THE IRONIC VISION OF LIFE
IN
THOMAS MANN'S FICTION
(A SELECTIVE STUDY)

PREFACE

Mann's presence on the literary screen of the 20th century is so overwhelmingly towering that it is impossible to ignore him without missing out on a vital strand of the mainstream of modern experience and response. His literary output was prodigious and he had a tremendous capacity for analysing and synthesizing the widest spectrum possible of human thought, as also the varied nuances of emotional sensibility and feeling that go into our encounter with life and death. As a German writer whose life span (1875 - 1955) stretched across a crucially significant and painful era of human history he was close to the surge and ebb of violent passions that stirred up the the I and II World Wars and seemed to signal the barbaric celebration of human extinction. Moulded and conditioned by the nihilistic interpretations of life as embodied in the works of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Mann's voluminous novels and many novelas seem to be reconciled to an acquiescent approach to life and inevitable death. But it is not hopeless despair or bitter fury that underlines Mann's writing. He offers no strained philosophy of optimism, of faith, or far-fetched meaning. Like his philosophic godfathers he has no compunctions about looking the horror of existence in the face. His literary art is, like music,
a temporary reprieve from life's repetitive process of desire, endeavour and frustration, a vicious cyclic pattern that is finally laid to rest by the meaningless oblivion of death. But the feeling which the reader carries away after a reading of Mann is not futility but 'the surpassing of the idea of despair by a sense of spiritual tranquility'.

This study attempts to probe the irony that results from this paradox: the sustained nihilistic content of Mann's works and its power to evoke a tremendous sense of the latent richness of life, along with the possibility of achieving it. Irony in Mann's fiction consists in the juxtapositioning of a slow but steady draining of vitality against the highest and richest possibilities of human endeavour and achievement. I have been constrained by the limits of a paper such as this to concentrate on a few chosen novels and novellas and highlight the intense involvement with life and the bewildering submission to a nihilistic approach to existence that life and its meaningless experience of pain forced on Mann. In an evaluation of the ironic vision of the writer, as contained in selected works, I have focussed on the most fruitful period of his artistic career, beginning with Buddenbrooks (1901) an achievement that thrust him into literary prominence at the age of 25, and extending to the twilight zone of his life to include The Black Swan, a novella published in 1953, two years before his death.

A direct appreciation of Mann's literary achievement, restricted though it may be to a vintage of his serious works
of fiction (excluding his lighter, humorous novels and his epic exploration of biblical myth in *Joseph and his Brothers*) may yield a greater insight into the psyche of the artistic consciousness than the avowed beliefs and policies of the public figure. Mann claimed in later years that his 'moral horizons' had outgrown the restrictions laid down by later German romanticism as it found expression in Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wagner. Mann believed that his vision gradually came to incorporate the European democratic religion of humanity. But the novel that followed not long after in 1947, *Doctor Faustus* and the novella *The Black Swan* in 1953 continued to be expressions of the nihilistic approach to life. One cannot escape the persistent nihilistic pattern of Mann's fiction. But at the same time one has to resolve the undeniable humanistic appeal that Mann exercised over generations of readers acclimatized to an atmosphere that bred disillusionment, horror and apathetic surrender to the forces of annihilation. What concerns us here is what lies at the heart of Mann's irony; the capacity to assess both the uncompromising viciousness of life and the magnificent splendour of human experience, endeavour and achievement in the realms of imagination and reason.

In the interests of a fairly comprehensive outlook on the position of Mann within the framework of modern thought and achievement, I have begun my study with a consideration of his relation to the prevailing philosophies of the time, existentialism and nihilism, narrowing my focus of attention to the ironic attitudes these schools of thought adopt in relation to pontific interpretations of life. Chapter II of this study attempts to delineate the influences in Mann's personal and intellectual development
and the kind of impact this had on his artistic work. In Chapters III and IV, I have concentrated on 2 major novels, *Buddenbrooks* and *The Magic Mountain* and 3 novellas, *Tonio Kroger*, *Death in Venice* and *The Black Swan*, analysing them in the light of Mann's ironic vision of life. Chapter V concludes the study, synthesizing the above strands of thought, focussing attention on Mann's overwhelming capacity to stir an awareness of the fecund possibilities of human existence despite his ironic and tragic vision of life.

It may not be amiss here to mention the obvious handicap a student labours under in studying a foreign author without direct access to his works - the ignorance of the language which serves as the vital artistic medium of expression and creation, in this case, German. Language experts have expressed dissatisfaction with existing translations of Mann's works but if the author's genius is so profoundly stirring in mediocre translation it is only an indicator of the glory of the original and, one has perforce, to learn to be content with available reflections of the same.