The Master of Time

Antoni Lange

Introductory Note and Translation by David Preece

Antoni Lange (1862-1929) was a prolific and versatile writer, philosopher, journalist and translator. Expelled from Warsaw University by the Tsarist authorities in 1880 for his patriotic activities, he completed his studies in Paris, and remained in that city until Poland re-established its independence in 1918.

Lange lived a life of great success, influence and artistic innovation, including in the field of science fiction. "The Master of Time" ("Władca czasu") is taken from the short-story collection *In the Fourth Dimension* (*W czwartym wymiarze*), published in 1912.[1] Sadly, in his latter days Lange reacted to his success by becoming sceptical, pessimistic and hermitic, the new Avant-garde generation criticised and undermined him, and he died in isolation, destitution and obscurity.

'The Master of Time' combines in a pleasant way hard science fiction and metaphysical concerns. Despite the use of allegedly superior Hindu wisdom as a justification for its *novum*, this has a natural (a plant from which a substance endowed with extraordinary proprieties is taken), rather than supernatural character. With it, a scientist is able to observe in accelerated time thousands of years of evolution on a microscopic world. This is a truly alien domain, being mostly free from the anthropomorphism usual in science fiction back then and still today, thus demonstrating Lange's remarkable speculative and world-building imagination.

---

1 The Polish version of "The Master of Time," along with the entirety of *In the Fourth Dimension*, can be found online at the website www.wolnelektury.pl. This text, which formed the basis for our translation, was taken from the second edition of *In the Fourth Dimension*, published by *Książka*, Krakow, 1912.

Antoni Lange

The Master of Time

On Thursday, during his lunch break, Professor Jan Kanty Szelest returned home at around 1 pm, where the concierge handed him a letter and a small parcel left by the postman. Both letter and parcel bore Indian postmarks, and had been sent by Symforion Larysz.

Larysz was a renowned scientist who had set off for India a year earlier to study the psychophysics of the Brahmins and related matters. He was known in the scientific world mainly as the inventor of a new microscope known as the metamicroscope. Even the finest microscopes cannot magnify objects to more than 1,500 to 2,000 times their size. A body 0.0001 millimetres in length thus attains a size of 0.15 to 0.2 mm.

Larysz's metamicroscope was built in such a way that, thanks to a complex series of convex and concave mirrors connected to an enhanced microscope, an object appeared in the eyepiece magnified to a million times its size, as if it were a metre long.

Professor Szelest studied botany and researched the mysteries of plant structure; he was particularly interested in the circulation of liquids, cell development and the phenomenon of growth. To glimpse growth in action, to perceive its inner essence, penetrate its manifestations – this was Szelest's dream. The Professor greeted Larysz's metamicroscope with boundless enthusiasm, but the apparatus did not solve certain difficulties; to attain the objectives Szelest had set himself, it would be necessary to control time; but how could one become its master? How could one stretch a moment into infinity? In a word, to achieve with the category of time what the microscope had achieved with the category of space? Szelest and Larysz had held forth on these issues at length on more than one occasion.

Concerning the nature of time, Larysz had his own personal, albeit not altogether clear views, and he hoped that Indian psychophysics would fill some of the gaps in his thinking. He had been planning a trip to India for some time, and when this finally came to fruition, he declared that he would immediately inform Szelest of any interesting discoveries. For this reason, Szelest eagerly seized the letter, and hurried to open the parcel. Inside was a small bottle, containing one hundred grams of red liquid, the colour of cherry juice. It had a white label with something written in Indian script that Szelest was unable to read, but below was written in Latin letters: *Anehaspati*.

He opened the letter:

"Dear Jan, finally I can send you good news about our business. Mainly thanks to a piece of good fortune.

Do you remember our Indian colleague from Paris, Mr Rajendralal-Mitra? He is a man as thoroughly grounded in all areas of European knowledge as he is in the ancient wisdom of the Brahmins. It cannot be denied that while Europe has made great technical achievements, it has neglected the mysteries of the human soul. So it is not surprising that when it comes to knowledge of psychological phenomena, we are simply children compared to the bottomless and unbounded knowledge of the Brahmins in this field.

Arriving in the city of Hastinapur, I was fortunate enough to meet Lalamitra, who in fact devotes himself mainly to political matters. Yet thanks to him I was able to make the acquaintance of several Brahmins, such as Nisikanta, Chandraloka, Ramasita and others, men in all ways worthy of the highest respect, both for their virtue and for their wisdom. These people have deeply pondered the nature of time. It is a category entirely sepa-

The Master of Time

rate from that of space, while remaining in close communion with it. Time has not only internal, but also external qualities. If we read in Indian literature that such and such a holy man lived for 10,000 years, this means only that he was able to extend an hour for hundreds of years; thanks to the power of his spirit, he multiplied time at will and increased hundredfold the extent of his life, giving it incredible intensity. According to Indian wisdom, today and yesterday and tomorrow – these are all the same. One minute, engulfed by the power of the spirit, means the same as a hundred years; conversely, a hundred years, when lived as by a plant or mineral, mean as much as one minute. Therefore, the extension of time lies within our power, which is known to the Hindus, and, as I recall, Lalamitra told us that they even possess a certain mysterious plant known as the master of time, which accomplishes by chemical means what others attain through internal refinement. The Brahmins therefore have two ways of extending and increasing time's power, taking control of it, and finally stepping beyond its bounds.

The first method, the more noble, is accessible only to those who achieve the greatest spiritual perfection; through the long cultivation of our spiritual strength, time will stop at our command, retreat to ancient yesterdays or flow into unknown tomorrows; it will coalesce entire centuries into the blink of an eye, or on the contrary stretch one minute into long centuries; eventually, time disappears completely at our command, and we stand entirely outwith its perception; in other words, we achieve immortality. The second method, the lower one, is based on physiological processes, namely the consumption of a certain berry. This method, Nisikanta told me, was, while not enduring, the most appropriate for us thick-skinned, meat-eating Europeans; we will only come to understand the first method a thousand years from now.

In the company of several Brahmins, I set off for the Himalaya in search of the plant. It is a grass known as anehaspati, meaning the Lord, the master of time; it somewhat resembles our chastetree, agnus castus, and produces small, beautifully coloured berries, similar to nertera depressa. They have a slightly sour taste. Three or four berries are sufficient to transform 15-20 minutes of our ordinary time into hundreds or thousands of years – almost instantaneously.

A very rare plant, it is found only at the peaks of two mountains named Tatravanta and Matravanta, at an altitude of 10-12,000 metres. The ascent is beautiful, but steep and perilous. However, my Brahmin guides led me safely to the summit, where I gathered an excellent supply of anehaspati. Following my return to Hastinapur, I consumed the plant on several occasions in the form of its berries, and found its effect simply wonderful. Through mechanically stretching time, you perceive 4-5 thousand times more phenomena than usual; or rather you break down one phenomenon into 4-5 thousand separate moments, and the whole takes on entirely new and unexpected forms, entirely different from our normal perception.

Microscopic research with the aid of anehaspati opens up worlds of hitherto unknown mysteries. I am sending you the plant in syrup form, as I am afraid that the berries could lose their potency during such a long transit. The syrup is durable, although of course not as powerful as the fresh plant. Take no more than 10-12 drops for one experiment, preferably with a glass of good Burgundy wine. I warn you that after ingestion, you will lose consciousness for one or two minutes; however, after that you may begin your research feeling as if your soul has been renewed. Be healthy, and write to me in Hastinapur with the results of your experiment. Rajendra-Lalamitra sends you cordial bows, as do my Brahmin friends, who know you from my stories. S. Larysz".

Professor Szelest was stunned. He already

The Master of Time

felt like the master of time, and was eager to take 10 drops of the liquid immediately, but he gathered his composure. — Calm, calm! — he implored himself, and first of all prepared his microscope and adjusted the eyepiece. He then began to choose among his preparations, looking for the most appropriate. He had various moulds and fungi, preserved in paraffin; he had bacilli, micrococcales, spirochaetes; he had *Labouleniales*, invisible mosses that bloom on the bodies of water beetles, and others. Finally, he also had a golden-green lichen he had discovered himself on fuchsia flowers, and which he named after a woman once beloved and lost too soon — *Vandamaria Szelesti*.

It was this lichen therefore which the professor chose to study. He placed the slide with the preparation in the microscope, set the mirrors and focused the eyepiece.

He lowered the blinds in the laboratory, and immediately saw through the lens an image that for some reason today seemed hazy. The image, about a metre in size, comprised an accumulation of watery-green spheres with golden nuclei; glassy juices flowed energetically through the cells, glittering with colour; then everything became dim.

The professor set his camera and took a photograph. Then finally he began to prepare himself for his new and unfamiliar work. He took a new specimen of *Vandamaria*, and placed it under the microscope. In ceremonial mood, he drank 12 drops of the liquid sent to him from India, then waited. In the first moments he did not notice anything, but soon everything darkened, and he felt as if he was falling into a chloroform sleep. However, he was conscious enough to be aware of his state of mind; he felt as if some new fluid was developing within it; like he was the same as before, but at the same time somehow different.

Later, Szelest would name this fluid *multiplicator temporis*. Looking around, he felt rather than saw that the world was still; for a moment, our scientist found himself in absolute darkness and unconsciousness.

He woke at once, more focused in spirit than ever before. He felt a new power in him, an intense sense of a new, fourth dimension – time.

He looked at his watch: it read one o'clock and two minutes, 12 seconds, 5 thirds, and he quickly noted this down.

In the eyepiece he saw the same image as before, but soon the fog dispersed, revealing its secrets, and the details became ever clearer.

What he thought was cellular plasma was actually some sort of greenish-silver nebula, swirling around its axis with incredible speed. Suddenly this nebula flared purple and collapsed into a number of smaller and larger spheres; one of these, in the centre, was about the size of a Catanian orange, golden-crimson in colour, and even cast some kind of rays out into the dark laboratory. The others, which were less bright, but still radiant, with a greenish tint, began to circle around the large red sphere, each on its own elliptical path.

The light of those spheres faded and went out, while the orange one continued to shine. As they circled, these spheres turned first one, then the other face towards the orange sphere; when one was lit, the other disappeared into darkness. One particular sphere, the greenest, attracted Szelest's attention.

He turned a mirror of the microscope so that the other spheres, along with the orange central globe, disappeared, and only one remained, which Szelest named Mea[1]; it now filled the entire screen of the eyepiece. It was blueish, as if surrounded by an ethereal film. The sphere was revolving constantly on its axis, and was one moment bright, as if made of gold, and then once again greenish-grey.

[1] Feminine form of the possessive 'my'/'mine' in Latin. *(Translator's note.)*

The Master of Time

The closer the professor examined the movements of the sphere, the more clearly he remarked enormous upheavals on its surface; from time to time smoke and flames burst from its interior, then a colourless liquid again poured down like a waterfall from the film surrounding the sphere.

On the face of the sphere, Szelest distinguished two surfaces: a harder, greenish-brown one, which he called 'land', and a blueish liquid, which he called 'water'. Suddenly a pale powder resembling flour began to fall from the film, and the 'water' took on a glassy aspect. The eruptions of flame died down, and what Szelest called land and sea for some time became calm.

In a moment of inspiration, he devised a method for counting the revolutions of the sphere, and calculated that four thousand years had passed since he first saw it in the glow of its large orange neighbour, and seven thousand years since he first saw the *Vandamaria* nebula.

Mea had now fully taken form. The glassy surface again became liquid, the white powder disappeared and the sphere became covered in green moss and lichen of incredible forms; in the transparent sea wonderful creatures appeared, doubtlessly alive, similar to bacilli and rotifers. Others began to scamper around in the shadow of the moss and ferns, while still others flew through the air. Naturally the professor could not but consider these the flora and fauna of Mea.

At this point, Szelest deftly fine-tuned the microscope and a large part of the sphere disappeared; all that remained was a section enlarged to a metre in size. It was seemingly still. Peering closer, the professor could make out a landscape in which one could distinguish (to use geographical terms) a seashore, cliffs, forests, wilderness. Thousands of living organisms roamed these spaces, consuming each other, fighting, multiplying, growing and dying. Generation followed generation, years and centuries flowed past, and this world grew more and more colourful and full of new phenomena.

Among the inhabitants of Mea there appeared a creature, similar to a lizard, which suddenly began to walk on its two hind legs, and used its front limbs to fight with others. This peculiar kangaroo (*Baccilus bipes Szelesti*) appeared in various colours: red, yellow, black, white and blue. Szelest noted that this tiny comma, which jumped like a flea and pulled moss and ferns from the ground with its front limbs, fought with all the other creatures in water, in the forests and in the air. What is more, these lizards joined together according to colour and fought fierce wars even among themselves.

The white herd consumed the black, the blue consumed the red and so on. Yet these bacilli worked with incredible energy, building something resembling an anthill. Having excavated some kind of bright metal, they began chopping at the forests and rocks, building prismatic clay houses (like termites), and set out to sea in tiny boats.

Soon, Mea itself began to change in many places; the forests disappeared, and an artificially cultivated mould appeared in the clearings. The anthill seemed to be surrounded with fortifications. These lizards, as we know, did not live in harmony with each other, and following the example of how the ant masters the aphid, the white herd kept the blacks like aphids, and the reds likewise dominated the blues. Suddenly the white herd moved in great numbers against the reds, and a terrible war raged between them for long years. Thousands died, both white and red; eventually the reds met the same fate as the blacks, and the blues took the place of the reds in that country. Now the reds and blacks could be seen meeting in secret; they then attacked the whites and blues, and a terrible slaughter ensued. Now blacks and blues reigned like ants, and white and blue served them like aphids.

There was one among the whites with a

The Master of Time

shining golden head, who moved amid the whites, the blacks and the blues, telling them something... (It is unfortunate, as it seems certain these beings had their own language, that no microphone exists that would be able to capture and transmit it to us!) From a quivering of the atmosphere it could be seen that the bacillus was crying out in rage; a few others of various colours stood by the golden-headed one, but the remaining herd, armed with shining pins, rushed at them and their leader – and in the blink of an eye, hacked them to pieces, and cut off the golden head, which they fixed to the end of a long pin and carried around the city.

This image gave Szelest a heavy heart. He was close to tears over this beautiful golden head of some advanced bacillus, murdered by barbarians. He no longer wanted to see such horror.

He adjusted the microscope and once again saw the entire sphere of Mea through the eyepiece. He noticed straight lines across its surface, which at first brought to mind the canals on Mars. Here and there metal wires could be seen, along which moved some kind of boxes on tiny wheels. Numerous boats sailed the seas, carrying lizards of various colours. The number of anthills increased greatly, but in many places a dusting of white powder could be seen. Particularly near the poles, considerable areas were as if covered in flour and glass. The lizards left these regions in increasing numbers, moving toward the equator. Recently flourishing forests vanished, anthills fell into ruin, and an increasingly bitter fight for survival raged among the bacilli. Thousands of creatures perished in the snow and ice, including the once-haughty rulers of the globe.

The once-radiant light that fell on Mea from its large orange neighbour was becoming ever paler, and as it turned, the tiny world became almost completely dark. Szelest quickly made a calculation, and saw that thirty thousand years had passed...

He adjusted the mirrors, and once again saw the original image with the large orange sphere in the centre, but it was no longer crimson as before (i.e. 30,000 years previously); it was now pale yellow, gradually fading to whitish-grey, then carbon-grey, and finally quite black. Night now reigned in this world.

Szelest watched with horror as the circling of the spheres around the central black globe continued for some time, but then stopped – and then each of them dropped into the abyss, crashing together. Darkness filled the screen, and the professor could have suspected that something had broken in the microscope and the image had disappeared due to a crack in the slide. But then suddenly – four thousand years later – in the very centre of the screen flashed a silver eye, which seemed to re-ignite the internal fire of these collapsed suns and planets – and the white-gold, dense, liquid mass began to turn once more.

One might describe it as the palingenesis of the worlds of the dead.

Seventy-two thousand years had passed. A new age of existence had begun.

Szelest was enchanted, ready to pray to Brahma for the grace he had bestowed on Larysz.

However, in the very moment the cosmic revival had begun, following its disappearance in that terrible catastrophe, the entire scene faded and froze and through the eyepiece Szelest saw just an ordinary enlarged view of *Vandamaria*; a plexus of rounded cells with shining nuclei, filled with a pale green liquid.

The effect of the *Anehaspati* had ceased.

Szelest looked at his watch: it read two o'clock and 32 minutes, 51 seconds and 38 thirds.

The entirety of this cycle, encompassing 72,000 years, from the formation to the annihilation of a vast system of worlds, had taken place in 20 minutes, 14 seconds and 33 thirds.