

SEAMUS JUSTIN HEANEY

When Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature last December, his Nobel lecture included the following words, "The form of the poem. . . is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit: the power to persuade the vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it." How the rightness of the poem counters the wrongness of the world has been the recurrent theme in Heaney's eleven major volumes of poetry, the first of which appeared in 1966 and the most recent this spring.

Heaney's poems constantly remind us of his origins in rural Northern Ireland, the son of a farmer. His poetry digs into the memories of childhood and family, and, going deeper, into the Celtic past of his people, and even into the archetypal memory of ancient human bodies, victims of ritual sacrifice, brought back as symbols of our own time and circumstance. The seemingly endless sectarian violence of his homeland continually informs his view of the wrongness surrounding him, as the effort to reconcile himself as poet and native son of Northern Ireland recurs in every volume.

Professor of Poetry at Oxford University for five years, and, since 1984, Boylston Professor of Oratory and Rhetoric at Harvard University for one semester each year, he resides today in Dublin. Not only a poet, he has established himself as a dramatist, critic, teacher, publisher, and scholar. This University takes pride in housing in Wilson Library what is perhaps the most complete and comprehensive collection of his publications in the world.

One of the eminent voices of literature in the English-speaking world today, Seamus Heaney, honoring us as our Commencement speaker today, is himself singled out with pride by this University with this honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.