



P E N G U I N  C L A S S I C S

KALIDASA

Kumarasambhavam

The Origin of the Young God



Kalidasa

kumarasambhavam

The Origin of the Young God

Translated from the Sanskrit by
Hank Heifetz



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KUMARASAMBHAVAM

KALIDASA, perhaps the most extraordinary of India's classical poets, composed seven major works: three plays, two epic poems and two lyric poems. According to legend, he lived at the end of the fourth century, and was one of the 'nine jewels' in the court of the Gupta king Chandragupta II. Although very little is known about his life, Kalidasa's popularity has endured for centuries.

HANK HEIFETZ is an award-winning translator (from classical Indian languages and Spanish), poet and novelist. His many works include *The Origin of the Young God*, selected as one of the twenty-five best books of the year by the *New York Village Voice* in 1990, and *The Four Hundred Poems of War and Wisdom*, translated from classical Tamil (with George Hart), which was awarded the prize for best literary translation from a South Asian Language (2002) by the American Oriental Society. At present he is working on a novel and finishing a long literary translation of the ornate Sanskrit epic *Śísupālavadhā* by the poet Magha.

Praise for the Book

Chosen as one of the best books of the year by the *Village Voice*, 1990

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Journal of the American Oriental Society

‘Hank Heifetz has had the audacity to take on a formally elaborate, densely allusive masterpiece in which rhythm, assonance and wordplay are crucial—an the gift to make [English] poetry out of it’

Village Voice

For Natasha

*'woman of healing beauty'
with timeless love*

Introduction

Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhavam* is the greatest long poem in classical Sanskrit, by the greatest poet of the language. Only the *Raghuvamśa*—a more extended but also a more uneven work by the same author—can be considered its rival for that title. Sanskrit (from *saṃskṛta*) means 'perfected', 'completely accomplished' and also 'purified'. The language is closely related to ancient Greek and Latin. It first appears in literary history as Vedic, the idiom of the Four Vedas that constitute (especially the *Ṛg Veda*, the Veda of Hymns) the oldest literature of the Indo-Europeans who, as pastoral tribesmen and warriors, began entering the Indian subcontinent about 1500 BCE. Classical Sanskrit is the later language, as described by the grammarian Pāṇini (c. fifth century BCE). This description was later interpreted as a codification, thereby artificially regularizing and encapsulating the language. Very early in its history classical Sanskrit became the speech of the educated to the educated, the language used in imperial courts and in the assembly halls for theological and philosophical discussion, while vernaculars called Prakrits (from *prākṛta*, 'ordinary', 'unrefined', 'original') developed for all other uses and people.

Although classical Sanskrit is still spoken and written in India by traditional scholars and clerics, its great period as a language for major poetry extends from the time of the later Upaniṣads (c. 600 BCE) to the end of the first millennium CE. A few valuable poems and verse plays come later, but even by the tenth century CE the separation between Sanskrit and the vernaculars seems to have grown too wide and Sanskrit to have lost much of its emotional force for the creation of poetry. (Among theologian-philosophers writing in prose, many of whom used Sanskrit continually and conversationally in monastic or priestly life, the language remained—and still is—emotionally alive as a medium for debate and analysis.)

Kālidāsa seems to have lived at a perfect time for Sanskrit, a period when this cultivated language had not yet grown too remote from the Prakrit of everyday speech. He consistently uses Sanskrit as a living language of feeling. In contrast

to the later emphasis, overwhelming towards the end of the millennium and after, on puns and erudite indirection in poetry, Kālidāsa's Sanskrit is normally direct and clear, but of a greater complexity and higher polish than that of earlier authors or of the more 'popular' Epic Sanskrit of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. The rhythmic and sonic resources of Sanskrit had been developed from the Epic idiom and were now available for *kāvya* (Ornate Poetry). In Kālidāsa's voice this *kāvya* Sanskrit is still plausible speech—at elegant levels of strongly felt emotion expressed in sensuous detail, with a classical but fresh perfection and moderation of form.

Classical Sanskrit poetry has often been compared to the productions of eighteenth-century English neoclassicism, chiefly because of the *kāvya* use of epithets, firmly fixed metres and elaborate circumlocutions for the sake of elegant variation. The comparison is misleading, however, as regards the charge of the poetry. Sanskrit verse is far more sensuous in image, rhythm and sound play and far more concerned with emotion, the inner life, than with wit, the comment on the other. These qualities of Sanskrit verse exist in Kālidāsa's great predecessors, such as the dramatist Bhāsa, who was still close to Epic simplicity in his handling of emotion, or Aśvaghoṣa, with his Buddhist *kāvyas* full of exultation; they are also found in his successors—Bhavabhūti, for instance, and his psychologically acute presentation of tragedy, or the poets Bhartr̥hari and Amaru, to whom hundreds of superb lyrics are attributed. In Kālidāsa these qualities of the best Sanskrit verse are combined with perfect pitch as well as a security of values—and apparently of worldly position—under (if his estimated date is correct) India's most illustrious empire.

The Poet

Verifiable biography is rare among the great figures of Sanskrit literature. About Kālidāsa, the unquestioned summit of Sanskrit poetry, we know, for certain, nothing. He is the author of two *mahākāvyas* (Great Ornate Poems), the *Kumārasambhavam* and the *Raghuvamśa*; three plays, *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, *Vikramorvaśīyam*, and *Mālavikāgnimitram*; and a *khaṇḍakāvya* (Extended Lyric), the *Meghadūta*. Another work generally accepted as his (though denied by some) is the *Ṛtusamhāra*, a collection of stanzas on the six seasons of the Indian year.

Within the Sanskrit and pan-Indian tradition, Kālidāsa has become the model of the great poet. Folk legends have gathered around his name and have been preserved in the oral tradition and written works based on that tradition. They

are of the sort that have been traditionally attached, in India and elsewhere, to great men become myths. One legend presents him as a dull and ignorant man who was given miraculous skill by the goddess Kālī. He then takes the name Kālidāsa, which seems to mean ‘slave (or servant) of Kali’. The *Bhojaprabandha* (c. sixteenth century ce) places him impossibly out of his time, at the eleventh-century court of King Bhoja of Dhāra, in competition with other poets also lifted from their centuries and set down together outside history. Still another legend would have him at the court of Kumāradāsa of Ceylon (c. sixth century ce), dying from the poison administered by a courtesan jealous of his literary skill.

For life rather than legend, we can only speculate. General scholarly consensus now places him in the fourth or fifth century ce, during the reign of the imperial Guptas, the classical age of Hindu art and politics. (Some Indian scholars still argue for a much earlier date.) Since his works indicate that Kālidāsa moved successfully in a glittering imperial environment, the role of court poet to the Guptas, like Virgil’s to Augustus Caesar, suits his tone of assurance and convinced commitment to the hierarchical and brahminical values of his society.

Other sorts of evidence, including certain features of stylistic development, favour this dating. Kālidāsa’s language (including the Prakrits used in his dramas) is distinctly more sophisticated than that used by the Buddhist writer Aśvaghoṣa or by Bhāsa, the only other major early dramatist whose works or fragments of works have survived. The first part of the second century ce seems a likely date for Aśvaghoṣa, since a plausible tradition associates him with the ruler Kaniṣka. Within the mists of Sanskrit literary history it cannot always be established that a particular work had wide enough circulation to affect its successors, but there is some evidence that Kālidāsa may have been influenced, even in content, by Aśvaghoṣa. A steady stylistic development from the earlier poet to the later would not, however, have necessarily taken three centuries. We are left with speculation, but the fifth century ce seems a likely guess.

Kālidāsa is a dramatist of the first order as well as a lyric poet, but it should be noted that his plays, like virtually all Sanskrit dramas, are written in a mixture of verse and prose, with the verse passages carrying the primary weight of expression. In drama his power depends not on characterization or plot but on the same qualities found in the *Kumārasaṃbhavam*—musical image structure and the rhythms and flow of poetry.

Throughout his work, at the level of semantics, his primary tool is the simile (*upamā*). In contrast to the tendency towards the oracular use of metaphor (*rūpaka*) in the earliest Indian lyric verse (of the *Ṛg Veda*), the word ‘like’ (*iva*,

yathā) constantly marks, in Kālidāsa, the release of unexpected clarities, musical resolutions of carefully constructed emotional tensions.

The Poem

The *Kumārasambhavam* has apparently come down to us unfinished, or as a complete fragment of a larger whole. Seventeen cantos (or *sargas*) are found in some manuscripts, but only the first eight can be judged, on available evidence, to be the authentic work of Kālidāsa. A later, lesser author (or perhaps two) seems to have completed the story, in nine additional *sargas*, describing the birth of the Young God Kumāra and his victory, as leader of the army of the gods, over Tāraka. For these nine *sargas* no commentary exists by Mallinātha, the most famous of Kālidāsa's commentators. Even more significantly, they are never quoted in the *alaṅkāraśāstra*, the Sanskrit treatises on literary theory and practice in which verses from *Sargas One through Eight* are common. Modern literary scholars also point to a general inferiority in the writing, with increased use of padding, as further argument against Kālidāsa's authorship.

The eight definitely authentic *sargas* have a completeness of their own. Thematically, they develop not exactly a love story but a paradigm of inevitable union between male and female played out on the immense scale of supreme divinity. Sanskrit poetry excels at the blending, or counterpoint, of eroticism and reverence towards divine (or imperial) power. In the legend of the love of the God and the Goddess, of Śiva and Pārvatī, Kālidāsa chose a theme in which these two elements are naturally and intensely unified. The story appears in the *Purāṇas*, the Sanskrit collections of religious legends, but all of them would seem to be later than Kālidāsa, whose specific sources are unknown.

The poem begins with a description of Himālaya, who is both mountain range and living god, and the birth of his daughter Pārvatī, early destined to be Śiva's wife but impeded by Śiva's renunciation of sexuality after the death of his first wife, Satī. But Pārvatī is really Satī reborn, and the marriage is desired not only by herself and her parents but also by the gods. The destined child of the union—Kumāra, the Young God, also known as Skanda or Kārttikeya—will lead the armies of the gods to victory against Tāraka, an Asura (anti-god, or Titan) who has temporarily assumed supreme power over the worlds as a result of magic force accumulated through *tapas*, ascetic practices combining self-torture and intense concentration. Her father orders Pārvatī to attend and serve Śiva in his meditation grove. Indra, king of the merely heavenly gods (who by this time in

Indian religious history are considered inferior to the three highest deities: Śiva, Brahmā and Viṣṇu), sends Kāma, the God of Love, to launch his flower arrows against Śiva's concentration; but Śiva discovers him and burns him to ashes with flames shooting out of his third eye. For an entire sarga, Kāma's wife, Rati (Sexual Delight), laments his loss and then receives a heavenly promise that Kāma will regain his body once Śiva and Pārvatī have been joined in marriage. Pārvatī then decides to win Śiva's love by demonstrating her ability to match the god at one of his most developed skills, the capacity for tapas. She succeeds, and Śiva sends the Seven Rishis to formally request her hand of Himālaya. The marriage is celebrated, and the poem as we have it concludes with a sarga on the lovemaking of Śiva and Pārvatī.

Moralistic critics in medieval and later India have severely censured Kālidāsa for depicting the lovemaking of gods. Editions of the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* have been published without the eighth sarga, especially if they are intended for use in schools. By contemporary standards, however, the sexual detail of this sarga—though vivid and beautiful—is discreetly handled, and most of Sarga Eight is taken up with Śiva's impassioned and sensual descriptions of nature. The evidence for its genuineness seems strong, and the level of the writing is quite as high as in the rest of the poem. If there is any significant issue of propriety, it is a matter of the sarga's place in and effect upon the entire poem. From this standpoint, the sarga is the inevitable requirement of the poem's sexual rhythm. Śiva and Pārvatī's nights of love complete the image of cosmic union, and the entire poem can then be read as a slowly building act of love.

In the development towards this culmination, numerous subjects are handled which the later aesthetic treatises define as characteristic of a mahākāvya: the descriptions of mountains and of a beautiful woman in Sarga One, the ode to Brahmā and the litany of Tāraka's acts of oppression in Sarga Two, the coming of spring in Sarga Three, Rati's lament in Sarga Four, the description of Himālaya's city in Sarga Six, the marriage in Sarga Seven, and the skyscapes and lovemaking of Sarga Eight.

The *Kumārasaṃbhavam* as Mahākāvya

The *Sāhitya Darpaṇa* (c. 1350) specifies that the mahākāvya must describe heroes; contain at least eight cantos (each composed in a single metre with the exception of the final verse or verses, where the metre must change); and depict such subjects as the times of day, landscapes, wars and lovers. The definition is

based on analysis of the actual body of literature, and the minimum number of eight sargas would seem to refer to the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* itself, the only one of that length among the great mahākāvya. Essentially, the form is a highly ornate epic consisting of lyric stanzas, though the word ‘epic’ applies to the plot line of the events, not to their treatment. The kāvya form deals with heroic and divine actions, but it really consists of extended passages of feeling. Some of these sequences in the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* can be classified within the traditional list of eight or nine *rasas*, ‘flavours’ or ‘emotional moods’. The description of spring in Sarga Three is clearly an instance of *śṛṅgāra*, the Erotic; and Sarga Four, Rati’s Lament, is an example of *karuṇa*, the Pathetic or Compassionate. Other extended sequences—the marriage in Sarga Seven or Śiva’s skyscapes in Sarga Eight—cannot less easily be assigned to a single rubric, but they always serve to maintain a particular body of feeling over a number of verses composed and crafted to be individually satisfying. In the later days of the mahākāvya, action dwindles away as ornamentation waylays any attempt at narrative. Here, at a time when the form has not yet aged, the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* exemplifies a vital rhythm of the Indian aesthetic sensibility, since classical Indian art in its important manifestations—literature, the visual arts and music—tends to be characterized by the movement of single, continuous, sensually curving lines, heavily ornamented as they advance but never, in the finest work, losing that quality of steady movement.

Except for Aśvaghoṣa’s two Buddhist kāvyas (c. 100 ce), which do not seem to have fully entered the mainstream of brahminical poetics, the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* and the *Raghuvamśa* are the earliest surviving examples of the mahākāvya. Three other poems are traditionally grouped with them as the five greatest examples of the genre: the *Kirātārjunīya* of Bhāravi (c. sixth century ce), the *Śiṣpālavadha* of Māgha (c. seventh century ce) and the *Naiṣadhacarita* of Śrīharṣa (c. twelfth century ce).

The Characters

As in virtually all Sanskrit literature, the characters of the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* are types rather than individualized psychological portraits. They are in no way diminished by this, although they cannot be subjected to the sorts of analyses one applies to characters in modern realism.

The plays of Bertolt Brecht, so remote in many obvious ways from the Sanskritic sensibility, offer an apt modern parallel in their concern, through

stylization of character, with arousing deep feeling in the spectator or reader by means other than psychological identification. Character, in both cases, is primarily the expression of a value, and this value does not move us through eliciting identification with a unique and detailed psyche but rather through means which can best be termed musical. Each character of the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* is a leitmotif, available for variation between the poles of humanly comprehensible behaviour and superhuman presence, and articulated within the field of the poem through Kālidāsa's magnificently subtle use of the strict metres of classical Sanskrit verse combined with his exact awareness of the emotional possibilities in various groupings of sounds. Each of his major characters, accreted in lines of poetry around its core value, becomes the expression of a generalized but very real configuration of feelings, available to us and received as authentic because of its truth to basic forces within ourselves.

Śiva is the ultimate—and in human terms ambiguous—life-breath of the universe. Kālidāsa fully delineates the uncanny aspects of this supreme being whom the human mind developed out of a threatening Vedic god of storms. He wears cobras as decorations, and his body is white with the ashes of the dead. Yet the poet represents this incomprehensible force—comprising all creation, continuance and destruction—as ultimately yielding to an even greater power, the drive towards continuity of life and the union in love of its individual representatives, a union that is embodied as sexuality at the private, physiological level. The presentation of Śiva as lover—behaving according to the *kāmaśāstra* (the Sanskrit treatises on sex) and subject to erotic desire—has been criticized in India, not only on the moral grounds already mentioned, but as a lowering of tone from the transhuman to the human. Kālidāsa, however, is faithful to the Upaniṣads themselves, where the body and the mind, the material and the intangible, the human and the transhuman, are often seen not as separate entities but as different aspects of a unity. No disjunction exists for Kālidāsa but rather a natural continuity:

And even the Master of Living Beings passed those days
hard, eager to be loving The Mountain's daughter,
and how can others who are under the power of the senses
stay unmoved when these emotions touch even the Lord?

6:95

Pārvatī is the standard perfect woman of Sanskrit poetry, superlatively beautiful, properly behaved in all her societal roles, possessed of every possible

feminine virtue. But she is also the Goddess, and Kālidāsa's poetry raises her to that height. In a psychological work, she would be a mere stereotype. In a musical work like the *Kumārasaṃbhavam*, she becomes material for a variety of sensuous images. These images or leitmotifs present the facets of an Essential Feminine, according to the values of Kālidāsa's imperial and brahminical time, but they also transcend them when the poetry is at its best and most universal. Pārvatī is the primary actor in the flow of the poem. Her decision to undertake tapas is its central event, and she succeeds in surpassing the most skilled of men at this conventionally male activity. Kālidāsa accepts his culture with its traditions of male superiority, but strong women are frequent in his work. Pārvatī's role in this poem (like Rati's Lament in Sarga Four) conveys great respect for the force of the feminine and a sense of sexual equality in the realm of feelings, if not in secular or connubial power.

Of the minor characters treated at some length, Himālaya and Rati deserve special mention. Himālaya is the benevolent father; but, more interestingly, he is a mountain range who is also a living god. Kālidāsa moves back and forth between the mountain as place and the mountain as person, sometimes fusing them:

From a distance The Mountain advanced
to honour them, carrying his offerings
while his footsteps made the earth
bend under their massive weight.

6:50

Rati appears only in the third and fourth sargas. Her importance is in her lament, which takes up all of Sarga Four. Though the lamentation is formalized and generalized, it is also very personal and deeply moving, with especially direct and simple language. In metre, diction and acuteness of observation, Kālidāsa seems to call on his own experiences of grief when he describes the keening of Rati after the destruction of Kāma:

'Where have you run to and left me
whose life rests in you, our love cut off in a moment
as a lotus can be left when
a flood of water breaks through a dam?'

4:6

The same quality is produced by a similar image when The Spring, Kāma's close friend, arrives to comfort Rati:

Seeing him, she burst into tears
and beat herself till her breasts were all pain
for when your own people appear
sorrow breaks through as if a gate has opened.

4:26

All the characters in the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* are superhuman, and the major ones are gods. As a classical Indian writer, Kālidāsa, in comparison to Homer for instance, enjoys certain privileges in his handling of divinity. In the Indian tradition, gods are seen as immense members of the family, human and sometimes even comic in their behaviour. But this tradition of intimacy is fused with an attitude of reverence, an absence of scepticism, and the tangible presence of the transcendent, both close and infinitely remote, in the idols in temples visited daily or in the possession trance of a devotee. Because for him the gods are at the same time his family and supreme unquestionable powers, Kālidāsa can move, with more seamless authority than a Homer, from Śiva as perfect lover, passionate and tactful:

After some days had passed, though it was hard,
Śiva began to change the ways of his beloved
and, as she came to know the taste of pleasure, step by step,
she gave up the hesitancies she had in loving.

6:13

to the god as upholder of the universe:

There the god who can be known in eight forms
fed wood to the fire, itself a form of him
and, for some unimaginable reason of his own, practised
tapas, he who himself gives the fruits of it.

1:57

This complex and committed feeling for the gods permits the *Kumārasaṃbhavan* to exist as an authentically religious love poem with out the culturally imposed need of a St John of the Cross to retain the form and passion but discard the substance of sexual love.

Rhythms and Expression

Classical Sanskrit poetry is written in quantitative verse, in four- line stanzas; within each stanza the number of syllables, as well as syllable length and order,

is strictly regulated. A syllable is long—as in Latin and Greek verse—if it contains a long vowel or a short vowel followed by two consonants. Among commonly used classical forms, only the Śloka and the Āryā forms differ somewhat from this description. The eight-syllable Śloka fixes the length only of certain syllables, whereas the Āryā (not used in this poem but common in Kālidāsa's plays) employs a cumulative rhythm based on the total number of longs and shorts in each line.

A total of eight different metres are used in the *Kumārasaṃbhavam*, the details for each of which are given in the notes to the sargas. In addition to the required long and short syllables, the poet must observe fixed caesuras (*yatis*) in the longer metres. The metric forms resemble the forms of Indian classical music, in which long rhythmic patterns (*tālas*) are divided by one or more caesuras. In oral presentation, the metres are sung to specific tunes. These melodies, or chant forms, vary in different areas of India, but they always clearly present the rhythmic patterns of the metres. Each sarga of the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* is composed in a specific metre, with a metrical change in the final stanza (or final two stanzas). The best Sanskrit poetry links the emotional possibilities of each fixed metre with a great range of meaning and sound to produce effects matched in the West perhaps only by the great Latin poets. Curiously enough, this mastery in the fitting of rhythm to emotion is never thoroughly discussed in the considerable mass of Sanskrit aesthetic literature, perhaps because such literature is mostly prescriptive rather than evaluative, but perhaps also because it emerged from a particular historical context. The alaṃkārasāstra, at least as it relates to lyric poetry, mostly post-dates the greatest Sanskrit poetry, and few of its authors were significant poets themselves.

One of the aims of this translation is to emphasize these rhythmic and sonic effects, which are the real grandeur of the poet and the poem. Let me offer two examples here.

Using the short eight-syllable Śloka form, Kālidāsa describes one of the abuses of power perpetrated by Tāraka the Asura. The speaker is Vācaspati:

tenāmaravadhūhastaiḥ
sadayālūnapallavaḥ
abhijñāś chedapātānām
kriyante nandanadrumāḥ

2:41

‘The trees of the Nandana Grove where
the wives of the immortals by hand

would gently pick blossoms have learned
from him to be cut through and fall.’

In the Sanskrit, the first two lines are sonically very smooth and soft, gliding along with the flow of two long compounds and a pronoun that blends into the first of them. The third line (literally, ‘knowers of cuts and falls’) begins with harsh consonant sounds and ends with three long ‘a’s in the word *pātānām* (‘of falls’), suggesting a shout for help or the long fall itself. The ‘kr’ at the beginning of the next line is like the final cut of the axe.

Here is another very different example in the twelve-syllable Vamśastha. This is part of Pārvatī’s ode to Śiva, in answer to an apparent stranger’s disparagement of him:

*tadaṅgasamśargam avāpya kalpate
dhruvaṃ citābhasmarajo viśuddhaye
tathā hi nṛtyābhinayakriyācyutaṃ
vilipyate maulibhir ambaraukasām*

5:79

‘Once it has come to touch that body, I know dust
from the very ashes of the dead will purify the living
and so the gods rub their foreheads with it as it falls
from the play of his limbs in the language of his dancing.’

The dancing rhythm of this stanza builds up in short steps to the long elegant turn of the compound which ends the third line, followed by briefer rhythmic beats once again in the fourth line. Two phrases are especially worth noting for the quality of their sound. In *citābhasmarajo viśuddhaye* of line two (literally, ‘the dust of the ashes of the funeral pyre [which serves] for purification’), the repetitive short ‘a’s of the first compound word move like drumbeats towards the sibilant, aspirate and long-drawn final vowel of the word meaning ‘for purification’, throwing semantically justified stress on *viśuddhaye*. In line three, *nṛtyābhinayakriyācyutaṃ* (literally, ‘fallen from the movements of his gestures in the dance’) dances around its beats of ‘a’ and ‘y’, while the consonants of *kriyācyutaṃ* seem to echo the very shaking loose of the dust. This compound, I felt, required an entire line for its movement into translation.

Neither Sanskrit aesthetic criticism nor Western scholarship has paid adequate attention to these effects of rhythm and sound, which are the bedrock of poetic achievement. I have consequently pointed to them here, rather than discussing issues more often stressed in the alaṃkāraśāstra, such as the listing and

definition of figures of speech. Further comments on Kālidāsa's work at the levels of rhythm and sound will be found in the notes, which offer a running commentary on the structure and aesthetics of the work.

On This Translation

The title *Kumārasambhavam* has usually been translated as 'The Birth of Kumāra' or 'The Birth of the War God'. I have preferred 'The Origin of the Young God', which is both literal and suited to the action of the poem as we have it, since Kumāra (literally, 'young man') is an eternal youth and the word *sambhava* means 'birth' or 'origin'. The title suggests my general approach to the translation. I have attempted to create a poem in modern English that conveys some of the greatness of the original through the means available in living speech. Although the translation is quite faithful to the original and is by no means a loose transcreation, it is not a word-by-word rendering of the Sanskrit. Phrases are moved around and freshly interpreted. Sometimes, so as not to interrupt the flow, an explanatory word or phrase is incorporated into the poem rather than hidden away in a note. In every case, I have tried to convey what I believe Kālidāsa intended. I have sought out equivalents (but not imitations) in English for the rich, penetrating and emotionally precise effects of Kālidāsa's stanzas. I have paid a great deal of attention to the rhythmic effects of individual stanzas and continuous sequences, by seeking means in English for conveying the rhythmic import of Kālidāsa's poetry. By this I mean the emotional content of rhythms, the results which Kālidāsa achieves through careful choice and placement of words within the generally rigid frames of his quantitative metres. It is normally not possible, nor even advisable, to copy such rhythms directly into English. My interest is in *translating* rhythm, by producing suitable rhythms at the level of the speaking voice. This is a translation for the ear, meant to be read aloud in the natural emotional tone suiting each stanza or sequence and with the poetic line as the basic unit, receiving its slight stresses at beginning and end. Ongoing analyses of this approach will be found in the notes and some examples of the translation of rhythm are given in the section 'Rhythms and Expression' above. Even my punctuation—which sometimes moves away from formal norms—is intended primarily to reinforce rhythms of feeling for the ear.

Scholarly translations of Sanskrit poetry into English have generally been of poor literary quality. A tradition of the bad, a style I call Indologese, was

developed in the nineteenth century and continues to be observed in many translations of Sanskrit literature into English. Its characteristics are stiff, archaicizing diction (full of words like ‘wanton’ and ‘charming’); the use of emotionally impoverished, merely ‘educated’ language; antiquated inversions of sentence structure; and iambic rhythms (used directly or present as underlying patterns) that are inappropriate to the quantitative effects of Sanskrit verse and alien to the far more varied rhythmic achievements of twentieth-century poetry. developments which open up interesting possibilities for the translation of rhythm.

The history of translation from Far Eastern poetry stands in interesting contrast. In this area, a tradition of good writing was established earlier in the century by Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley; such contemporary poets as Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder have furthered it. As a result, even the least talented translator of Far Eastern poetry normally avoids the subliterate banalities of Indologese. Yet the submersion of the Sanskrit tradition into a jargon that recalls premodern, supposedly elevated British forms of writing fails to confront the works on their own terms. This translation is meant to contribute to a way of approaching the great works of Indian thought and feeling that respects them enough to let them speak our own language, in our own time, as we use it for life.

One further point should be mentioned here. In later Sanskrit literary theory, an aesthetic of indirection was established as a sort of official line on the interpretation of Sanskrit poetry. Kālidāsa was writing at least half a millennium before the crystallization of this theory, but its influence has sometimes led scholars to read his poetry as far more indirect than it actually is. Where I have judged this to be so, I have tried to free the verse of interpretations that seem to muffle its poetic power.

On the Word Tapas

With a single important exception, Sanskrit words are used in this translation only if they are now familiar as English words or if they are the specific names of natural and supernatural objects. The one exception is the word tapas. It is conventionally translated as ‘austerities’, which I consider antiquated, stiff and inexact. Tapas is derived from the verbal root *tap*, originally meaning ‘to heat’, then ‘to generate magic heat or power by ascetic practices’, and, by derivation, ‘to suffer pain’—or, more loosely, to perform any sort of ascetic practice,

including purely mental acts of meditation. Various modern Indian languages use *tapas* colloquially to indicate a wide range of acts of endurance and concentration, often but not necessarily involving physical suffering. The word is very important to this poem, and its concrete, magical sense is not readily translatable. I have therefore decided to retain the Sanskrit word—as a collective singular noun—and to try to convey its archaic force through choices of diction, sound and rhythm.

Editions and Commentators

In preparing this translation, I have worked primarily from the Nirnaya-sagara edition with the commentary of Mallinātha. I have also paid close attention to the commentaries of Aruṇagirinātha and Nārāyana as given in the three-volume Trivandrum edition. Other commentators have also been consulted.

There have been two attempts at critical editions of the *Kumārasaṃbhavam*: Scharpé's *Kālidāsa Lexicon*, in which the text was not based on an examination of manuscripts; and the Indian critical edition by Suryakānta, which is idiosyncratic and pays far too little attention to aesthetic criteria in its choices and assumptions. The Western notion of a critical edition is hard to apply to classical Sanskrit works. In India the oral tradition is much more important than the manuscript tradition, and in the case of an early writer like Kālidāsa, the oldest manuscripts we have date from almost a thousand years after his possible lifetime. It is true that Mallinātha's text and commentary vary somewhat in different manuscripts. The Nirnaya-sagara edition is, nevertheless, the most highly regarded among Indian pundits and, weighing all the factors, it has seemed to me best to translate according to its readings, though I have not always followed Mallinātha's interpretations. Variants which seem to me of interest are given in the notes.

Preface to the Penguin Edition

I'm very pleased that Penguin India is reprinting my translation of Kālidāsa's *Kumārasaṃbhavam*. It was produced at a time when most translation from Sanskrit was waterlogged in nineteenth-century banalities produced by extremely learned but literarily deprived scholars. I think the situation has now improved and there is less need to justify translating into a modern rather than a faded (and emotionally remote) nineteenth-century idiom. I was gratified by its positive reception at the time (and many requests for copies when the original two editions fell out of print) and the appreciation accorded to it by poets as well as thoughtful scholars. I hope this edition serves the purpose of further demonstrating Kālidāsa's elegance and power, especially to people who cannot read the original, luminous Sanskrit. There is of course far more to say about Kālidāsa and Sanskrit ornate verse than I chose to include in the introduction and notes which (while providing necessary scholarly information) are primarily aimed towards general readers of poetry. But I have decided not to expand the introduction and I offer the text as published in its second American edition, in the hope that its virtues might continue to surpass its limitations.

The introduction and notes were written with two audiences in mind: those generally interested in poetry and those specifically involved with the culture of India. I considered it especially important to provide information that would ease a general reader's access to a great poetic tradition. Most of the Sanskrit references in the notes therefore clarify my choices as a translator, whereas the aesthetic comments support a general appreciation of the poetry rather than sketch a formal Sanskrit aesthetics—codified, in any case, long after the time of Kālidāsa.

Although the *Kumārasaṃbhavam* is considered a secular poem—in that it has no relation to religious rites and was undoubtedly presented for the entertainment of a king—it has a clear relation to the powerful Indian strain of erotic mysticism, as opposed to the mysticism of self-abnegation. One feels that Kālidāsa might have agreed with the poet Vallāṇa's evocation of the beauty of

the phenomenal world:

Oh, those bodies like worms, even though they
are bursting with great magic powers!
who sit and have found their immobile peace
in the prison of their self-torture!
I sing this for another kind of holy man to whom
a scoop of vegetable dropped as alms in his palm
has a taste no different from the honey of the lotus
of a young woman's face.

And he might well have agreed with the simple cosmic placing of intense desire
(and the replacing of the cosmos by it) in the following poem, from the Amaru
anthology, in a woman's voice of love:

Sometimes the day is better than the night
and sometimes the night is better than the day
but I wish day and night both would disappear
when I'm not joined in loving with my lover!

I hope that this new edition will help to spread an awareness of Kālidāsa's
sensuous affirmation of life in the face of nothingness and amid all the disgrace
of human history.

December 2013

On the Transliteration of Sanskrit

I have used the standard international transliteration for Sanskrit words and proper names. Vowels and diphthongs are to be read as follows:

a like the *u* in *but*

ā like the *a* in *father*

i like the *i* in *pill*

ī like the *i* in *machine*

u like the *u* in *put*

ū like the *u* in *rule*

r This is a short vocalic *r* as in some Slavic languages but it may, for convenience, be pronounced like the *ri* in *river*.

e like the *ay* in *pay*

ai like the *ai* in *aisle*

o like the *o* in *no*

au like the *ow* in *now*

All these vowels (except for the diphthongs *ai* and *au*) should be given a pure, continuous sound as in Italian or Spanish.

For convenience, consonants may be pronounced like their English equivalent with the following exceptions:

All aspirate consonants (*kh, gh, ch, jh, ṭh, ḍh, th, dh, ph, bh*) should be pronounced with a strong explosion of breath after the initial consonant. Thus *ph*, for instance, is to be pronounced like the *ph* in *uphill* (though as a single sound), never as an *f*, and *th* should be similarly pronounced like the *th* in *anthill*, never as English *th*.

c is like the *ch* in *child*.

t, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, the nasal *ṇ*, and the sibilant *s* are retroflex or cerebral sounds not

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