

An Irish Airman foresees his Death”

Summary

The speaker, an Irish airman fighting in World War I, declares that he knows he will die fighting among the clouds. He says that he does not hate those he fights, nor love those he guards. His country is “Kiltartan’s Cross,” his countrymen “Kiltartan’s poor.” He says that no outcome in the war will make their lives worse or better than before the war began. He says that he did not decide to fight because of a law or a sense of duty, nor because of “public men” or “cheering crowds.” Rather, “a lonely impulse of delight” drove him to “this tumult in the clouds.” He says that he weighed his life in his mind, and found that “The years to come seemed waste of breath, / A waste of breath the years behind.”

Form

This short sixteen-line poem has a very simple structure: lines metered in iambic tetrameter, and four grouped “quatrains” of alternating rhymes: ABAB CDCD EFGH GH, or four repetitions of the basic ABAB scheme utilizing different rhymes.

Commentary

This simple poem is one of Yeats’s most explicit statements about the First World War, and illustrates both his active political consciousness (“Those I fight I do not hate, / Those I guard I do not love”) and his increasing propensity for a kind of hard-edged mystical rapture (the airman was driven to the clouds by “A lonely impulse of delight”). The poem, which, like flying, emphasizes balance, essentially enacts a kind of accounting, whereby the airman lists every factor weighing upon his situation and his vision of death, and rejects every possible factor he believes to be false: he does not hate or love his

enemies or his allies, his country will neither be benefited nor hurt by any outcome of the war, he does not fight for political or moral motives but because of his “impulse of delight”; his past life seems a waste, his future life seems that it would be a waste, and his death will balance his life.

Complementing this kind of tragic arithmetic is the neatly balanced structure of the poem, with its cycles of alternating rhymes and its clipped, stoical meter.