

SPEAKER: Minnesota is lousy with poets. Outside of New York and California, there's probably more going on here in poetry than any other state in the country. No doubt there are several reasons. One certainly is that two of the best poets in the country live here, Robert Bly and Tom McGrath.

Of course, many states have fine poets living within their boundaries. But usually the poets are there because universities or colleges have paid them to come. They are collected in the same way. And for the same reasons that football players are recruited. They go where the money is best and the teaching load is lightest. And they are brought in to add prestige, a sort of freaks in residence recruitment program.

But Bly and McGrath are different. Both of them were born and raised in the area, Bly in Madison, Minnesota, and McGrath just over the border in North Dakota. Both of them have written extensively and movingly of Minnesota and Dakota.

Poetry, like everything else, is a cultural and social phenomenon. Minnesota has an ungodly number of good hockey players because it takes hockey seriously. And for the same reason, it has an ungodly number of poets. There is a climate for poetry here. And so it exists and thrives, feeds itself, and grows on the excitement that such energy always generates.

But the presence of poets like Bly and McGrath, who are here because they want to be, not because they are paid to be, is not the only reason poetry is alive and kicking in Minnesota. Poetry and politics have always been closely connected. Where people takes its politics seriously, it usually takes poetry seriously. If you're alive enough to care about the outer world of politics, chances are you are alive enough to care about the inner world of poetry.

This is one reason why two such small countries as Ireland and Chile have given us so many fine poets and writers, WB Yeats and Pablo Neruda, for example. Neither country is hardly a superpower. Neither country has the distinction of being responsible for the deaths of millions of people. But both countries take politics seriously. And relative to the rest of the United States, so is Minnesota, which has not only given the country more than its share of decent politicians, but has also been responsible for some of the most important radical political experiments this country has ever had.

Both Bly and McGrath, as well as many younger poets in the area, have been quick to sense and thrive on the connection between poetry and politics. I'm sure there are other reasons, too, for the strength of poetry in Minnesota, reasons that are harder to pin down. Poetry has always, for example, thrived on wide-open spaces--the sea, the plains, forests, and the stars. It's probably no accident that blind McGrath and other important poets of this area have steered clear of the cities.

Bly's first book was called *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. And McGrath has said, and I quote, "Here man can never think of himself as he can in the city, as the master of nature. Like it or not, he is subject to the ancient power of seasonal change. He cannot avoid being in nature. He has an heroic adversary that is no abstraction. At a level below immediate consciousness, we respond to this, are less alien to our bodies, to human and natural time."

Of course, not all the poetry that's written in Minnesota is going to be about Minnesota, but much of it is. And if it's true that poetry gives us back our lives and our day-by-day reality in a heightened and clarified form, then what Minnesota poets have to say about Minnesota may well be crucial in understanding our place and our times.