

MACLEOD, Kirsten, ed. 2018. Carl Van Vechten, *The Blind Bow-Boy*. Cambridge, UK: Modern Humanities Research Association. Pp. xxviii + 152. ISBN 9781781882900, Paper \$17.99.

Carl Van Vechten's *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923) is a book about pleasure — about the kinds of pleasure taken by 1920s dandies in literature, performance, perfumes, fashion, cocktails, Coney Island, and car rides; about sexual pleasures and the pleasure of solitude; about fads and the short shelf-life of certain kinds of pleasure; about whether one can learn from things that are pleasurable and whether one can learn to take pleasure. It is a modernist novel written in a Decadent register. The cataloguing of interiors frequently stands in for character development. The reader comes to understand who people are according to the kinds of tableware with which they surround themselves or in which they are able to find joy. The text speaks in commodity code, mixing the high and the low, mass and high culture, addressing itself to a readership who knows their French literature and avant-garde art and music as well as their fashion houses, perfumiers, and parlor songs. It expects from its audience a deep awareness of literary history as well as an up-to-date savvy concerning bestsellers and modernist trends. One is meant to feel whipped about by the whirlwind of things one might enjoy in 1920s New York by visiting certain neighborhoods, booksellers, and beautifully outfitted apartments. In conveying so much detail about the richness of modern pleasure, however, Van Vechten constructed a novel that demands a certain kind of cultural literacy. *The Blind Bow-Boy* is rooted absolutely in what Decadent modernist epicureanism felt like in Manhattan in 1923. It is, consequently, exactly the kind of book that becomes infinitely more pleasurable when experienced as a scholarly edition.

Kirsten MacLeod's new MHRA Critical Texts edition of *The Blind Bow-Boy* makes it possible and attractive to bring Van Vechten into both the undergraduate and graduate classroom by illuminating the novel's complex recipe for hedonism. As MacLeod notes in her introduction, while Van Vechten was a major figure during the early-twentieth century with ties to the key figures of high modernism, such as Gertrude Stein and Langston Hughes, as well as an entire network of camp or queer modernists, such as Ronald Firbank and Harold Acton, he is at this point "virtually unknown outside of academia" (vii). When his name surfaces, it has most often to do with his support of members of the Harlem Renaissance or his photographic portraits of modernist celebrities, but the majority of his literary works, which were quite commercially successful on publication, remain

out of print. Because he stands at the point of connection between so many key figures associated with queer and Black modernism, however, he should be brought back into the critical conversation. Indeed, the new modernist studies as well as increased contact between scholars of modernism and Decadence call for renewed attentiveness to writers like Van Vechten. And MacLeod, whose work straddles the boundary between Decadence and modernism and focuses on the reading habits, popular literature, and little magazines of this period, possesses the appropriate expertise to bring Van Vechten and his allusions into focus.

MacLeod's introduction makes the stakes of reading Van Vechten's work immediately and forcefully clear. The narrative focuses on a young man, Harold Prewett, whose absent father has paid a dissolute dandy to tutor him in the pleasures on offer in modern New York, and MacLeod demonstrates what this scenario has to say about early twentieth-century visions of queer identity and the new Decadence. MacLeod links these elements of the novel to its practice of a form of what she refers to as "arched brow modernism", "modernism that approaches its subject matter in a blithely sophisticated manner typified by characteristics associated with the body language of the arched brow — knowing, wry, cynical, and sardonic" (xiii). This sensibility operates at the foundation of camp aesthetics, which, as MacLeod notes, might be the most useful framework for understanding how Van Vechten "played an important role in developing a language and strategies of communication for the expression of queer desire and identity in this period" (xvii). In addition, MacLeod makes the case that the novel can be read as a highly detailed document of Jazz-Age New York, an element of the text that her annotations allow the reader to more keenly feel by conveying the cultural role each individual neighborhood would have played in the lives of 1920s Manhattanites. The notes on the distinction between the kinds of shopping available on Sixth as opposed to Fifth Avenue or the artistically redesigned rowhouses on Nineteenth Street in Gramercy Park bring to life the text's vivid sense of place, rooting audiences in the hedonistic urban geography of the novel. Her introduction also contains biographical background on Van Vechten, which highlights his position within the literary networks of the period as well as the manner in which his literary reputation shifted in the decades following this novel's publication. The "Note on the Text" provides useful insights into the novel's composition and sales numbers, the design of early editions, and artistic responses to *The Blind Bow-Boy*. In addition, MacLeod includes a bibliography of Van Vechten's key works, reviews of the novel, and significant secondary sources that would provide students encountering the text

a foundation for comprehending its impact and reception history. In every sense, then, MacLeod's framing of the novel makes it feel at once more significant and more enjoyable, and its availability now in an affordable paperback form will hopefully bring more scholars, students, and general readers into contact with its pleasures.

Kristin Mahoney
Michigan State University

FRANKEL, Nicholas, ed. 2018. *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Pp. 394 + 21 illustrations. ISBN 9780674984387, Paper \$18.95.

Referencing the period after his incarceration in the concluding paragraph of his prison letter to his lover, Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, Oscar Wilde wrote, "What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes" (FRANKEL 2018, 290–1). With this new volume of Wilde's writings begun during his incarceration of 1895 to 1897, Nicholas Frankel provides readers with a chance to reevaluate, to see "with different eyes", Wilde's output from a significant episode in his life. Frankel enables such a reevaluation by bringing together five texts: Wilde's clemency petition to the home secretary (sent in 1896), the lengthy prison letter that Wilde wrote to Douglas (composed 1896–1897), Wilde's two letters about prison conditions published by the *Daily Chronicle* (in 1897 and 1898), and his bestselling poem published after his release, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898).

This edition satisfies a clear need within Wilde studies, as it provides students and scholars with complete, annotated texts for, in particular, the relentlessly provocative ballad as well as the extant manuscript of Wilde's extended letter to Douglas, excerpts of which Wilde's literary executor Robert Ross published under the title *De Profundis* in 1905. The full text of the prison letter, when combined with Frankel's annotations of it, occupies nearly 250 pages of *Prison Writings*; it is the prominent selection in the volume. In it, Wilde recounts his thoughts and experiences from before and during his incarceration by juxtaposing the personal and philosophical as well as the mundane and the extraordinary. Wilde's epigrammatic style shines through in, for example, his response to Douglas's desire to publish an article vindicating Wilde: "All bad art is the result of good intentions" (247). Other passages show Wilde struggling with his bankruptcy, the death of his mother in 1896, and conflicts within his family that would lead to his permanent separation from his children. In his unsympathetic moments,