ONCE UPON A TIME IN RUSSIA

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It was an age and a land of extremes. On one level, a fairy land, one might have thought, replete with fables, and balls, and courtiers, and unhappy families, each of course unhappy in its own way, and duels and suicides and aristocratic love affairs, enshrined in the magical world of classical ballet—*Nutcracker*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*. But beyond or just below this shimmering, glittering surface, and contrary to most everything that Tchaikovsky or Petipa stood for, there also lurked, sizzled, simmered other forms of creative and destructive ferment. There was the poverty, the backwardness, and the oppression that may not have had any necessary and inevitable connection with, but eventually did feed into revolution. And meanwhile there was another artistic upheaval that was also rearing its head, something very different from what the court and the aristocracy traditionally consumed—the short happy life of the Russian avant-garde.

By all accounts it was an extraordinary phenomenon. Over 1890-1930, or in some interpretations beginning as early as 1850 and extending (despite Stalinism) as late as 1960, it was an explosion of counter-currents, involving daring initiatives and experiments in the hands of seemingly endless waves of brilliant individuals: painters like Kazimir Malevich, Alexandra Exter, Vladimir Tatlin, David Burliuk, Alexander Archipenko, Vasily Kandinsky, Naum Gabo, and Marc Chagall; poets of the caliber of Tretyakov, Pasternak, Yesenin, Mandelstam, Akhmatova or Mayakovsky; the composers Myaskovsky, Scriabin, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich; the dramatists Vakhtangov and Meyerhold; or those who moved from the stage to cinema, including Vertov, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko or Eisenstein. Far from sharing a uniform approach, they belonged to a variety of schools or styles, subscribing to diverse affinities, adherences, loyalties, or manifestoes. So there were the Suprematists, the Constructivists, the Futurists and the Cubo-Futurists, as well as *zaum*, the Imaginists, the Neo-primitivists, the Cosmists, and other forms of biopolitical utopianism. Still, collectively they had one thing in common. They were not just seen from the outside as avant-garde. This was also their own self-perception. Art was a transformative weapon. They regarded themselves not only as producing art, but producing art with a purpose, producing art against convention, producing art in opposition to prevailing tastes and values, to challenge and overcome the dominant aesthetic paradigm—and thereby also to change and improve society or humankind.

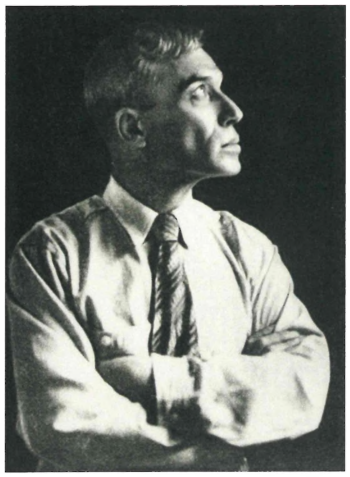
In retrospect, it appears to have been a desperately heroic and tragic quest, rendered even more poignant by the revolution that not only followed it, but also crushed it in utterly ruthless, callous, brutal fashion. Not only does this come across, even today, as an enormous drama, assuming the dimensions of a life-and-death story, a story of optimism and pessimism, first a miraculous birth and vibrancy and then a death, or should we say a murder; hopes of a new dawn and then a harsh descent into darkness. It also raises a series of questions about the connection between art and politics, or more specifically art and revolution. *Did this artistic and cultural efflorescence have anything to do with the coming of 1917 February or October? Was it part of their causation, or at least their constitutive outside?* Despite all its glory, in or by itself, the Russian avant-garde was not that peculiar. It was an avant-garde among many avant-gardes, starting, predictably, in France and spreading through the rest of Europe. But in all these other countries, there was no accompanying revolution.

In Russia there was. The revolution gave rise to its own myth, which keeps shrouding everything in its own mystery, and makes all debates that much more acute.

Most fundamentally, *was it necessary and inevitable?* Marxism had developed its own strongly affirmative theoretical apparatus in this regard. This was the working class revolution that the *Communist Manifesto* had already predicted back in 1848. There were other, parallel or complementary rationalizations at work. Plekhanov had noted, in *The Role of the Individual in History* (1898), that genius tends to come not all alone but in spurts, as embodied, for example, in Italian Renaissance painters, sculptors, and architects, or Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, or Napoleon's generals, or the men of the Scientific Revolution. This was because, he argued, there would frequently be a major, overriding issue or problem at a particular place and time, and it would attract large numbers of bright hopefuls to work on it, fostering a growth sector which might keep expanding even after a breakthrough was achieved. A good explanation, perhaps, of past phenomena; but seen in this light, why was there a comparable bunching in Russia in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century? It is tempting to answer that the big issue, which elicited this particular outpouring of talent, was a presentiment of revolution. *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. In this perspective, the avant-garde is one indication among many that Russia was ripe for or pregnant with something. Revolution happened. Therefore it was pregnant with revolution. And the avant-garde was a historical witness to, even the artistic herald of, the advent and the inevitability of this revolution.

This is much too naturalistic and naturalizing version of history. Still suffused with the lingering legacy of Hegelian, Marxist or other forms of organic evolutionism, it presents a totalizing, all-harmonious picture of everything that is happening in a given social formation at a particular moment—no disjunctions, no jagged edges; all actors and vectors working hand-in-glove, in the same direction, to bring about progress. Against it, I would like to suggest that first, there was nothing inevitable about the 1917 October or Bolshevik Revolution. It had nothing, but nothing to do with any objective, scientific laws of humanity's march into the future. Instead, it was an act of supreme voluntaristic opportunism that enabled a very small and marginal party to ambush the rest of society by pouncing on power in a special and irreproducible moment of war-induced paralysis. It was, therefore, a quite unforeseeable accident. Otherwise put, apart from the personal beliefs or longings of individual artists or literati, until World War I broke out, and even up to the fateful year of 1917, there was no general, social sense of expecting or being inspired by an imminent revolution

And secondly, art and revolution did not really hang together, at least not in the way that is proposed in pro-revolution narratives. The two were related, but not in a positive, consequential, one-after-the-other, or cause-and-effect kind of way. It was, of course, Russia that brought both into being, in the sense that its contradictory energies flowed into an artistic avant-garde as well as a political vanguard. It was also true that there was a profound connection between these two concepts; true, moreover, that not only political revolutionaries but many in the artistic or literary avant-garde, too, embraced or were swept along by ideas and ambitions of leading radical change. Many, indeed, were enthusiastic Bolsheviks, and *in their subjective self-consciousness*, surely, there was no contradiction between their commitment to both artistic and political revolution. This was clearly the case with Mayakovsky, with Vakhtangov, with Meyerhold, with Isaac Babel, with Eisenstein.



A young Boris Pasternak, full of hope and optimism. From 1922, he was always in the front ranks of Russia's lyrical poets. His novel *Doctor Zhivago*, which did not cover up its destructive human impact, was rejected for publication in the Soviet Union. Smuggled abroad, and published in Italy plus 18 other countries, in 1958 it won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Under immense pressure from the Soviet authorities, Pasternak was forced to reject the award.
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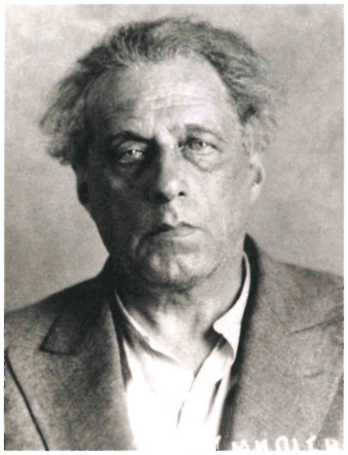

Meyerhold's mugshot at the time of his arrest by the NKVD. He was one of the first famous Russian artists to welcome the October Revolution. In 1920 he founded his own theatre, attaining immense popularity, though it was closed down by a Politbureau order in 1938. Arrested and tortured in 1939, he was sentenced to death on 1 February 1940, and shot the next day.
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Babel and his notebooks. He wanted to observe any and all details of life. *Red Cavalry* (despite enraging Marshal Budyonny with its many-sided realism), and then *Odessa Tales* became universally recognized masterpieces of Russian literature.
On 15th May 1939, four NKVD agents came to take Babel away. On 16th January 1940, Beria submitted an execution list of 346 "enemies of the party" (including Babel) to Stalin. His 26th January 1940 trial lasted only twenty minutes. He was shot by firing squad early on 27th January.
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Remembrance of things past. Posing for a Moscow group photo on 11th May 1924, from left to right: (1) the lyric poet and novelist Boris Pasternak; (2) the poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky; (3) Tomizi Tamiji Naito (Japanese writer); (4) Arseny Voznesensky (Soviet diplomat); (5) Olga Tretyakova (Russian actress); (6) film director Sergei Eisenstein; (7) another film-maker, Mayakovsky's friend and lover Lilya Brik.
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So for a peculiar historical moment of that great accidental success in the late 1910s and 20s, when the vanguard still needed the elite intellectual input of the avant-garde, the two did interact and overlap, giving rise to an illusion of the compatibility of revolutionary loyalty with artistic freedom. But this rare sense of exhilaration did not and could not last. For it was always an unequal, asymmetrical relationship. At the end of the day, the two spheres of art and politics were wholly different, as were their respective ambitions and projects. There was no question of who was going to adhere to whom, or who was expected to lead and who to follow. Whatever the *hubris* of its own most extravagant schemes might be, not even the Russian avant-garde was out to posit and defend any kind of hegemony. In contrast, it was the vanguard party that established and jealously guarded its absolute monopoly of power. This is not a matter of the 'bad' Stalin taking over from the supposedly 'good' Lenin—in whose time, and with whose full knowledge and approval, the Cheka's or political commissars' iron teeth were already nibbling at art and culture. What happened in the 1930s was that Stalin publicly acknowledged and formalized the disjuncture, the incompatibility. He destroyed the avant-garde, psychologically and physically, in order to install the 'socialist realist' cultural superstructure of the socialist state.

But so in retrospect, what really characterized Russia was not only the artistic avant-garde, splendidly varied and colorful though it was, but also the simultaneous emergence of a political vanguard, initially tiny and insignificant, alongside it. What was implicit in both was the belief that, whether in art or politics, society needs to be not just ruled (or governed) but *led* in order to accelerate, even to force, change and development. In both cases, it was an idea that evolved only from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution into the nineteenth century. In politics, for some thousands of years, there was basically just one 'period régime' of hereditary monarchies or dynastic states. Conversely, there was no pluralism—no room for ideo-political proliferation, democracy, or different political parties. Similarly, in art, too, there was only one 'period art' per each geographical niche of such traditional agrarian societies. In any comprehensive art history textbook, for example, you will find separate chapters on Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Persian, Indian, Chinese or Islamic art, while the story of European art (or art in Europe) will also proceed chronologically from the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance, to the Late Renaissance, Mannerism, and the Baroque. The point is that for all these ages and cultures, style and technique were purely personal. There were no collective groups or schools to speak of.

Change came with modernity. Public space expanded; new social classes and historical agencies emerged, breaking out of previous dictates and hegemonies to gain increasing autonomy. The printing press led to a quantum jump in the circulation of ideas. Newspapers and periodicals made it possible to address 'everybody'—the entire nation, all mankind, or the working class imagined not as a small fraction but a vast majority. Following Schiller, *Alle Menschen werden Brüder* [all men are brothers], wrote and composed Beethoven in the fourth movement of his Ninth Symphony, following it up with *Seid umschlungen, Millionen! Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt!* [rise and embrace, millions; this kiss is for the whole world]. That was 1824. Before or after, equally universal in their tones of voice and forms of address were the American *Declaration of Independence* (1776), the [French] *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789), or the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). What is the best form of government —or alternatively, how to make the best revolution? Liberalism, Nationalism, Socialism. Conservatism, Constitutionalism, Republicanism,

Radicalism. Marxism, Leninism, Communism, Fascism, Nazism. Maoism, Peronism, Chavism, and other Third World ideologies. Competing 'isms' arose, formed and reformed, sometimes fragmenting into smaller and smaller factions. It is significant that a parallel development should have taken place in literature, art and music, where preferred styles began to be advocated, to gather adherents, and to grow into schools only from the late-eighteenth into the nineteenth century, giving rise to another series of large or small 'isms,' including Romanticism, Realism, Classicism or Neo-classicism, Impressionism and Expressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Futurism or Situationism, each with its own vision of the only way to do good or true or correct art. In line with the exacerbation of epistemological self-confidence and monistic factionalism, here, too, there rapidly arose a welter of manifestos or comparable meta-texts, ranging from Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* (1769-1790), through Marinetti's *Founding Manifesto of Futurism* (1909), Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), *Du 'Cubisme'* by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger (1912), to Tristan Tzara's *Dada Manifesto* of 1918 and the *Two Surrealist Manifestos* of 1924. This last incident is particularly interesting. There were two such manifestos, because two rival factions had arisen within the Surrealist movement. Yvan Goll published the *Manifeste du surrealism* on 1st October 1924 and then André Breton published his own *Manifeste du surrealism* on 15th October 1924. Both sides were behaving virtually like political parties. They were so hostile to each other as to come to blows at one point. Surrealism thereby descended into a history of fractures, resignations, and excommunications.

This was so incredibly similar to the history of socialist factionalizing, such as between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, or between Stalinists and Trotskyists, or between Social Democrats and Communists, because by then the further development of industrial society had ushered in an age of not only groups or schools but vanguards and avant-gardes. A constantly accelerating stream of invention and innovation kept transforming all spheres and conditions virtually overnight. It was an unprecedented time of upheaval, when anything and everything seemed possible. One consequence was an uncontrollable proliferation of niches and life-styles, which fostered ever-increasing emancipation, opposing and discounting all establishments, and promoting artists' or writers' own authority against existing forms of authority. The Renaissance had brought forth the likes of Leonardo and Michelangelo as the new heroes. Romanticism refashioned them into daimonic geniuses. From the ranks of Hegel's *world-historic individuals*, Carlyle's *great men*, or Nietzsche's *übermensch*, they grew into new prophets of the truth, which now anybody might possess—standard bearers of monistic grand narratives. A further consequence was to exacerbate the clash between tradition and modernity. Paradoxically, this led not to satisfaction but to dissatisfaction and impatience with the pace of change: an imperious and adventurous desire to make it happen even more quickly.

This is why and how *fin de siècle* vanguardism or avant-gardism became so widespread, though the specific genesis, the scope and the respectability of the two concepts varied. Much more common was the notion of the artistic avant-garde, the use of which did not necessarily reflect any radical political preference. It was one thing to belong to the avant-garde, whether in others' or one's own estimate, and another thing to observe it and write or talk about it. Significantly, it was a follower of Saint-Simon, that is to say an 'utopian socialist,' who originated it. In 1825, Olinde Rodrigues wrote an essay where he called on artists (together with scientists and industrialists) to serve as 'the people's avant-garde' in the cause of social and political reform. So at the start, even the

artistic avant-garde carried a political edge, which as we have seen carried on into many painters, poets, writers or dramatists who embraced radicalism across the board. But as artists, they could only *support* political radicalism, while what they themselves could and did *produce* was radical art. Over time, therefore, the avant-garde developed, and was publicly recognized, as an artistic enterprise. Yes, it was innovative, experimental, non-traditional, and unorthodox. It broke the rules, stepped outside the line, dispensed with convention, pushed the boundaries, and challenged the establishment. But it was not necessarily perceived as politically dangerous, or alien beyond any reasonable limits. Eventually it won respect and admiration from all classes and sectors of society, including the conservatives. And even when it shocked the most, as with the 29th May 1913 world premiere of Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*, which caused a near-riot, it was always about art.

The same cannot be said, however, of the other element in this pair of terms, that is to say the vanguard. Not only was it much more explicitly and narrowly political, but it was also part and parcel of a peculiar political theory and vocabulary outside which it did not exist—in the sense that what these radicals postulated as the vanguard was not even recognized by the rest, i.e. the vast majority of society, as the vanguard. The French Revolution had come to stand as a model of mass urban revolt. After the defeat of the 1848 uprisings, this no longer seemed viable. In western Europe, where democracy offered much greater promise, liberals turned away from revolution to pursuing reform through expanding and developing parliamentary institutions. It was not here, therefore, that the notion of a vanguard originated or developed. In central or eastern Europe, on the other hand, reaction took over. Monarchies became ever more despotic, supported by landholding aristocracies looking to consolidate their grip over millions of peasants in the throes of 'the second serfdom.'

It was here, then, that the contradiction between tradition and modernity assumed potentially cataclysmic proportions. Against such entrenched autocratic régimes, post-1848 revolutionaries despaired of overcoming the Church and the secret police to reach, educate and awaken the masses in the cause of popular revolution. Instead of such political preparation, involving decades of patient organizing and propaganda, they began to turn to conspiratorial tactics: tiny groups of militants sworn into absolute secrecy and total loyalty banding together to assassinate kings, tsars or emperors, or their leading ministers, or their chiefs of police—in the hope that such selective murders would somehow expose the underlying weakness of the only superficially omnipotent régime, thereby stirring the people itself into action. In more developed countries like Germany, Marxist socialists comprehensively rejected this approach, opting to nurture a much more normal type of political party and activity now resting on a working class basis. In Russia, however, Lenin both criticized and at the same time borrowed and incorporated the idea (of course without ever admitting it) into his notion of a new type of double-tiered, semi-secret and semi-legal party that would serve as the vanguard of the proletariat, its small clandestine nucleus corresponding to the Carbonari's or the Narodniks' or the Young Turks' sworn-to-secrecy cells, but at the same time maintaining its 'legal air-pipes,' as Bolshevik theory put it, through its extensions or implantations in labor unions or other mass organizations. It would not, in other words, be the party of the entire working class but only of its vanguard elements. But when the historical opportunity presented itself, it would also be able to mobilize, through its vanguard, the entire class.

Generically speaking, therefore, a vanguard, or for that matter any member of a vanguard, was not simply a leading individual or group that just happened to stand out from the crowd in his

or her own time. Neither was he or she a pioneer or path breaker, or someone who was the first to make it to a new idea, country or discovery. Caesars, Alexanders or Napoleons had always existed, as had, at least after the fifteenth century, Leonardos or Michelangelos. *Vanguardism*, in other words, was not the same as *leadership*. Like Leninism on the one hand, and Fascism or Nazism on the other (to all of which it was related in complex ways), it was a completely new phenomenon. It proposed to create a small, tightly organized minority (the vanguard) that would be acting on behalf of the real but unrecognized interests of a supposed majority by consciously and deliberately setting a model or example, voluntaristically creating a new agenda of its choice, whether of aesthetics or politics, that simply wasn't there to begin with, and then ideally, dictating, forcing, imposing it on (the rest of) society. It was not limited to Leninism, but it was Leninism that made a complete theory of it. It was very much present in Fascist or Nazi practice, too, though in their hyper-nationalist populism the latter refrained from articulating it while building it into the *Führerprinzip*, where the vanguard is further reified into just the supreme leader's persona. Outside these ultra-radical, extreme-left or extreme-right movements, however, the concept did not gain widespread circulation. The artistic avant-garde, most everybody saw as the avant-garde. But only those belonging to this inner world of vanguardism saw and described their preferred parties or organizations—such as the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, one faction of which would eventually become the Russian and then the Soviet Communist Party (Bolsheviks)—as the vanguard, whether of the workers or the whole people. For the rest, if not revolutionaries or communists in more neutral terms, more pejoratively it was anarchists, subversives, or even terrorists.

On the one hand, therefore, it was no accident that the terms or concepts of the vanguard and the avant-garde should have arisen more or less at the same time, and furthermore to have interacted perhaps to a considerable extent, in a new European age of vanguardism. Basically, they both reflected a supremely optimistic belief in the capacity of active minorities to change society. But at the same time, they did not coexist everywhere; it was in going west to east across Europe, from economically and politically more advanced to less and less advanced societies, that not only artistic avant-gardes, generally recognized as such, but also political vanguards, only self-proclaimed, came into being. And even there and then, ultimately they proved incompatible. By the avant-garde, artists meant one thing, while what politicians, meaning revolutionaries, understood by the vanguard was entirely different. For a time, they (or at least some of them) supported and became fellow travelers of the revolution. But at the end of the day, the vanguard crushed the avant-garde, as the political revolution destroyed the artistic revolution. Those who had initially put their art at the service of the revolution became more and more alienated, to the point where they could no longer prevent their personal feelings from rising to the surface.

There were, there could be, no happy endings to such existential crises. Many fled, never to return: Kandinsky, Stravinsky, Horowitz, Balanchine, Nijinsky, Diaghilev, Chagall, Gabo... a seemingly unending stream of refugees or émigrés continuing with Nureyev, Baryshnikov, or Valery Panov and Galina Panova, in late twentieth century. Others like Vsevolod Meyerhold, Osip Mandelstam, or Isaac Babel were directly crushed by what Bukharin would call 'the infernal machine' (though only when it finally came for him). Anna Akhmatova's entire family was wiped out, while Pasternak or Bulgakov were cowed into submission. Hammered by waves of praise and denunciation, Shostakovich reflected his schizophrenia onto the tension between his symphonies and string quartets.

Petrov-Vodkin's 1922 oil portrait of Anna Akhmatova. One of twentieth-century Russia's three greatest lyric poets, she achieved early fame, though her personal, introspective 'bourgeois' style then caused her to be ostracized by the new régime. Unofficially banned through a 1925 party resolution, she also lost both her husbands to the Gulag and the secret police. Over 1935-40 she wrote *Requiem*, her masterpiece, about Stalin's terror.

Yesenin's tragic life. From 1913 he was hounded by the Tsarist, and then from 1922 by the Soviet secret police. In 1917, he first embraced the February and then the October revolutions, though he was quickly disillusioned. He was arrested twice in 1923, and then four more times in 1924. On 28th January 1925, he was found dead in his hotel room in St Petersburg. It was reported that he had hanged himself. Counter-claims that he may have been murdered by the OGPU have not been dispelled to this day.

Yesenin, probably forced into depression through increasing harassment by the NKVD, committed suicide on 28th December 1925, when he was only thirty, leaving behind a 'Farewell' poem written in his own blood. That same year, Mayakovsky went on a trip to New York. In his poem *Back home!* he wrote about how, while proletarians arrive at communism from below, it was 'from poetry's skies' that he had 'plunge[d] into communism.' It was like confessing a crime. Feeling that he somehow had to atone for his intellectual, hence 'bourgeois' origins, he descended into some quite abject self-humiliation, proclaiming that he wanted to be no more than a cog in the party-state machine:

I want the Gosplan to sweat in debate,
assigning me goals a year ahead,
I want a commissar with a decree
to lean over the thought of the age.
I want the heart to earn
its love wage at a specialist's rate.
I want the factory committee
to lock my lips when the work is done.
(...)
and Stalin to deliver his Politbureau
reports about verse in the making
as he would about pig iron
and the smelting of steel....

Mayakovsky at his most charismatic. He called his first great poem *The Thirteenth Apostle*, but faced with Tsarist censorship changed it to *A Cloud in Trousers*. With his stormy energy and love affairs, trying to bring him under control was like trying to squeeze a cloud into trousers, he was saying. He embraced the revolution, drew propaganda posters, wrote sloganeering ditties. He went back and forth between serving the party and "agitprop catching in his throat." He committed suicide in 1930.

But this was not the original ending. Earlier, Mayakovsky had written an ineffably more genuine, personal, melancholy conclusion:

I want to be understood by my country,
but if I fail to be understood – what then?
I shall pass through my native land
to one side, like a shower of slanting rain.

Was it a premonition? Five years later, on 14th April 1930 Vladimir Mayakovsky also committed suicide. 'Love's boat,' read a line from the last poem that was found in his pocket, 'has smashed against the reefs of life.'

Still we are left with an iridescent, incandescent brilliance. ■