Estragon’s boots in *En attendant Godot* harbor a secret that is less ‘audible’ in its English version. To perceive it, we must follow different threads: a remark made by Beckett to Roger Blin; a commentary by Leslie Hill and one by Dieter Wellershof in their analyses of the writer’s work; Beckett’s avowed intention in composing the play; and the role given, in both textual and scenic details, to the evocation of the two thieves crucified on Golgotha.¹

1. An Obsession with Boots

Beckett who descended from Huguenot émigrés (Knowlson 1996, 6) was quite aware of the French origin of his name. In *Eleutheria*, a character disguised as a spectator jumps upon the stage and, reading the author’s name in the program, pronounces it as ‘Bécquet’ (136). Leslie Hill, recalling this incident, questions the “status of names with respect to the texts they surround” (112). He draws attention to the fact that the word *béquet* or *becquet* has three senses: “something pasted on to a proof, an overlay,” “a male salmon, or a pike,” and “the middle sole in a boot, or the hobnail boot itself.” He adds a fourth sense for the near homophone *becquée*, which is “a ‘beakful’ of food” (Hill, 113).² Actually, the French word, as found in *Harrap’s Standard French and English Dictionary*, first published in 1934 and the most likely source for Beckett, is translated, in boot makers’ jargon, as ‘hobnail.’ The boot itself is not designated. *Pars pro toto?* Perhaps because of its trade-specific nature, this meaning is not found in all dictionaries. However, it figures in the *Trésor de la langue française* (1975) under the heading *cordonnerie* (‘shoe making’), and it is the first meaning given in the *Grand Larousse encyclopédique* (1960). The definition given in French corresponds exactly to the ‘hobnail’ as defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (“heavy-headed nail for bootsoles”) as well as in Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which Beckett would
undoubtedly have consulted given his admiration for its author. The synecdochal transfer extends beyond the boot itself, for, in English at any rate, the ‘hobnail’ is likewise a person. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), after specifying that the short nail with a round head was “used for the bottom of Plough-Men’s shoes,” gives a derived meaning: “A man who wears hobnailed shoes; a rustic, clodhopper, clown” (emphasis added).

In *Eleutheria*, boots are indeed a key element, for they are clearly associated with identity. They come into play at the moment of Victor’s father’s death. That precise moment is an important turning point: The Vitrier has been summoned to repair the window Victor has broken. The symbolic value of broken glass (here a window pane) in the context of a play in which the protagonist suffers from the suffocating atmosphere of his bourgeois identity is obvious. His revolt is thus associated with his violent gesture and with the fact that it is his shoe thrown through the closed window that creates the crisis. The Vitrier has retrieved the shoe and returns it to him, nullifying the young man’s rebellious act and exacerbating his frustration: “On ne peut rien perdre non plus” (71). What is he trying to lose? Victor’s shoes, according to Dougald McMillan, represent his implication in the material world that holds the young man captive (106).

The symbolic role attributed to boots or shoes is not, however, confined to *Eleutheria*. In the labyrinth-like search for meaning in the trilogy, Dieter Wellershoff – in an essay dating from 1963 – signals a kind of Ariadne’s thread formed by a pair of shoes (176). In his essay Wellershof draws attention to a scene in *Malone meurt* in which a man wearing a pair of yellow shoes hits Malone on the head. He raises the question about who could be the author of this crime: “Is it Molloy or Moran who both killed an old man […]? Has the incident now been repeated a third time?” (Wellershof, 176; my translation). The ‘criminal act’ being repeated here, Wellershof maintains, is one in which Malone finally “meets himself” (176). Indeed, the shoes discovered at the scene of the crime are his own. “The yellow shoes which belong to him [Malone] offer a bizarre clue linking all [three] characters, uniting them perhaps in a single one, alluding thus to their hidden identity, to Hermes, messenger of the gods and guide in the underworld” (176; my translation).

The yellow shoes in *Malone meurt* (163) become brown in the English version: “It was then I saw he was wearing brown boots, which gave me such a shock as no words can convey” (Beckett 2010, 2: 265).