

Some long poems, a 'place to wander in,' as Keats put it

# LENGTH AND DESTINY

## THE LONG POEM ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY MICHAEL ONDAATJE

Coach House Press, 344 pages, \$7.95

## THE VEHICULE POETS

INTRODUCED BY ARTIE GOLD

Maker Press, 94 pages, \$4.95

## REVIEWED

BY JOHN ROBERT COLOMBO

Ask anyone of my generation who went through the Ontario high school system in the fifties what a "long poem" is and the answer will probably be "a narrative poem written in verse form." Ask for some examples and you will receive Earle Birney's David and Robert Browning's My Last Duchess, not to mention various longer poems by E.J. Pratt.

This is not what Michael Ondaatje, the talented and energetic poet and novelist, had in mind when he compiled *The Long Poem Anthology*, a most assured-looking volume of 344 pages with an introduction, nine long poems, statements by the poets, even a bibliography, handsomely designed and well printed by Coach House Press.

The featured poets are Robert Kroetsch, Stuart MacKinnon, Daphne Marlatt, Don McKay, Robin Blaser, Frank Davey, George Bowering, Roy Kiyooka and bpNichol. Introducing their work, Ondaatje claims: "The most interesting writing being done by poets today can be found within the structure of the long poem." He finds their writing "personal, transitional, and local" and sees them as "our true documenters."

These are certainly the characteristics of *Seed Catalogue*, the 21-page poem by Robert Kroetsch, which gives the reader a sense of the every-

day experiences of a prairie childhood. At one point Kroetsch writes, perhaps self-consciously: "Once upon a time in the village of Heisler — / — Hey, wait a minute. / That's a story."

There is no room for story-telling here. Similarly, Nichol tries in the 38 pages of *The Martyrology* to depict an entire world (this time of the mind) of saintliness without saints. Between are recreations of specific scenes, Marlatt's *Steveston* and McKay's *Long Sault*, some more evocative of time and place and the poet's perceptions than others.

At least four long poems (those by Marlatt, McKay, Blaser, and Davey) strike me as being not long poems at all but suites of short poems-linked together by threads of theme or subject. The majority, though, meet Keats' definition of the long poem as "a place to wander in." So if you enjoy your poetry written in short bursts, interspersed with passages of prose, lists, bits of dialogue and even illustration (as in Kiyooka's *The Fontainebleau Dream Machine*) *The Long Poem Anthology* is for you.

*The Vehicule Poets* is a different kind of anthology, for no editor is credited with the selection, and Artie Gold, who contributes the introduction, calls this collection of poems "a point of convergence for our convenience." The poets, all Montrealers in their early thirties, are Endre Farkas, Artie Gold, Tom Konyves, Claudia Lapp, John McAuley, Stephen Morrissey and Ken Norris.

With so varied a collection, all the reviewer can do is single out poets whose work especially moved him. Two Hungarian-born Montrealers are outstanding. Endre Farkas explains in *Shop Talk*: "The poem I enter / is the perfect poem to enter / because I enter it."

He neatly escapes this solipsism and goes on to make other points. Tom Konyves' forte is the long poem with the long line. *No Parking* is a meditation on death and resurrection in a zany manner characteristic of the best of the surrealists.

I also enjoyed the poems of Claudia Lapp, charcoal-like sketches, and the heavier, impasto-like paintings of Ken Norris (who writes: "If we could live inside a poem / we'd live inside an ode"). But all seven poets seem intent on proving the truth of Louis Dudek's observation that "it is the destiny of Montreal to show the country from time to time what poetry is."

John Robert Colombo is editor of *The Poets of Canada and Other Canadas*, a collection of science fiction. A new work, *The Canada Coloring Book*, will be published shortly.



Editor Ondaatje: most assured