (Schweizer 2011, 17)—but, even so, the insinuation of hating God remains too strong for my purposes.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

one's faith under strain, it need not entail a loss of faith: it is just that the God in whom one's faith rests is apt to be understood as other than purely benign. Examining theologies or theodicies of protest thus brings us into contact with complex conceptions both of faith and of the God toward whom faith is directed. My claim in this article is that certain instances of religious poetry can facilitate deep philosophical contemplation of these complexities.

Subsequent to this introductory section, the article is structured as follows. In an initial elaboration of the category of theologies and theodicies of protest, special reference will be made to work in Jewish and Christian theology, philosophy of religion, and literature. The remainder of the article then turns to the poetic material that constitutes my principal focus. First to be discussed is work by the twentieth-century Welsh poet R. S. Thomas (1913–2000), who has been described by the philosopher D. Z. Phillips (1986) as a "poet of the hidden God," owing to the sense of God as a *Deus absconditus* that pervades much of Thomas's poetry. As Phillips remarks, "The thrusts and counter-thrusts in [Thomas's] poetry cannot be ignored if we want to appreciate what is involved in one of the most central of his ideas, that of a *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God" (Phillips 1986, xviii).[5] Whether we find in Thomas's work an overt reproaching of God is open to doubt, yet there is a persistent questioning of his own faith that is prompted by recognition of the hardships and vicissitudes of life. It is this questioning that brings Thomas's thought into proximity to the theology of protest, a proximity that manifests preeminently in the many instances in which it is precisely in the act of addressing God that the poet's doubts are articulated.

The second poet to be discussed is the eighteenth-century Bengali lyricist Rāmprasād Sen (c. 1718–c. 1775), who is widely hailed as "both the first and still the greatest of the Bengali Shakta lyricists" (Nathan and Seely 1999, xvi). Śāktism is a term for the strand of Hindu religiosity that treats the Goddess (an embodiment of "power," *śakti*) as the supreme deity, and Rāmprasād's devotional songs—or, more precisely, the songs that have traditionally been ascribed to Rāmprasād—are addressed almost exclusively to her, albeit under several of her names. Perhaps more than R. S. Thomas, Rāmprasād fits the description of a poetic theologian (or *thealogian*[6]) of protest, insofar as his lyrics include rebukes of

[5]The notion of a hidden God derives from Isaiah 45:15. See esp. the Douay-Rheims translation: "Verily thou art a hidden God, the God of Israel the saviour" (*The Holy Bible* 1914, 799).

[6]*Thealogy* has been defined in various ways. One succinct and widely cited definition is that of Carol Christ 1987, ix: "reflections on the meaning of Goddess." Though originally applied in the context of feminist discourse about Wicca or Witchcraft (e.g., Goldenberg 1979, 96–99), the term has also gained currency in connection with studies of Hindu goddesses; see, for example, Sherma 2011.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

the Goddess—often referred to as "Mother" (*Mā*)—for her neglectful indifference toward her children: "You are everywhere called compassionate, but there's no trace of compassion in you, Mother/… the more I cry 'Mother, Mother', the more you turn a deaf ear to my cries" (RJR 285; McLean 1998, 53, punctuation amended).[7] In addition to being of intrinsic interest, Rāmprasād's style of complaint extends and modifies the traditional conception of a theology of protest, giving it an inflection that is distinctively Hindu and Śākta. Without our needing to presume, implausibly, that he speaks for all devotees of the Goddess, we may hear in Rāmprasād a voice that encapsulates a vein of protest analogous to, but different from, those expressed in Jewish and Christian sources.

Within the parameters of a single article, it is not feasible to provide a thorough, let alone an exhaustive, examination of either of the poets that we shall be considering. By means of an analysis of their respective poetic theologies, however, the article exemplifies a direction in which philosophy of religion might look. Some, perhaps many, philosophers would consider it essential to prioritize critical evaluation in this analytic task, regarding it as a dereliction of philosophical responsibility to avoid assessing—in terms of rationality, plausibility, or pragmatic utility—the various conceptions of, and attitudes toward, the divine that we find in the poetic compositions at issue. I am not averse to such evaluative procedures, but the emphasis of my own approach is different. As I have argued at length elsewhere (esp. Burley 2020a, chap. 2), there is ample room in philosophy for what I (in part following Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers such as D. Z. Phillips) call a *critically descriptive* and *radically pluralist* approach to philosophy of religion.[8] Such an approach does not flinch from criticality but aims its critique primarily at prevalent presuppositions in the philosophy of religion itself, seeking to unsettle and disrupt those presuppositions by confronting them with alternative possibilities of religious meaning that had previously been marginalized or dismissed as unworthy of philosophical scrutiny. My approach to the poems themselves is more hermeneutical than evaluative, exploring the possible meanings that they harbor in an effort to diversify the range of religious perspectives available to us.

[7]In this citation and elsewhere, I follow McDermott 2001a in using "RJR" as an abbreviation for *Rāmprasād: jībanī o racanāsamagra*, the comprehensive Bengali collection of Rāmprasād's lyrics edited by Bhaṭṭācārya 1975. In each case, the number that immediately follows the abbreviation corresponds to the numbering of the lyrics in the second part of Bhaṭṭācārya's collection. The translator's name will be given after a semicolon.

[8]This use of the term *critically descriptive* is mine, but I borrow the notion of radical pluralism from Phillips 2007. For a comparable perspective, see Ramal 2019a and 2019b.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

The approach pursued here is not intended as a replacement for all others, nor am I contending that poetry (or any other literary or artistic genre) has deliberately been excluded from the philosophy of religion heretofore. Rather, the article strives to develop and further encourage the project of expanding the field of inquiry beyond standard formulations of theism and to show how utilizing poetry as a resource for contemplation can be one effective method of facilitating that end.

THEOLOGIES AND THEODICIES OF PROTEST

The term *theology of protest* is ambiguous, having two distinct meanings in theological discourse. On the one hand, it has been used by some Christian thinkers to identify any theological exposition of Christianity's status as a religion that engages in protest. As Peter Riga has put it, Christianity is "essentially a protesting and dissenting religion against any idolatry of any temporal structure or institution, whether political, social or ecclesiastical" (Riga 1969, 230). In this connection, some interpreters of Christian ethics have regarded its method of protest as an "attitudinal" one that deploys "the gentle but limitless power of love" (Häring 1970, 9). On the other hand, *theology of protest* has also been used to designate a theological position that, without denying God's reality, adopts a stance of suspicion and distrust toward God, reproaching God for causing or allowing the suffering of innocents. In a major work on this topic from a Jewish perspective, David Blumenthal maintains that in light of the immense suffering over the course of human history, epitomized by the Holocaust and the sexual abuse of children, it is appropriate to treat "abusiveness" as one of God's attributes (Blumenthal 1993, 235). When I use the term *theology of protest* in this article, it is this second sense of the term that is intended.

Closely related to *theology of protest* in the latter sense is *theodicy of protest*. Coined by John K. Roth, it denotes a response to the problem of evil that rejects the contention that, at the end of the day, all human suffering may somehow be redeemed or compensated for. Roth thus admits that his approach is as much an "antitheodicy" as it is a theodicy (Roth 2001, 4), for it does not attempt to excuse God's injustices or to argue that they are not really injustices after all; rather, it insists on calling them out.

Both the theology of protest expounded by Blumenthal and the theodicy of protest articulated by Roth demand the recognition of a complex and ambivalent God, as opposed to a God who is wholly and maximally benevolent. This recognition does not, however, require a turning away from Scripture, since complexity and ambivalence are already present in the God both of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the New Testament. As Gracia Fay Ellwood has documented, the Bible contains passages in which

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

God's behavior resembles that of, among other things, a sadistic torturer, an abusive husband, and someone who humiliates women and encourages sexual assault; in addition to being the creator and sustainer of the universe, God (Yahweh, "Lord") is jealous, partial, and volatile, exhibiting "characteristics of possessive attachment, domination and violence" (Ellwood 1988, 7). In accordance with her Quaker principles, Ellwood is willing to subordinate the scriptural passages in question to the authority of "the Light within" (Ellwood 1988, 3, 24). Valuing nonviolence over violence, Quakers tend to favor the hermeneutical strategy of disregarding "difficult" biblical sources, thereby avoiding the need to explain why God is not portrayed as uniformly benign (Ellwood 1988, 3). Theologies of protest, by contrast, reject any sanitizing maneuver, accepting that "dark dispositions" are characteristic of God as well as of human beings while also affirming the legitimacy of denouncing God's abusiveness (Blumenthal 1993, 243). What theologies and theodicies of protest profess, therefore, is the complexity of the relationship between God and humankind: far from being one in which unconditional obedience is called for on the part of God's creatures, it is considered apt for adoration to be combined with other attitudes, including dismay, anger, and bewilderment. From this point of view, the scriptural "texts of terror," in which God is a God of cruelty and vengeance, are no less authentic in their depictions of God than are the texts of love (Blumenthal 1993, 243).

Theologies and theodicies of protest derive inspiration both from biblical texts, such as the Book of Job and the Psalms of lamentation and imprecation (Brueggemann 1984), and from the long tradition of prophetic figures and rabbinic interpreters who question and challenge God while nevertheless professing belief (Laytner 1990; Weiss 2017). Other important sources include works of literature and memoir from outside of the biblical and commentarial traditions. Especially notable in this respect are writings by the Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, such as his play *The Trial of God* (1979). Set against the backdrop of the anti-Jewish pogroms orchestrated by the Ukrainian Cossack leader Bogdan Chmielnicki in 1648–1649,[9] though also echoing a scene that Wiesel witnessed as an inmate at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944 (Wiesel 1985; Frazer 2008), the play centers upon a debate between two characters over whether God should be prosecuted for crimes against humanity, held in front of an impromptu panel of judges comprising three wandering Jewish minstrels. The prosecutor is Berish, a Jewish innkeeper whose wife and sons have been slaughtered by the Cossacks and whose daughter Hanna has been left traumatized after being brutally raped. In speeches

[9] Blumenthal (1993, 250) mistakenly gives the date as 1348–1349.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

filled with rage and resentment, Berish declares his refusal to submit to God: "Let Him crush me, I won't say Kaddish.... I'll use my last energy to make my protest known" (Wiesel 1979, 133). Although Berish may appear to have lost his faith, to describe him as such would fail to capture the tension in his position. As Alan Berger remarks, the anger Berish exhibits "stems from the fact that he persists in believing" (Berger 2006, 82)—from the fact that he does not, perhaps cannot, bring himself to deny the reality of God, notwithstanding his fury at God's "hostility, cruelty and indifference" (Wiesel 1979, 125). Berish's unwillingness to renounce his faith is acknowledged even by his opponent in the debate, who perceives it as doing Berish credit (Wiesel 1979, 157). This defender of God is a mysterious figure called Sam, whose name is an abbreviated form of Samael, an alternative name for Satan. Hence, in an ironic gesture on Wiesel's part, "God is being defended by the Devil" (Berger 2006, 83).

Indicative of the variety of perspectives that have been drawn upon by theologians or theodicists of protest is a further story that Wiesel attributes to "a chronicler from the Middle Ages" (Wiesel 1978, 163) and that has been cited by Roth and others (Roth 2001, 20; Rubenstein and Roth 2003, 323; Long 2011, 128). In this brief story, a Jewish family has been exiled from Spain along with all other Jews who refused to convert to Catholicism. Having become refugees wandering across a desert, the mother and two sons died one by one, leaving only the father. After digging the grave of his second son, the father addresses God in a defiant tone. Declaring that he knows that God wishes to push him to despair and to forego his prayers, the father insists that he will not succumb (Wiesel 1978, 164). Unlike Berish in *The Trial of God*, whose resistance takes the form of an unwillingness to say the Kaddish, this bereaved father resists precisely by continuing that observance: "In spite of me and in spite of You, I shall shout the Kaddish, which is a song of faith, for You and against You" (Wiesel 1978, 164). The man affirms that his song, his avowal of faith, will not be silenced, even by God. The irony is again a powerful one: praise is being offered not because of, but *in spite* of God. In both this and in the case of Berish, however, there is the common theme of the retention of faith in the face of a full recognition of the terrors that afflict humanity: protest against those terrors becomes itself a form through which faith is expressed.

Having, then, outlined some key features of theologies and theodicies of protest, including the nuances and tensions that characterize them, let us turn to a consideration of the work of two poets. Beginning with R. S. Thomas, we shall see that his struggles with faith exhibit certain hallmarks of a theology of protest while remaining less vituperative than the pronouncements we have just seen exemplified in Wiesel's writings.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

R. S. THOMAS'S REVOLT AGAINST A COMFORTABLE VIEW OF GOD

Born in Cardiff in 1913, Ronald Stuart Thomas was raised on the island of Anglesey from the age of five. After completing a degree in Classics at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, followed by theological training at St. Michael's College, Llandaff, he was ordained a deacon in 1936 and then an Anglican priest in 1937 (Davis 2007, 20–21). Serving in various parishes over the course of his career, Thomas's poetic compositions evoke the often arduous life and rugged landscape of rural Wales while also embodying a persistent rumination upon the impenetrable nature of God.

It is in a letter to D. Z. Phillips that Thomas describes as a "principal feature" of his poetry "the revolt against a comfortable, conventional, simplistic view of God" (quoted in Phillips 1986, x). It is precisely this comfortable and simplistic view that Phillips finds in much academic philosophy of religion—a view of God that frequently floats free of the contexts in which God is invoked, prayed to, and wrestled with in the lives of ordinary believers. What is impressive in Thomas's poetry is the shrewd refusal to glamorize human life, embracing instead life's "radical contingency"—the suffering and hardship that go hand in hand with moments of grace (Phillips 1986, 153). This unflinching appreciation of the unevenness of life is reflected in the ambivalent character of God that emerges from Thomas's poetry: "All is ambivalence, multivalence even," he writes, again in the letter to Phillips. "The same natural background, which, from one standpoint has facilitated my belief in God, has from another raised enormous problems" (quoted in Phillips 1986, ix).

Of all Thomas's published collections, *H'm* (his seventh) is the one that comes closest, in several of its poems, to voicing a poetic theology of protest. The very title encapsulates the ambivalence to which we have just seen Thomas referring. Commenting upon this title, he once suggested that it could be pronounced either "as a purr of contentment" or "as a sceptical question" (Wilson 1972). To these two possibilities we might add the option of pronouncing it as a disgruntled growl, with what one critic has dubbed a "savagery" that makes the volume Thomas's "most memorable and most terrible" (Dyson 1981, 309)—where "terrible" implies, of course, something dark and disturbing rather than of poor quality.[10]

[10]In an earlier poem, "The Dark Well," Thomas himself uses the term "terrible poetry" to denote the type of poetry that is required to capture the hard life of the rural farmer, whose heart is the titular "dark well" (Thomas 1961, 9). With regard to the enigmatic and polysemous density of the title *H'm*, further interpretations to those I have offered in the main text could be added. As a referee for this journal noted, the word could be read as "a reference to an incomplete 'Him'"—either implying an incomplete (conception of) God or, perhaps, alluding to the practice among some Jews of writing "G-d" or "L-rd" instead of "God" or "Lord" respectively. Compare M. Wynn Thomas's description of Thomas as partially assuming in *H'm* "the guise of a latter-day Gnostic or Rabbinical Cabalist" (Thomas 2013, 222).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

In the poem "The Island," for example, Thomas envisages God's saying that he will cause the people to worship him and then, in return, "afflict them with poverty and sickness" (Thomas 1972, 20). Of the children who are brought forth within the community, God "will choose the best/ Of them to be thrown back into the sea" (Thomas 1972, 20), just as a fisherman might dispose of unwanted fish by tossing them overboard—only, in the latter case, it would not be the *best* fish that are discarded.[11]

On the face of it, there is undoubtedly a savagery in the depiction of a god who vows to repay worship with affliction and to sacrifice the preeminent members of a society upon a whim. William Davis (2007, 31) places "The Island" among Thomas's most "bitter and biting" compositions. Yet the poem's final line, "And that was only on one island," could be read as casting an ironic light upon the poem as a whole. The poet might be heard as inviting the reader to notice how preposterous it would be to conceive of God in the terms presented in the foregoing stanzas—how impossibly monstrous God must be if the treatment of the people on this island were to be extended to the whole of creation. Or, on another possible reading, how arbitrary must be God's taste for cruelty if it is *only* the inhabitants of this island that suffer such treatment. And if the image is of a god who is impossibly monstrous, or arbitrarily cruel, then maybe something has gone awry in the line of thinking that led to it. Phillips's proposal is that what has gone awry is that certain people have assumed that truths about God are inferable from how things go in human life (Phillips 1986, 70). Once that assumption is dislodged, conceptions of God need not be bound to reflect human experience, and Thomas is trying to dislodge it by exposing the outrageous image of God to which it gives rise. That, at any rate, is what Phillips suggests.

Whether Thomas *is* trying to dislodge the assumption remains in doubt, however, for nothing in "The Island" explicitly speaks against the more straightforward reading, according to which it is precisely the monstrousness of God that the harshness of life reveals. It is in the ambiguity between the possible readings that the potency of the poem resides. Once the presence of ambiguity is granted, the poem's pressing of the question of what kind of god it is that is being worshipped becomes all the more stark: is God truly callous or is a callous god merely the product of a spiritually shallow imagination? By leaving this question unresolved, the poem refuses to capitulate to a comfortable view of God. It thereby supplies an important reminder about faith itself—that faith involves reaching out into

[11]Moreover, the fish that are not discarded would be left to suffocate upon the floor of the boat, "the air/ echo[ing] to their inaudible screaming," to borrow Thomas's haunting description from a later poem, "Fishing" (Thomas 1978, 11).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

the space of unknowing, to a god that could, in the end, be one who, as in Wiesel's *The Trial of God*, would be most aptly defended by the Devil.

As Phillips observes, there are poems in *H'm* that appear to contain "warring conceptions of God" (Phillips 1986, 78): on the one hand, a god of ruthless power who inflicts arbitrary suffering upon the inhabitants of the world; on the other hand, a god who abides *in* the suffering of those inhabitants. "Repeat," for instance, is a poem that begins with God (referred to in the poem only as "He" or "Him") ostensibly toying with the world ("it") like a child might toy with insects. It is unclear what is going on: "He touched it. It exploded./ Man was inside with his many/ Devices" (Thomas 1972, 26). Has humankind just "exploded" into life, or is the explosion one that has wrought catastrophic destruction? Either way, "He" (God) then turns away "as from his own/ Excrement," for God cannot tolerate the "grin" of humanity (Thomas 1972, 26). Again, ambiguity reigns. The grin could be that of a nonchalant cheerfulness, or inane ignorance, smug complacency, or even the rictus of a corpse. Whichever is the case, God seems disgusted by his own creation, akin to Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's novel, who is repulsed by the countenance of the "thing" he has "endued with animation" (Shelley [1818] 2012, 84).

Following this initial repugnance, however, the god in Thomas's poem proceeds to bestow upon humankind the gift of poetry, which facilitates the lamentation of Job, the tragedies of Aeschylus, and the "grovelling of the theologians" (Thomas 1972, 26). Why "grovelling"? Perhaps because the theologians that Thomas has in mind are those who go out of their way to paint a "comfortable" picture of God, as resolutely loving and kind, in contrast to the ambivalent portrait that Thomas himself is limning. In any event, the poetic intelligence that has been granted to human beings also enables the development of science and technology—"in the laboratories/ Of the world"—the destructive potential of which has already been prefigured in the opening stanza's reference to human "Devices." Having "followed the mazes/ Of their calculations," God then returns "To his centre to await their coming for him"—like the mythic Minotaur, except in this case the labyrinth is that of the human mind.[12] The poem's final line, "It was not his first time to be crucified," makes a connection between the crucifixion of Christ and the death of God in a culture dominated by scientistic thinking—a death so emphatically announced by Nietzsche's madman (Nietzsche 1882, §125). So, again, the "warring conceptions of

[12]Thomas was later to publish a poem, "Arriving," that begins "A maze, he said,/ and at the centre/ the Minotaur/ awaits us" (Thomas 1981, 92). In this poem the Minotaur is something genuinely "fearful" at the end of the paths along which we travel, whereas in "Repeat" it is those who are "coming for him" who pose the threat.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

God" to which Phillips refers are that of a god of power versus that of a vulnerable god. Yet, given that this is "not his first time to be crucified," the implication is that even the vulnerability will not be fatal: God has been raised before and will rise again.

Thomas's poetic theology of protest is, then, itself an ambivalent one. It is a protest that never ceases to acknowledge the tensions between the ideal of a God of love and the realities both of human behavior and of the sufferings that we and other creatures endure. In this respect, as Thomas indicates, the accusatory finger is pointed more at unduly simplified representations of God than at God in Godself. Moreover, the tone of the poet's voice remains calm and the indictment more often subtle than overt. In some instances, however, it is this very subtlety that makes it possible for a single poem to be read either as a song of praise or as a cutting critique of God. The 1966 collection *Pietà*, for example, contains a poem, "Because," that at one level praises God for having the ability to look upon all things with a steady gaze; at another level, the apparent praise is backhanded, expressing cynicism about a god who remains insouciant in the face of such scenes as the starvation of wild animals or overfeeding of pets, the rising and falling of empires, and the spreading of infectious diseases. "This is what/ Life is," the poet attests, "and on it your eye/ Sets tearless, and the dark/ Is dear to you as the light" (Thomas 1966, 8). Is it a *good* thing that God is so distant from our moral universe as to be able to regard light and dark, joy and misery, virtue and vice, in a neutral manner—or does an equivalent care for light and dark amount to a careless indifference? Again, the poem does not force an answer upon the reader. It prompts philosophical and theological reflection instead of trying to tidy up the complexities of faith.

Though Thomas occasionally situates the voice of his poems "somewhere between faith and doubt" (Thomas 1978, 32), the doubt arises for him *within* a life of faith. His poems display a "doubting-belief" that relentlessly calls into question not the reality but the "justice and goodness" of God (McEllhenney 2013, xiii). To this extent, his mode of doubting resembles that of theologians of protest, albeit not in the vehement tones typified by Wiesel's Berish or the bereaved father in the desert. Thomas's reproach assumes the form of a vacillation, a hesitancy, combined with a firm resolve to resist the temptation to conjure an idealized image of God—a temptation to which philosophers of religion, especially those prosecuting apologetic ventures, all too readily yield. It is for this reason that Thomas's poetry constitutes a valuable reminder for the philosophy of religion, unmasking the superficiality of a comfortable view of God and thereby broadening philosophical and theological horizons beyond a simplistic theism. In the next section, we shall see how those horizons

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

can be enlarged still further when the concept of a theology of protest is extended to encompass the work of a celebrated Bengali lyricist who sings of an ambivalent Goddess, at once attractive and ferocious, maternal and aloof.

RĀMPRASĀD SEN'S CRIES TO AN INDIFFERENT MOTHER

The name Rāmprasād Sen is associated with a large corpus of lyrics or songs, many of which exist in more than one version (McLean 1998, 21–22). The likelihood that all of these were authored by the same person is remote, and speculation persists among scholars as to whether there were really two or three or even more "Rāmprasāds" (McLean 1998, xvii; McDermott 2001a, 42). What seems most likely is that there was, in the eighteenth century, a historical individual named Rāmprasād Sen who is responsible for composing three major poetic works plus numerous shorter poems, known individually as *pada*s and collectively as *padābalī*; these would have existed primarily or entirely in somewhat fluid oral form until being published in edited collections from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The first such collection, comprising a biography of Rāmprasād plus seventy-seven *pada*s attributed to him, was edited by Īśvarcandra Gupta in 1853–1855, some seventy-eight years or so after Rāmprasād is likely to have died (McDermott 2001a, 176).[13] More than twenty further anthologies have since appeared, each containing additional compositions, such that the *pada*s credited to Rāmprasād now number approximately 350. For my purposes in this article, it is not essential, even if it were possible, to discriminate between the works that are authentically Rāmprasād's and those that are later accretions, for it is the style of a certain subset of the poems—namely, those that I am characterizing in terms of a poetic theology (or thealogy) of protest—that interests me most, rather than their specific authorship.

Relevant to the sentiments expressed in poems attributed to Rāmprasād is the cultural context of eighteenth-century Bengal, where the religious movement now referred to in English as Śāktism was in ascendance. Śāktism—the tradition or confluence of traditions in which the Goddess (Śakti) is venerated, whether in her bellicose, benign, or ambivalent forms—is a complex and ramified phenomenon. As June McDaniel observes, "It contains elements from tantric Buddhism, Vaiṣṇava devotion, yogic practice, shamanism, and worship of village deities" (McDaniel

[13]Two of the *padas* published by Gupta are duplicated; hence, the total number is really seventy-five rather than seventy-seven (see McDermott 2001a, 334 n12). For an English translation of Gupta's biography of Rāmprasād, see McLean 1998, 139–58.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

1989, 86).[14] Precisely why it was gaining momentum in eighteenth-century Bengal remains unclear, but a few significant factors have been identified by historians of religion. Among these are the efforts of the pre-existing Śākta community to define itself more decisively against an increasingly vocal Vaiṣṇava majority; to this end, the warlike and sanguinary imagery surrounding aggressive forms of the Goddess, such as Durgā and Kālī, was particularly conducive. This imagery was, in turn, attractive to aristocratic landowners (*zamindars*), who perceived in it a means of advancing their status and influence by associating themselves with a figure of martial strength (McDermott 2011, 166). We should also not overlook the intrinsic potency of the imagery itself, synthesizing as it does apparently contrasting personae. These include not only the persona of a destructive female warrior, wielding multiple weapons and slaying demons on a cosmic battlefield, but also those of an alluring femme fatale and a nurturing mother who is the fertile source of the world.

As Rachel Fell McDermott has stressed, Rāmprasād himself was instrumental in promoting this multifaceted conception of the Goddess, as were subsequent poets who followed his lead, including those who composed lyrics in his name (McDermott 2001a, 183–84). Even so, there were precedents for this intricate synthesis in earlier sources. Notable in this regard is the Sanskrit *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa* (c. fifteenth to seventeenth centuries CE), in which Kālī figures not exclusively as a personification of bloodthirsty rage, as she had done to a great extent in, for example, the earlier *Devī Māhātmya* (c. sixth century CE). While retaining her characteristically formidable motifs, such as a garland of severed heads, protruding teeth and tongue, unkempt hair, and so on, these are described in the *Mahābhāgavata* as "lovely, charming, and beautiful," alongside her "'sparkling tiara' and 'full high breasts'" (Dold 2003, 41).[15] Taken together, this assortment of features amounts to a nexus of macabre, regal, sexualized, and maternal elements, all contributing toward the multivalence of the Goddess, a multivalence that was inherited and embellished in the poetry of Rāmprasād.

Several "emotive postures" (McDermott 2001a, 186) or "emotional moods and relationships" (Banerjee 2004, xx) are conveyed through Rāmprasād's *pada*s, generating a forceful sense of "the complex intensity of his relation with his deity" (Nathan and Seely 1999, xxxiv), all of

[14]For further exposition of Bengali Śāktism, see esp. McDaniel 2004. On Śāktism more generally, see Humes and McDermott 2009.

[15]See, for example, the description of Mahākālī ("Great Kālī") sitting upon her "bejeweled lion throne," radiating "the splendor of ten million suns" and replete with "dreadful fangs" and "a garland of skulls" (*Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa* 63.28–32 [Kumar 1983], my trans.; see also Nagar 2013, 284).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

which goes some way toward explaining the verses' enduring popularity throughout the Bengal region. The moods (*bhava*s) comprise states of self-surrender and intense devotion (*bhakti*), longing and beseeching, awe and delight, and also, importantly, accusation, lamentation, and reproach. It is these latter moods that give support to the characterization of at least some of the compositions attributed to Rāmprasād as exhibiting a poetic thealogy of protest, and it is the profound intermingling of "protest and submission" that has led some commentators to compare Rāmprasād to figures from Jewish tradition such as Job and Jeremiah (Page 1924, 618; Payne 1933, 95).

Vividly encapsulating the ambivalence and ambiguity of the Goddess in Rāmprasād's oeuvre is a poem in which her smile is likened to that "of a beast with bared teeth" (RJR 101; McDermott 2001a, 77). Simply put, her "smile" could equally well be the snarl that prefigures the frenzied attack of a wild animal. "Ascertaining the nature of Brahman is impossible," the poem continues, "But the essence of my Goddess is Brahman,/ and She lives in all forms." Like Brahman—the transcendent reality that is her essence—the Goddess is ultimately enigmatic; she dwells in all forms, whether these be benign or deadly. It is in passages such as this that we see how a philosophical conception, in this case a conception of divine immanence, pervades and propels Rāmprasād's poetic vision.

The mood of complaint or reproach comes through in verses where the poet takes issue with the Goddess, often bemoaning his own material circumstances. "I've got a bone to pick with you, Mother," he asserts. "You've trapped me in a family/ And seen to it I stay poor" (RJR 29; Nathan and Seely 1999, 18). The Goddess is accused of hypocritically making a mere pretense of poverty herself, "Smearing [her] skin with ashes"—the ashes, that is, from a cremation ground. Despite these discontents, however, the poem ends with an acknowledgment that surrender to the Goddess facilitates, or is equivalent to, the overcoming of evil: "At Your feet I can defeat/ Every evil every foot of the way" (RJR 29; Nathan and Seely 1999, 18). Similarly, a poem that rebukes the Goddess for her injustices—"mixing sand with some people's cooked potherb" while "mixing sugar with others' milk" (RJR 204; Sinha 1966, 28, translation amended)—ends with what is, in effect, a declaration of faith: "My mind has comprehended it, but my heart refuses to do so" (RJR 204; Sinha 1966, 28). In other words, the poet grasps intellectually that the world is unjust, even cruel, yet emotionally—fideistically—he resists the implication that the Goddess is callous and fickle. There is here a notion of accessing, by way of the heart, a truth deeper than what is available to reason. It is a sentiment that is an important aspect of the sense of overwhelming love that is so central to the *bhakti* traditions of India—the sense of being "so absorbed in love that

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

other emotions and satisfactions remain unfelt and pointless" (Singh 2006, 80).[16] It constitutes a notable point of contrast with the poetry of Thomas, in which we find not the emotionally charged *prema bhakti*—"the love or adoration felt by a devotee for his [or her] desired deity" (Chatterjee 1992, 63)—but the more ethically oriented charitable love (*agápē*) that, as William Davis has observed, was "central to [Thomas's] understanding and to his belief" (Davis 2007, 57). The distinction is not, however, sharp, and further exploration of similarities and differences between these respective modes of love, as expressed by Thomas, Rāmprasād, and others, would generate a fascinating continuation of the comparative dimension of my present project, though limitations of space prevent me from undertaking it here.[17]

For Rāmprasād, then, there are occasions when an initial voice of remonstration is checked and qualified by a voice of acquiescence; it is in the productive tension between these voices that much of the affective vibrancy of the poetry obtains. In certain instances, however, a sardonic tone hovers over the entire poem, such as when, referring to himself, the poet exclaims that "The son of the World-Mother [*jagadīśvarī*: world-ruler, world-possessor]/ is dying of hunger pangs! …/ You called and called me,/ took me on Your lap,/ and then dashed my heart/ on the ground!" (RJR 248; McDermott 2001b, 53). The Divine Mother is thus berated for her volatility. Hence, when the poem ends by announcing "Mother,/ You have acted like a true mother;/ people will praise You," it is difficult not to hear in these words an ironic inflection, implying that true mothers are those who solicit the adoration of their offspring one minute yet violently reject them the next.

In a further terrible image of child abuse, here paraphrased by Dinesh Chandra Sen, Rāmprasād describes the Goddess "as the mother who beats the child, while the child clings to her only the closer, crying 'Mother! Oh Mother!'" (Sen 1911, 714).[18] For those familiar with the infant attachment

[16]Raj Singh is here expounding the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra* (c. tenth century CE) in particular, but the point extends to the *bhakti* movements more generally.

[17]Such a further exploration might consider, among other things, the relation between love and knowledge in work by one of Thomas's foremost religious and philosophical influences, namely Søren Kierkegaard. Intriguing, for instance, is a notebook entry of 1848 in which Kierkegaard affirms that "to love and to know […] are essentially synonymous"—at least in an intimate interpersonal setting, where "the relationship is of such a heartfelt nature" that it is love, not verbal "assurances and the like," that enables knowledge of the other to be opened up (Kierkegaard 1996, 343). Compare Jean-Luc Marion (2002, 160): "We will attempt to think of love itself as a knowledge—and a preeminent knowledge to boot"—and also Furtak (2008, 65), who highlights Marion's debt to Kierkegaard. On the significance of Kierkegaard for Thomas, see esp. Davis 1998. For more on the relation between *bhakti* and *agápē*, see Panikkar 2003.

[18]Dinesh Chandra Sen cites as his source Sister Nivedita (1900, 53), who encountered the lyrics of Rāmprasād during her studies with Swami Vivekananda in the 1890s.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

experiments carried out on rhesus monkeys by the American psychologist Harry Harlow in the 1950s and 1960s, this image of a child clinging desperately to the mother who beats it may bring those experiments painfully to mind. Among the most notorious were the studies in which infant monkeys who had been separated from their real mothers were isolated in a chamber with a mechanical model replete "with retractable brass spikes, which could be stabbed into the infant as it clung" (Blum 1994, 90). Dubbing these models "iron maidens" or "evil mothers," Harlow "discovered that the little rhesus had an unswerving loyalty to them"; after being pierced, the infants would initially scream and scurry away, only to then pause, observe as the spikes retracted, and "return to cling again" (Blum 1994, 90–91). In this connection, we might cite Rāmprasād's double-edged rhetorical question, "Countless are the evil children, but who ever heard of an evil mother?" (RJR 250; Thompson and Spencer 1923, 49): "double-edged" because it can be read both as a denial that any mother could be truly malevolent and as an accusation that, nevertheless, *this* mother, the Mother of all, does indeed have an "evil" streak—or, in the translation by Nathan and Seely (1999, 11), is "a bad mother."[19]

This tragic predicament, of the infant whose only source and object of love is also the tormentor to whom it has no alternative but to repeatedly return, is all too familiar from real-life cases not only of child abuse but also of domestic violence and coercion between adults. Such relationships can be suffocating, the victims feeling themselves "locked in a violent embrace" (Eisikovits and Buchbinder 2000). By characterizing the devotee's relationship to the Divine Mother in terms of inescapable dependence fused with recurrent persecution, Rāmprasād accentuates the vulnerability of the human condition. "Mother," he pleads, "how much more can I say?/ I'll take Your blows/ and I won't fight back./ But nor will I stop/ calling 'Kālī!'" (RJR 53; McDermott 2001a, 197).

As several commentators have observed, there is a strong affinity between the recognition of the natural world as a source both of sustenance and of devastation and disease, on the one hand, and the depiction of a Goddess who is, by turns, gentle and compassionate and yet also "capricious and sometimes terribly cruel," on the other (Thompson 1923, 16). In times of natural disaster—drought or famine, for example—"it is not so much the tender aspects of the deity, but the awe-inspiring, the dark and the terrible, which confront [us] at every step, and cannot be ignored

[19]Rāmprasād's question implicitly invokes a line from the Sanskrit *Devyaparādhakṣamāpana Stotram*, traditionally (albeit probably apocryphally) ascribed to Śaṅkarācārya (c. eighth to ninth centuries CE): "A son may be bad, but never a mother" (*kuputro jāyeta kvacid api kumātā na bhavati*)—see *Bṛhatstotraratnākara*, stotra 73, line 2 (1912, 163); Keith [1920] 1953, 217.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

or easily explained away" (Payne 1933, 97).[20] Noticing this affinity does not commit us to any naturalistic theory of the origins of Goddess worship, as though the unpredictable fluctuations of the natural environment straightforwardly "explain" the development of an ambivalent conception of divinity. Other factors could easily have been involved, and we should not overlook the possibility that conceptions of the divine influence conceptions of the natural world no less readily than the other way around. Indeed, the conceptual relation could be internal, in the sense that the one would not be the conception it is without the other. In such a case there would be no precise demarcation, let alone a relation of logical or causal priority, between "natural world" and "the divine" (cf. Sinha 1995, esp. 8–9). Nonetheless, an appreciation of the precarious conditions of rural Bengali life makes it less surprising that the Goddess should be conceived of as mercurial and pitiless as well as generous and fecund.

In view of the striking theme of putting God on trial, which we saw exemplified above in Wiesel's play, we might note that a poem attributed to Rāmprasād utilizes this theme as well. In the latter case, the poet (or poetic speaker) threatens to take the Goddess to the court of Śiva, the Goddess's husband, to be tried for the "teasing and tricks" that she has played: "I'll show You what kind of son You've got/ When the hearing begins," Rāmprasād declares (RJR 25; Nathan and Seely 1999, 44). The combative air is tempered, however, by the poet's demand that what he wants as a settlement is that the Mother take him (i.e., Rāmprasād, her "son") "lovingly to [her]." In this case, then, the "trial," though motivated by a sense of injustice on the part of the believer, is less a demonstration of defiance than it is an impassioned plea for love—or rather, a plea for love is the form that defiance takes.

This intertwining of love and defiance is characteristic of how the Rāmprasādian poetic vocabulary—drawing upon and finessing earlier tropes from Hindu myth and iconography—persistently conveys a dual or polysemic resonance. As Leonard Nathan and Clinton Seely suggest, an accusation of indifference directed toward the Mother simultaneously indicates "her total detachment from the world," which is precisely the quality that the devotee himself aspires to cultivate in the search for spiritual liberation (Nathan and Seely 1999, xxx). As we saw in the case of Thomas's poem "Because," neutrality can from one point of view be perceived as calm impartiality; from another, it becomes indistinguishable from heartless neglect. In a similar vein, the charge "of shameless nakedness" can, when enounced by Rāmprasād, be heard as a dysphemism for "the awesome presence of real being, without the conventional covering

[20]Payne is here paraphrasing Dinesh Chandra Sen 1911, 714.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

of appearance," as when we speak of the naked or unadorned truth; and to admonish the Goddess for being intoxicated and mad can be viewed as ascribing to her "the joy of true freedom, and its refusal to be contained in rational or moral categories" (Nathan and Seely 1999, xxx). Just as the Goddess's drunkenness may signify "forgetfulness of her devotees," so it may also imply that she is "drunk with love for all beings" (Brown 1983, 119). Hence what Rāmprasād's poetry can remind us—and can remind the philosophy of religion—is, among other things, that attentiveness to the particularities and peculiarities of religious discourse is vital if we are to appreciate the subtleties and complexities of religious sentiments and characterizations of divinity. Faith and reproach need not be at odds with each other, for reproach may be an aspect of faith.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: ON POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY

The relationship between poetry and philosophy has a history too long and complicated to be more than hinted at in the present article. Notoriously, "hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people" are the only forms of poetry allowed in the ideal city envisaged in Plato's *Republic*; other forms, such as lyric and epic poetry, are banished on the grounds that their appeal is to human passion, allowing sensations of pleasure and pain to predominate over law and reason (*Republic* 607a3–b1, in Plato 1997b, 1211).[21] Nevertheless, as many commentators have noted, Plato's own philosophical works exude a profoundly poetic spirit (Greene 1918, 1; Destrée and Herrmann 2011, xiii–xiv). Thankfully, the *Republic*'s proscription of poetry has not been rigidly adhered to in the history of philosophy, yet among Western philosophers of religion poetry has rarely been a focal interest. What I have argued in the foregoing sections is that, far from being excluded or ignored, poetry—with the lyric central among its forms—should be embraced as a means of expanding the conceptual and imaginative scope of the field. This approach will already be familiar to many scholars and practitioners of certain non-Western philosophical traditions, notably the traditions of India, where poetry has long been employed to convey philosophical ideas. As Anglophone and Europhone philosophers of religion increasingly widen their purview beyond the standard spheres of concern, it is likely that poetic sources will come more prominently into view along with diverse forms of religiosity.

[21]See also *Protagoras* 347c–348a, where Socrates declares that interpreting poetry is not a fit activity for "well-educated gentlemen" to pursue: "We should put the poets aside and converse directly with each other, testing the truth and our own ideas" (Plato 1997a, 778).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

If there is an apparent tension between poetry and philosophy, it is between the density of poetry and the aspiration of philosophy toward perspicuity and determinacy. The tendency of poets is to compress language in such a way that poems, and many of the words and phrases that compose them, are pregnant with semantic abundance. As Helen Vendler observes, "Poetic thinking must work to compress a multifaceted scene, distributed over sequential time, into a single momentary *gestalt*; and in this necessity we understand the concentration and focusing necessary to poetic thinking" (Vendler 2004, 47). Whether this kind of compression is strictly a *necessity* of poetic thinking is open to question, but the contention that poetry characteristically involves ambiguity, polysemy, and equivocation—the very factors that make a poem amenable to divergent, albeit often complementary, readings—is hardly disputable. And these are precisely the factors that many philosophers, in the interests of clarity, strive to eliminate from their writing. Yet this apparent tension can be productive rather than problematic, not least for the purposes of philosophical reflection upon religion and conceptions of the divine.

If philosophy of religion wishes to do justice to the complexities of actual religious life and genuine religious sentiments, rather than fixating solely upon an idealized brand of theism, then the work of thoughtful, ruminative, morally serious poets provides an important resource to be explored. This need not involve abandoning clarity and precision, for it is these very qualities that are called for in the analysis of a poem. The poem itself may embody complex thoughts and emotions, which are sometimes so tightly interwoven that to presume their being neatly separable into distinct categories would risk doing violence to the integrity of the poetic vision. What follows from this, however, is not that poetry is insusceptible to philosophical treatment, but merely that analytic discernment is required. Exposition and analysis will demand acknowledging that, although religious discourse is often messy, it may not stand in need of being tidied up; to borrow a phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein, "What's ragged should be left ragged" (Wittgenstein 1998, 51; see also Citron 2012).

Beyond simply arguing, at a general level, for the value of religious poetry as a resource for philosophy of religion, the present article has sought to show the value that religious poetry can have by drawing attention to salient instances in the respective work of R. S. Thomas and Rāmprasād Sen. Giving cohesion to the analysis has been the theme of poetic theologies of protest, a theme that has itself been extended and elaborated by means of the analysis. In the case of Thomas, we have seen a subtlety of protest, an expression of deep ambivalence, which occasionally brings out the sense in which God might be thought of as savage without the poems themselves becoming aggressive in their reproaching

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

tone. Instead, the question is doggedly, if often only implicitly, raised as to whether or to what extent we can know anything of God at all. The possibility is thereby opened up of a faith that refuses to presume that God's character and purposes can be read off from the unstable circumstances of our lives in any obvious fashion. Yet what makes Thomas's work so candid and sobering is its unrelenting recognition of the temptation to view God through the prism of the world.

In the songs ascribed to Rāmprasād, meanwhile, we hear a theology of protest that extends this concept beyond the Judaic and Christian traditions with which it is most commonly associated—extending it, indeed, into the domain of thealogical discourse and of representations of the divine as alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, Mother, warrior, beguiling maiden, and also, occasionally, a youthful daughter (McLean 1998, chap. 6). As feminist thealogians have frequently stressed, thealogy is concerned less with any single "overarching paradigm for the idea of divinity" than with "openness to diversity and plurality" (Clack 1999, 155; see also Raphael 1999, 53). The plurality of images of the divine feminine that we find in Rāmprasād and in the broader Śākta tradition is in keeping with this general tendency while also retaining the principle of a unity encompassing the diversity. The intersection between feminist thealogy, Hindu studies, and the philosophy of religion harbors promising opportunities for enriching philosophical engagement with diverse conceptions of divinity (see, e.g., Patel 1994; Dalmiya 2000; Burley 2021). In these and other contexts of inquiry, the voice, or voices, of Rāmprasād constitute a provocative exemplification of the complexity and intensity of a defiant faith.

REFERENCES

Arnold, Dan. 2005. *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Banerjee, Shyamal. 2004. *The Divine Songs of Sage Poet Ramprasad*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

Berger, Alan L. 2006. "The Storyteller and His Quarrel with God." In *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling*, edited by Rosemary Horowitz, 71–89. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.

Bhaṭṭācārya, Satyanārāyaṇ. 1975. *Rāmprasād: jībanī o racanāsamagra* [Bengali]. Kalikātā, India: Granthamelā.

Blum, Deborah. 1994. *The Monkey Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Blumenthal, David R. 1993. *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

Bṛhatstotraratnākara [Sanskrit]. 1912. Mumbai: Nirṇayasāgar Press. Available at https://archive.org/details/Brihat_Stotra_Ratnakara_1912. Accessed May 30, 2020.

Brown, C. Mackenzie. 1983. "Kālī, the Mad Mother." In *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion*, edited by Carl Olson, 110–23. New York: Crossroads.

Brueggemann, Walter. 1984. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis: Ausburg.

Burley, Mikel. 2017. "'Mountains of Flesh and Seas of Blood': Reflecting Philosophically on Animal Sacrifice through Dramatic Fiction." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85 (3): 806–32.

——. 2020a. *A Radical Pluralist Philosophy of Religion: Cross-Cultural, Multireligious, Interdisciplinary*. London: Bloomsbury.

——. 2020b. "Narrative Philosophy of Religion: Apologetic and Pluralistic Orientations." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 88 (4): 5–21.

——. 2021. "The Nature and Significance of the Hindu Divine Mother in Embodied Thealogical Perspective." *Religious Studies* DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412521000263

Burton, David. 2017. *Buddhism: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Chatterjee Śāstrī, Asoke. 1992. *Caitanyabhāgavata: A Study*. Delhi: Nag.

Christ, Carol P. 1987. *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Christie, Elizabeth. 1979. "Indian Philosophers on Poetic Imagination (*pratibhā*)." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 7 (2): 153–207.

Citron, Gabriel. 2012. "What's Ragged Should Be Left Ragged: A Wittgensteinian Investigation into the 'Messiness' of Religious Beliefs and Utterances." PhD diss., University of Oxford.

Clack, Beverley. 1999. "The Many-Named Queen of All: Thealogy and the Concept of God/ess." In *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?*, edited by Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier, 150–59. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press.

Dalmiya, Vrinda. 2000. "Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of the Goddess Kali." *Hypatia* 15 (1): 125–50.

Davis, William V. 1998. "'At the Foot of the Precipice of Water … Sea Shapes Coming to Celebration': R. S. Thomas and Kierkegaard." *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* 4:92–117.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

——. 2007. *R. S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Destrée, Pierre, and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann. 2011. "Introduction." In *Plato and Poets (Mnemosyne Supplements)*, edited by Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann, xiii–xxii. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

Dold, Patricia. 2003. "Kālī the Terrific and Her Tests: The Śākta Devotionalism of the *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa*." In *Encountering Kālī: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, edited by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal, 39–59. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Dyson, A. E. 1981. *Yeats, Eliot and R. S. Thomas: Riding the Echo*. London: Macmillan.

Eisikovits, Zvi, and Eli Buchbinder. 2000. *Locked in a Violent Embrace: Understanding and Intervening in Domestic Violence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ellwood, Gracia Fay. 1988. *Batter My Heart*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill.

Frazer, Jenni. 2008. "Wiesel: Yes, We Really Did Put God on Trial." *The Jewish Chronicle*, September 19, 2008. Available at https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/wiesel-yes-we-really-did-put-god-on-trial-1.5056. Accessed November 29, 2019.

Furtak, Rick Anthony. 2008. "Love and the Discipline of Philosophy." In *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, edited by Edward F. Mooney, 59–71. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Goldenberg, Naomi R. 1979. *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Greene, William Chase. 1918. "Plato's View of Poetry." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 29:1–75.

Häring, Bernard. 1970. *A Theology of Protest*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The Holy Bible: Translated from the Latin Vulgate [Douay-Rheims version]. 1914. Baltimore, MD: Murphy.

Humes, Cynthia Ann, and Rachel Fell McDermott, eds. 2009. *Breaking Boundaries with the Goddess: New Directions in the Study of Śāktism*. New Delhi: Manohar.

Katz, Steven T., Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds. 2007. *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Keith, A. Berriedale. [1920] 1953. *A History of Sanskrit Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1996. *Papers and Journals: A Selection*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin.

Kumar, Pushpendra, ed. 1983. *The Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa: An Ancient Treatise on Śakti Cult*. Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers.

Laytner, Anson. 1990. *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition*. Lanham, MD: Aronson.

Long, Thomas G. 2011. *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Marion, Jean-Luc. 2002. *Prolegomena to Charity*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis. New York: Fordham University Press.

McDaniel, June. 1989. *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

——. 2004. *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McDermott, Rachel Fell. 2001a. *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kālī and Umā in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——. 2001b. *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kālī and Umā from Bengal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——. 2011. *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals*. New York: Columbia University Press.

McEllhenney, John G. 2013. *A Masterwork of Doubting-Belief: R. S. Thomas and His Poetry*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.

McLean, Malcolm. 1998. *Devoted to the Goddess: The Life and Work of Ramprasad*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Nagar, Shanti Lal, ed. and trans. 2013. *Devi Mahābhāgavata Purāṇam*. Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers.

Nathan, Leonard, and Clinton Seely, trans. 1999. *Rāmprasād Sen, Grace and Mercy in Her Wild Hair: Selected Poems to the Mother Goddess*. 2nd ed. Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1882. *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. Chemnitz, Germany: Schmeitzner.

Nivedita, Sister. 1900. *Kali the Mother*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co.

Page, W. Sutton. 1924. "Bengali Hymns to Kālī." *The International Review of Missions* 13:617–19.

Panikkar, Raimundo. 2003. *Bhakti Karuna Agape with Raimundo Panikkar*, edited by Marko Zlomislić, David Goicoechea, Suzanne K. Tebbutt, and Rajiv Kaushik. Binghampton University, NY: Global Academic Publishing.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

Patel, Kartikeya C. 1994. “Women, Earth, and the Goddess: A Shākta-Hindu Interpretation of Embodied Religion.” *Hypatia* 9 (4): 69–87.

Patil, Parimal G. 2009. *Against a Hindu God: Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Payne, Ernest A. 1933. *The Śāktas: An Introductory and Comparative Study*. London: Oxford University Press.

Peterson, Michael L., ed. 2017. *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, 2nd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Phillips, D. Z. 1986. *R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God*. Allison Park, PA: Pickwick.

——. 2006. *From Fantasy to Faith: Morality, Religion and Twentieth-Century Literature*, 2nd ed. London: SCM Press.

——. 2007. “Philosophy’s Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect—A Reply to Henk Vroom.” In *D. Z. Phillips’ Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses*, edited by Andy F. Sanders, 197–211. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Plato. [c. 390–380 BCE] 1997a. *Protagoras*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell. In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, 746–90. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

——. [c. 375 BCE] 1997b. *Republic*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve. In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, 971–1223. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

Ramal, Randy. 2019a. “On Wittgenstein, Radical Pluralism, and Radical Relativity.” *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 8 (1–2): 83–114.

——. 2019b. “Radical Pluralism, Concept Formation, and Interreligious Communication.” In *Interpreting Interreligious Relations with Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies*, edited by Gorazd Andrejč and Daniel H. Weiss, 135–56. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

Raphael, Melissa. 1999. *Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press.

Riga, Peter J. 1969. “Toward a Theology of Protest.” *The Thomist* 33 (2): 229–50.

Roth, John K. 2001. “A Theodicy of Protest.” In *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, 2nd ed., edited by Stephen T. Davis, 1–20. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Rubenstein, Richard L., and John K. Roth. 2003. *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy*. Revised ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

Schilbrack, Kevin, ed. 2002. *Thinking through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Schweizer, Bernard. 2002. *Rebecca West: Heroism, Rebellion, and the Female Epic*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

——. 2011. *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, Dinesh Chandra. 1911. *History of Bengali Language and Literature*. Calcutta: Calcutta University Press.

Sharma, Arvind. 1995. *The Philosophy of Religion: A Buddhist Perspective*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. [1818] 2012. *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, edited by D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf. 3rd ed. Peterborough, ON, Canada: Broadview Press.

Sherma, Rita D. 2011. “Introduction: A Hermeneutics of Intersubjectivity.” In *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings*, edited by Tracy Pintchman and Rita D. Sherma, 1–16. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Singh, R. Raj. 2006. *Bhakti and Philosophy*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Sinha, Amita. 1995. “Nature in Hindu Art, Architecture and Landscape.” *Landscape Research* 20 (1): 3–10.

Sinha, Jadunath. 1966. *Rama Prasada’s Devotional Songs: The Cult of Shakti*. Calcutta: Sinha Publishing House.

Sreekantaiyya, T. N. [1953] 2001. *Indian Poetics*. Translated by N. Balasubrahmanya. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

Stump, Eleonore. 2010. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Thomas, M. Wynn. 2013. *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Thomas, R. S. 1961. *Tares*. London: Hart-Davis.

——. 1966. *Pietà*. London: Hart-Davis.

——. 1972. *H’m*. London: Macmillan.

——. 1978. *Frequencies*. London: Macmillan.

——. 1981. *Between Here and Now*. London: Macmillan.

Thompson, Edward J. 1923. “Introduction.” In *Bengali Religious Lyrics, Śākta*, translated by Edward J. Thompson and Arthur Marshman Spencer, 9–30. Calcutta: Association Press.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023

Thompson, Edward J., and Arthur Marshman Spencer, trans. 1923. *Bengali Religious Lyrics, Śākta*. Calcutta: Association Press.

Vendler, Helen. 2004. *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weiss, Dov. 2017. *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Wiesel, Elie. 1978. *A Jew Today*, translated by Marion Wiesel. New York: Vintage Books.

———. 1979. *The Trial of God (as it was held on February 25, 1649, in Shamgorod)*. Translated by Marion Wiesel. New York: Random House.

———. 1985. "The Story of The Trial of God." In *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel, Vol. 3*, edited by Irving Abrahamson, 112–13. New York: Holocaust Library.

Wilson, Timothy. 1972. "R. S. Thomas." *The Guardian*, September 15, 1972: 8.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1998. *Culture and Value*. Edited by G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, revised by Alois Pichler, translated by Peter Winch. Oxford: Blackwell.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/89/4/1229/6456480 by guest on 24 February 2023