Poetry is an elusive art and poets remain forever mysterious. Their selves, both iconic and quotidian, come to us invariably through the prism of their poetic personae, no less than the symbols and diction of their unique compositions. To fathom Jayanta Mahapatra’s mind and art is not easy. Arguably, the best and the best-known Indian poet in English to emerge from the state of Orissa after Independence, Mahapatra’s poetry is often seen as a remarkable achievement, but abstract and abstruse nevertheless.

An essay that avoids the strict boundaries of the academic and the personal, while combining some of the best that the two genres can offer to connoisseurs of poetry, must direct the reader’s attention to the hidden recesses of the poet’s psychic self. Words and utterances of a great poet like Mahapatra often come as a source of enigma and paradox. This came home to me early enough in my acquaintance with him. On a promotional tour to Hyderabad, Mahapatra was once taken to three forums in quick succession on a single day. “Which English poets have influenced your creativity?” was a question repeatedly asked of him. “None,” replied Mahapatra, “I have not read any English poetry”. He refused to go beyond that.

The next day was different. After breakfast at a university guesthouse, Mahapatra and I had an animated conversation in his room. Half way through the meeting, I realized that I was being given privileged access to the poet’s private self. This was not the style of the shy and withdrawn man that I knew. Where, the audience of the previous day had drawn a complete blank, I now discovered an incredible storehouse of personal and family memories. All of a sudden, many aspects of the poet’s self fell into place and the
encounter turned out to be truly epiphanic. The result was a long conversation with him, excerpts of which I published in the literary pages of The Hindu.¹

We soon parted company. Mahapatra returned to his hometown Cuttack and to his famous address Tinkonia Bagicha (literally, “The Triangular Garden”). “Call me Jayanta Mausa,” (“uncle” in Oriya) he said over the phone, “Here, Runu Mausi wants to speak to you …”.

When I went through a self-portrait of Jayanta Mahapatra published in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*² I found an extraordinary creative account I did not think existed in the written form. This was not just the outline of a remarkable life, no less of pain, sorrow, loneliness and despair but also of a sense of fulfilment, of a life well lived. The incidents in this memoir, together with a commentary on the poems and the poet’s reflections, organically complete the picture of the growth of a poet’s mind.

For Mahapatra, a sense of pain is all-pervasive and goes back to his early childhood. As an adult, he carried within himself the child that once cried “one ordinary day in a schoolroom” (*CAAS*,137). Born to a lower middle-class Christian family, his father, we learn, was a sub inspector of primary schools. There were three children in all: a brother and a sister. The father’s job often took him away from the family and the son looked forward to the father’s return, for both of them shared a warm bond. On the other hand, unlike most Indian boys, he did not share a close affinity with his mother. As he recalls poignantly:

> I have never been able to feel that affinity with Mother as I had with Father. She was erratic in her ways, and as I grew up, my conflicts with her increased. She was shrewd, ingenuous; believing in anything she heard, even from total strangers. So often, I longed for someone in whom I could confide like a sister or a cousin of my age – but this didn’t come about. (*CAAS*, 139)

The youngest child in a class of around thirty, Mahapatra’s relative small size and frail health often made him an “object of peculiar

² *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series IX*, ed. Mark Zadrozny, Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1989 (henceforth referred to as *CAAS* followed by the page number).