2 The Appearance of Nothing

Many writers have represented confinement in a series of disturbing reversals. In a general sense this can be understood as an inversion in the 'normal' relationship we assume obtains between 'thought' and 'experience'. In confinement we come to experience the world directly in a manner we reserve more normally for reflective thought alone. Its space is as perfectly abstract as its time, and the bodies of its victims are aspects only of its universal substance.

SPACE

A French poet, Henri Michaux, puts the matter for us very well; he writes, 'Space, but you cannot even conceive the horrible inside-outside that real space is'.

The difficulty is a very general one, but no more readily solved because of that. While we are trying to describe the manner in which confinement constructs its world, we do not even know the space and time of our own everyday lives. Certainly our personal experience of space is distinct from our concept of space; just as the world of confinement is hardly hinted at by the concepts through which we only talk about it.

If asked about space we do not find it problematic. We can answer readily enough that space is extension; pure extension, symmetrical and limitless. Its difficulty, as a concept, has to do only with this boundless quality, which we intuitively demand of it, despite finding in it an equally impossible idea. Space itself does not appear interesting; it is the objects that fill it out that attract our attention.

We think of objects rather than the space that we deduce must be there to contain and separate them. Space is reduced, usually, to the emptiness among our points of attention, which, however narrowed, never reaches a continuous solid substance underlying
such appearances. We have no organ of space perception its apprehension is a higher-order intellectual function, absent from the first innocence of our sensory awakening. Space remains necessary for us because of the plentitude of subjects which we see and touch, everything which we can differentiate and which our life forces upon our attention.

We do not, however, experience space in this way, not in the real world. The pure, extended quality of space, its symmetry, boundless and formless qualities are all denied by the human agent that perceives and organises such perfect emptiness through a variety of arbitrary devices. Distinctions of left and right, forward and back, gradations of nearness and farness all bear the mark of human ingenuity and carry a meaning, which is absent in the mathematician's or logician's category. This introduction of qualitative distinctions into what is held, abstractly as an ideal continuum could readily lead us into a complex ethnography. It is not, however, necessary to be seduced by such formal complexity. To describe the space of confinement it is sufficient to invert only one of its normal human qualities; that quality which has been illuminated by Bachelard in his intriguing and original book, The Poetics of Space.

Bachelard describes what he terms intimate, or, 'eulogised space'. His interest lies in the quality of space that is seized upon and defended by the imagination. This quality, he contends, does not adhere to any empirical distinctions that can be detected in spatial categories, but lies wholly within our own subjective judgment. The image of such 'eulogised space', the forms in which such images appear and the affective relationships through which we recognise them, are all qualities of the subjective life which flow into the exterior topography and transform it.

In talking of the space we love, the space capable of receiving our impressions and throwing them back to be stored as memories, as nostalgia, Bachelard notes that the 'house holds a privileged position'. The house remains 'our corner of the world' and 'all really inhabited space', he assures us, 'bears the essence of the notion of home'. The house is the place made safe by and for our reveries and dreams. Such transformation of a place into a home operates wherever man settles himself, as a natural psychological extension of his presence; his imagination 'works in this direction', he assures