



The Morris Gray poetry readings

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NOTES

The Morris Gray Poetry Readings

ON 23 January 1929, Mr Morris Gray of Boston wrote a letter to the President and Fellows of Harvard College which began as follows:

I hereby offer to give to Harvard College a fund of \$30,000.00, the principal to be kept intact, the income to be applied in the sole discretion of the College to the purchase of books of current modern poetry; to the purchase of books on that subject; and finally, if aught of income remains, to the giving of occasional talks or lectures thereon.

By February 26th, Mr Gray had decided that there would not be enough income left for this last purpose, 'so I wish,' he wrote in a second letter, 'to add to the above fund the sum of \$10,000.00, the principal to be kept intact, the income to be applied in the sole discretion of the College to the giving of occasional talks or lectures on modern poetry.'

Until 1934, the administration of this extra fund was in the hands of the Harvard College Library; in that year its administration was given to the Department of English, and a committee of three members of that department has managed the details since. From 1934 to 1945, the committee consisted of Robert Hillyer, chairman, Theodore Morrison, and the present writer; since 1945, the present writer has been chairman, with Theodore Morrison and F. O. Matthiessen as fellow members.

When the fund was turned over to the English Department, its capital was \$11,006.17, and income had accumulated to the amount of \$1774.35. This accumulated income has been very useful and has been frequently drawn upon when a lecturer or poet has unexpectedly appeared in the neighborhood of Cambridge. The present income from the fund is about \$400.00, nearly all of which is spent in fees.

The second Morris Gray Fund has so far (as of December, 1947) offered to the Harvard community ninety-two readings of poetry or talks about poetry. Most of the important living American poets, and a number of British ones, have appeared under its auspices: Frost (five times), Auden (three times), Aiken (twice), Wallace Stevens (twice), MacLeish (twice), S. V. Benet, Cummings, MacNeice, Tate, Marianne Moore, Jeffers, Spender, W. C. Williams, etc. The committee in charge of the fund has felt that it should be beneficial in two ways — for writers of poetry as well as for those who want to hear it or hear about it. Consequently, a number of young poets, who can perhaps profit by having an audience in front of them for the first time, have been asked to read their verse. Most of these — Delmore Schwartz, Howard Baker, John Berryman, Edward Weismiller, John Ciardi, George Marion O'Donnell — were teaching in the Department of English at the time they gave their

readings, and their many students who came to hear them were thus able to see another aspect of their intellectual activity than that shown in the classroom.

Frequently there have been lectures rather than readings. In 1930 Bernard Fay, now serving a life sentence as a collaborationist in France, talked about Gertrude Stein; Mrs D. H. Lawrence, in 1937, discussed the poetry of her husband. In one year (1936-37) all five of the Morris Gray occasions were lectures rather than readings: Philip Horton on the poetry of Hart Crane, Edmund Wilson on 'Is Verse a Dying Technique?', Allen Tate on 'Tension in Poetry,' E. M. W. Tillyard on Milton's language, Sir Herbert Grierson on 'Donne and the Poetry and Criticism of Today.'

The lectures and readings have been variously successful. Poets are by no means always satisfactory interpreters of their own poetry, and extreme nervousness has often made some of the Morris Gray readers inaudible. One good reader was so shaky he had to clasp his book with both hands curled around the top and hold the bottom pressed against his stomach so that the pages wouldn't dance in front of his eyes. Another asked to have a paper cup full of brandy on the desk in front of him. His request was refused (he got the brandy in his tea beforehand). Another, a highly dramatic singer of folk-ballads, had a large tumbler beside him, filled with what looked like water but was gin. His performance was a great success.

The committee in charge of the fund has often wondered whether the readings and the lectures could not be supplemented, so that undergraduates

might have a chance to discuss poetry more directly with the visiting poets and critics. Consequently, at one time the poets were asked, as part of their commission, to be at home to undergraduates for a few hours in the evening after their reading or sometime the next day, and they were given a guest room in one of the Houses for the purpose. But the scheme was abandoned after a year. Some of the poets were reluctant, and the At Homes failed more often than they succeeded. Not many undergraduates turned up, and those who did weren't all of the right kind. There was, for example, Mr N. Mr N. was a thin man with spectacles; a great many forces in his background had led him to the belief that Mr N. was more important than anything else in the world. His egotism was impenetrable; it wasn't exactly aggressive, for his voice was soft, but it covered him like armor, or a kind of impermeable oil. He came to all the At Homes and did all the talking. He couldn't be stopped. At the end of the year, the committee decided to abandon the At Homes until Mr N. had graduated (he was a sophomore); but when he had, they weren't resumed.

One of the At Homes provided an interesting episode. The visiting poet was a man much admired by an undergraduate who was deeply concerned with poetry and wanted to give his life to it; this ex-undergraduate has since become widely and justly known. His parents were against such a career, however, and came to see the visiting poet, during his At Home, accompanied by their son. Also present, besides the inevitable Mr N., was the late John Wheelright, a most lovable man and a gifted poet, but capable of eccentric-

ity. Small quantities of beer were being drunk as the visiting poet and the parents took opposite sides in a debate about the wisdom of poetry as a profession. During the debate, Wheelright abruptly got up from his chair, dropped to all fours, and started to crawl under the rug. The parents stared at him as he humped along. 'Is that a poet?' they asked. The visiting poet had to admit that it was. 'Round one,' he observed, describing the scene later, 'was lost.'

One of the most fruitful results of the supplementary Morris Gray Fund has been that, in bringing poets to Cambridge, it has enabled Professor Packard to make recordings of their reading. The Morris Gray poets represent a large proportion of the hundred or more poets Professor Packard has recorded and whose records are in such constant use in the Poetry Room. Without the Fund, that admirable collection, rivaled only by the collection in the Library of Congress, would not be nearly so rich as it is. It is to a large extent through these records that the double purpose of Mr Gray's bequest has been fulfilled: to make the readings of poetry supplement the purchase of the books, and to have modern poetry a living and important part of the Harvard College Library.

But the most impressive illustration of how much a part of Harvard life the Morris Gray Fund has become is the size of the audiences which the readings attract. In the early days, the talks were held in a room in Widener, and attendance was by invitation only. The talks or readings were given no publicity, and the limited audience, of necessity somewhat arbitrarily chosen, tended to make the occasions esoteric.

Since 1934, however, the readings have been given as much publicity as possible, and even during the war the attendance was strikingly large. Lesser known poets have filled the Poetry Room, and for poets with a wide reputation no lecture room in the Yard has been too big. Three recent occasions are particularly memorable. In the spring of 1946, during the first term in which the College was full again after the war, W. H. Auden came to read. The committee had engaged Emerson D, which holds three hundred and fifty people, and which had been the right size for his audience when he had given a reading three years before. But as Auden and the member of the committee who was to introduce him came near Emerson, at the scheduled hour of 4:30, it was obvious, even from outside the building, that the place was packed to the brim. Crowded backs could be seen through the window panes, and the entire hallway of the building was jammed with people. There was only one thing to do: move the reading to the New Lecture Hall. The introducer forced himself through the crowd, and as soon as he had announced the change, the crowd started running. The sight of eight hundred people, mostly undergraduates, streaming across Memorial Hall triangle, all determined to hear a reading of poetry, was unforgettable.

A similar situation occurred in March, 1947, with Wallace Stevens. Sever 11 had been engaged, but with Emerson D in reserve. One look at Sever 11 was enough; the crowd ran across to Emerson D. But a second move was necessary; in Emerson D scores of people had to stand. So the audience was finally squeezed into the

large lecture room of the Fogg Museum, which holds three hundred and ninety-nine.

But the most memorable occasion of all was the reading given two months later by T. S. Eliot. This time the committee engaged Sanders Theatre, which, when one hundred and eighty people are seated on the stage, has a capacity of fourteen hundred and twenty. The committee also arranged for an overflow meeting in the New Lecture Hall. Its precautions were justified. There was not even standing room in Sanders Theatre, and the New Lecture Hall had a considerable crowd. The audience, again composed mostly of students, was attentive to the point of being devout, and no one present can forget the enthusiasm at the end of the reading, an enthusiasm which the beauty of Mr Eliot's performance more than deserved.

It is hard to sum up the total effect of Mr Gray's generosity; it has been both cumulative and indirect. The Morris Gray Fund has stimulated interest in poetry and made poetry more vivid by enabling students, however remotely, to have some contact with its practitioners. Its effect has been more than local: it has raised the prestige of poetry in general, and it has made Harvard's hospitality to poetry well known throughout the country.

TALKS AND READING UNDER THE AUSPICES
OF THE MORRIS GRAY POETRY FUND

(Where no title is given, the poet gave a
'Reading from His Own Poems
with Commentary')

1929: George Edward Woodberry,
'The Purpose of the Morris
Gray Fund, and the Place of
Poetry in the Life of College
Undergraduates'

- 1929-30: S. Foster Damon
Robert Hillyer, 'Robert Bridges
and his "Testament of Beau-
ty"'
- Lizette Woodworth Reese
Martha Dickinson Bianchi, 'Em-
ily Dickinson'
- Heathcote William Garrod
(subject not recorded)
- 1930-31: Bernard Fay, 'Gertrude Stein
and the Chapelle of the Rue
des Fleurs'
- Theodore Morrison, 'Poetry
from the Point of View of
the Magazine Editor as well
as That of the Writer'
- Hon. Joseph M. Proskauer,
'College Verse in My Under-
graduate Days'
- I. A. Richards, 'An Ideal Poetry
Room'
- Louis V. Ledoux, 'George Ed-
ward Woodberry'
- 1931-32: Hervey Allen, 'Amy Lowell'
- Theodore Spencer, 'The Poetry
of T. S. Eliot'
- 1932-33: Oliver St John Gogarty, 'Irish
Literary Figures and Their
Poetry'
- Richmond P. Bond, 'English
Burlesque Poetry'
- Horace Reynolds, 'Sean O'Ca-
sey: Ireland's Post-Revolu-
tionary Dramatist'
- 1933-34: Padraic Colum, 'Irish Poetry'
- Conrad Aiken
- 1934-35: Sean O'Casey, 'The Old Drama
and the New'
- Archibald MacLeish
Desmond MacCarthy (subject
not recorded)
- John A. Lomax and 'Leadbelly,'
Ballad Recital
- Robert Frost
John Crowe Ransom
- 1935-36: Robin Flower, 'Early Irish Po-
etry'
- James Stephens

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| | I. A. Richards, 'Recent English Poetry' | Robinson Jeffers |
| | Robert Frost | Stephen Vincent Benét |
| 1936-37: | Conrad Aiken | 1941-42: Theodore Spencer |
| | Wallace Stevens | Paul Engle |
| | Frieda Lawrence, 'The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence' | Marianne Moore |
| | S. H. Cross, 'Pushkin a Hundred Years After' | David McCord |
| | | Theodore Roethke |
| 1937-38: | Philip Horton, 'The Poetry of Hart Crane' | 1942-43: Robert Frost |
| | Edmund Wilson, 'Is Verse a Dying Technique?' | Edward Weismiller |
| | Allen Tate, 'Tension in Poetry' | John Jacob Niles, Ballad Recital |
| | E. M. W. Tillyard, 'Milton's Language' | Robert Hillyer |
| | H. J. C. Grierson, 'Donne and the Poetry and Criticism of Today' | Jesse Stuart |
| | | John Berryman |
| | | W. H. Auden |
| | | May Sarton |
| 1938-39: | Archibald MacLeish | 1943-44: Robert Francis |
| | Robert Frost | Theodore Morrison |
| | Donald Davidson | Robert Penn Warren |
| | E. E. Cummings | Marya Zaturenska |
| | Louis MacNeice | Christopher La Farge |
| | | 1944-45: John Jacob Niles, Ballad Recital |
| | | William Rose Benét |
| 1939-40: | Richard Aldington | Oscar Williams |
| | W. H. Auden | 1945-46: Tennessee Williams |
| | Robert Francis | Louise Bogan |
| | Wyndham Lewis | E. J. Pratt |
| | John B. Wheelwright | W. H. Auden |
| | John Jacob Niles, Ballad Recital | George Marion O'Donnell |
| | Winfield Townley Scott | 1946-47: Robert Frost |
| | Howard Baker | Randall Jarrell |
| | | Wallace Stevens |
| 1940-41: | Delmore Schwartz | John Ciardi |
| | Louis Untermeyer | T. S. Eliot |
| | S. Foster Damon | 1947-48 (incomplete): |
| | Samuel French Morse | Stephen Spender |
| | William Carlos Williams | Archibald MacLeish |
| | Merrill Moore | |

THEODORE SPENCER

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