

## Marjorie Perloff: On "The Young Housewife" (2)

The typography is in many ways the poem's substance. Take a poem like "The Young Housewife," a short lyric often praised for what James Breslin has called its "tough colloquial flatness," its "matter of fact" verse, but which, more precisely, uses that flatness for playful purposes:

. . .

Here the three stanzas are parody stanzas, the first, a neat-looking quatrain that has neither rhyme nor meter but slyly designates the young housewife by the same rhythmic group we find in "At ten A.M.":

At ten A. M.                      the young housewife

The second line, with its odd construction "in negligee" on the model of "in furs" or "in silks," is cut after the word "behind," a word that thus gets construed as a noun (her "in negligee behind") rather than as a preposition. The same sexual innuendo occurs in line 7:

shy, uncorseted tucking in

where the separation of the verb from its object ("stray ends of hair") makes us expect a reference to what one usually tucks into a corset. The next line produces even greater surprise:

stray ends of hair, and I compare her

To what, we wonder?

to a fallen leaf.

An absurd comparison, since surely the young housewife--she is constantly doing things, moving about, calling the ice-man or fish-man, tucking in stray ends of hair--is the very opposite of a fallen leaf. Or is she? Never mind the parody period after "leaf": the tercet now brings it all out into the open:

The noiseless wheels of my car  
rush with a crackling sound over  
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

In his erotic fantasy, the poet wants to make this attractive housewife a "fallen leaf" to the "noiseless wheels of his car," to "rush with crackling sound over / her dried leaves." But it is, after all, only a daydream; normal life must continue and so "I bow and pass smiling." The tercet has lines of 7, 8, and 9 syllables (3, 4, and 5 stresses) respectively; the diagonal created by its line endings thus presents an image of one-step-at-a-time accretion, as if to say that, fantasize all we like, we must get on with it. Typography, in a case like this, is destiny.

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