Though I am aware that many readers of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* are dismayed by the extent of the violence in the novel, I am not surprised to learn that many readers actually find the novel an exhilarating read. That is, I cannot pretend the pleasure readers take in the novel is a problem I would like to solve, for I too enjoyed the novel—and hold McCarthy accountable. Since being victimized can lead us to enjoy becoming perpetrators, McCarthy actually encourages us to enjoy Glanton’s mercenaries’ merciless but efficacious slaughter by first having us ride along side the hapless Captain White. When Glanton and his riders massacre the Delaware village, we may in fact not only understand it as an answer to the Apache’s slaughter, but experience it as a satisfying response to previous abuse. McCarthy thereby maneuvers us into agreeing with the judge that one lives best when one lives like Glanton and his riders do, by embracing one’s inner savagery.

McCarthy begins his novel in such a way that, regardless of the nature of our past experiences, we will know what it is to be weak and vulnerable. He involves us in his story-world by speaking directly to us and by encouraging us to identify with the protagonist, kid. In the text’s first line his narrator explicitly speaks to us. He acknowledges our presence: we thereafter cannot pretend to be detached observers, distinct from what we “observe.” He beckons us forward so that we “[s]ee the kid”; and when he then refers to the “[n]ight of your birth” (3), we might still think him speaking to us. He sets the kid off on a journey similar to our own: we all venture into unfamiliar territories. And as the unfamiliar land quickly also proves a very dangerous one, mightn’t we as well hope to hitch alongside some of those already accustomed to it while we accimatize ourselves? I am suggesting that when the kid signs up with Captain White he brings with him other riders—us, the readers of McCarthy’s novel. McCarthy has us associate with White’s gang, if only for comfort and security. And more the pity, for Captain White’s expedition serves as a kind of exemplum, the sort of story the judge would use to demonstrate the rightness of his understanding of men.

At the end of the novel the judge proclaims that there are three sorts of men. There are those who aren’t warriors, who can’t move other men—the least of men. Then there are two sorts of warriors: those who can dance, and those who can’t. True dancers are those “who have offered up [themselves] [. . .] entire to the blood of war”
True dancers kill because killing “speaks to [their] [. . .] inmost heart” (331). False dancers, on the other hand, try and establish the moral righteousness of their killing ways. Since Captain White sees himself as an “instrument of liberation in a dark and troubled land” (34), White is one such false dancer. He aims, that is, to civilize a land, to protect citizens “from the notorious packs of cut-throats presently infesting the routes which they are obliged to travel” (34). No doubt he enjoys the slaughter, but as he is apparently intent on being a wealthy landowner, he hopes for some future glimpse of pastoral order rather more than he does ongoing war. Those whom the judge would deem true dancers, sadden and disgust him. When the kid first meets White, the kid notes that he was apparently “sad[dened]” (33) by the efforts of “a heathen horde [which] rides over the land looting and killing with total impunity” (33). Unable to give himself entire to the blood of war, White can only imagine them as those “who cannot govern themselves” (34).

Since the judge believes that “[m]oral law is an invention of mankind of the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak” (250), he would despise White’s justification for war. He would judge White doomed in his efforts to enlighten a dark land, for he believes that moral law is essentially very weak. According to him, since men are natural killers, moral law cannot help but be “subvert[ed]” “at every turn” “by [h]istorical law” (250). And in how he portrays White and his riders’ journey through the desert, McCarthy confirms judge’s assessment that those who aim to civilize a naturally chaotic world are weak in spirit, and doomed to failure.

White and his party travel through a hostile landscape. Nature can only be thought of as provisioning in that it doesn’t forsake them the forewarning of their doom: “[t]hose first days they saw no game, no birds save buzzards” (42). And we notice how oppositely they are described. We are told that “the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear” (47)—the mountains are stark and menacing; the riders, in contrast, are meek and anonymous: they “rode with their heads down, faceless under their hats” (45). Nature’s beasts are mythical and magnificent, its horses “ra[ed] on the plains pounding their shadows down the night and leaving in the moonlight a vaporous dust like the palest stain of their passing.” (47). In contrast, the riders’ “animals were failing [. . .] [:] the wretched ponies huddled and whimpered like dogs” (47). Nature eagerly anticipates devouring White and his men; at dusk, the sun stood like a “head of a great red phallus [that] [. . .] puls[ed] malevolent[ly] behind them” (45). The sun brings shadows as “tentades
[determined] to bind them [i.e., White and his riders] to the darkness yet to come” (45), and White’s men are fearful: “They halted in the dark to recruit the animals and some of the men stowed their arms in the wagons for fear of drawing the lightning” (47). And they behave as those who are desperate would, as those who suspect they might soon die would—they pray to God.

The judge gauges that it requires a “largeness of heart” (330) in order to survive the desert. It requires, that is, ample inner resources and readiness to use them. White’s men are portrayed as if they lack the inner resources to deal with such a harsh terrain. Unprepared to deal with a landscape which refuses to just offer up either game or water, and disinclined to look to themselves to improvise, they ask God for help. We should note that turning to God is always a bad idea in Blood Meridian, for if God answers, He answers in blood. For instance, the kid stumbles upon corpses of Christina Mexicans who “barricaded themselves in [a] [. . .] house of God against the heathen” (60). These Christians owed their death, not their salvation, to those above: “savages had hacked holes in the roof and shot them down from above” (60). Since just previous to their request we are told of how “[t]he thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up” (47), we sense that God is at work concocting an equally appropriate deliverance for Hayward and his men.

When White’s sergeant finally sees the “heathen horde,” he exclaims, “Oh my god!” (53). Since this is the first time “God” appears in the text since Hayward’s prayer, McCarthy has us understand the horde as His response to (wayward?) Hayward’s prayer. It seems an appropriate response to deliver to men who, even though they understand His lands as “the high road to hell” (45), still insist on understanding Him as responding sympathetically to requests from the downtrodden. The portrayal of the Apache warriors—that is, to the devastating “legion of horribles” (52), which ride “down upon [White and his riders] [. . .] like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning” (53)—also responds to White’s assessment of the fighting strength of uncivil men. The captain had informed the kid that those they were fighting were a “race of degenerates” (34) who could be bested by “unpaid irregulars” (34). McCarthy shows, instead, that those who kill with impunity are the strongest, not the weakest, of men.

McCarthy ensures that Captain White’s last words show him up as a fool. In response to the sergeant’s query regarding the identity of the group advancing before
them, White answers, “I make it a parcel of heathen stockthieves is what I make it” (51). We, of course, might first appreciate why White thought defeating these “thieves” would prove such easy “sport” (51), for McCarthy restricts our vision so we see no more than what White and his sergeant can see through their telescope, meaning we see that there “were [but] cattle, mules, horses [. . .] [and] a handful of ragged indians mending the outer flanks of the herd with their nimble ponies” (51). McCarthy situates us on the desert plain, draws us into contemplating the nature of the group before us, and thereby positions us so that when the horde materializes, we should count ourselves amongst those caught out in surprise and subsequently trodden upon. Very likely, we feel some of the horror, some of the devastation experienced by White and his riders before they perish. And most certainly, unless we are masochists, it cannot be a pleasure to be conjoined to Saxons who come to know this:

[S]ome with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and dubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandlegged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. And now the horses of the dead came pounding out of the smoke and dust and dirded with flapping leather and wild manes and eyes whited with fear like the eyes of the blind and some were feathered with arrows and some lanced through and stumbling and vomiting blood as they wheeled across the killing ground and dattered from sight again. Dust stanched the wet and naked heads of the scalped who with the fringe of hair below their wounds and tonsured to the bone now lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming. (54)

I, at least, was sufficiently revolted by this scene that I essentially counted myself
amongst those downed, and therefore was disappointed that McCarthy continued to compound my sense of the kid as a perpetual victim. Yes, the kid “wondrously” (55) survives the attack, but following the Apache raid the kid again and again experiences what it is to be weak and vulnerable.

The kid *is* as vulnerable as a little kid in this part of *Blood Meridian*. When a Mexican captain offers him water, the captain lets the kid know he could just as easily have slain him. The captain likens him to a little lamb that calls for his mother, that is, to someone ripe for slaughter by wolves (65). Though wolves don’t catch him, Mexican soldiers do, and McCarthy describes him as such easy game: “the kid was standing by the cart pissing when the soldiers rode into the yard. They seized him and tied his hands behind him and they looked in the cart” (69). While he’s imprisoned, we learn that “[a]ll day small boys perched on the walls and watched by shifts and pointed and jabbered. They’d walk around the parapet and try to piss down on sleepers in the shade” (71). The kid throws a stone at one of them and manages to scare them away, but by now we likely wish him capable of a more devastating response to tormentors.

Social service professionals would tell us that those who’ve been badly victimized can be expected to join gangs for revenge—but this would come as little surprise to us, for after repeatedly having his vulnerability exposed and exploited, surely we are willing the kid to ride with winners for a change, whatever their disposition. And as if perhaps responding to our need, winners *do* show up: Glanton and his outriders come into town. Better—they’re recruiting.

Our first description of Glanton and his riders makes them seem the sort of men who would have anticipated and therefore could have dealt with the Apache horde that devastated White and his entourage. Like the Apaches, Glanton’s riders are described as a formidable “horde” (79) whose visage is so horrifying and awesome it “stun[s]” (78) onlookers. They are “viscous looking humans mounted on unshod Indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, dad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description, revolvers of enormous weight and bowie knives the size of claymore and short twobarreled rifles with bores you could stick your thumbs in” (78). Unlike White, the leader of this gang is a true dancer. We know early on—for example, from his making animals “dance” while testing his guns—that Glanton will not pretend to be a moral crusader. Being a member of his company is made to seem a privilege, unworthy of most: the kid and Toadvine have to pass themselves of as “seasoned
indiankillers” (79) in order to be counted part of it (all the kid had to do was to best and kill a non-combatant [i.e., a bartender] for White to seek him out). And in a way, it is: while the kid rides with him, the kid doesn’t know defeat for some time. Riding with Glanton, in fact, seems to respond to, to quit, a number of unpleasant experiences the kid had while riding with White.

For example, McCarthy has us attend to how nature “relates” to Glanton and his gang, just as he did with White and his riders. But whereas with White nature was an opponent, nature has no interest in besting Glanton or his riders—they seem, rather, in accord. We are told, for example, that “their track across the land reflected in its faint areature the movements of the earth itself” (153), and that “the men as they rode turned black in the sun from the blood on their clothes and their faces and then paled slowly in the rising dust until they assumed once more the color of the land through which they passed” (160). We shouldn’t be surprised that nature and Glanton’s riders coalesce, for as we have seen, nature is often portrayed in the novel as malevolent, black-in-spirit—and therefore akin to Glanton’s riders who “tread[ed] their thin and flaring shadows until they had crossed altogether into the darkness which so well became them” (163).

Some of the activities hereto associated with defeat in the text are recalled and transformed while the kid rides with Glanton. For the reader, they begin to accrue different, more appealing, associations. For instance, urinating has thus far been associated with the kid’s capture and humiliation. But while the kid rides with Glanton, he hears from the ex-priest how their companion, the judge, miraculously once saved all their lives by getting them to piss into a gunpowder mix he was preparing. McCarthy phrases the judge’s request for urine in a way that has us recall Hayward’s prayer for help. The judge tells them to “piss, [. . .] piss for your very souls” (132), and we might remember as we hear this White’s men encouraging Hayward to “[p]ray it up” (47) for rain. But while Hayward’s prayer for rain may have rained down upon them the horde, the judge’s request for urine ensures an easy victory: the text could not provide surer evidence that those who rely on their own resources are the ones who can expect to thrive.

Some might object to my linking the kid to the judge as they are never characterized as natural companions in the way that the judge and Glanton for instance are. However, both of them are to be counted amongst those referred to when “Glanton’s riders” becomes the composite “they,” and owing to the preponderance of paragraphs which begin with his pronoun (often with “They rode”
or “They ride”), many of us likely come to imagine them as conjoined throughout their journeys. The narrator overtly tells us at one point that: “They rode on. They rode like men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to the, like blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote. For although each man among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a [. . .] communal soul” (152).

Since I hold the description of the Apache attack as too vivid to be readily shaken off by the reader, I believe that as we hear of Glanton and his riders’ communal aspects, of how they ride and ride, and of how they ride with a purpose, that many of us sense and at some level hope, their mission is to provide a Saxon response to the Apache’s massacre we are still suffering from. I previously quoted a lengthy passage from the Apache’s massacre of White’s riders hoping I would thereby remind my reader of how affecting, how awful it was to encounter that passage for the first time. I also did so in hopes of persuading my reader that this scene involving Glanton’s riders’ massacre of the Delaware village recalls, replies to, and quits it:

Within that first minute the slaughter had become general. Women were screaming and naked children and one old man tottered forth waving a pair of white pantaloons. The horsemen moved among them and slew them with dubs or knives. A hundred tethered dogs were howling and others were raging crazed among the huts ripping at one another and at the tied dogs nor would this bedlam and clamor ease or diminish from the first moment the riders entered the village. Already a number of the huts were afire and a whole enfilade of refugees had begun steaming north along the shore wailing crazily with the riders among them like herdsmen dubbing down the laggards first. [. . .] When Glanton and his chiefs swung back through the village people were running out under the horses’ hooves and the horses were plunging and some of the men were moving on foot among the huts with torches and dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy. There were in the camp a number of Mexican slaves and these ran forth calling out in Spanish and were brained or shot and one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew
and humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives and a young woman ran up and embraced the bloodied forefeet of Glanton’s warhorse. (156)

As with the Apache attack, we have a “great vomit of gore” (98). The difference is that it is more appropriate to describe the narrative discharge this time as orgasmic. I say this because we now ride with the perpetrator, not the victim, in an excited release upon of a village we likely felt we had been preparing for.

Like before an orgasm, the paragraphs that preceded the attack have a regular rhythm. Again we are offered a succession of paragraphs that begin with “they.” Specifically, we are told that “They followed” (149), that “They passed” (149), that “For the next two weeks they would ride” (151), that “They cut the throats” (151), that “They crossed the del Norte” (152), that “That night they were visited” (152), that “Toward the morning they saw fires” (152), that “When the company set forth in the evening they continued south as before” (153), that “They saw to their arms” (154), that “They’d driven a stick into the ground” (154), that “They reached the north end” (154) before hearing how “They led the [. . .] horses” into war” (155). On the Vintage edition of Blood Meridian, a case for my argument can be made just by looking at the paragraphs on the page preceding the attack (page 154). Each paragraph is roughly the same length, is reasonably short, and begins with a monosyllabic word beginning with “T.”

The effect of encountering these two massacres sequentially is very different than if we had done so simultaneously. It is as inappropriate to point to the narrator’s referring to Glanton’s “chiefs” (156) and argue that with this McCarthy shows he would not have us mistake these pitiless Saxon marauders as any different from the Apaches they’re about to decimate, as it is to argue that the American CNN embeds who rode tanks intending to lay waste to Baghdad in response to the 9-11 New York devastation, showed the essential equivalence between Muslim and American warriors. No, just as those who felt victimized by the 9-11 attack rooted for the American tank divisions while they crushed Baghdad, since we suffered from the Apache attack, we are drawn to ride with Glanton and root for his gang—likely whatever the total number of body cavities they end up cavving in, arms and legs they end up deaving off, pleading, sunken, defeated heads they return only to decapitate. And we would done so even if they had dressed themselves near Indian out of fraternal respect for Apaches’ true warrior blood. That is, if we experienced the Apache
attack as our defeat, the Delaware massacre is only our revenge.

Some might argue we aren’t likely to root for puppy-killers, but I believe McCarthy portrays Glanton so that even if we hate him, we likely still admire him. Glanton is someone who “eats lead and shits bullets”—an unrelenting force (His bravado never ceases, not even at the moment of his death.). But not just this: for while in battle, most sentences that begin with “Glanton” are usually followed with him accomplishing the difficult in a meticulously perfect manner (An example: “Glanton brought the rifle to the crook of his arm and capped one drum and rotated the barrels and capped the other. He did not take his eyes from the Apaches” [158]; and another: “Glanton drew his rifle from its scabbard and shot the two lead horses and resheathed the rifle and drew his pistol and began to fire between the actual ears of his horse” [156].)—Glanton is so perfect in this environment most often we feel the universe is simply ceding his antagonists to him, because in awe, it knows it doesn’t have a hope. And for all his compelling competence and charisma, we are his as well.

McCarthy manipulates us into admiring Glanton, just as he manipulates us into enjoying Glanton’s evil ways, and we must ask ourselves why he does so. Would he have us shotgun and tomahawk our way through life? Does he want us to give ourselves entire to the blood of war, even if this just means spilling over carts toward the last available bit of clearance at a grocery store? I would like to think he wrote the novel hoping to make us aware of our susceptibility to manipulation, but since I am arguing it affects us primarily subliminally, I don’t think this was intention. Instead, for all his talk of God, McCarthy has me thinking he dearly wrote it while “the devil was at his elbow” (19).

Work Cited