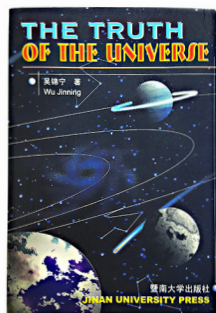


ONE OF MANY books  
to be found in the  
second class post,  
*B-korrespondens*.

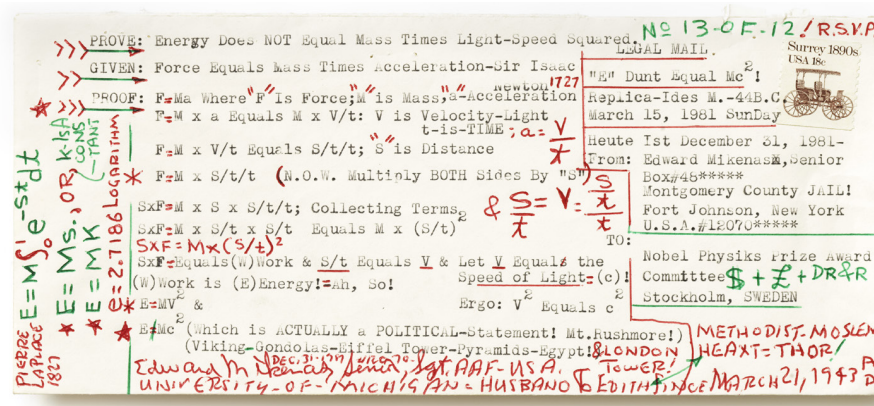


## Second class post

*Johan Kärnfelt*

In the image on the overleaf spread, there are letters and packages from every corner of the world. Together with other similar letters, they fill a large removal box to the brim. This correspondence – received by the Nobel Committees for Physics and Chemistry in just over six months of 2001 – is, as customary for scientific correspondence, full of thoughts, ideas and reflections, with sketches, photographs and printed papers. Despite this, most of the letters are unread, some even unopened. In the Nobel Archive they are filed under the heading of *B-korrespondens* [second class post] and are a very considerable part of the documents that are kept there, behind lock and key.

Over the years, when people have written to the Nobel committees, the secretaries have sorted the correspondence into two piles. One pile has related to what we could perhaps call legitimate Nobel matters, primarily nominations and expert statements. Once these matters have been dealt with by the committees, in the required order, the letters are archived in alphabetised annual volumes and sealed with a fifty-year embargo. The missives in the other pile fare differently; they are letters from people outside the world of academia but who, perhaps attracted by the glamour of the Nobel institution, want to make their voices heard. In this pile we find inventors, amateur scientists, hobby thinkers, worried citizens, fortune seekers and one or two people with loose screws. To the extent that these letters have been archived, they have first been cleared of bulky material such as books, rock samples and so on, and then sorted under the heading of *B-korrespondens*. It is not possible to determine the proportion that has been saved for posterity over the years – different secretaries seem to have pruned more or less vigorously – but that which remains is an unbroken series from the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, occupying many metres of shelving in the Nobel Archive.



LETTER FROM EDWARD MIKENAS to the Nobel committees, 15 March 1981.

Even after a superficial review of the letters, it is apparent that the most common reason these correspondents had for writing to the Nobel committees is that many of them quite simply think they deserve the Nobel Prize. For example, as a Swedish-American wrote in 1920, “I trust your Institution will do the RIGHT THING promptly”. They say they have invented a perpetual motion machine, solved the mystery of cancer or yet again proved that Einstein was wrong; now they are writing to the Nobel committees to make their findings known. Sometimes the request might be followed by a direct threat – “I inform you that reports have been made with the police, and that if Prof. S. Bergström, Chair of the Com., does not deal with my rightful prize this year, so that it is awarded to me, I will submit the case to S[tockholm] County Court” – but more often a humbler approach is used. One American, who sent in a thesis that he believes lays the foundation for a new physics, belongs to this category: “In presenting this I wish to do so in such a way as to make it eligible for consideration of your committee for a Nobel Prize in physics.”

But far from everyone is fishing for a Nobel Prize. Many of the letter-writers found in this material appear to be more interested in informing established science about the true state of things, for example the relationship between the frequency of radio pulsars and the proportions of the pyramids, marijuana’s potential as peacemaker, or squaring the circle. People who are genuinely concerned about some consequence of modern society are also regular occurrences, seeing the Nobel committees as the only institutions with the opportunity to do something about it:

JUST OVER SIX MONTH’S WORTH of B-korrespondens sent to the Nobel committees for physics and chemistry in 2001. ►



READ BY AIR MAIL  
SWEDEN  
To: The Honourable Secretary  
Nobel Committee for Physics  
Nobel House  
Sturegatan 14  
S-11436 Stockholm  
Sweden  
R.L. NO. 1534  
DA 1 KARACHI G.P.O. 7400  
NSR 50005  
KVA:s Vetenskapsak., 10405

Enryo  
KVA:s Nobelkommitté  
för Fysik  
Inkom den 24/2 2002  
Anchit  
Yeha

Mr. Daniel Roy Hines  
Box 132  
Fayalimide, Sudan  
B?

Anchit  
Yeha  
KVA:s Nobelkommitté  
för Fysik  
Inkom den 24/2 2002

Nobel Academy  
Nobel Str. 14  
Stockholm  
Box 50005  
10215 Stockholm  
Sweden

10  
11150  
Schweiz  
Schweizerische Akademie der  
Wissenschaften  
Postfach 400  
CH-8001 Zurich  
L'Académie  
des Sciences  
et des Lettres  
1005, Strassbourg  
Schweiz

George & Wade  
Alpaeva  
1974-499001  
de presidente  
de Nobel  
Volodymyr G. Bilozavetskyi  
vul. Keletska 104, kv. 75  
Vinnitsa, 21030  
UKRAINE

BY AIR MAIL  
par avion  
KVA:s Nobelkommitté  
för Fysik  
Inkom den 24/2 2002  
Nobel Institute of Physics,  
Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences  
Lilla Frescativägen 4,  
Box 50005  
10405 Stockholm,  
SHVETSIYA





I am not unduly worried as to who wins the race into space for I have seen that if Newton were wrong, and the Moon is NOT just the big body of surface dust we think it is, then great danger hangs over this earth, since if this matter is a fusible substance, and if hit by a thermo-nuclear bomb, by a new nation entering the space race, or others hoping that the people of earth would see their space achievements as a large cloud of dust rising from that airless moon, great danger could accrue.

Regardless of their errand, common to all these letter-writers is that they want recognition for themselves and their ideas. Many hobby thinkers have previously sent their works on the angle's trisection, or whatever it may be, to researchers and universities, but have been met by silence or even disdain; they now regard, irrespective of the part of the world they come from, the Nobel committees as a type of high court of the sciences. When everything else fails, this is where justice can be done. This is also apparent from the efforts made by some letter-writers to have certificates, court judgements and similar translated to Swedish before they are sent to the committees. Additionally, there are many examples of letter-writers who have principled opinions on the exercise of justice that the committees could be said to perform. For example, a young American student wrote in 1968 wondering why Afro-American researchers are not considered for the prize. An anonymous Swede had a similar issue in 1973, submitting a single sentence: "Give the Nobel Prize to a Woman!"

Even if individual academics are represented in the material, the absolute majority of letter-writers are active outside academia. This means they share one basic problem – they lack an obvious position from which to speak. This is something that must be dealt with, and subservient greeting pirouettes may be one way: "Highly honoured Nobel Committee! The highest place of judgement for all science, of the past, the present and the future!" However, most letter-writers appear to realise this is superfluous, that something more is required. The usual solution to the problem has simply been to attach one's opinions in the form of a piece of work, printed or as a manuscript, with the frequently-expressed hope that its contents will be adequately thought-provoking to arouse the interest of the committee's members. Many of these attachments have been removed in the archiving process, especially as it is not particularly unusual to send enough copies for "all those with responsibility at the academy to have their own".

For many authors, these printed works – which could be anything from half a page of text to an entire book – have another purpose, in addition to communicating thoughts and ideas. Let us look at an example: a few years after the Nobel Committee for Physics awarded the 1929 Prize in Physics to Louis de Broglie, for the discovery of the wave nature of elementary particles, one American wrote to the committee:

If you remember, in 1929 you gave to a French Scientist[t] the Nobel Prize for the wave movement of atoms, and I had a copyright on the wave movement of molecules (inclosed) [sic] in 1926. I am not blaming you, because you did not know of my theory; but I still believe that the wave movement of molecules, is the nearest right, because molecules are composed of atoms, and exist [sic] as molecules.

So the committee is excused, but note that the author believes he has copyright on his ideas. An appendix to the letter, and an argument in the context, comprises a short, *printed* text – almost a series of notes with varied ideas. The text was attested by a relative on 15 September 1926 and “copyrighted”.

Similar shenanigans recur throughout the correspondence. For many letter-writers, copyright appears to have the same role as an inventor’s patent: I had the idea first and, because it’s printed, I can also prove it. That copyright legislation only applies to the printed version, and not to the ideas made public, does not appear to have been a concern.

As a whole, the Nobel Archive’s second class post provides an alternative view on how ordinary people perceive both the Nobel Prize and science in general. Away from the glitz and the cult of the genius, annually reproduced in the media, people around the world regard the Nobel institution as an absolute bastion, a knight in shining armour, an institution of like-minds and the defender of noble thought. When they write, their intentions are often very serious: many apparently believe they have had revolutionary ideas. The letters consistently express an interest and, not least, the desire for confirmation and participation: “I never expect to win your prize; but scientific matters with me is a hobby, and my greatest pleasure is to forever keep trying.”

Of course, as a contemporary reader it is easy to smirk at some letters – at the Swede who suggests a Nobel Prize for the person who “makes cleaning unnecessary”, at the Indian who wants the Nobel Prize for calculator software that shows on which day of the week a particular date falls, at the Greek who – long before talk of global warming – believes that we must reduce the level of carbon dioxide in the air to improve people’s health – but after working through the archive, the lasting impression is instead humility and respect. Humility in the face of people’s conceptual worlds and creativity; respect in the face of the courage and the hopes they invested in their letters. These feelings are reinforced by the knowledge that they never had a chance. The line drawn in the archive between first and second class post is not simply an administrative one, but one that expresses a basic ordering of knowledge, where the person on the outside lacks the tools, the position and, not least, the case necessary to receive the addressee’s attention. Additionally, this distance is so great that a cursory glance at the letters, sometimes even the envelopes, was enough to make that judgement.

★

I have previously discussed similar correspondence in Johan Kärnfelt, *Allt mellan himmel och jord: Knut Lundmark, astronomin och den publika kunskapsbildningen* (Lund, 2009). On the concept of hobby thinkers, see in particular chapter 7. The correspondence discussed in this essay is housed in the Nobel Archive, the Center for History of Science, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, Stockholm. The letter-writers have often had vague ideas about which body is actually responsible for the Nobel Prize, with the result that letters have been addressed to a range of institutions, embassies and so on. These letters have then been forwarded to the Nobel committees. Cited letters from: Gunnar C. Engstrand (31 August 1920), G. W. Cooper (10 October 1931), Argyrios Kusas (20 December 1945), Daniel Andersson (20 April 1950), Lincoln Rogers (19 June 1951), O. C. Johnston (29 May 1963), Keneth Larson (30 April 1968), Sandra S. (8 November 1968), János Mautz (undated, 1971), anonymous (11 October 1973), signature A. (31 December 1977), anonymous (18 July 1980), and K. H. Mathew Kutty (15 May 1983), all in *B-korrespondens* of the equivalent year, Nobel Archive. The letter regarding the police report arrived in 1984, but has been anonymised out of consideration for the author. Sune Bergström did not chair any of the committees, as the letter-writer assumed, but rather the Nobel Foundation.