

Reviews

Boyden, Michael. *Predicting the Past: The Paradoxes of American Literary History*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009. 215 pages. ISBN: 978-90-586-7731-0. 39.50.

Literary history is beset with internal conflicts: critics argue the relative merit and importance of different genres, writers, and works, and debate the benefits and drawbacks of different theories and methodologies with almost clockwork regularity. It is precisely the predictability of this kind of debate that prompts Michael Boyden's study of the mechanics of American literary history. Drawing on the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann and the "forensic" approach to social institutions developed by Mary Douglas, Boyden tries to go beyond the stake-holding involved in these debates by taking a functionalist approach to literary history.

Densely but economically argued, Boyden's book contains a great deal of insight, if sometimes veiled beneath a jargon which lends pathos to the argument but also makes some of its claims vague and difficult to follow. Systems theory is theory on the grand scale, and tends to draw forth statements about universals rather than singularities. Hence it may not seem ideally suited for dealing with literary history, the universals of which have a way of splintering into just so many singularities at closer inspection; recall Lovejoy's discriminations of Romanticism, or the countless accounts of Modernism still being discussed. Boyden's book certainly is not short on questionable universals of a similar order—the terms "American literature," "paradox," and "American literary history" readily spring to mind.

In the main, however, Boyden steers clear of empty academicizing by grounding his discussion of the systemic character of American literary history as a professional institution in four individually themed chapters, each of which amounts to a case-study of how the paradoxes that beset American literary history manifest themselves in different aspects of its discourse: the debates about its supposed "Anglocentrism"; the debates in the era of natu-

realism about whether or not to include living writers in literary histories; the question of what amounts to American language; and finally, the question of literary genealogies, or more specifically, the shifting critical attitudes to Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson, and the confessional poets.

In the introductory chapter, Boyden introduces his main thesis, namely that “the literary institution maintains itself by institutionalizing its own negation” (19). The discipline of literary studies, in other words, takes for granted that how we perceive of literary studies will change over time: it is pre-programmed, as it were, to question its own foundations, by coming up with new questions to ask about literature and with new definitions of literature. By turning this reassessing principle into its very *raison d’être*, the literary institution is maintained through the very act of transforming itself: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. Or as Boyden puts it, “the possibility of negation and revisioning is built into the process of institution formation” (34).

Rather than contribute to this logic by offering yet another study seeking to reconstruct our view of American literary history, Boyden seeks simply, he says, “to explain why and how this institutional formation is continually in the process of rewriting itself” (16). The answer he comes up with is perhaps not very surprising given his theoretical framework, but it is nevertheless worth pondering: American literary history continuously rewrites itself, he claims, because it amounts to what Luhmann terms “a self-substitutive order,” that is, to a system which “deals with change by normalizing it, by making it expectable” (16). It thus always projects itself into the future: “Such an order is stabilized by a projective structure that validates itself by constantly propelling itself into the future” (48). The urge to reconsider the foundations of American literature thus would be an effect of the inverted temporal dynamics of the literary institution, which will always re-invent the past in its own image, or differently put, will seek to predict the roots of its own emergence.

From this perspective, Boyden argues in chapter one, it makes little difference whether we say that early textbooks in American literary history promote an Anglo-Saxon origins narrative for natural or for ideological reasons, because the latter option is already potentially inscribed in the former. As Boyden points out, early textbooks were in fact more reluctant to identify the early literature of the Puritans as “American” literature, than we tend to be today: for early scholars in the field, this literature was not national enough. When later critics critique the origins narrative as such,

they are in a sense merely repeating this original negative gesture, which signaled from the very first that the roots of the American literary tradition were found strangely insufficient as such. Rather than argue about who is right in cases like these—those who hold historical accounts to be natural or those who see them as ideological—Boyden suggests it is this very tendency of American literary history to continually postpone its fruition that needs explaining: “In a society that insists on equality and diversity, an expert perspective can only develop when it institutionalizes its own negation” (48). In other words, in order to uphold the image of itself as a democratic country, American literary critics must always demonstrate that the story told so far about the nation’s literary history needs to be transcended and expanded.

Similar “paradoxes” are unearthed in the subsequent chapters: that contemporary literature was gradually accepted as worthy of academic study to Boyden suggests that American literary scholarship “immunizes itself against the new by means of the new” (76); “the languages in American literary history [...] operate on the basis of a paradoxical logic: they revitalize themselves by continually reacting against their own standardized forms of usage, i.e. by foreignizing the domestic” (92); and in the case of calls to reassess individual authors, the “injunction to rectify the misrepresentations about the author appears equally persistent as the stereotype itself” (122). As this brief list of examples suggest, Boyden is a perceptive critic with a penchant for paradoxical formulations. This makes for intellectually stimulating reading for the most part, but can also grow a little tiring, especially since the paradoxical formulations do not always seem called for, and at times seem positively to obscure the issues at hand rather than clarify them.

When Boyden speaks, for instance, of “the paradoxical logic of literary studies, which both valorizes the new as something that is different from the old and at the same time distrusts it as something that warrants no more than passing interest” (71), it would seem the “paradox” is a result primarily of the way the argument confuses “the new” in a universal sense with “the new” in particular. For surely there is nothing paradoxical about valorizing works that provide us with new experiences, while at the same time debating whether a given work can be said to truly do so or not. What is at stake here would seem to be not paradox but the question of literary evaluation. One wonders, moreover, if the questions or “paradoxes” discussed are really specific to American literary history, as the title of the book suggests, and not rather traits general to the discipline of literary studies as such, as

the theoretical framework would seem to imply. Are the paradoxes diagnosed specific to American literary history, and if not, what is the relation between this particular discipline and that wider system that is made up of literary history in general?

Such questions are left unanswered in Boyden's study, which may seem problematic also in that his open declaration of a non-interventionist stand would seem to place him in a position beyond the debates on American literary history he seeks to understand—a rather peculiar position for a critic who has decided that this history must be understood as a system from which there is no escape. To be fair, however, Boyden's position should perhaps be seen less as an attempt to stand outside the system described and more as the willing decision of the critic to refrain from either promoting or resisting the machinery that he recognizes will be in place either way.

The "constitutive problem of American literary history," Boyden sums up his argument, is "that an expert perspective on American literature can only develop when it anticipates the possibility of revision or negation" (158-59). Even readers who question whether there really is such a thing as *the* constitutive problem of American literature, are likely to find Boyden's construction of such a problem within the bounds of his investigation fruitful.

Magnus Ullén

Østfold University College, Norway

McNamara, Kevin R., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 248 pages. ISBN: 978-0-521-73554-4. \$67.95.

Echoing Shelley's comments on London, Bertolt Brecht wrote in a poem about his time in exile in Los Angeles during the Second World War that "on thinking about hell [...] it must be still more like Los Angeles." This is one of the more drastic literary representations of the city mentioned by Russell A. Berman in his contribution to this companion collection, entitled "British Expatriates and German Exiles in 1930s-1940s Los Angeles." As consumers of American popular culture, we are perhaps more accustomed to thinking of L.A. as a paradisiacal place full of palm trees and beautiful people. This contrast between heaven and hell seems nevertheless to sum up the contradictory nature of this West coast Californian city, encapsulating on the one hand the American dream of Hollywood as well as the prom-