

## T. Tsimpouki on M. Boyden's *Predicting the Past, The Paradoxes of American Literary History*

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- 1 Boyden, Michael. *Predicting the Past, The paradoxes of American Literary History*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009. pp. 215.
- 2 In recent years Michael Boyden's research interests have focused on literary history and canon formation as well as on multilingualism and translation in literature. Boyden has masterfully combined these threads in his new book-length study of American literary history and of the paradoxes of its institutional formation. As the title seeks to convey, *Predicting the Past* is about how the present form of American literary history can be used to reconstruct the theorizing constructs in the discipline's past. One does so, Boyden argues, by taking into account the paradoxical dynamic of American literary history, which is what ensures the maintenance of the discipline by the institutionalization of its negation.
- 3 The author's thesis becomes clear in the book's introduction: unlike previous disciplinary historians who attempted to offer definitive solutions for the legitimization crises besetting American literary history, Boyden contends that change is the normal condition of the discipline which ensures its survival. In that sense, the formation of the institution is continually in the process of rewriting itself through revisionist interventions that expose the provincial, racist, sexist, classist, Anglocentric, or more recently Amerocentric biases of the American literary tradition. Lest that his thesis may sound confusing, Boyden repeatedly comes back to the paradoxical logic governing the discipline, which is none other than the tradition's constant anticipation of revision. Boyden focuses on particular themes and topics, "nodal points" as he calls them, which illustrate the self-induced complexity of American literary history around which the book is organized.
- 4 Although *Predicting the Past* does not claim to be a comprehensive history of American literary studies, it nevertheless covers a wide range of literary histories and reference works which are presented in chronological order. Chapter One discusses the widespread view that American literary studies are –from their inception- dominated

by an assumption of Anglocentrism; regardless of the various social/ideological factors that may have instilled this Anglo-Saxon roots narrative, it has itself proven functional for the self-invention of the American literary tradition by displacing the origin narratives. Thus, from the editors of 1917 *Cambridge History* whose ambition was to overcome American parochialism to Sacvan Bercovitch's proclamation as editor of the multi-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature* that the field's "center of gravity" must be transposed from the "nationalist" American Renaissance (as demarcated by early Americanists) to the "transatlantic" modernist period, each individual perspective is validated by the anticipation of its eventual revisioning.

- 5 In chapter Two, the promise of a truly inclusive realization of American literary history is developed in relation to the issue of "living" literature. Here, too, rather than simply reasserting the existing hierarchical system, Boyden regards the ban on living authors (i.e. the exclusion of realist and naturalist writers from early histories) as a means by which new voices are institutionalized: "neophobia is often a means for welcoming the new by making it expectable." As he points out, a telling example of the discipline presenting itself as "out of time with itself," is from Sinclair Lewis' Nobel Prize acceptance speech when he articulates the paradox that "recognition can only be granted by postponing it."
- 6 Chapter Three draws attention to the paradoxical character of the search for an "American" language. This is the most exciting section of the book, probably because of the author's interest in language and its relation to identity formation. The problem of language has been factored, according to Boyden, into the script of monolingualism in the US, with languages other than (American) English dying out or being bound to. But, as Boyden argues persuasively through a number of examples, this script has been paradoxically urging American literary history to open up to a linguistic pluralism, by reintegrating into tradition what had been considered foreign through a sort of conversion process.
- 7 The genealogical misrepresentations and the laws of literary succession that govern the discipline constitute the topic of Chapter Four. Boyden focuses on three canonical authors: Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson and Robert Lowell (and the school of confessional poets). Rather than attempting to rectify the misrepresentations of the above poets in the history of American literature, this chapter underlies the functional character of the corrective process their critical revisioning has undertaken. While genealogies establish valuation hierarchies, they inevitably open up the possibility of seeing things differently.
- 8 In all respects, *Predicting the Past* is a stimulating book that draws attention to the dynamic and uncompromising drive that governs of formation of American literary history. It is also a "visionary" book, in the sense that it presumes to predict the future of the discipline in its incessant revisioning of its "usable past" and endless recreation of the self-conception of American literary history.

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