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Plagiarism, or, as Martin Amis puts it, 'being caught with your fingers in the word-till', has been around as long as there have been writers and ideas, but there seems to be an exceptional amount of it about lately, both locally and on the international scene. Stealing is always stealing, but I think there are degrees of it: pinching a couple of words or phrases is reprehensible enough, but appropriating the results of someone's painstaking

research and groundbreaking ideas, and passing them off as one's own, is a shameful and despicable act. Such a crime was perpetrated against that gifted but troubled character, Eugène Marais, almost a century ago.

Marais was a remarkable figure: a man of many and exceptional talents. Most of us encountered him at school, learning his exquisitely minimalist poem, *Winternag*, it was written, we were told, to prove that it was possible to express literary ideas in Afrikaans, hitherto regarded as a 'kombuis taal', and his writing greatly influenced the language movement in its struggle for recognition. Besides poems, he wrote short stories, collected as *Die huis van die vier winde* and *Dwaalstories*.

He was a consummate storyteller. Reviewing the recent re-issue of his work in the *Mail & Guardian* (May 12 to 18, 2006), Elza Miles recalls being mesmerised by a reading of the title story of *Die huis van die vier winde* on a stormy night during her childhood. Professor George Weiner of Oxford University has a similar recollection. He grew up in Sunnyside, Pretoria, in a house a few doors away from where Marais was living at the time. He remembers how, in the evening, the poet would emerge from his lodging, immaculately dressed in white, for his nightly stroll to the river. This was the signal for all the children in the street to emerge too. Like the Pied Piper, he led them to a seat on the bank, where they would be held spell-bound by his stories. This memory is narrated by anthropologist Robert Ardrey, as told to him by Weiner, in his introduction to *The soul of the ape*.

Robert Ardrey greatly admired Eugène Marais, and dedicated his *African genesis* to him. In his introduction to *The soul of the ape*, Ardrey calls him 'a human community in the person of one man. He was a poet, an advocate, a journalist, a storyteller, a drug addict, a psychologist, a natural scientist'. He embraced the pains of the many, the visions of the few', says Ardrey, 'and perhaps the burden was too much for one man.'

Marais was born of Afrikaner stock in 1871 into a farming community near Pretoria. His early education at the hands of an Anglican missionary, Archdeacon Roberts, gave him a fluent command of English, and he was later sent to school in Paarl. After school, he became a journalist in Pretoria, and by the age of 21 he was the editor and owner of the *Land en Volk*. The following year he married, only to lose his wife soon afterwards, after the birth of their son. At the time he was suffering from neuralgia, and to ease his pain and grief, he turned to morphine, the beginning of a lifelong addiction.

Soon after his wife's death, he left Pretoria for London, initially to study medicine, but changed to law, and was admitted to the bar at the Inner Temple. Just at this time, the Boer War broke out, and Marais was interned as an enemy alien. In 1902, he escaped, and returned home via Central Africa, carrying arms and medical supplies for the Boers. But the war ended before he could get back, and the supplies were buried somewhere in the north.

The war left a legacy of bitterness against the British and all things English. Years later, writing to his translator in London, Marais said: 'It

was for purely sentimental reasons that I refused to write in any language but Afrikaans, notwithstanding the fact that I am far more fluent and more at ease in English.' This decision was to have serious consequences for his scientific work.

He retreated to the Waterberg, where, on and off for eight years he studied the habits and behaviour of a troop of chacma baboons, which resulted in the publication of *My friends the baboons*, as well as *The soul of the ape*. The latter was not published during his lifetime, and was lost for many years after his death, appearing in print for the first time only in 1969. According to Robert Ardrey, he was 'the first man in the history of science to conduct a prolonged study of one of man's primate relatives in a state of nature'.

Of equal importance, according to Ardrey, was the study he conducted of the complex insect society of the white ant, or termite. This study led him to a startling and radical conclusion: all the members of the ant colony form what is in fact one single organism. The termitary itself is the body of the organism, while the various castes perform the bodily functions: the fungus gardens as the digestive tract, the workers as the blood cells, and the queen as the brain, and also the reproductive organs. This idea was quite revolutionary at the time.

From 1923 he began publishing his conclusions in Afrikaans, in a series of articles in the *Huisgenoot*, with a definitive article appearing in 1925. Because they were written in Afrikaans, these findings were generally unavailable to the wider scientific community. But the Dutch and the Belgians, of course, were able to read the language without difficulty. In 1926, a year after Marais's article, there appeared in French a book entitled *La Vie des Termites*, later translated into English as *The life of the white ant*, putting forward the theories originally propounded by Marais, with no acknowledgement. The 'author' was the Belgian, Maurice Maeterlinck, a Nobel Prize winning poet and playwright, most famous for his poetic drama, *The blue bird*.

Some years before, Maeterlinck had published *The life of the bee*, a mixture of philosophy and natural history, but, according to Ardrey, 'he was not a scientist'. It was apparent to those familiar with Marais's study that the work he now passed off as his could not have been his own original research. As Marais later wrote to his English translator in London: 'You must understand that it was a theory which was not only new to science but which no man born or woman could have arrived at without a knowledge of all the facts on which it was based; and these Maeterlinck quite obviously did not possess. He even committed the *faux pas* of taking certain Latin scientific words invented by me to be current and generally accepted Latin terms.'

There was a local outcry. His publishers protested vehemently on his behalf: they suggested to the South African diplomatic representative in Europe that Maeterlinck should be approached. But nothing came of it. The protestors were from a small, insignificant country, the articles written in an obscure language, and Maeterlinck, after all, a world-renowned and respected literary figure. In the words of Marais himself: 'Maeterlinck, like other great ones on Olympus, maintained a mighty and dignified silence.' His book was not withdrawn, and his debt to Eugène Marais never acknowledged.

Ardrey calls Marais's life 'star-struck' and 'star-crossed'. He believes that this event finished him. 'Despite his objective, even humorous, recollections of the crisis in letters of later years', he says in the introduction to *The soul of the ape*, 'I do not believe that he ever regained the scientific urgency that had commanded his earlier investigations.' In March 1936, he committed suicide. It was left to later generations, and to men like Robert Ardrey, to redress the wrong done to him during his lifetime, and to accord him the recognition he deserved.