Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, ‘I will compose poetry’.

SHELLEY

That talk of inspiration is sheer nonsense; there is no such thing. It is a mere matter of craftsmanship.

WILLIAM MORRIS

Deux sortes de vers: les vers donnés et les vers calculés.

PAUL VALÉRY
ALSO BY A. F. SCOTT

FROM PARAGRAPH TO ESSAY I & II
A YEAR’S WORK IN PRÉCIS
ENGLISH COMPOSITION, BOOKS I–IV
POEMS FOR PLEASURE, BOOKS I–III
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MEANING AND STYLE
POETRY AND APPRECIATION
MODERN ESSAYS, 1939–41
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MODERN ESSAYS, 1943–51
COUNTRY LIFE
TOPICS AND OPINIONS
(Macmillan & Co.)
THE POET’S CRAFT
A COURSE IN THE
CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF POETRY

based on the study of holograph manuscripts,
earlier and later versions of printed poems,
transpositions of prose into verse,
and contrasted translations

BY
A. F. SCOTT

WITH A SELECTION OF
UNSIGNED POEMS AND PASSAGES
FOR APPRECIATION

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1957
Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
Published in the United States of America by
Cambridge University Press, New York

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107601277

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First published 1957
First paperback edition 2011

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library


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PREFACE

Browning’s Grammarian exclaimed:

Show me their shaping,
Their, who most studied man, the bard and sage.

This book tries in several different ways to present the ‘shaping’ of the poets by a close study of their use of language.

The first section consists of reproductions of manuscript poems; many of these are of the original drafts, showing the corrections made as the poem was being composed. A study of these manuscripts gives an insight into the poet’s mind and a personal contact not achieved from the printed page alone. We see, as it were, the hand moving across the page expressing thoughts and after-thoughts. We see a word struck out immediately after it was written down and another set in its place, following on at once with a second thought. Sometimes the correction denotes a change of mind; other corrections made above the line or in the margin are obviously not done immediately, but are later additions or substitutions.

It is interesting to note how the work of correction is often quite as inspired as ‘the first onrush of words and ideas’. As we examine these manuscript poems we feel with C. M. Bowra that ‘the poet must be his own critic and decide which are the right words among the many which come to him; he must exclude much that at first sight looks attractive, and adapt the outpourings of inspiration to the creative impulse which animates his poem’.

To these manuscript poems are added brief notes, and a literal transcription of the text.

The next section presents, for purposes of comparison, the first published version of several well-known poems with the more widely accepted revised version. A brief history of the changes is given so that we may follow some of the poems over a period of years.
The third section deals with the raw material used by the poet. As Sir Henry Newbolt says,

The more a writer struggles to invent the less he is likely to create. His true way is a different one; he finds his material among the accumulated stories of the race, whether ancient or modern; he sets to work to reject all that he judges unnecessary or unfit, to add all that is lacking; and finally, without effort, almost without consciousness of his power, he endows his work with his own personal quality in the act of making it serve his own purpose.

As we consider what Sir Thomas North received from Plutarch, and what Shakespeare received from North we see in action ‘a kind of creative evolution’.

It has been said that the translation of a poem from one language into another is not the making of poetry but its destruction. There have been, however, many fine translations of poetry into English by poets such as Chapman, Dryden, Pope, Cowper, Bridges, and C. Day Lewis. Admittedly, the beauty of their productions depends upon their handling of English, and it is always different from the beauty of the original, because in poetry the meaning of words lies in their sound as much as in their sense.

In the fourth section translations of the same poem (or passage from a long poem) are set down for critical comparison, not as faithful renderings (for that the reader would obviously need an intimate knowledge of the original) but as examples of the poetic style of different poets using the same material. Turning from one poet to another we may appraise such a line as:

I who queen it through these courts of heaven
against
I who in high heaven move as a queen
and
I who through heaven its mistress move
all derived from Virgil’s

Ast ego quae divum incedo regina.

The last section contains a number of unsigned poems arranged according to subject, lending themselves to contrast and comparison.
PREFACE

Included also are some poems given in different versions for close analysis. Occasionally a poem and the material from which it is derived gives further opportunity for critical appreciation. Throughout, material is presented for a close analysis of words and language, leading to a fuller understanding of poetry and the poet’s craft.

A. F. SCOTT

27 April 1956

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Section I

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(If planning this section I found Voices from the Past by James and Janet Maclean Todd particularly helpful. A.F.S.)

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