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Autumn by Jules Breton

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Sharon Fish Mooney
Autumn

Jules Breton
Automne

The river slowly flows; its waters weave
A path round stumps of alders, stained blood-red.
Tall yellow poplars scatter their golden leaves
Among blond flaxen reeds. The riverbed

Awakes and murmurs as a soft wind moans
And blows clear silver wrinkles from dark regions,
Where trembling trees dip down their domes and cones
As if agitated by birds in the thousands.

A thrush repeats its sharp and tiny cry.
Then, darting from the grassy shore it sings
And sparkles, jewel-like in the clear blue sky

As its prolonged note is heard, pitched shrill and higher—
The kingfisher takes flight on flaming wings
In a furtive ray of emerald and of fire.

Commentary

Jules Adolphe Aimé Louis Breton (1827–1906) was born in Courrières, Artois, France. A popular artist of the realist tradition, Breton became known in America for his 1884 oil on canvas, *The Song of the Lark* (Henry Field Memorial Collection, Art Institute of Chicago). Willa Cather's 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark* takes its name from this painting. Breton exhibited his work at the Salon de Paris and received several awards/medals for his art. He was elected to the *Académie des beaux-arts* in 1886.

Breton is less well-known for his poetry, but that, too, served to define his life. His poetry was published during his lifetime in a number of journals and in two books: *Jeanne*, a novel in verse, and *Les Champs et la Mer*, a collection of poems (1875).

My interest in Breton initially was sparked while doing research in the Van Gogh Museum library, Amsterdam, for my ekphrastic book of poetry after the art of Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh made reference to Breton's art and poetry nearly one hundred times in letters to friends and family members and considered Breton one of his most admired artists and poets. One of the poems Van Gogh sent to his artist friend, Anthon van Rappard was "Automne," dedicated to landscape artist Jules Dupré (1811–1889). Breton's choice of subject would have appealed to Dupré's love of nature.

In a letter to Breton in 1875, poet and literary critic Eugène Manuel wrote:

Today I have no hesitation in telling you that you are a poet with the pen as well as with the brush, and an excellent poet. The same deep sense of nature which has inspired so many wonderful paintings, you have found it and managed to reproduce it equally purely, seriously, and penetratingly with words, sound, rhythms and images.¹

Letters from other poets and art critics also expressed admiration and delight in Breton's dual artistic roles.

¹ Lacouture, Annette Bourrut. *Jules Breton: Painter of Peasant Life*. Yale University Press in association with The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 2002, p. 185.

Thirteen of Breton's poems, including "Automne," have been translated into English and published in *Vincent van Gogh—The Letters*, though without adherence to rhyme or meter.²

My desire to maintain metrical structures comparable to the original poems has necessitated, at times, substitutions or equivalents, though I hoped to adhere to both language and imagery that mirrored the spirit of the metrical literary traditions of the Victorian era in which he lived and wrote and the character and personality of Breton himself.

Breton's poem, with its focus on the kingfisher, also raises questions I'm exploring for a future book. Breton wrote "Automne" ca. 1875. Van Gogh's oil on canvas, *Kingfisher by the Waterside* was painted in 1887. Was this painting perhaps inspired in part by Breton's poem? Gerard Manley Hopkins, the painter who became a priest and poet and who was a frequenter of art museums in Europe and France, wrote his well-known poem, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" in 1887. Was he, too, perhaps influenced to some degree by Breton's art and poetry?

Source text:

Breton, Jules. *Les Champs et la Mer*. Alphonse Lemerre, 1875. Nabu Press, 2014, pp. 29–30.

² Jansen, Leo, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, editors. *Vincent van Gogh—The Letters*. Van Gogh Museum & Huygens ING, 2009; version: December 2010. <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let435/letter.html>