

Against sincerity: René Magritte, Paul Nougé and the lesson of Paul Valéry

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I
For much of his life, André Breton was deeply ambivalent about what to make of Paul Valéry. Early in his career, he was drawn to Valéry's symbolist poetics and went so far as to dedicate a poem to him in 1913. The two became friends and the younger poet looked to the older as a mentor and critic. Even more than Valéry's poetry, however, it was his prose piece, *An Evening with Monsieur Teste* (1896), that most fascinated Breton in his early years (he practically knew it by heart, he once remarked). And it continued to fascinate him for the rest of his life. Decades later, Breton remarked:

Still today, there are plenty of circumstances in which I hear this fellow [Mr Teste] grumbling the way no one else can; he's still the one who is always *right*. For me, Valéry had reached the supreme point of expression with Mr Teste; a character created by him (at least I suppose so) had truly set himself in motion, had come forward to meet me.¹

But if Mr Teste was 'one who is always right', Breton could not say the same of Valéry himself. As Breton's interest turned from Symbolism to Dada and Surrealism, Valéry's classicism — his 'Racinian alexandrines', as Breton called them² — came to be seen as a betrayal of Mr Teste's 'grumbling'. By the end of the 1910s, Breton had turned his attention toward developing a poetry of immediacy, which he referred to as 'automatic writing'. For Breton, automatic writing — which aimed at the direct, unmediated connection between thought and word — was the antithesis of Valéry's attention to poetic conventions and the classical tradition, an attention exemplified in the most retrograde fashion (as far as Breton was concerned) in the poem with which Valéry, in 1917, broke his long and famed silence, *The Young Fate* (*La jeune Parque*). Still, the two remained friends, with Valéry even serving as Breton's best man at his wedding to Simone Kahn in 1921. But the relationship cooled considerably throughout the 1920s, as Breton's allegiance to Surrealism — and with it, the insistence on poetic immediacy — grew more intense and uncompromising. As Breton wrote in his *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924): 'the first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard'.³ Poetic spontaneity, Breton knew well, was the exact opposite of Valéry's hyper-rationalized craft. The final break between the

two came in 1927, when Valéry was inducted to the Académie Française. Revolted, Breton sold his entire correspondence to Valéry to a book dealer on the very day of the induction.⁴ Three years later, Valéry's name would appear on Breton's 'do not read' list of authors both past and present (alongside Plato, Bergson, Malraux, and others).⁵

The Belgian faction of the Surrealist movement — centered in Brussels — is typically presented as a satellite of the French movement led by Breton. To a great extent this is true: the groups collaborated on a number of projects in the 1920s and '30s and, for the most part, these collaborations were organized under the auspices of Breton's group in Paris. It is also true that the paintings of René Magritte and Paul Delvaux and (to a lesser degree) the poetry of Camille Goemans and Paul Nougé gained international attention only after their work was reproduced in the pages of Breton's various publications. One would thus expect to find that, like Breton, the Belgian Surrealists would have held Valéry's poetic conventionalism in contempt. In fact, however, Magritte, Nougé and the others in Brussels held up Valéry as a model for emulation and at the same time had little interest in Breton's concept of 'automatic writing' and the call for a poetics of immediacy. What interested them even more than the poems and the Teste stories was Valéry's collection of meta-poetic texts — texts that ranged from thoughts on Leonardo to reflections on myth and history. And, above all, what struck them most directly was Valéry's abiding interest in the notion of artifice, of the inherently deceptive nature of linguistic communication and, with it, an uncompromising assault on the notion of literary sincerity. This essay sets out to detail the ways in which the Belgian Surrealists — Magritte and Nougé in particular — transformed Valéry's critique of sincerity into pictorial and poetic practice. It is hoped that, in doing so, light will be shed on the considerable divide that separates the discourse and practice of the Belgian Surrealists from their French counterparts to the south.

Before developing an account of the ways in which the Belgian Surrealists incorporated Valéry's ideas into their own practices, it is important to outline the particular aspects of Valéry's poetics that most interested them. First of all, it should be noted that Valéry was at least as ambivalent toward Breton's practice as Breton was toward his. In a number of well-known comments, Valéry dismissed Breton's approach as