irony is the one trope that cannot be mastered or used as an instrument of mastery. An ironic statement is essentially indeterminate or undecidable in meaning. The man who attempts to say one thing while clearly meaning another ends up by saying the first thing too, in spite of himself. One irony leads to another. The ironies proliferate into a great crowd of little conflicting ironies. It is impossible to know in just what tone of voice one should read one of Marlow’s sardonic ironies. Each is uttered simultaneously in innumerable conflicting tones going all the way from the lightest and most comical to the darkest, most somber and tragic. It is impossible to decide exactly which quality of voice should be allowed to predominate over the others. Try reading aloud the passage cited above and you will see this. Marlow’s tone and meaning are indeterminate; his description of the clamor of native voices on the shore or of the murmur of all those voices he remembers from that time in his life also functions as an appropriate displaced description of his own discourse. Marlow’s irony makes his speech in its own way another version of that multiple cacophonous and deceitful voice flowing from the heart of darkness, “a complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords,” or a “tumultuous and mournful uproar,” another version of that “one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense,” not a voice, but voices (pp. 55, 63). In this inextricable tangle of voices and voices speaking within voices, Marlow’s narration fulfills, no doubt without deliberate intent on Conrad’s part, one of the primary laws of the genre of the apocalypse.

The final fold in this folding in of complicities in these ambiguous acts of unveiling is my own complicity as demystifying commentator. Behind or before Marlow is Conrad, and before or behind him stands the reader or critic. My commentary unveils a lack of decisive unveiling in Heart of Darkness. I have attempted to perform an act of generic classification, with all the covert violence and unreason of that act, since no work is wholly commensurate with the boundaries of any genre. By unveiling the lack of unveiling in Heart of Darkness, I have become another witness in my turn, as much guilty as any other in the line of witnesses of covering over while claiming to illuminate. My Aufklärung too has been of the continuing impenetrability of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.

WORK CITED

The New Historicism and Heart of Darkness

WHAT IS THE NEW HISTORICISM?
The title of Brook Thomas’s The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics (1991) is telling. Whenever an emergent theory, movement, method, approach, or group gets labeled with the adjective “new,” trouble is bound to ensue, for what is new today is either established, old, or forgotten tomorrow. Few of you will have heard of the band called “The New Kids on the Block.” New Age book shops and jewelry may seem “old hat” by the time this introduction is published. The New Criticism, or formalism, is just about the oldest approach to literature and literary study currently being practiced. The new historicism, by contrast, is not as old-fashioned as formalism, but it is hardly new, either. The term new eventually and inevitably requires some explanation. In the case of the new historicism, the best explanation is historical.

Although a number of influential critics working between 1920 and 1950 wrote about literature from a psychoanalytic perspective, the majority took what might generally be referred to as the historical approach. With the advent of the New Criticism, however, historically oriented critics almost seemed to disappear from the face of the earth. The dominant New Critics, or formalists, tended to treat literary works
as if they were self-contained, self-referential objects. Rather than basing their interpretations on parallels between the text and historical contexts (such as the author’s life or stated intentions in writing the work), these critics concentrated on the relationships within the text that give it its form and meaning. During the heyday of the New Criticism, concern about the interplay between literature and history virtually disappeared from literary discourse. In its place was a concern about intratextual repetition, particularly of images or symbols but also of rhythms and sound effects.

About 1970 the New Criticism came under attack by reader-response critics (who believe that the meaning of a work is not inherent in its internal form but rather is cooperatively produced by the reader and the text) and poststructuralists (who, following the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, argue that texts are inevitably self-contradictory and that we can find form in them only by ignoring or suppressing conflicting details or elements). In retrospect it is clear that, their outspoken opposition to the New Criticism notwithstanding, the reader-response critics and poststructuralists of the 1970s were very much like their formalist predecessors in two important respects: for the most part, they ignored the world beyond the text and its reader, and, for the most part, they ignored the historical contexts within which literary works are written and read.

Jerome McGann first articulated this retrospective insight in 1985, writing that “a text-only approach has been so vigorously promoted during the last thirty-five years that most historical critics have been driven from the field, and have raised the flag of their surrender by yielding the title ‘critic,’ and accepting the title ‘scholar’ for themselves” (Inflections 17). Most, but not all. The American Marxist Fredric Jameson had begun his 1981 book The Political Unconscious with the following two-word challenge: “Always historicize!” (9). Beginning about 1980, a form of historical criticism practiced by Louis Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt had transformed the field of Renaissance studies and begun to influence the study of American and English Romantic literature as well. And by the mid-1980s, Brook Thomas was working on an essay in which he suggests that classroom discussions of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” might begin with questions such as the following: Where would Keats have seen such an urn? How did a Grecian urn end up in a museum in England? Some very important historical and political realities, Thomas suggests, lie behind and inform Keats’s definitions of art, truth, beauty, the past, and timelessness.

When McGann lamented the surrender of “most historical critics,” he no doubt realized what is now clear to everyone involved in the study of literature. Those who had not yet surrendered — had not yet “yield[ed] the title ‘critic’” to the formalist, reader-response, and poststructuralist “victors” — were armed with powerful new arguments and intent on winning back long-lost ground. Indeed, at about the same time that McGann was deploring the near-complete dominance of critics advocating the text-only approach, Herbert Lindenberger was sounding a more hopeful note: “It comes as something of a surprise,” he wrote in 1984, “to find that history is making a powerful comeback” (“New History” 16).

We now know that history was indeed making a powerful comeback in the 1980s, although the word is misleading if it causes us to imagine that the historical criticism being practiced in the 1980s by Greenblatt and Montrose, McGann and Thomas, was the same as the historical criticism that had been practiced in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, if the word new still serves any useful purpose in defining the historical criticism of today, it is in distinguishing it from the old historicism. The new historicism is informed by the poststructuralist and reader-response theory of the 1970s, plus the thinking of feminist, cultural, and Marxist critics whose work was also “new” in the 1980s. New historicist critics are less fact- and event-oriented than historical critics used to be, perhaps because they have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely and objectively known. They are less likely to see history as linear and progressive, as something developing toward the present or the future (“teleological”), and they are also less likely to think of it in terms of specific eras, each with a definite, persistent, and consistent Zeitgeist (“spirit of the times”). Consequently, they are unlikely to suggest that a literary text has a single or easily identifiable historical context.

New historicist critics also tend to define the discipline of history more broadly than it was defined before the advent of formalism. They view history as a social science and the social sciences as being properly historical. In Historical Studies and Literary Criticism (1985), McGann speaks of the need to make “sociohistorical” subjects and methods central to literary studies; in The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory (1985), he links sociology and the future of historical criticism. “A sociological poetics,” he writes, “must be recognized not only as relevant to the analysis of poetry, but
in fact as central to the analysis” (62). Lindenberger cites anthropology as particularly useful in the new historical analysis of literature, especially anthropology as practiced by Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz.

Geertz, who has related theatrical traditions in nineteenth-century Bali to forms of political organization that developed during the same period, has influenced some of the most important critics writing the new kind of historical criticism. Due in large part to Geertz’s anthropological influence, new historicists such as Greenblatt have asserted that literature is not a sphere apart or distinct from the history that is relevant to it. That is what the old criticism tended to do: present the background information you needed to know before you could fully appreciate the separate world of art. The new historicists have used what Geertz would call “thick description” to blur distinctions, not only between history and the other social sciences but also between background and foreground, historical and literary materials, political and poetical events. They have erased the old boundary line dividing historical and literary materials, showing that the production of one of Shakespeare’s historical plays was a political act and historical event, while at the same time showing that the coronation of Elizabeth I was carried out with the same care for staging and symbol lavished on works of dramatic art.

In addition to breaking down barriers that separate literature and history, history and the social sciences, new historicists have reminded us that it is treacherously difficult to reconstruct the past as it really was, rather than as we have been conditioned by our own place and time to believe that it was. And they know that the job is utterly impossible for those who are unaware of that difficulty and insensitive to the bent or bias of their own historical vantage point. Historical criticism must be “conscious of its status as interpretation,” Greenblatt has written (Renaissance 4). McGann obviously concurs, writing that “historical criticism can no longer make any part of [its] sweeping picture unselfconsciously, or treat any of its details in an untheorized way” (Studies 11).

Unselfconsciously and untheorized are the key words in McGann’s statement. When new historicist critics of literature describe a historical change, they are highly conscious of, and even likely to discuss, the theory of historical change that informs their account. They know that the changes they happen to see and describe are the ones that their theory of change allows or helps them to see and describe. And they know, too, that their theory of change is historically determined. They seek to minimize the distortion inherent in their perceptions and representations by admitting that they see through preconceived notions; in other words, they learn to reveal the color of the lenses in the glasses that they wear.

Nearly everyone who wrote on the new historicism during the 1980s cited the importance of the late Michel Foucault. A French philosophical historian who liked to think of himself as an archaeologist of human knowledge, Foucault brought together incidents and phenomena from areas of inquiry and orders of life that we normally regard as being unconnected. As much as anyone, he encouraged the new historicist critic of literature to redefine the boundaries of historical inquiry.

Foucault’s views of history were influenced by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of a wirkliehe (“real” or “true”) history that is neither melioristic (that is, “getting better all the time”) nor metaphysical. Like Nietzsche, Foucault didn’t see history in terms of a continuous development toward the present. Neither did he view it as an abstraction, idea, or ideal, as something that began “in the beginning” and that will come to THE END, a moment of definite closure, a Day of Judgment. In his own words, Foucault “abandoned [the old history’s] attempts to understand events in terms of...some great evolutionary process” (Discipline and Punish 129). He warned a new generation of historians to be aware of the fact that investigators are themselves “situated.” It is difficult, he reminded them, to see present cultural practices critically from within them, and because of the same cultural practices, it is extremely difficult to enter bygone ages. In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975), Foucault admitted that his own interest in the past was fueled by a passion to write the history of the present.

Like Marx, Foucault saw history in terms of power, but his view of power probably owed more to Nietzsche than to Marx. Foucault seldom viewed power as a repressive force. He certainly did not view it as a tool of conspiracy used by one specific individual or institution against another. Rather, power represents a whole web or complex of forces; it is that which produces what happens. Not even a tyrannical aristocrat simply wields power, for the aristocrat is himself formed and empowered by a network of discourses and practices that constitute power. Viewed by Foucault, power is “positive and productive,” not “repressive” and “prohibitive” (Smart 63). Furthermore, no historical event, according to Foucault, has a single cause; rather, it is intricately connected with a vast web of economic, social, and political factors.
A brief sketch of one of Foucault’s major works may help clarify some of his ideas. *Discipline and Punish* begins with a shocking and accurate description of the public drawing and quartering of a Frenchman who had botched his attempt to assassinate King Louis XV in 1757. Foucault proceeds by describing rules governing the daily life of modern Parisian felons. What happened to torture, to punishment as public spectacle? he asks. What complex network of forces made it disappear? In working toward a picture of this “power,” Foucault turns up many interesting puzzle pieces, such as the fact that in the early years of the nineteenth century, crowds would sometimes identify with the prisoner and treat the executioner as if he were the guilty party. But Foucault sets forth a related reason for keeping prisoners alive, moving punishment indoors, and changing discipline from physical torture into mental rehabilitation: colonization. In this historical period, people were needed to establish colonies and trade, and prisoners could be used for that purpose. Also, because these were politically unsettled times, governments needed infiltrators and informers. Who better to fill those roles than prisoners pardoned or released early for showing a willingness to be rehabilitated? As for rehabilitation itself, Foucault compares it to the old form of punishment, which began with a torturer extracting a confession. In more modern, “reasonable” times, psychologists probe the minds of prisoners with a scientific rigor that Foucault sees as a different kind of torture, a kind that our modern perspective does not allow us to see as such.

Thus, a change took place, but perhaps not as great a change as we generally assume. It may have been for the better or for the worse; the point is that agents of power didn’t make the change because mankind is evolving and, therefore, more prone to perform good-hearted deeds. Rather, different objectives arose, including those of a new class of doctors and scientists bent on studying aberrant examples of the human mind. And where do we stand vis-à-vis the history Foucault tells? We are implicated by it, for the evolution of discipline as punishment into the study of the human mind includes the evolution of the “disciplines” as we now understand that word, including the discipline of history, the discipline of literary study, and now a discipline that is neither and both, a form of historical criticism that from the vantage point of the 1980s looked “new.”

Foucault’s type of analysis has been practiced by a number of literary critics at the vanguard of the back-to-history movement. One of them is Greenblatt, who along with Montrose was to a great extent responsible for transforming Renaissance studies in the early 1980s and revitalizing historical criticism in the process. Greenblatt follows Foucault’s lead in interpreting literary devices as if they were continuous with all other representational devices in a culture; he therefore turns to scholars in other fields in order to better understand the workings of literature. “We wall off literary symbolism from the symbolic structures operative elsewhere,” he writes, “as if art alone were a human creation, if as humans themselves were not, in Clifford Geertz’s phrase, cultural artifacts” (*Renaissance* 4).

Greenblatt’s name, more than anyone else's, is synonymous with the new historicism; his essay entitled “Invisible Bullets” (1981) has been said by Patrick Brantlinger to be “perhaps the most frequently cited example of New Historicism work” (“Cultural Studies” 45). An English professor at the University of California, Berkeley — the early academic home of the new historicism — Greenblatt was a founding editor of *Representations*, a journal published by the University of California Press that is still considered today to be the mouthpiece of the new historicism.

In *Learning to Curse* (1990), Greenblatt cites as central to his own intellectual development his decision to interrupt his literary education at Yale University by accepting a Fulbright fellowship to study in England at Cambridge University. There he came under the influence of the great Marxist cultural critic Raymond Williams, who made Greenblatt realize how much — and what — was missing from his Yale education. “In Williams’ lectures,” Greenblatt writes, “all that had been carefully excluded from the literary criticism in which I had been trained — who controlled access to the printing press, who owned the land and the factories, whose voices were being repressed as well as represented in literary texts, what social strategies were being served by the aesthetic values we constructed — came pressing back in upon the act of interpretation” (2).

Greenblatt returned to the United States determined not to exclude such matters from his own literary investigations. Blending what he had learned from Williams with poststructuralist thought about the indeterminacy or “undecidability” of meaning, he eventually developed a critical method that he now calls “cultural poetics.” More tentative and less overtly political than cultural criticism, it involves what Thomas calls “the technique of montage. Starting with the analysis of a particular historical event, it cuts to the analysis of a particular literary text. The point is not to show that the literary text reflects the historical event but to create a field of energy between the two so that we come
to see the event as a social text and the literary text as a social event” (“New Literary Historicism” 490). Alluding to deconstructor Jacques Derrida’s assertion that “there is nothing outside the text,” Montrose explains that the goal of this new historicist criticism is to show the “historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (Veesser, *The New Historicism* 20).

The relationship between the cultural poetics practiced by a number of new historicists and the cultural criticism associated with Marxism is important, not only because of the proximity of the two approaches but also because one must recognize the differences between the two to understand the new historicism. Still very much a part of the contemporary critical scene, cultural criticism (sometimes called “cultural studies” or “cultural critique”) nonetheless involves several tendencies more compatible with the old historicism than with the thinking of new historicists such as Greenblatt. These include the tendency to believe that history is driven by economics; that it is determinable even as it determines the lives of individuals; and that it is progressive, its dialectic one that will bring about justice and equality.

Greenblatt does not privilege economics in his analyses and views individuals as agents possessing considerable productive power. (He says that “the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators . . . and the institutions and practices of a society” [Learning 158]; he also acknowledges that artistic productions are “intensely marked by the private obsessions of individuals,” however much they may result from “collective negotiation and exchange” [Negotiations viii].) His optimism about the individual, however, should not be confused with optimism about either history’s direction or any historian’s capacity to foretell it. Like a work of art, a work of history is the negotiated product of a private creator and the public practices of a given society.

This does not mean that Greenblatt does not discern historical change, or that he is uninterested in describing it. Indeed, in works from *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) to *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988), he has written about Renaissance changes in the development of both literary characters and real people. But his view of change—like his view of the individual—is more Foucauldian than Marxist. That is to say, it is not melioristic or teleological. And, like Foucault, Greenblatt is careful to point out that any one change is connected with a host of others, no one of which may simply be identified as cause or effect, progressive or regressive, repressive or enabling.

Not all of the critics trying to lead students of literature back to history are as Foucauldian as Greenblatt. Some even owe more to Marx than to Foucault. Others, like Thomas, have clearly been more influenced by Walter Benjamin, best known for essays such as “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Still others—McGann, for example—have followed the lead of Soviet critic M. M. Bakhtin, who viewed literary works in terms of discourses and dialogues between the official, legitimate voices of a society and other, more challenging or critical voices echoing popular or traditional culture. In the “polyphonic” writings of Rabelais, for instance, Bakhtin found that the profane language of Carnival and other popular festivals offsets and parodies the “legitimate” discourses representing the outlook of the king, church, and socially powerful intellectuals of the day.

Moreover, there are other reasons not to consider Foucault the single or even central influence on the new historicism. First, he critiqued the old-style historicism to such an extent that he ended up being antihistorical, or at least ahistorical, in the view of a number of new historicists. Second, his commitment to a radical remapping of the relations of power and influence, cause and effect, may have led him to adopt too cavalier an attitude toward chronology and facts. Finally, the very act of identifying and labeling any primary influence goes against the grain of the new historicism. Its practitioners have sought to “decenter” the study of literature, not only by overlapping it with historical studies (broadly defined to include anthropology and sociology) but also by struggling to see history from a decentered perspective. That struggle has involved recognizing (1) that the historian’s cultural and historical position may not afford the best purview of a given set of events and (2) that events seldom have any single or central cause. In keeping with these principles, it may be appropriate to acknowledge Foucault as just one of several powerful, interactive intellectual forces rather than to declare him the single, master influence.

Throughout the 1980s it seemed to many that the ongoing debates about the sources of the new historicist movement, the importance of Marx or Foucault, Walter Benjamin or Mikhail Bakhtin, and the exact locations of all the complex boundaries between the new historicism and other “isms” (Marxism and poststructuralism, to name only two) were historically contingent functions of the new historicism’s newness. In the initial stages of their development, new intellectual movements
are difficult to outline clearly because, like partially developed photographic images, they are themselves fuzzy and lacking in definition. They respond to disparate influences and include thinkers who represent a wide range of backgrounds; like movements that are disintegrating, they inevitably include a broad spectrum of opinions and positions.

From the vantage point of the 1990s, however, it seems that the inchoate quality of the new historicism is characteristic rather than a function of newness. The boundaries around the new historicism remain fuzzy, not because it hasn’t reached its full maturity but because, if it is to live up to its name, it must always be subject to revision and redefinition as historical circumstances change. The fact that so many critics we label new historicist are working right at the border of Marxist, poststructuralist, cultural, postcolonial, feminist, and now even a new form of reader-response (or at least reader-oriented) criticism is evidence of the new historicism’s multiple interests and motivations, rather than of its embryonic state.

New historicists themselves advocate and even stress the need to perpetually redefine categories and boundaries — whether they be disciplinary, generic, national, or racial — not because definitions are unimportant but because they are historically constructed and thus subject to revision. If new historicists like Thomas and reader-oriented critics like Steven Mailloux and Peter Rabinowitz seem to spend most of their time talking over the low wall separating their respective fields, then maybe the wall is in the wrong place. As Catherine Gallagher has suggested, the boundary between new historicists and feminists studying “people and phenomena that once seemed insignificant, indeed outside of history: women, criminals, the insane” often turns out to be shifting or even nonexistent (Veere, The New Historicism 43).

If the fact that new historicists all seem to be working on the border of another school should not be viewed as a symptom of the new historicism’s newness (or disintegration), neither should it be viewed as evidence that new historicists are intellectual loners or divisive outsiders who enjoy talking over walls to people in other fields but who share no common views among themselves. Greenblatt, McGann, and Thomas all started with the assumption that works of literature are simultaneously influenced by and influencing reality, broadly defined. Whatever their disagreements, they share a belief in referentiality — a belief that literature refers to and is referred to by things outside itself — stronger than that found in the works of formalist, poststructuralist, and even reader-response critics. They believe with Greenblatt that the “central concerns” of criticism “should prevent it from permanently sealing off one type of discourse from another or decisively separating works of art from the minds and lives of their creators and their audiences” (Renaissance 5).

McGann, in his introduction to Historical Studies and Literary Criticism, turns referentiality into a rallying cry:

What will not be found in these essays . . . is the assumption, so common in text-centered studies of every type, that literary works are self-enclosed verbal constructs, or looped intertextual fields of autonomous signifiers and signifieds. In these essays, the question of referentiality is once again brought to the fore. (3)

In “Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism,” he suggests a set of basic, scholarly procedures to be followed by those who have rallied to the cry. These procedures, which he claims are “practical derivatives of the Bakhtin school,” assume that historicist critics study a literary work’s “point of origin” by studying biography and bibliography. The critic must then consider the expressed intentions of the author, because, if printed, these intentions have also modified the developing history of the work. Next, the new historicist must learn the history of the work’s reception, as that body of opinion has become part of the platform on which we are situated when we study the work at our own particular “point of reception.” Finally, McGann urges the new historicist critic to point toward the future, toward his or her own audience, defining for its members the aims and limits of the critical project and injecting the analysis with a degree of self-consciousness that alone can give it credibility (Inflexions 62).

In his introduction to a collection of new historical writings on The New Historicism (1989), H. Aram Veere stresses the unity among new historicists, not by focusing on common critical procedures but, rather, by outlining five “key assumptions” that “continually appear and bind together the avowed practitioners and even some of their critics”:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. finally, . . . that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. (xi)
These same assumptions are shared by a group of historians practicing what is now commonly referred to as "the new cultural history." Influenced by Annales-school historians in France, post-Althusserian Marxists, and Foucault, these historians share with their new historicist counterparts not only many of the same influences and assumptions but also the following: an interest in anthropological and sociological subjects and methods; a creative way of weaving stories and anecdotes about the past into revealing thick descriptions; a tendency to focus on nontraditional, noncanonical subjects and relations; and some of the same journals and projects.

Thus, in addition to being significantly unified by their own interests, assumptions, and procedures, new historicist literary critics have participated in a broader, interdisciplinary movement toward unification virtually unprecedented within and across academic disciplines. Their tendency to work along disciplinary borderlines, far from being evidence of their factious or fractious tendencies, has been precisely what has allowed them to engage historians in a conversation certain to revolutionize the way in which we understand the past, present, and future.

In the essay that follows, Brook Thomas begins by claiming that if we are to catch a glimpse of the hazy truths that Heart of Darkness has to offer, we are going to have to approach Conrad's work with a renewed willingness to read historically. After all, the epigraph to his essay shows Conrad thought of fiction as history. Thomas begins his approach by providing a kind of history of history, by reminding us that, during the nineteenth century, history tended to be seen as an organic development toward the present. Consequently, the discontinuities of history were overlooked or, at least, glossed over by historians who all the while believed that they were describing the past as it really was.

Thomas critiques the old history not only to avoid its pitfalls but also because he sees Conrad as a kind of prototype of the new historicist, as a writer who, though in some ways biased in the ways of his culture, was nonetheless effective at debunking the melioristic historicism of his own age. Thomas uses "counter-memory," a phrase of Foucault's, to describe Conrad's picture of Kurtz, a man who gives the lie to meliorism by showing how the most "civilized" of Europeans can also be subhuman in savagery. In Thomas's view, Conrad anticipated the new historicism, too, by not choosing to try to tell how it was in the Congo via an objective-sounding, third-person, omniscient narrative. Even though Conrad had himself been there, he chose to tell his story indirectly, through an idiosyncratic, first-person narrator, Marlow, whose narrative is in turn relayed by another narrator who presumably has not even been to Africa. This elaborate structure makes us aware of structure as structure; thus, the novel doesn't pretend to offer us a perfectly clear, uncluttered, unbiased, perfectly natural view of the facts of the past.

Thomas, of course, is a newer historicist than Conrad; we can see this by the characteristics of his own text. The text praises Nietzsche, who helped decenter Western historical narrative, which had tended to assume that Western, idealist values were central and definitive and to judge the past of other cultures accordingly. Thomas also makes use of biographical and bibliographical information and, especially, of Conrad's own writings about his works. Those nonfiction writings, because they have shaped the critical reception of the fiction, must be attended to by the new historicist, in whose view the history of a work includes the work's point of origin, its point of reception, and even its future relationship with its audience. Finally, Thomas is not only familiar with but also adept at using the insights of avant-garde schools of criticism that have flourished since the demise of the old history. And yet, even as he uses them, he distances himself from them by situating them historically.

But Thomas can ill afford to historically situate and critically account for everyone and everything — from Conrad to reader-response criticism to the deconstructive readings of J. Hillis Miller — except himself. Were he to do so he would fall into the old trap in which the historical critic fails because he fails to admit his own historical limitations and consequent capacity for failure. Thomas implicitly does the former and explicitly admits the latter. "There is no guarantee that we will penetrate to the... heart of Heart of Darkness," Thomas writes (p. 266). There is, in its place, only the conviction that the heart of Conrad's novel can only be approached by the critic who practices sociohistorical criticism.