

Afterword to *Poemo de Utnoa* by Abel Montagut

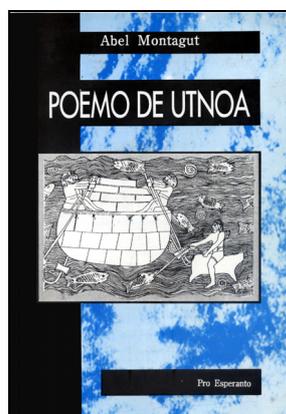
Translated from Esperanto by the author,
Probal Dasgupta

If a text written in 1992 and published in 1993 is partly translated in 2017, a few words about its context may not be out of place. Jorge Camacho Cordón – a mutual friend who with Montagut and a few other poets belonged to the incipient Iberian School of Esperanto poetry – introduced the two of us, postally, showed me a sample of Poemo de Utnoa, and invited me to write an afterword engaging with the text of this epic. This is the text that follows, after editing it for a readership that might be able to read the Catalan or Castillian versions of the poem, but not the original Esperanto.

A postmodern oeuvre

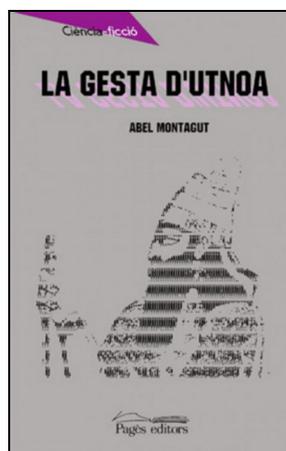
A distinctive direct method characterizes the cultural work done by Abel Montagut in the postmodern arena, where *Poemo de Utnoa* must be placed. To show how awed I am by his unusually straightforward (but ambitious) initiative, I must specify at once my understanding of this enterprise – of postmodernity – and locate his particular site of labour on the map I provide.

Neither an afterword writing project nor a postmodern enterprise can afford to supersede the writing of words or to abandon the pursuit of modernity. The task, in both cases, is to situate. An aftertext tries to position the main text in relation to other articulations. The postmodern impulse seeks to incarnate modernity's history-making spirit in a sustainable and geographical body. To put it differently, the postmodernities, as diverse as the regions where they emerge, try to place modern



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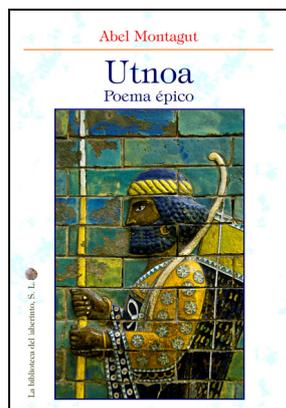
Vienna: Pro Esperanto, 1993.



La gesta d'Utnoa

Translations of the poem
into Catalan and Castillian
by Abel Montagut himself

Lleida: Pagès, 1996.



Utnoa: Poema épico

Colmenar Viejo:
La biblioteca del laberinto,
2018.



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universalism in locally sustainable homes. Modernity in its uncompromising classical form rejected allegiances and traditions. And yet one who has negated every specific inheritance, one who has spent a long time gathering ingredients for a universal humanhood, must at some point ask: Who am I, concretely? Am I alive enough to summon the energy that will be needed when the time comes to reconvene a serious collective, a 'we,' once a pan-human culture has been built and put in place? Those of us working in the cultural spaces at a nation-focused level often prefer far more regionalized articulations of the postmodern agenda. They tend to find it vitally important to refuse to inherit the orthodox profile of the national cultural tradition. In order to justify this rejection, they unmask and critique hegemonies that promote a particular set of texts as canonical, as representative of the entire nation. In their struggle against such hegemonies, they draw our attention to the voices of women and other oppressed categories, questioning the appearance of unity in the national canon. They thus actively undermine the unity of any national cultural profile. Instead, they prefer to highlight peripheral regions – sometimes in the physical sense of geographical regions, sometimes in terms of social categories. It is possible to argue, then, that those engaged in a cultural struggle against a particular orthodox nationalism tend to take a regionalizing view of the postmodern agenda. This view leads many of them to resist what initially looks like a unifying approach to the nation's historical reality but turns out to be a divisive imposition of boundaries – and eventually to resist naive historicity itself. Such resistance moves away from historicist modernism towards a postmodernity that seeks its identity in a sustainable human geography; this shift reflects a suspicion that any historicism – even the enthusiasm for a shared pan-human future seen as emerging from a commonly held view of the past – preaches a hegemonically conceptualized unity and must be unacceptable.

Readers directly or indirectly coming from such

movements of resistance to national cultural profiles cannot see, unaided, just how their struggles intersect with the project of *Poemo de Utnoa*. If we wish to provide the help they need, it is not enough to say that rejecting a national inheritance and accepting a pan-human inheritance stem from the same anti-national impulse. Montagut's Esperanto does not allow the term 'humankind' to be misused for some compromise-laden cluster of nations.

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A new type of heroism

Any literary labour inherits, and with some embarrassment passes on, materials and echoes from the heroic epic beginnings of textual memory. Later genres of writing rework in their various ways the raw material of those oldest traditions. Montagut's text digs deep, right down to the heroic foundation of all literature-making, and resists, by rewriting, the long accepted, but no longer acceptable, code of heroic warfare, of military honour, of pretty women who reinforce such honour, of tropes that are supposed to endow the text with artistic beauty. Going one step beyond the national-domain postmodernities which are



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resisting the hegemonic national culture profiles (and, now that they have managed to reverse the sanctification of the nation, are hesitating over how best to align the various resistance movements so as to enable coordinated cultural action), Montagut resists the early, pre-national form of state-format civilization itself in its literary dimension; in his writing, true sanctity comes to be associated with the actions of those who are able to be generous hosts and grateful guests under extremely unpropitious conditions. The half-hearted, inhospitable theorizings of our cacophonous times will definitely diminish the actual audibility of his initiative; but his text will be an exemplarily heroic guest of our times. It makes a manifestly significant contribution to the world of literary labour, even on Esperanto-independent assumptions about that world. Thus it earns a place on everybody's map of the world.

What significant contribution does the Utnoa text make, then? The heroes here are those who successfully overcome the ever recurrent temptation to engage in armed combat, even when the price of such overcoming is the horrifying death of the heroes, leaving their loved ones in heart-breaking grief. You remember that the real men in this epic find honour not in the ability to wage war and reduce to rubble, but in the capacity to build something oneself and to persuade others to take part in this constructive labour. It is still fresh in your mind that the women in this epic do not wait like objects for the glorious heroes to win them as prizes for successful combat; nor do the women eloquently praise violent actions; instead of being the booty for victors, they stand with their men as partners in battle. And you must have noticed that the text-beautifying methods in Montagut are just as non-objectual, just as participatory, as his beautiful women. I take it that your impressions will lead you to agree with me that what Montagut contributes to the site of postmodern labour is an embarrassment-free heroic image of a universal humanhood inalienably owned by every member of the species.

Abelian comparisons

I would like to call deobjectifying and participatory Montagut's characteristic methods of aesthetic labour. What I find most striking is the device exemplified in the following passage:

*They walked out of the Legislature with contrasting
Views held by various groups walking together.
Just as, on a field, at the crack of dawn,
Dozens of bees swarm around fragrant daisies
Playing around, while a brown bear quietly
waits
In ambush behind a fir tree, about to raid their
honeycomb,
That's how they walked as they chatted about
the fresh input.*
(K 1, vv. 265-271)

In this example – at an early point in the text – we find bees; the convergence of *abelo*, the Esperanto word for 'bee', with the author's first name Abel prompts us to call this trope the *Abelian simile*.¹ It makes a contribution to the global literary tool-kit. To take a closer look at the trope, let us go back to its first use, on the very first page (Kanto 1, verses 44-53). Just what do Abelian similes actually do?

They deobjectify; that is to say, they don't allow the 'objects' of comparison to fit smoothly into the traditional role of ornamental characterizers. An Abelian simile performs this deobjectification by deploying several resources. First of all, such a

¹ A critical reader (who is no more and shall not be named here) claimed, in personal correspondence, that the trope involved is the long familiar grand simile or the extended simile, used by poets like Homer and Milton, and should not be seen as a distinctive contribution by Montagut. That my correspondent seriously thought that I was unfamiliar with the grand simile suggests that I need to emphasize that substance is what is at stake here, not form alone. It is surely far-fetched to claim that Homer's trope can be associated, by anachronistic misprision, with the eco-politically conceptualized solidarity between humans and nature that drives the Abelian simile.



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simile never takes the form of a laconic half-line. In the forty-odd Abelian similes that occur in the text, the shortest one I found was four lines long. This length compels attention. Second, an Abelian simile always features two or more distinct species, although textual exigencies may give primacy to one, like the bees in the eponymous example. That diversity, along with the size factor, helps the device to succeed in presenting animals, plants and occasionally even humans as subjects rather than objects. Third, this subject status is underscored by the active element in the images:

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Abel Montagut makes it a point to avoid choosing purely static configurations, preferring instead to feature moving, planning, attacking, defending, suffering subjects. The image typically brings out the fact that participants in natural and human living, in the course of their independent living, often interact in these and other ways with participants who belong to other species. Fourth, in some but (to avoid setting up a stereotype) not all Abelian similes, there is an alternative image, such as the yacaré caiman featured alongside the

bear in the example we found on the first page of the poem. Such successive presentation of images underscores the parallel validity – at the level of citing comparable examples – of several performative realities whose vividness comes to mind in connection with the textual content that the author is seeking analogues for. The point is that no single analogue is uniquely appropriate or deserves to be privileged; thus, any one of them can be picked up for the purpose of the literary trope. The Abelian simile and its use as a virtually punctuation-like device counts as a constitutive feature of an epic at the bardic level. Let me unpack this point more explicitly.

The bards of old, associated as they were with a process preceding and grounding the institutional authority of the state, performed bardic gestures – as part of the epics they composed – directed at the gods. Placed on a pedestal over and above social life, the gods represented pure form. Divine sponsorship was supposed to nurture and protect the heroes, the children of the gods, performers on the epic stage initiating the god-sponsored leadership on which the legitimacy of the state rests. But our bard Montagut speaks from a position exterior to the state rather than one that precedes and grounds it: as a child of life and not a child of the gods, his human voice directs its gestures at other living beings *contiguous* to his speaking position rather than *subordinate* to the divine voice that the bards of antiquity claimed to speak for. The formal similarities between their ways of living offer *participatory* echoes that help bring out the ways in which the protagonists of the epic act in their lives; these analogies, by underscoring the continuity between the protagonists' modes of action and those seen in other times, other continents, other species, endow them with that concrete mythic validation that counts as one of the signatures of an epic. This is one aspect of Montagut's epic-writing labour that will reemerge with full clarity following its translation translated from the stateless language Esperanto into the ethnic languages associated with the bounded geographies of states.



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I turn now to another specific contribution that Montagut makes to the epic genre: the striking use of *participatory words* in his text. It is necessary to take a close look at some concrete examples.

Examples of participatory words

Let us start with examples that belong to the verb category. At the beginning of Canto 4 we find

*La ŝipo profiliĝis kaj ripoj **kornis** aeren.*

‘The ship profiled and ribs horned into the air’. Such writing is an advance over earlier uses of similar tropes, where metaphoric extension was an obvious constituent. In Montagut, we see no distance that metaphor needs to bridge; the directness of his verb says that the ribs directly choose to *be horns*, and to hit the air in their hornish capacity.

We may also consider the nomads at the beginning of Canto 5, where they

*al morto **vizaĝas**
sen levo de armiloj kontraŭ armiloj atakaj,*

‘turn-their-**face**-to death without using weapons against armed attack’ (against, the word is not analogous to the English verb ‘to face’); or Lemeh in the middle of Canto 2, where the text says he already “*grize **hararis**, sulke **haŭtis***” (615-616, ‘**haired** grey, **skinned** wrinkly = had grey hair, wrinkled skin’). Such words do not portray subjects of action standing at a distance from the materiality of what they are doing, using their hair or their face as if these were instruments; nor do they irrelevantly personify the hair or the face. What we are looking at here is a serious poetics of organs fully participating in the experiences and actions of the living being whose organs they are. The very existence of a nomad’s face is a continuous action – it permanently carries their dignity

the way carrying something on your shoulder is something you have to keep doing. In the case of Lemeh, the hair and skin are also Lemeh, they are not things he owns (however inalienably). Montagut – I have observed earlier – digs deep, right down to the heroic foundation of early states; likewise, we now see, he digs so deep that he reaches the participatory-organic basis of corporeal existence. The words that do this work for him embody actions – momentary, or sustained, or sustaining – and their verbhood pulsates underneath the substantival crust of their creature status.

We have been looking at the faces of verbs. But Abelian verbcraft appears in a more nuanced form over a wider range of words that feature a recognizably verbal bone to them. I have in mind the adverbial first constituent of words like *kurbekorna* (‘with curved horns’, where *kurbe* is adverbial, Canto 4, 781), *orebukla* (‘with golden curls’, deploying the form *ore*, adverbial, Canto 3, 560), *mildeklimata* (‘of mild climate’, *milde* adverbial, Canto 3, 822), in contrast to the adjectival first constituent of words such as *novaspeca*, *grizanube*, *fulmavoje* (‘of a **new** kind, in **grey** clouds, by a **lightning** path’, at Canto 3, 407; 595; 607). What is happening is that the distinctly substantival notions ‘kind, path, cloud’ are in systematic contrast with the verb-crafted processes ‘curvaceous horning, golden curling, mild climating’ [again, please set aside the ordinary English verb ‘curl’ – we want you to parse these verbs against the grain of ordinary English so that you get a sense of the richness of Abelian verb-craft]. Quite apart from this salient trope, this epic frequently uses compact verbs encapsulating the profiles of what would otherwise be seen as persons or things. At the end of Canto 4 we hear of “*Elamdi-on, kiu transnube **palacas***” (‘the god of Elam, who **palaces** beyond the clouds’, Canto 4, 747); at an earlier point, Uttu says, while grieving for Laŝmu: “*mia pereo pli bonus! ... ol ke nia tendaro vin **orfu***” (‘had only I died! ... instead of our side **orphaning**-it-without you’, Canto 4, 611); in Canto



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7 we hear of “*Eridua, kien laŭdire havenis / iam niaj geavoj, post ekziliĝo transmara*” (‘Eridua, where they say our grandparents once found **harbour** when they were exiled’, Canto 7, 172). Frequent adverb-initial compounds (*piemora bruligo, longestrataj urbegoj, blankesabla haveno...* there are so many of them, please excuse me for not glossing them all) display a skeleton mutated into verbhood; their active and versatile profile inflects even the formulaic epithets typical of the bardic style of epic composition, thanks to the Abelian rewriting of the rules constitutive of the epic genre.

Rewriting in a subjectivizing direction

The core stylistic devices of Montagut’s rewriting foreground the way humans who have renounced their primordial commitment to statecraft – who are rediscovering the heroic without embracing its old patriarchal basis, who give generosity pride of place in their new scale of values – learn how to associate nonhuman nature with subjectivity. Such activism involves *hospitably* construing every quality of fellow denizens of nature, wherever possible, as an *act* or a never-ending series of acts. This declaration of solidarity with what are construed as nature’s many *subjectivities*, apparent in every Abelian simile and in every face-to-face or skeleton-to-skeleton instance of Abelian verbcraft, and even in the actions and words of the heroes and heroines, offers an epic-formatted crown to the scientists who have worked for thousands of years to expose to the public, cogitative gaze all the processes that had been concealed in the privacy afforded by shells and other forms of armour; in our terms, scientists have laboured to uncover the actual verbs hidden under the appearance of nounhood. On this reading, Abel Montagut picks up where the scientists leave off, turning Esperanto into a seriously neutral and thus radical artistic vehicle for the not readily noticed radical content of the natural sci-

ences; such a partnership has the power to undermine the fortresses built over the millennia-long sponsorship of violence by the state.

Active abdication

Let us imagine that the laws of motion that govern the traffic of cultural labour end up giving *Poemo de Utnoa* a trajectory lying mostly outside the Esperanto world (for example, reaching most of its readers through translations into ethnic languages and critical reception in those languages, and so forth). When this is what comes to pass, everybody will need to take entirely seriously the fact that the text does not just **preach** some sort of hospitable humanhood, but **practises** a particularly rich variant of it. This form of hospitality – which I propose to characterize as ‘active abdication’ in order to have a convenient referential label – is in my view the best method available, in a period of history that has seen a general discrediting of militarism, for the work of building bridges over those distances that used to be regarded as valid justifications for wars of conquest. In Montagut, the scientific acquisition of knowledge about everything that inhabits nature is the initial learning component of the cultural labour whose larger goal is for humans to get fully acquainted with fellow inhabitants of nature on the way to harmonious participation in all the flows of life. This learning continues, beyond its scientific phase, in the specifically artistic labour of fashioning an adequate mirror for self-conceptualization by a self who has indeed digested all this learning and seriously inhabits the *Verstehenswelt* made available by the natural sciences, by history, by geography, by world literature. *Poemo de Utnoa* spectacularly illustrates this self-conceptualizing artistry we need, in the course of which humans today learn from their innumerable fellow citizens in this cosmos of life harbouring so many species, so many regions. Learning from our civilizationally ‘other’ fellow



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humans or from our nonhuman neighbours, we voluntarily step out of our particular ethnic cultural tradition which taught us how to pledge allegiance to our national or ethnic symbolism with pride. We do so by renegotiating the state or statelike walls that gave us shelter and once upon a time promised to protect us from dangerously nomadic outsiders. We line up to join the heroic community of Montagut's nomads; in this willingness to learn with full seriousness, we abandon the haughty teachings of the states and of their so-called educational systems.

Relatedness between postmodern projects

The modernist privileging of the enterprises of modernity somewhat impatiently dragged us out of the old patriarchal descentism that unambiguously docketed all individuals in some ethnic (or otherwise genealogized) tradition as its descendants. The haste of that exit may have led many of us to completely snap our communicative bond with people around us and to become thoughtless consumers. Even the glorious acceptance of all traditions expressed in generalized ownership declarations by self-proclaimed universalists ran the risk of turning into a programme of cultural aggression by knowers against those who (in a non-mutual set-up) would count only as known, not as knowers in their own right. In our times, some of us have been conscientiously dismantling the aggressive and environment-destroying consumeristic apparatus, while others, focused on reshaping our culture, have been trying to resituate our subjective selves in relation to the heroic mythologies that a love affair with science has banished into the attic. Our selves, so resituated, stop counting as descendants of some tradition that hands a heritage down across generations. We begin, instead, to organize our acknowledgements horizontally, in terms of consciously maintained membership of communities and solidarity across community boundaries. In our capacity as

authors or as readers (who therefore count as resonant co-authors), many of us will now want to – nobody will *have* to, these are invitations, they do not extort consent – truly take ownership of world literature by participating in the work of refashioning for ourselves its heroic, festive, ritual, symbolic basis in contemporary versions that we can seriously relate to, versions that make it possible for us to stop gazing from a distance at exotic-looking epics that we cannot recognize any affinity with.

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This invitation – formally festive and deploying some ludic humour – to join a global enterprise of creating reimagined contemporary versions of our fundamental textual nouns in terms of verbal textiles is in my view Montagut's contribution to the larger postmodern enterprise of resisting the prevalent industrial and 'educational' systems that have been committing cultural aggression, as in grabbing big chunks of their mass communication and book markets and propagating the supremacy of western 'civilization' without making more than a tourist-level (or market-research-level) attempt to understand non-western cultures. And so forth. This is the way the *systems* that are masters of the world uphold and update the orthodox preconcep-



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tion that it is the violent, the destructive, the victorious who are real heroes. What is postmodern is the quest for a way out of this nightmare that the modernist adventure has led us to. Modernism proposed to establish – and to provide error-free teaching of – some definitive checklist level universal human history. Today’s western systems *teach*. Montagut and other postmodern pioneers keep *learning*, and motivate us to keep learning.

Rejection of cultural federalism

Montagut’s practices, most clearly in the Abelian simile, resist the classical poetics of privileged examples – the poetics of anthology-worthy canonical texts that merit constant reinforcement through intertextual allusion (Montagut plays the allusion and homage game only with the epic works whose material he is directly refashioning); the poetics of default standards of comparison that canonical writing is expected to use with great frequency (Montagut avoids the default metaphors, except in the context of paying homage to the urtexts themselves). He does not allow a few exemplary poetic highlights to play the elite role of defining the defaults of humankind. From his principles it follows that a manoeuvre that involves juxtaposing the elite canonical texts and default foci of one society’s literary tradition with those of another, of a third, and so on, in order to set up a *democratically* federated family of elites is absolutely unacceptable. The earth that Montagut keeps faith with is not a conference drawing on the resources of all capital cities (however defined – politically, economically, or even ‘culturally’); he does not acknowledge elites as surrogates of the gods of antiquity.

For Montagut, earth is the fact that life, in the course of its ordinary living, celebrates; and invites other cultivators of the same region of the *Lebenserde*, with hospitable non-discrimination, to join the celebration, hoping to really get to know some fellow cultivators, not to be *taught* about *eve-*

rything. His poetry sings of places as regions of earth in this sense – not portraying them as places or nations that are members of bunches of places or bunches of nations and are wondering how to confederate into organized congregations. Montagut’s celebratory style – the quality of whose openness is more important the quantity of invitees – calls the same man by three different names: Uttu, Noa, Utnoa (recall that users of Esperanto are used to different people calling the same region either *Alsaco* or *Elzaso*; calling the same city either *Gdansk* or *Dancigo*), thus highlighting the plurilingual character of every regional community. We, the living, cultivate the land we live on in a communitarian fashion on the basis of the primordial, aboriginal covenant. We must insist that every ethnic and religious identity should give full content to our active abdication and go aboriginal again, to reinitiate ourselves into the authentically fundamental covenant with Forest-Earth – deeper than all fundamentalisms – which enjoins us to never destroy unless prompted by a direct need for food or some other urgent basic need.

Rejoicing

Now that we are done, I would like to pull out all the stops and applaud what has happened: the most experienced guesthood/hosthood movement of the world, the Esperanto movement, has demonstrated its maturity and seriousness by enabling the crystallization, in its unique language, of *Poemo de Utnoa*, thus expressing the supreme importance of hospitality as a defining feature of humankind itself. Natural scientists, the high priests of modernism, have been congratulating each other over the ‘quantitative revolution’ for centuries. We who have read Montagut have had the privilege of witnessing the beginnings of the qualitative revolution. Long live life! ●

Hyderabad, India, 11 December 1992 / Kolkata, India, 31 December 2017