

groom of this danger: *He reached your arms stretched on the pillow/forgot his father, and then his grandfather. . . .*

The Bedouin woman, considered weak herself, yet dangerous to men, lives her life subject to father, uncle, brother, and son. Resolute in adversity, only her poems speak of the hidden cost: *On my breast I placed/a tombstone, though I was not dead, oh loved one. . . .*

**IDOLS OF PERVERSITY:
Fantasies of Feminine Evil
In Fin-de-Siècle Culture**

by Bram Dijkstra
Oxford, 1986
453 pp. \$37.95



To many in the 19th century, Darwin's theory of evolution brought with it a new divide. The soul—gift of God and special preserve of the north European male—was manifestly superior to that base throwback from the animal kingdom, the body. Evolution gave men "scientific proof" of their superiority to women (fleshbound "breeding machines" graced only with the brains of a child) and to the "lower" races: Jews, Orientals, and, at the bottom, "simious" Negroes.

With this realization, says Dijkstra, a University of California, San Diego, comparative literature professor, came two opposing ideas of the feminine ideal: the pure woman who had escaped her base nature, and the temptress who reveled in it.

Simultaneously virgin, wife, and mother, Good Women—portrayed as untouchable nuns, mothers surrounded by children, or beauties "up to [their] neck[s] in flowers"—peer demurely out of 19th-century canvasses painted by such artists as Charles Alston Collins (1828–1873), Robert Reid (1862–1929), and Abbott Handerson Thayer (1849–1921).

Disdaining coarse flesh, *fin-de-siècle* artists exalted the purifying effects of pain. Consumptives languish palely, their illness paradoxically implying both virtue and hidden vice. Stylish boredom, mysterious vacuity—even madness or the "iconographic representation of a beautiful woman safely dead" proved (in the "sadistic ambiguity" of the age) titillating. Artists such as Otto Friedrich (1862–1937) and Lotte Pritzel (1887–1952), avoiding any hint of sexual threat, denatured their women and gave rise to the modern cult of emaciation. As one critic stated it, "there is nothing so handsome as a skeleton."

Woman as Temptress found her definitive symbol in Oscar Wilde's play, *Salome*. *Fin-de-siècle*

Salomes included anorexics, voluptuaries, and vampires—all fatal to men.

Why, asks Dijkstra, did the 1890 Paris Salon ignore Ella Ferris Pell's magnificent Salome, painted in the best academic style? Apparently, he concludes, male judges could not tolerate the self-possession of the half-clad, healthy young woman, so obviously inferior to none.

LOOK HOMEWARD:
A Life of Thomas Wolfe
 by David Herbert Donald
 Little, Brown, 1987
 579 pp. \$24.95

In 1938, author Thomas Wolfe died at the age of 38, having published two long novels—*Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), *Of Time and the River* (1935)—and written memoirs, a number of plays, and several hundred thousand pages in manuscript. Wolfe was a man who possessed almost inhuman energy.

Donald, a Harvard historian, describes him as an exhausting character. The unwelcome eighth child of mismatched parents, Wolfe was steadied by college years at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. In 1920, the ambitious young "genius" set off for graduate study at Harvard.

In Cambridge and during his years as a college instructor in New York, Wolfe stubbornly failed as a playwright. Failure pained him but he made use of it, cultivating the wild, lyrical misery that became both his trademark and his vice. That he retained an insatiable appetite for life surprised everyone—not the least Wolfe himself. (Invited to witness a birth, Wolfe amused the doctor by shouting excitedly, "Come on, Baby! Come on!" He spoke of nothing else for weeks.)

Yet even as Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins brought out Wolfe's first novel to critical acclaim, Wolfe tore back and forth from Europe to America—ranting, drinking, and bedding any female who would have him. In the destructive round that was his adult life, he alternated between orgies and a monklike isolation, during which he worked furiously, standing at a high table (chairs never suited his heavy, 6'5" frame) from dusk to dawn.

Marriage never entered his mind, but love came once—in the person of Aline Bernstein, married and 18 years his senior. "My Jew," he ambivalently called her during their years of passion, jealousy, fights, and separation, which ended only when Wolfe turned (significantly) to his mother for help.