Conclusion

The nineteenth century in Russia was a period of growing intellectuality and cultural maturity. Consequent to the growth of education and an increase in literacy, the role of literature came to be regarded as crucial to the formation of mental attitudes of modern man in the country. Literature very rapidly became a major subject of artistic preoccupation and critical deliberation among intellectuals who now concerned themselves with the questions of aesthetics and utility in this particular cultural form. The opening up of this crucial question regarding the purpose of literature was to a major extent the work of Vissarion Belinsky. Standing at a point of time which saw Western ideas and philosophies superimpose themselves on an unsophisticated and typically folk tradition of culture, (Belinsky himself was a product of this Western intellectuality which had infiltrated into Russia) Belinsky was quick to identify an orientation towards nationality in the Russian mode of thinking. To his mind this nationality of spirit was adequately represented in Russian literature which therefore had a more specific social role to fulfil. Belinsky's identification of literature as a vital medium which could be used to mould cultural attitudes led him to analyse the merit of literary productions of his times as well as of preceding eras with great precision and depth. The emergence of literary criticism as a serious subject of deliberation among belles lettrists in Russia in the nineteenth century was a consequence of the Belinskian probings into the merit of the literary output of the period. The polemics that resulted from this new concern with literature, brought to the forefront the basic question regarding the purpose that literature was to fulfil. With Czarist repression attempting to throttle freedom of art and expression, intellectuals of the sixties with the revolutionary ideas as their most important concern took their cue from Belinsky and set the trend in emphasising the dual role of literature. They were convinced that literature could be used as a tool for evading the censors as well as influencing the masses. The most striking manifestation of these ideas could be
found in the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century when Nikolai Chernyshevsky emerged as the mentor of a new generation of intellectuals. With the populist outlook distinctly gaining ground in the intellectual psyche, many a young writer and critic showed a tendency towards rejecting as useless literature devoid of any social relevance. Journals like *Contemporary* and more importantly *Fatherland Notes* played a significant role in this process by consciously abetting this utilitarian attitude towards literature and encouraging populist writers like Uspensky and Zlatovratsky and critics like Skabichevsky and Mikhailovsky, to hold their own in the literary milieu of Russia of the sixties and seventies.

Notwithstanding this narrowness of outlook among a section of the intellectuals in pre-revolutionary Russia, the question of aesthetics however, remained a major concern of many writers and artists. Writing in an atmosphere of populist fervour, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy never allowed utilitarian attitudes to constrain their style. The aesthetic concern which dominated their intellectual make-up, contributed in a large way in imparting a new stature to the relatively young literature of modern Russia, which attracted serious attention from the literary world of Western Europe. In fact Western Europe’s deliberation on the question of art for art’s sake now found a parallel in Russian intellectual polemics, initiated in the writings of these authors. The commitment to pure art, which came out forcefully in many serious non-literary writings of these two major figures, acted as a counterfoil to tendentious literature which was threatening to overwhelm literary creativity at this point of time.

The emergence of Anton Chekhov was perhaps a high point in the Russian litterateur’s quest for true art and emancipation from the populist stranglehold. Chekhov’s deliberate avoidance of polemical issues, his reluctance to put down in writing any views regarding the purpose of art and the success of his masterly
short stories which almost always desisted from moralising were all ample proof of Chekhov's abhorrence towards any kind of preaching through art. Chekhov's firm negation in a remarkably unobtrusive manner of any kind of politicisation of art was perhaps more significant, since radicalisation of the critical consciousness over decades had helped populist criticism to spread its tentacles over a major portion of serious literature in Russia. Chekhov, through his creation of a new genre in the form of the short story, which handled a remarkable variety of themes and which contained a range of stylistic innovations, emerged as a phenomenon, which populist criticism found unusually difficult to handle. As the reading public had increased immensely in volume by the second half of the nineteenth century, with provincial and rural Russia becoming increasingly discerning in their reading habits, the phenomenon of Chekhovian popularity seemed quite incomprehensible to populist critics. Chekhov not only published successfully in thick journals like Russian Wealth, Northern Herald and Messenger of Europe, but enjoyed a more wide-ranging readership by writing in popular journals like Niva and Oskolki. The stature which Chekhov ultimately gained as a writer, helped him to influence a young group of writers whose literary attitudes represented a transition towards artistic vitality rather than a preoccupation with social relevance in the execution of their art. Thus writers like Korolenko, Tikhonov, Shcheglov, Pisemsky, Kuprin and Bunin formed a rising group around Chekhov, some of whom (Korolenko, Kuprin and Bunin in particular) were to distinctly make their mark in Russian literature at the turn of the century. These like-minded authors together, contributed quite casually to a change in the tone and temper of aesthetics which increasingly acquired a more innovative and imaginative orientation. Utilitarian ethics in art began to be regarded an outdated.

Chekhov's stories perhaps contributed in a big way towards this change. His deliberate avoidance of themes of social relevance, his laconic descriptions of
ordinary everyday happenings and his nonchalant probings into the complex emotions of the human mind, all of which he presented to his reader with a deliberate toning down of the authorial voice represented a negation of the established (populist) canons of writing. Chekhov’s play-writing, most of which came towards the end of his life, turned out to be even more intricately stylised than his stories. Impressionistic in their exposition, Chekhov’s plays seemed incomprehensible to audiences unused to sophisticated stylisation on stage. However the existence of potential talent on stage in the personalities of V. I. Nemirovich Danchenko, K. S. Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Olga Knipper i.e. producers, directors and actors who were in search of new pastures in the dramatic art, represented a happy coincidence in which Chekhovian drama found scope for a thorough utilisation of its potentialities. The impressionistic and undramatic nature of Chekhov’s plays encouraged innovative stylised theatricality which was very soon to lead towards new trends such as Symbolism in Russian theatre.

In conclusion I would like to suggest that it was in this Symbolist trend in Russian literature that Chekhov’s literary work reached a culminating point. Here, I refer to the literary circle which, along with other Modernist writers, dominated the literary scenario in the early twentieth century. Reviews of their works appeared in the important journals of the time. They were acclaimed by critics as well as elitist readers of the intelligentsia. Among the “people’s intelligentsia” or the middling section of readership, comprising often self taught village school teachers, local officials, medical assistants and so on, the high art of the Symbolists did not make much evident headway. However, given the broad-ranging and

complex nature of their influence on publishing and writing, it is impossible to dismiss their significance even at this level. Symbolism constituted a new literary cult represented by figures such as Briusov, Balmont, Zinaida Gippus, Bely, Ivanov and Blok who made their presence felt in the Russian literary environment, inspired by French and Belgian Symbolism. The early Symbolists like Balmont wrote colourful, imaginative poetry of happiness aiming to arouse the senses. Often a preoccupation with mysticism led these poets like Briusov and Gippus to be regarded as decadent. In spite of the fact that later Symbolists like Ivanov, Bely and Blok often concerned themselves with questions of "art and reality", their poetry reflected their religious and philosophical orientation. The principal aim of the Symbolists was to express their feeling to the fullest extent through their poetry even if it implied the eroding of conventional norms. Briusov stated "The creative artist has one aim; to express his own mood, and to express it fully. General comprehensibility or accessibility is impossible to achieve, for the simple reason that people are different from one another". Symbolism in art saw poetry totally unconventional in format, often positing themes of intense personal and often mystical experience, flouting conventional poetic norms and yet having an impact on a sensitive audience. The fact that Symbolism attained a certain degree of popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century in Russia, I would like to suggest, was a vindication of the Chekhovian era with its explicit orientation towards a purity in artistic effort.

After the October Revolution, moreover, the polemical legacy on the question of the worth of art for its own sake was carried on by the Symbolist movement in the course of its subtle confrontation with the Soviet regime. While many Modernist poets (Mayakovsky according to some) were to toe the line with...
the Bolsheviks in their attempts to impose communist dogma on literature, according to recent studies, literary theorists such as Victor Shklovsky and Boris Eikhenbaum constantly attempted to highlight freedom from any kind of acquiescence to authority in art. ³ By this time, the wheel had turned full circle. Populist endeavour to manipulate art to suit political needs was replaced by Bolshevik efforts to impose political specificities on all cultural activity including literature. The worth of artistic freedom remained the constant and triumphant refrain, however, of Symbolist writers who relayed echoes of literary theories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into the Soviet period.

It would be a fitting tribute to Anton Chekhov and the group of young writers around him, to point out that it was their mature assessment of the duties of a true artist and their fundamental commitment to their art that made such a “continuity” possible. Not only did their endeavour ensure that a high literary quality was maintained in Russia throughout the later decades of the nineteenth century, but their efforts and ideas forestalled the deleterious impact of the threat posed to high literature by excessive revolutionary enthusiasm at this earlier time. The credit for preventing the reduction of literature to the level of propaganda well before the onslaught of Bolshevism must certainly go to Chekhov and his entourage. It is with them that the laurels must rest for the preservation of the concerns of the “golden age”, when those concerns first faced vigorous challenge.