This is a revised and expanded version of an earlier work, Authors and Authority: A Study of English Literary Criticism and its Relation to Culture 1750-1900 (1977). The respective titles highlight the primary differences between the two books. The later work takes in not only the twentieth century but also American criticism although its core remains pre-1900 English criticism.

Parrinder seeks not to write merely a chronological survey of literary criticism, a task undertaken by Wellek in his masterwork, A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950, as well as by George Watson and, collaboratively, by Wimsatt and Brooks. Rather, as he establishes in the introduction, his purpose is to consider the nature of a critic's authority, to see literary criticism as a 'normal science' (in the Kuhnian sense), to investigate its 'intellectual and sociological characteristics'.

In the first four chapters, the inheritance of the earlier work, Parrinder focuses on neoclassicism, the Romantics, and Victorian criticism, paying particular attention to Johnson, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Arnold. The analyses here, and indeed those throughout the book, are clear and closely...
These two meticulous surveys of modern criticism in all its vertiginous variety lead one to ponder what it is all about and where it may be heading. The book by René Wellek, focused on Central and Eastern European critics, is the penultimate volume of a vast project he began in the Fifties. The two previous volumes dealt respectively with English and American criticism in this same half-century, and chapters of the first four volumes of the series covered earlier critics that fall within the scope of Patrick Parrinder’s study.