

THE ENDURING VISION: A STUDY OF  
JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S  
"THE FALSE START."

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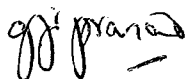
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## CERTIFICATE

Certified that Sumita Mohapatra has worked under my supervision for her M.Phil dissertation entitled "The Enduring Vision : A Study of Jayanta Mahapatra's The False Start" and no part of it has been submitted elsewhere for the award of any other degree.



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New Delhi,

June 23, 1986.

*Sumita*  
Sumita Mohapatra

Dedication

To my

Grand Mother

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## INTRODUCTION

The word is our sign and seal  
By means of it we recognize  
each other among strangers,  
and we use it every time the real conditions  
of our being rise to our lips

Octavio Paz  
in  
The Labyrinth of Solitude

One of the most consistent and prolific Indian English poets, Jayanta Mahapatra,<sup>1</sup> has increasingly started talking (in interviews, correspondences) about the futility of his calling - 'useless, the feeling of writing poetry'.<sup>2</sup> This attitude would have been alarming if it were born of or led to indifference. But there is a quiet, still desperation in this knowledge of futility which more than sets the tone for his recent poems. A detailed study of his poetry makes it clear that statements like the one mentioned above are not a result of apathy after a surfeit of recognition but a natural reaction after a long contemplation of the darkness inherent in things:

... hearing the stillness fall on the house  
as though it were the only thing left behind,  
this mortality of me,  
trapped in the moonlight that seemed to decay

like a dead man as I looked at it  
 Now the scent of time rises from the  
 warm earth,  
 enough to burst open the desert of dead  
 bone and dust:  
 under my sudden need for life  
 Perhaps a vow of eternal love  
 sits rocking in the thin twilight of the past,  
 lonely as a door closed determinedly  
 against it.

- The Retreat<sup>3</sup>

It is not that futility is the subject matter  
 but the poetic studies are directed towards the blank heart  
 behind the neat order of things. Pushpinder Sanyal feels  
 that 'It is what the images construe of a felt anguish and  
 concern with reality that builds up a substantial core of  
 meaning'.<sup>4</sup> Syd C. Harrex echoes the same sentiments that it  
 is 'The poet's personal modest sense of uncertainty that seems  
 to govern what he perceives as constituting the humble and  
 grand fundamentals of existence'.<sup>5</sup> The focus is not on negation  
 but on the inescapable sense of tragedy that lies behind every  
 creation be it of the world or of art. Mahapatra's concern is  
 with this tragic sense of life and he responds to it and  
 reflects it through his involvement with language and the craft

of poetry. The poems in The False Start are a meditation on time and space that has shaped his destiny and also an effort at the creation of a persona to shape the image of the creative self. It is a study of the self in the world and the world of the self. Language becomes a study of the possibility and failure of silence. The argument is whether silence can be employed as an evocative poetic method. Another consideration is the role and responsibility of time and space in poetry and their kinship with the material and the poetic worlds. Then comes the literary persona which assumes the role of both a contemplative, sometimes dramatic voice, and also a private self.

Mahapatra had already received international acclaim before the publication of his sixth book of poems, The False Start. The previous collections make significant statements about his style and vision. Yet it is The False Start which gives the irrevocable impression of a poet having come of age. The gap between theme and style is bridged and rhetoric no longer hinders interpretation. In the earlier poems form and content did not always harmonize. The nature of his themes which demanded a loose, rambling Lawrentian style needed a tout control too. The technical failures (the gap between the image and discourse, the cluttered clumsiness of language and the lack of focus) pointed towards an essential failure: language no longer sharpened thought but blurred it.





Language is no longer merely used but lived. The success results in evoking a response from the readers. C.B. Cox writes, "These mysterious, unsettling lines more often draw the reader onward and inward to probe his own dark heart to listen to the rain seep into the soil for the 'art, ceremony or voice that lies under my aimless hearing of the rain'."<sup>7</sup> Apart from the growth of the poetic skill another reason for this is Mahapatra's growing concern about the very nature of language. Though on the one hand he does not believe in caution, in the post-modernist obsession with the paucity and distortion of language he agrees with Jacques Derrida's opinion that 'To be a poet is to know how to leave speech'.

The False Start is the first collection of the poet which brings into sharp focus all the three major concerns mentioned earlier. Silence and/or absence is not just a word of poetic scope repeatedly used but a mysterious reality that the poet has to face and come to terms with in poem after poem. In A Rain of Rites this silence is a subject matter to be meditated on and not a symbol expressing the unsayable:

I have read the silence  
 that dances across the land at dawn  
 I have watched it grow  
 from a small lonely window  
 It hurts  
 The hundred thousand eyes  
 when I try to get over it

it creeps into my bed like a furtive child  
 It is really the waiting I've known?  
 words clinging to me like a trick?  
 nobody can help me  
 if I pull the covers over it.  
 Was it not on the inside,  
 walking down ahead of me in the morning?

- "Silence"

The tone is tentative and the feeling has not yet formed itself into an experience. In The False Start silence expresses three different concerns of the poet's life - childhood, relationships and death. Childhood has turned itself into the memory of a mysterious, painful past. Innocence of the heart makes escape impossible. The child who was a witness to events, to a time that cruelly, insiduously ruined everything, now plays the game of exorcism. Language, the craft of poetry, is used to shape the vast patches of silence. On the one hand, there is the recreation of self and on the other a search for an idyllic language. The silence of the world, which often becomes the silence of a divine being hints at the rift between creator and creation. Now an obsessive attention to the silence inherent in the memory of childhood, relationships or death tries to gauge the greater silence of the world and may be to discover a meaning.

And the wandering in my mind goes on  
 from moment to moment,  
 from one knowledge to another,  
 until something greater than darkness  
 passes between us ...

- "A Certain Refrain"

As life makes no precise, final statement, silence does not  
 answer any question. It is an effort at creation and recreation  
 and often generates the crushing awareness of failure.

Love is never a happy, fulfilling experience for  
 Mahapatra. Either it is shrouded with nostalgia:


Memories like the wind, and today  
 peers from years : over unbridled waves  
 and tenacious skies, and I know  
 that you can never be lost  
 because their secret nets of pain  
 would always be there to bring you in

- "Today"

or it is dealt with with a painful, desperate irony:

Woman, what things  
 you would make me remember,  
 what would you make me do?

- 'Woman In Love'



The otherness of the beloved, the lurking threatening, shadow of separation that darkens togetherness, the anguish of break-up become intimately linked with silence. And this silence proves to him that he possesses nothing:

Who knows  
 What's dying underneath  
 a dying blade of grass?  
 Or what habit palpitates  
 inside the dark pit of love:

- 'A Day of Rain'

The salient role of silence in relationships is to emphasize the utter loneliness of the self. As Octavio Paz wrote in the essay 'The Dialectic of Solitude', "His (man's) nature consists in his longing to realize himself in another. Man is nostalgia and a search for communion. Therefore, when he is aware of himself he is aware of his lack of another, that is, his solitude'. But in most of the poems the contemplation begins with the poet and his suffering as a man and turns into problems of poetics. In 'Poem for Angela Elston' leave taking changes into the awareness of a chasm between the intensity of feeling and mundane nature of language. As the unsettling memory of childhood turns itself into an icon of quest for the sacred language, the failure of relationships reveal the ignominy of being trapped by a language lacking power:





through which nothingness enters the world'.<sup>8</sup> This nothingness is poetized through the awareness of an ineffective language, and lost time recalled time and again through memory, and concern with death. The first chapter will deal with the mode of silence employed in the above-mentioned three levels.

Syd Harrex, discussing the setting of The False Start writes that 'one can identify in all the poems in the book an idiosyncratic landscape thereof which organically blends material world, material experience, intimate human relationships and psychic journeying. This landscape is a kind of meeting place for elemental and transcendental concerns'.<sup>9</sup> The paradoxes inherent in the personal and the poetic self seem to resolve themselves in the definitive and intense rootedness of the poetry in a specific setting. India which becomes Orissa is both a state of mind and a metaphor much like Joyce's Dublin or Baudelaire's Paris. The place is incarnated in language transcending the scope of mere setting. It merges with the flow of thought both creating and reflecting it. So Puri, Chandrabhaga, Balasore and Cuttack come together not as places rooted in time but constitute the very mode of being of the poem. The specificity of place is a part of the nature that is a constant fact in the poet's work. Space attains the form of nature which transforms itself miraculously. The earth with its ravaged topsoil turns into a silent, suffering woman, the rigid mountain teaches lessons in dignity, the trees are



the voices of long dead ancestors. Cezanne's words come to mind - 'The landscape thinks in me and I am its consciousness'.<sup>10</sup> It is not an unfailingly beautiful mellow nature, often becoming rigid with malevolence and silence. Yet there is an intrinsic balance. The vitality of nature does not exclude its malignity. So in a double movement which marks all relationships the poet imposes his ideas and moods on nature and also tries to unravel the mystery of it. There is very little trace of the public world (though sometimes the city with all its filth and corruption becomes an idiom for the present time). His involvement or engagement with the time he inhabits is not rooted in responsibility but compassion. It is the 'unspoken pity' that he mentions in 'Time Drawing In'. Memory, an instant of time, loneliness, silence, the poetic task all become crystallized in the setting. The inner space of the poems often goes through various phases in the process of its transformation from the concrete to the abstract. The concrete space denotes the involvement with one's roots but the abstract succeeds in including the various states of being. These include the influence of memory on poetic act, the primitive, ritualistic language and the creative language, the experience of death that underscores relationships and life.

The idea of time is intimately linked with poetic space, setting and landscape. Time is a maker too. It has shaped the poet's life and it has changed and continues to



There are instances in the poems where time attains a spatial scope and space exposes a sense of immovable iconized time. The poetic treatment deals with both the fragmentary and eternal aspects of time. The consciousness of time is a reality that lies outside oneself. And the creative process of writing about it implies the ability to confront and master it. The treatment of time and place gives the poems a touch of reality and also renders the surrealist effects more dramatic. In 'A Certain Refrain' the theme is the loss of an ideal self and the struggle to recall it time and again. But the tone is deliberately ambiguous. When the poet recreates the experience of a lonely childhood one feels that the poem is addressed to the mother but towards the end 'you' enlarges its scope. Only the time span reiterated as past keeps the structure of the poem tight and ordered. The effect of surrealism comes from the suggested link between the moods of a human being and the climate of a landscape. The element of the plot is less important to the poem than the incantatory quality. The experience that this kind of poetry creates ultimately lies with a strong feeling, richness of phrasing and an exciting sound. It is the quality that marks most of Dylan Thomas' poetry.

Pale rain over the dwindling harbour  
And over the sea wet church the size of a snail  
With its horns through mist and the castle

## Brown as owls

- Poem in October

(taken from the collection  
Poetry 1900 to 1965  
edited by George Macbeth  
Faber and Faber 1976)

In the first chapter we will study the process of facing the anarchy of time with a cluster of symbols denoting silence. In the second, the discussion will be involved with the poetic world rooted in the original and psychic places, the first being geographical in dimension and the second being that of the mind. Space and time become inter-changeable. An instant of time is often changed into a fixed area through the dramatic use of such symbols as the sea, sky, mountains, rocks, birds and trees.

The consciousness of space and time indicates an acute desire of recreating the central self. Meena Alexander writes, "Mahapatra confronts the issue of identity that arises for each and every writer in India, the anguished need to define a self, out of the bottomless flow of time; to cut identity out of the 'sky' eternal vault'." The question of identity is finally and exhaustively dealt with in the third major poetic concern of Mahapatra - the creative self and persona. 'I' or the voice of the poet is a permanent feature

of the poems. Mahapatra is never squeamish about being overtly autobiographical. In an essay titled "The Stranger within : Coming to Terms through Poetry", he says, "How will he [the poet] be able to communicate his experiences to others? I should like to think that unless one has learnt to know oneself, he or she couldn't be able to share his feelings and experiences at all. Only when one has begun to understand that he himself is a part of his experiences. Only when he comes to know what pushes him forward or backward in the complex process of life, only when he realizes what makes him move as he reacts to various situations which bring him joy or pain or rage - can he be able to communicate fully with another. Mere experiencing things keenly will not be enough, or an intense feeling for objects or relationships; a skillful creation which would transform his experience and capture it with appropriate words is also of utmost importance.'<sup>12</sup>

The quest for the origin and for identification with a central self are reflected in the transformation of creative self to a poetic persona. The disembodied, contemplative voice assumes a dramatic form generating points of tension. But this 'I' does not always have the fixed purpose of story telling. It combines the many selves of the poet, at various stages of time and thought. Sometimes, it is the lonely counterpart of the 'you' at others a voice of discovery probing the world that changes all. He records a journey of the

discovery of self at different phases of time and space. They include the self as a child, as a man, a lover, a father, an artist. The phenomenological interrogation comes from the strong sense of narrative centered around the 'I'. This does not indicate either artistic arrogance or solipsism. To the contrary, it is intimately rooted in the process of an emptying out of the self that Kierkegaard and Simone Weil speak of. The self is enriched not by being lavished on but by lavishing, not by focusing on itself but by its own forgetting. The intense consciousness, the inward motion of the spirit does not exclude humility. The poet becomes a voice in the surrealistic landscape, inhabiting a multiple layer of time. The past attains immediacy in the ceremonial evocation of the memory of the ancestors, the mysterious life of a race:

And in my wasting veins the dullness of pain  
 is from the water that bites into my skin,  
 from my brothers I have not wanted to know  
 the drifts of dead wood, misshapen and sad,  
 thrusting my many faces at me  
 I am not fulfilled as I think of  
 the long lines of water behind.

- 'To Night I Hear The Water Flowing

Apart from a search for the self, there are allusions to a tenuous kinship with the other, a beloved self or ideal image.

In the third and final chapter a detailed study of the relationship between the creative, imaginative self and the persona will be made.

Mahapatra is concerned with belief and unbelief not of any essentially religious kind but of a more primordial and personal faith that inspires creation:

As the stones spread their  
                                   designs over the hills  
 and teach them the silent  
                                   alphabet of belief.

- 'Time Drawing In'

It is laudable that though Mahapatra often reaches the edge of what St. John of the cross described as 'the dark night of the soul' he ultimately comes back to the life and meaning that language contains. One gets the impression after reading The False Start that the poems are not merely aesthetic exercise but the manifestation of a spiritual necessity. Though a Christian by faith, Hinduism is important to the poet not as a religion but rather as history, a state of being, a permanent structural element of the mind. If his poems are ultimately religious than it is in the sense that Kafka's novels are religious - through a terrible honesty of vision and purity of style.

The three chapters of this study will discuss the recurrent poetic themes that make The False Start the first

significant collection of Mahapatra and an important contribution to Indian English poetry. For the first time the poet has made a conscious effort to eliminate the major flaws of style to focus on the central issues of his poetics which have been identified in this introduction and are taken up for detailed study in the succeeding chapters.

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#### Footnotes

- 1 Jayanta Mahapatra has published nine volume of poetry to date.
- 2 Jayanta Mahapatra's personal letter to the author.
- 3 All the references from The False Start are from the book published by A Cleaning House publication, 1980.
- 4 Pushpinder Sanyal, "Two Shades of Metaphor", New Quest, May-June 1981.
- 5 Syd C. Harrex, "The False Start : The Carnle Reviews Journal (1981).
- 6 Ian Jakobson, Selected Papers in Structural Linguistics, Vilim Fried (editor), Mounton Publisher, 1982.
- 7 Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude (Penguin Books, 1985), p. 85.
- 8 Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness (Penguin Modern Classics, 1983), p. 150.



- 9 Syd C. Harrex, The False Start, loc. cit.
- 10 Paul Cezanne, Beyond Painting (New York: 1948), p. 14.
- 11 Meena Alexander, "A Poetry of Decreation", The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, vol. xviii, no. 1, 1983.
- 12 Jayanta Mahapatra, "The Stranger Within : Coming to Terms through Poetry", Dalhousie Review, vol. 30, no. 5, 1983.

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## CHAPTER I

## SILENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

"Between the shout and being silent,  
between the meaning that is all meanings  
and the absence of significance the poem rises."

- Octavio Paz

'The Children of the Mire'

Not many book length studies on Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry are available. But almost always he finds a place in the discussions and reviews of Indian English poetry. Increasingly critics are concentrating on him, convinced that his is a significant and authentic voice. Though most articles (due to lack of space, an attempt to include all the works of the poet, and also a certain unimaginative response) skim the surface of style and theme, they reiterate a single point - the role of silence. Pushpinder Sanyal lists it as 'the impression of remote and secluded sensibility musing on itself'.<sup>1</sup> C.B. Cox is of the opinion that silence is generated through a treatment of the world that is situated 'between waking and sleep, sunlight and rain, love and loss...' and takes us back to Genesis, in the beginning within the inner world, before history'.<sup>2</sup> Syd C. Harrex links silence with the

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concern to 'capture the predicament of incertitude at the heart of things',<sup>3</sup> Mahapatra's own words reveal much. In an interview with N. Raghavan, he observed, "silence is a sort of idea in my work, which may come as a revelation and perhaps it will come ... as a result of living simply - not aggressively - and the mind begins to flow like water. Or perhaps silence is an opposite pole to this : I mean there is always something eluding one in life - and that something. I have never been able to find even in whatever I call my own - like a wife or son ... let one call that my silence."<sup>4</sup>

Though impressive as a poetic concern silence contains the paradox that subverts poetic expression. How does Mahapatra reflect on silence yet manage to say something? What purpose does silence serve? How does he manage to create a certain set of idioms out of silence? There is a note of hesitancy in almost all the poems in The False Start. A subtle but felt reluctance to name a specific moment or mood. Definitions have scrupulously been avoided. So have been neat endings. The poems are not efforts at meanings but rather the reiteration that an absolute answer is impossible. So the keen sense of disolation becomes a mode of thought. The dark tenor is more than a poetic mannerism, but rather becomes the order of things. The dead continue to exist with the living, absences become living presences to haunt one. Memory becomes an endless moment, words fail to incarnate

objects. Having failed as a man, as a lover, as a father, the persona now faces the welter of language questioning not only his fate but the validity of art:

Quickly I step out of my house watch  
 the dull night in the thick streets  
 the pray of darkness on the earth bound stones  
 Every gesture I make covers my real world  
 With something opaque, like flesh a kind of silence

- 'The Retreat'

Mahapatra refers to different modes of silence. The silence that comes at the wake of too many or too few a words, the impotency of language that Arthur Adomov described thus: 'The words in our ageing vocabularies are like very sick people. Some may be able to survive, other are insurable'.<sup>5</sup> The other side of silence is the one towards which all language moves -

And a bird flies by small  
 in the extravagant darkness  
 The shaped blower-beds expose a cry  
 that bears no voice

- 'Measuring Death'

Similar ideas have already been expressed in the preceding collection, The Rain of Rites:

Thus I approach the boundary  
 the voices I make and their drooping echoes,  
 facing those secrets lost in one's own creation  
 now to fold slowly, or rise and ball in turn,  
 in that inner kingdom of consciousness  
 which moves each torture of memory  
 into the flesh

- "Four Rain Poems

In this Chapter, I aim to discuss the treatment of this multinatured silence in the poems. Silence sometimes reflects the nausea at either the excess or lack inherent in objects but often it dramatizes relationships, the miracle of language and the grace and dignity of simple lives. There is also a grim third side to the treatment of silence. It evokes the terrors that punctuate life. The uncertain undefined sense of the macabre fails to create the effect of a sudden pungent impact in the overall antifice of the poems:

Terrible, puffed-up clouds swoop  
 upon the sky  
 and yet leave no trace in the soft blue

- 'The Day After my Friends Became  
 Godly and Great'

A certain tension grips most of the poems because the poet simultaneously speaks about the

possibility and impossibility of his calling. The narrative voice and the negative meta narrative voice do not cancel each other out but successfully reveal the theme. The numerous false starts in life would have been a monotonous theme if the poet had failed to synthesize it with language and style. The theme is failure but the artistic recreation never loses credibility. Failure is not a cause but a condition of life. In the poem 'Absences', the poet speaks about death - a strong, persistent metaphor in other poems too. Death is not a sudden cessation here but rather a gradual fading away, an absence which does not make much of a difference until it is noticed. And the song is the only answer in the revolt against death. The awareness of the poem as an artefact is deliberately created and persona simultaneously assumes the role of the poet (in the process of making the poem) and a dramatic voice. Creation does not wipe away death but achieves a victory of sorts. Art also enables us to accept death as an event which makes life sensuous, immediate and urgent:

If there were no death here

The common-looking clouds would have blinded our eyes

- 'Absences'

The constant struggle between life and death between the song and the silence persists. The silence threatens the song and yet ironically makes it a success by revealing its momentary glory.

Underlying the theme exposing a concrete idea there is the continuous and complex interrogation about meaning. This finally lifts the poems above mere pessimism. Pessimism is generated by the knowledge that one's activity is devoid of purpose, is senseless, absurd. But in most of the poems in the collection, the quest for meaning is never negated. The very existence of the poem establishes the fact that the mute silence can be penetrated to reach the core of silence that contains all meaning:

My eyes have climbed long  
                   the shapes of trees  
 to find only breathless voices  
                   trapped inside.

- The Gift of Night

The poems do not so much communicate emotions as a vast stillness. This comes from a deep, rapt emphatic contemplation. It enables the poet to view the heart of the matter and to grasp the irrevocable paradoxes inherent:

Dark as death  
 Your eyes reach everywhere

- Through the Stone

The poet or rather the persona exposes the struggle with the medium of expression (the constant subject matter of Mahapatra's poetry) with personal anxiety concerning spiritual,

metaphysical doubts, and impotency in relationships. Not for him the sharp, precise and final rhetoric of Ted Hughes or Thom Gunn or the playful erudition of Stevie Smith. It is a complex, convoluted discourse that gives the impression of being unending and continued on to the next poem. Madhusudan Prasad writes, 'In him, there is a surface serenity; but below the surface there is unfathomable profundity and dazzling density of material. The total effect of his careful craftsmanship and the interplay of the sensory, the visual, the metaphysical and the meditative in his verse is overwhelming and easily memorable'.<sup>6</sup> His style brings to mind the words of Claude Mauriac "anyone who speaks is carried along by the logic of language and its articulations. Thus the writer who pits himself against the unsayable must use all his cunning so as not to say what the words make him say against his will, but to express instead what by their very nature they are designed to cover up : the uncertain, the contradictory, the unthinkable".<sup>7</sup>

Silence as a metaphor is used in three different thematic levels - childhood, relationships, and death. In the first, silence represents the sharp sense of bewilderment and the lost time. Relationships which always have three dimensions in Mahapatra (physical, emotional and spiritual) take recourse in silence because they are always destined to fail. Death assumes the form of an absence of meaning,



the muteness of nature and the failure of art and is expressed in silence - which is both a metaphor and a style - through the hesitant tonality of the poem. At all three levels, a relationship between the image and the discourse is always maintained.

The memory of childhood is a constantly haunting factor in Mahapatra's poems. Through the vivid flashes of relived experience he objectifies the time that is lost forever. But this time is inescapable because it is engraved in the mind before being properly formulated, in language. A child may witness some thing he does not know the meaning of, cannot talk about or explain away in his own mind and the experiences become traumatic. Something which he can never get rid of. In later years he comes to understand it, yet the same mystery does not fade away by the act of giving it form through language. The memory becomes an image of the continuous time which it incarnates. In "The Stranger Within" Mahapatra writes 'one of my strangely intense memories of childhood was that of the house (in which I lived) as it settled down each day into the darkness of night. It was a dismal, gloomy setting, one which haunted me with a certain persistence - until years later, a day came when I decided to put the whole thing on paper in an exercise of exorcism. It would be right to say that the situation chose me to write about it ... the darkened house of my childhood, the dark deodars with the

fruit-bats screeching in the branches and the shadows that appeared to blend with the wind which blew in until one discovered suddenly that the darkness was there, inside him. Strangely, these evenings in memory that lived closer to the heart than ever. An inexplicable loneliness linked itself with the sad-eyed oil lamp of my mother. They came to mean the same thing to me. I understand what a symbol was. Without trying to go deeper into the meanings of things, without my trying to become wiser. And as the years went by and I grew older, perhaps this image buried itself in the heavy undergrowth of my mind. It was only later, much later, when I started to write that I bound myself alone in the past, this past stretching before me and it was as if I had stepped on a small twig that snapped to make me articulate."<sup>8</sup> This elusive, half-buried awareness of childhood, contains an inexhaustible poetic theme:

There's a summer hiding away  
 behind the hills,  
 a haunting dream whose meaning  
 always escapes me

- "A Day of Rain"

The obsession with childhood does not become obscure for the reader because it is always being rescued from the welter of personal memory to create an objective correlative of some metaphysical anguish. One is reminded of William

Faulkner's memorable book The Sound and the Fury and the character of the mentally retarded son Benjy. Benjy remains a child all his life, steeped in the memory of his boyhood and the vague premonition of the family's collapse. The first book of the novel constitutes of his impressions, in his language which always is inadequate to express the tormented candour of his mind. Benjy does not have any sense of time; his only thought process is associative; the event of the day and what it reminds him of in the past are all one to him. Past is the 'luminous halo' which shrouds his present and future life. The only meaning in his life is his sister Caddy, whom he adores and the memory of her and childhood are inseparable:

Then the dark came back, and he stood black in the door and then the door turned black again, caddy called one and I could hear us all, and the darkness and something I could smell. And then I could see the windows, where the trees were buzzing. Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does even when caddy says I have been asleep.<sup>8</sup>

The language of Benjy blends with the objects he is describing. He had never abided by the rules that the world imposes on language. When he thinks, he does not separate his thoughts from his feeling. The immediacy conveyed by his talk comes from the fact that he is not describing but rather seeing for the second time.

This knowledge of a pure language that would not merely name but contain and exude meaning haunts Mahapatra's poems about childhood:

Only the loss of an innocence  
stretches the heart out of the present  
and siezes the day

- "Today"

The concern with innocence is linked both with language and time - childhood is hallowed, for the tyranny of time has no sway there and the images of the mind that contain it are superior to words. Words contract meaning, they limit it. Even when they successfully describe something they render it obsolete, trapping it within its definition. Between the language and the image looms the memory of childhood. It becomes silence:

The world which would slip down into that sea  
of the taut-wide eye of a lost child

- "A Sailboat of Occasions"

This silence is not emptiness or the absence of words but a skilful manipulation of language to create the effect of stillness, serenity. Language becomes a living entity, the process of its preparation for the ultimate task is also a part of the subject matter. This transforms the poetry with a romantic inclination towards observation into a poetry of transcendence. Galaway Kinell in his poem "A Point of View"



Herman Cohen. The latter regarded thought as 'pure creation' - not the result of experience but the condition of it. Along with this he insisted that all ideas have no existence in themselves but are laws or methods of thought and principles of life. Thus only through thought can existence be given to ideas. Thought also makes one realize the singular, undefinable quality of ultimate reality:

I know of the vast obstinate distance  
 in which my heart makes its home  
 and still I cannot grasp what this distance is.

- "Time Drawing In"

The common experience of childhood is always at the point of becoming emblematic, allgoric. The poet dramatizes the idea that the innocent years of past contained the poetry which now struggles to attain form when the poet has forfeited the claim to an exhalted, intuitive rhetoric. In relation to the poetics of Mahapatra, Bergson's ideas concerning time and memory are relevant. Bergson postulated two kinds of memory: habit or learned memory by which we orient ourselves in practical terms, and involuntary memory - a surging up of lived moments from the past.<sup>9</sup> This second type of memory becomes an object of deep interest in the poems:

There is a past which moves over the magic  
 slopes and hamlets of mind whose breath  
 measures the purpose of our lives

- "The Rising"



incantation yet they go beyond nostalgia. He posits different meanings to relationship at different times. The failed relationships make the meditation on the mystery and terror of human condition deeper. 'You' as the other is invoked time and again. Very often it is not a beloved person but an ideal image who is always being distanced by the yearning in the language. In the 'Poem for Angela Elston', the conventional tone provides an apt foil for the driven seriousness of the vision - 'You said : hold me just once tonight, before you leave this land'. Passion is not so much a part of it as desperation. Bare words, words that people use in a conversation bring out the poignancy of leave-taking. It is time that renders words sterile:

Words, brittle like grass or weeds  
growing under stone,  
that break apart at the slightest touch

- "Last Night, The Poem"

Anything that is said sounds clumsy yet one is torn within to use words. The core of meaning in the "Poem for Angela Elston" is not leave taking but the way words distort the grace and dignity of emotions. One is reminded of Albert Camus' emphatic declaration that 'The desire for possession is only another form of the desire to endure; it is this that comprises the impatient delirium of love. No human being, even the most



passionately loved and passionately loving is ever in our possession, on the pitiless earth where lovers are often separated in death and are always born divided, the total possession of another human being and absolute communion throughout an entire life time are impossible dreams. The desire for possession is insatiable, to such a point that it can survive even love itself. To love, therefore, is to sterilize the person one loves. The shame-faced suffering of the abandoned lover is not so much due to being no longer loved as to knowing that the other partner can and must love again. Those who have not insisted, at least once, on the absolute virginity of human beings and of the world, who have not trembled with longing and impotence at the fact that it is impossible and have then not been destroyed by trying to love half-heartedly, perpetually forced back upon their longing for the absolute, cannot understand the realities of rebellion and its ravaging desire for destruction.<sup>11</sup> This evocative, passionate truth regarding togetherness is echoed in another poem:

Sometime, somewhere  
Perhaps on the shore of some sea,  
we shall feel as much alone in the world  
as the others who have won their victories,  
and the trees that have seized  
the earth with their slow seasons.

- "Last Sadness"

With the second line the perspective of the poem (Poem for Angela Elston) changes - 'But then these were words again, pieces of silence people merely tell one another'. The lover and the poet are essentially one single person and the obsession is more with the craft of poetry than physical love. The poet is agonized, more because of the imperfection inherent in words than the termination of a love affair. One remembers Martin Heidegger's observation 'nothing finds its being in speech and the being of speech is nothing'.<sup>12</sup> In Mahapatra's poetic world, there are two types of nothingness. One is the oppressive sense of nothingness that comes in the wake of words, conveying no meaning. This is depicted in a very graphic image in the last part of the second line - 'clashes of thunder / that one would cut his hand on / the edges of their lightning'. The effort of communicating through words destroys one in the process. Precious instants of time or fragments of mood once shared become tainted when recalled through words. Yet man must speak and the poet must use words to reach the center of semantic stillness. The stillness that Eliot talks about in 'Burnt Norton' as being the container of dance without being either arrest or movement. The other type of nothingness is not negative but an ultimate condition that the artist strives for. It is never nihilism but an almost sacramental exploration of the possibilities of nothingness - the *la noche obscura*. The theme of this poem is simple (the pain of



separation), but Mahapatra uses it as a launching pad to go into the dimensions it points at. 'There was snow on the cracked oaks by the frozen river.' Mood is always created by a dramatic recreation of the landscape in his poetry. It serves as an objective correlative to blend the subjective and the objective. In the third line we come upon a polar world where pain is a 'small wet wind that came down from the bold starlit ridge'. The warmth of passion is missing. 'It was cold now and stiffly silent'. The impotence of words and the gloom of the landscape are inseparable. A comparison can be made with Edwin Muir's 'The Difficult Land', where long staccato lines evoke the picture of a barren place - 'Mile after mile of soft, useless dust / Dust rising before us and falling again behind us / Slowly and gently settling where it lay. This is a difficult country and our home.'

The words spoken by the poet's friend is a compulsive urge of the spirit and more tragic than parting. Because a silent parting would have denoted and ensured a continuation of the relationship no matter how intangible. Now words bring into sharp focus the fact that beginning and end limit everything. There is a subtle emphasis on the clandestine nature of the love affair. The cause does not depend on any moral issues for Mahapatra is no preacher, but on the cruel irony of time that renders one powerless. The enchanted realm is intruded upon by mundane yet inescapable decisions by a lack of choice and the poet mourns the time which was and is no more!

'This is how it is before the soft rain / before a certain memory / streams into our eyes or death'. The ice-encrusted landscape and death both denote a single theme - absence. Helpless in the face of limitations, we nevertheless arrange for funerals, unable to let go. This constitutes the poet's grief. In another poem "The Retreat", he asks, 'who knows how to emerge with dignity'.

The last part of the "Poem for Angela Elston" speaks about the dread that silence arouses - 'the silence we try not to taste'. Yet words do not celebrate a memorable occasion, they merely push it against a corner. On the other hand a poet uses words to go beyond words. This complex duality is the essence of this as well as most other poems. He explores the great emptiness behind the meticulous shape of things and silence which should be the medium is impossible. The tug of war between speech and silence creates a fine tension that shifts the focus of the poem. What began as a love poem ends as a rumination on the dissatisfaction that words create and the elusive fulfilment of silence - 'you must enter my life - with a word / which fills your mouth only like the wind'. The acute sensitivity of the poet zeroes on a problem that has no name. It is simply the presence of an absence and the only recourse is to discover a style of endurance.

There are poems in the collection where 'you' is ambiguous. In its complex caucus of meaning it points towards

the beloved, the ideal self, godhead, the dead father, the  
lost son and death:

Now this evening of October and in this  
evening you live somewhere I bring my face  
close against the mirror looking for you.

- "Another Evening"

Not a single poem celebrates the consummation of love. They  
are all steeped with the desolation of loss. The loss is not  
deliberate or sudden in nature. It is more of an inevitability  
like the need to make poems, or death. This tenor of quietude  
injects an element of security which is almost mystical in  
its calm energy. 'You' ultimately becomes the symbol of  
imagination that tries to penetrate what is beyond our world.  
After the craving for a person, a body, has exhausted itself,  
after pain has eased itself into an attitude of resignation  
the 'you' transcends to the level of the metaphysical. 'You'  
transforms itself into the most intense and individual  
experiences of living and being. Often it is the image of  
silence that in its deepest sense is the interpretation of  
the world. 'You' conceptualizes silence just as Rilke's  
famous poem about the unicorn makes an imagistic study of  
nothingness':

This is the creature that never has been  
They loved the way it moved, its suppleness  
its neck, its very gaze, mild and serene

Not there, because they loved it, it behaved  
 as though it were, they always left some space  
 And in that clear, unpeopled space they saved  
 it lightly reared its head with scarce a trace  
 of not being there, they fed it, not with corn  
 but only with the possibility of being  
 And that was able to confer  
 Such strength, its brow put forth a horn  
 one horn.<sup>13</sup>

This brilliant poem in four stanzas captures and picturises  
 the pure, formless, existence of idea. In the same way 'you'  
 continues the physical desire on a spiritual level - a desire  
 aimed at no nameable object of the world:

Now night is soaked in your silence  
 Your breath hangs black everywhere  
 and a thin shift of sunlight  
 breaks the hand tree where birds  
 sit silent in the dark.

- "The Secret"

More than the beloved, the allusions to the nameless person  
 marks the point of encounter between the poet and the world  
 and often between the craft of poetry and silence:

.... I cannot utter the words I know  
 and bring relief:

words that can be taken off  
and replaced by other similar and true.

- "The Rain Falling"

Here words possess a therapeutic value. They are ironically barriers to ward off the dark, bottomless truth that they themselves ceaselessly reveal.

Death has five central images in Mahapatra's poetry - 'water', 'door', 'the dark', 'smoke' and 'sky'. In 'The House', 'door' figures prominently. It is a frame for absence: 'A child's first drawing with a door through which clouds enter. A promise of life'. In the beginning there is an anticipation, a tenderness that always accompanies desire. The same door that waits for life to enter its portals becomes 'that closed relentless door' at the end. The intricate play of light and dark, hope and despair, meaning and silence come together to form the reality of the house. The house where life should be abundant is stalked by death:

You hold the walls tightly  
against your shoulder,  
think of lifting it up in your arms  
at the first death lying there,  
there as though in wait for you.

- "The House"

As childhood stands for an unsullied, sacramental language and the beloved for a persistent seeking of the soul,

death symbolises a transformation of a cloistered life into a vast, abounding dark spaciousity of meaning. The dread comes from the stubborn incomprehension of the mind. 'Steps in the Dark', one of the bleakest poems in the collection, is about mortality. 'Every evening' creates the effect of time in limbo and the following two lines 'the steps sound in the dark / there is movement somewhere, vague like the opening of a door' present the setting of the poem. A lightless world resembling de la Mare's ghostly scenario of 'The Listeners' unfolds to accommodate the voice deepening and darkening it. 'Dark' and 'darkness' have been used four times in the poems and it is interesting to note that the feeling of darkness has been sustained till the end. In the first stanza, lines like 'we wait', 'no one enters', 'we wait still', and in the second, the description of the vine climbing out of water takes one into the irredeemable Hades of darkness. In the second and more specifically third lines it becomes clear that darkness is a metaphor for death. Mahapatra does not lament about nothingness but the more tragic fact that when there should be a vast, silent emptiness, there is always the pathetic, undignified clumsy efforts of man. The scrouge is the waiting as time slips by, not making a person ready for his end but filling him with the certainty of a sad waste.

Death is a constant presence in the poems of The False Start. Wherever the presence is not obvious one finds



allusions to it as in the poem 'Time Drawing In'. There is an almost surrealistic effect in the lines - 'where old men have lain all night / to find their blue tongues slip away / unnoticed in the wind'. The meditative tenor goes on until it reaches the point of cessation and then again finds the tenuous threads of a new beginning. Death as a metaphor deserved study because it is used in interesting and new ways, always going beyond the confinements of its own meaning. Oblivion is very rarely a death wish, often it is an effort to reach the frontiers of silence or dissolution of the spirit in the flow of time, love, past and the power of all-pervading nature. The poet often creates a montage that does not so much speak about death as creates the effect of an end. In 'Measuring Death' he writes -

Late afternoon is an aimless look,  
 like moonlight  
 or a marble iceberg  
 drifting in an unknown sea  
 its whiteness dances in the bones  
 that run the length of death.

Long before the last words come, an effective picture of vacancy is created. There is no shrillness of tone, no emphasis on a terrifying personal neurosis and the lines do not strive to produce the terror of death. The calm tone indicates the poet's

attitude. The same emptiness in a poem of Sylvia Plath's can be quoted to point out the basic differences in the two modes of visualising death

my bones hold a stillness,  
 the far fields melt my heart  
 They threaten  
 To let one through to a heaven  
 startless and fatherless, a dark water

- "Ariel"

The very personal 'I' of Plath creates and maintains a distance between the poem and the readers. This distance gives a sense of observing something taking place that though disturbing, though an agony of spirit, does not particularly concern the reader. The brilliance fails to evoke empathy. Death becomes personal and suggests nothing beyond its definition. Maha patra depends more on the intricacies of a poetic structure. The poet does not intrude, very often there is no final statement. The images act as brush strokes lightly touching the contours of a picture which always remains unfinished. Death holds no terror for it leads to renewed life or a superior knowledge -- 'Isn't it death again / that brought your meanings of life / and then guided you back to it?'

Death also symbolises a feeling that comes in the wake of the irrevocable loss of past, the terrible intensity

of vision and the inadequacy of words. In 'Steps in the Dark' he writes '... a vine climbing silently in space / or emerging through strange water / ready and naked and of death'. There is a struggle to bring the experience of death into the body of the poem. Essentially the deep mystery of things and beings is not different from death. Silence and death assume the same meaning. Death also becomes a complex image of personal incidents that have wounded the poet. This enables him to bring about a symbolic enactment that prevents the poems from being either obscure or cloyingly intimate. A lonely childhood, the rift with his son, the loss of his father, the intolerable sense of creative failure assume the form of death. And when it is not death, it becomes a deathly absence - 'the substance that stirs in my palm / could well be a dead man' ('Ash').

'Measuring Death', the longest poem in the collection tries to name and recreates the experience of death in six parts making it as concrete as a house or a country. In the second is the premonition concerning a beloved person, specifically the poet's father:

'Dear Father,  
 isn't it death under your eyes?  
 You only need to fall asleep  
 with the desire for it.'

It is a naming in the third section - 'the sunsets floating darkly inside our breaths / describe without irony the feeling of death'. This is continued in the fourth. Definition deepens into meditation:

Thus I walk over the gathering of fallen leaves  
and something troubles me; I don't know exactly why  
perhaps and winds knows that rocks their cloven wings  
and shakes also the secret roots of our blood.

The fifth and sixth sections are a linguistic extension of death itself and also the resultant grief at the face of some incomprehensible dark mystery:

It is the afternoon light  
that gets on your nerves  
squares of dead windows that play with the worth of life  
exercises its secret strength, stiffen its grip  
on things that form of a long memory.

In the concluding part it becomes clear that death has not been named so much as the obscurity of this irrevocable memory has been given shape.

An absolute experience gets poetic shape through these intense and absorbed study of memory, relationships and death. The peculiar quality of lucklessness which darkens the poet's contemplation is not different from the lack of

control that he perceives in man vis-a-vis the world. A silence of hostility and a silence of accord lie between the poet and interpretation. And the effort of a difficult interpretation tinge the poems with an unmistakable aura of the tragic.

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#### Footnotes

- 1 Pushpinder Sanyal, "Two Shades of Metaphor", New Quest May-June 1981.
- 2 C.B. Cox, "The False Start", Hudson Review, vol. 35, no. 3, Autumn 1982.
- 3 Syd C. Harrex, "The False Start", The Carnle Reviews Journal, 1981.
- 4 Jayanta Mahapatra, "Inner View : Jayanta Mahapatra Talks to N. Raghavan", Tenor, June 1978, p. 60.
- 5 Arthur Adamov, L' Aveu, Paris; editions du sagittaire, 1946, p. 46.
- 6 Madhusudan Prasad, "Caught in the Currents of Time : A Study in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra", Contemporary Indo-English Verse (ed), Chiranta New Delhi, Arnold Heinemann, 1980.
- 7 Jayanta Mahapatra, "The Stranger Within; Coming to Terms Through Poetry", Dalhousie Review, vol. 36, no. 5 (1983).
- 8 William Faulker, The Sound and the Fury (Penguin Modern Classics, 1982), p. 32.

- 9 Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution (1907), translated from French by Arthur Mitchell (New York, 1911), p. 17. Copyright 1939 by Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc.
- 10 Georges Poulet : Studies in Human Time (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 82.
- 11 Albert Camus, The Rebel (Penguin Modern Classic, 1978), p. 86.
- 12 Martin Heidegger, The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics (1949), translated from German by Walter Kaufmann, in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre (New York, 1956), p. 210.

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## CHAPTER II

## THE FUSION OF TIME AND SPACE

1

Man cannot live except in sacred space  
And when there is no hierophany to reveal  
it to him, he constructs it for himself

- Mircea Eliade

("Pattern in Contemporary Literature")

The setting is an important facet of the poems of The False Start. It is less obvious here than in the earlier poems which because of their descriptive tenor specify and picturise a particular locale in detail. An area, even a street corner would come alive in the earlier poems, often assuming the role of a persona. The only problem was that though there was an unmistakable atmosphere, the specificity of place accounted for the ultimate shallowness of the poems. It was not created but described space and as a result remained stagnant like the backdrop on stage. In The False Start, the poetic concern is different. It is a study of the poetic mind as a creative being. The space where it exists is basically psychic in nature. The process of its transformation to artistic space is interesting. Memory, an instant of time, loneliness, silence, the poetic task all become crystallized in the setting. A reiteration shapes not only

the body of the poem but reveals the theme. The space of the poem can very rarely be pinpointed - the physical and concrete space merge with the mental thus producing a surrealist effect:

And here the stone : there is even  
 pain under its stare. Your world  
 comes to stiffen on it. On its open lie  
 Dark as death. Your eyes reach everywhere  
 And these my hands, quietened and growing still  
 as though, now covered with moss

- Through the Stone

Rock and earth are recurring symbols that constitute the landscape of the poems. Earth transcends Cuttack, Orissa, India to simply become the vast limitless space that has witnessed the endless scenario of mankind. 'Women in Love' begins with the lines - 'this earth / strange shore of strength / to touch you with its wand of lasting power'. This earth ultimately exists in the mind, in the soul and in poem after poem it establishes its mute but eternal presence:

Womb of the black earth  
 rests in your eyes  
 without the urgency of defeat

- Last Sadness

In the earlier poems the setting failed to make a lasting impact because its purpose was far from symbolical.



It merely described an already existing place in its single dimension. In contrast earth and rock and sometimes sea posit complex and multi-dimensional meaning to the theme and not merely that but often form the structure of the theme in this collection. By making the poetic space general Mahapatra is now able to make compassion for everyman a constant factor of the poems:

The limpid dignity of man  
 haunted forever by loss  
 the cold and cruel flush of my own pity  
 on this tired sleep

- Time Drawing In

Rock symbolises the austere, cruel, inscrutable face of the earth, denoting death, the inescapable passage of time and also, paradoxically, the core of immortality inherent even within a speck of dust. When earth exudes an effect of mellow quietude, the rock denotes a basic malignity. The sea is the spatial form of time and the subterranean place of both personal and racial memory. Often rain, water and river take its place but the meaning remains the same:

The rain turns the whole night in me  
 misty and damp  
 the old solitude of the earth  
 flutters in the soft curtains  
 where a wind floats darkly

- The Rain Falling

The sea is a country of death separated from the earth until the poet's vision discovers its relentless intrusions into the living world:

Humbled by the ghostly threat  
of the winds flight  
on that boat which carries nothing anywhere  
the dark winds ought to have known  
of the world which could slip  
down into that sea

- A Sailboat of Occasions

These metaphors of space allow for a density of feeling to saturate the poem and provide what Stanley Kaunitz called 'the psychic texture' of the poem. A topicality which would evoke India has been sacrificed to give the poems a more inward contemplative flow. With The False Start Mahapatra seems to believe that a poet is more than the eye of a camera. He is driven to imagine the world as he has never seen it before. In the bargain he takes one beyond what one knows and fulfils the purpose of all high poetry.

Unlike the earlier poems, the subject matter of the poems in The False Start are less concrete or even coherent. Even when the poet seemingly talks about death, there are mystifying allusions to phenomena which are not remotely linked with death. An elasticity of meaning underlies all the poems.

The poet has not shaped something but pinpointed the heart of the truth that has no contour and defies language. These brooding contemplations about the limitless facets of life would have blurred the architectonic of the poem except for these motifs which become the landscape. They bring about the cohesion between texture and structure. They also bring the reader to the vacant heart of the poem. At that point one deepens one's awareness of things without the help of the poet.

In transcending the fixed idea of concrete space the poet has succeeded in including the various states of being of the poetic idea. These include the influence of memory on poetic act, the primitive, ritualistic language and the creative language, the experience of death that underscores relationships and life. Space also denotes the doubleness inherent in everything, from language to self. It generates a dramatic distance sometimes becoming a fissure and at others achieving a fusion. As Baudelaire's Paris or James Joyce's Dublin becomes more than the mood and place of the theme, so also the old earth changes into language hinting at the origins of creative thought. It also symbolises the poet's act of withholding something fundamental which according to Heidegger<sup>2</sup> evokes a sense of being. As we saw in the first chapter there is an encounter between language and silence. Hence we encounter language discovering its kinship and vulnerability with and before space - both the outer-space

of the sky, the earth, the sea and the inner, dark space of the creative mind:

Now the night is soaked in your silence  
 your breath hangs black everywhere  
 and a thin shaft of starlight  
 breaks the hard tree where birds  
 sit silent in the dark

- The Secret

The stillness thus created lends a depth to the poems exposing not emptiness but an inner centre of fullness. With admirable skill the poet makes the space of the poem both vast and empty:

It is the sun that amazes  
 with its range of airs  
 its skies confusing one with the  
 richness of bursts  
 often I feel the angry silence  
 stirring the lotuses  
 and the water buried in the earth going white  
 wonderful the light bounding from tree to tree

- Shadows

Here it symbolises the limitless expanse of our universe and the imagination. It can be stiflingly cloistered too, picturing the dusty, dirty city and the mind festering with ceaseless thoughts:

In this December fog that comes crowding in  
 from nowhere, my life feels its weakness again  
 and my secret nerves and blood leave me  
 with the mask of pain  
 as the cool air of humble leaves  
 hears the cry of the slaughtered  
 sheep in the butcher house

- 'Time Drawing In'

A more complex part of the concern for everyman is the belief in the timeless presence of the race, the voices of ancestors, the deep empathy in the awareness of the lives existing on the edge of our world. These are symbolised through the rigid and ancient earth, mountains, skies and seas. The space which is a form of the nature has another life apart from its own. It contains the spirit of the race, the soul of the archetypal life:

Now the night touches one like a hand  
 as though to rouse my dreams from its still stupor  
 the bowed head unable to understand  
 the star's vast silence for the heart  
 or the lost purpose of dead man  
 that lie like sleeping lizards  
 along the leaves

- The Gift of Night

The recurring words, metaphors, symbols do not merely establish a certain meaning but hint at relationships between

disparate entities. For as E.D. Hirsh wrote, 'Meaning is that which is presented by a text, it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence, significance on the other hand names a relationship between that meaning and a person or a conception or a situation or indeed anything imaginable'.<sup>3</sup> This enlargement of meaning lends an unmistakable tone of remorse that tints all the poems. Very often this note of grief escapes the personal encompassing the cultural. A certain ceremonial formality is the result saving the poems from blandness. One is reminded of Susan Sontag's conviction that 'real art makes one nervous'.<sup>4</sup> So nature becomes specific space embodied in the earth and the sea, functioning as a vast psychic landscape - known in literary criticism as metempsychosis. This is an area of kinship that Mahapatra shares with Theodore Roethke -

The dreams in the wind  
 are wrenching the trees on my road  
 from their roots. In the sky's emptiness  
 the field's darken and grow small

- The Gift of the Night

So in two distinct poetic movements, space dramatizes the consciousness of the creative mind and the ancestral memory that has shattered the barrier of time. Space has at last become inward, contemplative and limitless:

ii

Time is always something we are  
 in the middle of, a between,  
 something always beginning and  
 rebeginning in us.

- W.S. Merwin ('Acts of Mind')

Time like silence is a major poetic concern of Mahapatra. The idea of time and space is linked in his poetry. Time always seeks the formal span of space and space transforms itself into condensed time:

Memories come like the wind and today  
 peers from the years

\* \* \*

Today leads me  
 as time flutters like a prayer flag  
 in the dispensed belief atop an  
 abandoned temple

- Today

We encounter four types of time in the poems - process, retrospective, barrier and polytemporal time. These four forms of time 'maintain an underlying sequentiality : process time keeps the linear direction, retrospective time folds the time line back upon itself, the barrier time breaks off fragments and rearranges the order. Polytemporal time however seeks a radically different orientation towards the

time line. It seeks to move from the horizontal sequence to vertical layers'.<sup>5</sup>

Time has remained a permanent philosophical problem and literary concern. One of the greatest mystical thinkers, St. Augustine demanding 'Quid est tempus?' brings to the question an exceptional union of qualities - personal, introspective, philosophical and theological : 'quid est engo tempus' si nemo ex me quaenat, seio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio (what time is then; if nobody asks me, I know; but if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me plainly I know not).<sup>6</sup> With Mahapatra all time roughly crystallizes past evoked through introspection or retrospection. Further past time can be recollected by intensely personal, private memory, or the obscure mythical memory whose existence can be discovered only through the creative act. Though a sense of loss is the predominant emotion, there is often the awareness of something which cancels out the procession of time, an immanent, immortal purpose underlying all anarchy:

Rigid

Yet strangely impotent

perhaps it eagerly waits for the world to speak

for the mute clock to strike again

for a new kind of society to form

from the ruins of hate

- The Mountain





Time is not a psychological or metaphysical puzzle in the poems. It is a natural force that transforms things, makes one aware that finally one possesses nothing except the haunting knowledge of loss, betrayal, dispossession. The same sentiments have been voiced by W.S. Merwin in an interview: 'All that we know about time is what we are. That's all we will ever know about it. Time is simply a way of living in the world that changes the world.'<sup>7</sup>

There are instances in the poems where time attains a spatial scope and space exposes a sense of immovable iconized time symbolized in the pictures of Keats' "Grecian Urn". Various facets of nature, even the things of the man-made world, become metaphors for time thus succeeding in establishing a relationship between past event and present evocation:

Now this evening of October  
 and in this evening  
     you live somewhere  
 I bring my face close against the mirror  
 looking for you. Your absence  
 is a part of growing older and this October  
 a time for measuring indefatigable memory

- Another Evening

The emphasis on the present in the first line brings out the poignant evanescence of moments. 'Now' is a moment whose existence reveals the annihilation of the multitude of 'nows'

which form the memory. 'You live somewhere' shows the calm acceptance that passion has no permanence. The third line hints at the complex nature of the 'you'. Apart from the beloved it is also the mystical, spiritual nature of the creative self. The allusion is to the transformation of the self through time. 'Growing older', hints at the loss of innocence that constantly haunts the poet. October becomes an icon of the past time, the loss of passion, the effect of the cruel tainting time. It is a poetic metaphor for the polytemporal time which is unforgettable because of the events it has witnessed and contains. Towards the end he writes 'only a cruel light of what has just gone by, flashes through the mind'. This is in the vein of Irish novelist James Joyce's idea of epiphany - 'a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the commonness of speech or gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself'.<sup>7</sup> Joyce believed that the artist should 'record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments'.

This poetic method of the metamorphosis of space into time and vice-versa saves the poem from being a static scenario. It enables the poet in his search of the past, to define the present. It is not one selected past but a range of past experiences now relived and altering the present; not memory but recreation with the possibilities and failures acted out.

The past is haunting because it contains one's childhood and love. Childhood is synonymous with innocence. This innocence is above naivete being more a purity of spirit. In 'A Certain Refrain' Mahapatra writes:

I look for your voice everywhere  
 but nothing is heard  
 \*           \*           \*  
 one name  
 flashes through my mind  
 when you are not here  
 the light of a lantern  
 in a lonely room at childhood...

The past has witnessed the affairs of the heart and the passage of time lifts them from the ordinary and mundane rendering them as relentless metaphysical longings of the soul:

... where the footsteps of women  
   I have loved  
 are heard,  
 the ones I could not even tell myself I loved

- The Secret

The nostalgia that the past creates becomes remorse. It is the same situation that Georges Poulet has discussed in 'Exploding Poetry' while studying Baudelaire's poetry - 'He has no choice but to recall the past since to live is to

become endlessly, retrospectively conscious of the transformation of the present into elapsed time. The poet of remorse is then also the poet of irremediable time, time lacking all freedom of being.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the poems in The False Start return to memory. It is almost as if the poetic act has taken place in the past, the poet is discovering it once again in the debris of time. The reverse side of the loss through time is the typical oriental awareness that time is an eternal, inexhaustible instant, relived time and again through memory. The psychic landscape captures the idea of this unending flow of time. The Romantics, in the tradition of Claude Lorrain's paintings have found this convention immensely poetic. The connection between landscape and a sense of the past was understood by the romantic poets chiefly in associative primitive-historical terms; but it came to be felt more personally and topographically. The transference of time to space makes the existence of a long moment possible. It is the life of a moment in which what has been, is or will be are always extant. Feelings, emotions, private experiences which are otherwise incommunicable because of their isolation, are dramatized by being projected into a multitude of dimensions of space and time. Though strictly there are no translations or interpretations, the very indefiniteness defines a real experience.

The other dimension of the personal time is the public one. The sombre even tragic tone is ultimately linked with

not any personal grief but the compassionate imagination acting out the consciousness of the dead and the living. The poetic voice includes an alienated consciousness which is able to meet a negative with a negative, intransigent, detached, open. The mode of thought establishes a connection between a structure of feeling and the poetic convention:

This is history

I would not disturb it; the ruins of  
stone and marble

the crumbling wall of brick

the coma of alienated decay

how exactly should the archaic dead

make me behave?

A hundred and fifty years ago I might have lived.

- The Abandoned  
British Cemetery at Balasore, India

History has been lifted out of the web of time, existing in a limbo enacted first in the consciousness and then through the creative act. The present is the shadow of that looming history and remorse is more than response - it is the mode of living. There is an inescapable awareness of a fissure: consciousness of both being the heir of certain riches and yet dispossessed of that wealth -

... the useless rain upon my familiar window;

the tired triumphant smile left behind by the dead

on a discarded anchor half-sunk  
 in mud beside the graves  
 out there on earth's unwavering gravity  
 where it waits like a deity perhaps  
 for the elaborate ceremonial of a coming generation  
 to keep history awake,  
 stifle the survivor's issuing cry

The vision of myth in the poems through its distancing,  
 its inevitability generates a contemporary feeling - the simple  
 yet ancient struggle between the assertion and the negation  
 underlying the order and system of life. The past has been  
 transformed to an unending drama that makes the ordinary  
 present life intolerable yet ironically meaningful and also  
 holds the promise of a future:

There is a past which moves over  
 the magic slopes and hamlets of the mind  
 whose breath measures the purpose of our lives

- The Rising

Ultimately the past reveals a central decision, an  
 apt structure for the permanent abstractions of existence.

In the poetic study of time and space the graveyard  
 is a recurring symbol:

I stand simply a just man  
 a ghostly skull

lying uselessly on the funeral grounds

on my fathers

- The Gift of the Night

The words 'my fathers' indicate the supra-physical link with the ancestors and death is the state of being where the restraints of time and space have dissolved. Instead of being viewed pessimistically it has been used to bring about a unification in various layers of time.

In the poems time has both a destructive and regenerative, redemptive side. By juxtaposing them within the span of a single poem Mahapatra suggests a private, mystical, experience of time. These poems are A Day of Rain, Today, Another Evening, Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore, India, The Rain Falling etc. Memory becomes a state of being, perceiving a continuity of feeling. He responds to the heightened moments of past with an imaginative alertness and to the duration with submission. The wet stretch of the beach, the stony seas, 'the sunless forests', 'the dark earth of war', are all timescapes that contain frozen time, ready to be experienced eternally. They also constitute a poetic triumph.

A directly intuited non-spatial stream of consciousness is behind the fusion of time and space in the poems of The False Start. Space and time become sets of relations between things which are in space and time. The human situation

inhabiting time and space transforms Mahapatra's ideas about history and memory into feelings. The solitary man becomes history itself and the memory of self and the memory of the race are inseparable. The obsessive tone of the poems achieve a sort of poetic balance and formality through being confined to poetic time and space. On a surface level they are the attributes of the poem and on a deeper level, constitute the very theme.

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#### Footnotes

- 1 Stanley Kaunitz, New Views on Poetry, Calvin Bedient (editor) (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 72.
- 2 Martin Heidegger, What is Metaphysics? (1929), Existence and Being, trans. from the German by R.F.C. Hull and Alan Crick (London, 1959), pp. 365-7.
- 3 E.D. Hirsh, Problems of Meaning (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 56.
- 4 Susan Sontag, Metaphor of Sickness (Penguin Books, 1983), p. 34.
- 5 David Lean Highdon, Time and Lit (Macmillan, 1977), p. 24.
- 6 St. Augustine, Confessions, xi, 14 (Watts translation), p. 39.
- 7 W.S. Merwin, Acts of Mind (University of Alabama Press, 1983), p. 102.



- 8 James Joyce, "Letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver" (1926), Letters, ed. Stuart Gilbert (London and New York, 1955), p. 243.
- 9 Georges Poulet, Exploding Poetry (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 62.

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## CHAPTER III

THE QUEST FOR THE ORIGIN : THE CREATIVE SELF AND  
PERSONA

With you

I have refound my name

- David Diop ( 'Voices' )

There is a distinct structure in the work of Mahapatra which may be characterized as alogical. This peculiar status comes from a deliberate failure of being specific about the world or the artist himself. In the poems he always seeks an extremely metaphoric form, establishing not so much the images as generating an internal dynamism. This creates a distinct surrealist effect. The setting, the time-span, the very mood and pace of the poem lose their rigid contour attaining significance at various levels of meaning. He often uses the Montage technique to bring together heterogenous, icon-like images to articulate a certain mood, a faint memory, an intuitive response:

A child's first drawing with a door  
through which clouds enter a promise of life

- The House

or



and -

my voice crouched in the shadow  
of split blood  
hangs on a branch like a droplet of water  
and quivers only to become  
secret star, slow flower again

- Time Drawing In

Though predominantly the voice is an impersonal medium of thought, it also exposes the innate dramatic element of the poet's being. The creative self and persona attain union in the course of the poems. This creates the impression of a deep, intuitive feeling about the nature of things instead of a merely cerebral response. The contemplation involves discovery at two levels - one personal and the other mythical. On the personal level, the poet constantly searches, finds and names the nature and significance of his own existence. On the mythical level the 'I' becomes the voice of the race. Underlying these is the deep concern about the creative process itself. The frequent meditations about the form and function of specific poems generate a profound sense of depersonalization. The first person voice often becomes a poetic mask performing various roles. In 'The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore, India', he is a witness: "This is history. I would not disturb it." In 'Measuring Death'





The meaning attains the status of existence only through the action of being written or formulated in speech. Yet this incarnation ensures a certain loss. It is the price an artist has to pay, yet he is not totally helpless before the mystery of language. He can use it to make language more than a naming object. Language reflects on itself becoming the subject matter of the work. In Mahapatra this attains a certain formality through being symbolised as the search for the self. In the first chapter we discussed silence and its role in memory, relationships and death. This is the desirable silence created through language to give deep insight into the nature of ideas, emotions and intuitions. The silence that the self tries to break is concerned with meaninglessness and poetic failure. The process of idea attaining form changes the creative self in subtle ways and the persona records it. The silence at encountering the world, the beloved, loss, the graceless horror of existence needs to be shaped into language. It is not a poetic taking stock of things but an intense appraisal of the self. There are two sides to the self-personal and supra-personal one possesses the sensibility to respond and the other must mould the response into lines of poetry:

The dark tree that stands  
over the fields of my blood  
has failed to leaf and bud





I heard him say : My daughter  
                   she's just turned fifteen  
 Feel her. 'Ill be back soon,  
 Your bus leaves at nine.  
 The sky fell on me, a father's  
                   exhausted wile  
 Long and lean, her years are cold  
                   as rubber  
 She opened her wormy legs wide  
 I felt the hunger there  
 The other one, the fish  
 slithering, turning inside

- 'Hunger'

On one side is the hunger of the flesh, always presented in stark, bleak pictures, and on the other the starved spirit seeking the other - in an idea of being and in language:

The dark maw of its approach  
 vicillating inside you, striking perhaps  
                   some atavistic chord  
 A time when the earth blood quivers  
                   in the struggle to live,  
 a certain hunger

- 'The Storm'

The persona in Mahapatra's poetry has more in common with the romantic image of creative self than the personal 'I'

of the confessional poets. The search for the definition of self is so intricately linked with the poetic task that what emerges is not narration but rather a complex inspection of the issues that concern poetry. In a long poem 'Will a Poem of Mine Be The only Answer' in Life Signs he deals with two questions (the craving for the immortality of words and the obsessive premonition of failure) overcome with the awareness that 'no one seems to need my answer':

All this naked knowledge makes one tremble,  
defeated as I am by my own tactics,

my poetry

by the words I measure with my pain  
the ceremony I make of every date

on the calendar,

the occasion I hold on to tenaciously  
before each death, as I warn my wife

and friends

not to come near or disturb me when

I write

The irony merely sharpens the despair. The creative self retreats back to meditate on itself, on the calling of poetry. The unflagging sense of anguish comes from the knowledge that poetry makes nothing happen, that it is an exercise in the dark. The momentary glory that the poet experiences is a

shame that can only be borne through endless humility. On one level the dissatisfaction is with the craft of poetry. In an interview Mahapatra says, "Uncertain as I am in my very existence, I feel uncomfortable in making any sort of statement about poetry in general and about my own work. For as a practising writer, even after years of continued struggle I see myself suddenly faced with the inconsistent character of my poetry. This, my realization of my own incompetence becomes a strong ground for dissatisfaction a sore that festers to dismiss the workings of my own imagination as irrelevant. Such times throw one into a state of despair. And what course is left open other than but to treat myself a period of total humility."<sup>3</sup>

But instead of laying the arms down before it, the poet turns it into a poetic study, relying on the anguish of expression to formalize the negation that is at the core of his artistic world:

Every man, every beast  
 trapped in his own sleep  
 only the wind you hear, that  
 scallops the silence of a whole birth  
 speaking from the skies where nothing moves,  
 the horizon black, motionless; the  
 old hills which define memory  
 stars of myth whose surfaces sling silence

- 'Listening'

This living vacancy denotes the nothingness born of impenetrable truths and the poet by presenting the flaws of language succeeds in incarnating its contourless presence. The startling incomprehension dawns on one that failure has all along been the theme and the effort of poeticizing it has to end in failure. The meaning exists in that precarious balance. The jadedness of language is another concern. The mystery that Mallarme strived to evoke in his poetry is echoed by Mahapatra too. He writes: "I realize today that a poem may say nothing really but it should go on to touch you. An air of mystery perhaps."<sup>4</sup> This is one of the major reasons for his obsession with past - both childhood and history. The distance contains a language steeped with old rites and myth and this is more poetic. Yet dwelling in the past brings into sharp focus the irretrievable loss of a meaning that cannot be salvaged.

On another level the poetic process reveals the loneliness of the artist first before language and then in the presence of the readers:

But every day fills only with itself now  
and I say to myself; someone will come  
from another country, from another time  
with a face vast as the cloudless sky.

- 'Rain of Rites'\*

The quest continues on a personal level even though Mahapatra is never specific about his 'Godot'. The trial with

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\* Rain of Rites published by University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1979.

language extends itself to the trial with the readers. Mahapatra admits that he is disturbed by such questions as, 'but what did you mean by that?' The chasm between the presentation of a poem and the response it receives wounds him. He is not sure there is a profound need for his poem after its completion as there was at its conception. He renders himself vulnerable for a second time. And where as before it was private now it is public. In the long poem 'Relationships' he mentions the contempt and betrayal of friends:

I remember only last week  
 I counted up my friends  
 and I felt as though I were  
                                   in painful exile  
 friendship is like a pool of water  
 where shadows move about and dance  
 and winds of doubt cloud some of the  
                                   drifting faces,  
 the sun of envy sucks the others away

- Relationships\*

In this context another powerful and recurring metaphor is used - exile. An exile lives with his memory which serves no purpose. It is an existence in limbo because present

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\* This quotation is taken from Mahapatra's seventh collection of poems, Relationships, published by the Chandrabhagi Society, 1982.

and future do not matter. The wages of imagination is exile. The poet through his vocation inhabits a lonely region. Yet the grief, frustration and dread of the common mass is his own. Ironically the very nature of his empathy renders him as sterile and impersonal as a medium:

And then perhaps you wanted to do  
 something for yourself  
 Accepting the absence of you.

- 'The Landscape of Return'

May be this is what made Albert Camus write in *The Plague*. 'Imagination wounds he who yields to it'.<sup>5</sup> The sense of aloneness in the midst of his craft and the people he is writing about generates a peculiar attentive quality. This differs from contemplation in an important way. Contemplation does not necessarily denote involvement when attention is a coming together of mind and soul. The ego surrenders before the imaginative force of the mind. The gap between the poet and the subject matter becomes bridgible. A wonderful intuitive compassion penetrates all. One forgets it is the poet who achieved this transformation. Desultory reading becomes a discovery of sorts:

With his body, he loses body  
 pales into a place  
 nothing matters  
 the river grows

the hill takes a high face  
 This mystic light oozes everywhere  
   like sweat  
 Absorbing it eats his mind  
 slowly around the edges

- 'Somewhere, My Man'

In spite of the exile, a triumph is achieved through the emptying out of the self into an expanding consciousness. The personal and fundamental anxiety and fear of the poet assume broader significance. For instance there are two very personal symbols which have been employed to suggest various meanings in his poems - the old, dying father and the lost son:

My father's voice  
 echoing wearily from bone to bone  
 comes to rest  
 on my eye like a speck of mould  
 And I have taken my likeness down  
 from the walls and hidden it  
 in the river's roots : a colourless  
   monsoon  
 eaten away by what has drifted  
   between us

- 'Life Signs'\*

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\* Life Signs (Oxford University Press, 1983).









is consciousness and the self of which it is conscious. This means that self is manifested through a play of multiple voices which often cancel each other out. The duality contains and originates from the personal self that changes and the mythical aspect that is changeless and universal. This conflict is noticeable in the two facets of the persona - the private self of the poet writing about personal experiences and the 'I' that is an archetype, recording intuitively the fluid life of the race. In one the journey is from the self to the other and in the second the search is for the one in many.

Though a final objective answer to the riddle of life is not possible, there is a possibility of its communication through artistic creation. The dramatic method of the artist ensures a response even though the mind is not totally clear about the point one arrives at. That is why the poet answers the question 'But what good is it? What does it do? with these words 'Everything if you will. And nothing.'<sup>6</sup>

The solemnity of tone does not indicate the meaninglessness of existence. The problem is just the opposite. There is a meaning, even multiple meanings. They can be sensed through a heightened imaginative meditation but they are immune like indifferent deities to the travails of common mass. They are not a part of our existence. One can only partake in them through a great cost - the price of exile:

Perhaps

You have had too long a journey to undertake  
 the bravery and daring like mindless glow-worms  
 that give a false assurance of light along the road  
 perhaps you cannot prevent your moving  
 to go down there, where the

sounds waken you

to unsettle your birth,  
 where the tremblings of the earth  
 that weigh you to your pain

are all motivated

- 'The Evening That is to Come'

A difficult and exacting attention to the hidden meaning that exists like memory or prophecy give the poems their anguished tone. Meaning is accessible to the sustaining effort of the mind. The creative act continues in poem after poem and it is this sense of continuous pursuit that made C.D. Cox write that the poems in The False Start blend into one another, so that the reader, mesmerized seems to be reading the same poem over and over.<sup>7</sup> The desire to possess the elusive meaning evoked in the eternal symbols of life (sea, trees, birds, places of origin, loved ones dead or alive) is only another form of the desire to endure. This need for perpetuation begins with the understanding of human suffering and also the painful knowledge that even pain does not endure, resolving at the end into the pit of apathy.

So to find the time among us  
 here on earth  
 when history does not reverberate any more  
 with the pulse of the drum  
 or with the chart of the tide  
 on a sacred Puri shore -  
 but the echoes of a bruised presence  
     lying like a stone  
 at the bottom of the soul's clean pool

- 'The Lost Children of America'

The self is engaged in a dual recovery of the meaning residing within and without. The process sometimes consists of brooding, rapt introspection where thought is the only presence ('In the world it is always I who come back! to myself, that far flower of thought' - 'ceremony'), or an encounter with the many voices and selves of the poet and even people and places. Talking about the creative process Mahapatra writes that 'it takes time for a person, to reach into his own self, the self that he supposes is known to him, he thinks he is familiar with. And even that self he knows may be made up of many selves - with my typically Indian outlook and up-bringing I would immediately visualise a river - the river of life-surviving the fury and the calm of the water's flow, amidst waterfalls and whirlpools; encounters which go on to build different responses, make our different selves'.<sup>8</sup>

The mask of the artist that Nietzsche and Yeats have mentioned basically stands for the literary persona. It subjects the poet to his other self and attains real personality. The ordinary nature finds redemption in art, so there is a certain power in the act of creation that the persona generates. This power rejects the world to create another in its place:

Now the heart says: you must find a new way  
try to turn the desire you hold  
into a fierce power

- 'An Impotent Poem'

Yet the awareness of this power cannot be sustained. For the poet is not Nietzsche's Superman but rather resembles Dostoevsky's underground Man: "His self-confidence is an incurable disease, his knowledge only serves to make him aware of his own unanswerable questions. He offers a disquieting counterstatement to Rousseau's program of self-revelation. And yet he is really candid: knowing and persistent."<sup>9</sup>

There is a certain reluctance in Mahapatra to specify the other. This curiously serves a significant purpose. Instead of being relegated to the status of a symbol, it remains an idea much in the same way as Beckett's Godot. And the elasticity allows varied interpretations - a beloved or some ideal person, a state yearned for, a deity or an absence that needs to be concretized:

You are the immense sound  
 that takes questionings and embraces  
 off my difficult ears  
 you are the gradual charge and decay  
 that is caught in the corners of my guilt  
 one name flashes through my mind  
 when you are not there

- 'A Certain Refrain'

'You' is the icon of a true and terrible need that Mahapatra speaks of in 'The Stranger Within': "A brown dust rises from the dirt road beside my house and stings my eyes, a familiar film tune from a record shop drifts into my ears, the sound of a bicycle bell softens and vanishes, two mongrels howl in the distance; amidst all this something makes me sit up in my room and draws me to this unseen presence, to a feeling that appears to outgrow form or time and I realize with a mixture of pain and meaninglessness that I must move on the blank sheet of paper, I have pulled in front of me. And move with my feeling ... for the life I lead. Move with the words, into a poem."<sup>10</sup>

In short the persona deals with the question of roots of origins. As silence formalizes the elusive quality of life, the 'I' searches for meaning amidst the struggle with language and self.

Footnotes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference (Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 102.
- 2 Jayanta Mahapatra, "Inner View : Jayanta Mahapatra Talks to N. Raghavan", Tenor/1, June 1978, p. 60.
- 3 Jayanta Mahapatra, "The Stranger Within : Coming to Terms Through Poetry", Dalhousie Review, vol. 36, no. 5, 1983.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Albert Camus, The Plague (Penguin Modern Classics, 1976).
- 6 Jayanta Mahapatra, "The Stranger Within : Coming to Terms Through Poetry", Dalhousie Review, vol. 36, no. 3, 1983.
- 7 C.B. Cox, "The False Start", Hudson Review, vol. 35, no. 3, Autumn 1982.
- 8 Jayanta Mahapatra, loc. cit.
- 9 Richard Elemann, The Modern Tradition (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 705.
- 10 Jayanta Mahapatra, "Interview with Asianweek", Asiaweek Literary Review, 10 September 1982.



## CONCLUSION

A discussion of the three recurring motifs of Mahapatra's poetry shows that The False Start occupies a central position in his poetic career. In his long essay 'Caught in the Currents of Time : A Study in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra', Madhusudan Prasad has managed to trace the poet's progress through the collections and it would be helpful to quote his comments starting with the very first book of poems: "Close the Sky. Ten by Ten which contains forty-nine poems of uneven length and varying tone and subject matter registers Mahapatra's initial immaturity : but then immaturity is common to almost all beginners. Therefore what matters most is the poet's progression from immaturity to maturity. In this regard, Mahapatra's each succeeding volume records a remarkably fast progression towards maturity - a fact that startles the readers." After a sketchy but impartial analysis of the poems in the earlier collections he discusses The False Start. "The False Start, the Sixth Volume of Mahapatra comprises of forty-three poems; but its title, quite misleading, belies the stupendous power of the poet that has shaped it. This volume related to the poet's life both in India and abroad to his friends and people, to his land and beyond. Once again, unfolding the poet's inversed sensibility and his characteristic hermit-like Meditativeness, this volume, in a way, continues an exploration of the recurrent motifs,





and old man's face  
 appears on the darkened ledge  
 the whewing of the wind  
 fills one with dense exile

- A Twilight Poem (p. 20)

The weakness of A Rain of Rites comes from the fact that often linguistic brilliance fails to ensure the thematic impact of the poems in their totality. One remembers patches rather than the central point. In The False Start the poems go back to their origin, completing a circle in the process of their development. Meena Alexander writes, "with Mahapatra, a writer as luminous as Haavikko, the journey is only intermittently towards 'the region that is no place'. In the analysis of his soil, his India is never foresworn. Mahapatra has chosen a difficult task what time splinters must continually be remade, the world recast again and again from consciousness. The loss of the old humanistic centrality means if anything, a more intense, a more lucid, consciousness. At the culmination of Relationship we hear him say: 'I draw the day unto myself, trembling with being'." Though there is scope for multiple interpretation in most of the poems of The False Start, the structural impact is not sacrificed. More than the social issues like poverty and corruption - which occupied Mahapatra during his early poetry - a concern with abstract but timeless problems (pain, evanescence of objects, emotions, people, the

struggle with ideas and language, the deep awareness of an all-pervading futility) gives the poems their high seriousness:

The old earth  
 One will go on listening  
 to the dance of the secret body  
 and to the stillness  
 that breaks on the stone.  
 Each day  
 our places are taken  
 the lost face at the world's edge,  
 rain hanging in the red branches  
 pain that always answers us  
 no matter how carefully we move  
 down the years where  
 sleep scatters against the god's cold glass

- 'The Years Down'

Though there are patches characterized by clumsy density in language ('Into your silence of sacred tree - shadow/hails the trumpet of the sun', 'Woman in love', or 'In your eyes my hands tremble to touch you' - 'Through the Stone'), language has become more lucid. The difficulty of poetisizing obscure personal obsessions or deep, racial truths, significantly maintains tension in the long, rambling meditations on self and the world.

Two later collections Relationships (Recipient of 1982 Sahitya Akademi award) and Life Signs (mostly a collection of poems published already in various journals) do not make any significant breakthrough in style or theme, but consistently develop and reiterate the ideas already dealt with in The False Start. Relationships makes an effort to go beyond the strict 'I' and 'You' confinement of love poetry to the metaphysical level of establishing a tenuous link, with the past. Prasad is of the opinion that 'Resolved into twelve sections, this long poem, a significant corollary of his critical piety and his commendable capacity to confront and interrogate the challenges and the deficiencies of all the traditions, rituals, and myths that have shaped his psyche, engendering in him a terrible sense of deprivation and defencelessness in the face of the overwhelming presence of the past, is indisputably his profoundly serious attempt at experiential meditation on his origins and his sacred ties with Orissa'.<sup>4</sup> The intimacy of personal relationship finds its culmination in the irrevocable attachment with history that is both a myth and an ever-recurring reality:

There are so many things you told me  
 but tonight I only think of  
 the words you could have said  
 Rain that falls silently in a July sky  
 Catching in your trembling skin  
 pearls of fire,

wet pigeons voices on the naked ledge,  
 a hand longing for love in the dark

- 'The Rain Falling'

The moody blues of personal relationships is transformed into the quiet formality of vast race memory, interspersed through the intricate levels of time and destiny:

Now caught in the currents of time  
 I watch the blue of the sky  
                   seep out slowly  
 hear the voices of old waves drift  
 and yet my existence lies in the stones  
 which carry my footsteps from one  
                   day to another,  
 down the infinite distances ...

- Relationships 'I'

This broadening of the focus results in a certain loss of the immediacy and piquancy of poetry. The single theme rigorously developed in a long poem is open to the danger of palling.

In Life Signs the mystery of language is developed in detail in some of the poems:

Let not words fill you with fear  
 those that trap you like an animal in your heart  
 Those that claim you like insects of the right  
 in their fiery light's path,

those that run down from snow-capped mountains  
 along interminable distances  
 those that contort themselves to tangled rivers  
 of permanent aloneness  
 those that blind you with your own impotence  
 and then crush with the desire  
 to make things right in the world

- 'The Quality of Ruins'

But the long passage of metaphysical investigation lack something of the expressive quality of The False Start - the restless, tragic fervour seems to have dimmed into an impassive altitude. There is an urgency in The False Start:

And this life still stands  
 propped up by our thousand little longings  
 But we can't go on living  
 simply for the smoke  
 that struggles to get us outside  
 or for the sake of an empty word  
 There is always the feeling  
 Of something spreading itself inside the chest  
 like blood or sweat ....

- 'Something spreading Itself'

The searching urgency of these lines has quietened into a withdrawal of the self from the world in Life Signs:





the magic light enough  
 for her to feel small and airy  
 as the limpid summer deer of desire  
       stepped forward, mysterious as a cloud  
 coold and white  
 with the rustle of rain

- 'The Years Down'

and his use of metonymy (in which concrete attributes stand for abstract entities and abstract segments represent or enact a concrete whole) make his poetics of thought unyielding to ratiocination and linear argument.

The poetic forays into the realms of language and silence, fusion of time and space and the creative self and its dramatic alter ego give The False Start the status of originality and significance.

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#### Footnotes

- 1 Madhusudan Prasad, "Caught in the Currents of Time : A Study in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra", Contemporary Indo-English Verse, ed. by Chiranthan, Kulshretha (Delhi: Arnold Heinmann, 1980).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Jayanta Mahapatra, Relationships (Chandrabhaga Society, 1982).
5. Madhusudan Prasad, loc. cit.

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