“Too clumsily explicit”: Beckett’s excised celestial music

Nowhere is the relationship between archive and text more pivotal than in Beckett’s exploration of the connection between music and spirituality. He frequently discarded detailed references to these aspects of his works, including the hymn ‘Now the Day is Over’ and recurring appearances of the ‘mixed choir of angels’, on the grounds that they were ‘too clumsily explicit’. Yet the traces left behind in the published works raise questions about how far his excised music should really be discounted as detritus.

Through a detailed study of the ‘mixed choir’ in Watt, I argue that Beckett’s excised music occupies an ephemeral space between presence and absence, opening up the published text to the ‘something or nothing’ beneath. The music is present insofar as it is represented on ink and paper in the Archive; but it is also necessarily absent from the published ‘official’ version of the text. This tension allows Beckett to more nearly emulate the ‘whisper of that final music or that silence that underlies All’, exemplified in the ‘enormous pauses’ of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony (Letter to Kaun, 9 July 1937). I explore how far the consignment of music to the Archive enacts a form of Heideggerian vermeiden (‘avoiding’, ‘fleeing’), where the otherworldly/spiritual potential of music in the published text is revealed only by avoiding its expression.

From outside the published or performed work, this excised music haunts the text from which it has been removed, like the fragments of Beethoven’s Largo that play ‘unheard’ in Ghost Trio. It is absent, yet constantly on the verge of appearance from its shadowy place in the manuscript or original script; expectantly anticipated but never arriving, yet always already present in the genesis of the text.