BOOK REVIEW:
DIRT SONGS: A PLAINS DUET
by Twyla M. Hansen and Linda M. Hasselstrom

A BOOK REVIEW IN THE FORM OF A LETTER

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

Twyla M. Hansen and Linda M. Hasselstrom, Dirt Songs: A Plains Duet (Omaha, Nebraska: The Backwaters Press, 2011), xiv & 148, $16.oo

(It bears mention that the poet, Linda Hasselstrom, and Francis Baumli the present reviewer, occasionally correspond. Therefore Francis Baumli wrote this review more as a letter to Ms. Hasselstrom than as a formal analysis. Hence, this combination of exegesis and commentary in the form of a personal letter.)

Dear Linda,

I had told you that after finishing with Dirt Songs: A Plains Duet I would send you a careful report. I believe my immersion has now been thorough enough to lend some degree of credibility to my observations. After skipping around in the book for a few weeks, I began in earnest and read the book carefully (and with pleasure!) three times. My method, however, was a bit disjointed. I began by reading a poem by Twyla Hansen, then a poem by Linda Hasselstrom, but this began to feel like, not ricochet, but discontiguity. (Note how I

am being so precise, and yet thoroughly unclear.) So I then approached the book one author at a time.

Before I comment on the writing itself, allow me to note that the visual appearance of the book is wonderful. The front cover is just right. I know you did not like the cover for No Place Like Home because you felt it failed to represent the locale in which the book is set. I liked that cover for almost the same reason, since I felt it was an ironic depiction of how one could so thoroughly fail to represent the book's locale. But the front cover for Dirt Songs is the truth set forth simply, starkly, beautifully. And I liked the picture on the back cover also: Two comely women posed naturally, instead of being made up like fashion-model bimbos. (Look at how they "do" Francine Prose. They try to make her look 20 years younger, and end up presenting a picture which could attest to the art of funerary make-up. "The undertaker's poster girl," I call her, in my unkind moments.)

As for the book's lay-out, the feel of the paper and its slight off-white tint, and also the font, are perfect. In fact, when my next book comes out, I am taking a copy of this book to the printer and saying, "Do it like this."

As for what is inside the book: It usually seems impolite to start by pointing out printing errors. (It's hard to imagine how authors can

keep reading if, in despair, they are burying their faces in their hands.) But this time I shall start this way since either there are no errors, or they are so slight as to scarcely warrant the notice of any eye except one so suspicious as mine.

In Twyla's section, I found only one slight error:

1. p. 59, 2nd stanza, line 1: Her words "snap shot," which I presume are meant to indicate a photograph, are misspelled. When "snap shot" is two words it means a quick shot from a firearm, usually a rifle, done quickly and scarcely aimed. When intended to mean a photograph, in all dictionaries and examples I could find, it is always spelled as "snap-shot," i.e., with a hyphen, or spelled as one word: "snapshot." (In truth, this is a small matter, and I would not bother to argue with anyone who claims that poetic license should allow Twyla to spell the word—or words—as she wants.)

As for your section, I found several possible (sic) errors. I here list them:

1. p. 68, 2nd stanza, 2nd line: Perhaps you intended a comma after "said," although maybe not. Grammatically the rule is not rigid, and I only call attention to this in case you intended a comma.

2. p. 76, last line on page: I bought two copies of the book; in one copy, the ink had smudged out on this line, and on the other

copy it had not. You might want your printer to check the typeset before the book goes into its next printing.

3. p. 102, last line of first (continued) stanza: I'm aware it's possible that you intended the word "she" to be "he" although I suspect you intended "she." I merely point this out because it would be an easy typesetting error to overlook.

4. pp. 105 & 107: I certainly was pleased to learn, from your website entry of March 20, 2012, that in these sections of the poem you purposefully spelled "salad" as "salat." When I first encountered this way of spelling these words in the poem, I thought they were probably typesetting errors, but was going to encourage you to not correct them since this is, after all, how most Missourians pronounce the word. To your proofreader who protested your spelling of "salat," you might have pointed out that a visit to the venerable Oxford English Dictionary would have shown that this spelling is allowed. In fact, the word was most commonly spelled as "salat" during the 16th and 17th centuries, and this way of spelling it, to this day, is not considered either archaic or dialectal.

5. p. 105, 4th complete stanza, line 5: You spell it as "lambs quarters," but the dictionaries say it should be "lamb's quarters." Your spelling is not jarring, even to my unyielding standards, and

might be allowed under the guise of poetic license. Allow me to note that in all instances of its oral usage I have ever heard, whether in Northwest Missouri where I grew up, Columbia of Central Missouri where I lived for many years, or where I now live in Saint Louis of East Central Missouri, I have always heard the words used as singular, i.e., "lamb's quarter." Apparently we Missouri hicks just can't get anything right. (Or maybe we can, since the OED does allow this way of saying and spelling it. Which raises the almost appalling question: Are Missouri hicks actually philological patricians?)

6. p. 107, first complete stanza, line 4: Perhaps your proofreader's orthographic conscience, after wrestling with the spelling of "salat," caused the proximal misspelling of "Locust" in this line as "Locus." (Or perhaps you meant to leave out the t, as a way of paying homage to old Walter's way of speaking?)

7. p. 126, stanza 4, line 3: I'm pretty sure the person you are referring to here is Emmylou Harris, who is not spelled "Emmy Lou" as you write it (even though, for reasons I am unsure of, it was spelled "Emmy Lou" on her first album: Gliding Bird). This isn't an egregious error, and one could even imagine your spelling it this way to avoid being overly specific in the poem. (And why would a pedantic scholar such as myself know how the name of this folk-

rock/country-and-western musician is spelled? Well, Emmylou's album, Quarter Moon in a Ten Cent Town, and also her, Light of the Stable, are two of the 50 or so albums on my Ten Favorite Albums list.)

8. p. 128, stanza 3, lines 5-7: I wrote you about this small matter before, noting that moles are actually insectivores, and that it is voles, using the moles' tunnels, who eat the plants' roots. I'm not sure this matters in your poem, since the moles are eating insects that feed not only on other insects but also on plants, and moles thus are eating plants indirectly. But when I communicated with you about this before, I neglected to mention that the expert I talked with noted that moles do occasionally eat buried nuts when they encounter them. He said, laughing, "Squirrels hate moles," but then went on to say that it isn't clear whether moles eat the nuts because they want them for food, or if it is because, being so territorial, moles are thus trying to keep squirrels away.

So there you have it. My list of mistakes that maybe aren't mistakes. For once there is no need for adrenaline or fretting.

So having finished with this small task, I make mention of my forthcoming chore: namely, my usual habit of gathering words for the OED which do not yet stroll the hallowed halls of that mighty multi-

volume tome. In Dirt Songs, I found but one, namely, "hummingbird moth" on page 110. However, the question as to whether this word should be in the OED is not simple. In Dirt Songs: A Plains Duet the word is not capitalized, which is a correct way of doing it. But a hummingbird moth may also be called a Clearwing Moth or a Common Clearwing. Capitalizing the name as Clearwing Moth indicates it is a proper noun, which therefore would likely disqualify it as a candidate for inclusion in the OED. But spelling it as hummingbird moth, i.e., not capitalizing it, means it is a "specific descriptive substantive" which isn't quite a proper noun and therefore can be included in the OED. So you see, a small matter like this, for someone as finicky and exacting and compulsive as myself, poses a major dilemma regarding high scholarship. (And Linda thought she was just putting a pretty image in a beautiful poem.)

Of course the most important aspect of what I should write here involves commenting on the book's poetry. There is one initial problem with this because the commentary is not on a single poet, not on an anthology of many poets, but on a pairing of poets. Commenting on a single poet allows focus, commenting on an anthology of poets allows a diffuse generalization of judgements, but two poets together? This is different and difficult. I have never

encountered a book with two poets residing therein side by side. I would have a difficult time commenting on a book of poems by Shakespeare and Milton, or Rimbaud and Poe, or Emily and Edna. So commenting on Hasselstrom, whose poetry I know well, and on Hansen, whose poetry I had never before encountered, is daunting.

I did find pleasing the consistency in values between the two poets, and I even found it remarkable how often poems by each artist dealt not only with the same topic and explored the same theme but also used similar images.

But now I proceed with some trepidation, exercising (I hope) an appropriate delicacy, but also adhering to the simple conviction that I have a duty to tell the whole truth. This truth is that the two poets were not matched in quality—as poets.

Allow me to, not digress, but go slightly afield so I may be specific in this judgement before I proceed with a few examples. When I was a teaching assistant in graduate school, working for (as you once put it) a pittance, I was a good teacher but not very good at grading. I graded too high, I knew it, but I was not able to remedy this problem because I had such a fear of being unfair. I wrestled with this problem a long time, but then one day, about to fill out the semester's grade cards, I flipped one over to see what was on the back. There, in

tiny print, was a simple guide for giving grades. It went something like: A = Truly outstanding student who ranks at the top of the class. B = Highly satisfactory work; rarely outstanding, often exemplary. C = Average work, neither remarkable nor deserving special criticism. D = Unsatisfactory, though shows some degree of merit. F = Fails to meet the minimum requirements of the class.

There it was. Very simple. And the first thing I thought was: If almost half my students are getting A's, then I am not demarcating who is outstanding or who is at the top of the class.

From that time forth, my grading was more judicious. A bureaucrat who was a lowly administrator at a university somewhere had probably written those instructions, and they made more sense than all my soul-searching had. They also made enough sense that I continue to apply that same grading scale to many other aspects of life: "That is an A+ show horse." "I did a D- job on writing that poem." "The novel, Winter's Bone, wasn't all that great. It's a C, but I'll give it a C+ for effort and for those occasional truly remarkable sentences." Similarly, I grade the two poets in Dirt Songs: A Plains Duet: "Twyla Hansen gets a solid B. Linda Hasselstrom is a solid A+."

Mind you, I am not saying Twyla is a bad poet, nor even a mediocre poet. She is a good poet. I can point out two aspects which

hinder her being a better poet. One is the visual (as opposed to aural) organization of lines on the page. Too often I found myself tripping—so to speak—as I would proceed down the page, stumbling from one stanza to the next for no other reason than because a stanza was not warranted. One would halt, then jump to the next words, just because of that blank space on the page, when the words should have been more compacted and thus allowed to flow on their own, or sometimes should have even been forced to nudge one another toward an increased intensity. A good example is "Greasy Spoon"(26). The images are alive and hospitable, the brief story is warming and instructive, and the poem even takes on momentum in terms of imagery right up to the last line. But within the poem, that constant skipping from first-person singular to third-person plural, if not exactly erratic, poses some degree of difficulty; however, this might have been more easily negotiated were it not for the fact that those jumps from stanza to stanza made the poem hard to follow. And witness a different kind of jump in this poem, this time to an attempt at universalizing in the first word on page 27, which is tried for by merely leaving the article out. ("Woman who has lugged around ... .") The universal is not achieved. One has merely halted one's reading to try and decipher what is going on here. So the reader comes away

confused: Such nice images, but such a rough ride through them. Another example is "Autumn"(37) where the images work but the arranging of them does not. This poem would make more sense were it not broken up into stanzas at all. For example, in the jump from the 2nd to the 3rd stanza, the last word of that second stanza is "race." Shouldn't this mean the image warrants fast-moving language—something that would put the reader's psyche in motion? Instead, one has to jump down to the next stanza (a quick downward crossing of the page) to note that the race is not over.

The other main problem involves Hansen's abrupt leaps from the concrete to the abstract, which happen mid-poem occasionally, though more often at the end of a poem. Sometimes this works well and adds value to the poem. In "Remembrance"(52) an assemblage of images, too loosely organized, takes on focus in the last three lines of the poem; this move from the abstract does not so much incline toward the specific as to the material, i.e., from abstract ideas to a nature we can visualize. So here, moving from one plenum of being to another serves the poem. This also is the case in "Driving West Ireland in Winter"(55). This poem begins awkwardly; one isn't even sure what that first stanza means. Then there is that truly sterling line, "where landscape and literature converge," and as this

poem proceeds it gets better because that abstraction at its beginning has given way to concrete images. Thus one is thoroughly anchored in the space-time of the locale. That last line then, which seems to become quite abstract, does not at all lead the reader astray because it remains grounded: "salt," and, "where it all began." If this poem does not proceed smoothly at every moment, it does not falter, and that last stanza is brilliant. This poem gets an A. But too often those leaps from the concrete to the abstract do not serve the poem. For example, in "Feeding the Hawk"(50) the concrete images all get lost in those last four lines, where we get a vague taste of the Biblical, and then, with that word, "ethereal," the whole poem loses shape and evaporates. Proust's character rouses from his reverie and shocks the reader by his abrupt, "The angels are white!" If his line is ethereal, it also has form; but Hansen's "ethereal communion with the gods" eludes the reader because it is too diaphanous to have form. "July"(51) on the following page disappoints in a similar way, although it does so even more abruptly, because we move from cicadas to crabgrass to a loving couple to the last line: "admitting their heavenly gifts." What was on its way to being a great poem, in that last line becomes too abstract. Just when the poem would profit

by becoming even more concrete, it abruptly absents itself entirely. The kaleidoscope has suddenly become transparent glass.

In her favor, Hansen is certainly able to take a startling image and make it grow before us, both visually and aurally. This is pleasantly manifest in "Corn"(4) and "A Farm Story"(24), each of these conveying a tale that is solid and vivid. One does, however, wish that the former poem had been presented as prose rather than as poetry, because here, again, the "jumps" between stanzas (that do not even need to be stanzas) distract. The latter poem, however, works very well—as a vivid story and as a poem with strong images, containing words that take on flesh, flesh that takes on words. If the last two lines cause a shift in focus that is almost too abrupt, this is not a major problem.

Another amazing ability Twyla Hansen has is an aptitude for insinuating an eroticism, whether sensual or sexual, into a poem—doing it in a way so subtle one almost fails to be aware of it—in fact, the nudge from one's own body is what inclines the mind to note what is being set forth. I could give many examples, but two are enough. Look at the fifth stanza of "Bread"(48) and you experience, in the same moment, both the greed and the satiety of eroticism. And that last stanza in "August 12 in the Nebraska Sand Hills Watching

the Perseids Meteor Shower"(53) could scarcely be bettered in the joyful task of combining sensuality with sexuality in an eroticism that is not at all ethereal (which would empty the eroticism into a void) but sidereal (which pours the eroticism into a vast receptacle).

So Linda, perhaps you now understand why there is a certain fellow in Canada who often says, not to me because he is a gentleman, but to our mutual friends, "Baumli is the critic from hell." I know Twyla is your friend, neighbor, and colleague. What I have said gives due praise, and also measures out criticism. Maybe you are feeling defensive for her, or maybe you plainly disagree with the negative things I have said and can only smile indulgently at my praise because it is not effusive enough. But when it comes to assessing a writer, I want to be polite, and if necessary I will even be stern, but I am not going to forsake what I (fallibly) believe to be the truth. Moreover, I always distinguish between the artist and the art. My judgement of someone's art is not how I judge that person. Of course I can not hope to accurately judge Twyla as a person from what little of her I have read, but from what I can glean from her art I think I would find her thoughtful, earnest, and just plain neighborly. I like her through her art. But her art is good, not great. This is not to say she is not capable, sometimes, of achieving greatness in her art. I

believe she does in her poems "Small"(30), "Leap Second"(39), and especially in "My Husband's Grandmother Worked for Willa Cather"(47).

There you have it. My assessment of Twyla Hansen's poetry, which reflects an attitude I suspect you divined already because in my several letters to you of late, I have said much that is laudatory of your poetry while being silent about hers.

As to your poems, I stated to you in a previous letter that I would just have to find something to criticize, if for no other reason than to be ornery. Well, since I am indeed in an ornery mood, and since it has been at least two hours since I have indulged this mood, I will proceed to criticize five of your poems. But before you get your dander up, hear me through, and you will find me more than once pointing to my own deficits as a judge here.

Also, allow me to state that I learned three important lessons about reading and evaluating poetry in the course of finding certain of your poems awry: Of course I realized that I might be quite correct in being critical. But also I learned that I should take into account my own ignorance about the subject-matter, and rectify that before hastily passing any negative judgements. And third, I learned that

critical judgements can reflect deficits in me involving perceptual "blind spots," personal proclivities, even downright prejudice.

As to the poems I did not like, or had difficulties with: First there was "Cleaning the Stove"(95) which just plain eludes me. Yes; I see the social commentary, the way of mixing this in with the mundane, and also the self-sacrificial immersion, but I do not espy your usual ability to mix these several perspectives with finesse and cause each perspective to nurture the other. So is this a bad poem? I think not. I believe this is one of those instances where I am just not "getting it." So I will pass no more judgement except to note that I shall go back to this poem many times until I figure out what I myself failed to see. "Studying Pumice"(97) also eluded me at first. This poem you published on your website some time ago, and I admit I was quite dismayed. I wondered, "Is Linda getting old, her mental faculties slipping? Is she losing her touch? Is she getting careless?" When I first read the poem in this book, I felt the same. But upon a second reading, everything came into place. I realized how carefully you were both contrasting and melding the mundane with the subterranean, meshing the work of a human beings' hands with the workings of the earth, blending form and matter, chore and celebration. The deficit had been mine. It is not merely a good poem,

it is a great poem. I needed to go into it further, and perhaps, approach it with more humility. Then there was "Sister Soar"(114). It is a great, and gripping, poem until those last two lines during which I was muttering to myself, "What does she mean by this act of scattering sage and tobacco leaves out the window of her car as she drives away from a fatal accident?" So the poem brought me up short, but I knew this was my ignorance interfering, because I remembered having encountered something similar in your writing although I could not remember where. A query soon revealed that this act is a sacred ritual reflecting the customs of the Indians of that locale, since sage and tobacco are a gift to those above. So now the two final lines not only make sense, they also lend a sacred and calming atmosphere to what has been a tumultuous story. Then there was—is—"Wicca"(137). I just plain did not like it, even after multiple readings. I above stated that readers should be aware of their own prejudices when reading a poem, and I can not claim to be without prejudice on this subject. I have read about Wicca as a religion, believe I have a fair understanding of it, and once quipped that Wicca is the feminine equivalent to the hypermasculine Shinto religion. Some time after that quip, I realized there might be a good deal of truth in this observation. But there also is the fact that I have

personally known three dedicated practitioners of Wicca, all women, and none had a very (shall we say?) pious attitude toward the religion. One attempted to use it for purposes that were blatantly cruel. One was a complete airhead who practiced it consistently but shallowly. And the other uses her knowledge as a bully, invoking it to control how social situations (some quite staid and formal) are conducted. So I admit that because of these several people I perhaps can not judge this poem well since, contaminated, I recoil from anything to do with Wicca. Still, I have a nagging suspicion that this collection of poems by the eminent Linda Hasselstrom contains one poem she did not do so well, and this is the one. But there are two other instances where I am fully aware that nothing but personal prejudice causes me to have problems. Both "How to Pick Green Beans"(139) and "Morning News on Windbreak Road"(143) are populated with snakes, or the possibility of snakes, and I loathe them—I don't so much fear snakes as I just plain hate them. (I suspect I am the most accurate shot in the world when I am aiming a gun at a snake.) So are these good poems? Yes; they are A or A+ poems. But because of who I am, I just can not appreciate them. Let this be a lesson to others who reflexively recoil from a poem. Then there is "Waiting for the Storm"(144) which we have discussed

before. Once again I stumbled over "my mother's curled into a comma" because I wanted to read "mother's" as possessive instead of as a contraction. With some embarrassment I think it would be accurate to judge that, on previous occasions, the two of us, if mildly and politely, quibbled and fussed over this line. I desisted with pressing my point, hoping that the day would come when I would see matters your way. But when I first read the poem in this book I knew that the day had not yet come because I went sprawling. And then (yes; and then) when I went back to the poem a day later, after a long and arduous immersion in Latin, I realized, finally, that all along the problem had been with me. I spend much time reading Latin, I translate it, and I often think in Latin. And (here is the crux!) in Latin there are no contractions. Which means that I rarely use contractions when speaking or writing English (which makes me sound very formal to some people) and every time I write a contraction in English it is an intentional, even forced, commission. This is why I was having problems with that line, "my mother's curled into a comma," and that's why I just couldn't see it your way! (And yes; both the contractions in the sentence I just wrote were self-conscious, intentional, and writ with forced, almost painful, difficulty.)

There remains the consideration that when I had trouble with this line before, I asked other people to look at it and give their judgement. They all agreed with me that it was confusing and difficult. So I felt I not only was right in my judgement but also that this judgement had been duly and properly reinforced. But this time, I have asked several people to look at the line again, and none of them find it at all problematical. Why the difference? I suspect that the first time I was not using a very scientific (so to speak) approach, and was communicating to those people, before they encountered the line, my confusion and concern. They, being nice and accommodating, were wanting to reinforce my conviction. But this time, when I asked other people to look at it, I made sure to seem very neutral, even nonchalant. The result: not only did no one find the line difficult, they couldn't at all understand why I might find it difficult.

So there you have it, Linda. The sum of my criticisms, or exceptions. Only one of these exceptions do I still believe retains merit.

From my several concerns about some of your poems, I did humbly learn a lesson: That indeed the reader's criticisms may be correct, but (especially when judging a consummate artist) one should also keep in mind that one's judgement might be the result of

ignorance, personal emotional deficits, prejudices either mentalistic or emotional, and simple personal proclivities which do not warrant being generalized as judgements. (So here I leave this matter be, except to apologize—both to you and to myself—for the time wasted in those several clamorings over, "my mother's curled into a comma.")

There is one further topic which here bears discussion, is neither a criticism nor even a definitive judgement, and this involves when it is appropriate for a poet to challenge the reader with unusual words. For example, when I came across, in the first line of your "Primer"(134) the noun-phrase "cold frame," I thought to myself: "How sad, that so many readers of this poem will not know what this means." So should you not use these words? That isn't the solution. The solution is for readers to go to the dictionaries and look up what they do not know. (And it is the duty of dictionaries to record regional, rural, and dialectal phraseology such as this!)

Things become more difficult, however, when one enters what I call the postmodern language idiom. It bears being noted that what is defined as "postmodern" in art has itself gone through something of a metamorphosis over the last 50 years. Half a century ago, it could entail a deliberate attempt to reintroduce into modern-day writing

traditional or classical styles (as was once done by the Pre-Raphaelites in painting, although they did it so much better!), or it could refer to a tendency to take modernistic elements to an extreme. But over the last 50 years or so, postmodernism seems to have become something else, and for some period of time I could not quite figure out what this is. Then, one day, I was pondering what I have often felt to be, not a misnomer, but a scarcely clear or eclectic phrase: "early modern philosophy." I had studied this era in graduate school, I took courses (yes; more than one) entitled "early modern philosophy," and in those courses I was studying people from about 1600 to 1800 A.D. People such as Hobbes, Descartes, Leibnitz, Spinoza, Pascal, Locke, Berkeley, Hume. "Early modern?" What could be modern about people that many centuries ago? But then I reflected upon how philosophy has proceeded at such a slow, exploratory, even cautious pace. (But that it were so slow, careful, and modestly incremental today!) So yes; when one stretches time out, and allows for the long, laborious process of philosophical progress, then it is clear that those people really were the early modern philosophers, and philosophers since are modern ones too—right up to the contemporary or "late modern" ones.

Literature, to no small degree, has been doing something similar, and so it is appropriate to think of modern literature as what has persisted over the last four centuries up to the present. "Early modern" defines an era, and even "late modern" defines an era. "Postmodern" is no longer the practice of reintroducing old styles of writing, nor is it any longer even the practice of taking modernistic tendencies to extremes. It has nothing to do with "modern" because "modern" is part of an era, whether one thinks of this era as the last 400 years or the last 40 years. What now is "postmodern" does not define an era, except insofar as it negates the modern era. Postmodernism takes language that is different from the past, glories in what is now, and presumes that these current terms will either push into the future and define an era there, or (more likely, and preferably) will so clutter and crowd the future's literary terrain with such a myriad of changing details as to defy the amalgamation of ideas, customs, and mysteries into what we would otherwise define as an era in the future. In postmodern writers, one often finds this tendency played out in a nostalgic love for recent pop words, icons, and people, e.g., Dow Jones, Mickey Mouse, Elvis, Marilyn Monroe. But postmodern writers push beyond what is nostalgic and attempt to insinuate contemporary, ephemeral, and media-laced terminology

into a literature which, qua postmodern, tacitly defines a practice and a "school" even as it defiantly refuses to be classified as part of a school or an era. Some authors attempt to be entirely postmodern, at least in some of their works, e.g., Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo; others dabble in it occasionally, e.g., Anthony Burgess and Francine Prose; and others allow momentary elements of the postmodern to find their way in rarely, intentionally, and with obvious purpose, e.g., Norman Maclean (Hill Bros. coffee can!) and Linda Hasselstrom. (It bears mention that these momentary appearances are so rare as to scarcely warrant calling this third grouping of authors "postmodern.") The question here—and it <u>is</u> a question, not a criticism—is: Can these words work not only for the present but also for the future? Can these words have meaning not only today, but also have decipherable meaning two millennia from now? If the artist is a good artist, or a great artist, or (per the present topic) what some would think of as an immortal artist (paying due deference, however, to those greedy black holes out there in space), then is this indulgence in the postmodern, however rare, a prudent thing to do? I tend (sic) to think not. I want an immortal artist to be just as well understood two thousand years from now as we understand that

artist today. But what if words interfere with this? For example, let us look at some contemporary words and speculate.

Words which I think could be understood 2000 years from now, because they could be looked up, would be:

Chevy
Coke
John Deere
Kleenex
Smith & Wesson
Xerox

But words which I doubt could be looked up beyond a thousand years from now would be:

bell bottoms
Gibson
Half & Half
Kenworth
Sherman
the twist

And words which I doubt could be looked up beyond 500 years from now would be:

flip-flops
Melmac
Miracle Whip
Snickers
TCBY
twistie

So if I consider a poet to be of extremely high stature, it is difficult for me to witness the postmodern presence (taint?), except in extremely

small doses—so small one can speculate that if a reader of the future could not understand, or look up, a certain word, then either this would not matter even to the attentive reader, or it might be considered a tantalizing mystery which lends a tint of quaint nostalgia, or it could pose an indecipherable touchstone which would be, not frustrating, but beautiful in its opaqueness. (As can happen, e.g., in opera, when, not understanding the language that is being sung, we are thereby forced, i.e., allowed, to focus more on the pure and beautiful tonal quality of the words!)

So in the spirit of this discussion I turn to two of your poems: "Valentine For My Mother"(92) and "Bacon, Lettuce and Tomato"(100). In the former you use "Melmac" which I had to look up. (In Northwest Missouri, where I was born and raised, we used a different word: Formica); and in the latter poem you use "Miracle Whip" (which I did not have to look up because, as a child, I was almost addicted to the stuff). The crucial questions here (and yes, they are crucial): Could these words be deciphered by readers two thousand years from now? I think not. Does it matter? I'm not sure. I only note that the writer must be circumspect about such words. A couple of such instances can be considered pleasantly curious, charmingly quaint, or even wondrously inspiring; but a writer whose

works warrant claim to immortal status must be extremely careful to not go beyond the realm of uplifting mystery into the unseemly terrain of dismal detritus and indecipherable clutter.

So having allowed myself this brief philosophical excursion, I shall proceed to a happier topic, and this is to mention your poems in this collection which were my favorites. Note I do not state that these were the "best." Sherwood Anderson convinced me that none but the writer is qualified to make this judgement. But as to my favorites, I can give a list, which perhaps is overly long, but try as I may I can not make it shorter. They are:

"Visiting the Nursing Home"(85)
"Instead of a Death Watch"(87)
"My Uncle Harold Makes Up His Mind"(91)
"Valentine For My Mother"(92)
"1971: Across From the Packing Plant"(101)
"1971: Establishing Perpetual Care at the Locust Grove Baptist Cemetery"(104)
"Sister Soar"(114)
"Finding Mother's Jewelry"(117)
"When a Poet Dies"(123)
"Ice Skating on the Dam"(133)
"Girls at Fourteen"(135)
"Lost and Found"(138)
"Waiting for the Storm"(144)

(If you are pouting and muttering, "You mean you didn't like the <u>others</u>?!" please remember, I said these are my <u>favorites</u>.) Allow me

to note that I tend to favor those which deal with specific people you have known intimately (even if anonymously).

But I would be remiss if I failed here to comment on certain of your other poems. I want to be brief, simply to avoid this essay (it is that!) from getting much longer. So I will limit my comments to but a few:

"Taos Pueblo, 1968"(78). Oh such gorgeous lines: "The muscles in her back flowed slow / as heavy oil. She gestured us to chairs / ready at a table scoured soft." What I wouldn't give to be able to write but one line as good. And this poem also was an education in how the visual and the aural can work together so well in poetry. At the very end you write: "we still could taste the bread. / We still could taste the blood." When I looked at this visually, I wanted those words "still could" to read "could still," but when I read these lines aloud, in your way as "still could," then your way sounded better, whereupon I then also preferred them visually the way you had done them.

"Visiting the Nursing Home"(85) and "Instead of a Death Watch"(87): These poems go together insofar as they deal with the same topic. I comment upon them because they so well tell the history of a person, while so perfectly conveying the massive spiritual depth of your love for that person.

“My Uncle Harold Makes Up His Mind”(91) is a complete story about many people in less than a page, and at the same time, an exploration into the interior cosmology of a soul. Many a novel has not accomplished what you here accomplish in but 26 lines!

“Studying Pumice”(97). I have already commented on this poem, but I must add that even the likes of Heraclitus and Hermes Trismegistus would have been impressed.

“1971: Across From the Packing Plant”(101). This poem caused me, after first reading it, to put the book aside for several days. Not because the poem was painful (although it was very painful), but because the poem was just so powerful I needed time to savor it as it lay—raw and ripening—in my soul before I went on to read another poem.

“1971: Establishing Perpetual Care at the Locust Grove Baptist Cemetery”(104). In this poem you make several people come alive, and at the poem’s end, you even raise the dead. It is a treatise on morals, on neighborly responsibility, and on the power of family and rootedness. (And for what this observation is worth: I have a small suspicion that you consider this poem the best one in the book.)

“The Westie’s Nightly Game”(108). This poem is all motion, commotion, and words giving form and even composure to the fast-

paced kinesis. I wonder if you could have written this one successfully if you hadn't spent all that time herding balky cows.

"Home: Ending the Day"(109). My reaction can be summed up by what I wrote at the end of the poem after first reading it: "Who else could take something this mundane and still reveal herself as a consummate master? Not to mention, as a lover of the world!"

"On This Day"(112). Again, my words written in at the end of this poem suffice: "How can a poem both bring tears of sadness and give inspired chills at the same time? None but a genius could keep this topic from being maudlin." (You may blush.)

"Girls at Fourteen"(135). At the end of these lines I wrote, "This poem has an emotion so reminiscent of Emily Dickinson." From me, Linda, that is high praise, and it is warranted. As far as I am concerned, you may count the best American poets not only as your companions, but also as your envious peers.

Based on what you have given us in Dirt Songs, Linda, I think you become a better poet. You reach deeper into that wellspring of tenderness which so defines the center of your soul, and always makes its way into your poems—those creatures of your creativity. This tenderness, whether it be set forth as a singular emotion or as a component of love, invariably is one of the emotional foundations in

every one of your poems. It may shine forth in a brief but brilliant array of words, as in "Taos Pueblo, 1968"(78) where you single out one person with the lines (already noted above), "The muscles in her back flowed slow / as heavy oil." Or this tenderness may be less an observation, and more quietly communal, as in "Sunday Morning"(122) where you write: "My golden head is mostly gray, / but hers is gleaming. / .... I'm a little creaky in the joints; / she's awkward with the coming child." This tenderness may focus on a further, more specific emotion, as when you channel it into quiet forgiveness in "The Story We Told Each Other in Zion"(76) wherein you set forth those brilliantine lines: "Now when I think of you, / I forget the way days clashed / like cheap bracelets on a skinny wrist." And this tenderness becomes more than communal, it stretches pantheistic, in "Chin Hairs"(96) when you write, "But these days we each know / what the other is thinking. / We understand how fast / the sun is sinking into winter." You retain the same ability to be sharply focused which you have displayed in all your poems of earlier years, and yet, in this collection, you display more breadth in your embrace of ideas and people. Also, your poems are more multi-layered in meaning. Their sheen of simplicity, conveyed by both the grace and power of

your words, is a mantle covering soul strata that range from the subterranean to the empyrean.

I am an avid reader in more than one language, but when it comes to the great authors, I haven't read them all. Hence, the word "probably" should not be left out of the following sentence, which I state with some degree of shyness since I do not want to come across as your court (or ranch) hagiographer: Linda Hasselstrom is probably the best living writer in the entire world.

At the end of my second reading of Dirt Songs, I wrote in my journal:

Linda Hasselstrom's poems are like perfect prayers: profound, peaceful, each of them a blessing. As we read her poetry, giving thanks for this abundance of blessings, we come to realize that her poems are not like prayers; rather, her every poem is a prayer. She shows us in poetry what Mozart showed us in his Exsultate, jubilate: The focus of prayer is the sacred or divine, and the language of prayer is piety commingled with joy.

High praise such as this is deserved. And high praise evokes speculation of mighty dimension. The speculation I allude to goes thus: I tend to judge the merit of poems only if I can read the poems in their original language. Translations almost never do them justice because, however much they may get the meaning right, they by necessity convey a different aural message. So in my reading I tend to focus on the Latin, French, Spanish, and English poets. From my

reading I have come to judge that the very best poets I have read comprise a Holy Trinity: Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope. Then there are those other great poets who reside upon the flanks of that upper echelon, such as Villon and Rimbaud, Neruda and Borges, Emily and Edgar, T.S. and L.H. Never for a moment do I tire of reading these poets. Certain of their poems I have, driven by aesthetic greed, read hundreds of times. With each reading my estimation of these poets and their work is raised higher. Over the last few years, I have even come to think that eventually this Holy Trinity is going to have to welcome a new member—a new peer. And I am not unaware of the vast responsibility I assume in stating that my latest reading of Linda Hasselstrom causes me to think that the time of this reckoning is nigh.

(Written: Apr.-May, 2012.)
(Posted: August 19, 2012.)

(This piece was actually written in 3 days, from April 6-9, 2012. I skipped one day in this 4-day time period. I then proofed and polished it 9 times. This is unusual since almost always I proof everything I write 13 times. I never set out with the intention of going through this process 13 times; it's not as though I am superstitious about the number. Rather, it just works out this way. But this time the proofing and polishing happened but 9 times, the final immersion accomplished on May 16, 2012. So this is the date this manuscript was actually completed. I state this much about my writerly

“methodology” because so many of my readers ask me about the particulars of my so-called “method.”)

(It bears mention that Linda Hasselstrom took exception to this review’s comparison of her relative merits as a poet with respect to her companion’s merits.)