The Terrible Art Of Designing A War Memorial

These names,” she wrote, “seemingly infinite in number, carry the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying those individuals into a whole. …Brought to a sharp awareness of such a loss, it is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss. For death is in the end a personal and private matter, and the area contained within the memorial is meant for personal reflection and private reckoning.”

This is Maya Lin’s memorial but not Lutyens’s. His is about Death the Victor, father of the Korean War. This is not surprising. War memorials are not easy to design, especially today, when Victory, a goddess for the Greeks, shows us an ambiguous face. The most successful memorials of modern times have therefore not been about victory as such but about the single, incontrovertible truth of war: that it kills a lot of people.

From that point of view, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington commemorates something still fresh in our consciousness, and is in all likelihood America’s greatest such monument—if we except the battlefields themselves that have been movingly shaped by the National Park Service: Antietam with its bucolic killing fields, Gettysburg with its Union monuments all musingly higgledy-piggledy while the Confederate guns come out of the woods in line.

But Maya Lin’s memorial has an ancestor perhaps even greater, certainly of a different cast from hers, though it, too, deals wholly with the dead. It is Sir Edwin Lutyens’s memorial to the dead of the Somme, built at Thiepval in France in 1924. Lutyens had already built the most complete modern monument to Empire and the Nation State in his design of the city of New Delhi. At Thiepval he designed the complementary monument to modern war. Maya Lin, then a senior at Yale College, had not yet seen Lutyens’s memorial when she designed her entry in the enormous competition that was held for the Vietnam Memorial in 1980, but the statement of intention that was required to accompany it remained to be written.

At that moment she happened to hear a lecture about Thiepval illustrated by a number of slides, some of which she later duplicated to use in Washington in defending her own memorial from the “gash of shame” accusation that had been leveled against it. She read Lutyens’s monument in her own terms and shaped it to her own gentle, sorrowful vision.

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Dedication of the memorial at Thiepval, France, in 1932—Its high arch screams. Now. No one is exempt. It is this that does it: the terrible courage of human beings advancing in the open toward pain, nothingness, the void: insatiable, unimaginable Death. There is no victory over it. But there they come, the men, unbroken, across the open ground. It is not to be borne.

It is much to the point that Lutyens clearly used the neo-grec pilgrimage church Notre-Dame-de-Brebières, in the town of Albert, just out of sight in the valley below, as the model for his memorial. He adopted its red brick and stone trim and abstracted their re-

The most successful tributes address the single, incontrovertible truth about war: that it kills a lot of people.

relationships and clarified and magnified their forms. The church, after repeated bombardment, had an unintended cross vault in the side of its tower, and Lutyens incorporated that, too, in his monument. Albert had been sung by all the poets in the British ranks because, by yet another fluke of bombardment, a statue of the Virgin and Child that crowned the tower hung perpendicular to the ground for many months, leaning over the street, as if Mary were about to dash the Saviour to the ground, driven mad by compassion for the marching men below. These Lutyens gathered up to sleep at Thiepval under the round eyes of Death and in his silent scream. And Death ferociously guards them. He is marked with their names, and men and the landscape alike lie under his horrific mask, his Aeschylean glare.

Maya Lin's memorial is not so terrible. She leads us gently into the ground, enveloping us slowly in the war. We can touch the names on the wall, cool to our fingertips. Then she brings us out of it. The dead become fewer and we are led up from the tomb toward, on the one side, Lincoln's Olympian temple and, on the other, Washington's obelisk rising to the sun—suggesting "a unity between the nation's past and present," Maya Lin wrote. Her memorial is hopeful, personal, as she says, but profoundly communal, too. We, the living, commune with the dead, are with them, love them. They have their country still. That is why this monument so broke the hearts of the veterans of this war—who felt that their country had cast them out forever. Not so at Thiepval. No communion is possible there. The dead are alone. They are separated from us forever by their terror, their courage and their pain, and by Death's monstrous fact. He is their Fatherland, and in what state they lie, confronting the empty rhetoric of things.