

Marja Vuorinen
 marja.@helsinki.fi
 Department of Social Science History
 P.O. Box 54
 FI-00014 UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
 Phone +358-9-191 24972

In fond remembrance? Images from noble life in the past

Abstract

This paper and my eventual presentation deal with the testimony given by a Finnish nobleman, Arvid Järnefelt (1861-1932), about the 19th century noble way of living. Despite of his birth – perhaps also because of it – he was a dedicated egalitarian and an original social theorist, who vented his ideas in his many literary works. The biographic details and background information given in this paper are intended as an introduction. In my presentation in Florence I will concentrate on the magnum opus of his later life, a three-volume real-life novel about his family, *The Novel of my Parents I-III*, published in 1928-1930, and its relation to the standard descriptions of nobility in the 19th century Finnish fiction.

Järnefelt's mother was a daughter of a Russian noble family renowned for its artistic and political talent; one of her most important objectives was to introduce the Finnish readership to Lev Tolstoy's teachings. His father was a member of Finnish military nobility, who in later life became a fervent nationalist. Both parents thus participated after their fashion in the moulding of the Finnish nation state. The son continued their ideological work towards more radical goals.

In his many novels Järnefelt programmatically criticised nobility for exploiting the people and planned a more democratic future, stating that if nobility wished to survive, it should "climb down from the shoulders of the people". Because of his political bias he is often overly critical about the allegedly luxurious, selfish, spiritually empty noble living. Nevertheless he gives a full and detailed – and perhaps even secretly longing – picture of a way of life that had all but ceased to exist.

In my presentation I seek to deep-read the retrospective 20th century text and to assess its semiotic, discursive and ideological content against the double backdrop of the two centuries.

Arvid Järnefelt: the portrait of a part-time anarchist¹

If someone should ask you, what kind of a man I am, tell them that I am an anarchist. – Arvid Järnefelt, in his sixties, to his friend Erkki Vala.²

Arvid Järnefelt was born in 1861 in the St. Petersburg region, where his father then held a position in the Pulkovo Observatory, and died in 1932 in Helsinki. His life span coincides with several

¹ Unless a separate footnote is given, the text of this chapter is based on a timeline included in the most recent biography on Järnefelt, *Arvid Järnefelt: kirjailija ajassa ja ikuisuudessa* by Juhani Niemi. SKS: Helsinki 2005, pp. 307-312. The same events, in more detail, can be found in Niemi 2005, passim. The storyline is based on the account given by Arvid Järnefelt himself, in his biographic *Vanhempieni romaani I-III* (The novel of my parents, 1928-1930). – Arvid Järnefelt I. Kodin suuret klassikot. Espoo 1986.

² Quoted in Niemi 2005, p. 281.

important phases of the Finnish national and socialist movements, and his life's work became an essential part of both of them. He was perhaps the most prominent Finnish dissident, social theorist, free-thinker and visionary of his era, the so-called golden age of the progressive national *Fennoman* movement, from the early 1890s to the late 1910s, before the final separation from Russia.

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 of long military traditions, originating from Germany and ennobled by the Queen Christina of Sweden in 1651. Alexander made the acquaintance of his future wife Elisabet, or Yelizaveta Konstantinovna Clodt von Jürgensburg (1839-1929), in 1854 while studying military engineering in a military academy in St. Petersburg. Her family had moved to St. Petersburg from Livonia. The baronial Clodt family line, elevated for military services, was also a Swedish creation³ from the early 18th century when the Baltic counties belonged to Sweden, but the family allegedly originated from southern European early medieval nobility.

The Clodt family was well known for its artistic bent. Several of its members were active within the proto-socialist *Narodnik* movement and endeavoured to cultivate close relationships with the so-called ordinary people. Their other interests included philosophy and foreign languages. By religion the Clodts were Lutheran, not Russian (Greek) Orthodox, and this little anomaly perhaps made them unusually receptive to radical ideas about culture and society.

In spite of their multi-national aristocratic roots both 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. They also encouraged their children to learn Finnish. After the family returned to Finland the sons were entered into a Finnish-speaking school, to introduce them to the language of the majority of the nation, and to middle-class children. According to the son 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 '70s, eventually became the most conservative of the lot. He did not fully share Elisabet's, and later Arvid's, democratic, second-wave or *Young Fennoman* ideas.⁴

Arvid Järnefelt's student years, a full decade from 1880 to 1890, were turbulent and unfocussed, perhaps best described as a continuous quest for some greater good to strive for. 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

³ See the online database of the Swedish House of Nobility, under the heading Clodt: <http://www.riddarhuset.se/jsp/index.jsp?id=553>

⁴ Niemi 2005, pp. 24-51. About the ennoblement, see also the online database of the Finnish House of Nobility, under the heading Järnefelt: http://www.riddarhuset.fi/fin/suvut_ja_vaakunat/

Will of the People) or *Koko Programmi Toimeen* (The Full Programme into Action). In 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 and seriously planned to practice law, but soon gave it up to pursue more fully his progressive ideals.

His spiritual and social awakening, inspired by Lev Tolstoy's teachings, dates from 1891. After that he resolutely gave up the supposedly easy life of a functionary, and began working as a craftsman, experimenting without much success with shoemaking, smithery and masonry.⁵ Eventually he became a small-holder, aiming at sustaining himself and his family by the produce of the land he himself would till. A small farm called Rantala, purchased in 1896, became the homestead of him and his family until 1927, when they 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 other, more important 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 intellectual kind. Following in Tolstoy's footsteps they took to educating and enlightening the local rural folk by organising a library, inviting lecturers and giving readings, thus encouraging the villagers to read about and discuss the current social, political and cultural issues amongst themselves.⁶

The Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and the domestic turbulences that ensued, particularly the Great Strike in 1905, the crofters' strike of Laukko in 1906-1907 and the 1918 Civil War, developed into crises also in Järnefelt's personal life. In 1907 he visited the Laukko region and published a pamphlet about the events. In 1917 he became a layman preacher, travelling around in a Christ-like manner, giving unauthorised sermons in churches. His wilful behaviour towards local ecclesiastic and mundane authorities got him arrested many 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 had become a diplomat in the service of the young republic, also abroad. During 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. His writing career began fairly late in life but continued uninterrupted until his death. He had a hand in the founding and managing of the prominent progressive newspaper *Päivälehti* (founded in 1889, now *Helsingin Sanomat*). His first

⁵ Niemi 2005, pp. 96-100.

⁶ Niemi 2005, pp. 101-112, 228-230, 256.

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 the nationalist ideology.⁷ His last, unfinished novel *Lalli* was published posthumously in 1933. The book is named after a semi-legendary medieval Finnish hero who allegedly protested against the forced conversion of Pagan Finns into Christians by killing a Catholic bishop. It promotes, among other things, the pacifist ideology of Tolstoy.⁸

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

The impact of Lev Tolstoy's (1828-1910) 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 family circles, particularly in Elisabet Järnefelt's literary salon. There the son imbibed the ideas that became both the ideological core of his literary oeuvre and the guideline of his personal life. Arvid Järnefelt recounted his moods of this period in his book of confessions, *Heräämiseni* (My awakening, 1894), openly admitting that his professed Tolstoyan love for the people was in the beginning just a pose, but eventually developed into an actual conviction.⁹

Järnefelt's idea of fairness did not have much to do with the rational division of labour. He's beautiful yet impractical ideal was that no-one should make use of – or, as he would have it, take advantage of, or even exploit – the work of another, e.g. to keep 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 the division of labour created an essentially violent hierarchic structure, placing some people above others to exploit them and to act as their tyrants and judges.¹⁰ He put this ideal into words in his novel *Helena* (1902), describing a young 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”.¹¹

His land reform model was focussed on the concept of manual work. Its aim was to redistribute the land among those who actually tilled the soil. Only if the big landowners personally took to the plough, they still had the right to own the land – as he himself had done. This kind of fairness principle applied particularly to the growing class of crofters, who did not own the soil they

⁷ Arvid Järnefelt: *Isänmaa*, WSOY: Porvoo 1965 (1893), pp. 45-46, 109 and passim.

⁸ Arvid Järnefelt: *Lalli*. Söderström: Porvoo 1933.

⁹ Niemi 2005, pp. 29-30, 38, 56-61, 70-86, 91, 99, 117, 124, 127, 149, 154, 158-165. Arvid Järnefelt: *Heräämiseni*. Otava: Helsinki 1894; *Samuel Croëll*, Helsinki 1899; *Maaemon lapsia*, in Teoksia III, WSOY: Porvoo 1927, pp. 219, 224, 227.

¹⁰ Niemi 2005, pp. 79, 208, 211, 279. Järnefelt 1894, pp. 91, 239-240, 208-238. Järnefelt 1986, p. 524.

¹¹ Järnefelt: *Helena*, Helsinki 1902, p. 367.

tilled, and whose social position was intensively discussed in the late 19th and early 20th century. In his pamphlet *Maa kuuluu kaikille!* (The Earth/soil belongs to everyone!, 1907) Järnefelt professed his admiration for the Finnish rural worker, whom he described as a martyred hero.¹²

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 even exploring the idea of (unmarried but committed) 'free love', he earnestly preached against professional prostitution, which he considered one of the many social ills created by the modern urban way of life, and a manifestation of the inequality of the classes – upper class men exploiting working class women. He demanded that everyone should try to resist such temptations as arise in their lives, and help the opposite sex to resist theirs. Marital love, though basically healthy and acceptable, should ideally be directed towards de-sexualised universal love, brotherly and sisterly compassion. The highest form of love, for Järnefelt and Tolstoy alike, was the mystical love for God and humankind, the latter best expressed in social equality.¹³

Järnefelt met Lev Tolstoy twice. In the early 1890s he wrote a treatise on Tolstoy's books and in 1895 sent him a letter 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 openly confessed his admiration his guru. Tolstoy's answer was equally polite, sympathetic and encouraging, yet he refused to grant his admirer an audience. The correspondence continued haltingly. Tolstoy was not too keen on publishing Järnefelt's texts and criticised severely the samples Järnefelt sent to him. The first meeting eventually took place in 1899, in 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 Russian great thinker as a supporter of the Finnish quest for reinstating the jeopardised constitution. Yet the two literary men managed to make contact on a more personal level, too. Järnefelt later described his ecstatic impressions when visiting Tolstoy's private study: from such a small, cosy chamber has sprung forth such wisdom! The second meeting, on more personal and private terms, took place in 1910, slightly before Tolstoy's famous last escapade and ensuing death. Järnefelt seems to have copied his role model in this respect, too – after all, he was the Tolstoy of Finland, why should not he also leave his loved ones behind to commit himself more fully to preaching universal solidarity! In later years, Järnefelt translated into Finnish several Tolstoy's books. In his own *Vanhempieni romaani* (The novel of my parents I-III, 1928-1930) he applied the structural scheme of Tolstoy's *War and peace* (1865-1869).

¹² Niemi 2005, pp. 111, 161-175. Arvid Järnefelt: *Maa kuuluu kaikille!* V. Kosonen: Helsinki 1907.

¹³ Niemi 2005, pp. 129-133, 191-192, 200, 226, 237, 246, 282-283. Arvid Järnefelt: *Veljekset*, Helsinki 1900, pp. 111-113 (on prostitution). Järnefelt 1899, p. 125.

Järnefelt obviously wanted to follow his mentor's example to the last. He arranged himself to be buried in the same manner as Tolstoy: in his own garden, in the shadow of big trees.¹⁴

Art imitates life: Järnefelt's ideal types of working noblemen

In his own life Järnefelt tried to keep physical and mental labour in a balance, thus optimising the benefits of both. He definitely knew from his own, hard-earned experience, what manual work was all about.¹⁵ Yet in his fictional texts he on a couple of occasions described the healing power of manual labour for those who hitherto had led an idle life, and presented the physical and mental superiority of the manually working classes in a deliciously naïve and romantic manner, with an ideological agenda that is quite obvious, at least to a current reader.¹⁶

The ideal types of noblemen, created by the progressive, nationalist Finnish fiction writers of the 19th century to illustrate the possible career choices of the nobility, were several. Each had their ideological dimension. The reactionary types included the courtier (serving a 'foreign' lord in a 'foreign' court, either Swedish or Russian), the civil servant, the retired officer, the lord of the manor passively enjoying the yield from his estates, and the active officer (a rather harmless yet also quite useless type). The most important progressive type was the nobleman farmer, a landowner who worked to modernise the cultivation of his lands; the others were the entrepreneur (often unsuccessful, illustrating the inability of a nobleman to cope in the modern world of business) and the nobleman-turned-labourer.¹⁷ The last type only appeared in Järnefelt's novels, for obvious reasons.

The idea of manual labour was present also in the image of the nobleman who becomes an active farmer. In several of his novels Järnefelt described young noblemen and women, who either dreamed about such conversion or actually shed their noble airs and graces to become small-holders working on the land. This kind of dream is mentioned in passing in *Isänmaa* (Fatherland, 1893)¹⁸ and described at length in two other novels. In *Helena* (1902) an idealistic young noblewoman persuades her fiancé to give up a military career. Eventually they purchase a large estate, Helena's old homestead, and lend the most of the land to the crofters on easy terms. For themselves they keep only a small farm, adopting a simple, peasant-like lifestyle.¹⁹ *Maaemon lapsia* (Mother Earth's

¹⁴ Niemi 2005, pp. 112-123, 204-226, 252, 267.

¹⁵ Niemi 2005, 109-111.

¹⁶ Arvid Järnefelt, *Hiljaisuudessa*. In Teoksia III. WSOY: Porvoo 1927 (1913), pp. 263-296 and 308-321.

¹⁷ See Marja Vuorinen: *Aateluuden semiotiikka, teoria ja käsite, aatelismiehen ideaalityypit ja populaarit demokraatit 1800-luvun kaunokirjallisuudessa* (The semiotics, theory and concept of nobility, the ideal types of a nobleman and anti-aristocratic democracy themes in the Finnish 19th century fiction). A licentiate thesis, University of Helsinki 2001. <http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/julkaisut/val/yhtei/lt/vuorinen/>

¹⁸ Järnefelt 1965, p. 53.

¹⁹ Järnefelt 1902, pp. 11-14, 36, 45-47, 55-58, 106-116, 126, 133-153, 356-361.

children, 1905) recounts the same development, with similar ideological motivation, with different trimmings. It even acknowledges the contemporary experience about farm owners of peasant origin: that they can deal with their subordinates much harder than those of noble or gentry origin, who have practiced being masters for generations. In the book a progressive nobleman manor owner is described setting up a school for the farm workers' children. Economically exploiting the landless rural workers was thus by no means shown as a monopoly, or a standard practice, of the nobility.²⁰

His very own literary creation, the nobleman worker character, Järnefelt only described once. In the novel *Veljekset* (Brethren, 1900) he tells the story of four orphaned sons of an impoverished noble family, who in their childhood have made acquaintance with idealistic, egalitarian notions fairly similar to those the author himself had adopted. One of the other brothers 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, first decides to learn farming, but soon leaves the agricultural institute to start working at a machine shop. He consorts with his colleagues from the workshop but also makes the acquaintance of the local small-town gentry, and realises, in a way so typical to such ideologically orientated 19th century novels, that the blacksmiths are usually honest and decent people, while the so-called gentry are lazy, pleasure-seeking and vain. Gabriel gets involved in a brawl and gets 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, of course, 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 nobility.²¹

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 almost totally impractical notions about supporting himself and his family by the work of his hands. He also suffered, for all his life, of an overheated moral nerve system.

What was his social activism all about? Was it a lame effort at channelling the turmoil of the era, to anticipate the societal change bound to happen sooner or later, by voluntarily giving in – a romantic, morally self-serving response to a 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 of the era, or even an agent of the same? Did his work actually have a part in changing the world into a better place?

²⁰ Järnefelt 1927 (1905), pp. 180-181, 186-188 and passim.

²¹ Järnefelt 1900, pp. 77-139, 299-300 and passim.

The answer, I think, must be yes, to all the above questions.

The innocent, unconscious self-praise and open admiration of his family's, particularly the Clodts', professed democratic-mindedness betrays, that adopting the progressive ideology served the psychological needs of a complex man who, for his reasons, whatever they may have been, might not achieve an ordinary success. Also, he did not always practice what he preached. In 1917, when entering the churches to give sermons, he and his followers often acted quite violently. Nor was his angry demand that church pulpits be open to all who wished to give speeches exactly peaceful in nature. His lowly attitude towards the Rantala peasants strikes 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 considered his antics to be expressions of vanity, self-centeredness, coquetry, exhibitionism, or even a 'Christ complex'. Alternately, they just thought he was plainly being difficult. Indeed, even Järnefelt himself admitted something like this.²²

On the other hand Järnefelt's writings definitely had an effect on the fine tuning of 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* (1919), the law guaranteeing to the crofters the right to buy for a state-subsidised price the lands they had cultivated so far. The contemporary opinion saw Järnefelt's pamphlet *Maa kuuluu kaikille!* (The Earth/Soil belongs to Everyone!, 1907) essentially as romantic idealism; yet it became a bestseller and was read by many.²³ In his books Järnefelt undoubtedly wielded the power of the word, thus creating ground for a better future. The fact that his ideological message was communicated mostly via fiction seems to hint, that by sending an exaggerated and emotionally loaded message that was not even supposed to be accepted at face value, Järnefelt tried to ensure that at least a part of the message got through.

The progressive semiotics of nobility: imagining old evil power²⁴

Järnefelt's literary activities coincided with the rapid growth of the volume and societal impact of the products of the printing industry. The appearance of mass-scale print media and the somewhat later introduction of the modern universal-suffrage-based voting system brought about a major change in the field of societal power. In the course of the 19th century, as the Weberian power-as-coercion gave way to the far more subtle, media-related power-as-persuasion. Publishing and

²² Niemi 2005, pp. 210-217, 224, 282.

²³ Niemi 2005, p. 175.

²⁴ Based on Vuorinen 2001.

distributing information became an efficient tool for controlling thoughts and attaining political hegemony in a society which operated on the so-called democratic principle.²⁵

The new era also brought new men to the centre of the society. The university-educated, nationalistic-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 an unselfish, decent and modern new elite – as opposed to the greedy, decadent and reactionary old nobility. Arvid Järnefelt spent his formative years among people of this kind and, despite of his noble birth, fully adopted their line of thinking, eventually developing it to unforeseen extremities.

In the 19th century Finland fiction literature was often used to serve the purpose of political manipulation. 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 fiction by definition does not have to be true, the writers had the greatest freedom imaginable to compose the characters, situations, plots and dialogues to create persuasive images. Individual characters were typically used as representatives of the antagonising groups, and set to play against each other in telling social situations. Romantic novels abounded in descriptions of such encounters. In them a bright young commoner hero typically challenged a degenerate nobleman, and emerged from the situation as a moral winner. The ideological message was always the same: the representative of the new elite had personal strength, good character, sound values and a warm heart. Respectively, the old establishment guy appeared as arrogant, violent, calculating, pedantic, cold-hearted, and rude.

The semiotic makeup of the image of nobility was closely related to different sources and types of power. The first frame of reference, the warrior, relates nobility back to its ancient roots as the military stratum of society. The image of power it conveys is *straightforward* and *personal* in the 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 the writers who identified with a more modern, peaceful fraction of the society. Firearms were shown as implements of cruelty and mindless destruction, and the duel tradition was attached to an outmoded code of honour dating from a warlike past.

The second frame of reference, the office/officer, belongs to the era of centralised states with organised armies and civil bureaucracies. The hierarchic structures were represented as sources of an *institutional*, as opposed to straightforward, kind of power, referred to via signs like civil and military uniforms, court dress, decorations and titles, all revealing an individual’s position in a hierarchy – which in itself was deemed the direct antithesis of democracy. An interesting deviation

²⁵ E.g. C. Wright Mills: *The Power elite*. Oxford University Press: New York 1956.

of this theme was an uncouth, untidy uniform, usually worn by an easy-going field officer as a protest 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, as landownership in the pre-industrialised days was still the principal source of wealth. However, the manor also signified straightforward personal power over those under the lord's direct command, and the influence which a wealthy man of high status necessarily had in a rural community consisting mainly of commoner farmers. Manor buildings sometimes acted as symbols of 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 grossly unequal distribution of wealth. To accentuate this image, there were the other kind of noble lords: progressive ones who themselves tilled the soil and shared the sound agrarian values of the rural folk.

The fourth power base was the family, the channel through which *economic, cultural and social capital* (as coined by Pierre Bourdieu) were privately transmitted from one generation to the next. The idea of family was present in its traditions, e. g. in the stories about how the family was raised to nobility, the family name, and their maxim; in emblematic objects like coats of arms or portraits of ancestors; in family politics that manifested as dynastic marriages, tombs, inheritances, fear of extinction, and legal adoption to prevent that; and in the manifold mystery of the noble blood – the one that boiled easily and was to be kept pure.²⁶ All of these “undemocratic” features were described with ironic over-dramatization.

The fifth base of the noble power was the exclusive high society, the forum of applying the acquired cultural and social capital. The type of power particular to the social scene was of *diffuse*²⁷ nature: a delicate influence, not a crude authority. The signifiers of this category include typical incidents of the high life – balls, parties, dinners – and the social hierarchies present in them, e.g. seating at table according to rank, and the dance code stating who is to dance with whom in what order; all these were often shown as manifestations of ridiculous, old-fashioned stiffness. Originally the so-called “noble manners” were seen as a web of over-courteous, dishonest flattering and endless intriguing. Distrust later gave way to an honest, if sometimes bitter, admiration of the free and self-confident manner of the noble, and of their ability to exploit their social networks to the full. 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 sixth and last source of power was the noble individual: the *cultural capital* reproduced in every generation, with varying results. The individual vices and virtues, the ingredients of personal

²⁶ Marja Vuorinen: “Inventing an enemy: Bloodsucking noblemen in Finnish fiction”. In *History in Words and Images*. Ed. Hannu Salmi. Turku: University of Turku, Department of History, 2005.

<http://vanha.hum.utu.fi/historia/2002/hwibook.pdf>

²⁷ Michael Mann: *The sources of social power, volume II: The rise of classes and nation-states, 1760-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp. 6-9.

attraction amounted to the *diffuse power* available to a person. The traditional features of a nobleman – gallantry, the concept of honour, the virtues of a soldier (loyalty, courage, persistence and patriotism), hot temper and, respectively, the ideal of self-restraint – were usually treated as something rather comic. The notoriously libertine sexual conduct of noblemen had a more serious function in defining the enemy: the heartless, unrepentant womanisers either seduced-and-abandoned or downright raped peasant girls or other symbolical representatives of the “people”. Another stigmatizing feature was the renouncement of religion, the enlightenment-originated atheism. Yet another antidemocratic theme was the so-called noble pride, manifest most often in the form of ridiculous disputes on primacy that frequently ended up in duels.

The 19th century Finnish authors of fiction readily represented nobility as a group whose appearances and downright existence belonged to past centuries. However, they were also represented as the only contemporary societal group that had a share of every type and source of power, and monopoly over some. Other powerful groups, e.g. the clergy as wielders of ideological power, or the bourgeoisie and modern industrialists as ones with economic power, only had access to one source of power each. The discursive media-related type of ideological power, wielded by the definers themselves, was, conveniently, not mentioned at all.

Another way to undermine the idea of nobility as hereditary elite was to present democracy and equality as supreme values. The most ancient image of equality was *danse macabre*, a reminder of the fact that Death eventually takes us all, commoner and noble alike. The principles of equality before God and before the Law, and the notion of us all being children of Adam, all pointed out that equality was a Christian, lawful and natural state of affairs. The ethos of physical labour and the “emotional democracy” of love affairs between unequal persons 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 theme was revolution, quasi-hidden in images like a decapitated doll, a bottle of French wine of the 1789 vintage, or the collapsing of a seemingly indestructible stone wall whose substructures have crumbled.

The Novel of my Parents: a private detour to nostalgia

One way of looking at descriptions of nobility, particularly when studying those written by commoners who observed it “from below”, is to look for what they reveal about the hidden agendas and structures of criticism: how even 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 kind of power in the society.

But in this chapter I seek to do the exact opposite: to find out how a text by an ultra-democratic writer, who happens to be a born nobleman, with an obvious ideological motivation and a condemning attitude towards his own people, still betrays a deep knowledge and even on-the-sly appreciation of his past.

From the beginning of his *The Novel of my Parents I-III* (1928, 1929, 1930) Järnefelt dutifully set the scene for preaching democratic ideals based on the principle of equality. In the first book he lets his aging mother narrate the past histories of the family. Elisabet nonchalantly states, that from what she has been told, her ancestors had been some Livonian baronets, who fortunately had had the decency of not valuing their noble birth overmuch. “It must be considered a merit, that one forgets such old sins, the sinful act of the past generations who deviously hauled 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.”²⁸ Later she is twice quoted saying that high birth gives no right to expect benefits.²⁹ She also gives account of her grandfather, who “loved the people” so much as to put on a worker’s outfit and descend “to the people” *incognito* to cultivate “genuine friendships”.³⁰ The reader meets also another, younger member of the admirable Clodt family, who boasts that he has no knowledge about his ancestors and is completely indifferent about finding out.³¹

The democratic ideal of personal merit as the sole definer of a person’s worth is also prominent in the novel. When describing an ideal civil servant Järnefelt points out, that inherited status must be overlooked and only personal traits and capabilities taken into consideration when appointing civil servants. He also states, that an ideal civil servant treats people according to their personal qualities, not their rank or prestige. He is as polite to the high and the low, doesn’t bully or patronise his subordinates or flatter his superiors, doesn’t seek favours, and is independent and self-reliant.³²

Alexander Järnefelt as 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.³³ Yet his nationalistic 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.³⁴ On the other hand, the reader is told that the Järnefelt children were put to school among middle class children precisely to

²⁸ Arvid Järnefelt: *Vanhempieni romaani I-III*. Kodin suuret klassikot. Weilin&Göös: Espoo 1986, pp. 97-98.

²⁹ Järnefelt 1986, 370, 382.

³⁰ Ibid. 100-101.

³¹ Ibid. 182-184.

³² Ibid. 100-101, 134-136, 167, 438.

³³ Ibid. 343-347.

³⁴ Ibid. 383-384, 407-408.

introduce them to the “real people” and to bring them up as little democrats – presumably by their father.³⁵

As both Järnefelt’s father and maternal grandfather were artillery officers, the most prominent of the ideal types 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 and becomes an officer. He comes from an impoverished noble family line, which of course causes problems. The standard state of affairs is that officers are men of independent means, supported by a steady income from their family estates. Accordingly, the state pays them only a token sum that alone does not guarantee decent living even for a single man, let alone provide for a family. Opportunity opens when he is recommended for training in a state military academy, becomes an expert on artillery and eventually takes on a teaching post in the same academy. Benefits for the holders of such positions include a large apartment free of cost.³⁶ The reader is thus invited to witness a change of tide: a double switchover from traditional officers-and-gentlemen to modern career officers, and the gradual modernising of military technology.

Finnish Cadet School as the first step towards military training is an obvious choice also for young Alexander Järnefelt. After that 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 take on the more traditional stuff: sports, languages (English, French and Russian) and horseback riding. During his training he internalises the most important military code of the multiethnic officer core: fidelity to the sovereign, to his comrades and to the fatherland. And as Alexander too doesn’t have any independent means to speak of, he too gravitates towards a modern branch for better pay, becoming an artillery officer trained also in land measurement.³⁷

When it comes to the symbolic frames of reference that relate nobility to different types of power, it is no surprise that most signifiers of each group are present also in Järnefelt’s production. Below I concentrate on such items as can be found in the *Novel*.

Signifiers belonging to the Warrior frame of reference are the scarcest, as suits a realistic description of latter-day nobility. The only theme that belongs 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 in theory rather than in practice, as a possibility rather than an actuality.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid. 294-297, 306.

³⁶ Ibid. 102-103, 127-128.

³⁷ Ibid. 156-157, 175-178, 264-265.

³⁸ Ibid. 193.

The military men of Järnefelt's family circle belonged to the second frame of the Office/Officer, 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 an undue interest in uniforms and decorations: the morally good officer is not vain and only dons his uniform at festivities. Decorations are described as something essentially ok – provided that they are a well-deserved, just reward for actual services rendered. They are observed as a matter of course in the military circles, and also as an acceptable 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 such persons who covet them, or wish to wear as them trinkets, for vanity, are strictly condemned as immoral and un-democratic-minded. What is said about the correct attitude towards decorations is equally true about uniform: it is morally ok, if donned with honour, as a token of belonging and comradeship, but if coveted for vanity it is morally condemnable.³⁹

Manor as the major economic power base for nobility, criticised as a signifier of inequality, doesn't really enter the *Novel*. Instead, manor life is seen in a positive light. Järnefelt describes family summers at the country literally in sunny tones: swimming in the sea, having friends and relatives to stay for long periods, cultivating at least romantic attitudes towards, if not actual contacts with the peasants of the surrounding villages.⁴⁰ A slightly more moral tone sets in, when the author describes the luxurious, expensive urban homes of the high and mighty: the settings for high life, not for mixing with ordinary people. Noble homes are intended for big social gatherings and 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 in to give statement 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.⁴¹ Järnefelt also criticises the social pressure: even poor noble families have to keep up appearances, and outwardly live up to the expectations of their society.⁴²

An ironic undertone presents itself in a sudden discontinuity towards the end of the saga of the so far so righteous Clodt family: some more distant 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”.⁴³

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

³⁹ Ibid. 134-135, 167-169.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 137-141.

⁴¹ Ibid. 435-438.

⁴² Ibid. 264-265.

⁴³ Ibid. 483.

describes how the noble children learn the ways of the grand society by play. They go to their own parties where they mimic the behaviour of their elders, and attend the grown-up parties to perform little music or dance numbers.⁴⁴ 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 discussion of the noble society. The author describes at length, how his father, at the time contemplating about marrying Elisabet, discusses the pros and cons with his comrades, and is given good advice: 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.⁴⁵ The third theme relates to the family as a source of identity. As opposed to the righteous member of the Clodt family, mentioned earlier, 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.⁴⁶

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 observes closely the suave manners necessary for such occasions. His attitude towards the phenomenon is twofold. He accepts the fact that contacts with the right persons help in everyday matters and career moves: a minor nobleman needs them to gain access to the society of men of power. Such manoeuvres feel embarrassing but are actually useful and not too immoral either, if not misused to gain purely personal benefits. The theme is illustrated in a positive light by Alexander's career: when he proceeds, he learns to make full use of his networks, and justifies it morally with the notion that the system is based on mutual benefit, seeing that each favour is eventually returned. Particularly useful his old contacts prove when he re-enters military service proper during the Crimean war.⁴⁷

When describing situations where he himself was supposed to mix and mingle for benefit, Järnefelt adopts a considerably more acrid tone. In Alexander Järnefelt's schemes the Governor-generals balls and parties were an opportune arena for lobbying for nationalistic *Fennoman* aims. Young Arvid is trained to become a dance floor diplomat, to work quietly for his father's political agendas, and doesn't feel quite at home in this role.⁴⁸

The calculating nature of networking is present also in the relatives' attitudes toward the choice of school for the Järnefelt children. When they are put to Finnish-speaking school among middle class children (whose parents are bourgeois, petty officials and land-owning wealthy peasants), well-meaning relatives worry about them missing the important chance of making the

⁴⁴ Ibid. 104-106, 133-134.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 202-203, 248, 262-263,

⁴⁶ Ibid. 182-184.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 161-162, 202-203, 350-352, 382.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 383-384.

acquaintance of the right kind of children, an to form networks among their peers, that would come in handy at a later age. Thus noble childhood is seen exploitatively, only as a foundation for an outwardly successful adulthood.⁴⁹

A little vignette that is in the book definitely for didactic purposes, but nevertheless echoes an atmosphere that shows at least a part of the nobility in a favourable light, is the description of Alexander's first visit to Elisabet's baronial family. He goes in hoping to remember all the airs and graces, and is pleasantly surprised to find himself in a relaxed and cosy party instead of the stiff-upper-lip kind of gathering he had been expecting. Being very shy he still manages to behave in a comically courtly manner.⁵⁰

The all-important question of languages was also present in the *Novel*, but instead of using it to convey a black-and-white moralistic picture Järnefelt explains certain phenomena as seen from the inside. For the critical nationalistic writers the French language was the main signifier for noble cosmopolitanism, and condemned as such. Yet Järnefelt takes to explaining that Russian nobles spoke French because of the immigrants from France, who entered the country after the revolution, even though he, too, gives preference to the native Russian. When it comes to the Finnish society, where the allegedly relic-like Swedish language is still spoken by the high society, he is not so tolerant.⁵¹

When describing the noble individual Järnefelt listed many traits found also in the standard critical descriptions. He recognises the attitude of some nobles, that religion really is more for the common people, whereas nobility usually is more detached from it, though respectful to the outer form of the ceremonies.⁵² The legendary hot-temperedness and respective self-control, the easily boiling noble blood and need to restrain it are present in the character of his father Alexander.⁵³ The concepts of personal honour, military virtues, comradeship and the military honour code are all mentioned in a positive tone.⁵⁴

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, the ideal of self-discipline, demand of strict self-control preferred by Alexander – and another, more relaxed tradition preferred by Elisabet.⁵⁵ 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 in a morning frock, and being seriously interested in card games.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Ibid. 294-297, 306.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 186-187.

⁵¹ Ibid. 103, 143-145, 156-157, 161-162.

⁵² Ibid. 330, 392.

⁵³ Ibid. 288-289, 324-325.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 169.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 288-289, 324-325.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 462-465.

Inside information about details of noble living could be used to criticise un-democratic practices (mother Elisabet sitting in the best pew in the church during the opening ceremonies of the four-estate parliament, the hierarchy-revealing opening ceremony described in detail⁵⁷) or to give away less flattering facts about the so-called high and mighty (experienced servants who have made their career serving one aristocratic family after another knowing better than their beginner masters how to organise great parties⁵⁸).

Of all available the anti-aristocratic democratic themes Järnefelt mentioned in the *Novel* only one, but in two different aspects and on three different occasions. It is well in line with the overall theme of his book. Equality before God is perhaps the most fundamental of the traditional equality principles, and it was most prominent in the teaching of Tolstoy. Järnefelt twice quotes, in disapproving tones, people who do not share his ideal. The conservative and rigid grandma Järnefelt is first quoted pointing out that God himself has created some flowers (families) more beautiful (noble) than others. Then another, anonymous noble person is heard saying that equality in front of God doesn't really mean equality in the society. In the end Järnefelt pronounces his own extreme faith by stating that keeping servants in against God's spirit.⁵⁹

To conclude: the glorious noble past in Järnefelt's *Novel of my parents* serves two very different purposes. First, it is a treasure chest where the author can pick didactic examples of bad behaviour, unfair practices, stupid prejudices and irresponsible attitudes, and, to contrast them, also the better options usually illustrated by the unusual attitudes and actions of the virtuous Clodt family. Secondly, 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 their flaws, trying hard to make sure that the reader understands exactly how little value he gives to them. Still he obviously enjoys the nostalgic light they still reflect, touches them fondly and puts them gently back to the chest, to be preserved for all eternity.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 326-327.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 450-451.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 187, 410, 524.