*Beckett's Art of Salvage: Writing and Material Imagination, 1932-1987*, by Julie Bates, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 248 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN 9781107167049

Bowler hats, old boots, greatcoats, ladies’ hats, mourning dresses, beds, rocking chairs, bicycles, wheelchairs, crutches, sticks, pockets, bags, stones: these are the objects that Julie Bates situates at the heart of Samuel Beckett’s ‘art of salvage’. *Beckett's Art of Salvage: Writing and Material Imagination, 1932-1987* focuses on the many incarnations and fates of these fourteen objects, selected by Bates for their particular significance, across a body of work renowned for its diversity. This approach enables Bates to unveil thematic connections between vastly different texts, written at vastly different times and, often, for different media. As it scrutinises the bizarre paraphernalia invoked in many of Beckett’s texts, the book presents an intriguing portrait of a material imagination that, while cultivating the semblance of exhaustion, thrives upon relentless returns to the same ‘poor materials’, putting ‘well-worn things in the hands of characters that have themselves been ruined by neglect and marginalisation’ (220).

Over the course of four chapters, Bates examines what Beckett’s texts tell us about his perspective upon the material world – a material world that is ceaselessly reimagined, as part of a creative process unambiguously reflected in the work’s thematics of salvaging. She shows how the author configured many of his texts around his memories, around his emotions, and around a well-defined array of cherished and well-worn objects that often trigger his characters’ utterances, gestures and thoughts. One of the book’s many distinctive features is that it considers Beckett as part of a community of artists, writers and iconoclasts well-versed in the matter of exile and in the catastrophes of modern history. The links Bates draws between Beckett and Sergei Dovlatov, Nevill Johnson, Elias Canetti, René Magritte, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and W.G. Sebald are inspiring and break the glass wall that commonly seems to separate Beckett from his contemporaries. Through and alongside these carefully-crafted comparisons, the book explores Beckett’s fondness for repetition as well as the limits that he imposed upon the creative motifs that he deemed worth pursuing. Bates also draws attention to his distinctive working habits: she begins her introduction by noting that after 1938 Beckett had only three different studies, all furnished with the bare essentials, and she notes his preference for ‘cheap, common notebooks and paper […], including school copybooks’ that rapidly show signs of deterioration (13).

The Beckett that she uncovers, obsessed with the same ‘poor materials’, comes across as an artist concerned not simply about the concreteness of things, but about raw emotion and the idiosyncrasy of personal memory. The critical interest in Beckettian modes of metawriting and self-referentiality is as old as Beckett’s postwar texts, yet in this book Bates opens up new areas for investigation and gives a fresh and invigorating twist to these important questions. She argues, for example, that ‘the parental memories at the heart of many of Beckett’s works are not vestiges of a deep autobiographical or autographical project that he built up and sought to erase’, but ‘are established piecemeal in his writing by an obsessive use of objects with parental associations’ (16). Chapter 1, ‘Relics’, focuses on the bowler hat (and its variant, the cap) and old boots – ‘salvaged objects that conjure up the vanished worlds of middle-class Protestant Ireland and the larger world of Europe before it was shattered in the twentieth century’ (16). Here as in subsequent chapters, Bates offers fascinating insights into the arcane history of these objects, in a manner that brings out the pertinence of this history to Beckett and his writing practice. Chapter 2, ‘Heirlooms’, focuses on Beckett’s conflicted relation to personal memories of his parents; it demonstrates how Beckett ‘links his characters to his own losses’ (71), and contrasts the greatcoats associated with the realm of the paternal with the ladies’ hats, mourning dresses, beds and rocking chairs tied to memories of the mother. Chapter 3, ‘Props’, focuses on wheelchairs, sticks and crutches – the prosthetics that Beckett’s characters so often need. The closing chapter, ‘Treasures’, focuses on bags and pockets, looking at *Happy Days* and *Malone Dies* in particular detail. Pockets, Bates observes, ‘serve as hidden spaces, miniature stages upon which events of reduced proportion but great importance take place’ (173); bags serve the same function, ‘but are deployed with considerably more ostentation’ (175). The book ends with a discussion of Beckett’s fascination for stone, pebbles and ‘extinct materials’ such as dust.

Many aspects of Bates’s study are anchored in a biographical tradition of scholarship; throughout, she returns to descriptions given in biographies of Beckett and to recollections penned separately by his friends. Some facets of her argument, nonetheless, also respond to a much broader and densely theorised field marked by the growth of scholarship on waste, materiality and memory. Thing theory – the theoretical field that may seem, on the surface, most closely linked to Bates’s topic – does not feature as a prominent framework: for Bates, Beckett’s unremitting concern with exhaustion and the symbiosis between character and thing proves incompatible with many of the arguments advanced by theorists such as Jane Bennett and Bill Brown. Instead, she takes her cue from Bruno Latour’s thinking on archaeology and from Edward Casey’s work on place and memory. Although the book is less concerned about the details of historical context than about the mechanics of Beckett’s imagination, it offers some startling observations about the wider significance of Beckett’s work. Notably, Bates encourages us to think of Beckett’s adoption of ‘poor materials’ as correlating his ‘elective estrangement from authorial fluency by writing in a non-native language or through self-translation’ (66). Through the flotsam of his material imagination, she argues, we can discern a broader commentary on ‘his own contemporary period – the modern Ireland and Europe that vanished during his lifetime’ (5). In his writing, she observes, we are confronted to ‘a lumber room in which the remnants of European culture have been dumped’; to ‘six hundred years of Europe boiled down to the odds and ends of a bourgeois household and music-hall wardrobe’ (21). There are many reasons why, for Bates, ‘[i]t is unlikely that Europe will again produce a writer as immersed in its heritage as Beckett’ (21).

As this brief sketch shows, this is a thought-provoking and original book, which offers a deeply engaging portrait of Beckett and of his work, and anchors into a concrete and highly personal world an artistic enterprise commonly perceived as abstract, ethereal, if not frankly unconcerned about the material world. New readers of Beckett as well as long-standing fans will find plenty of food for thought in this valuable and compelling study.

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