

LIU TSUNG-YÜAN¹ AND THE EARLIEST CHINESE ESSAYS ON SCENERY

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Among the most important and far-reaching changes which literary composition underwent in the T'ang period (618-906 A.D.) was the reform of prose, the abandoning of "balanced" or "parallel" prose² in favour of an unregulated free style³ which became known as "ancient" prose⁴, both to distinguish it from the form in current use and as a reminder that it had been the standard long before the development of the parallel style.

Parallel prose, a "curious blend of ornament and preciousness", has been described as a "unique production of the Chinese language"⁵. But most languages lend themselves in some degree to the use of parallel phrases and sentences, and the style was "unique" in Chinese chiefly in the extent to which it was used.⁶ The monosyllabic character of the Chinese language makes it possible to write pieces of any length entirely composed of parallel sentences, every character in the first of which is balanced in the second by words of the same part of speech and similar in nature (*e.g.*, cold : mild ; rain : wind) arranged in the same order, but belonging to different tone-groups⁶. The whole composition, which in form and in

¹ 柳宗元 (773-819 A.D.). Giles, *Biographical Dictionary*, 1631.

² *p'ien wên*, 駢文

³ *san wên*, 散文

⁴ *ku wên*, 古文

⁵ Kiang Kang-hu, *Chinese Civilisation*, p. 446/7.

⁶ Perhaps the nearest approach in English literature (the wide differences in the two languages render close comparison impossible) to Chinese parallel prose is euphuism, the affected style of conversation and writing which was fashionable for a time at the Court of Queen Elizabeth. This consisted of two distinct elements, the first of which was "a principle of symmetry in the prose, emphasised by the use of alliteration in such words as are antithetical *e.g.*, Let my *rude* birth excuse my *bold* request". "A prose thus fashioned", say the authors of this definition, "becomes almost as intricate as verse". The other element belongs more particularly to Lyly (1553-1601 A.D.), the originator of euphuism, who "decorated his prose with similes from mythology and from the natural history of the bestialies and herbals dear to medieval minds". [Mulgan, J. and Davin, D. M. *An Introduction to English Literature*, (Oxford, 1947) p. 31.]

rhythm is closely related to poetry, consists in its most common form of a collection of couplets or pairs, all of which contain the same number of characters—generally twenty, divided into two groups of ten, each of which is subdivided into four and six. For this reason parallel prose is often called "fours and sixes"¹.

Parallel sentences occur in the Confucian classics and in the writings of the Ch'in and Han periods, but no composition consisting entirely of parallel sentences was written earlier than the Chin dynasty (265-419 A.D.). During the whole of the period between the Han and the T'ang dynasties (*i.e.*, 220-618 A.D.) the form flourished exceedingly, and it continued to be the accepted literary medium until a movement for the restoration of unregulated "ancient" prose was inaugurated in the middle of the T'ang period.

The change-over from regulated to unregulated prose did not occur suddenly. Writers in the early part of the T'ang period continued to write in the parallel style, though strict attention was not always paid to the rules which governed it, and passages or sentences occurred in freer style. Chang Yüeh² (667-730 A.D.), for example, abandoned to a considerable extent the flowery phrases and over-elaborated expressions which were characteristic of parallel prose, and both he and others who continued to write formal compositions in parallel prose often elected to use a freer style when they wrote for their own entertainment and that of their friends³.

It is probable that the introduction of rigidly regulated poetry into the syllabus of the official examinations during the reign of the Empress Wu (684-705 A.D.) had some influence on the movement to liberate prose from rules and restrictions. Poetry had for several centuries invaded the realm of prose, and the reform consisted essentially in drawing a clear dividing line between the two, introducing at the same time a simplified vocabulary and greater flexibility in form.

The reform movement received its greatest impetus from Han Yü⁴ (768-824 A.D.) and Liu Tsung-yüan, but it was only in the Sung period (960-1278 A.D.) that the so-called "ancient" style completely routed its rival⁵. This is not the place to discuss its subsequent deterioration, but it should be noted that as time went on the "ancient" style in its turn lost freedom and simplicity. Its introduction into the syllabus of the official

¹ *ssü liu*, 四六

² 張說。Giles, *Biographical Dictionary*, 134.

³ See Edwards, *Chinese Prose Literature of the T'ang Period*, (Probsthain, 1937-8), Vol. II, p. 35 and *passim*.

⁴ 韓愈。Giles, *Biographical Dictionary*, 632.

⁵ Tséng I, 曾毅, *Chung kuo wên hsüeh shih*, 中國文學史, 2 vols. (Shanghai 1930) Vol. II, p. 51: 至於宋而古文始大暢, 韓柳之功在唐爲小, 在後世爲甚鉅也。

examinations under the Sung was the beginning of its decline, and later there was developed for the benefit of candidates the careful study of what was called the "purpose and mode of expression of ancient prose"¹, which removed from it much of the sincerity and flexibility that characterised it at its best and eventually reduced it to a stereotyped form of "examination" prose. This again became regulated, and from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) onwards consisted of a fixed pattern of eight paragraphs known as the "eight-legged essay"². To some extent this also was "parallel" prose, for each two of the eight paragraphs formed a pair, the words and sentences of one paragraph being required to correspond with those of its complement.

The literary renaissance which took shape under the leadership of Han Yü was certainly a magnificent achievement. But credit cannot be given to Han alone. To bring it to perfection the movement needed also the work of others, and especially of Liu Tsung-yüan. Han's writings, chiefly didactic and narrative, were the work of a master able to use his language freely and at will, but it was Liu who introduced and perfected the art of writing in the language of every-day use descriptive pieces which have never been bettered and which Han, lacking the artistic temperament, was incapable of producing.

The fact that Han was the accredited leader of the reform school, and that scholars in the Sung period were even more interested in the doctrines which he taught than in the form in which they were expressed, led them to take Han and not Liu as their model, and although the names of the two were frequently linked it was Han who exerted the greater influence. Nevertheless Liu's descriptive writings hold a distinctive place in Chinese literature, and never, before or after him, did the same or similar external conditions, reacting upon a supremely artistic temperament, recur to produce precisely the same results.

The part played by Han Yü in the reform movement is fully described by Professor Margouliès in his excellent book on the development of Chinese prose writing³. "Han Yü", says Dr. Margouliès, "comme chef d'école, lutte et élabore les principes; Lieou Tsong-yüan, dont le rôle est purement artistique et qui est du reste infiniment plus artiste que Han Yü, par des textes non seulement narratifs ou didactiques mais aussi descriptifs fournit des modèles parfaits de l'application des formules nouvelles, une consécration artistique de la nouvelle école plus brillante encore que ne la donnent les compositions parfois un peu laborieuses ou sèches de Han Yü

¹ *ku wên i fa*, 古文義法, See Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1943), Vol. I, p. 236/7.

² *pa ku wên*, 八股文

³ Georges Margouliès, *Evolution de la Prose artistique chinoise* (München, Encyclopädie-Verlag, 1929), p. 169-197.

Licou Tsong-yüan introduit dans le nouveau style la souplesse et l'aisance¹. Dr. Margouliès further points out that while Han Yü, perhaps the greatest and certainly one of the most prolific of Chinese prose writers in any era, claimed, though with little justification, to be first and foremost a poet, Liu, essentially a poet, wrote three times as much prose as poetry.

The circumstances which led Liu to develop his talent for descriptive writing are related in his official biography in the *Old History of the T'ang*², and more briefly in a memorial essay written by Han Yü³. Born in 773 A.D., he was outstanding among his contemporaries and by the time he was thirty had risen to be an assistant secretary in the Board of Rites⁴, but two years later, in 805 A.D., he was implicated along with other officials in the rebellion of Wang Shu-wên⁵ and as a result was deprived of his metropolitan post and transferred to a minor provincial post at Yung-chou⁶ in Hunan. On arriving there he could not obtain accommodation and took up his residence in the Lung-hsing Temple⁷. There he believed that he would feel quite at home, for as he says in the account of the circumstances which he wrote in a short essay entitled *Yung-chou Lung-hsing-ssü Hsi hsiüan-chi*⁸, he had "long been acquainted with the doctrines of the Buddha"⁹.

He did not, however, settle down at once in the temple. His room faced north and was rather dark and he found it depressing at first. But, as the building was perched upon the highest point in the region, he soon began to realise that he could look out from his eyrie and watch the great river¹⁰ flowing past, and beyond the river the hills, valleys and forests which make that part of Hunan one of the most beautiful regions in China¹¹, and he gradually became reconciled to his new surroundings.

Chinese literature owed much, in the T'ang and other periods, to the custom of banishing offending officials to distant posts where they had leisure to develop their scholarly interests. Li Po is the classic example of

the poet who was not a success at Court, and both Han and Liu were degraded and sent to minor provincial posts. But whereas Han was soon recalled, Liu returned to the capital after ten years only to be sent away again, and eventually died in exile. Though he was irked by the uncongenial environment of a provincial post, he had not the fighting temperament and, unlike Han, he did not struggle to recover his lost position. His retiring nature, and perhaps also his Buddhist outlook, made him accept passively his prolonged banishment and after a time he created a new life for himself and began to take an interest in his surroundings.

During the years in Yung-chou he made—if the number of memorials he wrote in the time is any criterion—many friends. He must also have taken at least a minimum of interest in the duties of his post¹ since he was able to retain it throughout the period. But, as we know from his writings, a great deal of his time was spent in making excursions to every one of the celebrated beauty-spots in a region famous for its scenic beauty, and in writing descriptions of the places he visited². In 815 A.D. he was recalled to the capital, but almost immediately he was dispatched to Liu-chou³ in Kuang-hsi, a post even more remote than his previous one, and there, after only four years, he died at the early age of forty-six.

As a writer of prose in the T'ang period Liu shared the first place with Han Yü. Both promoted the unregulated style, which they appear to have adopted independently of one another, and both assisted greatly in weakening the position of parallel prose. Each developed his style according to his nature, training and beliefs. Han owed his dominant position no less to the forcefulness of his doctrines than to the excellence of his literary style⁴, while Liu, in whom the instinct to instruct appears to have flickered but weakly, devoted himself to purely literary pursuits⁵. He was

¹ When he was sent to Liu-chou 柳州 in 815 A.D. he found the people there very backward and their customs barbarous. In particular, he was deeply shocked by their habit of selling people into slavery without time-limit, and before he died he succeeded in introducing a measure of reform.—Han Yü, *Liu Tzu-hou mu chih ming* (See p. 150, note 3 above).

² See *Liu Ho-tung ch'üan chi*, 柳河東全記 (See p. 150, note 8 above), Ch. 26-29. Liu was called Ho-tung because his family originally came from that region. Ho-tung was the name given to part of the modern province of Shansi.

³ 柳州 Liu is often spoken of as Liu Liu-chou 柳柳州. Liu-chou was the present Ma-p'ing. See Playfair, *op. cit.*; no. 3981.

⁴ Han himself, writing to a graduate named Li (*Ta Li hsiu ts'ai shu*, 答李秀才書 See *Han Ch'ang-li ch'üan chi* (Sü pu pei yao series, 222/3), Ch. 16, p. 142), declared that his pre-occupation with the ancients was due to his interest in their doctrines, and not merely in the excellence of their writings: 愈之所志於古者不惟辭之好其道焉爾。

⁵ Kuo Shao-yü 郭紹虞, *Chung kuo wên hsüeh p'i p'ing shih*, 中國文學批評史 (Shanghai, 1934), Vol. I, p. 250; 韓猶有得於道，柳則僅工於文。

¹ Margouliès, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

² *Chiu T'ang shu*, *Lieh chuan*, 舊唐書，列傳，Ch. 160.

³ *Liu Tzu-hou mu chih ming*, 柳子厚墓誌銘. See *Han Ch'ang-li ch'üan chi*, 韓昌黎全記, (Sü pu pei yao series, 222/3) Ch. 32, p. 5a.

⁴ *Li pu yüan wai lang*, 禮部員外郎. See des Rotours, *Le traité des Examens*, traduit de la *Nouvelle Histoire des T'ang*, Chap. XLIV, XLV (Paris, 1932), p. 7.

⁵ 王叔文. See Giles, *Biographical Dictionary*, 1361.

⁶ 永州, the present Ling-ling. See Playfair, *Cities and Towns of China*, (Shanghai, 1910), no. 7843.

⁷ 龍興寺

⁸ *Liu Ho-tung ch'üan chi*, 柳河東全記 (Sü pu pei yao series, 224) Ch. 28, p. 5a.

Yung-chou Lung-hsing-ssü Hsi hsiüan-chi, 永州龍興寺西軒記

⁹ 余知釋氏之道且久。

¹⁰ *Ta Chiang*, 大江, i.e., the Hsiang (湘).

¹¹ 西序之西屬當大江之流。江之外山谷林麓甚衆。(Hsi hsiüan-chi. See note 8 above).

a little concerned at his own disinclination to teach and admired Han for the strength of his convictions and for his courage in face of criticism. But, while he admired, he felt unable to emulate Han's methods¹. He gives two reasons for his failure to set himself up as the founder of a school. He did not disapprove of the idea in principle, but he felt himself unworthy²; and because the traditional relation of teacher and disciple had long been unfamiliar in the world he was afraid of the duties it involved³. Nevertheless, younger scholars in the part of China where he lived all looked on him as their master⁴.

It is true that Liu was handicapped by not holding orthodox Confucian views and that he lacked confidence in himself, but there was another reason for his hesitation. He did not regard literature purely as a craft which could be taught. Like Spenser, who described poetry as "no arte, but a divine gift and heavenly instinct", he was able to see more clearly than did most Chinese writers a distinction between facility and inspiration. In his view a man must be endowed with a literary sense and could not acquire it from others. The most that could be imparted by one person to another was an understanding of the functions of words and similar technicalities. The essence of the matter remained with the man in possession of the gift, but it could not be passed on, and Liu refused the title of 'master', which he did not feel qualified to bear.

How far Liu was influenced in this attitude by his belief in Buddhism is hard to say. Han's position on the other hand is easy to understand. Responsibility for instructing the young was part of the Confucian tradition and it fitted Han's turn of mind perfectly. He wrote to expound the way⁵—that is to say he wrote always with a purpose—while Liu, at least in his descriptive essays on scenery, wrote because he wished to capture and keep

¹ Liu Ho-tung *ch'üan chi* (See p. 150, note 8 above), Ch. 34, p. 8a, 僕才能勇敢不如韓退之。(Ta Yen Hou-yü lun shih tao shu, 答嚴厚輿論師道書。

² I consider myself unworthy: 自視以爲不足。

³ I am afraid and refuse to undertake it: 懼而不爲

Both these comments (2 and 3) occur in Liu's reply to a letter from Yen Hou-yü on the subject of the duties of a teacher. (See note 1 above.)

⁴ Han Yü, Liu Tzu-hou *mu chih ming* (See p. 150, note 3 above); 衡湘以南爲進士者, 皆以子厚爲師。

⁵ *Wên i wei ming tao*, 文以爲明道。Han rejected old rules of grammar and introduced new styles and manners, and pressed his ideas upon his hearers with such energy and intrepidity that he was constantly subjected to ridicule and accused of being "mad". All this Liu observed, and knew that he himself had not sufficient independence of spirit to follow the same path.—Liu Ho-tung *ch'üan chi* (see p. 150, note 8 above), Ch. 34, p. 8b, Pao Yüan *Chün-ch'ên hsiu ts'ai pi shih ming shu*, 報袁君陳秀才避師名書。

for his own the beauty which he saw around him and to express his own reactions to it¹.

The differences between the two writers are fundamental. Han wrote to instruct others; Liu wrote to please himself. Han was a born teacher; Liu a creative artist. Han's writings were generally an expression of his convictions, while many of Liu's most interesting essays resulted directly from the reaction of his artistic temperament to his environment. In the memorial essay already referred to, Han says that although Liu would have been outstanding in any circumstances, he would not have been able, had he not suffered prolonged disgrace and known extreme poverty, to reach that degree of perfection in his writings which must in fact make him famous for all time².

Despite the love of natural beauty which Chinese scholars expressed in their poetry, they did not use it as a subject of prose-writing. The earliest Chinese work on topography appears to have been the *Water Classic*³, a work on the watercourses of the empire, to which the historian Pan Ku⁴ refers, and which must, therefore, have been in existence about the beginning of the Christian era. But the version extant⁵, which is thought to have been written in the Three Kingdoms period (221-265 A.D.) and was "highly esteemed as a description of the waters of the empire"⁶, and rightly described by a modern writer as "a mine of topographical information"⁷, appears to be a work intended for practical purposes.

Whether the *Water Classic* was merely a "dry-as-dust topography" or, as some critics believe, an account of its author's travels, it had, so far as is known, no successors until, early in the ninth century A.D., Liu Tsung-yüan began to describe the excursions which he made into the beautiful regions in central and southern China where he spent the years of his exile. One exception, indeed, there was. A single essay was written by Yüan Chieh⁸ (b. 723 A.D.) in the eighth century, and Liu may well have read both this

¹ Liu summed up his own ambitions thus: "What I seek to avoid is reputation, and what I love is the reality": 僕之所避者名也, 所愛者其寔也。Liu Ho-tung *ch'üan chi* (See p. 150, note 8 above), Ch. 34, p. 7b.

² Han Yü, Liu Tzu-hou *mu chih ming* (See p. 150, note 3 above); 然子厚斥不久窮不極雖有出於人其文學辭章必不能自力以致必傳於後如今無疑也。

³ *Shui ching*, 水經

⁴ 班固, d. 92 A.D. Giles, *Biographical Dictionary*, 1600.

⁵ *Shui ching chu*, 水經注

⁶ Wylie, *Notes on Chinese Literature*, (Shanghai and London, 1867) p. 43.

⁷ Chü Tui-chih, 瞿兌之 *Chung kuo p'ien wên kai lun*, 中國駢文概論 (Shanghai 1934), p. 34.

⁸ 元結。Among the best-known of his essays is *Yu ch'i chi*, 右溪記。(Yüan Tz'u-shan *chi*, 元次山集, Ch. 9, p. 5b).

and the *Water Classic*. There was also the *Peach Blossom Fountain*¹ of T'ao Yüan-ming² (365-427 A.D.), but this was in narrative form, very different from Liu's purely descriptive accounts of the places he visited and admired. Liu's essays have been well described as "not topography but pure literature"³, and his achievement in this field—not only in prose but also in verse—is far more striking than that of any previous writer. The "field and garden" verses⁴ of earlier poets—Hsieh Ling-yün⁵ (385-430 A.D.) and T'ao Yüan-ming for example—are full of charm and pleasant lyrical description. But Liu's works have something more. His is no mere prettiness of style; his language, though smooth, is full of vigour, and his craftsmanship—in particular his sense of line and colour—is unrivalled. With equal facility he carries into his verse the natural qualities of his prose and into his prose much of the charm and artistic feeling of his verse. He is a master of descriptive writing, equally felicitous in prose and verse, and because of his artistic sincerity and his essential simplicity he succeeds in making us believe that here is not art, but the ordinary tones of his natural voice. In his *Lament for Liu Tzu-hou*⁶ (i.e., Liu Tsung-yüan), Han Yü comments on the quality of Liu's style and likens it, in the traditional metaphorical manner, to the mellifluous sound of hanging ornaments of jade striking together by the movement of the breeze.

It is easy enough to understand why descriptive writing was not practised in the six centuries during which the balanced style was the standard. The constraints of a form so mannered and so pedantic prevented originality of expression and hampered the play of fancy. Satisfying as the purely verbal grandeur of the parallel style may have been to ears attuned to the subtleties of its rhythm, it was too archaic, too full of only half-intelligible phraseology, too formal and too disciplined to admit the introduction of natural emotions or the natural expression of them. The rules of syntax and the mannerisms which belonged to parallelism had to be rejected; words

¹ *T'ao hua yüan chi*, 桃花源記。Translated by Giles in *Gems of Chinese Literature (Prose)* (London 1926), p. 104.

² 陶淵明。Giles, *Biographical Dictionary*, 1892.

³ Chü Tui-chih, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁴ *T'ien yüan shih*, 田園詩

⁵ 謝靈運。Giles, *Biographical Dictionary*, 739. Among his descriptive poems are (i) *Yeh hsiu shih mén*, 夜宿石門, (which contains the well-known couplet: 鳥啼識夜棲, 木落知風發: When the birds twitter we know the time has come to retire for the night; When the trees shed their leaves we know the winds (of winter) will blow); (ii) *Shih pi ching shé huan hu chung*, 石壁精舍還湖中; and (iii) *T'eng Chiang chung ku hu*, 登江中孤嶼。

⁶ Han Yü, *Chi Liu Tzu-hou wén*, 祭柳子厚文。See *Han Ch'ang-li ch'üan chi*, 韓昌黎全記。(*Ssü pu pei yao* series 222/3), Ch. 23, p. 2b.—Translated by Giles in *Gems of Chinese Literature (Prose)*, p. 123. and by Margouliès in *Le Kou-wen chinois* (Paris, 1926), p. 216.

which could not be revitalised had to be abandoned; and a new lucid style, purged of the affectations of the old, needed to be created before even an artist such as Liu Tsung-yüan could produce the beautiful passages of descriptive writing (called in Chinese "records of excursions")¹ for which he is justly famed.

"Records of excursions" hold a special place in Chinese literature and, says a modern Chinese work², "Liu was both the first and the best of writers of essays describing places which he visited". Although, as I have said, he may well have read both the *Water Classic* and the essay of Yüan Chieh, his work is too spontaneous to give rise to the suspicion that he had any thought of imitating either of the earlier works. The terse descriptions in the one and the accidental character of the other were not calculated to inspire, for example, the group of essays known as the *Eight records written at Yung-chou*³. These were the direct result of a combination of circumstances. Liu's banishment, the sensitive nature which kept him always conscious of the disgrace under which he suffered, a mind imbued with Buddhist ideas and love of nature⁴ and a deep appreciation of the consolation to be found in beautiful surroundings when cut off from direct contact with friends whose interests and tastes marched with his own, all combined to produce both in prose and in verse some of the finest descriptions to be found in the Chinese language.

Descriptive prose writing is by no means common in Chinese literature in any period; even purely descriptive poetry is much less frequent than lyrical poetry and subjective verses of a reflective character. The poet is nearly always a figure in his own picture and Liu's power of detaching himself from the scene is a special feature of his writing. In this his artistry shows itself; his taste is impeccable. He seldom sets himself in the centre of his own stage and he can describe what is before his eyes without moralising generally or seeking to find in it a lesson for himself. Three examples of his verse will help to illustrate his style:

¹ *Yu chi*, 遊記, a term for which no exact English equivalent appears to exist.

² Hu P'u-an, 胡樸安 and Hu Huai-shên, 胡懷琛, *T'ang tai wên hsüeh*, 唐代文學 (Shanghai, 1939), p. 42.

³ *Yung-chou pa chi*, 永州八記。See *Liu Ho-tung ch'üan chi* (*Ssü pu pei yao* series 224): (i) Ch. 27, p. 5a; (ii) Ch. 27, p. 6a; (iii) Ch. 28, p. 3a; (iv) Ch. 28, p. 3b; (v) Ch. 28, p. 4b; (vi) Ch. 28, p. 5a; (vii) Ch. 28, p. 6b; (viii) Ch. 28, p. 7b.

⁴ In his ardent defence of Buddhism Liu wrote, "Buddhism admits of no envious rivalry for place or power. The majority of its adherents love only to live a simple life of contemplation amid the charms of hill and stream. And when I turn my gaze towards the hurry-scurry of the age, in its daily race for the seals and tassels of office, I ask myself if I am to reject those in order to take my place amongst the ranks of these.—Giles, *Gems of Chinese Literature (Prose)*, p. 141, translated from *Liu Tsung-yüan's Preface sent to the Buddhist Hsiao-ch'u, Sung seng Hsiao-Ch'u hsü*, 送僧浩初序 (*Liu Ho-tung ch'üan chi* (*Ssü pu pei yao* series 224), Ch. 25, p. 10b.

A walk to the ferry after the rain ceased¹.

As soon as the rain cleared from the river I felt I must take a long walk

And as the sun set I started out alone for the Yü-hsi ferry.

At the ferry the water had receded from the path to the village,

Leaving a raft hanging, out of its element, in a tall tree.

On rising at midnight to look out on the western garden as the moon was rising².

I waked to hear a heavy dew falling.

I opened the door leading to the western garden.

The cold moon was rising over the hills in the east,

And a rustling began among the sparse stems of the bamboos.

From the distance came the sound of a spring tumbling over stones

While now and then in the mountain a bird twittered.

I leaned against a pillar till the day dawned

In solitude beyond all telling.

Snow on the River³.

In a thousand hills the birds have ceased to fly;

On myriad paths man's prints are blotted out.

In a lone skiff an old man in reed hat and cloak

Is fishing in snow on the wintry river.

This last poem, one of the best-known of all Liu's verses, has been described by a modern Chinese critic⁴ as "outstanding in all time for its beauty". The scene, described in simple words, is suggestive of a Chinese painting. Liu's effects, if the term "effects" may be applied to so spontaneous a poem, are obtained chiefly through his clear vision and simple language. As a writer he is never exciting, never roused by enthusiasm for his subject, as Han was, to great heights or depths of emotion; his style is seldom disturbed by imaginative flights, nor does he introduce from his immense store of classical learning the allusions which fill the verses of earlier poets. Like Wang Wei⁵, whose "poems were paintings, while his paintings were poems", Liu possessed the gift of painting word pictures and he is among the few who were able to do this objectively. His is

¹ Liu Ho-tung *ch'üan chi*, (See p. 150, note 8) Ch. 43, p. 142.

² *do.*, Ch. 43, p. 132.

³ *do.*, Ch. 43, p. 146.

⁴ Chang Ch'ang-kung 張長弓, *Chung kuo wen hsiieh shih hsin pien* 中國文學史新編 (Shanghai, 1935), p. 126.

⁵ 王維 (699-759 A.D.) Giles, *Biographical Dictionary*, 2241.

pure artistry, to a degree which neither Han Yü or any other of his contemporaries ever attained. And best of all he is able to express his thoughts in every-day language. The language of his verse is often so simple that it appears to be removed from the realm of prose only by the difference in word order, while at its best his prose is hardly less close to poetry. He has been well called the "divine hand"¹ in the special field of descriptive writing of an objective type², for, in spite of occasional lapses into passages which appear perilously near to the parallel style, his "records of excursions"³ are unrivalled in any period in their simplicity and delicacy and are rightly described by Chinese literary critics as "unrhymed poetry". It is not possible to quote at length here and much of the charm of the style of the original is lost in translation. The following extract, from an essay written at Yung-chou and entitled "*A visit to a Little Rocky Pool at the west of the Little Hill*"⁴ will serve, however, to exemplify the character of the new form of which Liu was the real originator:

When we had gone a hundred and twenty paces westwards from the little hill we heard from the other side of a thicket of bamboo the sound of water like the tinkling of girdle-ornaments—a sound to make glad the heart. Having cut a path through the bamboos, we saw below us a little pool of water, very clear and cold. Its bed was entirely of rocks, which near the shore projected above the water, forming ledges, islets, ridges and cliffs. Green trees and tangled creepers spread irregularly, swaying to and fro and quivering unevenly.

The hundred or more fishes in the pool looked as if they were all swimming in space without anything to support them. The sun shone down and found its way through; their shadows were thrown on the rocks, now placid and motionless, now suddenly darting into the distance, coming and going swiftly as if they shared the enjoyment of the visitors.

Looking across the pool to the south-west one could see where it came into view and where it disappeared from sight, bending like the Dipper and winding like a serpent. Its banks were deeply indented and irregular and it was impossible to tell where it had its source. We sat overlooking the pool, ringed in on all sides by bamboos and trees, utterly solitary and remote from men. My spirit was benumbed and, chilled to the bone, I was filled with a deep melancholy and realised that I could not long remain in that rarified atmosphere.

¹ *shêng shou*, 聖手

² See Chang Ch'ang-kung, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

³ *yu chi*, 遊記; *shan shui chi*, 山水記。

⁴ *Chih hsiao ch'iu hsi. hsiao-shih tan*, 至小丘西小石潭。See Liu Ho-tung *ch'üan chi*, (See p. 150, note 8) Ch. 29, p. 46.