Empire Burlesque

Mark Svvenvold
For Ron Wandover, wherever you are
Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Memo: Understanding As I Do That This Little Work . . . 1

Part One: Plus Ultra

Jeffersonian 7

Part Two: Landscape with Man, Ax

I Exeunt 17
II Memo: from the Platte 18
III Voyager, 1804 19
IV Memo: To the Assembled Company 20
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
A Crossing 24
Untoward Memo 25
The Bitterroot 26
Sacagawea Somniloquy 27
V Celestial 28
VI Shannon, Lost 29
VII (When does it begin, this blurring into error?) 30
VIII (Evening evolves a salad of shadows) 31
IX Upper Missouri: In Search of the Shoshone 32
X Shannon, Found 33
XI Lochsa River Apology 34
XII Our Story (So Far) As the Function f(x) 35
Coda: The Past as Obsolete Gesture 36
Memo: From The Course of Empire by Bernard DeVoto 37
Part Three: Let Nothing You Dismay

I Recall Being Beautifully Stoned 41
The White Pages 44
Minimalism (After Empire, a film by Andy Warhol) 46
Pre-Amputee To Reviewers 49
Catastrophilia: As If Written Somewhere, Say, At A Place Unknown,
    And, Perhaps, Never to be Known (To Ambrose Bierce) 50
Glib: 53
Memo: to Bierce, Crossing the Mississippi 55
Empire Burlesque 56

Part Four: News to Pluto

News to Pluto 59
Helen, the Extra Special 61
Catastrophila (Once, so drunk I spoke spontaneous Danish) 64
Brodsky, Seattle, 1984 65
Moon Too Easy After Bone 66
Orpheus, Pt. Townsend, Washington 67
Catastrophilia: The High Concept 68
Long Time Traveling Here Below 69
To an Unknown Poet, Dead at 39 72
Memo on the Sublime: To Longinus from San Francisco 73

Notes 77
Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgement is made to these publications, where the following poems, under slightly different titles, first appeared:

*Agni Review*: Jeffersonian

*Barrow Street Review*: Sacagawea Somniloquy

*The Death of the Cabaret Hegel* (Chapbook): To an Unknown Poet, Dead at 39

*The Frost-Proof Review*: Landscape With Man, Ax; Memo: from the Manitou, 1804; Memo: As the State of Mind in Which We Are Generally Gives the Colouring to Events; The Past as Obsolete Gesture

*The Iowa Review*: Memo: Understanding As I Do That This Little Work Would Be Nothing In Itself.

*The Journal*: Avaunt & etc; Memo: From the Platte; Memo: To the Assembled Corps; Celestial; Shannon, Lost; VII (When does it begin, this blurring into error?); VIII (Evening evolves a salad of shadows); Upper Missouri: In Search of the Shoshone; Shannon, Found; Lochsa River Apology; Our Story (So Far) as the Function f(x); Charon Crossing, Mississippi

*Ploughshares*: The White Pages; I’d Really Rather Be in Authentic City

*Poetry 180*: Pre-Amputee to Reviewers

*Swink*: Minimalism (*Kong, After Empire*, by Andy Warhol)

The real trouble, seen in hindsight—
that Don Antonio de Mendoza,
farther than ever from his beloved sardine tapas,
could not keep position, nor govern well, alas,
and with Cortez out there, somewhere, and coming on—
the pressing question, amid the sage and chaparral,
the sun-cracked earth, and those coughing, dusty tribes
awaiting miracles, the real question, for a diarist
and observer of this empty-headed spectacle of blood,
it seems, was what to do with the assembled gentlemen-dandies
shipped off by their fathers for great obras—
Pedro de Guevara, son of Don Juan de Guevara,
nephew of the Count of Oñate, &c and for instance,
whose cabeza they found particularly vaca,
blinking into the tarnished squalor of another sunset—

Don Lope de Urrea, laughing at his own jokes,
Francisco Gorbalan, the Unaccommodating,
so called, Don Alonso Manrique de la Otiose,
also known as “Little Fatty,” and Paco the Offbeat,
who later shot himself in the eye—
What captaincies would you give the likes of these?
As for Coronado? One followed him
and that was that. One did not question
certain things, even as the days amassed,

even as the land began its tricks,
—why not drop that sea chest, anyway?
and their methods of inquiry grew less

—how shall we say—diplomatic?
O moon, O horizon of staggered
double amputees, wonder of wonders

to thread atrocity through the narrowing eye
of the historical method. Shall we lie down, instead,
& sleep all winter? For they were terrifying, yes,

and also a bit ridiculous. (The local’s early best defense:
to nod & point them farther on).

—One did not question
even as the spell of the sky fell hard upon them,
how under that sky,

the land beneath like a treading mill
or some great, scrolling script beneath them,
held them fixed in its vastness,

though if one stopped in the dust
and let the horses pass, until the glitter
of helmets and the shouts of the goatherds

vanished like bells into the processional wind,
then, it seemed, a former world,
in one sweeping view, realigned itself in the heart.

The past behind, the future ahead, in clinking armor.
And here, within that part of the past,
amid the swell
of sweet grass, chest-high, under a sky
and the sky’s trance, which says, a little farther on,
I have made this hasty note:

the grassland opens like a sea
and then, like a sea,

closes behind.
ONE

Plus Ultra
Because it was, and because it was enough, it seems, so that: yonder star-swirl might compose but the smallest flower or leaf thereof, and in that leaf a world . . . because He chose, for He was busy—what with mollusk and mountain, because it all fit—weasel, flea, and spore, because the difficult, the unforgiving forms of continental granite and jenny wren brooked no counter, no other, no outer, no ex, posed no irony of scillia, no pause, supposed no sad planet afloat in oceanic space, no lone and troubled inheritor-savant, —because they lived unpredicated, reader, like a sand fly or a sea cliff or a river . . .
They brought oilskin bags for their journals,

they brought instruments:

two sextants,

a horizon,

a sun,

artificially its term and angle

reflecting in a pan,

and other gear to measure

the land,

the river’s reach, its extent—

you will notice and comment on the soil,

the date at which particular plants

put forth or lose their leaf, or flower;

times of appearance of particular birds,

reptiles, insects . . .

dinosaur bones,

volcanoes. . . .
(which would require, at the very least, it seems, something to write with)

six papers of ink powder, crayons, and sets of pencils

(and something to write on)
field tables,

(and something to see with at night)
twenty gross of candles

(and something to keep out the weather)
sheets of oiled linen for tents and sails
six large needles, six dozen awls

(and for warmth) six dozen woolen pants,

30 yards of common flannel, one hundred flints,
30 steels for striking or making fire—

. . . because they could & because it was there,

and, since it was in St. Louis, 1803—
that Auguste Chouteau

and all the fine girls and buckish Gentlemen,
danced as they danced as they danced to celebrate Napoleon’s

Garage Sale—

they brought a surveyor’s pole & chain,
and a set of plotting instruments—

(Meanwhile. . . .)
. . . . Up river, the Sioux:
hostile, numerous, well armed,
certain to demand ransom for passage)

Hence: Guns & Ammo, Mail Order Dept—

one swivel-mounted cannon made of bronze,
four heavy shotguns or blunderbusses,
four hundred pounds of lead for shot
fifteen Pennsylvania rifles,
two hundred pounds imported rifle powder.

(and a little something for insects & etc.)
a mosquito net,
curtains; 8ps cat gut,
two hundred pounds
of tallow mixed with fifty pounds of lard
which they smeared

“about the arms & face
to repel the most pugnacious”

mesquetor . . .

misquitr,
muscatoes. . .
They brought the new Jerusalem, 
and the firepower to back it up;

They brought the God of Joseph Mede 
“Awakened out of sleep.”

*His* tools and *His* fondness for gadgetry—
an air rifle, a collapsible 
“semicylindrical,” iron frame canoe.

and from Thomas Parker of South Third Street, Philadelphia, 
a very expensive watch—

“with her a screw-driver and kee, 
the works stoped by inserting a hog’s bristle”—

They brought fifteen pounds of Peruvian bark, 
for malaria, 
they brought books—

two volumes of Linnaeus, Barton’s *Elements of Botany*

*The Nautical Almanac and Astronomical Ephemeris*—

(and something out of Locke and something out of Bacon 
and something out of Newton—
for instance, the medicine of one Dr. Rush)

to wit:
When you feel the least indisposition, do not overcome it by marching. Rest in a horizontal position.

Benjamin Rush, that is, whose pills “cure all of mankind’s ills”——

To be your own best physician, take these pills for a general purging.
When you feel an indisposition,
—calomel.
six parts mercury to one part chlorine—called “Thunderclappers” by name.

. . . an attack of fever? of ague? Just listen——for what I’ve said bears repeating——If you assume a horizontal position,

and opium, and niter or saltpeter, and jalap, and whiskey and a little laudanum

. . . soon all will be well again. You won’t hear your men complaining, anyhow, of the least indisposition.

For they’ve brought presents for all the new tenants
ten pounds assorted sewing thread; silk fabric, and paint, and vermillion——

and they’ll be more refreshed, I say, by lying down. That’s key. Prevent verticality. No leaning, no listing, no half-hearted horizontalisme

should be allowed. In sum: go prone briefly, it goes without saying, and, at the least indisposition——be sure to rest in a horizontal position.
They arrive
like emperors of China, recognizing no equals
only tributaries,
with 12 dozen flags,
and 12 dozen friendship coins,
and whiskey by the barrel,

the ocean breaks its shackles
and a great earth lies open—

the stone rolls down the mountain
and the rivers run backward
and a new generation ascends
in a keelboat, in canoes,

with small cheap scissors,
and common brass thimbles,
and 288 knives; and combs;

and Kirwian’s Elements of Minerology,

and A Practical Introduction to Spheres and Nautical Astronomy

and ear trinkets, and arm bands,

and red glass beads
and white glass beads
and blue glass beads

tunc Orientis occidit et ortum est . . .

. . . imperium sine fine dedi.
TWO

Landscape with Man, Ax
Being as it was October on the Plains,
the mammals gathered into their herds—
elk, pronghorn, buffalo, and squirrel
especially, and in such numbers they’d sound
from a distance, like a sleek, chittering river
moving through the overstory of oak and hickory
until they reached the banks of the Missouri,
where they’d pause, as Meriwether reports,
“and with lusty abandon, plunge into the waters.”
A flock of pigeons flew above us, blocking the sun.
Making haste, I set up my espontoon & let loose
with the blunderbus. The birds, en masse,
shat upon us, and those I struck dropped
by the dozen like tennis balls upon our decks.
THREE

Let Nothing You Dismay
I Recall Being Beautifully Stoned

—Seattle, 1993

In a convertible, with the top down, the wind up, her hair like the crazy spray of a broken hydrant, a ghost approached me.

I’d postponed my plan for Jumping From a Bridge, a rambling tract of Death Schtick, the newest performance craze, mine to be punctuated by a vault from the rail of the Aurora Avenue Bridge.

But I’d failed, that day. I didn’t jump.

What was left but to work through the jeering crowd? (‘He’s just a poseur. No commitment to the craft.’) & thumb my way home:

She stopped for me, said, “get in,” lit a joint, said: “The perfect BLOW-JOB’S every man’s true EL DORADO— Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

In a blue print dress, a bad wig, discreet goatee, fine filaments of reddish arm hair, it was Pound, of course, who had lobbied, with qualified success, it seemed, for a variance on the code of the underworld. He was lecturing already:

“Sheer, shattering PHALLIC impact. THAT’S what we lived for, BACK IN THE DAY . . .”

He was working on a wad of Beechnut packed into his lower lip. He reached for a cup, spat, set it down, began waving his hands like a conductor

—“YR all either jumping off bridges,” a pause, for my sake, or waiting for the NEXT BIG THING”—
eyes asquint, searching the rear view mirror,
the disappointed crowd behind us thinning out—

“Whatever the HELL that was suppose to be,”
Then, an evaluative glance—“How’s your Latin?”

In a car driven by the great ghost of Pound
with wild hair and tobacco stains on his dress,
the look in his eye was fierce, but fearful, too,
my silence a dread confirmation,
I sank like an object dropped from a height.

“Well, anyhow, ’twas seldom spoken, if at all, actually,”
his voice trailing off.

We fell silent, both of us absorbed,
in a hempish sort of way,
into the summer stream of evening traffic purring
all around us down the gaudy thoroughfare
of Aurora—

“The Renaissance INVENTED perspective,”
Pound blurted out, a propos of nothing,

“the technique of DEPTH and DISTANCE,

“the vanishing point, smuggled in someone’s pocket
like a tomato seedling across the waters,

“and this grew into something we wanted
to vanish into:
    cf. Boone into Kentucky,
    Colter, down the Yellowstone . . .”

And here, too, as far as one could see,
the vanishing had neither flagged nor faltered—
Coronado’s banners and whirligigs fluttered over
cars and discount furniture stores
and streets where people waited
between having and getting.
And as far as one could see,
    one could get
an oil change, a back rubbed,
    or have
the world’s shortest little nervous breakdown
before the light turned green.

And as far as one could see,
the speed limit in Purgatory was a steady
five over the posted 40, so we kept apace,
and we stopped when they stopped, and looked
straight ahead, as they looked straight ahead.

And we said nothing, as they said nothing—
and our souls, such as they were, CAR-RT sorted,
settled and idling in unison, murmured
a catchy, toe-tapping, panicked little song.

—“What is this place?” Pound said, at last.
—“North 85th and Greenwood,” I said, helpfully.

—“No, no,” with a sweep of his hand
that took in the Piggly Wiggly & the strip northward
clear to Canada
—“No,” he said again. “I mean, THIS!”
FOUR

*News to Pluto*
Do not, under any circumstances, bring up *The Chuck Berry Sex Video*, for instance, the news of which will never reach Pluto, one prays. It may be true they’ve assigned undue reverence for certain cultural ejecta (their hymns are based on a Rick Wakeman solo project, it seems) but when they point backward along the asymptote through ice and dark matter to that speck of star as tiny as a nit, our signal flailing against the noise, and say, *Maybe something interesting’s happen there!* just know there’s not enough gravity on Pluto to hold more than one meaning at once, let alone its opposite. Your irony is out their window. Tread lightly, in other words. They really want to know.

And when, from your great remove, and with a few dozen mouse-clicks, you zoom in like a god, right down to their rooftops, (at such proximity the resolution goes to shit, & things begin to blur and get downright blobular), the trick, then, of course is to jettison the fancy gadgetry and hand the craft over to a poem

a door clicks
quietly, at one AM, the engine cut—the sound of tires rolling on gravel to a stop, (drogue chutes drifting through the pines like hushed voices), your eyes adjusting to the light

of Pluto,

when you land, again, (and here’s the thing: it’s never the first time) you do so, not because it’s right or good, or because you hope to make amends, or resolve a grudge or two,
or, in a weak moment, imagine that you’ve come
to deliver the celebrity commencement address
long overdue but finally bestowed,
nor have you come, as you start to hope,
looking down your derelict block,
because of some colossal administrative error, say,
some spectacularly maladroit transposition
of destinations (e.g. for Paris, Pluto).
On this point, I’ve got no lesson for you.
You’re here, as it starts to sink in (again)
for reasons that simply don’t apply
anywhere, which is the guiding prerogative
of a darkened and now decommissioned planet.
And it’s not your place to tell them what you’ve heard.
The news to Pluto will arrive soon enough
and won’t be what they don’t already know.
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 dedi” [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.