The avenue at war: From formal avenue to shattered splinters

L'allée dans la guerre : de l'allée formelle à un champ d'esquilles

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'Another taunting V'

The column march has become one of the lasting images of the Great War. Having endured an apparently aimless and endless train journey from base-camp to railhead, troops of the British Expeditionary Force marched to war along the great tree-lined roads of Northern France and Flanders. In the opening months of the war never had an environment seemed so suited to the patriotic mood of determination and purpose:

> '… on the way to Shrapnel Corner: a long road across a wide plain, no buildings no trees except an avenue of precisely spaced Lombardy poplars which tucked in the road, so to say: no abrupt turnings, no side tracks, no ups, no downs. A road not to be taken casually, the first step obviously committing one to going on to some end.' [1]

The avenue epitomised the 'foreignness' of France. It soon became a popular motif in letters, poetry and drawings. One combatant described his first column march 'along a great road which stretched to the horizon as straight as only a French road can be.' [2] However, exhilaration gave way to fatigue: soldier-artist Keith Henderson wrote wearily of 'poplars and more poplars. Still we rumble on through symmetrical France.' [3] Another wrote of the debilitating infinity of the French highway:

> 'The tree-lined sides stretched ahead, the perspective drawing them together in a never-ending V for a couple of kilometres or so. There would be a slight change of direction and straight ahead another taunting V.' [4]

As the fighting on the Western Front became static the imagery of momentum had to be conveyed not through the diction of dynamic motion, but through a re-appraisal of the spatial and temporal diagonal of the landscape, and in particular the avenue.

Across the 'empty battlefield' that characterised the middle three years of the war (1915 - 1917) the role of the avenue in the battle landscape changed. Here, I offer a parallel between the several 'stages' of the avenue as it traversed the static battle and three recognisable stages in the course of a river. [5]

Geographers have identified three stages in the evolution of a river from watershed to estuary and these can be likened to the nature of the avenue on a fixed war front: both avenue and river share an energetic, youthful Early Stage characterised by propulsion and forward momentum: this is followed by a Middle Stage where momentum is lost and the route becomes circuitous as the initial energy is blocked and diverted: the Final Stage is typically lethargic, meandering, often idle.

On the Western Front, the avenue in its early stage was a thrusting, relentlessly direct route to the war front, like a surrogate railway line moving troops with maximum speed into a spatially homogeneous and secure environment.

After this channelled energy, the avenue was gradually absorbed into the active war zone. Here it was prone to shellfire and over time was reduced to a bare and denuded road with trees stripped of leaves and branches. In this middle stage the avenue's function in a rational perspectival system came to be torn apart, its singular direction was replaced by confused and ambiguous directions, and its axial function within formalised geometric ground plans was submerged in the debris of No Man's Land. In the final phase the singular directional sense was lost completely, and is best represented in the potent image of a single duckboard track meandering, almost aimlessly, across the levelled wastes of the flooded battlefield.

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Early dynamic stage

Direct, unambiguous, assertive - the endless highways of northern France seemed the perfect embodiment of a martial ideal. Indeed, it might be argued that the image of a formal road in this fresh, thrusting early stage played a similar iconographic role to the railway system across the British Empire - it first neutralised, then commanded space by deeply penetrating the interior of hostile country. Certainly, its part in the official rhetoric of Government propaganda was not lost: recruiting posters often featured soldiers marching unhesitatingly in columns, admirably aided by straight undeviating roads lined with trees.

Possibly, the greatest creative image of the thrusting energy of the tree-lined road cutting its way like a mountain river was created by the British artist Paul Nash. His lithograph *Marching at Night* describes an endless column of men moving through the closed space of an avenue. He simplified the avenue and the column into basic geometric blocks: the troops at the front of the column seem to stride out of the lower edge of the picture frame, while the geometrically simplified poplar trees in the avenue cut back into deep pictorial space.

The picture captures one of the peculiar optical effects caused by the regular spacing and uniform height of a long tree-lined road at night recalled by another soldier- artist Paul Maze on the road south of the Aisne:

> …a late moon appeared, ascending slowly into a perfect round above the dark line defining the far distance, the trees silhouetted against it appeared to slide backwards as we moved forwards. [6]

The middle stage of lost momentum

As the avenue 'approached' the active war zone, it entered a complex middle stage. Nash had achieved a sense of forward momentum by using a single vanishing point and by drawing the trees in two simplified, regimented rows. Any interruption in these rows would cause an uneven accent in the dominant rhythm and undermine the directional energy and perspectival simplicity of the avenue.

In an avenue, a missing bough or a snapped trunk could give a clue to the nearness or direction of battle. Edward Handley Read's picture Somewhere in France conveys this notion of imminent, directional threat by depicting a single fallen tree bough and plume of smoke, which both assume great significance in this deserted warscape.

The avenue could convey, in a single image, the effects of the passage of time on the deserted battlefield and the ways in which warfare altered the spatial understanding of the battle terrain. Here is evidence of how time could be measured:

Along the voluminous velvety roads one rolls under plumy avenues of trees. And then the road becomes less velvety, and the avenues by degrees less plumy, till at once they are only stark skeletons, gap-toothed and shell-shattered in their rows. [7]

Emerging from a small wood behind the battle zone another combatant assumed the road would stretch ahead 'as straight as an arrow for miles'. But the column then marched into a very different environment:

> ... we find ourselves back again on the Anzin Road and are immediately struck by the sudden changes in the landscape, the village of St Aubin is in ruins and only stumps of trees line the road.[8]

Writing about the peculiar spatiality of the Front, the soldier-poet T.E.Hulme described in 1915 the sudden alterations in the 'feel', though not always the appearance, of the landscape. 'In peacetime' he wrote, 'each direction of the road is as it were indifferent, it all goes on ad infinitum. But now you know that certain roads lead as it were, up to an abyss.' [9]

Many other writers and artists found it a powerful motif, perfectly suited to express the uncertainties and unpredictability of siege warfare. If a denuded avenue pointed tactically in the wrong direction it became simply irrelevant. Ian Strang's watercolour, The Menin Road with Tanks shows a road that is now churned and impassable, and the tanks' movement from right to left across the picture is proof that the orientation of the avenue is meaningless. There are now many paths across the battlefield, not just the one dynamic route implied by the avenue.

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The late stage

As it crossed the battlefield the avenue was remorselessly ground down: trees shattered, straightness lost, forward propulsion abandoned. In the formal gardens of desolated chateaux it had simply vanished; its energy dissipated into the inertia of the desert of the Western Front.

The sole pathway across the landscape now took the form of a long blackened timber track, each piece laid side by side, floating on the liquid mud. Tracks meandered across the battlefield, weaving between craters, taking the line of least resistance, like an aged river that has run its course. It was the trademark of a lost cause:

Hopeless greyness, a landscape with only one colour, the dim greyness of mud below and a pall of cloud above. It was surely man's greatest devastation to date, nothing unobliterated that had been there before, but now only the duckboard tracks, the broken white tapes, the 'corduroy' road over the sea of shell-pitted mud. [10]

Artist Louis Ginnett's painting of the Ypres Salient is an exact metaphor for inertia and hopelessness. It shows a meandering track wandering aimlessly into the beleaguered landscape and then, like a river delta, splits in two, before vanishing into the mud. This seemed to be terminal, the end stage; although not quite.
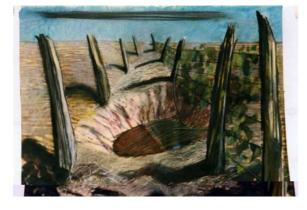
To some artists and writers, it was also an unconscious reminder of the meandering English country lane, much used in recruiting posters to spur civilians to defend their homeland: 'Isn't this worth fighting for?' asked one such poster, depicting an arcadia of thatched cottages, rolling meadows and leisurely winding lanes.

It was the final twist of the meandering road lined gracefully with trees, and to many the avenue would appeal as the most fitting memorial to fallen comrades. Officer Alexander Douglas Gillespie wrote from the trenches in 1916 that once the war had ended the governments of France and England should construct one long avenue between the lines from the Vosges to the sea. 'It would', he argued 'make a fine broad road on the 'No Man's Land' between the lines, with paths for pilgrims on foot, and plant trees for shade, and fruit trees so that the soil should not be altogether waste'. [11]

But Gillespie's vision of a Via Sacra was not to be. Despite much enthusiasm in the press, his vision of an endless commemorative avenue perished, as did he, in the formless void of the trenches.

Notes

1. Bernard Martin, Poor bloody Infantry: A Subaltern on the Western Front, 1987, p.41.
2. Charles Douie, The Weary Road: Recollections of a Subaltern of Infantry (1929/1988) p.39.
3. Keith Henderson, Letters to Helen,1917, p.4. Letter dated 6 June 1916.
4. George Coppard, With a Machine Gun to Cambrai, 1980, p.11.
5. Although now a rather dated geographical notion, a concise explanation of the three stages in the river's life is in L. Dudley Stamp, Britain's Structure and Scenery, New Naturalist, 1946 /Fontana 1972, pp.60-63.
6. Paul Maze. A Frenchman in Khaki, 1934, p.35. Extract dated 31 August 1914.
7. Cited in Alistair Horne, The Price of Glory, 1962, p.24.
8. Phillip Gibbs, Realities of War, 1920, p.292.
9. T.E. Hulme, 'Diary from the Trenches', Further Speculations, (Editor, Sam Hynes), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1955, p.157.
10. H.E.I. Mellersh, A Schoolboy at War, 1978, p. 135 - 136.
11. Alexander Douglas Gillespie, 'The Sacred Way', Letters from Flanders, Smith. Elder and Co., 1916, also quoted at length in E.B. Osborn (Ed), New Elizabethans. Bodley Head, 1919, pp. 112 - 114.

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 Il a à son actif de très nombreuses publications dans les domaines de l'histoire culturelle, de la géographie culturelle et des études du patrimoine. Il a écrit ou dirigé huit ouvrages, notamment des monographies sur les artistes de guerre Stanley Spencer et Paul Nash. Il a également publié sur les jardins de la paix, les sites de mémoire, les paysages commémoratifs, et sur le plus fameux des artistes de rue anonymes, Banksy.

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