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AUTHORS AND AUTHORITY

**English and American Criticism
1750–1990**

Patrick Parrinder

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Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	1
1 Samuel Johnson: The Academy and the Market-Place	6
Neoclassicism: Dryden and Pope	6
Minim, the <i>Dictionary</i> and the <i>Life of Savage</i>	18
Milton, Shakespeare and the <i>Lives of the Poets</i>	29
2 William Wordsworth: The Poet as Prophet	38
Sublimity and transcendence: the later Eighteenth Century	38
The Preface to <i>Lyrical Ballads</i>	44
Poetic power: Wordsworth and de Quincey	56
3 The Romantic Critics	64
Reviewers and Bookmen: from Jeffrey to Lamb	64
Samuel Taylor Coleridge	74
<i>Biographia Literaria</i>	74
Coleridge on Wordsworth	87
Shakespearean Criticism	95
Shelley, Hazlitt and Keats	99
Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry'	102
Hazlitt and Keats	105
Hazlitt and de Quincey	112
4 Victorian Criticism: The Republic of Letters	117
The Definition of Literary Culture	117
Thomas Carlyle	125
Tennyson and Mill	129
The Birth of American Criticism: Emerson, Whitman and Poe	134
Ruskin and Morris	139
Matthew Arnold	143
Homer and the Grand Style	146
<i>Essays in Criticism and Culture and Anarchy</i>	155
<i>Essays in Criticism: Second Series</i> and other later writings	166
The later Nineteenth Century	177
Walter Pater	178
Swinburne's Criticism	185

vi *Contents*

Harrison and Saintsbury	189
The Genteel Tradition and Henry James	190
Leslie Stephen and A. C. Bradley	196
W. B. Yeats	201
5 Modernists and New Critics	207
The Children of the New Epoch: Lewis, Pound and Hulme	207
T. S. Eliot	214
Eliot as modernist	216
<i>The Sacred Wood</i> and the dissociation of sensibility	221
The later Eliot	226
Poetry and the Age (1920–60)	233
I. A. Richards	234
Leavis and the Southern Agrarians	243
Leavis on poetry	246
Leavis and Lawrence	252
Williams, Caudwell and Orwell	255
The New Critics: Ransom, Burke, Blackmur and Winters	259
6 The Age of Interpretation	270
The Scientific Schoolmen	270
William Empson	274
Northrop Frye	281
Roman Jakobson	287
Theory and Interpretation: the Text and the Dream	293
Freud and deconstruction	295
Harold Bloom	300
Paul de Man	306
7 The Challenges to Interpretation	314
The Men of Letters: Wilson, Trilling and Steiner	314
Edmund Wilson	315
Lionel Trilling	320
George Steiner	324
Virginia Woolf and Feminist Criticism	326
Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory	337
Notes	350
Guide to Further Reading	374
Index	384

Preface

The first four chapters of *Authors and Authority*, with the subtitle 'A Study of English Literary Criticism and its Relation to Culture 1750–1900', were published by Routledge and Kegan Paul in 1977. The book was not originally meant to stop at 1900, so that the present, greatly enlarged edition represents the fulfilment of my original plan. At the same time, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have been written in the very different intellectual climate of the late 1980s. One of the changes to be recorded is that nobody today discusses the 'decline of English' in the resigned, elegiac tone that was common fifteen years ago. Criticism and English studies have not only revealed great reserves of vitality, but there is a renewed sense of their cultural and educational importance. The relationship of literature to literacy, and the place of English in the national education systems of the English-speaking countries, have continued to be hotly contested.

Another major change is in the currency of the word 'authority', which in 1977 had scarcely risen to the surface of literary discussion. In the year that the earlier part of *Authors and Authority* appeared the journal *Daedalus* published a translation of Jean Starobinski's essay 'Criticism and Authority', a brief history of the concept of criticism in France. E. D. Hirsch, Jr's *Validity in Interpretation*, published ten years earlier, had been one of the first books to bring the terms 'author' and 'authority' together for rhetorical purposes, and by the early 1980s, in the aftermath of the post-structuralist inquisitions into the Death of the Author and the Myth of the Author, this coupling had become a commonplace. Where Hirsch's theory of reading seeks to reinstate the authority of the author's intention, many of the more recent discussions of literary authority either register its loss or, where it is judged to have survived, they seek to undermine it. The ironies involved were neatly illustrated by a conference of the 'Literature Teaching Politics' group, held in England in 1984: the conference took 'Authority' as its main theme and one of the topics offered was 'The absence of authority as itself authoritative'.

Chapters 1 to 4 have been considerably revised for the present edition. The new Chapters 5, 6 and 7 discuss twentieth-century literary criticism written in English, so I have been forced to omit, or to cite in very summary fashion, a good deal of the criticism

and theory that is currently discussed in university English departments; in some cases this is because I judge it to be ephemeral, but much of the material concerned is either not primarily literary, or is read in translation. Readers chiefly interested in multinational literary theory will find structuralism and deconstruction discussed in Chapter 6, and feminism and cultural theory in Chapter 7, with emphasis on the major English-language critics in each field. The future of a strictly literary criticism is also questioned – and reaffirmed – in these chapters.

For Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I am grateful for the encouragement provided by Beverley Tarquini and Caroline Egar at Macmillan, and the resources of the universities of Reading and California (Santa Barbara), where they were written. Coral Howells and Jenny Taylor gave generous encouragement and support, as well as stern criticism of my attempts to deal with feminist theory. Above all, I must thank Lilian Argrave for her patience and expertise during many hours of word-processing, and Jenny Bevan for her assistance. My debts to family, friends, colleagues and students, in a book first conceived at the University of Cambridge nearly two decades ago, are quite simply too numerous to mention. I would like, however, to dedicate this edition of *Authors and Authority* to the memory of three former colleagues and mentors, Ian Fletcher, Graham Hough and Raymond Williams. Each of them is present at particular moments in this book but, at a deeper level, their very different lives and outlook embodied the critical vocation as I understand it.

PATRICK PARRINDER
Reading, October 1990