IN THE WAKE OF IMAGES: MINIMALISM IN JAYANTAMAHAPATRA'S *BARE FACE*

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"Art excludes the unnecessary"—Carl Andre
"Even the headless torso of Ghandi
In the city square can speak.
Like truth, unsaid most of the time,
Yet almost said."—poem, Sometimes, JayanataMahapatra

The subject of this discussion is a close reading of the contemporary poet,JayantaMahapatra's book *Bare Face*(2000). The work, *Bare Face*, is only one out of sixteen books of poetry written by Mahapatra. In fact, the poet from Cuttack, India, can most humbly boast of an international readership and reputation. Recently, within the last two years, Mahapatra's already established literary career has gained renewed attention. The year 2009 was a good year for Mahapatra; for, he received the prestigious Allen Tate award for poetry, the SAARC literary award, and the Padma Shree Award in India (for a citizen who has made a significant contribution to the country's literary development). He has earned, in the past, the American *Poetry Magazine's* coveted *Jacob Glatstein* award. These global recognitions are certainly merited for the eighty three year old poet. It might surprise some to know that Mahapatra came to poetry later in life than most feted poets. He was already forty when his verse was first published; the majority of his working adult life was spent as a scientist in the study of physics. Mahapatra is known to western readers by the fact he has published in some of the most competitively prestigious poetry journals in America, such as *The ChicagoReview*, *The Georgia Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *TheHudson Review*, to name but a few.Mahapatra is a memoir/essayist, humanitarian, and most of all, a poet.

Bare Face stands out as an exemplary collection of poems that reveal Mahapatra's ability to describe the invisible—shadows, emotions, memories, the observations of the mind that can never be seen *but only* depicted symbolically. Even while Mahapatra is able to paint for us, his readers, a picture of what cannot be seen externally (but only felt internally within the consciousness of an individual self), he is simultaneously able to reach further to express the quotidian life in its most stripped down, essential terms. The quotidian life is that which most people would call the mundane, the ordinary, the expected (not the unique), the usual (not the unusual). For Mahapatra, the quotidian life is the life of a village, to be found in the remembrances of his native Orissa—in the timid bellowing of animals, of candles lending shadow to a night vision of a temple. Or, it is in the rain, in the wetness of the land, in the dryness of the mind. We see an example of this very anti-western kind of quotidian life in Mahapatra's poem, "Silence." It is a positive

affirmation of the east as much as it is a denial of the west that we find in Mahapatra's poems. In "Silence," he graciously writes,

> Rain, all night.
> Capacious, like the body of a woman.
> And the heat, intolerable.
> A cow lows once.
>
> Strong smells of fish and palm-toddy in the air.
> One doesn't wish to say anything at all.
> How will cross over?
> The water, running out from the feet, ends up nowhere.

In "Silence," the minimalism of the quotidian life is in the ability to incorporate descriptions related to the five senses through the use of images. The odors of fish, the way air gains the stench of land, the way a woman's body brings natural and maternal heat. "Silence" is also a good example of the fact that Mahapatra's poetry is always asking of readers to think of questions—how is a woman capacious? What does it mean to "cross over?" Is that death? Is it is a mental state, somewhat like a meditative positioning of the mind? Are we to draw a parallel between women, death, uncertainty, and rain? What is the linkage, the connection? This is what Mahapatra's minimalism provides—a way of exploring questions, linking images into a string of associations, leaving some of the work of constructing solid conclusions up to the less than solid, indeterminacy of the openness of the text and the play of interpretation of the reader.

Where the west and east overlap is the concept that the quotidian life is filled and regimented by custom, by needs and necessities, by the close circle of those we keep near us. If the quotidian life extends at all beyond this it is often by some chance encounter and then the quickening begins to move past the chance encounter and back toward the regulatory measures of one's normal daily routine.

So, it is in Mahapata'ssketches that he can give us both the invisible world of thought as well as the quotidian life, the everydayness of a village to such a degree that even a western reader who may be unfamiliar with what village life is like can begin to 'feel' as though he or she *has been there before*, if in a past life or inside the constructed imagism of the poem. To be inside the poem is what Mahapatra's minimalism seems to accomplish. The minimalism creates a dajavu effect within the poem's *life*. His images create a feeling of *having seen what the poet has seen* (even if we have not), and so we want to think that we too are bound inside the life of the poetry by that same force that binds and habituates the poet toward an set of ideas, a way of *seeing the world (literally)* that becomes *perception of the world (metaphorically, impressionistically)*. It is through this dual process of painting for his readers the inward, mental and emotional world of what comes with the price of silence (ideas, conceptualizations, questions, the dialectic movement of rationalizations butted against *irrationalizations*) *and* the outward, living world of the physical (of nature itself, of a *naturalism*) that we encounter Mahapata's*technique* of using minimalism.

Let's ask a question of this art device, though. What is minimalism? In terms of an aesthetic movement, it spans a range of genres from music to the visual and plastic arts, to I include sculpture, architecture, fiction, meta-fiction, and poetry. As a whole minimalism is one small component of modernism. Historically, the minimalist movement was a reaction to World War II and the post-war culture that followed; thus, it begins in the late 1940s but extends into the counterculture of the 1970s. As with any art movement that spins out of a war, minimalism expressed the intellectual disillusionment produced by having witnessed the pain and suffering of war. Much like the literary and art cultures of the 1920s and 30s that had been disillusioned by the first world war and had reacted by producing works that demonstrated a mistrust of society, so minimalism demonstrated a mistrust too. But in the special case of minimalism the mistrust was aimed at the production of values, of what had loosely been called the 'moral,' so that religion, God, absolutes, and all abstractions came under intellectual scrutiny and artistic fire as doubt spread as to whether a society, a community, or a civilization could ever create a cohesive definition of any of these concepts.

Minimalism brought with it an enormous energy, as it tried to capture on canvas and in print, in stone sculptures and buildings, in language and in paint, what it meant to exist in a world where all the old values needed to be re-evaluated and overturned and all the new values had yet to be made because no one trusted in social institutions enough anymore to bother to create any more values. If art was not about the business of perpetuating or creating values within the art object, what then was it about? The answer minimalists gave was that it was about art itself, about images, about visualizations (even novelists and poets had the new burden of carrying out the creation of visualizations through words, though a sparse and economically fragile use of words), and about the expression of an emotional malaise, a numbness, and an angst about the future of everything.

Of course, in one regard the concept of using or applying minimalism never really disappeared after the movement itself died down; for, well into the 1980s, 1990s, and even in our present century, we can find examples of minimalism, and Mahapatra's poetry is one such example. Here, I would like to give a quick review of the genre distinctions of minimalism and some of the major tenets associated with each genre's use of the aesthetic form. By providing this kind of survey, it will help lay a foundation for understanding what minimalism can include. In its more generic sense, minimalism is often used to reference any art that lacks ornamentation.

Minimalism is a way of describing art that is used to represent the convergence of the concrete with the abstract, though without using an excess. The mistrust of intellectual abstractions, such as religion and God, or law and tradition, within society, meant that abstractions in art and in the literary had to be presented in a new way that could recover the relationship of the abstract to the concrete.If religion was lost in the new future, would it be mourned for the loss of the spiritual or the loss of its temples? If tradition is unloosed, would the oppressed still suffer or suffer less? These are two of the questions, or ways of interpreting minimalism, that Mahapatra asked in his art of poetry.

Minimalist art as a whole abides by the principle that "less is more," and so relies upon the most stripped down, barest of measurements to express the artist's concerns. In one regard, what is at times coined minimalist art is also interchanged with abstract expressionism, so that at one time an artist may be called a minimalist and at another time the same artist will be called an abstract expressionist. One complaint against minimalist art is that it is too meager, too understated, and often for all its efforts to express a correlation between the concrete and the abstract because of its underwhelming bare use of mere essentialists to convey a point, the result is that the concrete is often forgotten, abandoned or overlooked in favor of trying to comprehend the technique of representation.We might think, for instance, of the painting of Franz Kline or Mark Rothko. In architecture, we recall Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's*German Pavalion* in Barcelona as an example.

Conversely, by positive standards minimalist art can supply what more ornamental or formal art forms cannot—minimalism can accomplish the expression of a single quality of the object, idea, or concept being depicted within the minimalist art form. That is, a minimalist painting can draw attention to just a wave of color, to color itself, its arrangements and juxtapositions. Or, a minimalist poem can call the reader's focus toward the language itself, to a single image created by the language.

In music, minimalism is associated with composers such as John Cage and Philip Glas. Principles of minimalist music include a basic use of *repetition and reoccurrence*—this could be *a repetition of tonal elements, of motifs, a constant return and reprisal of elongated notes, or the transparency of the percussions in a song*. In fact, minimalist composers, like John Cage, will deliberately expose each particular note thereby destroying harmony in the piece; this is so to call attention to the parts of the construction of the compositional piece. Harmony is not the goal in minimalist musical composition; instead, dissonance and tonal distance is the aim. In this respect, minimalism bears a resemblance to its cousin, postmodernism, that also aims at creating disparate meanings and destabilizations of the authority of interpretation in art.

In the visual and plastic arts, terms such as literalist art or ABC art are often used interchangeably with minimalism. The literalist and ABC art movements grew in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s, in the generation that had been affected by the Cold War culture produced out of the post-World War II climate. The goal of these movements was likewise to reduce the art object to one particular element—this could be to reduce the art object to a stripe of color, to a wave of paint, to a geometrical shape. The result is the diminution of realism, the total loss of the artist's subjective being as imbuing the art object, and an increased demand for audience interpretation.

In one strong sense, the reduction of the art object to one particular part of the art form parallels what in post-structuralism is referred to as the "death of the author" or the disappearance of the authorial interpretation from the literary work in favor of the reader's interpretation. Likewise in the visual and plastic arts, minimalism ushered in a "death of the artist," whereby the subjectivity of the artist

becomes much less important than the objective place of the art object *or of the viewer's freedom* to interpret the objective nature of the art object. The more the artist recedes in the minimalist work, the more the art object protrudes to the foreground of the art experience.

When turning to literature in fiction the works of Hemingway and Raymond Carver best represent the movement. And in poetry the works of William Carlos Williams give us linguistic equivalents to the minimalism of the visual and plastic arts. Poetry's use of minimalism is akin to other modernist movements that also sought to attack an ornamentation and unnecessary embellishment in the use of language, reduce the artist's supreme authorial power to dictate textual meaning and textual interpretation, and to place greater need for the reader to understand the role of context (including irony) when formulating interpretations—to this degree, minimalism in poetry is related to Dadaism and even Asian Haiku. Again, the principle of "less is more" is what prevails in minimalist poetry.

If we look globally, at the transnational arena of poetry, minimalist poets include such well-known authors as P.P. Ramachandran, a Malayalam poet whose work has been described as and praised for being minimalist. According to the respected poet, E.V. Ramakrishnan, Ramachandran's is said to be"the most accomplished craftsman among the poets of the 90s" in part because his expertise in managing "minimalism [creating an] understated quality [while negotiating] the micro-politics of everyday life." This "micro-politics of everyday life" is what I referred to at the start of this discussion as the quotidian life, the reutilization of the ordinary of experience. Within the circle of global minimalist poets, we find not only Ramachandran but also Mahapatra.

The origins of Mahapatra'spoety, which if it is to be classified as a version of minimalism, was birthed out of the poet's childhood pain as well as out of the suffering of others that he witnessed in the poverty of his native land of Orissa. Like many minimalist artists—the whole lot, the painters and the writers alike—and similar to those participants of other abstract art movements, such as expressionism, surrealism, and modernism more generally, Mahapatra was greatly affected by World War II. It was with the fears produced during World War II and in its aftermath that Mahapatra started to connect the emotional suffering he experienced in his childhood with that of the physical suffering of those people hurt by the war's impact upon India. Mahapatra's childhood memories are filled with the contradictory feelings of a boy reared in western colonialism. At times treated very roughly by wealthier peers at the westernized educational institutions he attended, he found himself retreating as a boy further and further inward to the life of thought, imagination, and feeling. The emotional and psychological life of his boyhood never left Mahapatra, and so when the Second World War came he found himself 'mapping' the war's toil upon the land and the people of India onto his previous wounds suffered as a child raised in a colonial culture. Through these rough and raw connections, over time, Mahapatra discovered a language of his own to describe this common ground of pain. In his autobiography, Mahapatra tells us the following about his perception of the Second World War.

> But times were different then. I am talking of the time when World War II had just began. Blackout had been imposed; an air base had been established beyond the river which encircled our town. The newspapers carried daily accounts of the war…This was Orissa then: the poverty of huts and hovels sunk into the red earth of squalid side banes, and the bare needs of our people. The wild growth of vegetation around us, and the misery and disease. The beggars apparently everywhere: the crippled and the blind…young girls and boys with their eyes gourged out by the scourge of pox: and the ever-present lepers…All this was something, I realized then from which there could be no escape…they had to suffer their torn, maimed lives in apathetic silence. I thought of the sickly smell of rotting guavas on the soggy ground. It appeared there was not much difference between rotting fruit and faceless people; the smells of decay and life and death had become one. And it made me watch my world in…stupor, waiting simply for something to hide me.

We see in the description how the war impacted him in a way that left permanent psychological scars. The war also produced on him a poetic inclination to begin to mentally pick through the rubble of debris the war brought and sift out strong images—images of the dying, of the infirm, the maimed, the crippled, the diseased, the elderly, of forgotten and ruined youth, of a land sick too. Smells, the aural, the oral, began to come together in Mahapatra's mind.

Personal crisis, too, lead Mahapatra to seek an outlet to express pain. He mentions in his autobiography how the death of his people, which happened over a period of years and not in one instance, culled in him a deeper sense of how life makes mysterious imprints upon the human imagination. It seems based upon what Mahapatra writes in his autobiography that the war and the deaths it produced lead him further toward the desire to understand how the imagination uses the impressions of others' miseries as a vehicle toward symbolic manifestation. The fact that Mahapatra was so greatly affected by his people's struggles during the war points as well toward the rootedness of the poet.

In addition to the war, there were other influences upon Mahapatra that eventually led to his becoming a poet and may have contributed to the development of his minimalist use of language. One such influence was seeing his grandfather's diary, written in the language of his people, Oriya, and not in the English he would study through a westernized education. The literal, physical sight of the alphabet, of the letters produced a mystical effect upon Mahapatra. Mahapatra writes the following in his autobiography or personal memoir what it was like to see his grandfather's legacy of language.

> One evening on his brief visit home, Father brought out an old, tattered notebook from somewhere and called us near him. A faraway look kept flitting in his eyes; of something unbound, of distances that appeared to edge his usual fatherly bliss with gloom.

> We watched him as he opened the book gingerly and pinpointed to the already-yellowed first pages on which a childish scrawl was beginning to turn brown. The Oriya alphabet on the page was difficult to read; the letters were in a script mostly used by rural, unlettered folk. Father pointed at the writing and said simply, "Your grandfather's."

What the notebook or diary of the grandfather came to reveal was the recording of an event in the history of the land. As Mahapatra notes, "In the year 1866, a devastating feminine had struck Orissa." But the recording of the event as retold by Mahapatra is filled with imagery, an imagery that creates a strong sense of suffering, tells of feelings of unrest and emotional anguish, or internal disquiet, fears and disharmony. Mahapatra writes in his memoir about his grandfather's diary that it contained images and information about the nineteenth century pestilence, and again how that carried with it the realization that the human condition was often largely characterized by a futile and shapeless suffering.

> Though the English, whole ruled the country, made frantic efforts for the movement of food grains into the province, no rice was available, especially in the villages. There were no roads, and communication on a few…pathways was only the help of bullock carts. Even the tamarind trees were stripped of their tender leaves as people began pouncing on whatever they could find.

Describing the double-nature or double-consciousness of his childhood experiences, Mahapatra writes also in his autobiography that his life, his childhood mainly, was torn between the influence of the west (in the auspicious shape of missionary religion) and that of traditions, of the equally auspicious Hindu rites and culture. He tells it this way,

> So, as children, we grew up between two worlds. The first was the home where we were subjected to a rigid Christian upbringing, with rules my mother sternly imposed; the other side was the vast and dominant Hindu amphitheater outside, with the preponderance or rites and festivals which represented the way of life of our people. Two worlds then; and I, thinking I was at the centre of all; trying to communicate with both, and probably becoming myself incommunicable as a result through the years.

That Mahapatra should call the Hindu customs an "amphitheater" points to the formation of an artist temperament within his childhood. Everything he witnessed, from his grandfather's notebook or dairy, his education at schools, even religion, and later the Second World War, each and all became occasions for the formation of impressions of what life represented. Out of these impressions, images arose, congealed in the mind, and eventually made their way into poems, though much later in Mahapatra's life.

In his short autobiography, Mahapatra's tells how he years spent as a student. But in one description one of the most important memories of the experience was

that of witnessing the mighty power of the River Ganges. In Mahapatra's poetry, rivers hold a special place, signifying everything from life to transition into death, to the disquiet of an intellectual's mind. In his autobiography, he writes the following.

> Many of my evenings were now spent on the ghats by the river. The Ganga reminded me a little of the river of my childhood, but this was wilder. The unending flow of the vast sheet of water awed me: it made me embrace the mysterious. During the rains, the river became so wide that one could not see the far bank; and the steamers with their hollow, resonant sirens moved me as they moved off from MahendruGhat.
>
> The banks of the Ganga seemed to hold on to the spirits of the death along with the movement of life itself. I perceived the hush of ritual with sun-worshipers bathing on misty mornings, in the tremble of lifeless flowers on worn-out steps, and with the dead burning day after day on their wood pyres at dusk. Above all, I experienced the stillness of time as never before: and for the first time heard the reverberation of words…

Let's turn our attention now from the autobiography or personal memoir of the poet to the work of art itself, the poetry. The poem, "Traveller," starts by describing a simple occasion, that of an evening walk by a village temple. The bells ring out from the temple each evening, and the reader may presume at the same time. The scene turns though away from such a quiet, peaceful image to the stirring of fear and violence. The temple becomes a place of unrest, not of life, but of death, as the wanderer passing by the temple finds his attention captured by a dying girl, laying waste in her mother's arms. Contrasted against the girl's dying and the mother's attempt to calm her screams is nature. Mahapatra paints the picture of the temple as shrouded by naturalism. Mahapatra writes,

> Every evening
> the bells of the temple close by
> rest their easy weight on the bones;
> its times again to wonder
> what I'll do with what I learn.
> A warm vapour rises
> From the darkening earth like a hope.
> Somewhere, inside a room,
> A girl is dying in her mother's arms.
> Elsewhere, someone
> revenges himself for his broken life.

The time of bells gives way to the time of nature, that of nature's movement. The girl's death then becomes fixed in the middle of society's unnatural rendering of time, as symbolized by the bells of the temple and perhaps even to a degree by the temple itself, and that of what is natural or genuinely real, the deer trotting through

the land's vegetation. What then does the temple itself symbolize—is the temple a metonym for religion, of Hinduism, or ritual, rites, sacrifice? Why is the girl shuddering in death? Why is the girl inside a room, representing the female as shrouded and unseen, of feminine suffering as un-witnessed? Is she sacrificial? Or is the mother sacrificial because she holds the girl down in her arms? Is the wanderer, a consciousness of supposed objectivity, the sacrifice because of his neutral, unmoved, passionless observations?

These are all questions Mahapatra deliberately leaves unanswered as part of the puzzle of the violence of his poetry, and so much like the American minimalist fiction short story writer, Raymond Carver, the language of minimalism becomes synonymous in the work of art as the language of a carnal destruction. For Mahapatra, like Raymond Carver, minimalism carries the weight of depletion; that is, it expresses the feelings of crushed souls, scattered lives, ruined lovers, denigrated women and men without a sure sense of the moral. Minimalism in Mahapatra, like in Carver, or for that matter, as in Hemingway, is the art of despair. The process of writing for Mahapatra is a "painful" one; he has noted this in his autobiography.

> Language had always fascinated me, and no, crowded down by words, I was taking risks with my first poems. The poems hurt me as I went on making them; they were awfully compressed poems, and betrayed the feelings in them. It stupefied me, the process of writing, building a poem.

And yet, there is something slightly more in Mahapatra's minimalism, and it is that working concurrent to the images of suffering are other images, those of naturalism. Thus, there is a kind of harmonious balance created in Mahapatra's minimalism—between death, longing, anguish, and perhaps even a hint of the atheistic, and that of the assurance of naturalism or nature's continuance. We do not necessarily find this balance in the American writers of Carver and Hemingway; naturalism in both of these authors only works to confirm violence in the universe. In Mahapatra, naturalism undermines the violence and thereby leaves us with a queasiness of wondering what is real and what is not, what is an illusion and what is concrete, what is subjective and what is objective—it the queasiness of existentialism that finds its ways into the poet's application of minimalism. As Mahapatra goes on to write in the "Traveller,"

> Movement here has purpose:
> It is not cold and tired.
> The deer chasing the new growth of grass.
> The drum thumping against the sky.
> The woman with her knees drawn to her chest.
> And the wind that deceives itself
> It has tellingly carried the scream of the girl
> Who is dying in her mother's arms.
> My knowledge and my time
> Fail to quiet the night

Unlike the flutter of birds.
I try to wear this weight lightly.
But the weight of the unknown buries me.

Thus, the poem ends by a reference to what religion cannot bring for Mahapatra; he cannot accept that we have absolute knowledge of the after-life, or even of the meaning of why we suffer in this life.

All that he can affirm is the animation of the wind, the pattern of the birds and their flight, that the natural world is and that somehow we too are within this natural world, somehow struggling beside the deer, the birds, grass. But struggling for what we do not really know.

This lack of epistemological certainty brings the poet to a metaphysical place in Bare Face. In the poem, "One Clear Night," he writes of God as at play with humanity. What is the world if not God's world, but if we cannot grope our way through the darkness of the soul to distinguish illusion from the real, is there anything to conclude except that God is the master at play? While this metaphysical position would leave many of us with cold shivers, it leads the poet to an existential freedom. Mahapatra says this,

Over the hills to the lonesome sal trees
The shadows of the night play God once again
Over the fields; the morning's orchids bloom
As new forgiveness, Freedom, the puppet,
Sways to the pull of unseen masters.
And death walks as always without haste,
Into the sun, the growth of all things.

There is, in fact, existential loneliness floating inside the poet's brain. This loneliness forms the poet's path to freedom; it is not to be feared as many might imagine. The occasion of the poem is lost love or the end of a love; but Mahapatra uses that as a bridge into trying to separate the false images he has created for his life from that of what might be deemed as an authentic self. He cannot reach the place of this authentic self, but only make the realization that he has lived untruly and against himself. This acknowledgement leads his to the "grief" in the poem, more perhaps than the end of love. He feels himself apart from God; for the poet and God are on two different paths, though the poet's path leads to a freedom of the mind.

Across the void, all day it is night inside,
In loneliness alone, God takes a different way home.
And I can find myself lying about my life.
But tonight grief and I can stand together,
Our voices no more raised in disparate words
As when we first tried to understand each other.

The topic of God is a sub-text or recurring theme in Bare Face. But is religion and God the same in Mahapatra's poems? And whose religion does Mahapatra chose to

represent? In the poem, "Abandoned Temple," he gives us another sketch of a Hindu temple. The image is quite visual. We can imagine the temple fading in soft light emerging from votary candles; the seasons too are fading, as autumn passes into the harsher absence of winter. There is a stillness across the land. No wind.

> Abrambly thicket of blackberry canes
> Squats, a votary, before it.
> Another autumn slowly ticks away.
> Veils of mist smile on nervously
> At this victim of unmoving grass.

Such a simplicity to the expression of what a temple looks like. But the poem moves forward to describe a second image, that of youth and childhood innocence contrasted against the fierceness of the temple's architecture—its paintings, its gilded gods, its sculpted bodies. And these images belie the innocence of Mahapatra's personal memories of childhood.

> A wandering boy hurls a rock through
> The ruined entrance. Shadows in retreat fly;
> Of serpent-girls, elephant-gods, fiery birds.
> Mosquitos slap the Silva lingain ignorant silence.
> A long shiver running down the shrine.

Thus, the poem contorts to a position of dialectical opposition. The temple cannot truly hold the innocent. And yet, the boy is there, present, in his full innocence. The temple is haunted by the spirits of the past—of priests we might guess. The minimalism of images is there too in the language of the poem—against the temple scene, a lone white flowering vine curling its way up the temple like a god-snake. The moon bounces off the white flowers, and we can imagine the flower being further illuminated, made paler and whiter. Thus, the poem reveals a co-mingling, a life of ritual brought together with the mind of a child, and with nature's delight. We see again the intrusion of the natural upon the human platform. Again, naturalism is always ready to invade religion and life in Mahapatra's poetry.

> A ghost holding its gaze to a distant tenderness.
> In an expanded pupil of stone
> A whitened hibiscus twists its way
> Along the phosphorescent t wake of a moonbeam
> Toward a winter-life of ritual and innocence.

Naturalism as juxtaposed against symbols of religion are scattered throughout Bare Face. Another example is the poem, "In the Time of Winter Rain." In this poem, there is an added dimension to Mahapatra's usual naturalism, though, and that is the imagery of the mightiness and auspiciousness of India's rivers. Comparing the mind or consciousness' ability to travel or wander backwards, to create memories, that at the same time propel the thinker forward, to the Mahanadi River, Mahapatra more comfortably positions himself in the midst of the natural realm in this poem.

We learn to smile in a time of winter rain.
Under a wet sky it's no meager comfort
To feel the radiance of noon in our palms,
The almond-eyed boats clutching time in their fists
In the Mahanadi River, the light shoulders of
Peaceful lotuses floating motionless.

As the poem develops, Mahapatra searches the meaning of memory and how it brings him back to the referential point of childhood as an essential framework of experience.

How I have waited, shaped by memory,
These many years without knowing exactly why.
Does childhood spread out all the way
From the hills of innocence to the horizon of the sea?
These hours belong to us, resembling mimosas
That grow through the fungi of an adamant earth,
Where our tears, just our tears, weave illusory balance.

Yet, the poem also moves in the direction of most of Mahapatra's works, eventually toward the violent. Destructive forces are shown to be unleashed against the defenseless—old men and young men. The helpless are just that in the poem—without aid. The poet is left only to recount what he has seen. To tell the stories and hope that in the telling there is some recompense. But even the image of the rocks that the women are tied to—symbolizing female oppression—in the sense of the imagistic reminds one of a temple. Nature, as usual, is there in the poem, as both background and foreground, and it humanity that is somewhere, stuck in the middle.

Perhaps the wind blows cold, and the old men
Evoke the image of the dead, finding themselves
Wandering in the chimerical darkness of our eclipses.
In the writings on ancient rock, young women
Bound and gagged, etch the grey walls
With their dead brown bellies, their joyless eyes.
On the pages of palm leaves they dance, lonelier than ever,
Stone-bodied courtesans swaying to the dark water.

A place that never leaves the poet's mind is that of his native origins, Orissa. Nothing so beautifully expresses his constant mental return to his birthplace as the poem, "Watching Tribal Dances in an Orissa Village." He writes,

Moments of ages past, of the power from the earth,
Of shadows of tree and quartz,
Of the drained silence of starvation
So certain tomorrow and the day after.
These knowledgeable hands of mine bind me.
Another Orissa village's grief
Sits motionless, like a baleful idol.
Such grief does not move.

It merely weakens my hands
To find solace in the ashes of past cremations,
Lost words.

Ultimately, where can all these images lead us—images of violence, dismissal, neutrality, destruction, helplessness, religion, temples as still-life, memory, and naturalism? For Mahapatra in Bare Face, it brings us to a place of rest, a still point, a momentary lapse, created lacunae of the consciousness and spirit, a temporary stasis—that is, to silence. In "Only Twilight," he describes the essential structure of silence—it is formed out no place and ends in no place (is eternal, like the eternal beginning of creation as described in the *Rig Veda*). Silence is also that which can reach the poet's mind in its freedom away from the place of the religious. Silence is what wraps and curls around nature itself when the mind lost in contemplation finds itself. Silence is perhaps a place of God or can be the absence of such a place. Is silence death or is it the meaning of life? Mahapatra asks. Seeks.

Only twilight, that begins nowhere and ends nowhere,
Touches me like nothing does.
It's femininity, quickened with childishness,
Stands out apart;
It brings in loss, beauty, the nearness of the soul.
Someone I have forgotten
Pauses in that warm darkness of sparrows
That crowd back at dusk, their bodies
No more tensed for flight. Nests are full.
Stubbled fields across the river,
Stretch out their hands, secret allegiances.

Mahapatra lends to silence that attribute he considers most eternal and divine, that of the feminine. While so many of Mahapatra's poems speak of the oppression of women and of the wrongful oppressive silencing of women, when describing the nature of external silence he makes it feminine to lend to women strength, perhaps. What better time of the day than twilight can there be to explain the predicament of the mind lost unto itself, except that of twilight, a time caught between two other times. Thus, the poet Mahapatra is in Bare Face caught between two times—childhood and age, life and death, the past and the present. One wonders only where the future is in Mahapatra's poems.

Was this twilight simply an idea,
Working it through the years, from man to man,
An immobility between death and life?
Born of this sad gold, the night
Opens one more cage, loosening
The animals of reveries through the trees,
So that we would be quiet
And our silence would have no consequences.

Does Mahapatra mean this, though? Does he truly believe silence would be without consequences? What would such a world be like or a place within or beyond this world be like where there are no consequences? Does this imply a lack of the ethical or the moral? Or, is something beyond either? These are questions the poet never answers, for any answer would spoil the game of language, the game of art. It is in the endless play of the image and what the image can bring, the endless reign of open possibilities that the poet Mahapatra imagines what a freedom that hurts no one might look like.

Works Cited

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