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Illogical Disdain in Cummings's 'Buffalo Bill's'

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[This is a revision of 'Cummings's "Buffalo Bill's" published in *The Explicator* 53:3 (Spring 1995), 174-5]

First published in the first issue of *The Dial* in 1920, three years after the death of Bufalo Bill Cody, this poem was subsequently republished as number VII of tgen 'Portraits'. The subject of this portrait is not, as commentators have asserted, Buffalo Bill. Neither is it merely an elaboration on the conventional trope of *sic transit gloria mundi*, of which the appropriate tone would be sadness. Here is the poem:

Buffalo Bill's
defunct
Who used to
ride a waterswmooth-silver
stallion
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat
Jesus
He was a handsome man
and what I want to know is
how do you like your blueyed boy
Mister Death?

The speaker praises the dead celebrity but also disparages him. The reason for the disparagement cannot be, as one interpreter has suggested, disapproval of Cody's 'blend of hero and charlatan' or reduction of 'heroic deeds to circus stunts'.[i] The speaker clearly admires the showmanship. Yet he disparages the man not for a reason personal to Cody but in order to rival him in worth or stature. The poem is a self-portrait of an admiring but disdainful speaker, unaware of a logical flaw in his reasoning and the profound irony of his own situation.

The speaker admires Buffalo Bill's skill in shooting and his good looks. He also admires the horse Buffalo Bill rode, which has symbolic affinity with its rider since it was male (a 'stallion') and 'silver', like silver-haired Bill Cody in the period when he was best known. The speaker's admiration is preceded, however, by irony and followed by sarcasm. The word 'defunct' (instead of 'dead') is itself performative, demonstrating callous or humorous indifference to or even approval of Cody's death, and the question 'how do you like your blueyed boy' sarcastically belittles Buffalo Bill and conveys the speaker's sense of superiority over him. Furthermore, the possession by 'Mister Death' of a blue-eyed boy has pederastic connotations. The celebrity Buffalo Bill was skillful, superior, and, in the last decades of his life, the most famous man in the world. But now he is dead and, the speaker assumes, it is better to be alive than dead. Implicitly, he ignores the ontological notion of 'better', selecting instead its competitive meaning. Since the speaker is alive, and death has cancelled Buffalo Bill's skill and erased his dramatic good looks, the speaker now, he thinks, has advantage over him. (The reduction of 'Jesus' in the expletive ensures that the contrast between life and death is not here complicated by the possibility of an afterlife.) The word 'pigeons' has a pertinent connotation in this context. It denotes inanimate clay disks, clay suggesting mortality, partly by association with scriptural 'feet of clay' (Daniel 2:33-4) and partly because Cody is reduced by death to clay. Buffalo Bill once rode a silver stallion, the man's stature symbolized by his supremacy over the impressive animal. Now the speaker, who has his (as it were) foil in pederastic Mister Death, rhetorically rides Buffalo Bill, verbally elevating himself as performing at Buffalo Bill's expense. The speaker regards himself as, in effect, the new Buffalo Bill—not a world famous former buffalo hunter and Indian-fighter but the dominant male. Buffalo Bill is now to the speaker as the stallion had been to Buffalo Bill. But he is chiefly like Death in dominating Buffalo Bill and likely riding him sexually—sodomy being a time-honoured means of humiliating rivals. The pederastic implication relies on two metaphors, Death being an adult male and Cody being a young boy, but it is strongly implied.

Logically, the self-elevation of the speaker at the expense of a dead man is nonsense, since the dead by no longer existing (as the speaker assumes) differ categorically from the living and therefore cannot be compared. St Anselm anticipated the speaker when he argued for the existence of God, 'than whom no greater can be conceived', on the grounds that existing is better than not existing. His contemporaries and later philosophers refuted his argument by pointing out

that you cannot say something in existence is ‘better’ than something that isn’t. The gloating self-evaluation of the speaker has no logical foundation. It is also ridiculous in failing to take into account his own mortality. (If his implied contention of superiority were true, it would be only temporary.) The poem contains the theme of the passing of worldly glory, but its principal meaning is that pride is stupid and goeth before a fall. The question of whether the speaker is identical to the poet need not be asked, since it cannot be answered, but if Cummings was unaware of the ironies of his poem, they deepened considerably with his death in 1962.

Note

[i]Rushworth Kidder, *E.E. Cummings. An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columb ia UP, 1979), 28.