Great Authors, Composers & Artists: Music and Literature

This course investigates the relationship between music and literature in Germany and Austria in the first half of the 20th century. The main focus will be on Thomas Mann’s and Hermann Hesse’s books, in which music figures very prominently. We will start with Mann’s novella, Death in Venice, and consider both the movie adaptation by Luchino Visconti, which relies heavily on Gustav Mahler’s music, and the opera by Benjamin Britten, in which the protagonist’s sexual identity takes a central role. We will also read portions of his Doctor Faustus, linking them to conceptions of music history, nationalism, notions of creativity as a superhuman attribute, and the image of the ideal composer. This will provide a starting point for looking at the cultural functions of a wide range of repertory, from Beethoven to Schoenberg. Our discussion of Hesse’s works will center around The Glass Bead Game, his most ambitious novel, and the role of music in the main character’s spiritual development.