For the Boy with the Eyes of the Virgin: Selected Poems
by John Barton

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In For the Boy with the Eyes of the Virgin: Selected Poems, John Barton deftly etches a poetic and personal history of the homosexual impulse from ancient to contemporary times. In the tour de force opening poem, “The Pregnant Man” (from The Photographer), Barton elliptically and with playful humour suggests the clash between this unstoppable same-sex male erotic impulse and society, hinting at the homosexual male’s resistance to society’s conforming principle at the same time that society attempts to thwart or disavow the impulse’s existence. Of course, the proposition of a “pregnant man” is preposterous in the manner of Greek myths (such as that about Athena being born from Zeus’s head), but the image becomes loaded and, might I add, iconic: the phenomenon of the homosexual man setting a precedent in history, and thus giving birth to succeeding generations of homosexuals is metaphorically stunning:

I’ve let you in,
filled empty marble halls,
arching silences that have lasted generations.
My doctor will be shocked.
Hitler will be shocked.
They never knew I would give birth
to a new age. (15)

While during the “first month” the fetus “I” of the poem becomes an “occupied country,” the verse “I never sensed the missiles across the border” suggests the fetus’s unawareness of the lack of acceptance that will follow its birth, as during the next month during this allegorical pregnancy the doctor “fed” it “pills”; but the “I” of the poem still “refuse[s] to surrender.” In the final stanza, we see how this progeny of the “pregnant man” becomes associated with the misfits, “dissidents,” and isolationists; however, the attitude towards an idealistically conceived homosexuality remains ambiguous, with the speaker denying “that shit about being lovers, / being friends” (17) at the end of the poem.

A history of the speaker’s own beginnings and the realization of his homosexuality is prepared for in the sections “Hidden Structure” and “Great Men.” In the former long poem, we feel his anxiety and honesty as he queries, “Should I only love women?” Rather equivocally, he then goes on to describe his attraction to women in muted terms – “as sand falls into the creases” – while he finds himself drawn to men who provide the “luxuriant storm” (28). Following this ontology of his growing awareness of his sexual orientation, the section Great Men details the precedent in literary history and puts the prototype of the homosexual man in excellent, creative company:

Great men have slept
in each other’s arms: Rimbaud
and Verlaine;
Auden and Isherwood;
and maybe Michelangelo
warmly carved David’s thirst
for women in
the marble thrust of some half-forgotten
lover’s unforgettable
thighs. (50)

One of the more succinct and striking poems in the collection is “Cellophane Suit,” in which the poet mythopoetically presents his birth and homosexual awakening with the totem of the cellophane suit or placenta initially masking his realization:

Soon it had shrunk so much,
it pinched my groin.
Just once some jerk

one desk behind ran
his hand down the back

of my neck.
My suit of cellophane
went with a bang
like a balloon held
to a flame. (47)

The poem has a chiselled brightness and jauntiness that amuses while maintaining a certain enigmatic quality. The closing lines, “with my skin/exposed like this// it’s all guesswork,” suggest the vulnerability of the boy during this experience whose sensations he does not yet fully comprehend. Two poems later, in “Naked Lunch,” the speaker comes to the mature realization that all love, in the manner of W.H. Auden’s “Lullaby,” shares a common human denominator: “we are lovers whether our lovers / are women or men” (55).

From this idealistic view of homosexual love, the poems in the section Designs for the Interior reflect on the more sordid physicality, suggesting that homosexuality may be as promiscuous as heterosexual love. In the title poem, a boy from Central America coyly offers the speaker, a tourist, oral sex after a snow cone has failed to slake his thirst. At the same time that the speaker is attracted to the boy, he is wary of this “aggressively beautiful” boy:

. . . I refuse with money, not knowing what
icy current of death
he might also carry in his blood. (74)

In the final section, which includes poems from Hymn that play with the long line (in some, such as “Days of 2004: Days of Cavafy,” using lines longitudinally across the page), Barton brings the theme of homosexuality to a modern context. In the above lyric poem, almost epic in length, Barton compares Forster’s regret about the loss of Greek civilization to his own nostalgia about the male erotic body as it may be re-conceived in the contemporary urban scene. A loneliness permeates the poem while the speaker finds himself lusting after one man after another, never satisfied: an emptiness follows that parallels a yearning for spirituality in the contemporary absence of gods. The closing lines of the poem, with the speaker giving directions that he hopes are “less unsatisfying to a stranger,” are powerful in their suggestion of an age without faith or conviction but still retaining a basic human decency.
Although all these poems are drawn from previous anthologies, *For the Boy with the Eyes of the Virgin: Selected Poems* is indeed a cohesive collection. The running theme of male erotic love as epitomized by the cover art, an image of a Greek-like sculpture of a boy's face (with eyes closed) by contemporary artist Miles Lowry, gives the collection meaning in a postmodern context. Throughout his career as a poet, Barton seems to have changed his style from a shorter, chiselled line to a longer, flowing line, but his theme throughout this collection remains the same even as it becomes more complicated and his mood shifts and twines around his material. 
