**Contributor: Etienne Terblanche**

**Entry: Marais, Eugène (Nielen) (1871-1936)**

Eugène Marais played an astounding number of roles: he was poet, fictionalist, essayist, naturalist, radical experimenter, hypnotist, medical doctor, psychologist, equestrian, prospector, businessman, journalist, advocate, war agent, political arbiter, farmer, literary mentor, spellbinding teller of children’s stories, and more—all rolled into one dazzling, humorous, magnetic, dark, and anachronistic personality. He lived, learned, and worked in an equally astounding array of places, including Pretoria (where he was born), Boshoff, the Paarl, Johannesburg, London (where a chimpanzee stayed with him in his room), the Waterberg, Mozambique, Erasmus, Durban, and Heidelberg (South Africa). His studies of chacma baboons, *The Soul of the Ape* (1937) and white termites, *The Soul of the White Ant* (1937), illustrate a revolutionary, modern mind at work. His great poem ‘Winternag’ (‘Winter’s Night’) (1905) is modern in form and impact, and it helped modernize Afrikaans and South African poetry. Equally ‘modern’ was his addiction to morphine: he acquired the habit as a young man, partly because great minds at the forefront of their time experimented with the drug, and partly because of a nervous condition induced by overworking and the naive notion in those days that it was a fairly harmless and even miraculous form of medication. The immense and endless struggle with this addiction drove him to commit suicide in the South African veld (countryside) near the Magaliesberg, in 1936. Marais was ahead of his time. A symbolic instance is his discovery of a cycad in his beloved Waterberg. This was viewed then as a geographical impossibility (too far to the west, was the verdict).Its existence there was confirmed only four decades later: it now carries the name *Encephalartos eugene-maraisii*.

He had the ability to cross-stitch the worlds of naturalism and literature with great dexterity. Many decades before anyone else did, he studied apes in the wild (not in captivity): he got to know a large troop of chacma baboons intimately over three years during the Anglo-Boer War. With the aid in London of Winifred de Kok, the material was published in 1937 as *The Soul of the Ape*. In the same year his book on white termites, with its daring theory that the nest was an organic whole of which the queen was the brain, was published in English as *The Soul of the White Ant*. Published earlier in Afrikaans as part of a series in a magazine (in 1925), it is almost certain that the theory was plagiarized by the Belgian, Flemish-reading Nobel Laureate Maurice Maeterlinck. However, as Edward O. Wilson has pointed out, both naturalists had been preceded in conceiving of this theory by W. M. Wheeler—though Marais arrived at the notion independently by means of painstaking and patient observation in the veld, without knowledge of Wheeler’s publication.

He was further able to traverse the supposed divide between Europe and Africa, in part because Afrikaans is an indigenous language with European roots: his short stories published in a volume entitled *Dwaalstories* (*Stories about Being Lost*) in 1927 as well as poems such as ‘Mabalel’ (1933), which briskly and pitifully narrates a young African girl’s encounter with a partly mythical crocodile, witness his open-minded, strangely cosmopolitan ability to incorporate Africa in literature. His eloquence in English furthermore enabled him to traverse the cultures of Afrikaans and English, thus adumbrating the complex and fruitful love-hate relationships between these linguistic spheres in South Africa, an ability enjoyed by later important writers such as N. P. van Wyk Louw, Etienne Leroux, André P. Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Antjie Krog, and Leon de Kock. Among other things, Marais passionately supported the Afrikaners during the Boer War, and incisively satirized in a newspaper column entitled ‘Swart Pilletjies’ (‘Little Black Pills’) what he perceived as the rather barbaric, sly, and bullying Afrikaner president and hero, Paul Kruger.

A single great Afrikaans poem guarantees Marais’s literary modernness: ‘Winternag’ (‘Winter’s Night’) published in 1905. Imbued with concrete and fragile imagery of the scorched earth left by the English during the Anglo-Boer War, it appeared when Afrikaans was still developing as a poetic language. Its compact poignancy stands in contrast to most of the more archaic, frolicsome, or clumsy Afrikaans poems of its day. It strips language to an intense music-like essence. It never explains itself, but instead shows the reader what it means by way of skilfully arranging its fragments. And it offers an objective correlative which evokes a fine-tuned emotive response. That response is wide-ranging, but it involves a deep sense of the Afrikaner’s closeness to African earth, and loss in the face of the violence done to them by what they held to be the most civilized country on earth, a civilization to be emulated: England. The poem incorporates and transcends these realities to achieve lasting impact; it distinctly modernized Afrikaans.

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