CHAPTER III

WORKS: BUDDENBROOKS, TONIO KROGER,
      DEATH IN VENICE

"The nihilistic movement is merely the expression
of a physiological decadence".¹
- Nietzsche

Buddenbrooks is a semi-autobiographical evocation
of the life of upper class families in the latter half of
the 19th century, committed to increasing prosperity
through hard and careful management of finances. Behind
the gay swirls of lovely women at sumptuous banquets, the
scrupulous regard to social niceties and etiquette, the
graceful manners and affectionate family gatherings there
are arguments about domestic finances, about arranged
marriages of convenience, heartbreaking farewells between
lovers separated by rank and class, heated quarrels
between the artist and the banker behind the facade of
aristocratic nonchalance there are qualms about choices
made, about decisions to be taken.

Johann Buddenbrook is the existing patriarch of
the clan. He lives with his son Consul Jean Buddenbrook
and his wife in a lovely palatial home. The Consul has
two sons and two daughters. Tom and Christian are
inclined to business and the theatre respectively. Tony
is vivacious and attractive while Clara, the youngest is
a serious pious girl and her role is important only to
the extent that it affects the rest of the family. Johann Buddenbrook has amassed a huge capital and is proud of having stabilized enough wealth and reputation to fear no rivalry. Hearty and outspoken, he has tremendous faith in his second son, Jean. Gotthold is his first born, from an earlier marriage and has earned his father's displeasure by marrying against his express wishes into a middle class family. He is constantly badgered by his son for a bigger settlement than the one agreed upon soon after his marriage. Jean is inclined to support his father against the increasing demands of his step-brother but delicacy advises restraint.

Consul Jean Buddenbrook is religious and principled. In delineating Jean, Mann seems to be having a dig at the religious fervour of the calculating businessman who thinks it advisable to keep the Higher Authorities in good humour lest they thwart earthly plans for prosperity and profit. Jean is a fervent Christian but a shrewd businessman and there is nothing that he will not sacrifice at the altar of the firm's welfare. The chronicle Diary is a highly regarded record of the family's devotion to the firm and it is potent enough to clinch matters in Tony's mind and make her determined to give up the man she loves and marry the man her parents believe she should, even though she finds him extremely repulsive.

Mann's saga of the Buddenbrook clan begins in an atmosphere of rich family ties, friendly community gatherings, of strongly maintained traditions and loyalties. But the canker of decay has begun to make itself felt in the
lives of individual characters. Christian the younger son, is given to digestive disorders and dental problems, which in Mann is a sure sign of declining vitality. He has a marked inclination for the theatre. Jean Buddenbrook, despite his strong advocacy of the family motto 'Attend with zeal to thy business by day but do none that will hinder thee from sleep at night', and his Christian piety is not above lying to Grunlich about the actual sum of family dowry. Wealth is important enough to justify a loveless marriage in the case of Tony and Thomas. Uncle Gotthold and Christian go ahead with their unapproved matches but nothing but misery comes of that too. Neither Thomas's practical industry nor Christian's profligate indulgences lead to happiness.

In the conflict between Christian and Thomas, Mann is using a theme that he will repeat in many of his works: namely 'the conflict between bourgeois and artist, the irreconcilability of the artist and his bourgeois environment', a conflict which will find further elaboration in the history of Hanno, who will embody Mann's interpretation of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche: that the artist represents decadence, in so far as art is the result of self-abnegation of will (Schopenhauer) and that weakness of will is the mark of decreasing vitality (Nietzsche). The nihilistic impress is patently obvious. The whole novel in fact is an elaboration of Mann's version of Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean philosophy.

The Buddenbrook history unfolds to reveal Tom's marriage to the beautiful Gerda. Her silent brooding
nature and musical inclinations add to her ethereal loveliness. She brings in a dowry that increases the Buddenbrook coffers and prestige: all in all the kind of match a Buddenbrook scion should make. Like Tony, Thomas gives up love to stand true to the interests of the firm. But is Gerda the kind of woman who will bear sturdy offspring to continue the Buddenbrook lineage? Does Thomas feel a twinge of premonition when he describes her to Tony thus:

She is a wonderful creature: there are few like her in the world. She is nothing like you Tony to be sure. You are simpler, and more natural too. My lady sister is simply more temperamental', he continued, suddenly taking a lighter tone. 'Oh Gerda has temperament too - her playing shows that; but she can sometimes be a little cold. In short she is not to be measured by the ordinary standards. She is an artist, an individual a puzzling, fascinating creature.5

Mann's sense of irony is surely at play when he follows up this conversation between brother and sister to describe the silent entry of Gerda in the twilight dimness

The corridor opened and there stood before them in the twilight, in a pleated pique house frock, white as snow a slender figure. The heavy dark-red hair framed her white face, and blue shadows lay about her close-set brown eyes. It was Gerda, mother of future Buddenbrooks.

The second half of the novel is a journey through the twilight zone of disintegration. Christian has grown into a self-preoccupied hypochondriac with zest only for the arts.
Tom cannot abide him and in the interests of the family and firm he sends him away to enter into business partnership with a firm in another city. One cannot help recalling Consul Jean's sustained attempts to conciliate his wayward step brother Gotthold and his success in keeping him in control without compromising on the firm's welfare. We recall Jean's fervent plea to his father:

This bitter feud with my own brother, with your eldest son, is like a hidden crack in the building we have erected. A family should be united, Father. It must keep together. "A house divided against itself will fall".7

Thomas' aversion to Christian is an ironic expression of his fear of himself. While discussing Christian's morbid self-preoccupation with imagined and real ailments, Thomas tells Tony:

I have thought a great deal about this curious and useless self-preoccupation, because I had once an inclination to it myself. But I observed that it made me unsteady, hare-brained and incapable — and control, equilibrium, is at least for me the important thing. There will always be men who are justified in this interest in themselves, this detailed observation of their own emotions: poets who can express with clarity and beauty their privileged inner life, and thereby enrich the emotional world of other people. But the likes of us are simple merchants, my child; our self-observation are decidedly inconsiderable. We can sometimes so far as to say that the sound of orchestra instruments gives us unspeakable pleasure, and that we sometimes do not dare try to swallow — but it would be much better, deuce
take it, if we sat down and accomplished something, as our fathers did before us.\footnote{8}

Thomas is expressing the dictates of Reason, much as Settembrini will do in *The Magic Mountain*. The clarion call to duty and action is the voice of active and healthy participation in life but nihilists would have it that it is also the voice of fear in the face of the unavoidable desolation of reality.\footnote{9} Tom himself ultimately gives in to finicky concern with his outer appearance as decreasing vitality snaps at the exuberance of his practical attitude to life.

*Buddenbrooks* may conform to a nihilistic pattern of life but one must account for Mann's immense power to recreate the pulsating immediacy of life with a feeling and love that is not quite in accordance with the cynical nihilists's outlook on life. Several scenes come to mind: Hanno's impatient anticipation of his vacation and his feelings as it gradually dwindles in the inexorable flurry of Time, the celebration of the firm's centenary year with the reverent insight it provides into the different aspects of such a function, focussing on people and events alike with the humane, though ironical viewpoint which comes close to compassion, though that is a term hardly thought of in relation to Thomas Mann. Mann's description of particular episodes are Dickensian in its capacity to delineate humour while capturing the essential mood of a given situation or the essence of a character. Consider for example this description of Tony's second suit for Permaneder. Tony's disastrous marriage with Grunlich has
ended in divorce. Her large dowry disappeared in the sea of debts that had brought bankruptcy on her husband. Tony is very keen to enter into a second marriage - to remove the blot that her divorce has placed on the family reputation and of course to become a person of importance in her own right with a life of her own. She has only her beauty and vivacious charm to draw another suitor - no second dowry to speak of. Holidaying in Munich with her friend she meets a bachelor brewer, a hearty, homely man of modest means, but he is her best bet to the matrimonial status. She returns home to wait expectantly for her admirer. Mann describes his first meeting with Frau Consul, Tony's mother with a tongue-in-cheek humour. Permaneder has just sent in his card to the lady of the house.

On the card was printed: 'X. Noppe and Company'. The 'X. Noppe' and the 'and' were crossed out with a lead pencil, so that only the 'Company' was left. 'Oh, Frau Consul', said the maid, 'there's a gentleman, but he doesn't speak German, and he do' go on so—' 'Ask the gentleman in', said the Frau Consul; for she understood now that it was the company who desired admittance. The maid went. Then the glass door was opened again to let in a stocky figure, who remained in the shadowy background of the room for a moment and said with a drawling pronunciation something that seemed as if it might have been; 'I have the honour—'

'Good morning', said the Frau Consul. 'Will you not come in?' And she supported herself on the sofa-cushion and rose a little; for she did not know yet whether she ought to rise all the way or not. 'I take the liberty', replied the gentleman in a pleasant sing-song; while he bowed in the
politest manner, and took two steps forward. Then he stood still again and looked around as if searching for something - perhaps for a place to put his hat and stick, for he had brought both - the stick being a horn crutch with the top shaped like a claw and a good foot and a half long - into the room with him.

He was a man of forty years. Short-legged and chubby, he wore a wide-open coat of brown frieze and a light flowered waistcoat which covered the gentle protuberant curve of his stomach and supported a gold-watch chain with a whole bouquet of charms made of horn, bone, silver, and coral. His trousers were of an indefinite grey-green colour and too short. The material must have been extraordinarily stiff, for the edges stood out in a circle around the legs of his short broad boots. He had a bullet head, untidy hair, and a stubby nose and the light blond curly moustache drooping over his mouth made him look like a walrus.10

Mann continues in the same vein to bring out the salient features of the character and situation.

The purpose of this rendering in this study is to emphasize Mann's affinity with life, its quirks, its humours. What is derived from the above reading is Mann's affectionate engagement with life. The tone of the above description is not the bitter detachment of the nihilist who had given up all attempts to draw pleasure from life. The detached tone is to aid better perception - there is no cynical derision here - the humorous element is held up to ridicule but in harmless laughter. The whole content of the novel flows towards a nihilistic finale.
but life itself is the most potent character of the novel, not death. The ability to live is dwindling, this is the general malaise of the 20th century. But at no point is life condemned. Life refuses to be compartmentalized and categorized, to fall into set formulae - but that is its irresistible element. We fail to measure up to it - stricken by a malady that draws us into the quicksands of self-indulgent death. That is Mann's diagnosis of the human situation.

Tony's marriage proves luckless: neither is Permaneder awe-struck nor inspired by the Buddenbrook ideals of industry and dignity, which was what she had hoped for, nor is he overtly concerned with Tony's idea of happiness. A baby girl that is born of their union does not survive and Tony suffers in the alien atmosphere in Munich whose inhabitants are not inclined to accord her the respect that she feels is due to her lineage. When she finds Permaneder paying drunken court to the maid in the house, she gives vent to all her loathing and frustration and returns home to pursue a second divorce. Permaneder is more than willing to grant it, so is he to return the dowry and Tony resumes her solitary position as divorcée dependant in the family. Even in her personal sense of misery, her predominant thoughts are for the family. With hearfelt emotion uncommon to a person so given to feminine vanity, she tells Thomas

'You must go on alone now', she said. There's nothing good to be looked for from Christian, and I am finished, failed. Gone to pieces. I can do no more. I am a poor,
useless woman dependent on you all for my living. I could never have dreamed, Tom that I should be no help to you at all. Now you stand quite alone, and upon you it depends to keep up the honour and dignity of the family. May God help you in the task.11

Thomas Buddenbrook is increasingly becoming conscious of the responsibility lying heavily on his shoulders - he is enterprising, hard-working, upright and popular in his dealings with neighbours, colleagues and family members. He attempts not to compromise on the ideals he inherited from his father, not withstanding his personal desires. Yet he breaks off with Christian who at the first chance he gets marries a woman of loose morals. The lady having ensured that all the benefits of marriage accrue to her, promptly has Christian shut up in an asylum. Mann narrates this with the clinical irony which identifies him as nothing else will:

Bad news came of Christian. His marriage seemed not to have improved his health. He had become more and more subject to uncanny delusions and morbid hallucinations, until finally his wife had acted upon the advice of a physician and had him put into an institute. He was unhappy there, and wrote pathetic letters to his relatives, expressive of a fervent desire to leave the establishment where, it seemed, he was none too well treated. But they kept him shut up, and it was probably the best thing for him. It also put his wife in a position to continue her former independent existence without prejudice to her status as a married woman or to the practical advantages accruing from her marriage.12
Thomas' ardent dream of seeing the firm multiply its profits and his family name forge ahead remain hampered by inherent liabilities. There are flashes of success but these are too fragile to boost the sagging fortunes of the firm. Against his own better judgment he accepts Tony's advice to buy the Poppenrade farm, exploiting the strained circumstances of the owner and hoping to reap a rich profit when it is harvest time. But events give an ironic twist to his hopes. The harvest is blighted and the firm suffers a tremendous loss. Thomas finds it increasingly difficult to cope with the challenges of business and is bewildered by his fatigue and loss of interest. A heavy sense of despair and futility begins to bother him.

Hollingdale analyses the cause of the withering Buddenbrook clan as the death of scruple-ridden conscientious family. The Hagenstroms go from strength to strength and what characterizes them most clearly is the total lack of inhibitions or remorse. Expansively built, Herman Hagenstrom is given to good food and easy manners, riding smoothly from success to success. What marks the difference between Herman Hagenstrom and Thomas Buddenbrook is the total absence in Herman of the kind of soul-searching conscientiousness that Thomas habitually gives in to. Buddenbrook's tendency to brood over the moral finesse of his deals signals him as the outsider in the modern success cult which exclusive club demands the unfeeling pursuit of power and prosperity. In that pursuit one would be a fool to waste time
agonizing over who has been trampled underfoot in the rat race. When Tony hears that Herman Hagenstrom is the prospective buyer of the old Buddenbrook home she makes an impassioned appeal to Thomas to shut out all possibility of Hagenstrom presiding over their family abode. But practical necessities compel other decisions and Tony has to accept Hagenstrom as the new owner of their mother's beloved home.

Thomas, in the heyday of his career, had built a vast palatial home, but the maintenance of its loveliness continues to take a heavy toll of his finances and peace of mind. He gradually begins to realize that he is presiding over the decline of the Buddenbrook fortune. He finds himself being over-cautious and timid in his business enterprises and it was in an attempt to rid himself of his sense of self-doubt that he had gambled his chances on the Poppenrade harvest. But the gamble didn't pay off and Thomas finds himself helplessly ineffective - to Combat the sudden but steady decline of his firm's standing. These things begin to weigh heavily on him. He begins to disintegrate physically and mentally, suspecting that he has no will to fight the adversity that dogs his footsteps. Most of the energy that he can summon up is used to maintain with fastidious care, the shine of his outer appearance: he spends hours to ensure that his thinning hair and ageing face are groomed to provide the exterior world with a facade of spruced alertness and clan. His clothes are brushed and pressed to satisfy his increasingly finicky tastes. At forty,
Thomas has become an old man with an intolerable urge to let everything be - to be left alone. He recognizes this as a symptom of old age and with embarrassment seeks to mask its manifestations in himself. The Thomas of the latter half of the novel is a hollow shell of the well-bred businessman, with recourse to a fairly high standard of acting talent that dictates the smiling set of his mouth, a stance that he will drop only in privacy to assume its natural dropping position. One cannot avoid the irony of a man embodying the disintegrating will summoning all his failing resources to prove to the world that he is still in control of his rational faculties and in possession of enough dynamism, to give direction to his life.

Thomas' blighted life still sees possibilities of promising hope in his only son, Hanno. But Hanno has been a sickly babe and has grown into an introverted child, morbidly sensitive to human pain. He shrinks from all the healthy activities that other boys of his age indulge in and is preoccupied to obsessional extremes with music. All attempts by Thomas to wean him from his mother's influence and school him in the practical aspects of business life are futile because Hanno is dutifully attentive and willing to observe his father's advice but his heart is not in it and he cannot adapt himself to the philistine world of profit and loss. Thomas begins to brood over his dreamy son and hope for the future slowly withers.
Comprehension of the nature of his malaise eludes Thomas until he chances upon Schopenhauer and is elated by his diagnosis of modern man's affliction as the increasing debility of the will.

He was filled with a great, surpassing satisfaction. It soothed him to see how a master-mind could lay hold on this strong, cruel mocking thing called life and enforce it and condemn it. His was the gratification of the sufferer who has always had a bad conscience about his sufferings and concealed them from the gaze of a harsh unsympathetic world until suddenly from the hand of an authority he receives as it were justification before the world, this best of all possible worlds which the master-mind scornfully demonstrates to be the worst of all possible ones.19

A decayed tooth proves to be the cause of Thomas's death. Schopenhauer provides him with the alibi to give in to the death instinct. The nihilist's fascination with death is revealed in Thomas's delirious exposition of the significance of death:

What was Death? The answer came, not in poor, large-sounding words: he felt it within him, he possessed it. Death was a joy, so great, so deep that it could be dreamed of only in moments of revelation like the present. It was the return from an unspeakably painful wandering, the correction of a grave mistake, the loosening of chains, the opening of doors - it put right again a lamentable mischance.19
But here we discover that along with the urge for extinction is a deep need to merge with life in a more potent and happy manner. Curiously enough the death enamoured individual is in quest of a fuller richer life:

Have I hoped to live on in my son? In a personality yet more feeble, flickering, and timorous than my own? Blind childish folly! What can my son do for me? Where shall I be when I am dead? Ah it is so brilliantly clear, so overwhelmingly simple! I shall be in all those who have ever, do ever, or ever shall say 'I' - especially however, in all those who say it must fully, potently and gladly!

- Somewhere in the world a child is growing up, strong well, grown, adequate able to develop its powers, gifted, untroubled, pure, joyous, relentless, one of those beings whose glance heightens the joy of the joyous and drives the unhappy to despair. He is my son. He is I, myself, soon, soon; as soon as Death frees me from the wretched delusion that I am not he as well as myself.

Have I ever hated life - pure, strong, relentless life? Folly and misconception! I have but hated myself, because I could not bear it. I love you, I love you all, you blessed, and soon, soon, I shall cease to be cut from you all by the narrow bonds of myself; soon will that in me which loves you be free and be in and with you, in and with you all.

What is envisaged here is some kind of spiritual metamorphosis; disclaiming responsibility and shrugging off the obligation to live in the given present in the given conditions. A form of escapism which at the same time highlights the desirability of a happy active life, which physiological disability makes impossible.
What appears to be wishful thinking on the part of one totally anamoured of death could also be a subconscious attempt to still any remnant of guilt that may nag his conscience. It also adds validity to our contention that death is not the ultimate destination of Mann's fiction: it is total life, life lived befittingly in wholesome, vibrant and splendid fashion - what is bemoaned is the unhappy creature struggling with a decaying will, heavily encumbered by remorse and fears, making him unworthy of life.

Thomas, the fastidiously turned out senator is found dying in dirt and squalour, where he fell after a painful dental operation. His will reveals that he had no designs for a business career as far as Hanno is concerned. The business is liquidated, Gerda sells the lovely home that had become an ironically opulent expression of deteriorating fortunes and Thomas' widow and his heir settle in the country to live in quiet comfort. Hanno's end has been prophesied with pathetic irony early in his life. As a little boy he had found the family chronicle with the names of all the family members, past and present recorded on it. He had ruled a line across the page after his own name. When his father reprimands him for it, the little child stammered 'I thought - I thought - there was nothing else coming'.

Tony, his aunt has great hopes for him. Tony is now an ageing matron, her life bereft of any hope for the future as Erica has been deserted by her husband and lives
with her daughter in her mother's house. She hopes that the family and firm will see happier days, if not as glorious as those she enjoyed as a child, if only Hanno will take up a career that will further the family pride and prestige. But Hanno himself has no such aspirations: life itself is too unwanted a burden to bear. Every moment of normal routine is an anxiety-ridden space of time and the only solace he finds are in theatre and in music. Self-absorbing indulgence in the arts is the only form of existence his nervous system can take. It heightens his desire to languish effortlessly in the arms of death. The ritual of being rudely awakened every morning by the alarm clock is a strain that he attempts to slumber through increasing his sense of guilt in being disloyal to the call of everyday life. This call which to the healthy individual ought to be a challenge to meet the new day gradually becomes the cry of life itself which Hanno chooses to ignore. He finds in cholera the escape to the realm of eternal slumber.

Cases of typhoid take the following course:

When the fever is at its height, life calls to the patient, calls out to him as he wanders in his distant dream, and summons him in no uncertain voice. The harsh imperious call reaches the spirit on that remote path that leads into the shadows, the coolness and peace. He hears the call of life, the clear, fresh, mocking summons to return to that distant scence which he had already left so far behind him, and already forgotten. And there may well up in him
something like a feeling of shame for a neglected duty; a sense of renewed energy, courage, and hope; he may recognize a bond existing still between him and that colourful callous existence which he thought he had left so far behind him. Then however far he may have wandered on his distant path, he will turn back - and live. But if he shudders when he hears life's voice, if memory of that vanished scene and the sound of that lusty summons make him shake his head, make him put out his hand to ward off as he flies forward in the way of escape that has opened to him then it is clear that the patient will die.23

The novel ends with the Buddenbrook women bidding farewell to Gerda who has lost everything and is leaving for Amsterdam to play duets with her old father. Gerda has lost husband and son, but the most bereft personality is not Gerda, but Tony. She has lost her dream, her hope. She who at no juncture of her stormy life has lost faith in the family, in the pride and dignity of the Buddenbrooks, is now reduced to a faltering sense of loss and purposelessness:

God forgive me! When one begins to doubt - doubt justice and goodness - and everything Life crushes so much in us, it destroys so many of our beliefs - ! A reunion - if that were so -24

Seseml Weichbrodt, the old hump-backed schoolmistress asserts her faith in a final reunion, a final pattern out of the meaningless chaos of existence,25 but one can hardly equate that with Mann's own convictions. By the end of his
literary career, when he sought to identify his views with those of Goethe, it is more feasible to attribute a positive belief to the author. But in *Buddenbrooks*, the assertion of belief over the ruins of the family lineage is an ironic statement sufficient to demolish itself by its own hollow testimony. The positive element in Mann is not Christian, it is not based on the hereafter, but existential and humanistic, based on life, this side of the grave.

II Tonio Kroger

Tonio Kroger is a sad lyric in which the artist for once tries to describe himself and the pathos of the artist-nature without irony and as a result falls into self pity.26

Mann seems to have closely identified himself with Tonio Kroger, but irony is not absent from his study of the artist-alien. The irony is focussed closer home and the novella becomes the author's arena for pitting the sensitive genius against society in which the hale and hearty stomp cheerfully and ruthlessly through life unencumbered by the painful knowledge that the artistic Cain has to lumber with in life. The delineation of Tonio Kroger is based on the nihilistic equation between the prodigy and the withering will, criminal inclinations, sickness and warped spirits. Shame stalks
the artist because he has this unwanted gift: the power to see into the nature of things and the urge to give expression and form to his insights. Knowledge of things is the shameful brand on his brow and he squirms with embarrassment he has to endure. What he craves for is a sense of belonging, of normalcy but this is what he has forfeited by the burden of vision and expression. He wanders solitary and marked the only form of ecstasy he can enjoy being the artistic experience.

**Tonio Kroger** touches directly upon the theme of irony we have been dealing with: the irony we have associated with Thomas Mann; the detached tone he adopts and the contrast between the nihilistic content and the bounteous sense of life that one actually experiences from his works:

> If you care too much about what you have to say, if your heart is too much in it you can be pretty sure of making a mess. You get pathetic, wax sentimental something dull and doddering, without roots or outlines, with no sense of humour — something tiresome and banal grows under your hand, and you get nothing out of it but apathy in your audience and disappointment and misery in yourself. For so it is ........... Feeling, warm, hearfelt feeling, is always banal and futile; only the irritations and icy ecstasies of the artist's corrupted nervous system are artistic. The artist must be unhuman, extra-human; he must stand in a queer aloof relationship to our humanity; only so is he in a position, I ought to say only so would he be tempted, to represent it, to present it, to portray it to good effect. The very
gift of style and of form and expression, is nothing else than this cool and fastidious attitude towards humanity; you might say there has to be this impoverishment and devastation as a preliminary condition. For sound natural feeling, say what you like has no taste. It is all up with the artist as soon as he becomes a man and begins to feel.27

The above section explicates the nature of Mann's own use of irony as is to be perceived in his attitude to his creative powers, his style and content.

Tonio Kroger aspires with all his heart and soul to be one with the blue-eyed and blonde individuals who skip from activity to activity, carelessly garnering the rich harvests of love, friendships, fun and laughter. The kind of life the artist in his isolated loneliness longs for:

People say......... that I hate life, or fear or despise or abominate it. I liked to hear this, it has always flattered me; but that does not make it true. I love life.....Life as the eternal antinomy of mind and art does not represent itself to us as a vision of savage greatness and ruthless beauty; we who are set apart and different do not conceive it as, like us, unusual; it is the normal, respectable and admirable that is the kingdom of our longing: life in all its seductive banality! That man is very far from being an artist, whose last and deepest enthusiasm is the raffine, the co-centric and satanic; who does not know a longing for the innocent, the simple and the living, for a little friendship,
devotion, familiar human happiness — the gnawing, surreptitious hankering for the commonplace.......

But no matter how ardent the longing for the ordinary, Tonio cannot shrug off his artistic temperament and all he can do is settle down to make the best of it though he is unable to ward off the suffering it entails.

Tonio has an intense crush on two individuals during his adolescence; first on Hans Hansen and later on Ingeborg Holm. Hans is everything that Tonio is not: blonde, blue-eyed and gregarious, popular and active. Inge is the pretty girl who fall for men like Hans and show nothing but contempt for the introverted and awkward artist. Tonio worships them ardently but hopelessly knowing he can never claim kinship with their world. Time takes him to the south after his father's death and his mother's remarriage. Here he hobnobs with people of his own kind but he cannot assume the pose of one who feels contempt for the ordinary and normal life of mankind. He lives in wanton profligacy while he creates literature with the compulsion of the born artist.

In due course he decides to holiday in Denmark, breaking journey in the city of his birth and childhood. He visits city and home, like a stranger, unknown and unrecognized. His home has been transferred to strangers and part of it has been converted into a public library. Tonio realizes that his personal reminiscences cannot find a place to roost here anymore. He returns to his
hotel to be accosted by security man who demand identity papers for they have to distinguish him from a wanted criminal, 'of unknown parentage' and unspecified means wanted by the Munich police for various shady transactions and probably in flight towards Denmark'. Tonio Kroger has no papers to establish his identity and finally uses proof-sheets of his literary work to wriggle out of the situation. Tonio is upset by the incident but senses some propriety in the proceedings because deep within himself he does identify himself with a shady character 'of unknown parentage'.

In Copenhagen Tonio Kroger relaxes like a dutiful tourist, but the highlight of his holiday is the spectacle of a dashing Hans Hansen and a lovely Ingeborg Holm dancing in wonderful abandon. These two epitomize for him all that has lain beyond his reach and in his silent tribute to their normalcy he chants:

You must not cloud your clear eyes or make them dreamy and dim by peering into melancholy poetry.....To be like you! To begin again, to grow up like you, simple and normal and cheerful, in conformity and understanding with God and man, beloved of the innocent and happy. To take you, Ingeborg Holm, to wife, and have a son like you, Hans Hansen - to live free from the curse of knowledge and the torment of creation, live and praise God in blessed mediocrity! Begin again? But it would do no good. It would turn out the same - everything would turn out the same as it did before. For some go of necessity astray, because for them there is no such thing as a right path'.

The excruciating agony he has to live with is born of the agony of his situation:
To long to be allowed to live the life of simple feeling, to rest sweetly and passively in feeling alone, without compulsion to act and achieve — and yet to be forced to dance, dance the cruel and perilous sword — dance of art; without even being allowed to forget the melancholy conflict within oneself; to be forced to dance, the while one loved ……31

_Tonio Kroger_ is such an intimate portrait of the author and by extension of the artist and so neat a formulation of the ironic aspect of the life and work of the literary figure that it is very tempting to quote endlessly. But in the interests of economy I shall satisfy myself with two more passages. Both are deeply moving. The first is a painful summing up of his life:

He looked back on the years that had passed. He thought of the dreamy adventures of the senses, nerves, and mind in which he had been involved; saw himself eaten up with intellect and introspection, ravaged and paralysed by insight, half worn out by the fevers and frosts of creation, helpless and in anguish of conscience between two extremes, flung to and fro between austerity and lust; raffine, impoverished exhausted by frigid and artificially heightened ecstasis; erring, forsaken, martyred, and ill — and sobbed with nostalgia and remorse.31

The second is a lyrical evocation of the commitment of the writer along with the concomitant irony of his deepest desires

As I write the sea whispers to me and I close my eyes. I am looking into a world
unborn and formless, that needs to be ordered and shaped; I see into a whirl of shadows of human figures who beckon to me to weave spells to redeem them: tragic and laughable figures and some that are both together - and to these I am drawn. But my deepest and secretest love belongs to the blond and blue-eyed, the fair and the living, the happy, lovely and commonplace.32

Nowhere has Mann revealed himself with such naked honesty as he has in Tonio Kroger.

III DEATH IN VENICE

We have acquainted ourselves with the artist-product of the nihilist age - as Hanno the sickly babe, the introverted child and the gravely self-preoccupied adolescent. In Tonio Kroger we are introduced to the writer passing on from adolescence to early youth and manhood. Gustave Aschenbach represents the middle-aged author. He was

the poet-spokesman of all those who labour at the edge of exhaustion; of the over-burdened, of those who are already worn out but still hold themselves upright; of all our modern moralizers of accomplishment with stunted growth and scanty resources, who yet contrive by skilful husbanding and prodigious spasms of will to produce, at least for a while, the effect of greatness. There are many such, they are the heroes of the age. And in Aschenbach's pages they saw themselves; He justified, he exalted them, he sang their praise - and they, they were grateful, they heralded his fame.33
Death in Venice has that perfection of execution which tempts one to expound on its excellence of craftsmanship. But the most painfully vibrating nerve in the anatomy of the novella is that of irony. The tide of occurrences and coincidences that lead Aschenbach to his tryst with dissolution and death partake of a nightmarish quality — lending to the story a touch of the grotesque and surrealistic. A chance glimpse of a passing traveller rouses in the ageing writer a hankering for the remote, for the primeval. The lure of the imagined vista of wild growth and fiery beasts holds him spell-bound and he finds himself on his way to Venice. On the sea-passage he is fascinated by a ludicrous old man who attempts by his behaviour, clothes and cosmetic-aids to pass off for a young man. The mysterious gondolier who rows Aschenbach to Lido knows the author's destination before he can mention it and disappears before he can be paid. Every incident that befalls Aschenbach resounds silently with ironic overtones: the purport of Aschenbach's flight from daily routine is relaxation, pleasant change, but it turns out that he is being led ignorantly but compulsively to dissipation and death.

There seems something within the artist himself seeking out destruction and Aschenbach becomes conscious of it while he sits on the resort beach contemplating the sea.

His love of the ocean had profound sources: the hard-worked artist's longing for rest, his yearning to seek refuge from the thronging manifold shapes of his fancy in the
bosom of the simple and vast and another
yearning, opposed to his art and perhaps for
that very reason a lure, for the unorganized,
the immeasurable, the eternal, in short, for
nothingness. He whose preoccupation is with
excellence longs fervently to find rest in
perfection; and is not nothingness a form of
perfection? 34

The terrible unknown exerting such a tremendous power over
Aschenbach takes the form of a Polish boy, fourteen years
old and ethereally lovely. He is holidaying with his
family in the same resort and Aschenbach finds himself
increasingly and irresistibly drawn to the alluring
perfection of the boy. He begins to watch out for and
study the grace and charm of the child with growing
absorption. 35 But this outer perfection conceals the
seeds of decay which in Mann manifests itself in rotting
teeth as in the cases of Tom and Hanno Buddenbrook. At
close quarters Aschenbach notices that

Tadzio's teeth were imperfect, rather
jagged and bluish.... 'He is delicate,
he is sickly', Aschenbach thought.
'He will most likely not live to grow
old'. He did not try to account for the
pleasure the idea gave him. 36

That Death in Venice is another evocation of the
nihilistic sweep towards the whirlpool of death is
becoming very obvious.

The air and surroundings that lend the setting to
the narrative are heavy with the overabundance of
vegetation, filth and sultriness that one associates with
the tropics. Aschenbach had been vacillating between a notion of leaving if the heavy heat didn't break off and a growing need to stay as long as Tadzio was in the vicinity. At one stage he even decides to move to a more congenial resort but on his way he is filled with overwhelming regrets and at the station he learns to his great joy that his trunk by some quirk of fate had been sent the wrong way and of course Aschenbach has to return to his hotel and wait till the missing trunk is located. He returns, never to leave the city again. Aschenbach is now inextricably wedded to his fate and experiences a sense of resigned and excited anticipation of whatever is to come.

As he now settles down to a languid period of ease with no end in sight, he ponders over the change in his attitude:

Always, wherever and whenever it was the order of the day to be merry, to refrain from labour and make glad the heart, he would soon be conscious of the imperative summons - and especially was this so in his youth - back to the high fatigues, the sacred and fasting service that consumed his days. This spot and this alone had power to beguile him, to relax his resolution, to make him glad.37

Death has already laid its soporific touch on him and his torpor has its glowing centre in 'the lovely apparition'38 of Tadzio as it ran and played in noble splendour against the vast background of the sea. Aschenbach comes to worship him as the epitome of creative perfection.39 Aschenbach's growing love for the boy renews his poetic
response to the world and everything around him and Tadzie is bathed in the splendour of new love. Every day is a beginning brimming with possibilities. Aschenbach's infatuation reaches almost uncontrollable intensity and he begins to follow the boy whenever he goes out to visit places with his family. Though there is no verbal communication between Tadzie and Aschenbach, the boy seems to have become aware of the passion he has roused in the ageing writer and often startles his ardent lover by turning to meet his eyes, returning his gaze with serious intensity.

A fourth grotesque character is introduced to add to the unknown traveller, the indecent old man rigged in a young rake's attire and the mysterious gondolier. This is a street singer who comes to entertain the hotel guest with his group of performers. Singing lustily, he gyrates his thin body - suggestively, and looking up impudently at the members of his audience as they lean on the balustrade laughing down at his antics. While collecting money, he whispers hoarsely to Aschenbach that Venice is being disinfected as a routine, precautionary measure.

Aschebach realizes that he has flirted with danger long enough and that he ought to take concrete measures to leave Venice before it is too late. He learns confidentially from a British embassy official that the authorities are suppressing the magnitude and seriousness of the cholera epidemic as they fear economic reverses if the tourist inflow slackens. Cholera had
raised its vicious head in the 'hot moist swamps of the delta of the Ganges, where it bred in the mephitic air of the primeval island jungle, among whose bamboo thickets the tiger crouches, where life of every sort flourishes in rankest abundance..."

It had spread via trade routes and had settled in the hot stagnant moist air of Venice, reaping a rich crop of lives. But due to official censorship most of the gay visitors to Venice remained unaware of the infectious calamity that lurked in the wings waiting for an opportune moment to strike. The close presence of death had loosened all sense of morality and restriction in the city and men gave way with desperate abandon to vice and indulgence. The official advised Aschenbach to leave Venice at the earliest as a blockade would prevent possibilities of escape.

Aschenbach's saner urge to advise Tadzio's mother to leave with her children at the earliest is suppressed by dreams of licentious freedom in a city at a time when the pestilence will break down all norms of decency and moral behaviour. Aschenbach now turns into the old man who on the ship to Venice had flaunted the clothes and mannerisms of a youth. He spends hours on his looks, getting his face and hair done in imitation of a younger man. The change that illicit love has brought in this revered man of letters is incredible.

There he sat, the master: this was he who had found a way to reconcile art and honours; who had written The Abject and in a style of classic purity renounced bohemianism and all its works, all sympathy
with the abyss and the troubled depths of the outcast human soul. This was he who had put knowledge underfoot to climb so high! who had outgrown the ironic pose and adjusted himself to the burdens and obligations of fame; whose renown had been officially recognized and his name ennobled whose style was set for a model in the schools. The he sat. He eyelids were closed, there was only a swift sidelong glint of the eyeballs now and again, something between a question and a leer; while the rouged and flabby mouth uttered single words of the sentences shaped in his disordered brain by the fantastic logic that governs our dreams.42

In his silent communion with the boy of his desires, Aschenbach reveals the irony in the discrepancy between what appearances suggest and what actuality is.

\[\text{.......
beauty alone is both divine and visible; and so it is the sense's way, the artist's way .........to the spirit
\]do you believe such a man can ever attain wisdom and true manly worth, for whom the path to the spirit must lead through the senses? Or do you rather think
\[\text{...... ...that it is a path of perilous sweetness, a way of transgression, and must surely lead him who walks in it astray? For you know that we poets cannot walk the way of beauty without Eros as our companion and guide. We may be heroic after our fashion, disciplined warriors of our craft yet are we all like women, for we exult in passion, and love is still our desire - our craving and our shame. And from this you will perceive that we poets can be neither wise nor worthy citizens. We must needs be wanton, must needs rove at large in the realm of feeling. Our magisterial style in all folly and pretence, our honourable repute a farce, the crowd}^{\text{5}}\]
belief in us is merely laughable. And to teach youth, or the populace by means of art is a dangerous practice and ought to be forbidden. For what good can an artist be as a teacher when from his birth up he is headed direct for the pit? We many want to shun it and attain to honour in the world; but however we turn, it draws us still. So then, since knowledge might destroy us, we will have none of it. For knowledge, does not make him who possesses it dignified or austere. Knowledge is all-knowing, understanding, forgiving; it takes up no positions sets no store by form. It has compassion with the abyss - it is the abyss. So we reject it, firmly and henceforward our concern shall be with beauty alone. And by beauty we mean simplicity, largeness and renewed severity of discipline; we mean a return to detachment and to form. But detachment and preoccupation with form lead to intoxication and desire they may lead the noblest among us to frightful emotional excesses, which his own stern cult of the beautiful would make him the first to condemn. So they too, lead to the bottomless pit. Yes they lead us thither, I say, us who are poets, - who by our natures are prone not to excellence but to excess.

Aschenbach embodies the final stages of a faulty decaying will and Tadzio is the ironically beautiful expression of the same flawed, drooping will of the 20th century. The pursuit of one by the other is the natural outcome of the irresistible summons of death. The nihilistically deterministic pattern of the story is heightened by the rich splendour of Venice which comes across as overblown and disease-ridden though still enticing and alluring. The sense of fatality is
prevalent here to a degree that one encounters again in Doctor Faustus. Adrian Leverkuhn grimly pursues destruction, Aschenbach is lured by the same irresistible urge embodied in the beautiful boy whose Greek proportions leads him into the world of shame and indulgence. Eventually he succumbs to the disease helplessness against the spasms of a death-seeking will which seeks manifestations in art, crime and perversion is a theme that is reiterated throughout most of Mann's works.