Empire Burlesque, the title of this book, occurred to me in 1996, as I was finishing Soul Data and embarking upon my next project. This was before Ken Burns got a hold of Lewis and Clark but not before Stephen Ambrose did, whose Undaunted Courage set in motion a project that I did not know would take me ten years to complete, Lewis and Clark and others—Kong, Pound, Bierce—patiently waiting by the river bank as other things marvelously intervened, way leading on to way, and the years amassed. I did not know of the eponymous Bob Dylan album until late in the game when someone pointed this out. Dylan, I thought. Of course. You won’t find him here, unless the large things that shape us remain, like back-scatter in the cosmos, both nowhere and everywhere. For truth-in-labeling purposes, I requisitioned a poem from Soul Data, confusingly titled “Empire Burlesque,” from a warehouse in Denton, Texas, and put it on page 56, where it sits recuperating. If you have gotten to this point looking for Empire Burlesque: High Crimes and Low Comedy in the Bush Administration, well, congratulations. This is not that book.

“Memo: Understanding As I Do That This Little Work Would be Nothing In Itself . . . etc, etc” (p. 1). The longish title, taken directly from Pedro de Castaneda’s preface to The Journey of Coronado, amused me.

Plus Ultra (“You Can Go Beyond”; section title p. 5). Charles V’s motto, conceived circa 1516.

“Jeffersonian,” (pp. 7–13). “Yonder star-swirl might compose/but the smallest flower or leaf thereof”: David Rittenhouse’s speculation, correct, as it turns out, about galaxies in the universe. Rittenhouse, one of Jefferson’s circle, along with Benjamin Rush, lampooned in this poem, Joseph Priestly, Thomas Paine, and Charles Wilson Peale, built an Orrery that, according to Daniel J. Boorstin’s The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson, was “considered the first mechanical wonder of the American world.” Other quotes are from Thomas Jefferson’s instructions to Lewis and Clark and from the laundry list of articles brought on the expedition as found in The Journals of Lewis and Clark. The following excerpts were found in the fabulous and strangely moving Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire, by Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt: The ocean breaks its shackles / and a great earth lies open . . . is from Seneca’s Medea; Tunc Orientis occidit et ortum est Occidentis imperium, [when the might of the East declined, that of the West arose], is from Orosius, pupil of Augustine, in his history of the world; “and a new generation ascends . . . imperium sine fine dedit” [an empire that will never end], is from Virgil’s fourth eclogue.
“Exeunt” (p. 17). Playing fast and loose as this volume does with *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, I recall a mention of migrating squirrels, so I had them thundering through the treetops. The rest is invention.

“Memo from the Platte” (p. 18). *Caught 500 catfish near the river mouth* . . . For concision, I may have rounded-up the actual number. I don’t know about you, but that’s a lot of catfish.

“Voyager, 1804” (p. 19). Labiche’s fantasy is not in *The Journals*, of course, but the notation for latitude and longitude are, so X marks the spot where someone yearned.

“Memo: As the State of Mind in Which We Are, Generally, Gives the Colouring To Events, When The Imagination is Suffered to Wander Into Futurity” (21). So much of interior life goes unsaid in *The Journals*, or gets glossed with the much-used, throw-away phrase “& etc,” which deserves its own poem, that this title, which comes from one of Lewis’ entries, struck me as a rare moment of disclosure, almost a premonition. During a long winter with the Mandans, Joe Shields was able to trade food for sheet iron from a forge he’d constructed. The first volumes of *The Journals*, published years after Lewis’ probable suicide, included passages describing the incantatory sexual rituals meant to draw buffalo closer to the Indian encampment, the more explicit passages of which were chastely translated into Latin by Nicholas Biddle.

“VI Shannon, Lost” (p. 29). Shannon, the youngest member of the Corps of Discovery, gets lost. Days later, John Colter finds him. I’m interested in the way mistaken assumptions acquire the force of destiny. Here Shannon assumes, mistakenly, that he’s been passed, or left behind, when in fact, he is traveling in front of the Corps. His daily effort to “catch up,” which only widens the distance between them, feels like a parable.

“The Past as Obsolete Gesture” (p. 36). Marianne Moore taught business English to the pupils of The Carlisle Indian Industrial School (Now the United States Army War College) where founder and former Indian fighter Richard Henry Pratt hoped to assimilate Ojibway, Sioux, and other boarding-school-age tribal members by teaching them how to type (“Tab Q tab return”), etc. The school’s football team, coached by Glenn “Pop” Warner, invented the forward pass, among other things, and included Hall of Fame running back Jim Thorpe, whose career Moore followed throughout her life.

“The White Pages” (p. 44). His car found abandoned by the Golden Gate Bridge, God bless you, Weldon Kees.

“Pre-Amputee to Reviewers” (p. 49). This poem is an adaptation for my own purposes of a joke I heard performed at a benefit for the Bronx Academy of Letters.

“News to Pluto” (p. 59). A Rick Wakeman solo project? The joke is lost if I have to explain, alas—too bad for me. It’s unclear if the poem itself is improved by reading it while listening to the keyboard player for the prog rock group *Yes*’s *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, but you are welcome to try. Attention insomniacs: possibly a first use of Google Earth as a guiding image in an American poem?
“Long Time Traveling Here Below” (p. 69). “Molly T. and her Band o’ Lyres”—the name of an old-time music group which, if it doesn’t exist, should.
