

Part I
On Knowing and Not
Wanting To Know

Intimacy and Pleasure

On my way home to Cambridge in the summer of 1992, after a year spent away in the United States, seated in the train, scanning through a London evening paper to find out what I had missed, I came on a reference to the suicide of Sappho Durrell. The article implied that her incestuous relationship with her father, the writer Lawrence Durrell, lay behind it. Lawrence Durrell was famous as a novelist and poet: Sappho herself had published a few reviews but at thirty-five, the age she had reached when she killed herself, her own career as a writer was still embryonic. For me, as for many readers of *The Alexandria Quartet*, the work which had made her father famous, its tale of an incestuous romance between the poet Pursewarden and his blind sister Liza had been just that, a romantic fiction, something that existed in a magic realm outside time. Now with this grainy photograph, the heavy inking of the page, for me the romance of the notion shattered like glass.

Durrell's account of two children growing up together in a remote farmhouse in Ireland, alone except for an old woman who took care of them, once read innocently to me, almost like a fairy-tale. Around 1960 when the Alexandria novels were being published, for most people incest could still be contained within the category of fiction. Specialists really knew better, of course, but faced with the challenge of what they knew they drew back. When a young psychologist named John Bowlby did make a move to work on incest, not long after the Second World

War, he was warned off it by senior members of his profession and told that it would sabotage his career to make a study of a subject that there was such resistance to knowing about. Instead, he chose to work on maternal deprivation and so made his name.

We have had to give up our pretence of ignorance in recent years and agree to face the fact that sexual relations between close relatives do take place, and not only in the west. Tracking the path of HIV infection in India, for example, threw up unsuspected patterns of sexual connection within families even before a recent survey suggested that among educated women up to 76 per cent had been subjected to sexual abuse at home. Nor is it safe to think of this as a new problem: after interviewing people who as children had been evacuated away from the bombing during the Second World War, Charles Wheeler, the BBC correspondent, estimated that 1 in 10 had been abused in their new homes. Figures are only starting to become available around the globe but there seems no reason to believe that there is any country in which incest does not occur with some regularity, even though in theory it is forbidden. In many countries national pride intensifies the pressure for secrecy which is already exerted within families, because it has been the conventional wisdom to equate acts of incest with the absence of civilized values. It is often claimed that civilization is based on the taboo on incest, that this taboo stands at the centre of the human world.

Language itself, like shame, seems to block clear thinking in this area. Most of us understand the term 'incest' as referring to sexual relations that are forbidden because there is a blood tie between the partners already. But in spite of the fact that they are covered by a blanket term, it seems obvious that the relationships which are covered by the single term 'incest' take many different forms, involving situations and events which have little in common. What adolescents experience when they become incestuously involved raises issues that are very different from those raised by the brutal penetration of a young child. And what about when it takes place between two free adults? As a topic, incest confronts us with questions about pleasure even while it asks that we also bear in mind trauma and damage. This demand seems to paralyse our minds.

It is perhaps not surprising if many of us baulk at imagining the state of mind or the circumstances in which an older person could force themselves sexually on a child. But this need not any

longer be allowed to distract us from a more pressing task, that is, the work of examining the state of mind, or rather the state of dissociation, that exists inside our own heads. We might ask ourselves how it comes about that what has been considered as universally forbidden, a taboo that exists in every culture, seems by all accounts to be a world-wide practice. By what means has our common blindness been preserved?

Finding answers to this question will take up the first part of this book. Whether every act of incest is automatically an act of abuse is a matter that has also been blurred. Both women and men have spoken repeatedly of the trauma, the humiliation and confusion that they experienced as very young people when they were used to secure sexual gratification for an adult, a parent or parental figure, someone older or more powerful than themselves. It is true that the majority of reported cases do involve fathers and daughters, where the disparity in terms of power and authority is likely to be very great, but it is also clear that not all incestuous encounters are between those who are not equals.

Siblings of about the same age, whether same-sex or heterosexual like Durrell's pair, the twins Liza and Pursewarden, might be pretty equally matched. In cases where there is no disparity, no overwhelming of one person's authority by another's, there appears to be no reason why trauma should arise, were it not for the pressure of the ban which defines all forms of incest as wrong. This pressure once internalized by individuals could be enough to give rise to the traumatic fears which are linked with the terror of retribution. As a form of damage, psychological trauma is associated with helplessness, with being unable to resist or escape from situations of extreme danger so that the psychological integrity of the individual is put at risk. In cases of incestuous abuse it is the forcing, not the close family relationship, which does the damage. Incest and abuse are not synonymous. This would suggest that there is no reason to intervene in those situations where a brother and sister decide to live together as partners. Their greatest danger at present seems to be the isolation entailed by the secrecy they are obliged to adopt. Yet in Michigan a few years ago a sibling couple were jailed. Attitudes to incest that focus on punishment and on enforcing isolation are often found, especially in those in authority: I shall be arguing however, that thinking in terms of punishment is to step even more deeply into confusion.

It is not even clear that all cases of abuse are equally traumatic, although the pressure in favour of blanket condemnation is intense. 'Dare one suggest, in the present climate of opinion, that the context of sexual interchange between adult and child – the presence of love or hate, the degree of confusion, etc. – is of major importance?', as the psychoanalyst and author Peter Lomas enquired in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 2 December 1994. It appears that there are families in which the shared closeness of a sexualized relationship that might otherwise be defined as abusive offers the only refuge, the only experience of tenderness. In those conditions, even an abusive relationship can be a life-saver. In the 1997 play *How I Learned to Drive*, American playwright Paula Vogel presents such a family, where the uncle was sexually involved with his niece from the time she was nine.

Without denying that damage was done to her, the play suggests that if it were not for this relationship this girl might not have survived her family, to leave home and go away to college. This escape also means that she develops and chooses to withdraw from the sexual relationship with her uncle. The play is titled *How I Learned to Drive*: it is this uncle who gives her the literal driving lessons which allow her to leave town. The uncle and his story also have their own weight for this playwright. He is a sensitive man, isolated in a marriage and a family where emotion is coarsened or blanked out in the other adults, and so finding rewarding exchanges only with the children. Without the hope that the relationship with his niece gave him, once she has refused the marriage that he was planning to offer her at eighteen, this uncle then drinks himself to death.

As a piece of theatre *How I Learned to Drive* presented these stories side by side on the stage, showing how one was bound up in the other and that neither was intelligible without information about the family as a whole. Instead of drawing back in affront, when they were invited to be present in the company of live actors who were performing this situation and bringing it to life for them, audiences responded with recognition. *How I Learned to Drive* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. Writing in antiquity, another dramatist, the African playwright Terence, had already remarked: 'Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto' – which could be paraphrased as 'I will draw back from nothing that teaches me about human nature.' Watching *How I Learned to Drive*, theatregoers were not moved to disgust but to recognition and to reflection.

Unlike the language of theatre, the language of educated thinking shies away from exploring the human meaning of the experience. Theatre plays on voice and on the difference between voices. As a visual art it also plays on what can be observed by the audience and on the gap between word and action, between what is happening on stage and the way that action is spoken of by the characters. Stimulated by this to check the evidence for consistency, audience members are actively invited to know. In comparison with that, arguments about incest which are primarily intellectual, and are not grounded in an appeal to the evidence of the senses, tend to run into the sand.

Even among therapists, work with 'incest survivors' – a term which obscures the fate of those, like Sappho Durrell, who do not survive abuse – is allowed to cover over the complexity of what is at stake when incest occurs. In 1998 two biographers published lives of Lawrence Durrell and both chose to side-step the matter of his relationship with his daughter Sappho, one with talk of 'false memory syndrome' and the other speaking of the need for 'proof'. These terms might be read as the language of scientific thinking, but when they are used as they are here, in biography, where telling the story of a life is the task at hand, they seem designed to mask an inability to think or to know once the topic of incest has been raised.

Literary critics appear tacitly to accept Durrell's own writings about incest as an extension of his enquiry into pleasure, but a nod in passing is all that these critics seem to manage, not as if they were hostile but as though they were shy. It is as though they were not certain how to go on, how to find language or even whether they hoped to be understood. 'Carrying within it the notion of intellectual as well as sexual incest and homosexuality which are predicates of this initial flashback, *The Avignon Quintet* thus returns us to the organic connection between sexual and intellectual intercourse, of which the *pogon*, the "word which does not exist", might be regarded as both "the compact and the seed"', writes Richard Pine, in his book *Lawrence Durrell: The Mindscape*. Such ambivalence may be no accident, for under Christianity pleasure has been linked with the forbidden. It is not always remembered – or perhaps we have forbidden ourselves to remember – that we were introduced to our capacity for pleasure as infants in the care of adults.

The intimacy between parents and babies or young children, an intimacy that is usually associated with mothers, is the earliest

form of pleasure that we know. Such pleasure is no luxury, as John Bowlby himself showed in the study of refugee children that he made soon after the war, but our natural medium or habitat, our way of connecting with the world and with ourselves. Without this closeness children fail to develop and become listless and sick. They lose interest in the world and their curiosity, which is another name for their intelligence, dies back. By his work, Bowlby showed that in the human blueprint pleasure and knowing, knowing and intimacy are linked. It is in the cradle of this intimacy as young children that we learn to know and become eager to explore the world.

The company of women

Like the critics who write about Lawrence Durrell, I received a training in the study of literature in the course of my education at the university. Noting how the impulse to explore seems to wither away in older, more educated minds at the mention of the word incest, and remembering the healthy curiosity of children, I propose to adopt a new tack and call on what I knew as a child. Looking back at myself at the time when I was small, before I was trained as a reader, I find myself thinking about fairy-tales and about the Emperor's new clothes. I wonder about the world that is seen through a child's eyes and I ask: what could I see for myself as a young child?

Streetsbrook Road stretches out in front of me. I can see all the way down to the roundabout as I speed along. I am in the pushchair. It's not the time when my mother snatched an afternoon away from the new baby to dash up to the cinema at Hall Green to watch Princess Elizabeth's wedding. I'm remembering before that, to the time when there was just me. Me and my mother and her friend, Auntie Floss, who went into Solihull to the shops. The air is bright with summer. The cotton of their flowered dresses swishes at my side as we hurry, always a bit on the late side, down to catch the bus, Floss looking back over her shoulder, ready to break into a trot, waving at the driver, to show we're doing our best to get to the stop. The conductor will help to fold the pushchair. On a good day. When he doesn't, Floss will give my mother a meaning look from under the rolled brim of her hat.

They are busy once we are in the shops. Smelling of talcum, lipsticked, they compare patterns, they test out the feel of cloth between their fingers. They weigh serving dishes in their hands. They glance at each other. They shrug their shoulders. Their voices, like a song, answer each other, rising and falling, at the back of my head. My attention is not on them. It does not need to be. It is free, to spy out among the legs and the corners of counters and the hems. Hems of petticoats under summer dresses. Peep-toed shoes. Red toenails. Sandals.

When I smell the special smell of coffee, I know we must be going into Pattisons. Even today there is a fragrance, a scent that lingers around some places where coffee is served that takes me back to those bright mornings. I will be let out of the pushchair to sit up at the table too, on a wooden chair with a smooth seat and a hooped back. The waitress brings another cushion. I know that I could fall out of the back if I don't sit up, so I remember to keep still. Now they sit down too, opening handbags, reaching for cigarettes, leaning forward to get a light. They are smiling and laughing, though they keep saying that they are tired. On the table is the little silver coffee pot and my mother pours from it into two cups. I just have milk in my cup. And I choose a long éclair, like a sausage with its stripe of shiny brown icing. When I have finished it, my mother wipes my face, looking carefully, not to miss any crumbs and not to hurt me. I look back up into her eyes and see only love.

There would come a day not so far in the future when she would take me shopping on her own, to buy white gloves, when she wanted to show me off to the nuns, a summer's day when the only white gloves that she could find to fit a four year old were woollen ones that made my fingers thick and stubby. Those nuns took over her care after her own mother died when she was fourteen. But that day of the white woollen gloves and all that it threatened, threatened for both of us, was not yet. In preparing me as a four year old to give up pleasure, though she did not know it, my mother was preparing me to give up my closeness with her too.

In the garden in the afternoon I play in the tin bath that has been filled with water. Am I taking a bath or am I playing? Perhaps there is no difference in that time. I know that once I had my hair washed under the kitchen tap, held up by a firm arm, a voice laughing because it was the wrong place for washing hair, while under me yawned the deep cavern of the white porcelain

sink. Afterwards I am folded into the light blue sundress, one of the two my mother's friend Auntie Mollie made for me. There are no sleeves, just a binding round the holes for the arms and a little tie at the waist to keep it done up. I am light in my clean dress, standing up straight in the garden.

Then there was the baby. He was called Michael. Do I remember saying, as she was changing him 'It's like a pink rosebud' and my mother's surprised concurrence? I think I do. Or did she remember it, with fondness? Which of us was which? Michael dribbled. He held his breath when he was angry, throwing both father and mother into panic. They blew into his protesting mouth.

Upstairs I have a set of photographs from that time. Michael and I are sitting side by side on the settee. The fawn settee in uncut moquette, with the ridges that scratched. It used to stand in the lounge, a room that my mother only used for special occasions. But we are not got up for any occasion. Michael's egg-like head looks off-duty. At any moment a dribble might escape. I have that almost jumble sale look of children after the war: hand knitting and pass-me-downs. My mother would vehemently deny that I wore anything that was not brand new in those days: let's say I looked like a child of that time, soon after the war, one who might have been photographed playing in the street.

At the sight of those photographs my mother would always exclaim: why didn't your father put you into something better? It seems a photographer – there were photographers going door to door in those hard days of the late forties – a photographer had chanced to come by one morning when our father was looking after us on his own. It hurt my father that people should have to go door to door, I know, 'to be reduced to doing that', as I heard him say. He would have opened the door to the other man and invited him in.

Seated on the settee, still today, baby Michael and myself at three years old beam up into their faces, indifferent to the camera's gaze. Across the room, out of shot, stands my father, still today. Only by taking the measure of the trust that is written in our lifted faces do I gauge my father's presence. Without this image on the slightly sticky, warping paper, I would not be able to reconstruct his presence or his children's joy and confidence in him. What happened, I ask myself today, what came between to cut me off from those feelings for my father and from the closeness with him that my brother and I once shared?

Ian Suttie and the tenderness taboo

Looking back, I am struck by how clear I was at three years old about what was going on around me, without the intermediary of words. It was not from words that I drew my information. But I am left with a question about loss. In my story I seem to stand on the brink of a precipice in time, a moment after which there followed separation, when the links with mother, father and brother were sheered away. The human world that I see before me, and on whose verge I myself stand at three years old, seems to be founded not on the taboo on incest but on forgetting and on putting an end to closeness and intimacy.

When I was sent off to school in the convent, handed over by my mother to the nuns, I learned to forget my father and how close we had been when I was small. Some might claim that in describing that cut-off I was speaking of an experience that was true only of my own situation and of the history of my own family, one which had no wider relevance beyond. Yet I myself would argue differently here. Instead I would say that my own early perception of catastrophic change spoke of an experience which is widely shared. The experience of division between fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and children does not in itself give rise to sexual abuse. But the evidence suggests, as I will go on to argue through my chosen examples, that there are crucial links between this forced separation and the compulsive behaviour of those who perform acts of abuse. It lays a foundation for such acts.

For the moment, though, let me begin by connecting my own vision as a child with the work of Ian Suttie, the early British psychoanalyst, who in his 1935 book *The Origins of Love and Hate* identifies an early moment of loss, one accompanied by shame and confusion, which in his view is not individual or accidental but systemic. It is a moment of damage that all children sustain as they are prepared to meet the conditions of life in the outside world, according to him. Suttie was writing about the care that children receive not from bad mothers but from mothers who seem like good ones, who are meeting the regular standards of good practice. According to his disturbing argument, even children who receive what is taken to be good care from their mothers, as I did myself, from mothers who are acting in good faith, are in that very process exposed to mutilation and loss.

The name of Suttie and his work have remained known principally to therapists, in part perhaps because Suttie himself died young, a few days before the publication of his only book. Nevertheless, his thought has been very widely influential, above all in the development of the study of relations between mother and child, which is now known as object relations theory. In a sense, it was on the back of the pioneering work of Ian Suttie, which had caused a stir when it was first published that John Bowlby based his own observations, twenty years on. Suttie was one of the first to conceptualize the notion of attachment and bonding as the foundation of emotional life and to write of the mourning and deprivation that follow when those connections are broken. It was such breaks, he believed, that were responsible for giving rise to emotions of hatred, rather than any inherent tendency to evil, such as the original sin of which Christianity speaks.

Suttie's work included a dimension that Bowlby's lacked. During the First World War, as a young psychiatrist, Suttie had been posted to the Middle East, where he worked with patients from many different cultures. Suttie himself was a Scot and he did most of his work in Britain, a country which is known abroad for its harshness to children, but he supported his own observations and arguments by references gathered from his wide reading across a range of disciplines. From the start, his understanding of human behaviour also combined the perspective of an anthropologist. When he came to argue that the relationship with the mother was the most important element in establishing identity and the inner life, Suttie drew attention to the fact that this statement was at odds with the patriarchal way of thinking, which considered the child's relationship with the father to be the one which determined who it was. He saw his own work as offering a conscious challenge to the ways of thinking that had been developed under the system which put fathers first.

It was the transition between the world of home and the outside world on which Suttie focused, arguing that across the world, to a greater or lesser extent, it was standard practice for mothers to withdraw tenderness from their young children, the tenderness in which they had been raised as babies, and to do so before they were ready for it. This is not a necessary separation of the kind that we are now often urged to aim for that Suttie was describing but something more like a forced surrender, one breaking the old link between parent and child. The break does not

arise spontaneously as part of human development but is brought about by mothers themselves, without realizing the implications of their action and in the belief that they are acting in the child's best interests. This practice, which he saw as universal, could only be explained, so he thought, by reference to the way that life was lived in the outside world, that is in terms of a mutilation imposed by way of adapting to that world outside.

The break which Suttie identifies as systemic comes while children are still at home, as they begin to be prepared for life in a world which is ordered differently, one in which tenderness or sensitivity to others, the awareness which has so far been the very breath of life to the child, are despised, especially tenderness between men. Out there in the public world, separation rather than intimacy rules, as he reminds his readers, noting how that world is organized around separations, a separation between women and men, between men and the world of women and children, and between generations, between parent and child.

Suttie asks his readers to look on these divisions with fresh eyes, not to view them as natural or inevitable but to recognize them as artificial, that is produced by culture, as the product of choices that have been made and as associated with giving a preferential value to men. Reflecting on Suttie's argument, it seems to me that as a young child I was already living in a place where these divisions were making themselves felt. I was still joined in feeling with my father and brother, yet in the company of my mother and her friends I already knew the separate lives that women make for themselves without the company of men. In that early moment of transition I had not yet experienced the trauma that he describes, the moment of loss when connection, inner and outer, is lost. To pinpoint that experience Suttie speaks in terms of the child's discovery that its own offers of tenderness, the reciprocity that was once so welcome, are now rejected as inadequate because something different is required. Seeing this cut-off operating world-wide, just as the taboo on incest is said to do, Suttie named it as the taboo on tenderness. Suttie argues that it is this taboo, rather than one against incest, which structures both the inner world of individuals and the outer one in which we live together in society.

Substituting tenderness as the behaviour that is forbidden throws our life as adults into a new light. The effect on the inner life of children of the violent early change which Suttie describes is

catastrophic. He writes of grief, for the loss of the original relationship with the mother, whose terms, as we know from Bowlby, are the only ones which respect the child's own nature, and of a rage which is nothing but appropriate. Suttie also names anxiety, humiliation and confusion, the feelings that today are associated with psychological trauma, though he himself does not use this term, writing at that time. Children are without power to resist when they are required to give up the only language of relationship that they know. The complexity of what they experience in that moment is beyond speech. Perhaps the most lasting impression is of shame, a shame that leads them to question their own instincts and perceptions on finding that they have made the wrong move, that they have as it were misunderstood the rules of the game. In Suttie's view, avoiding the memory of this early shame, banishing it from the mind, becomes the most powerful imperative of emotional life in adults.

The feelings around this 'violent change', as Suttie argues, are ones that we would like to leave behind because they are so painful, but like the fragments and shards from any traumatic experience they keep re-presenting themselves in later life. Most of us know what it is to writhe at the memory of social occasions where we feel we made fools of ourselves. In those moments of terrible embarrassment, of disproportionate shame at remembered mistakes, 'mistakes that we regret more than real crimes', as he points out, Suttie argues that it is the old early shame coming back to us and with a vengeance, as they say. Perhaps it is not vengeance that these feelings want, however, though it seems likely that they do underpin much popular enthusiasm for punishment, so much as recognition, to be taken back and reintegrated into our understanding of the past.

But according to Suttie, there is a huge resistance against going back, against revisiting the world that we once knew, now that the flaming sword of shame stands at its gate. In consequence that taboo on tenderness which is inflicted on us when we are very young continues to freeze our stance as adults. Suttie speaks of its manifestation in the adult as a refusal to participate in the emotion of others, in case painful longings are aroused, a refusal that may have the effect of cruelty and which he names as 'psychological blindness'. One of the most obvious manifestations of that blindness, I would argue myself, is our common blindness to the prevalence of incest and to the emotional conditions which

give rise to it. Under patriarchy, the social organization that puts a premium on forms of behaviour that it identifies with men, psychological blindness and the cruelty which that entails characterize what is understood as the grown-up way of being in the world.

With these arguments, Suttie consciously makes a break with Freud and with his model of the process by which the human psyche develops. Looking back, as John Bowlby would write, fifty years later the moment could be clearly seen as an epistemological break. Yet it is only today, in seeking to overcome our ignorance concerning incest and abuse, that the full explanatory power of the tenderness taboo as he named it can be realized. Remembering this concept and the dangers that follow on attributing special qualities to men, remembering too the child's early pleasure in those it loves, we can go forward to harmonize features of the debate around incest which up till now have remained discordant and contradictory.