

The Priest in Superposition

R.S. Thomas and the Quantum Nature of Sacred Waiting

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*'Prompt me, God; / But not yet. When I speak, / Though it be you who speak /
Through me, something is lost. / The meaning is in the waiting.'*

R.S. Thomas, 'Kneeling'

Abstract

When R.S. Thomas knelt before the altar in his Welsh parish churches — Manafon, Eglwysfach, Aberdaron — conventional theology frames this as preparatory devotion: the priest making himself ready to receive divine communication. Thomas's own words reveal something more radical. In his poem 'Kneeling', he articulates an insight that quantum physics would formalise decades later: meaning exists not in the resolved state but in the superposition, in the duration of uncertainty before observation forces collapse into singular actuality.

This essay argues that Thomas's notorious theology of divine absence is not a record of failed encounter but a precise phenomenological account of the measurement problem: that observation destroys superposition, that speech collapses infinite potential into a single actuality, and that the waiting before revelation contains more truth than any revelation itself. It further argues that Wales — Thomas's Wales, and the Wales that the Liminal Mind practice investigates — exists in a structurally equivalent condition: neither fully one thing nor another, holding incompatible states simultaneously, resisting the premature collapse that official heritage narrative demands.

I. The Inverted Prayer

The structure of 'Kneeling' is unusual for devotional poetry in what it refuses. Thomas does not ask God to speak. He begs God not to speak yet. This inversion of the entire logic of petitionary prayer is not poetic paradox or performative humility. It is a precise phenomenological claim about the nature of meaning and the cost of revelation.

*Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.*

R.S. Thomas, 'Kneeling'

Something is lost. Thomas is precise about this. Not that something is deferred, or that something remains imperfect, or that the human vessel is inadequate to carry the divine message without distortion. Something is lost. The loss is ontologically real, and it occurs at the moment of speech, of resolution, of the silence becoming a specific thing rather than everything at once.

The question the poem poses is why a priest — a man who has given his life to the pursuit of divine communication — would resist the arrival of what he has spent that life waiting for. The answer Thomas gives is that he understands what he would be destroying by receiving it.

The priest delays revelation not from doubt but from understanding. He knows what observation costs. He knows that the moment God speaks, every other thing God might have said ceases to exist. The waiting preserves what speech destroys.

II. The Measurement Problem as Theology

In quantum mechanics, a particle exists in superposition until observed — simultaneously occupying all possible states. Only measurement forces collapse into one specific actuality, destroying all other potentials. The electron passes through both slits until we look, then it passes through only one. Before observation: infinite possibility. After observation: singular reality. Schrödinger's cat remains both alive and dead until the box opens.

Thomas discovered this same structure through theology. As long as God remains silent, infinite divine messages exist simultaneously as potential. The silence contains every possible revelation — comfort, challenge, condemnation, blessing, mystery. But once God speaks, even through Thomas as vessel, every other revelation ceases to exist. Only one specific message manifests. Wave function collapse translated into theological terms.

This explains what has long puzzled Thomas's critics: his theology of divine absence. Scholars have struggled with a priest whose poems depict God as silent, distant, and hidden, reading this as spiritual crisis, failed faith, or the peculiar austerity of a difficult personality. But what if absence is not divine abandonment? What if absence is the necessary condition for superposition? God cannot simultaneously speak and remain in infinite potential. Silence preserves multiplicity. Speech destroys it.

The air a staircase for silence. This is not atmospheric description. It is a precise account of the superposition state: the space before the box is opened, before the measurement is taken, before the wave function collapses into the one thing that it will now, irreversibly, have been.

Thomas's God is silent not because God is absent but because Thomas understands that the silence is fuller than any speech. Every possible revelation exists simultaneously in it. The moment God speaks, that fullness ends.

III. The Body as Instrument of Duration

The ritual posture matters. Thomas does not merely think about waiting — he enacts it physically, in stone churches, on cold floors, in the specific discomfort of sustained kneeling. This is not incidental. It is the method.

The physical discomfort of sustained kneeling creates temporal duration that cannot be rushed or abbreviated. Five minutes kneeling feels eternal. Eight minutes creates genuine uncertainty — the temptation to stand, to walk away, to abandon the ritual before the superposition has run its full course. The body enforces waiting. You cannot collapse into resolution prematurely because the body will not allow it.

This is phenomenological method disguised as religious practice, or religious practice that happens also to be phenomenological method. The spare, stone Welsh churches Thomas served — Manafon in the Montgomeryshire hills, Eglwysfach in Ceredigion, Aberdaron at the tip of the Llŷn Peninsula — are instruments of duration. Their cold and silence enforce the waiting that the waiting requires. They resist the comfort that would allow premature resolution.

Thomas's poetic language performs the same function. No romantic Celtic mysticism, no sentimentalised rural nostalgia. Instead: slate, stone, silence, absence, waiting. The spare, harsh register refuses the consolation that would let the superposition collapse. The form enacts the argument. The discomfort is the method.

The stone church is not a backdrop. It is an instrument — a device for producing the conditions under which superposition can be sustained long enough for the waiting itself to become the meaning. Thomas built his practice in spaces that made impatience physically difficult.

IV. Wales in Superposition

Thomas performs his waiting in specifically Welsh spaces, and Wales itself is the larger superposition his poetry inhabits. His Wales exists in perpetual uncertainty — simultaneously ancient and dying, present and absent, real and fading. The Welsh language persists but diminishes. The culture endures but transforms. Wales waits in uncertainty: neither fully independent nor completely absorbed, existing in the quantum space between states.

This is not a problem that Thomas tries to resolve. It is the condition he insists on maintaining. He refuses to collapse Wales into comfortable narrative — either nationalist celebration or elegiac decline. Both exist simultaneously. The superposition must be sustained. His Wales is not the Wales of the tourist board or the heritage industry or the nationalist movement or the Welsh Office; it is a Wales that holds incompatible states at once and refuses to let any single narrative close the question.

Official heritage infrastructure works in the opposite direction. It collapses superposition prematurely, selecting one narrative — Celtic heritage, literary tradition, scenic landscapes — while erasing others: industrial extraction, colonial complicity, class struggle, linguistic erosion, the communities that built the wealth and absorbed the cost. Thomas resists this collapse not through argument but through the sustained practice of refusing resolution.

Wales as not-quite-nation, not-quite-region; present but overlooked; real but invisible — this perpetual liminal condition is not, in Thomas, a problem awaiting political solution. It is a privileged phenomenological position: the vantage point from which the superposition can be observed without being forced to collapse.

Thomas's Wales is neither the Wales that nationalists want nor the Wales that the heritage industry provides. It is a Wales in superposition: holding every incompatible version of itself simultaneously, refusing the resolution that would make it legible and in doing so destroy what it actually is.

V. Contemporary Resonance: Against Algorithmic Certainty

The contemporary resonance of Thomas's method is not incidental. We live in a moment that demands immediate resolution: binary political positions, algorithmic certainty, data-driven decisiveness, the collapsing of every question into a metric that can be optimised. The infrastructure of contemporary attention is designed to prevent the sustained waiting that Thomas's practice requires. Every notification, every scroll, every platform optimised for engagement is a mechanism for forcing premature collapse.

Against this, Thomas offers methodological resistance. He demonstrates that some truths only exist in uncertainty, that observation destroys what it claims to reveal, that the question contains more wisdom than any answer. When he writes 'something is lost', he is describing the fundamental tragedy of knowledge itself: every act of knowing destroys infinite possibility, every observation collapses superposition, every revelation is simultaneously creation and annihilation.

The ritual continues anyway. He keeps kneeling. The waiting persists. Not because resolution will eventually come, but because the waiting itself — the disciplined maintenance of uncertainty, the refusal to force premature collapse, the courage to remain present in not-knowing — constitutes the only authentic engagement with reality's actual structure.

VI. Implications for the Liminal Mind Practice

The connection between Thomas's method and the Quantum Memory project is structural rather than thematic. Quantum Memory is not about R.S. Thomas, and it is not set in his sparse Liminal landscapes. But it is animated by the same resistance to premature collapse that his poetry enacts.

The RFID portrait system at the heart of Quantum Memory is, in one sense, a device for maintaining superposition: the face that appears when a reader is held to the tag is not fixed. It is one instance of a person who existed across time, who held multiple incompatible states simultaneously, who cannot be reduced to a single archival image without something being lost. The installation refuses the premature collapse that the archive demands. It keeps the superposition open.

The Welsh industrial communities that Quantum Memory investigates exist in a structurally identical condition to Thomas's Wales: simultaneously present and absent, real and fading, holding a knowledge that the official record cannot encode and the heritage infrastructure will not preserve. The project's task is to maintain that superposition long enough for it to be witnessed — not to resolve it into a comfortable narrative, but to hold the incompatible truths open together, in the same space, long enough for their full complexity to be felt.

Thomas kept kneeling before an altar in an empty church in a declining parish, waiting for a God he understood would destroy something by speaking. The Quantum Memory installation asks its visitors to hold a tag before a reader in a Miners' Institute, to encounter a face that is both present and gone, and to remain in that uncertainty long enough for the meaning to be in the waiting.

He was never waiting for God to speak. He was recognising that waiting is the encounter — the moment of superposition before collapse, where infinite possibilities exist simultaneously, where meaning resides not in resolution but in the radical uncertainty that precedes it. Quantum Memory is built in that same space.

Note on Sources

The quantum physics framework used in this essay — superposition, wave function collapse, the measurement problem, Schrödinger’s cat — is drawn from standard accounts of quantum mechanics and is applied here as an analytical analogy rather than as a claim that Thomas consciously worked within physics. The argument is that Thomas arrived, through theological and phenomenological inquiry, at a structural understanding that physics later formalised — not that he read Bohr or Heisenberg. The text of ‘Kneeling’ is from Thomas’s *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (Dent, 1993).

Key References

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