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ul. Kościuszki 37,
30-105 Kraków,
Poland,
Tel.: 00 48 12 61 99 506 and 507,
Fax: 00 48 12 61 99 502

Rights Director - Anna Rucińska rucinska@znak.com.pl
Rights Manager - Magdalena Dębowska hajduk@znak.com.pl

Book report

A Treatise on Shelling Beans by

Wiesław Myśliwski

Basic facts

This long novel, written in Polish, is the monologue of an ordinary man in the autumn of his life, as he talks to a stranger one evening while shelling beans. Through stories from his childhood and youth, the old man reveals most of his personal history, with frequent digressions on topics from the mundane to the philosophical, and reflections on people and life. The resulting narrative is extremely readable and engaging, providing entertaining tales as well as food for thought about the big questions of human existence.

Although no place or personal names are ever given, the old man clearly experienced the Second World War in Poland as a child, trained and worked there as an electrician helping to build "a new, better world", then went to live in Western Europe as a saxophone player for some years, before returning to the Polish village of his childhood to be the caretaker for the summer cottages there. He tells a variety of stories in the real speech of a plain man, including comedy and tragedy. His tales reveal much about twentieth-century human experience in this part of the world, and he also philosophises more generally on life, seeming through his narrative to be trying to make sense of it all; following the annihilation of his entire family and his own miraculous survival, he has plainly suffered guilt about being alive, but perhaps ultimately found a reason to exist through art, in the form of saxophone music.

The author

Wiesław Myśliwski was born in Sandomierz, south-eastern Poland, in 1932. He studied Polish literature at the prestigious Catholic University in Lublin before becoming a novelist and playwright. He is known for stories with rural settings, describing the fate of country

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people after the war, when they had no choice but to move to the cities, and lose their traditional village culture. Under the surface, he writes about ordinary people finding their place within history, as it crushes their individuality. During his career his work has become increasingly philosophical, discussing the human condition. It has always featured what he calls "living speech", the actual narrative of real people in the form of a monologue.

This is Myśliwski's fifth novel, in a succession that has marked a development from rural themes concerned with the problems of country dwellers forced by a changing world to move to the city to much broader philosophical reflections on the meaning of life, death, love, good and evil, within the context of absorbing stories about ordinary people enduring a trying historical fate. His novels include: *The Naked Orchard* (1967; a son's loving portrait of his father, a village teacher who has to leave the country and undergo a shift to a different way of thinking), *Stone upon Stone* (1984; as he builds his tomb and prepares for death, a villager recalls his successful past as a brave partisan, and how he then lost the love of his life, leaving him alone with his reflections on the meaning of it all), and *The Horizon* (1996; the most autobiographical of Myśliwski's novels, describing his poor childhood and the towns of his youth), which won Poland's most prestigious literary prize, the Nike, the first year it was awarded.

As one reviewer has noted, "Myśliwski…works on each book for ten years or more, apparently honing and vetting every sentence. In his lengthy novels…there is no room for an accidental word. A work compiled by this method inspires confidence, like something crafted by an old master." In between novels he has also published five plays, and most of his work has been successfully filmed for cinema or television in Poland. *The Naked Orchard* and *Stone upon Stone* have both been published in German (as *Der Nackte Garten* and *Stein auf Stein*, both Berlin-Weimar, Aufbau, 1974 and 1990 respectively).

Main themes and messages

This novel is a dense fabric of stories and ideas. Many of the stories could stand alone and are very readable, though told in the narrator's rambling style, with digressions and interruptions. There is a lot of humour, as well as tragedy, and a wide cast of characters. There is a historical context, though no places or people are ever named, making the narrator's life more universal, the story of an ordinary man tossed by the storms of fate in a war-torn country.

Certain themes echo through the book, imperceptibly giving it the atmosphere of a piece of music as familiar refrains are repeated. Firstly, there are themes within the narrator's life story: his childhood and family, the war, his school, his work as an electrician, his days as a saxophone player, and his encounters with various people.
Then there are philosophical and moral themes: the question of whether life is predestined, or just a series of accidents, and the extent to which we have control over our own fate; the

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idea of loss of faith, including the question of whether it is possible to believe in God after such a terrible war, and the need to believe in something after such devastation, the need to find a meaning in life. Other "human" themes include rebellion, and the question of whether we can rebel against our fate and achieve self-knowledge by doing so.

There are also what might be termed political or historical themes, such as the idea of building a "new, better world" after all the destruction, as a positive reaction. Disaster happens, then everything has to be restored again; even for ordinary people, the world has to make sense. Another theme concerns identity, and how the annihilation of war effaces it; in the communist Poland that emerges after the war, all the apparatchiks wear identical masks.

The author himself identifies one particular scene as key to the moral message of the book. In it, the narrator encounters a man he thinks he recognises, a German of his own age who tells him how, shortly before committing suicide, his father confessed to him that as a soldier taking part in the murder of an entire village, he had found and spared the life of a small boy. At this point in the narrative we have apparently already heard the story from the narrator's perspective, because he has told how as a small boy he hid and survived when German soldiers murdered all his family and burned down their village, though in his account he did not mention the soldier who spared him. But we realise that as the only one to survive, by an amazing stroke of fortune, he feels guilty – he shouldn't be alive, and has had to find justification for his own life ever since. The author also identifies the saxophone as the narrator's salvation, the symbol of art, which gives human life meaning.

Amid some sad tales of war, love and loss, there is a lot of humour in the book, and Myśliwski is very good at writing comedy. The humour is often absurd – such as the scene where the communist official confides his real feelings to his own penis, or when the narrator's eagerness to escape from a man's terrible snoring on a train causes him to lose his treasured hat.

The book is also full of symbolic leitmotifs, recurring like melodies. Though it is not always obvious what each metaphor means, and is perhaps up to the individual reader to choose for himself, many of them are identifiable. Breaking down the ingredients of the intricate mosaic that constitutes the book, we find: **memory** – challenges to the idea of what memory is and how it works, culminating in the idea of memory without experience as the narrator tells of his first meeting with a woman he already knew in memory. His repeated hints that he knows the visitor from somewhere before are another part of this questioning of memory, how and what exactly we remember, or choose to forget. There is also the importance of memory as the only way the dead have of surviving – the narrator remembers the villagers from his childhood, and paints signs to mark their graves. As the narrator tells his own stories and those he has gleaned from others, there is also the idea that memory is collective, and one man's life is a sum of pieces from many others. **Photographs** are connected with memories in this book too, as a supposedly faithful record of a memory, but one that is just as unreliable as the human mind. For example, the German soldier's son

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claims to have an impossible photo of himself and his father looking at each but also facing the camera; he searches his wallet for it but cannot find it. Another photograph features in a dream, and again is a distortion of the actual, dream-distorted scene it seems to record. **Dreams** are thematic in the book, as yet another inconsistent, real but inconclusive factor contributing to human memory and understanding. The narrator's grandmother could interpret dreams and seemed to hold the keys to understanding life, whereas his grandfather, following terrible experiences of war, was unable to dream at all.

More tangible leitmotifs include **music and musical instruments**; as above, they symbolise art, which gives human life a meaning. Less instantly recognisable symbols includes **hats**; two stories centre around trying to find the right hat for oneself, so perhaps wanting to wear a particular hat could be interpreted as wanting an individual identity; meanwhile, when the narrator is told the hat he wants cannot be removed from the shop window display, we could understand him to mean that the (in this case) communist monolith tries to force people into accepting what they are given, not making their own choice. **Trains** feature in the book, perhaps as a symbol of transition. **Snoring** comes up several times in comic contexts; another motif involves **shaving** with a cut-throat razor. **Shelling beans** could also be said to be a metaphor: when the visitor arrives saying he has come to buy beans, and it emerges that they need to be shelled, there is an excuse for the narrator and the visitor to spend time together shelling them, while the narrator tells stories from his life, reliving a village tradition that Myśliwski himself remembers from his childhood, when everyone contributes stories while shelling beans.

Style and language

Myśliwski's work is characterised by what he calls "living speech", and all his novels are written as a monologue delivered by a single narrator. Regarding speech as a crucial tool for a man's ability to construct his own image of the world and make sense of existence, his aim is to write the way ordinary, uneducated people really do speak, full of asides, changes of theme and returns to earlier threads. "Language give us our humanity," he says, "it is what constitutes our imagination, thoughts and feelings. It is not just for communication but gives us our inimitable individuality." When as a small boy the narrator is traumatised by witnessing his family's murder, for several years he loses the power of speech. In fact he is generally not much of a talker – in the stories he tells from his life, he is the listener, rather than the speaker; the present outpouring to the visitor is the culmination of his experience

The apparently sparse narrative style is packed with detail, with short sentences building up an intricate mosaic. In translation, it needs to be rendered in similarly natural language. The use of monologue could be equated with a sort of confession; clearly it is important for the (childless) narrator to pass on his story and experience to someone.

However, the main narrator does not provide the only voice in the book. Within his narrative there is a lot of conversation, and stories within stories, some told by men and

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women he talks to (though reported by him). Like the time and place, most of the characters are nameless, except for the mysterious Robert, who invited the narrator back to Poland from abroad and then dropped him. The visitor to whom the narrator addresses his stories is also very mysterious and has stirred a lot of speculation among the critics. His identity could be interpreted in various ways, at the reader's discretion, so he could be death, an angel, a devil, the narrator's alter ego or earlier self, whoever; Myśliwski himself says he doesn't know who he is, but the point of his appearance is to give the narrator a mirror to reflect himself in, someone to pass the story on to, in order to give his life sense and meaning. Occasionally the narrator seems to repeat a question asked by the visitor, and he often tries to place the visitor in his memory as if he has met him before, so we never entirely forget his presence, even though he is such a passive foil for the narrator.

Conclusions

This book is very readable and entertaining on several levels. By turns it is funny and thought provoking, full of good stories as well as offering universal ideas about life. It is also highly complex and intelligently written, and hard to summarise. Ultimately, Myśliwski's view of the world is optimistic – despite disaster, human beings will always do their best to rebuild and make sense of it, and show amazing resilience. Language offers them a means, and art a reason.

The universal value of the book is heightened by the author's reluctance to specify places, people and events by name or date. We know the book is about Poland in the twentieth century, but it transcends its own setting and is not at all restricted by it. The narrator is sympathetic, we can relate to him and we never lose our liking for him at any stage of his life story. Many of his experiences are familiar to all of us. Although his life has been blighted early on by a tragedy that threatened to be overwhelming, and his efforts to survive, preserve the past and come to terms with it are essentially positive and life-affirming. Perhaps the one gaping hole in his life is his lack of a successor; he and his wife parted because he didn't want to have children, so now he is passing on his story to the visitor – who may or may not be a total stranger, if he exists at all.

Brief plot summary

Chapter One: it's autumn; an old man lives in a village full of summer holiday homes near a forest and a lake. He stays all year as caretaker for the place, while other people are only there in the season. An unidentified man has come to buy beans, and as they spend the evening shelling the beans, they talk – or rather the old man does almost all the talking. (The other man never actually speaks.) The old man paints memorial plaques for people buried in the woods, whom he remembers from his childhood. He tells the story of his neighbours who made sculptures, introducing digressions on the healing properties of honey and herbs.

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Next he tells how he first came here in the dark, looking for his friend Robert's house, and almost ran two men over in road in fog. Then he tells how he got his dogs - he found one of them tethered up and left to die, and saved the second one from being drowned. He describes how his family used to shell beans together in his childhood – parents, grandparents, sisters – while telling stories.

Chapter Two: Shelling beans is an art, there's a technique to it, says the narrator. He tells the story of Robert, whom he met when he played the saxophone in a restaurant band abroad, and who invited him to visit him in Poland. Robert wrote him effusively friendly letters for several years, insisting that he come; when he finally did, Robert's attitude to him was quite different, inexplicably cold and resentful. Robert brought him to this place, and then the narrator revealed that it was where he came from in the first place – everyone had died in the war but him. He tried to leave again, but decided to buy a house and stayed for good; instead, it was Robert who left. Robert's only contact now is to send money – if it is from him – each month for maintenance.

Chapter Three: The narrator says he's sure he's met the visitor before – he keeps trying to place him, but never does. He talks about the summer visitors, and how he keeps things in order here. He talks about dreams, saying his grandmother could interpret them; he recounts memories of his grandparents, his grandfather's war experiences and how he was wounded, then shared a meal with an enemy soldier. The narrator describes how he helped a woman living in one of the holiday homes who had been beaten up by husband.

Chapter Four: The narrator tells how his Uncle Jan gave him a harmonica, the beginning of his musical career. He describes the workers' school he attended as an orphan after the war, featuring a drunken music teacher and some battered instruments. The narrator was given professional training as electrician, where the pupils did forced labour, and where he started playing the saxophone. Later he worked on building sites and up telegraph poles, connecting the lines to bring electricity to the countryside. He tried saving money for a sax, while his fellow workers drank their wages away. (See extract.) But a currency devaluation ruined his dream and he tried to hang himself but was rescued by ghost of his uncle, a suicide.

Chapter Five: The narrator starts telling a story about an incident that occurred at his school when the boys watched a film featuring a man trying on lots of hats, while his female companion takes little interest. The detailed narrative is interwoven with childhood memories of Christmas at home with his family.

Chapter Six: Continuing the school story, the narrator describes how a rebellion broke out when the power failed and the film was interrupted. The boys caused a lot of damage and attempted to hang the drunken music teacher, whose peculiar compliance defused their rage. (See extract.)

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Chapter Seven: The narrator tells the story of a priest who worked on the building sites with him as a welder, and of a girl who served food in the works canteen and fell desperately in love with a foreign contract worker; the priest conducted a secret wedding for them, but then the relationship soured, the priest was killed falling from the scaffolding, the foreign worker deserted his "wife" and she lost her job, but continued to hang around the building site waiting for him to come back.

Chapter Eight: The narrator describes the types of men who worked on the building sites and how truths about them emerge after a few drinks. He tells how he played the saxophone in the works band, and how the disabled, one-armed warehouseman who used to play the saxophone gave him private lessons but wanted him to leave the band for fear it would ruin his playing. In a story within the story, amid heavy security the band goes to play at a top-secret masked ball for high-up communist officials, where in the toilet the narrator overhears a bigwig drunkenly addressing his political doubts to his own penis.

Chapter Nine: A diatribe on shaving and using a cut-throat razor leads back to the story of the eccentric warehouseman who let the narrator play his valuable saxophone. Unable to cope with the man's insistence that he leave the band, the narrator stopped going to see him. Finally the warehouseman bizarrely tried to give him money for the valuable saxophone, insisting that if, despite having a talent that made it rightfully his, he wasn't going to play it, he would buy it back off him. This strange logic led the narrator back to his lessons with the warehouseman, until his death. After that the narrator played the saxophone in a ruined church and helped the organist to recover the organ from the rubble.

Chapter Ten: The narrator goes back to his childhood memory of hiding in an underground larder when soldiers came, shots were fired, and through a chink in the door he witnessed the murder of his entire family and all the other villagers. Finally he was found by a girl working as a nurse for the partisans in the forest, and became her companion. He had lost the power of speech, so she read him Andersen's Fairy Tales and charged him with the task of keeping the partisans away while she bathed naked in the stream, which he did not fulfil well. Finally she was killed by an enemy bullet.

Chapter Eleven: Once again saying that the stranger looks familiar to him, the narrator tells how while living abroad he passed a man in the street who looked familiar, they nodded to each other, but realised they had never met before, then went to a café to talk. The man told him of another man who made daily visits to this café and insisted on sitting at the same table, as if he were waiting for someone who never came. Meanwhile the narrator was feeling ill, and digresses on his illness, how he met his wife, and how they parted because he didn't want to have children. He returns to the story of the man in the café, who told him how his father had returned from the war very withdrawn, depressed and unapproachable. Finally the father summoned him to tell him how during his army service he had seen a child hiding in a

storeroom – presumably it can only be the narrator, although in his own telling he never mentioned the soldier – but didn't kill it. After making this confession to his son, the father had then killed himself while shaving. The man then searches in his wallet for a strange photograph, which he says shows himself and his father, looking at each other, but also facing the camera; he fails to find it.

Chapter Twelve: Indirectly confirming the man in the café's story, the narrator tells the visitor how the soldier who found the storeroom fired a full magazine into the family's beloved pet pig. The pig was intelligent and friendly, often following family members on their way about the village. The narrator went back to the café but never saw the man there again. He describes the animals in the local forest, and a strange ex-hunter who used to live there and had a large collection of trophies. In another memory from school, he describes betting games the boys used to play with matchboxes, and how one loser, to avoid the humiliation of being slave to the winners, fell into the latrine to make himself unapproachable. Then he tells how he himself was ill after the nurse died in the forest, and was nursed by a forester's wife, angering her by trying on her dead husband's hat in a room he was forbidden to enter. Seeking amusement, he went to sell fruit to the passengers on the local trains, until a man he met on the train took him to the school, where he then stayed and was trained as an electrician.

Chapter Thirteen: The narrator describes how he went to the city to buy a hat, and met a strange hat shop owner who refused to sell him a brown felt hat from the shop window display. After a lengthy conversation dominated by the hat shop owner, the narrator fixed the electricity in the shop for the man, who insisted the hat in the window would be too big for him, but finally took it from the display and gave it to him. It was much too big but he took it anyway, with newspaper stuffed inside to make it fit.

Chapter Fourteen: On his way home, the narrator travelled on a very crowded train, where he was disturbed by monstrous snoring. He digresses with a story of how as a very young man he lived at a widow's house with several men who snored, and how she invited him into her bed to get some peace, but disturbed him even more by talking non-stop and planning to seduce him. He returns to the story of the crowded train, telling how in his desperation to get away from the snoring man he left the precious hat behind, and was ridiculed by the railwaymen at the station when he tried to run after it. (See extract.)

Chapter Fifteen: The narrator reflects on the sum of his life, and accepts it for what it is. He describes a fisherman who comes to the village out of season but never seems to catch anything. He tells of a strange dream he had about a crowd of women in elaborate mourning outfits standing over piles of brushwood in which the village men are dying. The narrator tries to recognise the women, but cannot. A priest appears and takes an instant photograph of the scene, in which the women's outfits are brightly coloured. The women prevent the

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narrator from seeing exactly who is dying under the brushwood. He wonders what this dream can mean.

Chapter Sixteen: It is evening now, and the narrator is still sure he knows the visitor from somewhere. He tells how nowadays he cannot play the saxophone as his hands are too stiff. He talks of human memory and its fragility, and says he doesn't believe life is predestined, but happens accidentally. The saxophone was everything to him – it allowed him to go abroad and leave behind the memories he wanted to escape, though once he could no longer play, he found he had never really got away from them. He tells stories of sanatoria where he has taken cures in his life, and about a woman he sat opposite on a train whom he seemed to recognise but couldn't place. Soon after, he shared a park bench with her, and then met her a third time, when they shared a café table. This time he spoke to her, but she strongly denied the other two encounters had ever taken place. They became close friends and had an on-off affair. He reckons his memory of her dated from before meeting her, instead of the usual way around. The book ends when the narrator has to go on his evening round of the village, checking that all is safe and well.