How does it feel to be locked up? We have all experienced the minor irritations of confinement — housebound for two or three days with a bad cold; restricted, by some accident or other, to a week in bed or, perhaps, suffered a fortnight in hospital. Can we pursue some such incipient personal classification to its logical conclusion and discover for ourselves, simply by reflection, the inner world of its more extreme forms? Such a method would be misleading, less because of individual variety in our experience of constraint, than because of its inability to anticipate those qualitative changes and the more complete re-ordering of our subjective life effected in its 'advanced' stages, and because of the distortion, common to everyone, in the recollection of such experiences after they are restored to a normal condition of freedom.

We cannot rely either upon a method of direct, objective observation. That not only refuses to define confinement as an experience and avoids by this scientific tactic the personal struggle which is its real subject matter, it employs a whole variety of analytical 'frameworks' (political, economic, historical, psychological, anthropological, etc.) for its observation, defines its world from so many different angles, that it cannot even reconstruct the inescapable and simple totality which it constitutes for those it encloses. The basic fact of confinement, that is to say, is not an 'objective' fact at all, but a primitive experience which we must acknowledge as an immediate intuition.

Observation none the less is vital, and our personal experience is no less so, if we are to grasp the reality of confinement. It is conventional nowadays to regard personal interests, intuition and moral commitment as so many distorting influences upon the scientific method, to be either purged by suppression or exorcised by open admission and public debate, from our search for knowledge. The stunning negativity,
of confinement however demands a reversal of this judgement, and places understanding in the perspective of a personal encounter.

We can begin, therefore, directly with a quotation from one of George Jackson's prison letters contained in Soledad Brother. In it he admonishes his father for sending an indiscreet letter that referred to his son being 'bent on self-destruction'. This was seized upon by the prison authorities as 'proof' of Jackson's proneness to violence. In consequence the letter, Jackson adds matter-of-factly, 'caused me to to be put in a cell that has the lock welded closed'. That little phrase, 'welded closed', is not a piece of information upon which we reflect, it is simply a statement that makes us shudder.

And here is something from Volume Two of Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago; he is describing the first Soviet labour camp, on Solovetsky Island in 1918:

And here is how they kept the prisoners in the punishment cells: poles the thickness of an arm were set from wall to wall and prisoners were ordered to sit on these poles all day . . . The height of the poles was set so that one's feet could not reach the ground. And it was not easy to keep balance. In fact, the prisoner spent the entire day trying to maintain his perch.

This response, at once moral and physical, addresses itself to the universal character of confinement. A response, localised in the viscera, which is aroused by the appearance of confinement in all its forms; in the personal and particular, in its vast historical presence, and in the invented plight of its imagined victims.

The welded lock and the poles take confinement to an extreme. They perfectly isolate the pure principle of confinement from the encumbrance of utility or rationality. They are imposed as punishments to which the prisoner is forced to submit because he has not already submitted to the pitiful life allowed him in prison or labour camp. This refusal is met by releasing upon him the full force of confinement. It is the purity, rather than the harshness of this alien condition to which our moral nausea is a response.

George Jackson was already restricted to a solitary cell for twenty-three-and-a-half hours of every twenty-four; the prisoners on Solovetsky Island were