You Just Change Your Attitude Now Please, Young Man; or, The Art of Superior Inferiority

WILLIAM SAROYAN, whose son is a Nugget addict, knocked on our door one happy day and offered the following wry valentine to all the Embattled Young

Identity and attitude are of course inseparable, which is a stupid way of saying style is the man, which is a boring way of saying you're who you think you are, other people are not who they think they are, they are who you think they are. When a man is young he is sick or silly if he doesn't think he's the cat's ass. Everybody else is a square and a phony, especially those who are past the age of 27, which is the last year of youth and truth. After 27, the human experience is only a prolonged burial ceremony with all kinds of pathetic diversionary acts, so that stiffs in their middle 30s may console themselves by becoming millionaires, or by holding public office, such as the Presidency, as it might be called, or by becoming the most unsuccessful abstract painter of the day and nation. Youth is the proper time to find the world and the human race false and hopeless, a theory that is neither arrogant nor inaccurate. Its only flaw is that it's useless.

What everybody wants to know is how does this inevitable falsity and hopelessness concern me, perhaps the first perfect specimen ever to reach the sidewalk of the world? How may I, neither false nor hopeless, pass along to everybody else what I am and have and know, so that they also, poor bastards, may be magnificent?

The attitude is rude, which in itself constitutes size at least, but rudeness soon slides into civility and then little by little into downright courtesy, or murder, and the kid's feeling of superiority is discovered to be a delusion, whereupon the world has a new adult. Whoever the kid had been, whoever had had the grand attitude, has finally heeded the admonishment of parents, teachers, governments, religions and the law: "You just change your attitude now please, young man."

This transformation in kids—from flashing dragonflies, so to say, to sticky water-surface worms slowly slipping downstream—is noticed with pride by society and with mortification by God, which is a fantastic way of saying I don't like to see kids throw away their truth just because it isn't worth a dime in the open market.

Now, twice 27, it isn't likely that I shall ever be approached by representatives of the youth of Russia, China, Japan, Africa, Mississippi, Cincinnati and Sacramento, for answers to the basic questions. The **exceptional** youth, I might have said: The regular or routine youth, being in charge of the world and everything, would expect **me** to go to **them** for answers. Even so, perhaps I might be permitted to decide which **are** the basic questions, and then to answer them, not so much to the best of my ability as to the end that there might be a laugh in it somewhere.

Perhaps the most basic of the questions is, "What is a fellow supposed to do in order to be so impressive that the most beautiful and desirable girls of Jersey City take for granted that he is the only man in the world?"

The answer to that question is this: Unless the man has majored in dentistry, in which case he must bring a lot of zip and dash to the filling of teeth cavities, the thing to do is to make an art of something that has never before been an art.

This can be done with almost any **thing,** and by the keeping and strengthening of the wild attitude, which can transform junk of all kinds, for instance, into sculpture for thoughtful exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Stuff found in the street, and **only** that stuff, could make a new reputation, and a fortune.

For the new painter the solution to the problem might be the size of the area to paint, or the shape: A circular fresco, for instance, might be most effectively achieved by having the painter (or artist)apply his paint from a moving motorcycle, or horse, or swing, or roller skates, or from stilts, but again the important thing is the attitude: The man must be big. But of course big is always big by comparison. As there is never any competition, it is very easy to be big.

That's sculpture and painting, accepted and traditional forms of art.

What about unknown forms? Well, they are certainly **there,** and they can easily be revealed.

As a poor illustration of this, a new art might very well be the making of statements, such as this one: "I have just completed my first work of art, New York City, which I believe deserves to be carefully noticed."

Or this: "I have finally added 30 billion years to human time, so that it is now reasonable to believe immortality of some sort is not inconceivable. It was hard work."

Or: "Whenever you see an eye in any human being or animal, I hope you will have the decency to bear in mind that I invented eyes. I need the honor."

Another good bet is pomposity, but of course deadpan or dishonest pomposity, inasmuch as honest pomposity is only laughable. It is enjoyed by what is known in the vernacular as great men, and of course every country in the world has them. Dishonest pomposity on the other hand is something else again, and only an anarchist-genius can have it. But the anarchist-genius is almost always anonymous, which makes this branch of superior inferiority appealing only to a few kids in the whole world at any given time.

Crime in any of its pathetic forms is useless. Literal stealing, for instance, is ridiculous, while stealing which appears to be philanthropy is clever.

And so on.

To sum up, at least somewhat, perhaps this may be the point not to forget: The whole thing is nothing unless an attitude of some kind is imposed upon it, and the attitude most likely to impel fun appears to be that inasmuch as something or somebody is kidding something or somebody, why the hell shouldn't I, too? ■