

# The New Criterion

## Books

October 1996

### Shorter notice

by [Robert Richman](#)

Review of *The Master Letters* by Lucie Brock-Broido

*The Master Letters* opens with “Carrowmore,” a decorous, restrained lyric about a girl finding an ornament and a piece of hair—two offerings, she surmises, to a dead predecessor—in the earth:

She buried her bone barrette

In the ground’s woolly shaft.  
A tear of her hair, an old gift

To the burnt other who went  
First. My thick braid, my ornament—

My belonging I  
Remember how cold I will be.

In terms of style, however, “Carrowmore” is not an augur of things to come in this book-long tribute to Emily Dickinson. Many of Brock-Broido’s poems—her title comes from three letters Dickinson left in her drawer at her death, one addressed to “Recipient Unknown” and two to “Master”—are composed in a sinewy, ornate language that recalls Gerard Manley Hopkins more than Dickinson:

That I had no idea I had been travelling  
In the scrying light, crutched friar roaming

Snow-apple orchards every autumn,  
Clutching the fireless stricken lantern

Of your feudal dark ...

Brock-Broido’s modern-day verse epistles are addressed not to one particular “Master,” but to men in general; some express anguish and anger, others an amusing obsequiousness spoken in a

mock-groveling tone. Occasionally there is a note of defiance: “I am ... nobody’s panther ... nobody’s violin ... nobody’s isotope ... nobody’s humming bird.” And yet, Brock-Broido’s sequence isn’t feminist; it’s too ambivalent, unpredictable, and rifled with self-doubt for that. In “Grimoire,” a poem near the end, Brock-Broido announces that her “little book of incantation” (i.e., her volume of poems) will soon “be done,” but “is nothing that I want.” And in the “letter” to the poet’s dead father, also late in the sequence, the book’s high point in language coincides with the poet’s own “surrender”—the word is from this poem’s title, “The Sleeping Hollow of His Face Will Be the Straight Pass of Surrendering”—to less “blister & audacity” on her part and to a balanced view of men:

And from that

Tourneying, that day,  
There would be nothing

More to crave & nothing  
More to set the heart on,

No cumulus of knowing,  
No rubricant of pulse.

(Aptly, this is the first time any form of the word *surrender* appears since the insubordinate “not surrendering” remark in a poem earlier in the book.) Also dulling any potential political edge is the quantity of quotes interpolated in the text—from John Clare, Robert E. Hayden, Archibald MacLeish, and Anna Akhmatova, to name a few. (One is tempted to say that Brock-Broido digs into the literary past much the way the barrette-finding girl of “Carrowmore” digs into the earth, and the poet’s interest in parents, precursors, and ancestors isn’t overcome until the last poem, a celebration of now-ness in which the word *am* turns up twelve times.) Distancing the book even further from any kind of diminishing political orthodoxy, however, is the baroque writing, which is as far from a Williamsian “natural” speech (not to mention a Williamsian focus on the present) as can be imagined. “What lives of subject matter, dies of subject matter. What lives in language, lives by language”: Karl Kraus’s observation comes to mind when reading Lucie Brock-Broido’s new book of poems.

Difficult, steeped unashamedly in language and the literary past, *The Master Letters* is a blow to the recent resurgence of a populist, vernacular poetry.

Robert Richman

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 15 October 1996, on page 72

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