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Jayanta Mahapatra: A Poetry of Decreation

By: Meena Alexander

*Patience, a quality of attention which is the finest refinement of desire, distinguished the work of Jayanta Mahapatra'.
Meena Alexander's discussion of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry that was first published in 1983*

Twilight in Cuttack. The wind barely rustles in the dry leaves. A man lifts his hand, his head bent, listening. For almost an eternity he stands, as the wind blows, swiftly now, through the dry leaves and sifts the green pointed twigs on the tree. Quickly, his hand in consort with the wind, he parts the dark mesh of leaf just above his head. How silently he beckons! In the glow of torchlight I see the pointed twigs bent in a round, the tiny freckled eggs, warm, almost smoky. He drops his hand and the leaves cover the nest. It is dark now in Cuttack, the wind dying in the shadows, in the soil.

The image remains with me. It was Jayanta Mahapatra showing me the koil's nest. I choose to begin with this memory for the quality of attentiveness it discloses, the absolute inclination to the movement of the wind so that the nest is not unnaturally disturbed, the care for a secret being.

This patience, this quality of attention which is the finest refinement of desire distinguishes the work of Jayanta Mahapatra, a remarkable poet, writing now [1983], in English in India. In a tongue which is not that of his mother, yet which he has made his own, he establishes a fragile self, waiting, "listening, pinned to the stone".

Stone is crucial to Mahapatra's cosmogony. It was there at the beginning. It is the penetrable permanent. He inhabits an earth where monuments of stone crumble and crack, yet survive in the same realm as human beings, the glory of stone glimpsed momentarily by consciousness. Stone does not vanish as flesh does, yet to reach the still point it must be transcended just as the self must be emptied out:

At the touch of stone
the immensity becomes your own: gods,
fathers, sons, binding into earth, becoming
one and centre.

In a poem called "The Ruins" he alludes to the pain of stone, cracked by time:

chipped fingers, the thin
crack running slant along
the brow.

A tragic tone is released: "so like a word, its blue wings broken... ". Yet we, speaker and listener, both using words, are bound to this ruin. Language fails us, even as we struggle to understand. The flaw lies in our very being, in the way in which we inhere in this world, pitted by time:

Nothing that is
whole speaks of the
past. Or lives. Or can
form into a word.

Simone Weil, the great French religious thinker, has spoken of decreation as a certain quality of attention, an emptying out of the self, an almost mystical waiting. She argues that it requires giving up "our imaginary position as the centre, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of the soul ... " .

Annihilation of what we normally call identity, a position at the centre of space, works a change in the very quality of perception. I quote:

A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility ... analogous to that which takes place in the dusk of an evening on a road, where we suddenly discern as a tree what we had at first seen as a stooping man; or where we suddenly recognize as a rustling of leaves what we thought at first was whispering voices. We see the same colours; we hear the same sounds, but not in the same way.

It is precisely this painful transformation, a withdrawal of the will, the power of a visionary consciousness filling up the place the will had bent to its own purposes, that we see in Mahapatra's poetry. Even the human body vanishes, giving up the centrality of location it had main tained. But what happens next? The mind is gently consumed, from the edges, inwards.

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.

The "mystic light" is the visible aspect of time and the self will vanish into its depths. We are not dealing with Blake's problem: seeing a world in a grain of sand, a heaven in a wild flower. This is not the Romantic figuration of consciousness expanding.

Rather, 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's eternal vault". For the poet, unlike the mystic, must continually, perilously, return to the realms of individuation; travel the journey back and forth, ceaselessly. In his long poem *Relationship* Mahapatra meditates on the problem of a self, over whelmed by time. He seeks "a prayer to draw my body out of a thou sand years". Yet the poet must still persevere, search 'time's mouth' till finally the realization dawns on him: the utterance is silence.

But time has no
mouth, and the
black labyrinth
of casurinas along the edges of
the sea closes the sky's eternal
vault ...

In an earlier poem "The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic, 1975" the poet had explored the visionary silence of a holy man who sits under a brand new awning in the market place. Children, their bodies like "rough-hewn stone", go up to him. The speaker strains to hear their words, but he fails. Darkness falls:

I leaned forward and touched the man's still shoulder.
Cruelties trickled like
insensible resin from his torn
wounded trunk.
The centuries locked like wheels.

The entire memory of a race is locked into flesh, fragile, vulnerable to touch, yet curiously permanent, like stone. The old man's body is porous, like ancient stone, taking on the knowledge of a soil, of buried dreams and myths. Yet his flesh is eternally wounded.

It is the wound of poetry, the gash in the body when the body is lent to the soil. Yet out of suffering the true word emerges, trembling at the brink of darkness. Paradoxically, it is utterly lucid, clarified by the light of vision, by a self that is one with the soil in which it finds itself:

the distant music of the stars
cuts blood and the suffering of
the earth returns.

I think of the Finnish poet Paavo Haavikko, a writer of intense clarity, his speech refined by ice and snow, by

the journey through familiar
speech towards the region that
is no place.

With Mahapatra, a writer as luminous as Haavikko, the journey is only intermittently towards "the region that is no place". In the final analysis 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, more lucid consciousness. At the culmination of *Relationship* we hear him say: "I draw the day unto myself, trembling with being". And in a poem called "The Mountain" he writes of the gravity of a mountain continually sifting, chopping, splintering under the pressure of attention:

Shackled to earth it stands, all its dead weight.
In the darkness of
evening silence and
pressure only,
multiplying, adding,
subtracting, in the
abyssal heart.
Each day,
falling to pieces under the
straddling sunlight, it gives clear
proof that one
might still reconstruct one's life ...

We have a powerful, haunting image of the world made and remade through the visionary instinct. But this is not to say that there is a real solid self. That would be too simple a way out. Poetry comes when a soil speaks, when time is "broken into small fragments of light and shadow". The voice comes from a realm beyond the common self, pierced by "a too true transience".

But this is no common soil, no ordinary earth; in Mahapatra's world "the trembling of dreams is everywhere, like the wind".

In his "Orissa Journal" Mahapatra speaks of the source of dream, of memories that "flit like clouds in the sky". After detailed description of an encounter with Govinda Maharana the local image maker who knows he must shape the goddess Durga both as creator and destroyer, the speaker moves to a reflection on the crowded noisy festivities and embedded in the teeming soil, the cosmic spark; life, that as the *Upanishads* tells him springs from the smoke of desire. "For a moment", says the speaker, "I forget myself ... I hold my breath":

The physical perspective changes every moment; perhaps this is what hammers on the shell of one's inherent isolation, that time is not constant, and the present is not the present any longer. Slowly I realize that I am living at one particular instant in many layers of time—the mythic, the historical and the present. What one sees in the present is only what has stirred the air of the place for countless generations.

In such a world, which is truly India, the gesture of grace involves an attentive waiting; emptying out the self, waiting, watching, witnessing.

The largest untruth would be the imposition of will, positing a solid central self. In one of his finest poems "The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore, India" Mahapatra gives us the resigned, meditative poise needed to survive in such a world. The British conquerors have vanished, leaving their tombs behind, haunt now of the lizard and scorpion. The terror of mutability is on the self and there is no escape. The young are dying; they reflect the "blood's unease" and "death's sickly trickle" is everywhere, gathering power

and momentum:

through both past and present, the
increasing young, into the final bone,
wearying all truth with ruin.
This is the iron
rusting in the vanquished country, the
blood's unease, the useless rain upon my
familiar window ...

What becomes of the bond between death and the self? Death is a birth-right and must be drawn into the voice; into the source of power. "The age old grass of my death" the poet calls it in Relationship (p. 14), echoing the "tribe of grass in the cracks of my eyes" in "The Abandoned British Cemetery". For it is only when death is evoked that the beginning will give itself up, the "ruined birthplace" appear and the voice reach the final fragrance, the fragrance from the one bloom absent from all bouquets.

In his long poem, Mahapatra speaks of those who are able to live with the knowledge of death, beyond the myth of happiness. It is a cold, sparse landscape of the mind:

I thought: those who survive the myth
have slipped past their lives and cannot define their reason,
the trees are getting sparse, the clouds dwindle into colder air ...

But it is this realm and no other that holds "the open centre of the heart's space". Here we are given solitude, the limpid truth of "something hatching alone on the unknown leaf". It is a realm of beginnings, a tenuous redemption, a truth for the mind unwearied by time. A poet one is truly grateful for, Mahapatra shows us the quivering movement out of darkness:

Darkness that comes
slowly in, voices and feet
marking time, floating
towards invincible sunrise,
a vine climbing silently in
space
or emerging through
strange water, reedy and
naked and of death.

The poetry of decreation has come full circle. Out of the "silent alphabet of belief" has emerged a new world; for the posture of grace, a vine, climbing through water.

(Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023), the poet who was considered one of the founders of English poetry in India, died on 27 August)

Meena Alexander (1951-2018) was author of poetry, fiction, essays, and criticism and a Distinguished Professor of English at the City University of New York. This article was originally published in The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 18(1), 42–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198948301800105> . It is republished here with the permission of David Lelyveld.