At the same time, says Sypher, both concepts of self of the nineteenth century have been further damaged by movements of the twentieth century in the fields of physics and logic. The creative artist, being extremely sensitive to contemporary thought in all fields—though generally unconsciously so—has currently produced anti-literature and anti-art as an inevitable corollary of anti-physics (entropy, chance, relativity) and anti-logic (e.g., “the logic of antagonism”: Lupasco, Bridgman). Today, in place of the self, the artist thinks of the anonymous being.

Nevertheless, even in the most extreme anti-literature (e.g., Beckett), there is a kind of residual humanity—not a bona fide self, but a broad human pulse that cannot be annihilated: “We have an existence, however unwillingly, after we have lost an identity; and we do not seem to be able to diminish this existence below a certain point.” Upon this “existence” Professor Sypher proposes to erect some kind of humanism. It will, perforce, be different from any kind of previous humanism, and will indeed be almost the antithesis of classical humanism:

Jean Grenier has set the main question: in spite of all this dehumanizing, all this anti-romanticism, does there remain a certain kind of humanism? A humanism that is not anthropocentric? Have we not, since the Greeks, confused humanism with anthropomorphism? Is it thinkable that anti-painting, like anti-literature, is humanistic in a form we have not yet recognized? Any such humanism would be selfless in a way classic humanism was not; for classic humanism—and romantic humanism—put man at the center, whereas this more self-obliterating humanism would bring man into a less egocentric relation with things. It would in any event be a humanism hard for Western man to accept, requiring a
humility we have often praised but seldom practiced.

The difficulty with Professor Sypher’s book is that after an admirably lucid account of cross-currents in modern literature, art, science, philosophy, and political science, he then presents a humanism that Paul Elmer More, for one, carefully studied and rejected thirty-five years ago.

What Sypher seems to be talking about here involves two different humanisms merged into one: the mystical humanism of the Orient and the non-theistic humanism of the Occident. The first of these is essentially that de-personalization of the self in which it becomes absorbed into the meaningless flux. It is perhaps best known in Western circles as the nirvana of the Hindus, but it has also flourished in our literature in the semi-pantheism of Wordsworth’s worship of nature and Emerson’s Oversoul.

More himself was at one time so attracted to this kind of humanism that for about three years he practiced it in his withdrawal to Shelburne, New Hampshire, which gave title to his famous Shelburne Essays. While there, he translated a hundred poems from the Sanskrit of Bhartrihari, and in subsequent volumes returned frequently to his reading in Hindu thought and his own experience in the life of contemplation.

It will never do, he finally asserted. For Western man with his tradition of personal liberty and freedom, and more particularly for the Western man of the Judaic-Christian tradition with its emphasis on the heightened sense of personal meaning and destiny—it will never do: “Annihilation in Jehovah is a contradiction in terms.”

Undoubtedly anticipating this, Sypher suggests that Freudian psychology with its emphasis upon the Ego and the Id may simply be a late offspring of the whole romantic hero concept. But it is not simply Freudian psychology. Western literature from Hamlet to Dale Carnegie is too saturated with observations about man’s own importance to himself for us to brush easily aside the reality of man’s ego. “When I had once addressed your Lordship in public,” wrote Samuel Johnson to Lord Chesterfield, “I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little.” And here, as so often, we feel the voice of human experience speaking through the great lexicographer. A humanism that begins, as Sypher’s does, by asserting that “any surviving humanism must be based upon a negative view of the self if not a cancellation of the self” seems perilously close to an anti-humanism.

Later, in discussing how this humanism would actually operate in the affairs of men, Sypher suggests that it might profitably look to Martin Buber and Albert Camus. The former of these asserts that we are all individuals, but realize our individuality only by entering into relations with others. For Camus, the self is, “absurdly enough, anonymous but accountable.”

Sypher appears to be suggesting that the ontological argument is still in force, but he derives from it moral imperatives without theological implications. Because man cannot help being human, he must act accountably.

For some years More tried to maintain the kind of non-theistic humanism Sypher here advances. But then he found that even Plato had never been able to defend a non-theistic humanism. For it cannot be demonstrated finally, he decided, that the evil man who is mistakenly honored and prosperous is really less happy than the good man who is mistakenly despised and impoverished. In a world where there is no “just-judging Jove” we find no defense of the right, but only the practice of might making right.
Actually, the problems raised by modern science and thought are not different in essence from those the Greeks considered. According to More, for example, one will find modern man’s dilemma clearly enough presented in *Oedipus Rex*: “Man is intellectually impotent, but morally responsible.” Substitute the word *absurd* for *impotent*, and you have something not far removed from Camus’ analysis.

It is probable that both Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More would have found Sypher’s humanism defective because his major thesis is not really true: romanticism is not dead, and the anguish of the modern artist is not the basis for a new humanism. It is simply renewed evidence for Goethe’s statement: “Romanticism is disease.”

It is not within the scope of this review to say how that romanticism can be corrected, but in Randall Stewart’s article on Faulkner (Modern Age, Winter, 1961-62) we find clearly delineated what can happen to even the most romantic mind when it is both restrained and inspired by a true humanism.

Without that older humanism to correct it, the anti-literature of the twentieth century will become only one more of the interesting minor movements of our times. With it, of course, it will cease being anti-literature.

Reviewed by ROBERT M. DAVIES

Bankruptcy in the Drama


**The Acid Test** — *the* method of assessing honestly the worth of all that occurs in the contemporary theatre is at once both a moral and an aesthetic judgment: *should it be there?* Neither Mr. Weales nor Mr. Taylor has bothered to make this double-barrelled judgment, and so have failed to answer the most important questions which their respective studies beg.

Mr. Taylor, who has somehow managed to plod laboriously through two hundred and seventy-three pages without ever explaining why the Angry theatre is “angry” or why it is “theatre,” bases his discussion upon the assumption (if you can believe it) that England produced no major dramatists prior to Sir Arthur Wing Pinero. The author of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, then, stands, for Mr. Taylor, at the source of “the mainstream tradition of British drama.” Peter Shaffer and Arnold Wesker write with the theatrical aplomb of Pinero, but this is not surprising: “it is just the usual pruned, heightened realism of traditional stage parlance.”

What Mr. Taylor will do when and if he ever gets around to reading *Faustus*, I cannot presume to guess. But I do think that there is something more than the usual