The example of Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) shows that the mere biographical coordinates of a writer do not necessarily fix his place in literary history. Kleist was Goethe’s and Schiller’s contemporary, but his texts look like nothing these famous exponents of German Classicism ever wrote. On the other hand, Kleist’s writings no more comfortably fit in with the Romantic period that followed. Kleist was of noble origin but some of his texts are openly critical of privilege. The political dimension of his work is no less ambiguous, at a time in which political leanings were invariably gauged either by support for, or opposition against, Napoleon. We will approach this singular German writer by studying some of his major works, concentrating primarily on his prose narratives, but will also include one or two of Kleist’s plays and a few of his essays.

All readings and class discussion will be in English. Enrollment in this course fulfills the Arts & Letters requirement.