Ever since the late 1960s, scholars have faced a troublesome problem: how to judge scholarship and teaching derived from an outlook not their own. When faculty members have convened to examine a doctoral student, screen job applicants, or decide a tenure case, the debate has frequently settled into a contest of formalists judging Marxists judging humanists judging Derrideans, etc. In the past, scholars might have disagreed over first principles of poetry, human nature, tradition, and so on, but they generally shared ideas of what constitutes a good argument, good evidence, and good style. In the 1950s, a myth critic and a New Critic commenced their interpretations with different concepts and goals in mind, but they rarely debated criteria of valid inference, appropriate evidence, and lucid expression. Cleanth Brooks never accused historicist scholars of subscribing to spurious, outmoded conceptions of knowledge. But in the current climate, in which rival commitments run deep into the most basic questions, argumentation itself is up for grabs, justified only according to the frame, the theory, the ideology of those wielding it.

The problem is exacerbated when the material under review adheres to a line of reasoning founded upon a single individual, an authority who presides over the discourse as guide and exemplar. In that case, scholars are compelled to judge the work for its derivations, as a piece of discipleship to be estimated by the standard set by the master. Academics trained to judge works of criticism by their evidence and inferences, or their erudition and eloquence, are caught short when called to appraise this kind of work. Impersonal standards of clarity, validity, and fluency, it is said, do not apply to performances that model those standards on the example of an intellectual figurehead. When non-disciples encounter essays that contain ingenious and labored readings of literature and culture, but which seem to conclude with familiar general principles taken from the master, they hesitate, wondering if that is the point. They are taken aback when they serve on search committees and read cover letters that begin, “I am a feminist-Foucauldian who applies cultural and discourse analysis to nineteenth-century American women writers.” They sigh when they observe clever graduate students embracing Lacanian psychoanalysis before

Mark Bauerlein is professor of English at Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322. The University of Pennsylvania Press published his most recent book Literary Criticism: An Autopsy in 1997.
having read widely enough to make their commitments informed and flexible. Asked to evaluate master-derived scholarship, members of tenure committees, editors assessing manuscripts for presses, and professors reviewing books for journals must choose either to read the material in the spirit in which it was written—e.g., use Derridean norms for Derridean criticism—or to examine the material on standards of proof and persuasion, which derive from no single master or school of thought. Each option has its pitfalls: the first makes the reviewer himself into a disciple, the second makes the reviewer into an antagonist—at least from the perspective of the one being reviewed.

This is an impasse that hinders academics in their role as referees. In the present state of affairs, in order to approach the particulars of a derivative work, referees are constrained to enter the system of concepts and rhetoric unique to the xian mode, accepting a host of premises and phrasings as part of the work's donnée. They must accept a system of beliefs and methods, a style, an idiom of idiosyncratic terms, favored locutions, and novel affects lifted from the master's corpus and assimilated by the devotee as a scholarly practice. To judge a de Manian study of Rilke's poetry, one isn't supposed to quibble with the theory of figural language assumed by the study. Partisans claim that that is unfair to the work being judged. One can only ask whether the study invokes the theory correctly and wields it shrewdly. If they disapprove of the framework, if they reject an axiom in the master's thinking, readers are disqualified from estimating the details of the study, for the details rest so firmly upon the axiom that the entire argument is invalidated. The master's thinking is a decisive threshold, a criterion that divides readers into those who admit the framework and those who interrogate it. For the terms and premises unique to a master-based school of thought are not hypotheses to be tested, opinions to be proffered, or surmises to be considered. They are founding postulates, ready commandments that produce the interpretations that follow. Lacan's epigrams on the gaze beget a reading of Hitchcock's Vertigo. Harold Bloom's conception of poetic influence initiates a series of monographs on Whitman, Williams, Stevens, and Pound. These master postulates are generative, allowing new interpretations to arise and be respected as long as the master's repute remains high.

These frameworks enable interpreters to proceed not only by shaping the outlook of disciples, but also by becoming the subject matter of their readings. Not long after translations of Ecrits, Surveiller et punir, and De la grammatologie arrived in the United States, numerous books expounding the dense positions of these theories followed, and with great success. Jonathan Culler's On Deconstruction (1982) made its way onto dozens of graduate seminar reading lists, and Jane Gallop's Reading Lacan (1985) received an Honorable Mention in the MLA Lowell Award contest. Recent expositions of the masters have grown more stylized in their treatment, and more focussed upon the person—