"I hope it will be said of my work that it was well-disposed towards life, while being acquainted with Death". 

- Thomas Mann

Man in Mann's fiction is like Hardy's protagonists in a desperate quest after pattern and meaning. The horrifying realization slowly dawns on him that there never can be a design to life - it lies beyond the petty claims of reason and morality and is erratic and whimsical often bizarre and agonizing. Hardy's fictional structure evokes awe and tragic despair. Mann's fictional ambience on the other hand, heightens a surrealistically grotesque incredulity at the irony of life and man's futile attempts to categorize and ennoble life by consecrating its vagrant events as providentially planned incidents. The grotesque element is the result of the dryly detached tone that distances the author from the pain of existence. In Hardy, man is passionately involved to the end with attempts to subjugate life to meaning, but in Mann man seeks music and highly intellectualized pursuits that take him into the stillness of death. Cessation of life, of vigour and enterprise,
of battles and pursuits, stillness is what enamours Mann's heroes.

But if Mann's heroes and heroines are intended to depict dying wills surrendering to apathy and death, their fictional rendering is by no means restricted to this purpose. Mann's intellectual and philosophical convictions were based on Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and Wagner, but Mann's creative soul speaks a different tongue; even in the depiction of a dying society, one is pleasantly surprised to discover a certain passion and power that one associates only with surging life. Mann's technical excellence, it can be argued, is just another symptom of the final stages of a withering life force, but Mann's creative execution cannot quite be described as the perfection of cold marble, it pulsates with life. His characters are delineations of particular schools of thought, as clearly demarcated and defined as the characters of a morality play but their intellectual embodiment does not define them totally. Thomas Buddenbrook is a man who stands for the dying individual but isn't his evocation itself a testimony to the wonderful undeniable gifts of life? Mann's work can hardly be described as that of the intellectual bystander who has submitted to the power of death. Every detail he brings in from the barber's morning rituals on Thomas to Hans Castorp's unadulterated joy in his cigar, speak of a feeling for life, that has not fallen prey to a decaying will. In creating tapestries of
deteriorating life, Mann has given the richest tribute to life, its nuances and its unpredictable quirks and joys, its ups and downs. What transpires in the long run to impress us is that even the deep experience of pain is a tremendous experience of life and to immerse in it even while accepting the lack of any verification of pattern or meaning from an all-powerful agency - that is to be worthy of life. Mann imposed Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's intellectual reading on his fictional universe, but his instinctive feeling for life evaded the grim impress of his philosophy and it is this that brims over the rim of his fictional universe, filling his reader with a wonderful sense of the richness of existence.

If Mann unconsciously betrays a positive involvement with life, there is irony in the contrast between the effect and thematic contents of his work. For the reader apart from becoming aware of the nihilistic reading of life that German philosophy had engendered is also awakened to the opulence of life, the opulence of not just happiness and fulfilment, but the painfully enriching experience of anguish, the lethargy of ennui, the oscillating emotions of fearful hope, the agony of loss and parting, the bitter taste of rejected achievement and also the unpredictable and ironic turns that life takes, with just one final certainty at the end of it all, beyond which there may be just dust and ashes, utter non-being- even then life doesn't lose its glory and splendour: to
have lived and lost is better than not to have lived at all. (with due apologies to Milton for the liberty).

In pursuing Thomas's career or Hanno's career one is moved at their inability to ward off the lure of death. Hollingdale points out that Mann equates decadence with physical decadence. Hence hope lies in uplifting man physically and then finding a new basis for new values which is why with all its nihilistic content Mann and his reader do not lose sight of the unavoidable richness and possibilities of life and human achievement. Mann's fictional world, and creative style and tone embody the pathos of nihilism but the form it assumes in the obsession with physical infirmity and decay - is also a pointer to the solution - find a physical remedy to the physical ailment and the sickening miasma of morbid intellectual and spiritual preoccupation will yield to a healthy life-oriented basis for constructive values.

The complex vision of life that Mann brings to his fictional work envisages the irreducible puzzle of life. Irony is prevalent at so many levels - conscious or unconscious - in the method, tone, and the theme of his creation that to embrace all its manifold implication is almost impossible. The pursuit of certain specific strands of the ironic cast of Mann's vision illuminates a mind overwhelmed by the tragic
desolation of life devoid of order, logic, or significance, but there is no fatigue or defeat in its response to the marvellous nuances of human behaviour. Like Gustave Aschenbach Mann may be 'the spokesman of those who labour on the edge of exhaustion' with this difference that he has diagnosed the problem.

Life is not discarded or abandoned......and those who do so are shown as highly pathetic characters. Mann brings the vulnerability of life into focus. He cherished life sufficiently to bring all the depths of his perception and his indefatigable energy to his voluminous rendering of the oceanic flow of life, of people and their wonderfully distinguished individuality, their humours, eccentricities, affectations, weaknesses, loves, hopes, desires and disappointments. Only a man who sees salvageable material will bear against so much current to hold aloft something our fatigued wills may have no strength to bother with. Mann's irony is the language of man fighting pain not of cynicism.

Mann consciously sought to shrug off the nihilistic yoke that his reading of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche had burdened him with. That he didn't quite reach the tranquility of complete faith is fairly borne out by what may appear like the contrived endings of some of his later novels. But despite what he assumed was his faith and despite what he thought was his conversion to
'democratic humanism', he unconsciously betrays a positive affirmation of life and what may be called existential values rather than nihilistic pathos in his fictional renderings. A whole world of complexities underlie the ironic vision of Thomas Mann.