

Arvid Järnefelt, the Finnish Tolstoy

A radical social reformer and a nobleman

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Arvid Järnefelt (1861-1932) was one of the most intriguing figures of the turn-of-the-century Finnish political arena. He was an original social thinker who advocated the equality of classes and sexes, and fought fiercely to improve the living and working conditions of the poor. Despite his noble birth, he chose to engage in political activity. He presented his reformist programme in novels and pamphlets, and acted periodically even as a travelling preacher, typically pushing his message through in an aggressive way, rather than gently persuading his audience or convincing by argument. Moreover, he chose to publish his texts in Finnish, the language of the majority of populace, instead of the Swedish language spoken by the Finnish nobility, a tradition dating back to the pre-1809 days when they were still subject to the Swedish crown.

Järnefelt claimed the right to propagate his ideas anywhere, and was not above forcing his way into club locales and churches if access was denied. He was at times insolent, even violent towards the authorities, overriding any and every obstacle to put through his ideals. As a result of this, he was loved by many but also hated by quite a few, widely admired but also justifiably criticised, and sometimes even feared.

On a more personal level, he was known to have unusually close ties to his mother Elisabet, a widely known cultural mother figure of her own right and the hostess of an influential literary salon. Järnefelt shared with his mother a passionate interest in the ideas of Lev Tolstoy (1828-1910) and persistently sought contact with him, until the master consented to meet with his eager disciple. The admiration towards the great Russian thinker affected several of Järnefelt's own life's choices. It led him to acquire a small farm for his family homestead, to set up a rural idyll by sharing in the manual work and unpretentious lifestyle of the local peasant population. In his later years, he openly claimed to have become the Tolstoy of Finland. His professed willingness to sacrifice his own personal comfort to advance a greater good sometimes caused his friends to accuse him of having a serious Christ complex.

Arvid Järnefelt belonged to the generation who witnessed the passing of the Finnish nobility from political dominance into near-oblivion. In his youth he was trained, by his father, to become a major player within the noble estate of the Finnish four-estate parliament, but chose instead to become a dissident. The first constitution of the Republic of Finland, of 1919, abolished nobility as a political entity. The Crofters' law, passed already in 1918, carried out a land reform programme Järnefelt had essentially formulated in his pamphlets and novels, effectively diminishing the grandeur of the traditional manor lifestyle considered typical for Finnish nobility.¹

What was the prime motive of this nobleman reformist? What was his activism all about? Was it a lame effort to channel the turmoil of the era, to anticipate a societal change bound to happen by voluntarily giving in – a morally self-serving response to a growing demand from outside that could not be subdued? Or, was it just fashionable nonsense, imposed on a weak-willed son by an overpowering mother? Or, were his literary *oeuvre*, and even his life, symptoms of an important process, or even an agent of the same? Did his work actually have a part in changing the conditions of the workers for the better? How honest, in the end, was his self-announced resignation of the old noble ways?

Arvid Järnefelt: the portrait of a part-time anarchist²

If someone should ask you, what kind of a man I am, tell them that I am an anarchist. (Arvid Järnefelt, in his sixties, in a letter to his friend Erkki Vala)³

Arvid Järnefelt was born in 1861 in the St. Petersburg region, where his father then held a position in the Pulkovo State Observatory, and died in 1932 in Helsinki. Thus he was born in Imperial Russia as a citizen of the Grand Duchy of Finland, but lived his last years in the Republic of Finland founded in 1917. His life span coincided with several important phases of the Finnish national and socialist-reformist movements, and his life's work became an essential part of both of them. He became the most prominent Finnish social theorist, free-thinker and visionary of his era, the so-called Golden Age of the progressive nationalist *Fennoman* movement, from the early 1890s to the 1910s.

Arvid Järnefelt's overall notoriety was greatly enhanced by the fact that he was a member of an illustrious Russian-Finnish noble family. His father, Alexander Järnefelt (1833-1896) came from an impoverished Finnish noble family with a long military tradition, originating from Germany and ennobled by the Queen Christina of Sweden

¹ In reality, not all Finnish noble families possessed manor houses, and many of the largest farms were actually the property of freeholding peasants. Thus the law allowing the crofters to purchase their land for their own affected both the noble and the commoner masters equally.

² Unless a separate footnote is given, the facts of this chapter are taken from the timeline of the most recent biography on Järnefelt, *Arvid Järnefelt: kirjailija ajassa ja ikuisuudessa* by J. Niemi [Arvid Järnefelt: author in time and eternity] (Helsinki, 2005) 307-312, where the same events can be found in more detail. See also Pertti Karkama, *Vallan orjat ja ihmisarvo. Arvid Järnefeltin ajatusmaailma* [Slaves to power and human dignity: the thought of Arvid Järnefelt], (Helsinki, 2010).

³ Quoted in *ibidem*, 281.



The Rantala farm, purchased by Arvid Järnefelt in 1896 and his family homestead for more than three decades. This is where the author put his Tolstoyan ideals into practice. The manor is still owned by his descendants, who keep the place largely as it was in Arvid's days (photo the Eero Järnefelt Collection, National Archives of Finland, Helsinki)

in 1651.⁴ Alexander made the acquaintance of his future wife Elisabet (Yelizaveta) Konstantinovna Clodt von Jürgensburg (1839-1929) in 1854, while studying engineering in a military academy in St. Petersburg. Her family had moved to St. Petersburg from Livonia. The baronial line of the Clodt family, elevated for military services, was also a Swedish creation⁵ from the early eighteenth century, when the Baltic counties belonged to the Swedish crown. The family allegedly originated from southern European early medieval nobility.

The Clodts were known for their artistic bent, counting among the family members at least a sculptor, a painter and a drawing teacher. Many of the Clodts were also active within the proto-socialist *Narodnik* movement and endeavoured to cultivate close relationships with so-called ordinary people. Their other interests included philosophy and foreign languages. By religion the Clodts were Baltic Lutheran, not Russian Orthodox, and this little anomaly perhaps made them unusually receptive to unconventional ideas about culture and society.

In spite of their multi-national aristocratic roots both the Järnefelt spouses felt well in tune with their respective native cultures. Elisabet was used to speaking Russian at home, instead of the then more fashionable French, while Alexander was unusually fluent in Finnish in a cultural environment where most local nobles preferred Swedish. Later on, they also encouraged their own children to learn Finnish,

⁴ About the ennoblement see the online database of the Finnish House of Nobility, under the heading Järnefelt: www.riddarhuset.fi/fin/suvut_ja_vakunat/ (accessed 20 Oct. 2011).

⁵ See the online database of the Swedish House of Nobility, under the heading Clodt: www.riddarhuset.se/jsp/index.jsp?id=553 (accessed 20 Oct. 2011).

thus taking the side of the Finnish-speaking nationalist movement, and detaching themselves from the pro-Swedish counter-movement which many Finnish aristocrats joined. After the family returned to Finland the Järnefelt parents chose to enter their sons into a Finnish-speaking school, so as to introduce them to the language of the majority of the nation and to middle-class children. According to Arvid, his father, who for decades held high offices of both military and civilian rank, and was active in the first wave of the nationalist *Fennoman* movement in the 1860s and 1870s, eventually became the most conservative of the lot. He did not fully share Elisabet's, and later Arvid's, more democratic second-wave or *Young Fennoman* ideas.⁶

Arvid Järnefelt's student years, a full decade from 1880 to 1890, are best described as a continuous quest for some greater good. He was politically active among a group of like-minded friends. They formed the core of a radical association *KPT*, explained alternately as an acronym of the words *Kansan Pyhä Tahto* (The Sacred Will of the People) or *Koko Programmi Toimeen* (The Full Programme into Action). At the University of Helsinki he studied many subjects, including jurisprudence, Russian philology, philosophy and psychology. In 1886 he got a scholarship that allowed him to study in Moscow for a full academic year. Later he and his wife Emmi resided for a while in St. Petersburg, where their first son Eero was born in 1888. Järnefelt eventually graduated from the University of Helsinki with a legal degree in 1890. He seriously planned to practice law, but eventually gave it up to pursue more fully his progressive ideals.

His spiritual and social awakening, inspired by Lev Tolstoy's teachings, dates from 1891. As a result he gave up the supposedly easy life of a bureaucrat, and began working as a craftsman, experimenting without much success with shoemaking, smithery and masonry.⁷ Eventually he settled down as a small-holder, planning to sustain his growing family by the produce of the land he himself would till. A small farm called Rantala, purchased in 1896, became his homestead until 1927, when the family moved back to Helsinki. Particularly during the first two decades Järnefelt worked the land himself, if with the help of several capable farm hands, all the while continuing his intellectual career as a novelist and journalist. The crops that the family hoped for were not only of a material but also of a spiritual and mental kind. Following in Tolstoy's footsteps they took to educating local rural folk by organising a library, inviting lecturers and giving readings, thus encouraging the villagers to discuss current social, political and cultural issues amongst themselves.⁸

The Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and the ensuing domestic turbulences, particularly the Great Strike of 1905, the crofters' strike of Laukko in 1906-1907 and the 1918 Civil War, developed into crises in Järnefelt's personal life too. In 1907 he visited the Laukko region, consequently publishing a pamphlet about the events. In 1917 he set off as a layman preacher, travelling around the country in a Christ-like manner, giving unauthorised sermons in churches and other locales. His wilful behaviour towards both ecclesiastic and mundane authorities got him arrested many

⁶ Niemi, *Arvid Järnefelt*, 24-51.

⁷ Ibidem, 96-100.

⁸ Ibidem, 101-112, 228-230, 256.

times, and led to several lawsuits. He was eventually pardoned by the future marshal, then temporary regent, C.G.E. Mannerheim in 1919. From time to time he would still embark on his restless travels, first in Finland, and later, in the early 1920s (after his son Eero became a diplomat in the service of the young republic) also abroad. In his later years he pursued his chosen path in a more subdued manner.

Despite his other activities Järnefelt was first and foremost a writer – a professional novelist, playwright, pamphleteer and journalist.⁹ His writing career began fairly late in life but continued uninterrupted until his death. He had a hand in the founding of the prominent progressive newspaper *Päivälehti* (issued from 1889, now known as *Helsingin Sanomat*). His first novel, *Isänmaa* (Fatherland) appeared in 1893. In it he describes in gently mocking tones his own hopeful, idealistic generation and their dutiful but vain (in both senses!) effort at uniting the nation, from the highest to the lowest, in the name of nationalist ideology.¹⁰ His last, unfinished novel *Lalli* was published posthumously in 1933. The book is named after a semi-legendary medieval hero/villain who allegedly protested against the forced conversion of pagan Finns into Christianity by killing a Catholic bishop. It promotes, among other things, the pacifist ideology of Tolstoy.¹¹

Järnefelt's socio-ethical reform programme: the Tolstoy connection

The impact of Lev Tolstoy's ideas was beginning to show in earnest in the early 1880s, when Elisabet's generation was getting middle-aged and Arvid's generation was coming of age. Tolstoy's books were read and discussed within the Clodt and Järnefelt circles, particularly in Elisabet Järnefelt's literary salon. There the son imbibed the ideas that became the core of his literary oeuvre as well as the guideline of his personal life. In his book of confessions, *Heräämiseni* (My awakening, 1894) Arvid Järnefelt intimates that his professed Tolstoyan love for the people was in the beginning just a fashionable pose, but eventually developed into an actual conviction.¹²

Järnefelt's idea of social fairness did not have much to do with rational division of labour. His beautiful yet impractical ideal was that no-one should make use of – or, as he would have it, 'take advantage' of – the work of another, for example, from personal servants. His reform programme aimed at establishing equality between the upper and the labouring classes. In an interestingly proto-Foucauldian manner he saw that any division of labour created an essentially violent hierarchic structure, placing some people above others as exploiters, judges and tyrants.¹³ This ideal was put into words in the novel *Helena* (1902), describing a young and idealistic noble couple who wish to start their own small farm and 'unnoticed and on the quiet climb down from the shoulders of the people'.¹⁴

⁹ Arvid Järnefelt's published works include thirteen novels and nine plays, four collections of short stories, several pamphlets and autobiographic texts.

¹⁰ A. Järnefelt, *Isänmaa* (Porvoo, 1893) 45-46, 109 and passim.

¹¹ A. Järnefelt, *Lalli* (Porvoo, 1933).

¹² Niemi, *Arvid Järnefelt*, 29-30, 38, 56-61, 70-86, 91, 99, 117, 124, 127, 149, 154, 158-165; A. Järnefelt, *Heräämiseni* (Helsinki, 1894); idem, *Samuel Croëll* (Helsinki, 1899); idem, *Maaemon lapsia*, in: idem, *Teoksia*, III, 219, 224, 227.

¹³ Niemi, *Arvid Järnefelt*, 79, 208, 211, 279; Järnefelt, *Heräämiseni*, 91, 239-240, 208-238; idem, *Vanhempieni romaani* (1st ed. 1928-1930; Espoo, 1986), I-III, 524.

¹⁴ Idem, *Helena* (Helsinki, 1902) 367.

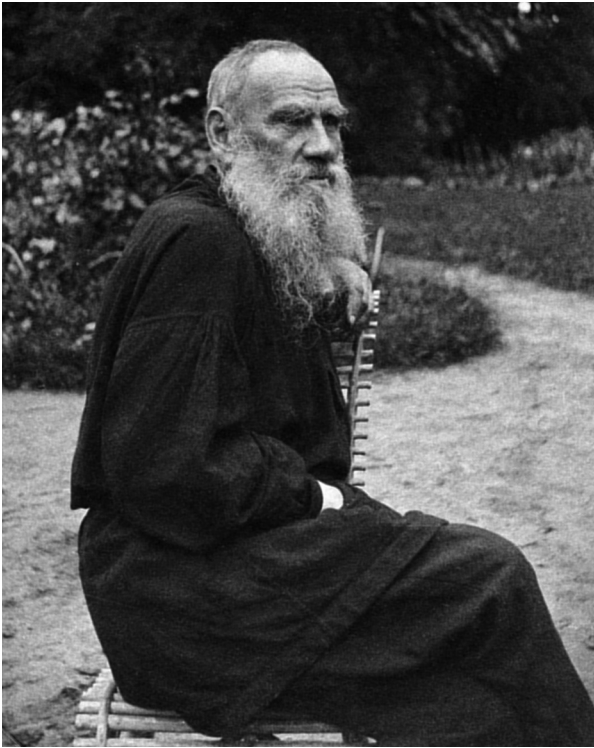


Arvid sitting by the Black Sea shore, Crimea, 1899. The magnificent view in the background evokes the style of the seascape paintings by their uncle, Mihail Konstantinovish Clodt von Jürgensburg. He was a member of the Peredvizniki (Wanderers) group, who put the Tolstoyan ideals into practice by organising popular art exhibitions (*photo Eero Järnefelt; the Eero Järnefelt Collection, National Archives of Finland, Helsinki*)

His land reform model focussed on manual work. Its aim was to redistribute the land among those who actually tilled the soil; the big landowners thus only had a right to own land if they personally took to the plough. The principle applied particularly to the growing class of crofters, who did not own the soil they tilled, and whose social position was intensively discussed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the strike-inspired pamphlet *Maa kuuluu kaikille!* (The earth/soil belongs to everyone!) Järnefelt professed his admiration for the Finnish rural worker, describing him as a martyred hero.¹⁵

Also Järnefelt's sexual ethics echo the teachings of Tolstoy. He earned the nickname of 'the first Finnish radical feminist' by emphasising the equality of the sexes in this respect: that both men and women should strive for purity of thought and deed. While openly confessing his own brothel visits and experiments on emotionally committed unmarried relationships, he preached against professional prostitution, condemning it as one of the many social ills created by the modern urban life, and as a manifestation of the inequality of the classes, namely, upper class men exploiting working class women. He also demanded that everyone should try to resist such temptations, and help the opposite sex to resist theirs. Marital love, though basically healthy and acceptable, should ideally be directed towards de-sexualised universal

¹⁵ Niemi, *Arvid Järnefelt*, 111, 161-175; A. Järnefelt, *Maa kuuluu kaikille!* (Helsinki, 1907).



Tolstoy sitting in his garden, from a Järnefelt family photo album. The picture was probably taken by Arvid's son Eero, during the second visit to Jasnaja Poljana (*photo the Eero Järnefelt Collection, National Archives of Finland, Helsinki*)

love, brotherly and sisterly compassion. The highest form of love, for Järnefelt and Tolstoy alike, was the mystical love for God and for humankind, the latter best expressed in social equality.¹⁶

Järnefelt met Lev Tolstoy twice. He wrote a treatise on Tolstoy's books in the early 1890s and sent him a letter in 1895 accompanied with a translated sample of his own philosophical texts, expressing a hope that they be published also in Russia. In the letter Järnefelt in polite words confessed his admiration for his guru. Tolstoy's answer was equally polite, sympathetic and encouraging, yet he refused to grant his admirer an audience. He was not keen on publishing Järnefelt's texts either, and severely criticised the samples he had received. Their first meeting eventually took place in 1899, during the heated atmosphere of the so-called first Russification period (1899-1905). It was organised by third parties, with the obvious political agenda of enlisting the famous Russian thinker as a supporter of the Finnish quest for defending the jeopardised constitution. Yet the two literary men managed to make contact even on a more personal level. Järnefelt later described his ecstatic impressions when visiting Tolstoy's private study: from such a small, cosy chamber had sprung forth such wisdom! The second meeting, on more private terms, took place in 1910, shortly before Tolstoy's famous last escapade and ensuing death.

¹⁶ Niemi, *Arvid Järnefelt*, 129-133, 191-192, 200, 226, 237, 246, 282-283; A. Järnefelt, *Veljekset* (Helsinki, 1900) 111-113 (on prostitution); idem, *Samuel Croëll*, 125.

Incidentally, Järnefelt copied his role model also in this respect. After all, he was the Tolstoy of Finland, why should not he leave his loved ones behind and swan off to preach universal solidarity? In his later years Järnefelt translated several Tolstoy's books, and applied the structural scheme of *War and peace* in his own work. He even arranged himself to be buried in the same manner as Tolstoy: in his own garden, in the shadow of big trees.¹⁷

The progressive semiotics of nobility: imagining old evil power¹⁸

Järnefelt's literary activities coincided with the rapid growth of the European publishing industry. The appearance of mass-scale print media and, later, the introduction of universal suffrage¹⁹ brought about a major change in the field of societal power, introducing the subtle, quasi-invisible media-related power of persuasion. Distributing information became an efficient tool for controlling thoughts and thus attaining political hegemony in a society which operated on the so-called democratic principle.²⁰

The new era brought new men to the centre of the society. University-educated, nationalist-minded, middle-class-originated intelligentsia used the print media to promote its liberal, progressive ideology, but also to establish its own identity as the prime defender and educator of the subordinate classes. It sought to represent itself as unselfish, moral, modern new elite – as opposed to the greedy, decadent, reactionary old nobility. Arvid Järnefelt spent his formative years among people of this kind and, despite his noble birth, fully adopted their line of thinking, eventually developing it to unforeseen extremities.

In nineteenth-century Finland fiction was widely used to convey political manipulation.²¹ As the most encompassing of literary genres, with descriptions covering all walks of life, it enabled the authors to display an extensive array of signifiers. And as

¹⁷ Niemi, *Arvid Järnefelt*, 112–123, 204–226, 252, 267.

¹⁸ Based on M. Vuorinen, *Kuviteltu aatelismies: aateluus viholliskuvana ja itseymmärryksenä 1800-luvun Suomessa* [Imagined nobleman: nobility as an enemy image and as an in-group identity in nineteenth-century Finland] (Helsinki, 2010). Antony Taylor, in his book *Lords of misrule: hostility to aristocracy in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2004), discusses similar themes but without composing a coherent semiotic system.

¹⁹ In Finland universal suffrage was established in 1906.

²⁰ E.g. C.W. Mills, *The power elite* (New York, 1956).

²¹ The authors whose *oeuvre* I studied for the purpose of making the semiotic chart of nobility were those whose works belong to the national canon and who have attained a status of a classic. Obscure writers who only published one or two books have been left out. The authors of the romantic period include J.L. Runeberg (1804–1877), academic, schoolmaster and poet laureate, Fredrika Runeberg (1807–1879), a clergyman's daughter and the poet's wife who, unlike her male colleagues, received no formal academic education, Z. Topelius (1818–1898), professor in history at the University of Helsinki and the most celebrated writer of historical novels of the period, and J.J. Wecksell (1838–1907), a poet and playwright, whose career was cut short by a mental illness; they all wrote in Swedish. Finnish-speaking romantics include Aleksis Kivi (1834–1872), a university drop-out with a rural background and the official founding father of Finnish prose, Pietari Hannikainen (1813–1899), a land surveyor and journalist, who in his novels described rural life, and K.J. Gummerus (1840–1898), a country teacher, writer and publisher. Among the realists the most prominent authors were Juhani Aho (1861–1921), a journalist and professional writer, Arvid Järnefelt (1861–1932), the main topic of this article, Minna Canth (1844–1897), a well-to-do small-town shopkeeper and literary matriarch (again, as a woman, the only one with no academic education), an Teuvo Pakkala (1862–1925), a journalist, publishing editor and novelist, who all wrote in Finnish. Another nobleman-born realist, novelist and small-town journalist K.A. Tavaststjerna (1860–1898), who had originally studied to become an architect, wrote in Swedish. All in all, the novels, novellas, plays and epic poems by the above writers that contain descriptions of nobility and for which I created chart amount to 130 (J.L. Runeberg: 10, Fr. Runeberg: 3, Hannikainen: 6, Topelius: 35, Päiväranta: 6, Kivi: 13, Wecksell: 1, Gummerus: 10, Canth: 3, Tavaststjerna: 13, Aho: 12, Järnefelt: 17, Pakkala: 1).

fiction by definition does not have to be true, the writers had the greatest freedom imaginable to compose their characters, situations, plots and dialogues to create persuasive images. Individuals were typically used as representatives of antagonising social groups, and set to play against each other in telling situations. Particularly the romantic novels²² abounded in such encounters, describing a bright young commoner hero challenging a degenerate nobleman, and emerging from the situation as the moral winner. The ideological message was always the same: the representative of the new elite had personal strength, good character, sound values, warm heart and good manners. Respectively, the old establishment guy appeared as arrogant, violent, calculating, pedantic, cold-hearted, and rude.

The semiotic makeup of the image of nobility reflected different sources and types of power. The first frame of reference, **warrior**, relates nobility back to its ancient roots as the military stratum of society. The power it conveys is *straightforward* and *personal* in the classic Weberian sense: who by force, or by potential of force, can make his will prevail over others, is powerful. The most important signifier of this category, the sword as 'the weapon of honour', was represented ironically by writers who identified with a more modern, peaceful fraction of the society. Firearms were shown as implements of cruelty and mindless destruction. The duel tradition was ridiculed as stemming from an outmoded code of honour dating from a warlike past.

The second frame, **office/officer**, belongs to the era of centralised states with organised armies and civil bureaucracies. The hierarchic structures were represented as sources of *institutional* (as opposed to straightforward) power, referred to via signs like military uniform, court dress, decorations and titles, all revealing an individual's position in a hierarchy – in itself considered an antithesis of democracy. An interesting deviation of this theme was an uncouth, untidy uniform, usually worn by an easy-going field officer in opposition to the prim neatness of his more aristocratic-minded counterparts.

The third base of noble power was the **manor**, the primary sign of *economic* power, landownership in the pre-industrialised days being the principal source of wealth. However, the manor also signified the lord's straightforward personal power, and the indirect influence a wealthy man of high status necessarily had in a rural community of commoner farmers. Manor buildings sometimes symbolised the noble estate: their crumbling walls represented the moral decay of the nobility itself. The exclusive manor lifestyle was shown in an unfavourable light to point out the unequal distribution of wealth. To accentuate this image, there were the other kind of noble lords: the progressives who themselves tilled the soil and shared the agrarian values of the rural folk.

Yet another noble power base was the **family**, the channel through which *economic, cultural and social capital* (coined by Pierre Bourdieu) were privately transmitted from one generation to the next. The idea of family was present in its traditions, for instance in the stories about their ennoblement, the family name and the maxim; in

²² I refer to the conventional style labels mainly when their periodisation coincides with a qualitative change visible in my own sources. In the Finnish fiction the romantic period (focussing on the emotional autonomy of the individual) began circa 1830. The realistic period (focussing on societal and moral issues) began circa 1860, giving way to a neo-romantic style period from 1890 onwards, but the periods overlapped considerably. For example K. Laitinen, *Suomen kirjallisuuden historia* [History of the Finnish literature] (Helsinki, 1981).

emblematic objects like coats of arms and portraits of ancestors; in family politics, for example dynastic marriages, monumental tombs, heirlooms, fear of extinction, and legal adoption to prevent that; and in the manifold mystery of the noble blood that boiled easily and was to be kept pure.²³ All these ‘undemocratic’ features were described with ironic over-dramatisation by the critics of the aristocratic rule.

The fifth base of the noble power was the exclusive **high society**, the forum of displaying cultural and social capital. The type of power particular to the social scene was of *diffuse*²⁴ nature: delicate influence, not crude authority. The signifiers of this category include incidents of high life – balls, parties, dinners – and the social hierarchies present in them, like the seating according to rank and the dance code stating who is to dance with whom in what order. They all were ridiculed by critics as old-fashioned stiffness. Originally also the so-called ‘noble manners’ were seen as a web of over-courteous, deceitful flattering and endless intriguing. Distrust later gave way to honest, if sometimes bitter, admiration of the free and self-confident manner of the noble, and of their ability to exploit their social networks. The languages of the high society – particularly the ‘non-national’ Swedish and the even less domestic French – were unanimously disapproved of, vis-à-vis the ‘national’ Finnish language.

The last source of power was found in the **noble individual**: the *cultural capital* reproduced in every generation with varying results. The individual vices and virtues, the ingredients of personal attraction, amounted to the *diffuse power* available to a person. The traditional features of a nobleman, gallantry, the concept of honour, pride, soldierly loyalty, courage, persistence and patriotism, hot temper and the respective ideal of self-restraint, were often treated as comic. For the critics, the notoriously libertine sexual conduct of noblemen had a most serious function: showing them as heartless, unrepentant womanisers who seduced and abandoned or downright raped peasant girls – the symbolical representatives of the ‘people’. Another stigmatising feature attached to nobility was the renouncement of religion: an enlightenment-originated atheism.

The nineteenth-century Finnish bourgeois fiction writers readily represented nobility as belonging to past centuries. However, the nobility was also represented as the only contemporary societal group that had a share of every type and source of power, and a monopoly over some. Other powerful groups, for example the clergy as wielders of ideological power, or the modern industrialists and merchants as ones with economic power, only had access to one type of power each. The ideological power related to print media, wielded by the definers themselves, was, conveniently, not mentioned at all.

Another way to undermine the idea of nobility as a hereditary elite was to present democracy and equality as supreme values. An ancient image of equality was the *danse macabre*, a reminder of the fact that death eventually takes us all. The principles of equality before God and before the law, and the notion of us all being

²³ M. Vuorinen, ‘Inventing an enemy: Bloodsucking noblemen in Finnish fiction’, in: H. Salmi, ed., *History in words and images* (Turku, 2005); www.hum.utu.fi/projects/historia/konferenssit/2002/articles/Vuorinen.pdf (accessed 20 Oct. 2011).

²⁴ M. Mann, *The sources of social power. The rise of classes and nation-states, 1760-1914* (2 vol.; Cambridge, 1986-1993), II, 6-9.

children of Adam, pointed to equality being a Christian, lawful and natural state of affairs. The ethos of physical labour and the democracy of emotions, particularly love affairs between persons of unequal standing, added to the idea of natural equality. The most tentative, if also the most dangerous (at least in the eyes of the censor) anti-aristocratic literary theme was revolution, quasi-hidden in images such as a decapitated lady-doll, a bottle of French wine of the 1789 vintage, or the collapsing of a seemingly indestructible stone wall whose substructures have crumbled.

All of these features can be found, in one way or the other, also in Arvid Järnefelt's literary oeuvre.

Art imitates life: ideal types of working noblemen

In his own life Järnefelt tried to keep physical and mental labour in balance. He definitely knew from experience, what manual work was all about.²⁵ In his fictional texts he occasionally preaches the mysterious healing power of manual labour for those who led an idle life. He also celebrates the physical and mental superiority of the working classes in a deliciously naïve and romantic manner, with an ideological agenda that is quite obvious, at least to a current reader.²⁶

The progressive, nationalist nineteenth-century fiction writers had created a gallery of noblemen ideal types to illustrate the possible career choices of the group; each type had an ideological dimension. The following set of types is taken from Finnish fiction but the phenomenon itself is Europe-wide. The reactionary types included **courtier** (in the Finnish case serving a 'foreign' lord in a 'foreign' court, either Swedish or Russian), **civil servant**, **retired officer**, **lord of the manor** passively enjoying the yield from his estates, and **active officer** (a rather harmless yet also quite useless type). The most important progressive type was the noble **farmer**, a landowner who aimed at modernising the cultivation of his lands; the others were **entrepreneur** (often unsuccessful, illustrating the inability of a nobleman to cope in the modern world of business) and **nobleman-labourer**.²⁷ The last, ideologically most progressive type only appeared in Järnefelt's novels, for obvious reasons.

The idea of manual labour was at the core of the nobleman farmer figure. In several of his novels Järnefelt described young nobles, who either toyed with a conversion, or actually shed their airs and graces, to become small-holders working on the land. This dream is mentioned in passing in *Isänmaa* (Fatherland, 1893)²⁸ and described at length in two other novels. In *Helena* (1902) an idealistic young noblewoman persuades her fiancé to give up a military career. They purchase a large estate, Helena's old homestead, and lend most of the land to the crofters on easy terms. For themselves they keep a small farm, adopting a simple, peasant-like lifestyle.²⁹ *Maaemon lapsia* (Mother Earth's children, 1905) recounts the same development, with similar ideological motivation, but with different trimmings. It acknowledges the contemporary experience about peasant landholders: that they can deal with their

²⁵ Niemi, *Arvid Järnefelt*, 109–111.

²⁶ A. Järnefelt, *Hiljaisuudessa*, in: idem, *Teoksia*, III, 263–296, 308–321.

²⁷ See Vuorinen, *Kuviteltu aatelismies*, 65–145.

²⁸ A. Järnefelt, *Isänmaa* (1st ed. 1893; Porvoo, 1965) 53.

²⁹ Järnefelt, *Helena*, 11–14, 36, 45–47, 55–58, 106–116, 126, 133–153, 356–361.

subordinates much harder than the gentry, who have practiced being masters for generations; a progressive nobleman farmer is described setting up a school for his workers' children. Economically exploiting the landless rural workers was thus by no means seen as a monopoly, or even a standard practice, of the nobility.³⁰

His very own literary creation, the character of a noble worker, Järnefelt only described once. The novel *Veljekset* (Brethren, 1900) tells the story of four orphaned sons of an impoverished noble family, who in their childhood have imbibed idealistic, egalitarian notions similar to those of the author himself. One brother becomes a priest, the other a civil servant, while the youngest seems unable to finish his academic studies. Gabriel, the *alter ego* of the author, leaves an agricultural institute to start working at a machine workshop. He consorts with his fellow workers but makes also the acquaintance of the local small-town gentry. Little by little he realises, in a way so typical to such ideologically orientated novels, that the blacksmiths as a rule are decent people, while the so-called 'better people' are lazy, pleasure-seeking and vain. Gabriel gets involved in a brawl and is arrested, but is immediately released with apologies – 'I'm sure, sir, that it is all just a big mistake' – as the police constable realises he is dealing with a nobleman. This again sets him brooding over the inequalities of this world. Eventually he decides that his future lies with the ordinary people, not with his native noble estate.³¹

The novel of my parents (Vanhempieni romaani): a private detour to nostalgia

One way of looking at descriptions of nobility, particularly when studying those written by commoners observing it 'from below', is to look for what the texts reveal about the hidden agendas and structures of criticism: how seemingly innocent observations about a noble way of life actually focus on different types and sources of power, portraying nobility as the sole, and malevolent, holder of any power in the society.

In the following I seek to do the exact opposite: to find out how an ultra-democratic writer, who happens to be a born nobleman, with an obvious ideological agenda and a condemning attitude towards aristocracy practically oozing from his fingertips, still betrays a deep knowledge and even on-the-sly appreciation of their collective past.

From the beginning of his *The novel of my parents I-III* (1928-1930) Järnefelt dutifully set the scene for transmitting the democratic principle of equality. In the first book his aging mother nonchalantly narrates the past histories of the family. Elisabet tells the reader that from what she has been told her ancestors were some Livonian baronets, who fortunately had the decency of not valuing their nobility overmuch. 'It must be considered a merit, that one forgets such old sins, the sinful act of the past generations of deviously hauling themselves to a position above ordinary people, their equals. In the home of my childhood we despised people who took pride over their noble ancestry [... and] their families' glorious past.'³² Later she is twice quoted pointing out that high birth gives no right to expect benefits.³³ She also

³⁰ Idem, *Maaemon lapsia* (1st ed. 1905; Porvoo, 1927), 180-181, 186-188 and passim.

³¹ Idem, *Veljekset*, 77-139, 299-300 and passim.

³² Idem, *Vanhempieni romaani*, 97-98.

³³ Ibidem, 370, 382.



The Järnefelt family on the Rantala porch in the 1920s. On the left Elisabet Järnefelt (née Clodt von Jürgensburg), the powerful literary matriach and Arvid's mother. In the middle the author himself, with his son Eero standing beside him. On the right Arvid's wife Emmy and on the stairs their daughters Liisa, Emmi and Maija. (photo the Eero Järnefelt Collection, National Archives of Finland, Helsinki)

gives account of her grandfather, a high official who allegedly loved the people so much as to put on a worker's outfit and descend to them *incognito*, allegedly to cultivate genuine friendships.³⁴ Later the reader meets another, younger Clodt, who boasts that he has absolutely no knowledge about his ancestors and is completely indifferent about finding out.³⁵

The democratic ideal of personal merit as the sole definer of a person's worth is prominent in the novel. When describing his ideal Järnefelt underlines, that inherited status must be overlooked and only personal capabilities taken into account when appointing civil servants. Respectively, an ideal civil servant treats people according to their personal qualities, not their rank. He is polite to high and low, does not bully his subordinates or flatter his superiors, and does not seek favours.³⁶

Arvid's father Alexander, a nobleman *Fennoman*, is described as a strange bird among his coevals and equals, whose only aim allegedly was to advance to important positions and engage in the social life of the top echelons of the Russian Empire.³⁷

³⁴ Ibidem, 100-101.

³⁵ Ibidem, 182-184.

³⁶ Ibidem, 100-101, 134-136, 167, 438.

³⁷ Ibidem, 343-347.

Yet his nationalist programme was essentially aristocratic, with a mixed democratic content at the most. His goal was to establish a genuinely Finnish nobility to supplant the Swedish-speaking fraction.³⁸ On the other hand, the Järnefelt boys are described as going to school with middle class children, learning to know 'the people' and growing up little democrats, presumably guided by their father.³⁹ Criticism against un-democratic attitudes is present also when the conservative grandma Järnefelt is quoted saying that God himself has created some flowers (families) more beautiful (noble) than others.⁴⁰

As both Arvid's father and maternal grandfather were artillery officers, the most prominent ideal type of nobleman in the *Novel of my parents* is the active military officer. The writer's knowledge about the banalities of the workaday lives of the military is too ample not to show. His account gravely undermines the steely cliché image of military nobility.

In the novel Elisabet recounts how her father as a boy enters military school. He comes from an impoverished noble family line, which causes problems. Officers are expected to be men of independent means, supported by a steady income from their family estates. The state therefore pays him only a token sum that is not enough even for a single man, let alone a family. Opportunity opens when he is recommended for training in a state military academy. He becomes an expert on artillery, eventually taking on a teaching post. Benefits for teachers include a large apartment free of cost.⁴¹ The reader is invited to witness a change of tide: a switchover from traditional well-off officers-and-gentlemen to modern 'officers-and-salary men', at the gradual modernising of both military career and technology.

Finnish Cadet School as the first step in military training is an obvious choice for young Alexander Järnefelt. After graduating he enters a training period in St. Petersburg, enrolling as a student in the same military academy where his future father-in-law is a teacher. His training aims at technological expertise, but to complete it he also needs to learn the more traditional stuff: sports, language training (English, French and Russian) and horseback riding. During the training he internalises the military code: fidelity to the sovereign, to his comrades and to the fatherland. And as Alexander either has no independent means to speak of, he too gravitates towards a modern branch for better pay, becoming an artillery officer trained in land measurement.⁴²

When it comes to relating nobility to different types of power, it is no surprise that most signifiers of each frame of reference are present also in Järnefelt's *Novel*.

Signifiers belonging to the warrior frame are the scarcest, as suits a realistic description of latter-day nobility. The only theme belonging under this heading is the duel tradition. It is mentioned in passing, as something that still exists in the margins of the aristocratic mind, but as a possibility rather than an actual practice.⁴³

³⁸ Ibidem, 383-384, 407-408.

³⁹ Ibidem, 294-297, 306.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 187.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 102-103, 127-128.

⁴² Ibidem, 156-157, 175-178, 264-265.

⁴³ Ibidem, 193.

The military men of Järnefelt's family belong to the office/officer frame, signifying a position in a hierarchy. Here his moral attitude towards un-democratic phenomena takes over almost completely. His ideal of a democratic nobleman is characterised by the absence of interest in uniforms and decorations. A good officer is not vain, and only dons his uniform at festivities. Decorations are described as essentially acceptable, provided that they are well-deserved, a just reward for actual services rendered. In the military circles they are observed as a matter of course. They are accepted as a means to an end: a way of showing to those, whose opinion matter, that one is a man of honour, willing and able to prove his worth. But those who actually covet them, or vainly wish to wear as them trinkets, are strictly condemned. What is said about the correct attitude towards decorations is equally true about uniform. It is morally acceptable, if donned with honour as a token of belonging and comradeship, but condemnable if coveted for vanity.⁴⁴

Manor as the major economic power base for nobility, and thus a signifier of inequality, does not really enter the *Novel*. Instead, manor life is seen in a positive light. Järnefelt describes family summers at the country in sunny tones: swimming in the sea, having friends and relatives to stay for long periods, cultivating romantic attitudes towards – if not actual contacts with – the local peasants.⁴⁵ A slightly more moral tone sets in, when the author describes the luxurious, expensive urban homes of the high and mighty: they are settings for high life, not for mixing with ordinary people. Noble homes are intended for formal receptions, balls, dances and dinners. Yet the author describes the prestigious interiors with polished floors, sofas, chandeliers, heavy ornamental lamps, grand pianos, paintings and statues, with a pang of nostalgia for the sheer beauty of it all – even though he, in a dramaturgical manoeuvre so typical for him, again invites his mother to give testimony about the inner emptiness of such living and the pleasure of retiring into private life, freed at last from the duties of a society hostess.⁴⁶ Järnefelt also criticises the social pressure that compels poor noble families to live up to the expectations of their society.⁴⁷

An ironic undertone presents itself in a sudden discontinuity, towards the end of the saga of the so far so righteous Clodt family. Some relatives are observed busying themselves with purchasing four big estates to replace the original Jürgensburg in Estonia, because, as they are heard explaining, 'One just has to own a manor house to feel like proper nobility'.⁴⁸

Family as the signifier of cultural, social and economic power transmitted in private from generation to generation is present in three themes that typically convey a critical message. Järnefelt describes noble children learning the ways of the grand society by play. They give their own parties where they mimic the behaviour of their elders, and attend the grown-up parties to perform little music or dance numbers.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 134-135, 167-169.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 137-141.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 435-438.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 264-265.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, 483.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, 104-106, 133-134.

Dynastic marriages are mentioned in the context of actual human life – not as a practice observed from afar, but as a consideration, however inappropriate, that enters the everyday discussions of the noble society. The author describes at length, how his father contemplates marrying Elisabet, and discusses the pros and cons with his comrades. They advise him that a Russian wife is an advantage, if he wishes to make his career in Russia, but a disadvantage, if he chooses to return to Finland instead. In any case, marrying a noblewoman is a must, if he wants to be taken seriously among his peers.⁵⁰ The third theme relates to the family as a source of identity. As opposed to the righteous member of the Clodt family, mentioned earlier, the ordinary nobles show a vainer attitude, stating that it is important to remember the family histories and completely understandable to boast about one's ancestry.⁵¹

High society as the arena for intrigues, networking, mingling with potentially important people and cultivating personal relations with them is the main signifier of the diffuse power of influence. Järnefelt closely observes the suave manners necessary for such occasions with a twofold attitude. Contacts with right persons help in everyday matters and career moves. A minor nobleman needs them to gain access to the society of the men of real power. Such manoeuvres may feel embarrassing, but they are useful and not too immoral either, if not misused for purely personal benefit. The theme in its positive aspect is illustrated by Alexander's career. When he proceeds, he learns to make use of his networks, justified by the mutual benefit, as each favour is eventually returned. His old contacts prove particularly valuable when he re-enters the military service proper during the Crimean war.⁵²

When describing situations where he himself was supposed to mix and mingle for benefit, Arvid Järnefelt adopts a considerably more acrid tone. In his father's schemes the governor-generals' balls and parties are an opportune arena for lobbying for *Fennoman* aims. Young Arvid is trained to become a dance floor diplomat, to work quietly for his father's political agendas, and does not feel quite at home in this role.⁵³

The expectations attached to networking are present also in the relatives' attitudes toward the choice of school for the Järnefelt children. When they are put to a Finnish-speaking school among middle class children, well-meaning relatives worry about them missing the important chance of forming contacts among their peers, to be called upon at a later age. Thus childhood is seen exploitatively, as a foundation for an outwardly successful adulthood.⁵⁴

A little vignette that is in the book definitely for didactic purposes, but nevertheless echoes an atmosphere that shows the Clodtian nobility in a favourable light, is the description of Alexander's first visit to Elisabet's baronial family. The evening holds a surprise for him. He goes in hoping to remember all the airs and graces, and is pleasantly surprised to find himself in a relaxed, cosy party instead of the stiff-upper-lip kind of gathering he had been expecting. Being very shy he nevertheless manages to behave in a comically courtly manner.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibidem, 202-203, 248, 262-263.

⁵¹ Ibidem, 182-184.

⁵² Ibidem, 161-162, 202-203, 350-352, 382.

⁵³ Ibidem, 383-384.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 294-297, 306.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 186-187.

The all-important question of languages is also present in the *Novel*. Yet instead of using it to convey a black-and-white moralistic picture Järnefelt explains certain phenomena as seen from the inside. For the critical nationalist writers the French language was the main signifier for condemnable noble cosmopolitanism. Yet Järnefelt takes to explaining that Russian nobles spoke French because of the post-revolution immigrants from France, even though he, too, gives preference to the native Russian. When it comes to the Finnish society, with the 'relic-like' Swedish language still prevalent in the high society, he is not as tolerant.⁵⁶

When describing the noble individual Järnefelt lists many traits of the standard criticism. He recognises the attitude that religion really is more for the common people, whereas nobility often is detached from it, though respectful to its outer ceremonial form.⁵⁷ The legendary hot-temperedness and respective self-control, the easily boiling noble blood and the respective need to restrain it are present in the character of his father Alexander.⁵⁸ The concepts of personal honour, military virtues, comradeship and the military honour code are mentioned in a positive tone.⁵⁹

More personal – and less standard – his account gets when describing the noble upbringing as he himself experienced it: strict and disciplined, almost military training, hard punishments and the ideal of self-control preferred by Alexander, contrasted by the more relaxed tradition promoted by Elisabet.⁶⁰ Noble individuals could also appear as freaks. Järnefelt critically describes an eccentric family acquaintance, baron Linder, a perfect specimen of a lazy nobleman, strolling around in his Mustio manor parklands all day long in a morning frock, and being seriously interested in card games.⁶¹

Detailed inside information could be used to criticise un-democratic practices, as when mother Elisabet sits in the best pew in the church during the opening of the four-estate parliament, with the hierarchy-revealing ceremony described in detail⁶² – or to give away less flattering facts about the so-called high and mighty, as when experienced servants who have made their career serving one aristocratic family after another are shown to know better than their beginner masters how to organise great parties.⁶³

Of all the anti-aristocratic democratic themes Järnefelt mentioned in the *Novel* only one, but in two different aspects and on three occasions. It is well in line with the overall theme of the book, and of his life. Equality before God is perhaps the most fundamental of the equality principles. Järnefelt quotes, in mildly scandalised tones, people who do not share this ideal. First his own grandmother states that God had a hand in creating a universe with differences, then another, anonymous noble person says that equal in front of God does not mean equal in the society. In the end Järnefelt pronounces his own faith: keeping servants in against God's spirit.⁶⁴

The glorious noble past in Järnefelt's *Novel of my parents* serves three very different purposes. First, it is an ideological treasure chest where the author hand-picks

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 103, 143-145, 156-157, 161-162.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, 330, 392.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, 288-289, 324-325.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, 169.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, 288-289, 324-325.

⁶¹ Ibidem, 462-465.

⁶² Ibidem, 326-327.

⁶³ Ibidem, 450-451.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, 187, 410, 524.

didactic examples of bad behaviour, unfair practices, stupid prejudices and irresponsible attitudes. To contrast them, he displays better options, usually illustrated by the attitudes and actions of the unusual Clodt family.

Secondly, he offers the reader a wealth of inside information: real-life military men with economic problems, opening ceremonies of the parliament observed close by and personal experiences of exclusive balls and parties brimming with political undercurrents, witnessed by few.

Thirdly, the past is also a treasure chest in a more literal meaning. The author picks up object after object, often pretending to look at them only to find flaws, working hard to make sure that the reader understands how little value he gives to them. He describes interesting people, summers in the country, family gatherings and luxurious settings with polished furniture and glittering ornaments. He lets us enjoy the light their surfaces still reflect, touches them fondly and puts them gently back to the chest.

Too little, too late? Aim, motivation, consequences

In his programmatic texts Järnefelt expressed many practical ideas about how the society might be developed – if also other, far more naïve ideals. In his own personal life he cherished romantic and at times very impractical notions about supporting himself and his family by the work of his hands. He greatly loved his family, yet grossly ignored it sometimes. He also suffered, for all his life, of an overheated moral nerve system.

A key to understanding Järnefelt's aspirations lies in his seemingly quite innocent self-praise and open admiration of his family's professed democratic-mindedness. The progressive ideals obviously served well the psychological needs of a complex man who, for whatever reason, might not achieve an ordinary mundane success. Another key is that he did not always practice what he preached: for example, he often breached his pacifist ideals. Järnefelt, with his equally pacifism-pontificating comrades, often forced his way into churches. Nor was his angry demand that church pulpits be open to all speakers exactly peaceful in nature. His humble attitude towards the Rantala peasants strikes one as a pose, calculated rather to make the gentry feel self-satisfied than actually empower the rural folk. His contemporaries, even some of his closest friends often considered his antics to be expressions of vanity, self-centeredness, coquetry or exhibitionism. Some even blamed him of having a Christ-complex. Alternately, they just thought he was being difficult. Indeed, even Järnefelt himself admitted something like this.⁶⁵

On the other hand, Järnefelt's writings definitely had an effect on the ideological atmosphere of his era. He had a hand in creating and maintaining a strong public opinion that eventually blossomed forth in the form of the so called *Torpparilaki* (Crofters' Law), guaranteeing to the crofters the right to purchase, for a state-subsidised price, the lands they had cultivated. The contemporary opinion saw the pamphlet *Maa kuuluu kaikille!* (The earth/soil belongs to everyone!) essentially as romantic idealism. Yet it became a bestseller and was read by many, who were certainly influenced by its content.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Niemi, *Arvid Järnefelt*, 210-217, 224, 282.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 175.