4 The End of the World

Confinement has so far been described as if it were a consequence of being locked-up; an experience predicated upon physical constraint in one form or another. Confinement, it is true, does follow necessarily upon such physical measures. The captive subjected to restraint cannot, in the end, resist its advances. But there is no simple chain of causation here. Confinement is a metamorphosis into another, alien, world which should not be mistaken for its visible, varied appearance as a prison, a hospital, a labour camp or an asylum. Once on the inside the transformation is total. Confinement's inverted repetition constitutes a new experience and brings into existence within its victims a new negative subjectivity.

There is no necessity, in fact, in finding confinement in one place rather than another. The temptation is always to provide confinement with an empirical substance that, more properly speaking, does not belong to it – it after all is nothing. Succumbing to the temptation leads only to semi-rational arguments and excuses; in short to an 'aesthetic' theory of confinement that avoids its strenuous, committed rejection. As an experience, however, confinement does not depend simply upon the presence of locked doors, chains, bars and straitjackets. We can find confinement also among those still 'at liberty', though they are often enough locked-up when this is discovered.

It is a commonplace (and like most truisms it is never taken seriously) to say that the confined are driven mad by being enclosed. But it might equally be claimed that the mad suffer from confinement, whether or not they are physically constrained. There is no fundamental difference, in other words (from the viewpoint of the subject), between the confined self and the self-confined self. The experience of confinement is everywhere the same – that is to say the manner in which they experience their world constitutes a common language – and is only loosely related to those physical antecedents that fill up its emptiness, for us, with the rationality of a cause.

The correspondence between madness and confinement
has been made by many of the authors whose testimony has already been quoted. Dostoevsky, for example, explicitly represents confinement as a species of madness. His descriptions of some of his fellow-prisoners, indeed, read like extracts from the textbook cases of the following generation's academic psychiatry.

This gives to The House of the Dead the appearance, at first, of somewhat unsympathetic and harsh judgments. He claims many of those who shared his prison lacked any moral sense. They showed 'not the least sign of shame or repentence', they lacked, apparently, any redeeming characteristics. 'Intrigues, calumny, scandal of all kinds, envy and hatred reigned above all else', he tells us. Later judgments as he became more involved with particular characters and 'causes' are less sweeping and condemnatory. He becomes amazed, for example, at the diligence and calculative skill displayed by some prisoners in the accumulation of small sums of money (we are back in the days when such things were still possible). He was even more surprised by the manner in which such sums were spent; in the purchase of fancy clothes or in immediate debauchery (even that was still possible). Dostoevsky remarks that 'Their pleasure in feeling themselves well dressed amounted to childishness; indeed in many things convicts are only children'. This theme of childishness recurs frequently throughout his book, recurs, in fact, throughout confinement. Old people, for example, once they have been 'institutionalised' become 'merely' children. And Gregor Samsa was thrust back into childhood, before being driven finally beyond childhood into non-existence. Psychiatrists have even seized upon the phenomenon and dignified it as a 'theory' of regression. Dostoevsky notices too his fellow convicts' unpredictability — another sign of their 'madness'. Many prisoners appeared perfectly calm and quiescent, but 'Suddenly one prisoner to the astonishment of his superiors becomes mutinous, plays the very devil, and even ventures upon some capital crime.' Such outbursts, Dostoevsky regards as hardly surprising;

it is simply the convulsive manifestations of his personality, an instinctive melancholia, an uncontrollable desire for self-assertion which obscures his reason. It is a sort of epileptic fit, a spasm. Even so must a man who is buried alive and suddenly wakes up strike against the lid of his coffin. He tries to rise, to push it from him, though reason must convince him that his efforts are useless.