

Classic Poetry Series

Eugene Marais
- poems -

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Eugene Marais(9 January 1871 – 29 March 1936)

Eugène Nielen Marais (pronounced /'juːdʒiːn 'niːlən m?'re?/; 9 January 1871 – 29 March 1936) was a South African lawyer, naturalist, poet and writer.

His early years, before and during the Boer War

Marais was born in Pretoria, the thirteenth and last child of his parents, Jan Christiaan Nielen Marais and Catharina Helena Cornelia van Niekerk. He attended school in Pretoria, Boshof and Paarl and much of his early education was in English, as were his earliest poems. He matriculated at the age of sixteen. After leaving school he worked in Pretoria as a legal clerk and then as a journalist before becoming owner (at the age of twenty) of a newspaper called Land en Volk (lit. Land and (the Afrikaner) People). He involved himself deeply in local politics. He began taking opiates at an early age and graduated to morphine (then considered to be non-habitforming and a safer drug) very soon thereafter. He became addicted and his addiction ruled his affairs and actions to a greater or lesser extent throughout his life. When asked for the reasons for taking drugs, he variously pleaded ill health, insomnia and, later, the death of his young wife as a result of the birth of his only child. Much later, he blamed accidental addiction while ill with malaria in Mozambique. Some claim that his use of drugs was experimental and influenced by the philosophy of de married Aletta Beyers but she died from puerperal fever a year later, eight days after the birth of their son, Marais' only child. In 1897—still in his mid-twenties—he went to London, initially to read medicine. However, under pressure from his friends, he entered the Inner Temple to study law. (He qualified as an advocate). When the Boer War broke out in 1899, he was put on parole as an enemy alien in London. During the latter part of the war he joined a German expedition that sought to ship ammunition and medicines to the Boer Commandos via Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique). However, he was struck down in this tropical area by malaria and before the supplies could be delivered to the Boers, the war ended.

After the War

From 1905 he studied nature in the Waterberg ("Water mountain"), an area of wilderness north of Pretoria and wrote in his native Afrikaans about the animals he observed. His studies of termites led him to the conclusion that the colony should be considered as a single organism. In the Waterberg Marais also studied the black mamba, spitting cobra and puff also observed a specific troop of baboons at length, from which numerous magazine articles and the books "My Friends the Baboons" and "The Soul of the Ape" originated. He is acknowledged

as the father of the scientific study of the behaviour of animals, known as Ethology. As the leader of the Second Afrikaans Language Movement, Marais preferred to write in Afrikaans and his work was translated into various international languages either late in his life or after his death. Southern Africa is the only place in the world where Afrikaans is spoken to any degree, although it can be understood by Dutch and Flemish people. His book "Die Siel van die Mier" (lit. "The soul of the ant" but usually given in English as the "Soul of the White Ant") was plagiarized by Nobel laureate Maurice Maeterlinck, who published "The Life of the White Ant" in 1926, falsely claiming many of Marais' revolutionary ideas as his own. Maeterlinck was able to do this because he was Belgian and, though his mother tongue was French, he was fluent in Dutch, from which Afrikaans was derived. It was common at the time for worthy articles published in Afrikaans to be reproduced in Flemish and Dutch magazines and journals. Marais contemplated legal action against Maeterlinck but gave up the idea in the face of the costs and logistics involved.

The social anthropologist Robert Ardrey said in his introduction to *The Soul of the Ape*, published in 1969, that "As a scientist he was unique, supreme in his time, yet a worker in a science unborn." He also refers to Marais work at length in his work 'African Genesis.' Marais was a long-term morphine addict and suffered from melancholy, insomnia, depression and feelings of isolation. The theft of his ideas weighed heavily on his mind and some say this caused his final demise, although others argue that the issue had an energizing and invigorating effect. Certainly it brought him back into the public eye in a favorable way. In 1936, deprived of morphine for some days, he finally borrowed a shotgun (on the pretext of killing a snake) and shot himself in the chest. The wound was not fatal and Marais therefore placed the end of the weapon in his mouth and pulled the trigger. This occurred on the farm Pelindaba, belonging to his friend, Gustav S. Preller. For those who are familiar with the dark moods of certain of Marais' poems there is a black irony here; in Zulu, Pelindaba means "the end of the business" – although the more common interpretation is "Place of great gatherings". Marais and his wife Lettie are buried in the Heroes' Acre, Pretoria.

Legacy

Marais' work as a naturalist, although by no means trivial (he was one of the first scientists to practice ethology and was repeatedly acknowledged as such by Robert Ardrey and others), gained less public attention and appreciation than his contributions as a literalist. He discovered the Waterburg Cycad which was named after him (*Encephalartos eugene-maraisii*). He is amongst the greatest of the Afrikaner poets and remains one of the most popular, although his output was not large. Opperman described him as the first professional Afrikaner poet;

Marais believed that craft was as important as inspiration for poetry. Along with J.H.H. de Waal and G.S. Preller, he was a leading light in the Second Afrikaans (language) Movement in the period immediately after the Second Boer War, which ended in 1902. Some of his finest poems deal with the wonders of life and nature but he also wrote about inexorable Death. Marais was isolated in some of his beliefs, he was a self-confessed pantheist and claimed that the only time he entered a church was for weddings. Although an Afrikaner patriot, Marais was sympathetic to the cultural values of the black tribal peoples of the Transvaal; this is seen in poems such as "Die Dans van die Reën" (The dance of the rain). The progenitors of the Marais name in the region were Charles and Claude Marais, from the Paris region of France. The Marais name has retained its original French spelling and pronunciation in South Africa.

Die Dans Van Die Reen

O die dans van ons Suster!
Eers oor die bergtop loer sy skelm,
en haar oge is skaam;
en sy lag saggies.
En van ver af wink sy met die een hand;
haar armbande blink en haar krale skitter;
saggies roep sy.
Sy vertel die winde van die dans
en sy nooi hulle uit, want die werf is wyd en die bruilof groot.
Die grootwild jaag uit die vlakke,
hulle dam op die bulttop,
wyd rek hulle die neusgate
en hulle sluk die wind;
en hulle buk, om haar fyn spore op die sand te sien.
Die kleinvolk diep onder die grond hoor die sleep van haar voete,
en hulle kruip nader en sing saggies:
"Ons Suster! Ons Suster! Jy het gekom! Jy het gekom!"
En haar krale skud,
en haar koperringe blink in die wegraak van die son.
Op haar voorkop is die vuurpluim van die berggier;
sy trap af van die hoogte;
sy sprei die vaalkaros met altwee arms uit;
die asem van die wind raak weg.
O, die dans van ons Suster!

Eugene Marais

Die Spinnerak-Rokkie

'n Feetjie het vir haar
uit spinnerak 'n doek vergaar;
'n rokkie wit as heuningwas
het sy toe aanmekaargelas.

Maar nouliks was dit om haar lyf,
toe kom 'n windjie, vlug en styf,
en met die uiting van sy sug
daar trek ons Feetjie deur die lug!

Haar maatjies staar haar treurig aan,
hoe sy hoog oor die bome gaan,
tot sy met heel haar rokkie fyn
daar in die verte glad verdwyn!

As jy 'n rokkie ooit besit
van spinnerak of iets soos dit,
pas op hoe jy jou dan verroer,
'n windjie mag jou glad vervoer!

Eugene Marais

Die Stille Rusplaas

Drie verse uit 'Die Tuin van Proserpina'

Die Juigende, die Sterke -
Die dood sal hom ook raak;
Nooit sal hy vlieg met vlerke
Of pyn in vure smaak.
Die Skoonheid van die rose,
Die kom en gaan van bloese
Stoor nooit die Liefdelose -
Waar liefde ons versaak.

Bevryd van dors na lewe,
Van al ons hoop en wee,
Dank ons - bo alle vrees verhewe -
Die gode wat dit gee:
Hier eindig al ons drome,
Hier rus die lewenslome,
Hier vloei die moegste strome
Uiteindelik in die see.

Nòg gloeiend' son, nòg duister,
Nòg keer van aand en dag,
Nòg waters sag gefluister
Sal ooit die slaap verkrag.
En soeter, sagter, vromer,
Vergeefs kom weer die Somer,
Want droomloos is die Dromer,
Verdiep in ewig' nag.

Eugene Marais

Mabalele

Vinnig langs die paadjie trippel Mabalêl;
vrolik klink die liedjie
wat die klingelinge van haar enkelringe vergesel.
Op die voetpad sy alleen,
met die skadu's om haar heen;
op haar kop die kruik gelig
in gedienstig' ewewig.
Golwend kleur die hemelboog,
stadig sterf die laaste lig,
en van verre deur die skermmure
winkend blink die eerste vure.

Wydgestrek in eensaam' vrede
lê Rakwen', die stille, brede;
glansend in die westerpraal,
met 'n ceintuur in sy diepte van koraal.
En die witgepluimde riet
sing 'n treurig' wiegelied,
en buigend vleg 'n wilwersoom al om
die diepgespieëde hemelkom.

Wag, wag, Mabelêl!
Is daar niks wat jou vertel-
is daar niks wat deur die duister
bang en dringend in jou ore fluister
van die vreeslike gesel
wat jou vrolik' lied beluister,
wat jou spoor hou, Mabalêl?
Word jy niks gewaar
van 'n dreigende gevaar?
Voel jy nog nie, kil en snood,
Om jou hart die skadu van die dood?

Ver benee die palmietstele
in die bloue duister wag Lalele,
kwintessens van alles boos,
die Wreedheid self, meedoënloos;
met lydsaamheid wat alles kan ontbeer,
wat tyd en toeval kan trotseer;

wat seker as die Noodlot van sy dag
stil-wakker in die diepte op sy ure wag.
Deur winterkou en somergloed,
deur blankend' droogte en swelgend' vloed,
deur al die kerende taf'rele,
in sy diepte wag Lalele.

As die straaltjie in die sand
deur 'n vlam-geskroeide land
tussen walle dor en vaal
skaars die rotse van Rakwena haal,
en die hulsels van die riet
'n rouband bind van swart verdriet
om die groenbedekte kuil
waar die laaste water skuil
en die sugtend' wind versmag
deur 'n woedend' son verkrag, -
roerloos by die skepplek hou Lalele wag!

En wanneer in donker nagte
rasend losbreek al die magte
van geweld en storm en vloed,
en Rakwen' omring van angsgeskreeu,
smagtend sig nog eens te wreek,
soos 'n swaar gekweste leeu
swart en brullend deur die bome breek; -
blinkend uit die donker kolk, -
vlieg 'n vlammend' dolk, -
wat deur stormbanke dig
'n wêreld van verwoeste loof verlig -
ongerouer deur al die groot krakele
in sy diepte wag Lalele!

Droom sy op die kantjie, Mabalêl,
tot haar hart verlangend swel;
in haar peinse ongedeer,
staar sy in die diepte neer,
staar sy in die spieëlgewelf
met die donker reeds omsoom -
tot sy, dromend, self
deel word van 'n salig' droom;
uit die wêreld omgekeer

lokkend lag haar beeldjie weer.

Stadig deur die rietpensele
opwaarts uit die diepte rys Lalele.

Skud jou wakker, Mabalêl!
Sien jy nie die skadu opwaarts wel?
Naar die hoogwal, Mabalêl!
Hou jou mymering vir later -
nooit had vyg of wilg in water
so 'n gespieëldde metgesel!
Nooit 'n skrikbeeld uit die holte van die nag,
wat die dromer sug doen na die dag;
nooit onheilige gedaante uit die diepte van die hel
half so dreigend, half so fel
as dié skadu, Mabalêl,
as dié skadu, wat benee jou
uit die diepte opwaarts wel.

Voor jou voete, Mabalêl,
deur die westergloor verhel,
waar jy onbedagsaam staar,
sonder ooit gedagte van gevaar,
uit die stroomweg stadig
dryf 'n halfverdrinkte blaar.

Had jy spiere van 'n tier,
of die vlerke van 'n gier,
meidjie, niks sou dit jou baar,
want te lank het jy gewag - te laat!
Uit die spieëlvlak omhoog
bars 'n skuimend' waterboog;
Oor Rakwena, kalm en breed,
Galm 'n enkel angsvol' kreet;
en dan saggies weer
oor alles sak die stilte neer.

Winkend deur die skermure
helder blink die voornagvure.
Uit die donker stilte, skel,
klink geroep na Mabalêl
en die rotse antwoord weer;

maar terugkom sal sy ... nimmermeer.

Stadig deur die rietpensele
naar die diepte sak Lalele.

Eugene Marais

Skoppensboer

'n Druppel gal is in die soetste wyn;
'n traan is op elk' vrolik' snaar,
in elke lag 'n sug van pyn,
in elke roos 'n dowwe blaar.
Die een wat deur die nag
ons pret beloer
en laaste lag,
is Skoppensboer.

II

Gewis en seker is die woord:
die skatte wat ons opvergaar,
ondanks die sterkste slot en koord
word net vir mot en roes bewaar.
Net pagters ons
van stof en dons
om oor te voer
aan Skoppensboer.

III

Die heerlikheid van vlees en bloed;
die hare wat die sonlig vang
en weergee in 'n goue gloed;
die dagbreek op elk' sagte wang
en oë vol van sterre prag
is weerloos teen sy groter mag.
Alreeds begint die rimpel sny;
oor alles hou die wurm wag
en stof en as is al wat bly:
Want swart en droef,
die hoogste troef
oor ál wat roer,
is Skoppensboer.

IV L'ENVOI

Gewis is alles net 'n grap!

Ons speel in die komedie mee
geblinddoek met 'n lanferlap
wat selfs die son 'n skadu gee.
Wat treur ons tog?
Viool en fluit maak nog geluid,
en lank die nag wat voorlê nog.
Al kan ons nooit volmaaktheid raak,
nog blink die oog en gloei die huid
wat heel die winter blomtyd maak.
Dus onverlee
lag ons maar mee
met elke toer
van Skoppensboer!

Eugene Marais

The Dance Of The Rain

The Dance of the Rain

Oh, the dance of our Sister!

First, over the hilltop she peeps stealthily

and her eyes are shy

and she laughs softly

From afar she begs with her one hand

her wrist-bands shimmering and her bead-work sparkling

softly she calls

She tells the wind about the dance

and she invites it, because the yard is spacious and the wedding large

The big game rush about the plains

they gather on the hilltop

their nostrils flared-up

and they swallow the wind

and they crouch to see her tracks in the sand

The small game, deep down under the floor, hear the rhythm of her feet

and they creep, come closer and sing softly

“Our Sister! Our Sister! You've come! You've come!”

and her bead-work shake,

and her copper wrist-bands shine in the disappearance of the sun

On her forehead, rests the eagle's plume

She descends down from the hilltop

She spreads her ashened cloak with both arms

the breath of the wind disappears

Oh, the dance of our Sister!

Eugene Marais

Waar Tebes In Die Stil Woestyn

Daar sou ek vrede weer beseef
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;

En huiswaarts brommend sluip die tier,
Sy donker moordplek pas verlaat,
Wanneer die eerste grou lumier
Met splend' mis die veld beslaat.

O Land van al ons liefde, daar
Sou ek aanbiddend weer
Die kloppe van U hart gewaar,
U moederlike skoonheid eer.

Sou ek een guns nog hier verdien,
- Nog een gebed omhoog verhoord -
Geen mensepraal sou ek wou sien,
Die glorie van geen vreemde oord.
My bede sou net dit verkry: -
Laat weer U eensaamheid my daar
Vir laas met roerend' mag berei
U groter stilte te aanvaar.

Laat uitlok deur geen suil of steen
'n Enkel sug of woord van haat;
Met al U vrede om my heen
Sal nagt'liks uit die hemelstraat
Sag neerskyn op my laaste huis

Die vonkelend' sterrebeeld van U kruis.

Elk' ydel vrees sal daar verdwyn;
Daar sou ek vrede weer besef
Waar Tebes in die stil woestyn
Sy magtig' rotswerk hoog verhef.

Eugene Marais

Winternag

Winternag

O koud is die windjie
en skraal.
En blink in die dof-lig
en kaal,
so wyd as die Heer se genade,
le 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!

Eugene Marais

Winter's Night

Winter's Night

O the small wind is frigid and spare
and bright in the dim light and bare
as wide as God's merciful boon
the veld lies in starlight and gloom
and on the high lands
spread through burnt bands
the grass-seed, astir, is like beckoning hands.

O East-wind gives mournful measure to song
Like the lilt of a lovelorn lass who's been wronged
In every grass fold
bright dewdrop takes hold
and promptly pales to frost in the cold!

Eugene Marais