Predicting the Past
The Paradoxes of American Literary History
Michael Boyden

Drawing from the social theories of Niklas Luhmann and Mary Douglas, *Predicting the Past* advocates a reflexive understanding of the paradoxical institutional dynamic of American literary history as a professional discipline and field of study. Contrary to most disciplinary accounts, Michael Boyden resists the utopian impulse to offer supposedly definitive solutions for the legitimation crises besetting American literature studies by “going beyond” its inherited racist, classist, and sexist underpinnings. Approaching the existence of the American literary tradition as a typically modern problem generating diverse but functionally equivalent solutions, Boyden argues how its peculiarity does not, as is often supposed, reside in its restrictive exclusivity but rather in its massive inclusivity which drives it to constantly revert to a self-negating “beyond” perspective. *Predicting the Past* covers a broad range of both well-known and lesser known literary histories and reference works, from Rufus Griswold’s 1847 *Prose Writers of America* to Sacvan Bercovitch’s monumental *Cambridge History of American Literature*. Throughout, Boyden focuses on particular themes and topics illustrating the self-induced complexity of American literary history such as the early “Anglocentric” roots theories of American literature; the debate on contemporary authors in the age of naturalism; the plurilingual ethnocentrism of the pioneer Americanists of the mid-twentieth century; and the genealogical misrepresentation of founding figures such as Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Lowell.

**MIND BOYDEN** is Assistant Professor of American Literature and Culture at the Department of Translation Studies of University College Ghent, Belgium.

_In this insightful and accessible analysis, Boyden reveals the complex ways U.S. literary historians have constructed narratives of national identity and culture that conceal crucial elements of the story. This is an engaging, groundbreaking study of an influential historical form._

- Emory Elliott, General Editor, Columbia Literary History of the United States

_A member of the new generation of international Americanists deeply familiar with America’s institutions, myths, and imaginaries, Boyden ably illustrates the productive possibilities of practicing American Studies as a non-American Americanist._

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