

Classic Poetry Series

Nérée Beauchemin
- poems -

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Nérée Beauchemin(20 February 1850 - 29 June 1931)

Nérée Beauchemin has been described as representing a decisive turning point in the development of French-Canadian poetry and as the most insipid poet of the nineteenth century. He was acclaimed, in his time, for bringing craftsmanship and refinement to a poetic tradition characterized by bombastic sloppiness. He lived in rural Quebec, which he celebrated without exaggeration or heavy didacticism, and is best remembered for delicate, precise vignettes of traditional French-Canadian country life.

Charles-Nérée Beauchemin was born 20 February 1850 in Yamachiche, a small town in the fertile belt near Three Rivers, Quebec. His father, Hyacinthe Beauchemin, was the local doctor, and Beauchemin was to follow in his footsteps. The poet's mother, Elzire Richer-Laflèche Beauchemin, was related to Louis-François Laflèche, the outspoken nationalist bishop of Three Rivers, and to Lomer Gouin, once premier of Quebec.

Beauchemin studied at the seminary in Nicolet; this does not imply a religious vocation, seminaries being then the regular place for a secondary education. From there he went on to study medicine at Laval University from 1870 to 1874. He returned to practice medicine in Yamachiche, where he remained for the rest of his life. The place was not without literary memories, being also the birthplace of Antoine Gérin-Lajoie, but Beauchemin was not closely associated with the main literary circles in Quebec and Montreal. He had apparently begun to write poetry while he was a student in Quebec City--his earliest known composition dates from that time--and he published verse from time to time in newspapers, though without any thought of making a literary career.

One of Beauchemin's early poems, "Rayons d'octobre" (October Sunbeams), attracted the attention of more established writers: Louis Fréchette sent congratulations. The poem is a visual and evocative depiction of traditional farm life, set in a mellow autumn scene, and ending with the image of a bird flying bravely into the advancing chill of nightfall. The moral message is only hinted at, and the versification is relatively free of padding and trite effects. Beauchemin continued modestly writing and publishing until, in 1888, the Royal Society of Canada awarded him a prize, based on about a hundred scattered poems. The same group of admirers elected him to membership in the Society in 1896, a circumstance that obliged him to publish a book. *Les Floraisons matutinales* (Morning Blossomings) appeared the following year; it was a collection of forty-five pieces, without any particular order or discernible principles of selection. The common underlying theme is fidelity: to nature, to religion, and to la patrie,

which for Beauchemin means, above all, his own region. The collection also includes historical pieces that recall, thematically, the martial airs of Octave Crémazie and the Patriotic School. Stylistically, however, there is a distinct difference: "La cloche de Louisbourg" (The Bell of Louisbourg) is mainly devoted to a physical and artistic description of the bell saved from a fort that had seen important battles between French and English under the old regime. The poem won immediate praise because it avoided the rhetorical excesses of the older school.

The title of Beauchemin's second volume, *Patrie intime: Harmonies* (Intimate Homeland, Harmonies, 1928), more clearly defines his true nature. A preliminary poem declares that the poet has accepted life in the small circle lit by the blue sky under which he was born and where, as in a cloister, he has found complete inner peace. Meditation, nuance, and understatement, evident in his earliest work, take a decided upper hand, though there are still commemorative pieces that mark occasions great and small, public and personal. *Patrie intime* creates an enviably harmonious world in which art, truth, beauty, nature, and God form a serene family, perhaps like the author's own. (He had married Anna Lacerte, daughter of the local member of Parliament, and raised ten children in a large, old house.) Even when he speaks of the tantalizing goals of the artist, it is not as a *poète maudit* (cursed poet) driven mad by the unattainable: "Hantise" (Obsession) acknowledges the disappointment encountered by any poet at the inadequacy of his words, but more than that it expresses the ecstasy of playing with rhythms and phrases, the search that leads toward beauty, truth--even God. Death, a frequent theme, is always viewed with unshakable Christian faith.

Explicit religion plays a large part in Beauchemin's poetry; sometimes he literally describes the liturgy, the way one might paint a nativity. But his best-remembered compositions imbue ordinary life with a feeling some critics have described as mystical: the Sanctus enters the humble rural home, giving it spiritual value. The agricultural year and nature's cycle of death and renewal spread the same feeling into all Beauchemin's rural scenes, such as "La Glaneuse," his portrait of the gleaner in cheerful dialogue with a generous sun. Here, quite typically, nature participates in Christian charity without a hint of the dreaded ambiguity found in major telluric myths.

Beauchemin's is above all a visual art. It has been correctly observed that his tropology is rare but unadventurous; apart from his faith in Christian mysteries, he presents a literal, precise, material world. For this Gérard Bessette judges Beauchemin harshly; but others have hailed the evocative descriptions in Beauchemin's first book. Like the French Parnassians he is capable in his best work of painting a picture and relying on its suggestiveness.

Whereas writers' identifications with rural French-Canadians are often suspect, Beauchemin appears to write from inside the rural scene rather than about it. He proudly adopts the archaic diction of his neighbors and deftly adopts their conventional symbols, such as offering verbena as a sign of friendship. If ever the French-Canadian rural religious idyll (much decried since the Quiet Revolution) had a moment of truth, it is to be found in the verse of this modest country doctor, who died in 1931, only two years before his neighbor, Philippe Panneton (Ringuet, 1895-1960), started to write *30 Arpents* (1938; translated as *Thirty Acres*, 1940).

A Celle Que J'Aime

Nérée Beauchemin

Claire Fontaine

Claire fontaine où rossignole
Un rossignol jamais lassé,
N'es-tu pas le charmant symbole
D'un cher passé?

Source de fraîche mélodie,
Qui fait fleurir, sous nos frimas,
Ce rosier blanc de Normandie,
Qui ne meurt pas!

À ce bouton de rose blanche,
L'hiver ne fut jamais fatal,
Non plus qu'au chêne qui se penche
Sur ton cristal.

Oh! c'est une peine immortelle
Qui s'épanche, en larmes d'amour,
Dans la naïve ritournelle
De l'ancien jour.

C'est un reflet des ciels de France,
Ô fontaine, que tu fais voir,
Dans la limpide transparence
De ton miroir.

Nérée Beauchemin

Crépuscule Rustique

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Fleurs D'Aurore

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La Branche D'Alisier Chantant

Nérée Beauchemin

La Maison Solitaire

Nérée Beauchemin

La Maison Vide

Nérée Beauchemin

La Mer

Nérée Beauchemin

La Muse

Nérée Beauchemin

La Petite Canadienne

Nérée Beauchemin

L'Avril Boréal

Nérée Beauchemin

Le Ber

Nérée Beauchemin

Le Dernier Gîte

Nérée Beauchemin

Le Fleuve

Nérée Beauchemin

Le Lac

Nérée Beauchemin

Le Vieux Parler

Nérée Beauchemin

L'Érable

Nérée Beauchemin

Les Corbeaux

Nérée Beauchemin

Ma France

Nérée Beauchemin

Ma Lointaine Aïeule

Nérée Beauchemin

Notre Terre

Nérée Beauchemin

Patrie Intime

Nérée Beauchemin

Perce-Neige

Nérée Beauchemin

Primroses

Nérée Beauchemin

Québec

Nérée Beauchemin

Rayons D'Octobre (I)

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Rayons D'Octobre (Ii)

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Rayons D'Octobre (Iii)

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Rayons D'Octobre (Iv)

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Roses D'Automne

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