The War Poets. Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 2000.

Collin Hughes
Washington State University

The words of Brook, Owen, and Sassoon represent a mere moment of antiwar sentiment within a longer tradition of war poetry that primarily spurred romantic tales of duty-bound soldiers forsaking their sweethearts for god and country. The poetry of war almost innately transmogrifies into tales of nationalism, inspiring jingoist songs that celebrate the political course of the British empire. The film for the humanities offers us the moving yet myopic prophecy of the imperialist muse from Anglo-Saxon times to the 20th century.

One of the chief mysteries of this film is that the creators never acknowledge their perspective—a single, poetic and political strand of the experiences of young men in war. In the traditional way of showmanship within the empire, the British perspective becomes virtually the only perspective. They call war the catalyst for art, but ignore Homer. Yet, the film offers moments of fine criticism and analysis, especially from Jon Stallworthy of Oxford University. The accompaniment of valor is reflective misery and madness; the eternal vitality of war is the poet's translation and acculturation of horror, luck, and, of course, glory. Warriors will brave any hellhole. Into the valley of death rode the six hundred poets. There are few exceptions. War poets seldom take flight. They are the journalists surrounded by poisonous gas and flame; and importantly, while finally crawling the charred ground within the ideology of war, they have always first followed their marching orders.

For art's sake, the film ignores the implications brewing beneath the surface of most war poems. Still we know that using rhyme and meter to endorse war is as old as verse itself; and more so, the art of the empire explains why executive decisions won't be judged. The impulse toward violence is sophisticated enough to allow the illusion of independence. We are patronized while the poetic muse converts conflict into long-term power and riches with a whole array of words that conceal conventional prejudices. A few young artists, a handful only, cry out against the propaganda, the true poet soldiers now dead. It seems that a species capable of creating the most sweeping destruction is also capable of pondering the sweepingly idiotic appeal of doing so. The film reminds us that despite our potential for self-loathing, we historically and traditionally rally and multiply around the flag. The poet narrator travels around the world dismayed, steeped in misery yet offering a sly argument: some of the human race perhaps deserves destruction. Death is necessary, even poetic, so to speak; the empire is simultaneously doing some good through wholesale destruction and the enemy is always *ipso facto* less than human—or so the poetic stepping-stones of the empire tell us. We are

nodding at a familiar face, reading a sort of self-righteous drama of the soul that might cause a person to break down and yell, "Enough of war." The story begins with a question. Can you imagine such a scene? Imagine what it might be like to rummage through the detritus of graphic inhumanity and hysteria, longing for peace and democracy. These are the tangled sentiments of the duty-bound War Poets.

Above all else, the words of the soldier poets make beautiful and ghastly sounds; warriors are dying under slowly shifting stars. The crouching of their bodies, the pounding of the drum, the blind salute and the blind suffering—the war poets say they have seen horror and politics and they are not tongue-tied. Regardless of the film's static use of ghostly tombstones and melodramatic readings, the poets themselves look to the sky and speak. Some of their voices uphold the mighty tradition—this is always true. More importantly, others give us a living obituary of war. And this is enough to make the film itself worth the trouble. ❋