

THE PROPER STUDY

By D. H. Lawrence

IF no man lives for ever, neither does any precept. And if even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea, so also does the weariest wisdom. And there it is lost. Also incorporated.

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan.
The proper study of mankind is man.

It was Alexander Pope who absolutely struck the note of our particular epoch : not Shakespeare or Luther or Milton. A man of first magnitude never fits his age perfectly.

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan.
The proper study of mankind is Man—*with a capital M*:

This stream of wisdom is very weary now : weary to death. It started such a gay little trickle, and is such a spent muddy ebb by now. It will take a big sea to swallow all its alluvia.

“ Know then thyself.” All right ! I’ll do my best. Honestly I’ll do my best, sincerely to know myself. Since it is the great commandment to consciousness of our long era, let us be men, and try to obey it. Jesus gave the emotional commandment, “ Love thy neighbour.” But the Greeks set the even more absolute motto, in its way, a more deeply religious motto : “ Know thyself.”

Very well ! Being man, and the son of man, I find it only honourable to obey. To do my best. To do my best to know myself. And particularly that part, or those parts of myself that have not yet been admitted

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into consciousness. Man is nothing, less than a tick stuck in a sheep's back, unless he adventures. Either into the unknown of the world, of his environment. Or into the unknown of himself.

Allons! the road is before us. Know thyself! Which means, *really*, know thine own *unknown* self. It's no good knowing something you know already. The thing is to discover the tracts as yet unknown. And as the only unknown now lies deep in the passional soul, allons! the road is before us. We write a novel or two, we are called erotic or depraved or idiotic or boring. What does it matter, we go the road just the same. If you see the point of the great old commandment, *Know thyself*, then you see the point of all art.

But knowing oneself, like knowing anything else, is not a process that can continue to infinity, in the same direction. The fact that I myself *am* only myself makes me very specifically finite. True, I may argue that my Self is a mystery that impinges on the infinite. Admitted. But the moment my Self impinges on the infinite, it ceases to be just myself.

The same is true of all knowing. You start to find out the chemical composition of a drop of water, and before you know where you are, your river of knowledge is winding very unsatisfactorily into a very vague sea, called the ether. You start to study electricity, you track the wretch down till you get some mysterious and misbehaving atom of energy or unit of force that goes pop under your nose and leaves you with the dead body of a mere word.

You sail down your stream of knowledge, and you find yourself absolutely at sea. Which may be safety for the weary river, but is a sad look-out for you, who are a land animal.

Now all science starts gaily from the inland source of *I Don't Know*. Gaily it says: I don't know, but I'm going to know. It's like a little river bubbling up cheer-

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fully in the determination to dissolve the whole world in its waves. And science, like the little river, winds wonderingly out again into the final *I Don't Know* of the ocean.

All this is platitudinous as regards science. Science has learned an uncanny lot, *by the way*.

Apply the same to the Know Thyself motto. We have learned something by the way. But as far as I'm concerned, I see land receding, and the great ocean of the last *I Don't Know* enveloping me.

But the human consciousness is never allowed finally to say: "I Don't Know." It has *got* to know, even if it must metamorphose to do so.

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan.

Now as soon as you come across a Thou Shalt Not commandment, you may be absolutely sure that sometime or other, you'll have to break this commandment. You needn't make a practice of breaking it. But the day will come when you'll have to break it. When you'll have to take the name of the Lord Your God in vain, and have other gods, and worship idols, and steal, and kill, and commit adultery, and all the rest. A day will come. Because, as Oscar Wilde says, What's a temptation for, except to be succumbed to!

There comes a time to every man when he has to break one or other of the Thou Shalt Not commandments. And then is the time to Know Yourself just a bit different from what you thought you were.

So that in the end, this Know Thyself commandment brings me up against the Presume-Not-God-to-Scan fence. Trespassers will be prosecuted. Know then thyself, presume not God to scan.

It's a dilemma. Because this business of knowing myself has led me slap up against the forbidden enclosure where, presumably, this God mystery is kept in corral. It isn't my fault. I followed the road. And

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it leads over the edge of a precipice on which stands up a signboard : Danger ! Don't go over the edge !

But I've got to go over the edge. The way lies that way.

Flop ! Over we go, and into the endless sea. There drown.

No ! Out of the drowning something else gurgles awake. And that's the best of the human consciousness. When you fall into the final sea of *I Don't Know*, then, if you can but gasp *Teach Me*, you turn into a fish, and twiddle your fins and twist your tail and grope in amazement, in a new element.

That's why they called Jesus : The Fish. Pisces. Because he fell, like the weariest river, into the great Ocean that is outside the shore, and there took on a new way of knowledge.

The Proper Study is Man, sure enough. But the proper study of man, like the proper study of anything else, will in the end leave you no option. You'll have to presume to study God. Even the most hard-boiled scientist, if he is a brave and honest man, is landed in this unscientific dilemma. Or rather, he is all at sea in it.

The river of human consciousness, like ancient Ocean, goes in a circle. It starts gaily, bubblingly, fiercely from an inland pool, where it surges up in obvious mystery and Godliness, the human consciousness. And here is the God of the Beginning, call him Jehovah or Ra or Ammon or Jupiter or what you like. One bubbles up in Greece, one in India, one in Jerusalem. From their various God-sources the streams of human consciousness rush variously down. Then begin to meander and to doubt. Then fall slow. Then start to silt up. Then pass into the great Ocean, which is the God of the End.

In the great ocean of the End, most men are lost. But Jesus turned into a fish, he had the other consciousness of the Ocean which is the divine End of us all.

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And then like a salmon he beat his way up stream again, to speak from the source.

And this is the greater history of man, as distinguished from the lesser history, in which figures Mr. Lloyd George and Monsieur Poincaré.

We are in the deep, muddy estuary of our era, and terrified of the emptiness of the sea beyond. Or we are at the end of the great road, that Jesus and Francis and Whitman walked. We are on the brink of a precipice, and terrified at the great void below.

No help for it. We are men, and for men there is no retreat. Over we go.

Over we must and shall go, so we may as well do it voluntarily, keeping our soul alive; and as we drown in our terrestrial nature, transmogrify into fishes. Pisces. That which knows the Oceanic Godliness of the End.

The proper study of mankind is man. Agreed entirely! But in the long run, it becomes again as it was before, man in his relation to the deity. The proper study of mankind is man in his relation to the deity.

And yet not as it was before. Not the specific deity of the inland source. The vast deity of the End. Oceanus whom you can only know by becoming a Fish. Let us become Fishes, and try.

They talk about the sixth sense. They talk as if it were an extension of the other senses. A mere *dimensional* sense. It's nothing of the sort. There is a sixth sense right enough. Jesus had it. The sense of the God that is the End and the Beginning. And the proper study of mankind is man in his relation to this Oceanic God.

We have come to the end, for the time being, of the study of man in his relation to man. Or man in his relation to himself. Or man in his relation to woman. There is nothing more of importance to be said, by us

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or for us, on this subject. Indeed, we have no more to say.

Of course, there is the literature of perversity. And there is the literature of little playboys and playgirls, not only of the western world. But the literature of perversity is a brief weed. And the playboy playgirl stuff, like the movies, though a very monstrous weed, won't live long.

As the weariest river winds by no means safely to sea, all the muddy little individuals begin to chirrup: Let's play! Let's play at something! We're so god-like when we *play*.

But it won't do, my dears. The sea will swallow you up, and all your play and perversions and personalities.

You can't get any more literature out of man in his relation to man. Which, of course, should be writ large, to mean man in his relation to woman, to other men, and to the whole environment of men: or woman in her relation to man, or other women, or the whole environment of women. You can't get any more literature out of that. Because any new book must needs be a new stride. And the next stride lands you over the sandbar in the open ocean, where the first and greatest relation of every man and woman is to the Ocean itself, the great God of the End, who is the All-Father of all sources, as the sea is father of inland lakes and springs of water.

But get a glimpse of this new relation of men and women to the great God of the End, who is the Father, not the Son, of all our beginnings: and you get a glimpse of the new literature. Think of the true novel of St. Paul, for example. Not the sentimental looking-backward Christian novel, but the novel looking out to sea, to the great Source, and End, of all beginnings. Not the St. Paul with his human feelings repudiated, to give play to the new divine feelings. Not the St. Paul violent in reaction against worldliness and

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sensuality, and therefore a dogmatist with his sheaf of Shalt-Nots ready. But a St. Paul two thousand years older, having his own epoch behind him, and having again the great knowledge of the deity, the deity which Jesus knew, the vast Ocean God which is at the end of all our consciousness.

Because, after all, if chemistry winds wearily to sea in the ether, or some such universal, don't we also, not as chemists but as conscious men, also wind wearily to sea in a divine ether, which means nothing to us but space and words and emptiness? We wind wearily to sea in words and emptiness.

But man is a mutable animal. Turn into the Fish, the Pisces of man's final consciousness, and you'll start to swim again in the great life which is so frighteningly godly that you realize your previous presumption.

And then you realize the new relation of man. Men like fishes lifted on a great wave of the God of the End, swimming together, and apart, in a new medium. A new relation, in a new whole.

THE GRAND SECRET.—This is the grand secret for finding readers and retaining them : let him who would move and convince others, be first moved and convinced himself. To every poet, to every writer, we might say : Be true, if you would be believed. Let a man but speak forth with genuine earnestness the thought, the emotion, the actual condition of his own heart ; and other men, so strangely are we all knit together by the tie of sympathy, must and will give heed to him. In culture, in extent of view, we may stand above the speaker, or below him ; but in either case, his words, if they are earnest and sincere, will find some response within us ; for in spite of all casual varieties in outward rank or inward, as face answers to face, so does the heart of man to man. (*Thomas Carlyle.*)