Jayanta Mahapatra is a poet with modern sensibility, yet the past in all its traditional and cultural magnificence lures him. In his very personal language he reacts to the past which seems to endow his poetry with a deep vision and also a sense of loss. There is a longing for the past and also latent grief for what has been lost and the way it has been lost. Time and again, the poet through his poems makes us step into the land of nostalgia as he journeys through the shadowy regions in an attempt to relate with the ages gone by.

The quest of this bilingual, prolific poet becomes existential as he in his consciousness tries to find a niche in the scheme of universe. Obviously, in his world there is a tension between the past and present and no resolution. Brooding, meditating, doubting, questioning, the poet touches many subjects like hunger, poverty, love, lust,
relationships, religion and spirituality; always maintaining a deliberate 'no comment' stance and making use of 'silence' in an eloquent manner. Caught somewhere between action and contemplation, he sometimes appears like a twentieth century 'Hamlet'.

His responses, too, are very personal and subjective most of the time, making his poetry quite obscure and hard to read yet about his sincerity nobody is ever left in doubt. Usually the very first word of his poems strikes a mood and sets a tone, making it a poetry of inner spaces. In the tradition of modern poets he juxtaposes images, etc., so that his poems easily disorient the reader and appear not flowing or spontaneous but conscious acts of intellect. Infact, the response to his poetry, too, can be very personal and subjective. No doubt, Jayanta Mahapatra is a conscious poet with a conscience!

Remarking on man's desire to recapture past, Marcel Proust quotes a 'celtic' belief according to which the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in either some plant, animal or even in an inanimate object till the day we happen to pass by the tree or are able to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison,

Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised their voice, the spell is broken. We have delivered them : they
have overcome death and return to share our life.

Proust further comments that trying to recapture past is a labour in vain. All the efforts of our intellect are futile because "The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect in some material object (in the sensation that material object will give us) which we do not suspect". The surface of Mahapatra's awareness, too, holds magnetism of such a moment which lingers in all its intensity and remains poised in his memory like souls ready, waiting and hoping for their moment. Jayanta Mahapatra is one Indo-Anglian poet who, unlike his contemporary Indian poets, does not fight his roots. On the contrary, his sensibility is firmly rooted in his Oriya, viz., Indian roots. His poetry is deeply entrenched into the philosophy, culture and traditions of his soil.

The poet does not suffer alienation, and consciously seeks to establish a relationship with whatever is ancient and traditional and goes on to derive inspiration from the magnificent old ruins like in his long poem 'Relationship'. "His poetry unravels a fabric of the past, woven with a few relevant historical details of the land of Orissa and its ruins everywhere, holding dim interiors of myth and the rites and rituals centered on the three temples at Bhubaneswar, Puri and Konarka symbolising a hoary tradition of which he is an inheritor".
Your silence, my land,
grows
With an old petrified loneliness,
And your bronze youth
overwhelms
With an unheard cry of the infinite
That once blazed
The red sand-stone walls
of Konarka,
Bhubaneswar and Puri
With the terrifying passions
Of solitary beings.

With the sheer magic of his imagination he makes these ruins palpitate with life. 'Konarka' becomes a symbol of everything beautiful and ugly because there is much in the ancient tradition which fills one with despair, disgust and helplessness. What we have let our glorious, ancient heritage come to today as it seems scarred with violent wars, blood-shed and the years of unholy exploitation. With time, everything, the river, the stone and even the priest have been profaned.

The cruelties
Of ruthless emperors who carved peaceful edicts
On blood-red rock....

Here sometimes, the guilt, too, meanders in, giving his poetry a strange brooding, meditative tone. 'Konarka' haunts him always as he patiently waits for the tradition and history to have a replay. He waits for the time to 'Open its mouth' and unravel all:
Once again one must sit back and bury
the face
In this earth of forbidding myth
The phallus of the enormous stone
When the lengthened shadow of a restless
Vulture,
Caresses the strong and silent deodars in
the valley,
and when the time of the butterfly
Moves inside the body of the forest bear,
And feel the tensed muscles of rock
Yield to the virtuous water of the hidden
Springs of the Mahanadi;
The mystery of secret rights that make up
destiny...

The cultural and the historical past keeps haunting the poet. He is intrigued by it and keeps trying to recapture the past or the time as he views it in its entirety. Time becomes an important motif of his poetry as he unfolds his poetic vision in a time scheme which covers eternity, encompassing past, present and the future, treating it in an Eliot-like manner.

Time arouses various emotions in the poet. He views it with awe, a sense of urgency and even with a feeling of uneasiness and helplessness at the mere thought of not being able to escape from the moment which for him also becomes a moment of reckoning. Mahapatra's world is made of tradition and history, forever recreating itself, playing on the myth of eternal return. He makes extensive use of the symbols of 'River' and 'Stone', because in a way they stand for eternity or timelessness, acting as a link between the past, present and the future. For him the present contains
nothing but the past, and what is found in effect was already there in the cause. Also, for him poetry becomes significant when the poet makes the reader enter the poem in which the myth-act is present, where the reader has to live the way the things were; in other words, where we participate in some mythic journey of man. It is at such times that we are participating in something both contemporary and ancient, in the story which the poet has built up again in his poem. Here, it is that the poem will touch us in our deepest self, because of the myth that is the carrier of the poem. It is not always possible to recapture or recreate the past and that leaves the poet unhappy at his own helplessness in a way that Proust describes:

What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not so far exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of the day.

Mahapatra is after that elusive 'something' of the past which goes on eluding him. His poetry tries to give voice to that abyss of uncertainty and thus out of sheer despair the poet speaks out:
...Nothing else,  
As I continue walking back and forth  
Not knowing where whether the earth  
Would let me find finally its mouth...  

An intense pre-occupation with the past and the problem of coming to terms with it makes the most significant feature of his poetry: Sometimes, the poet feels cut off from his past and he feels cruelly deprived, yet he keeps experiencing that obsessive presence. The poet soon becomes aware of the presence of the past in the bright and turbulent colours of the Ocean. Rocks and rivers unfold to him the fresh wonders of their eternal presence,

The stones of the temple carry the narrator's footsteps 'from one day in to another, down to the infinite distances, the dense jungles', leading to the remote past. He thus arrives at the realisation that his existence lies in the stones, that ... the stones were my very own, waiting as mother or Goddess or Witch, as my birth feeds on them as though on the empty dugs of sorcerous thought.

Mahapatra, the poet, tries to establish a link between the past and the future, between myth and reality. "...Therefore in Mahapatra's poetry space unweaves itself, deconstructs itself all the time, melts into history and myth". Mahapatra in his poetry consciously makes an attempt to return to mythical forms, to reestablish the value-based natural environment that physical science today fails to apprehend. Also, Mahapatra's another concern
happens to be the repossession of that cultural heritage which will finally lead him from a guilt-ridden sense of isolation to a final joyful feeling of a definite oneness with one's roots. The poet also suggests that alienation is caused by the feebleness and fragility of historical memory.

The swords of forgotten kings
rust slowly in the museums of our guilty
While the carved rock loses its light.

Although, history has increasingly made us rational in thinking, yet it has also disinherited us traditionally and culturally; the way we usually describe the mind of the modern man, where he wishes to free himself of traditions. There is in the poet a desire to recapture the past which can also be looked upon as a deep desire to preserve that non-rational, mythical memory, a man made record of man's intuitive and instinctive ideas of themselves. These mythical forms are still available because in another sense they are beyond history living in a timeless world, beyond the realm of consciousness. In Mahapatra's poetry everything else becomes subsidiary to myth:

The landscape is always haunted by myth, the centre of the poet's existence moves backwards in time, towards the past, towards meaning. He must keep moving towards origin so far as the form will allow him. The poet's return to the past (the cultural past, not simply the individual past) and the poems return
from meaning are a paired phenomena in Mahapatra's work. They provide the creative tension for his poems.¹²

Through this continuous obsession with past and the mythical tradition, the poet, in fact, makes an attempt to find a niche for himself in the historical, cultural context. Everything about his country, be it 'the way of the river' or 'The Chariot festival of Puri' reminds him of his ancestors and he tries to establish a relationship with them, acknowledging it thus:

Tonight I know that the life I have lived
Is my life softened in my father's life.
What can set me free
From the time before I was? Can it
Shrink the circles of light lit by the dim moon
of my ignorance.¹³

And also,

I am the water in my father's eyes.
I am the slow flow that takes me gently down.
Has its darker depths taught me already The art of disguise, its strong necessity.¹⁴

Mahapatra has an understanding of his Indian, viz., rural, Oriya roots and he asserts his kinship with them because,

I know I can never come alive
If I refuse to consecrate at the altar of my origins.¹⁵

And, his proud assertion of having intimately belonged to a place which has always deeply associated with the emotional
and social culture,

I live in a rural city in coastal Orissa, a place that has always adhered to its rituals and unchanging attitudes even in the face of change and intrusion of new technology.

Thus, he proclaims total affinity with his roots,

This is the town where I was born;
Here with other,
Years after years I celebrate the joyous festivals,
In the whine of the cripple and the mangled leper
I see the power of people holding their ground.

It is in relevance with his Indian roots that Mahapatra seeks to relate with the 'Beyond' in his poetry.
Indian sensibilities have been so nurtured, so deeply entrenched in him that we fail to think of life as apart from tradition and religion and so it is, as he believes poetry should belong to life and be one with it,

When poets came to regard as their chief function the portrayal of actual contemporary life with all its inconsequential details, that poetry became real, or naked and simultaneously more difficult to understand.

Jayanta Mahapatra believes that the poetry has a mission and the poet has a moral responsibility towards life as he firmly believes in the civilising effect of poetry. Poetry is an activity of the mind and it is inevitable that
the nature and significance of the image of man, and the civilisations that have gone to shape that image, penetrate the centre of our consciousness. For Jayanta Mahapatra, poetry is a continuous effort to make sense of life, seeking answers from himself and these questions bring him face to face with himself and his way of life. So he, forever, in his poetry attempts to embody the intensities of his own living and the attitudes appropriate to these institutions. What time and again, motivates and directs his journey is not just a perception of the power of the umbilical link with the past but also his disenchantment with the present. The poet believes that he is the part of that eternal chain binding him and making him one with the culture, tradition and civilization of the world. And, it is on the basis of this that he is able to define the role of man of a more civilised, humane ideology. In a way he accepts the reality of the contribution of every human being to world civilization, irrespective of race, colour and creed of the people of this planet.

Keeping silence
A stone celebrates with its wreaths of faith:
In the ages underneath it.
Such time that's buried everywhere.
Ancient water in rock.
Blinded and, repeated in the blood.
And

The grave flood rushes past,
As it had
Thousands of years ago.

What strikes one is the continuity of the human race and the world culture. This belief of the poet brings us to the hypothesis of C.G. Jung's 'Collective unconscious' which is something like an unceasing stream, having lived the life of an individual countless times and possessing a living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering and decay. Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, carries in it the flavour of the past, that unspoken chain, in the form of the myth and archetypes inherited and thus fuses life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present, which threatens to slip away from it. This is what that gives the impression of the poet being firmly rooted in his roots. In his poem 'Thirst' he goes on to say:

Of people, inside their pull of bone.
The darkness fumbling through the shapes of prayers,
Everywhere, an ancient rite of dead years
Makes its obeisance to life.
I crane my naked neck
Under the stony sunlight
Stalling for a little time.
A stranger on this instant of becoming
Towards the proud Brahman priest
Whose outstretched hand will place
The God's vermilion on my birth.
Between the posture and the act
I am held.
Slaked with an impressive destiny.
"Between the posture and the act" is significant because it exhibits that the poet is not so absolutely and so unquestionably under the spell of the past. For the poet the past is made of folk tales and legends which have become an inseparable part of his inheritance and he continuously goes on linking his legendary past to the life of the individual,

Inside me
Is the boy I found
tracked by stone
....

His thin black cry
Pointing at my life. 22

The poet draws freely from the similar local legends, the Oriya heritage, and for instance the legend of,

The girl woman, like Topoi,
On which the long heroic song 23
Plucks the everlasting stars.

Mahapatra never tires of portraying the religious rituals and modes of worship. His poems are full of sharp pictures of the rituals of worship and temple scenes, with the priest, and the crowds 'through the temple doors' and cripples and lepers. Sharply etched images bear the burden of such scenes:

My blood drowsy in the
Mosquito hum of chanting,
And a final white flower of worship
Pays for my sins and watches. 24
Despite his deep involvement and the tenderness with which he depicts the scenes, the poet appears doubtful as to his total commitment and involvement with his heritage. He appears to be haunted by questions like, "What have I run out of? An inheritance?"  

Despite his deep love for the past, there are places in Mahapatra's poetry where we come across a touch of ambivalence towards his past and tradition which to him seems to have become, somewhat frozen in stone. A stone becomes much more than a mere stone, symbolising knowledge, culture and values of centuries:

Stone is the theme,
And the endless, forbidden temple wall
Goes from lighted shadow into shadowy light.

His modern sensibility does not always let him accept the tradition, he has inherited. Although there is no conscious alienation from the Hindu past which he keeps creating and recreating in his poems, many times simply only as a backdrop, yet there does seem to be an element of detached objectivity in his comments. At times, there even creeps in, a tone of gentle criticism and cynicism:

The entire land immobile like the river
In its used infirm bed.
It fills the poet with despair at his own helplessness:

We stand here, too, voiceless as water,
Without surprise, without promise,
tying the spires of temples
With an eye
Crumbled by merciless faith.

The poet becomes gently ironic as he comments on the deadness of the rites and rituals and the blind faith in them, yet he can not break away and all this clearly exhibits the poet's absolute awareness of the unbroken chain of heritage and also strengthens his belief regarding roots:

I have here what my life has reached down
And scooped a handful of moist earth.
It is the other life
Out of the voices of the dead
That shelters the warm space of my birth.

All this in a way, starts a question in his mind; where to from here and on what to build then? It is not exactly alienation that the poet experiences yet there creeps in his poems a sense of helplessness, endowing his poetry with a 'tragic Vision'. He further appears estranged, distanced and extra sensitive. Commenting on this aspect of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry, Bruce King writes:

Mahapatara's poems often record a distance between himself and the customs of his surroundings. There are the sounds of temple bells, the prayers of
priests, the funeral pyres, the uncomplaining acceptance of the past, representing a possible reality, or a mentality of which he is not a part. The listening and waiting are, however, a result of consciousness, the rational mind which is aware of its individualisation and difference. The poems keep returning to the desire to overcome such alienation through passive attention, in the hope that some renewal will occur. "Listening" concludes 'You merely, wait, listening, pinned to the stone'. The 'Sentence' ends:

Behind the locked door you're waiting for things those reasons:
Something that lives in the brittle reeds of your veins Something that urges the relentless trees to whisper of their years.

Again and again, Mahapatra keeps becoming aware that although a child of his civilisation, he is an exile and an out-cast, with no apparent hope of his ever been able to bridge the chasm that separates him from his origin and ancestry. The poet is really troubled and "wearied by the echo of the past's goodbye. He is left with a sense of loneliness, bitterness, sorrowfulness - a consciousness of 'the old emptiness of my own destiny'. All this depresses as well saddens the poet and he begins to wonder at the truth of life. Maybe, he feels as lost as the lost children of America, who,

Wander bare-eyed
Smelling of incense and living on grass and flowers
And loitering around
Like the dark winds of Asia
Which murmur joylessly in slums
But do not answer
Opening their hidden faces
Like lonely picture post cards of unknown lands;
Perhaps some sing, and some others
Chant the Mantras of the dead
With what benign resignation of all children,
Or perhaps like victims waiting out
The relentlessness of time,
Keep watching the skies
With terror in their gaze.

The past chases Mahapatra as an illusion he can not overcome. He is haunted by it as he goes on hunting for it. It appears that he really wishes to make sense of life which lies in fragments before him! He is even able to fight and overcome guilt and look somewhat hopefully to the future:

Fear of my guilt, I bid you farewell.
... Is anything beyond me that I can not catch up?

Something urges him to seek answers of himself, testing his feelings by striking them against the fabric of the poems he writes. And his poetry ends up as 'endless questioning' as he deals with subjects like time, death, and the great quest of man one after another but such thoughts emerge only after he meditates on the immediate landscape of his land. If he feels ambivalent towards the past, he experiences the same ambivalence for the present too.
According to Mahapatra, the whole race of human being has reached an impasse. In a state like this, it becomes important for him to define humanity in clearer terms and to achieve this aim he tries to redefine his own reality, unweaving a space in mind and by deconstructing. He glorifies the task of a poet because to him, a poet more than anyone else is conscious and he defines the human being as some one who can give himself up to the essence of all things. In his own words:

It is true that when poetry speaks of the elementary and profound concern of man- and mystery and tragedy of this vital process, this act of living, loving, becoming and dying - it becomes like a pool that gives back our image on the threshold of an experience like a bright shell in the sea resonant with the accumulated echoes of its past history, which forces us to face the unending change of matter that continues with a troubling beauty after myth.

Mahapatra is a poet, endowed with a deep and rare subtlety of vision. It is also his training as a physicist that helps him to experience and feel something that lies beyond the realm of the material world. Perhaps this is what that has made Meena Alexander write:

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 boy 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 to 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.  

Although, the poet appears pensive, yet emotionally and culturally he is not a recluse. Commenting on the basic concern of Mahapatra's poetry, Bruce King writes, "The basic problem haunting Mahapatra's Poetry is the relationship of the self to the other, the distance felt by the consciousness between being aware and what one is aware of".  

Mahapatra himself expresses his feelings like this: "a poet does not know what poetry is, nor what it can do but like metaphysics poetry too, persists in trying to find something of permanence beyond changing appearances, some yet unknown form of transcendental nature".

Mahapatra's feelings get intenser as he questions the existence of the self in context with the society, Hindu culture, rituals and spirituality. He observes and reacts to his own environment and then listens quietly and sensitively to his own feelings. For him the poetry that is truly Indian in essence, takes us beyond ourselves, bringing us face to face with the self on the other side.
Mahapatra's poetry seems to be aware of the fact that there are not many answers, nor is he seeking them. What he is after is a kind of harmony and peace amongst conflicting worlds; emotional, social, physical, and spiritual and thereby coming to a tranquil acceptance, always getting sustenance from the past. It is this that brings alive the element of nostalgia in his poetry as the poet continues making that 'dream-like pilgrimage' into the past. This is one thing that has made Bruce King comment:

Mahapatra's imagination has always been concerned with such relationships as the difficulty of bringing into harmony such opposites as Christian guilt and Hindu myth, destiny and will, his environment and the western social order his grandfather chose, his sexual desires and his conscience.

So for Mahapatra the search goes on till he realises that his salvation lies in his beginnings, i.e. his past:

In your dance is my elusive birth,
That swallows the green hills of the land
And the crows that quicken the Sun-light in the veins,
And the stone that watches my sadness fly in and out
Of my deaths, a spiritless soul of memory.

Mahapatra thinks in terms of metaphors. In his poetry, we are not face to face with any simplified apprehension of reality, or any direct explanation of phenomena. We see the
things in a diffused light that throws suggestive shadows to enrich the meaning of the entire poem. 'The drunken Yellow Flames' of the oil lamp do not dispel but accentuate the darkness which is here synonymous with loneliness. All this is compressed into a few lines and this compression gives to the poem an intensity, and a dramatic dimension. In his own words:

What appears to disturb me is the triumph of silence in the mind and if these poems are inventions, they are also longings amid the flow of voices towards a need I feel is defensive. A poem makes me see out of it in all directions like a sieve, and I am almost relieved at that all-important thought.

So, the poet attempts to explore his own ability to make that quietness bloom, to make silence say something without actually saying it. That is why there is so much suggestiveness in Mahapatra's poems. I realise that it is very easy to label Mahapatra's poetry as Indian, but it is not. His poetry is more of the world rather than of India alone. It is made of contraries and oppositions. There is, in his poetry a constant longing for a "paradisial pre-associated past of tradition and an organic view of the world".

Although Mahapatra makes extensive use of the Indian motif and metaphor which has enriched his poetry, yet as a poet he would rather belong to the world. He does try to
seek solace from the great tradition of the world, the
universe. Use of the Indian metaphor is only symbolic. He
would rather be categorised with the modern avant-garde
poets of the world. From his temperament, sadness,
loneliness, solitude and isolation he takes a flight towards
the expansion of the soul to create a 'wholeness' in an
otherwise fragmented world and is able to achieve a kind of
new awareness, awakening in himself and his poetry. He makes
use of the external world to present subjective reality to
let emotions in at the edge of awareness.

Mahapatra speaks of a poet's mental
Landscape, an 'inner world of his own
making a world spaced by his own life,
of secret allusions, of desire and agony,
of a constantly changing alignment
between dream and reality.' Rather than
moral choices, Mahapatra speaks of being
'uncertain' of his 'very existence' and
of groping from poem to poem for the key
to human understanding.

Mahapatra is an Oriya Indian. He writes in Oriya too,
yet English language drew him to it. He handles poetry
with a sense of experimentation. Jayanta Mahapatra uses
words to serve his own ends, and to seek reconciliation with
the world outside him. Slowly his language goes on to
become purposeful from the beginning of groping helplessly
in the dark:

You are only used to seeing your
own hand rise.
Against the throats of your own words.
He believes that a "Great poem lets us embark on a sort of journey or voyage through symbols and allusions to encompass the human condition". He makes use of contrasts, opposites, subtle shifts, eruptions, interruptions, obscurities and personal allusions to create a dream-like world, where the search continues from poem to poem as the poet grooves to come out of darkness. He tries to evolve the truth; the truth of the true poetry. In his poetry there is no conflict or any feeling of guilt for writing in an alien language. Instead, the poet's adopting the English language to express himself, goes well with his desire to belong to the world. As a poet he would not like to limit himself in any way. In an article of his he quotes Edwin Kuir,

Our minds are possessed by three mysteries: where we come from, where we are going and since we are not alone, but members of a countless family, how we should live with one another.

For Mahapatra too, the poetry should reflect this and stand for it. Only then it would gain meaning and become significant as,

I tried to speak of the myth of sleep and action in the hope of soothing myself and those others Rummaging through the secret blood of the wind in the pines And awaiting the deepening nature of all things.
To finally reach the calming realisation,

This is the real body: raging
pachyderm
with the crazy testicles, red and wild,
The lusting God of the blackest
Siva night;

For now I touch your secret order
embarrassed yoni;
Before me lie the sulking years of dreams
The stricken purposes of the muscles
The violent splashes of the Sun-sets
In the fibres of the being.
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