This class will study three seminal German-language authors of the Modernist period, who came of age when traditional assumptions about authority could no longer be relied upon. In Franz Kafka’s bleak world of corrupt and incomprehensible authority, in Thomas Mann’s alignment of authority with fascism, and in Robert Walser’s refusal of authority or power and his retreat into a miniscule world, authority is a category under critique. But despite the stances that the texts’ narrators and characters take on the problem of authority (skepticism, hostility, anger, non-understanding), the texts’ meaning often remains ambiguous or elusive.

Given this refusal of fixed or certain meaning, we will extend our inquiry about authority to the question of where to locate the “authorized” meaning of fictional texts and of whether it inheres in the author, historical context, text itself, or in the reader. Though we will read some biographical essays about Kafka, Mann, and Walser alongside their fiction, we will also read formal, historical, and psychoanalytic essays (Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud,) that throw the biographical approach into question, allowing us, in this course on authors, to ask how modern attitudes towards authority contribute to the displacement of the author as the repository of the text’s meaning.

**Primary texts may include:** The Trial, “The Judgement,” “In the Penal Colony”; The Assistant; “Nothing at All”; “Am I Demanding?”; “A Sort of Speech”; “Masters and Workers”; Thomas Mann, “Death in Venice”; “Mario and the Magician”; “The Blood of the Walsungs”; “Tristan.”