

THE TRAGIC GENIUS OF EUGENE MARAIS

1871 - 1936

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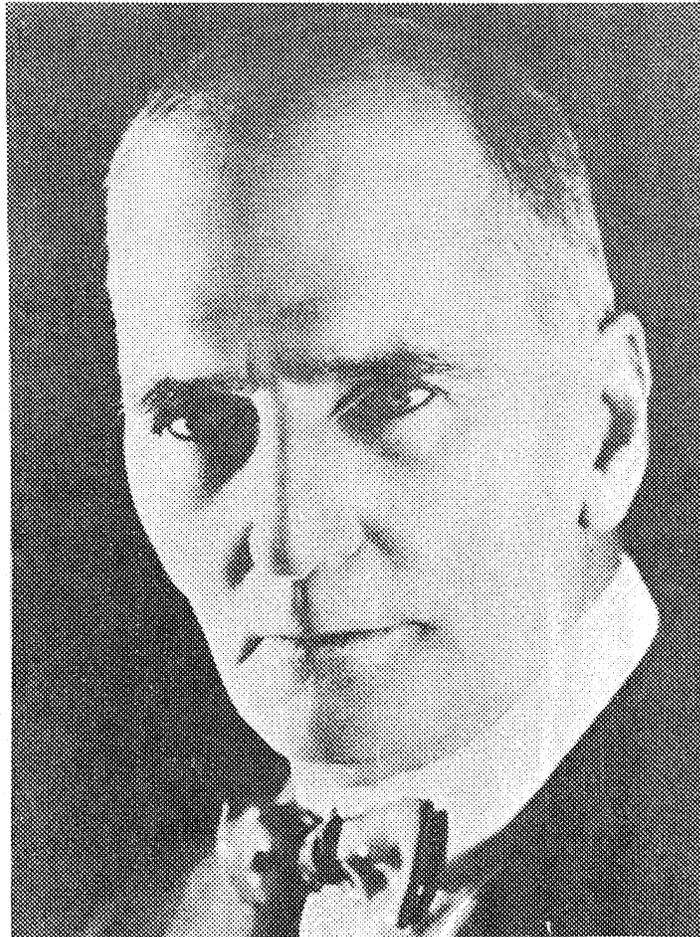


Fig. 1

He was a man courtly, gentlemanly in every oldtime ecstatic sense. . . . His charm was something that contemporaries who outlived him recall with yearning . . . he was a poet with no eternal page to write upon. As a scientist he was unique, supreme in his time, yet a worker in a science then unborn . . . a human community in the person of one man. He was a poet, an advocate, a journalist, a story-teller, a drug addict, a psychologist, a natural scientist.

Thus wrote Robert Ardrey in the Introduction to The Soul of the Ape - the only one of Eugene Marais' books which was published in English. Ardrey, is, of course, the best-selling author of The Territorial Imperative, and of African genesis, which was dedicated to the memory of Marais.

The title of this paper was obtained from Ardrey: "Tragic, unknown Eugene Marais . . . was the purest genius that the natural sciences have seen in this century. [His studies] remained, with one extraordinary exception, unknown to science, for they were written in Afrikaans."

This may seem like somewhat extravagant praise, and perhaps a reassessment of Marais is in order. This presentation serves only as a brief introduction to Marais' many talents. One of the difficulties in studying his work is that very little of his writing in Afrikaans is accessible to North American students. It is hoped that enough interest in his work can be generated to persuade scholars, students or the general reader to establish a demand for his books, so that they can become more readily available.

Eugene Marais was born on January 9, 1871, the youngest of twelve children. His early years were spent on a farm, but his family later moved to Pretoria. Initially, his schooling was in English, but subsequently he received weekly lessons in Dutch. While he was still at school, he demonstrated a talent for writing poetry, and some of his verses were published in The Paarl District Advertiser. When he left school, he was briefly articled to an attorney, and then he obtained a position as editor of a local Dutch weekly newspaper, Land en volk. By the time he was 21, he had saved enough money to purchase the paper.

He developed a reputation as a crusading and fearless investigative journalist, although he attracted the ire of

the government of Paul Kruger, because of his political criticisms, and accusations of wrong doing in high places. In fact, he was sued for libel, charged (and acquitted) of high treason, and excluded from the Parliamentary Press Gallery by resolution of the entire Volksraad.

In 1894 he married Aletta Beyers, whom he described in a letter to a friend as "the most perfect female body and mind that God ever planted in South Africa." But, eleven months later, she was dead, as a result of kraamkoors or septicemia, contracted during the birth of their son. This was a common cause of death during childbirth in those days, but Marais blamed the doctor, who was drunk while delivering the baby. He also blamed himself, because he was not at her side, but out on the job, reporting on the opening of a new railway line between Pretoria and Delagoa Bay.

It was at about this time that he began his lifelong addiction to morphine. One of the myths surrounding him - and there are many - was that this addiction was caused by the death of his wife. As may become apparent, deepseated personality disorders are the more likely cause. Setback followed setback. His newspaper, Land en volk, suffered financial losses. He lost a suit for libel, which he had instituted against a writer of an anonymous letter. His father died, to be followed a month later by his mother. The Transvaal was in political turmoil, as a result of the infamous Jameson Raid, which was a bungled attempt on the part of Cecil Rhodes to overthrow the regime of Paul Kruger.

"Everything is drifting to the dogs," he wrote to a friend.

On the advice of friends, he left South Africa for London in January 1896, where he spent five years studying law, medicine and psychiatry, mingling with high and low

society, and taking stock of himself. Notwithstanding his Afrikaner background, he had grown up in an English cultural tradition, and he adjusted well, perhaps too well, to the cultural and social life of London. He failed his medical exams, because he was involved in a number of other activities not connected with his studies, including that of raising a baboon in his chambers, as a companion rather than a pet.

The Anglo-Boer War broke out while he was in London, and he became an enemy alien on parole. In 1902, he returned to his native land, devastated and demoralized by the War.

In spite of his English education, and his political opposition to the Afrikaner folk-hero, Paul Kruger, he retained a strong Afrikaner-nationalistic consciousness. He wrote that the most enduring result of the War was "that it made me far more bitter than men who took part in the War at a more advanced age, and who had less to do with the English before the War. It was for purely sentimental reasons that I refused to write in any language but Afrikaans, notwithstanding the fact that I am more fluent and more at ease in English."

Ardrey says that it was "Marais' tragic fortune that the pain of his people became so intensely his own that he confined almost all of his writing to a language understandable by so few."

At about this time he had planned to write an epic poem presenting the saga of the Afrikaner people's struggle for freedom. He only managed to complete a few lines, and yet these lines mark the turning point in the development of Afrikaans as a literary language. This fragment, called Winternag, which was published in Land en volk on June 23, 1905, is one of the best-known and most frequently anthologised poems in the Afrikaans language.

O koud is die windjie
 en skraal,
 En blink in die dofliig
 en kaal,
 so wyd as die Heer se genade,
 lê die velde in sterlig en skade.
 En hoog in die rande,
 versprei in die brande,
 is die grassaad aan roere
 soos winkende hande.

O treurig die wysie
 op die ooswind se maat,
 soos die lied van 'n meisie
 in haar liefde verlaat.
 In elk' grashalm se vou
 blink 'n druppel van dou,
 en vinnig verbleek dit
 tot ryp in die kou!¹

Perhaps the literary quality, influence and hidden meanings of this poem have been exaggerated and over-emphasized. The fact remains that it characterises the alienation and introspection reflected in much of his work.

After an unsuccessful stint as lawyer in Johannesburg, he moved to the Northern Transvaal, to the district known as

¹O cold is the slight wind
 and sere
 And gleaming in dim light
 and bare
 As vast as the mercy of God,
 lie the plains in starlight and shade.
 and high on the ridges
 among the burnt patches,
 the seed grass is stirring
 like beckoning fingers.

O tune grief-laden
 on the east winds pulse
 like the song of a maiden
 whose lover proves false.
 In each grass blade's fold,
 a dew drop gleams bold,
 but quickly it bleaches
 to frost in the cold!
 (translated by Guy Butler)

the Waterberg. It is this period in his life, this environment, that provided him with much of the background for his later work. Periodically he withdrew from the society of his fellow man, and disappeared into the bush, with nothing but baboons for company. His observations at close hand of these relatives of Man resulted years later in the publication of Burgers van die berge. Although the format was basically anecdotal, his experiences in the Waterberg led him to develop his theory that "No man can ever attain to anywhere near a true conception of the subconscious in man who does not know the primates under natural conditions."

Those years in the Waterberg must have been a time of great peace, and also of creativity, for Marais. Much later he expressed an intense desire to return to that time and that place.

Daar sou ek vrede weer besef
 Waar Tebes in die stil woestyn
 Sy magtig' rotswerk hoog verhef
 En Mara in die sand verdwyn;

Waar smôrens van die hoogste krans
 Die berghaan draaiend opwaarts spoed
 Om uit die gloeiend' hemeltrans
 Met groot geroep die son te groet;

Waar treurig nog die wolfgehuil
 Weerklankend in die kloue dwaal,
 En grootwild om die syferkuil
 Soos skadu's in 'n stofwolk maal;²

²I will find peace once more
 where Thebes in the quiet desert
 Raises its mighty balustrade of rock
 and Mara vanishes softly in the sand;

At dawn, from the highest cliff
 The eagle soars and swoops
 Through the glowing canopy of heaven
 to greet the sun with joyous cry;
 where the mournful jackal's howl
 Echoes from the craggy slopes,
 and wild game round the watering hole,
 Whirl like shadows in a cloud of dust.

(translated by C. Reitz)

Marais' behaviour was characterized by frantic bouts of creative energy, interspersed with periods of apathy and estrangement. All this time he was struggling with his addiction to morphine, but whenever he tried to abstain, or his friends hid or destroyed his drug, the withdrawal symptoms became so terrifying that they came to realize that nothing could help him. His physical dependency was total.

"Hy wou doodgaan, man, en net sodra daai pilletjies kom, toe was hy reg," commented a servant.

His poem "Mabalêl," written at about this time, represents death as a monster, lurking in the hidden depths, waiting to devour and destroy. It tells the story of the young Bantu girl, Mabalêl, going to the river to draw water, and of the crocodile Lalele lying in wait for her.

During the period 1923-1925, Marais wrote a long series of articles for Die Huisgenoot on the termite, or "white ant." These subsequently appeared in book form as Die siel van die mier. The thesis which he presented was that all members of a termite colony, and the termitary itself, from what is essentially a single organism. The various castes within the society have the functions of the body's organs; the queen is the brain, and when she dies, the termitary dies. This was a radical departure from current theories of insect behaviour and social organization, but because it was written in Afrikaans, it attracted little attention.

However, a couple of years later, a book was published in France called La vie des termites. In that book, presented for all the world to read, was Marais' theory of the termite "soul" or "consciousness." Half his life's work stolen, or so Marais felt. The author was Flemish, and could presumably read and understand Afrikaans; he was a winner of the Nobel

prize for literature, and the darling of European literary society: the famous author of The Bluebird: Maurice Maeterlinck. To this day no one knows why he did it, or how he got away with it. It has been suggested that both Marais and Maeterlinck based their theories on the work of earlier biologists. But Maeterlinck had never seen a termite nest in his life. He even committed the faux pas of taking certain Latin scientific words invented by Marais to be current and generally accepted Latin terms.

Marais' publisher and friends tried to induce him to take legal action, but by this time he had neither the funds nor the energy to pursue the matter. Maeterlinck maintained a dignified silence during the furore.

Throughout his life Marais sought the friendship of children, particularly young children. He was attracted by their simplicity, their unpretentiousness. They loved him for his stories, his humour, his fantasies - for treating them as equals. At one time he was boarding with a family of ten children, when a weekly magazine, Die Boerevrou, offered prizes in a short story contest. He suggested that Anna, a fifteen year old daughter, enter the contest. "Wait, I'll help you," he said. He not only helped her - he wrote it himself. The theme was the birds of Witklip, and a fountain under a krantz which has to be approached cautiously and scooped dry with a skepbekertjie before it disappears.

"Write it over in your own handwriting, and send it in," he told Anna. Something must have gone wrong, because this simple, beautiful piece of prose did not receive the attention of the editors of Die Boerevrou. Forty-five years later, it was found, and published.

In 1931 Marais was involved in what later came to be known as "the Lamontable affair" which did some damage to

his public image, and provided further setbacks to his self-esteem.

A Professor of French at the University of Pretoria, Lamont, wrote a book, under the pseudonym Wilfred Saint-Mandé, called War, wine and women, which was published in London by Cassell. It purported to be an anti-war story, but it contained several passages which enraged South Africans, and Afrikaners in particular. For instance: "The backveld boer bathes only for baptism, marriage and burial . . . many of them are illiterate boors, surly and morose."

Four young Pretorians were so incensed that they abducted Lamont, literally tarred and feathered him and dumped him out in the middle of the Town Square. They were charged with assault, and a local attorney, Hjalmar Reitz, and Marais were hired to defend them.

Marais was asked to participate, not because he was a lawyer (he had not practised for years), but because he was considered to be a prominent Afrikaner, a founder of the Afrikaans language movement, write of Winternag and Maralêl - the man whose biological theories had been stolen by Maeterlinck. Only recently he had given an outstanding and well-received public lecture on some Bushman artifacts which he had discovered.

But the court case was a fiasco. Reitz and Marais' arguments did not help. Marais was not equal to the task. His voice failed him, and his popular image crumbled. The defendants were found guilty (which they were, of course) and fined £50 each.

After this event, he did not appear in public again, or anywhere he could attract public attention. He even refused to attend the premiere of his new play Die Swart Verraad.

Notwithstanding this setback, the period 1931 to 1934 was among the most creative and prolific in his life. For several years he had been a reporter and feature writer for the struggling biweekly Die Vaderland, under the editorship of his friend Gustav Preller. Under new management, Die Vaderland became a daily, with a weekly magazine supplement. The new manager, a businessman, recognized Marais' potential. Had not his series on the termites increased the circulation of Die Huisgenoot tenfold? Preller was told to keep Marais writing, and to get short stories and articles from him on a weekly basis.

He produced his series from the Waterberg years, Burgers van die berge, which attracted a great deal of attention, and Laramie die Wonderwerker, a long Don Quixote-like tale, which presented a satirical portrait of the kind of person he felt he had become - the former mighty magician struggling through life as a tramp on the back of a donkey.

After the completion of Laramie, Die Vaderland had difficulty getting contributions from him. The editors literally had to stand over him while he wrote, cajoling him and encouraging him. In spite of this pressure, and notwithstanding some failures, Marais managed to reach heights of excellence in the use of words, in the perceptions he described, that have never been equalled. Most of the time he was heavily under the influence of morphine; he could hardly walk, he kept on falling asleep. One wonders at the ethics of his colleagues who hounded him to produce. But if they had not done this, we would not have possessed the legacy of Diep rivier, Die pad van drome, Die huis van die vier winde, Die vlieënde hollander, Die ondergang der tweede wereld, and many other perceptive tales.

The story Salas y Gomez portrays the world of dreams and nightmares brought on by extensive use of morphine.

. . . dat hy hier handgemeen raak met 'n bose en 'n wrede vyand wat met genadeloose wreedheid sy verplettering probeer veroorsaak. Dit was iets met die geaardheid van 'n wilde roofdier wat in die duister plekke van sy siel op die loer lê, klaar om sy beter, sy manmoediger self te bespring. . . . Dit was in verband met hierdie gevoel dat hy die eerste tekens van vrees, van bangheid, gewaar geword het. En dit was vrees vir niks uitwendigs nie. Hy het self nie geweet waarvoor hy bang word nie en van die donker gevoel self kon hy geen duidelike uitleg in woorde gee nie.

Dit het altyd begin met die betwyfeling van die werklikheid van wat gebeur het; selfs sy teenswoordige omgewing het 'n onuitlegbare skyn van onwesenlikheid aangeneem. Dit was asof hy in 'n droom beweeg - 'n aaklige droom wat hy tevergeefs probeer afskud. En dan saam met die angsgevoel ontstaan 'n onregeerbare rusteloosheid. Hy voel dat hy opgesluit is . . .³

And then, finally, in 1935, he began a correspondence with a young South African, Winifred de Kock, living in London, and married to the English writer, A. E. Coppard. She had expressed an interest in translating one of his books, and he agreed to let her work on Die siel van die mier. He also wanted her to help him put the finishing touches on his book, The soul of the ape, written in English,

³ . . . that he had come to blows with an evil and ferocious enemy which had tried to destroy him with merciless ferocity. It was something with the nature of a wild animal which lay in wait in the dark recesses of his soul, ready to pounce on his better, more courageous self. . . . It was with this feeling that he became aware of the first signs of fear and anxiety. And this fear was not for anything external. He did not know what he was afraid of and could give no explanation in words for this dark feeling.

It always began with a doubt of the reality of what had happened; even his immediate surroundings had an inexplicable appearance of unreality. It was as if he moved in a dream - a horrible dream which he tried in vain to shake off. And then, with the feelings of anxiety, there began an uncontrollable restlessness. He felt that he was imprisoned. . . .

(translated by C. Reitz)

but he had mislaid, or lost, the manuscript. It eventually surfaced, under mysterious circumstances, over thirty years later.

Marais' letters excited de Kock, but they also filled her with a sense of foreboding. He had written to her in intimate terms of his pain, physical and mental, as by this time morphine and spiritual alienation had taken its toll.

"Please tell me, what is the matter? I don't like your reference to being in pain, and what you said about dying. . . . Eugene Marais, for goodness sake, don't go and die just when we are beginning all this exciting work. Please assure me when you write that you are not going to die for years and years."

Three months later, on March 30, 1936, Eugene Marais shot himself, and embarked on that Deep River, that Dark Stream, in whose embrace all his anguish ended.

O, Diep Rivier, O Donker Stroom,
 Hoe lank het ek gewag, hoe lank gedroom,
 Die lem van liefde wroegend in my hart?
 In jou omhelsing eindig al my smart;
 Blus uit, O Diep Rivier, die vlam van haat,
 Die groot verlange wat my nooit verlaat.
 Ek sien van ver die glans van staal en goud,
 Ek hoor die sag' gedruis van waters diep en koud;
 Ek hoor jou stem as fluistering in 'n droom,
 Kom snel, O Diep Rivier, O Donker Stroom.⁴

⁴O, Deep River, O Dark Stream,
 How long have I waited, how long dreamed,
 The blade of love twisting in my heart.
 In your embrace ends all my pain;
 Extinguish, O Deep River, the flame of hate,
 The great longing that never leaves me.
 I see from afar the glint of steel and gold,
 I hear the soft murmur of water deep and cold;
 I hear your voice as whispering in a dream,
 Come soon, O Deep River, O Dark Stream.

(translated by C. Reitz)

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL FOOTNOTE

The major biography of Marais is Die Groot Verlange by Leon G. Rousseau (Cape Town, Human and Rousseau, 1974) from which much of the background for this paper has been gleaned. Another useful contribution, particularly with respect to Marais' scientific writings, is Robert Ardrey's introduction to The soul of the ape by Eugene Marais (New York, Atheneum, 1969), page 1-55.

Publications which deal with Marais critically, or analytically, are:

Cloete, Theunis Theodorus. Eugene Marais. Cape Town, Nasou, 1963 (Monografieë uit de Afrikaanse Letterkunde, 1).

Du Randt, William S. H. Eugene N. Marais as prosais. Cape Town, Nasou, 1969 (Monografieë uit die Afrikaanse Letterkunde, 11).

Lindenberg, E. Versamelde gedigte van Eugene Marais. Pretoria, Academica, 1966 (Blokboeke, 2).

See also the chapters on Marais in the three standard studies of Afrikaans literature:

Antonissen, Rob. Die Afrikaanse letterkunde van aavang tot hede. Pretoria, HAUM, 1965, pp. 89 - 95.

Dekker, G. Afrikaanse Literatuurgeskiedenis. Pretoria, 1965, pp. 57 - 62.

Kannemeyer, J. C. Geskiedenis van die afrikaanse literatuur: I. Cape Town, Academica, 1978, pp. 222 - 239.

Although now somewhat out of date, a bibliography is available of works by and about Marais.

Rossouw, F. Eugene Nielen Marais, 1872-1936; Cape Town, School of Librarianship, University of Cape Town, 1957.

Marais' poems have been collected under the title Versamelde gedigte (19th ed., Pretoria, van Schaik, 1972). An edition with English translations was published as Gedigte; poems (Pretoria, van Schaik, for Witwatersrand University Press, 1956).

His scientific works, which are available in a variety of editions, are:

Burgers van die berge (translated as My friends the baboons).

Natuurkundige en wetenskaplike studies.

Die Siel van die mier (translated as The soul of the white ant).

The soul of the ape.

His collected stories, narratives and essays include the following:

Dwaalstories.

Die Huis van die vier winde.

Keurverhale.

Laramie die wonderwerker.

Die Leeus van Magoeba.

Magriet van laastelust en Die wegraak van Sannie.

'n Paradys van weleer en ander geskrifte.

Die skepbekertjie; oor die voëls van Witklip.

Die stem van die storieverteller.

Uit die verhaalskat van Eugene Marais.