

STANISŁAW LEM

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

FOREWORD BY
SETH SHOSTAK

translated by Michael Kandel



HIS MASTER'S VOICE

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Seth Shostak vii

**EDITOR'S NOTE BY
PROFESSOR THOMAS V. WARREN 1**

PREFACE	3
CHAPTER 1	25
CHAPTER 2	37
CHAPTER 3	45
CHAPTER 4	61
CHAPTER 5	95
CHAPTER 6	107
CHAPTER 7	117
CHAPTER 8	127
CHAPTER 9	139
CHAPTER 10	153
CHAPTER 11	161
CHAPTER 12	173
CHAPTER 13	181
CHAPTER 14	213
CHAPTER 15	219
CHAPTER 16	227

FOREWORD

What would happen if scientists picked up a transmission from a distant race of aliens? Would we ever be able to decipher its meaning?

That's the premise and puzzle of *His Master's Voice*. Surprisingly, despite being a work of fiction, the scenario posited by author Stanisław Lem could play out for real, and before mid-century.

When this novel was written, a new scheme for finding proof of technically advanced extraterrestrials had debuted. SETI, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, used radio telescopes—large antennas—to hunt for signals that would be proof that someone was out there. While humans couldn't rocket to other star systems, SETI was a scientifically based method for discovering cosmic company light-years away.

These experiments, which have proceeded in fits and starts for the past sixty years, have been steadily increasing in both sensitivity and speed. It's entirely conceivable they will succeed in finding a signal coming from beings at least as clever as *Homo sapiens* within a few decades. Lem was well aware of SETI, and those efforts give his book credible support.

In *His Master's Voice*, Peter Hogarth, a professor of mathematics, narrates his experience as a member of a select research team convened by the US government to puzzle out

an unexpected signal from deep space. While at first seeming to be nothing more than random noise, characteristics of the signal lead the novel's protagonists to suspect that it might be a message.

Unlike SETI, Lem's scientists don't pore through data collected by conventional telescopes—either those sensitive to light or to radio waves. Rather, the signal is from the rattle of cosmic neutrinos—high-energy, nearly massless particles that waft at enormous speed through the universe. While a few researchers have proposed that these ghostly, smaller-than-atom particles might be used for interstellar signaling, no SETI searches have ever attempted to find neutrino broadcasts. To a large degree, this is a consequence of the difficulty of detecting neutrinos. To sense them requires enormous devices. As an example, the University of Wisconsin's Ice Cube experiment, situated beneath the snowy landscape of the South Pole, relies on a cubic kilometer block of ice to intercept and register these elusive particles. Despite its size, it detects only a handful of the billion trillion neutrinos that pass through the block every second.

Unwieldy and inefficient detectors are a technical drawback that progress in engineering might someday ameliorate. But that aside, there's no doubt that communicating with neutrinos could have its plus points, ones foreseen by Lem. Because they penetrate almost anything without the slightest perturbation—including our own Earth—one needn't point a telescope in any particular direction to study these tiny particles. They come at us from all directions, including straight down.

This makes Lem's story more feasible, if futuristic. But his concern is less with the technology of discovery than with its consequences. If there's actually a "message from the stars,"

how could it be decoded? This is not a trivial problem with a self-evident solution. As proof, note that there have been many academic papers and conferences to discuss what information we should send to putative aliens. But few in the science community have seriously addressed the matter of decoding a received signal. That's a far harder problem.

But hard or easy, decoding would be on the agenda. Any deliberate broadcast from the stars would surely have a message. It wouldn't be an empty, useless whistle in the stellar forest. After all, such a sterile whine would be dauntingly expensive, especially if it was intended to reach all parts of the galaxy. In Lem's story, the amount of energy required to produce the neutrino signal is reckoned to be equal to the luminous output of the Sun or more. It would be an astounding waste, even for profligate aliens, if there were no content, no message. Far more likely would be that the signal carries meaning—some instruction, for instance. Or an invitation to action. Perhaps even a warning. In all these cases, the message would be important for its recipients to understand.

So the motivation of the scientists in this tale to decode the bits stored on miles of computer tape is strong. But there's a caveat. It's possible that the message is a mirage—that what's been recorded is only the senseless hiss of natural processes, a meaningless hum from the machinery of Nature.

This possible scenario has considerable precedent in real life. At the time *His Master's Voice* was first published, British astronomers were puzzling over some rhythmically repeating radio emissions coming from the sky. They whimsically referred to the source of these mysterious signals as LGMs, or "Little Green Men." It was believed that any signal so regular must be the work of intelligent beings.

It wasn't true. Eventually, these transmissions were proved to be entirely natural phenomena: the insensate ticking of rapidly rotating, dead stars now called pulsars. Such incidents—and there have been many—are both a warning and an undercurrent to the deliberations made by Peter Hogarth as he wrestles with the problem of understanding whether a signal bearing the hallmarks of intelligence might, in fact, be no more than the inanimate staccato from an as-yet unknown astronomical process.

The inventive and cerebral Lem is careful to point out that distinguishing between these two possibilities compels his protagonists to deal with considerations that are generally irrelevant to the natural sciences. If the recorded data really have a creator, then it's necessary to ponder what motive prompted their transmission. This is significantly different from, for example, figuring out the behavior of atoms, where a physicist needn't question intent.

In the real world, informal protocols exist to serve as a guide in case SETI trips across a signal. However, the advice they offer is simple, straightforward, and bereft of any suggestions on how to decode the transmission. *His Master's Voice*, despite being fiction, gives us a deeper look at what would follow an actual SETI detection. Lem deftly anticipates the inevitable ambiguities, the personal conflicts, and even the inescapable government paranoia.

Would the discovery of an apparent message in the patter of neutrino noise lead to enlightenment or only to an endless enigma? In *His Master's Voice*, the clear mind of one of science fiction's greatest practitioners explores an unprecedented discovery, one that might offer an opportunity to glimpse the incandescent wisdom of intelligence millions or billions of

years more advanced than ourselves. Such a discovery would be both electrifying and frightening. And it could change from fiction to fact tomorrow.

Seth Shostak

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HIS MASTER'S VOICE

EDITOR'S NOTE

The manuscript was found among the papers of the late Professor Peter E. Hogarth. That great mind, alas, was unable to put it into final form, though he had labored long over it. The illness that claimed him made the book's completion impossible. Because the deceased was reluctant to speak of the work—a work unusual for him, and undertaken more out of a sense of duty than by choice—and reluctant, even, to speak of it to those near him, in whose number I am honored to have been included—certain obscurities and points of contention arose during the preliminary efforts to prepare the manuscript for publication. I must state, to be truthful, that in the circle of those who were made acquainted with the text there were voices raised in opposition to its publication: they claimed that such was not the intention of the deceased. There is to be found, however, no written testimony of his to this effect; one can only conclude that such opinions are without foundation. It was obvious, on the other hand, that the thing was unfinished, for it had no title, and one particular fragment existed only in a rough draft, which fragment was to have served—and here lies one of the principal doubts—as either a preface or an afterword to the book.

As friend and colleague of the deceased, and mentioned by him in his will, I have decided, finally, to make of this fragment,

necessary for an understanding of the whole, the preface. The title, *His Master's Voice*, was suggested to me by the publisher, John Keller, whom I wish to take this opportunity to thank for the great care he has given to the publication of this last work of Professor Hogarth. I should also like to express here my gratitude to Mrs. Rosamond Schelling, who so painstakingly assisted in the initial editing and in the final proofreading.

2

Professor Thomas V. Warren
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June 1966