Content warning for depression and suicidal ideation

This essay will examine 'Dear Esther' by The Chinese Room, 'The Enormous Space' by J.G. Ballard, 'Nightwalking' by Matthew Beaumont, and the 'Silent Hill' series by Konami.

I have lived as a shut-in – to greater and lesser degrees – for almost all of my adult life. An illness struck me at school, and it did not leave. Sitting for weeks (and then months) in the darkness of my bedroom, I found I had come to like it. I quietly dropped out, and have since sought to live alone in a series of one-bedroom flats, working solitary night-time jobs. This has been my life for a decade.

Depression, panic, suicide attempts; a machine-gun fire of nervous tics, mutterings, murmurs and muscle spasms; torn and mismatched clothes, no eye-contact; night buses, no friends. The results of my experiment in isolation have been wholly unsurprising and unambiguously unhealthy. Textbook case. What needs to be done next is clear. I am not well, and I need to make myself better.

In The Chinese Room's *Dear Esther*, Esther is dead, and your character is grieving. You are alone, marooned on an island in Scotland's Outer Hebrides. You walk blearily across the windswept landscape, from a sickly and fragile dusk into the small-hour gloom of the morning. The path you take is winding and circuitous and seemingly without object. Over time, you intuit you have been stranded a while. You walk under vast displays of cliff-side graffiti, fevered writings stretched across whole swathes of the coast. You start, slowly, to ascend the island's peak, where – teetering, and seething in the wind – a grey metal tower blinks red. Talking wildly to yourself, climbing rung by rung, the purpose of your walk pulls rapidly into focus.

I revisited *Dear Esther* late last summer, in the ruins of an abortive relationship. My PC could not run the game, so I sought out YouTube walkthroughs on my phone. The format worked well. Buried under a duvet, I spent days watching the game's death-march play out on loop; there was enough variation in the different playthroughs to maintain my hazy, lizard-brain stimulation. When evening came and forced me to leave my bedroom, I would swaddle myself deep within jumpers and coats. Shuttling to work on the night-bus, I cocooned myself, maintaining unbroken my private communion with the screen.

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Dear Esther's fevered tone – and much else besides – seems deliberately evocative of the fiction of J.G. Ballard. Car wrecks and cryptic prose; radio towers emitting submerged and spluttering signals; paranoiacs wilfully stranded on uninhabitable islands: The Chinese Room borrows heavily from Ballard's language of trauma.

Ballard's story *The Enormous Space* (an early teenage favourite) has obvious parallels with *Dear Esther*. Its middle-aged narrator has been abandoned by his wife, pushing him into a desolate bachelorhood. Reeling from the humiliation, he reflects that:

> "I could change the course of my life by a single action. To shut out the world, and solve all my difficulties at a stroke, I had the simplest of weapons – my own front door."

He makes a retreat that is total: he cuts off his phone, burns all his letters, resolves to never again leave his house. By accelerating his isolation, he can thereby take ownership of it. His wife has not rejected him; he has rejected the world.

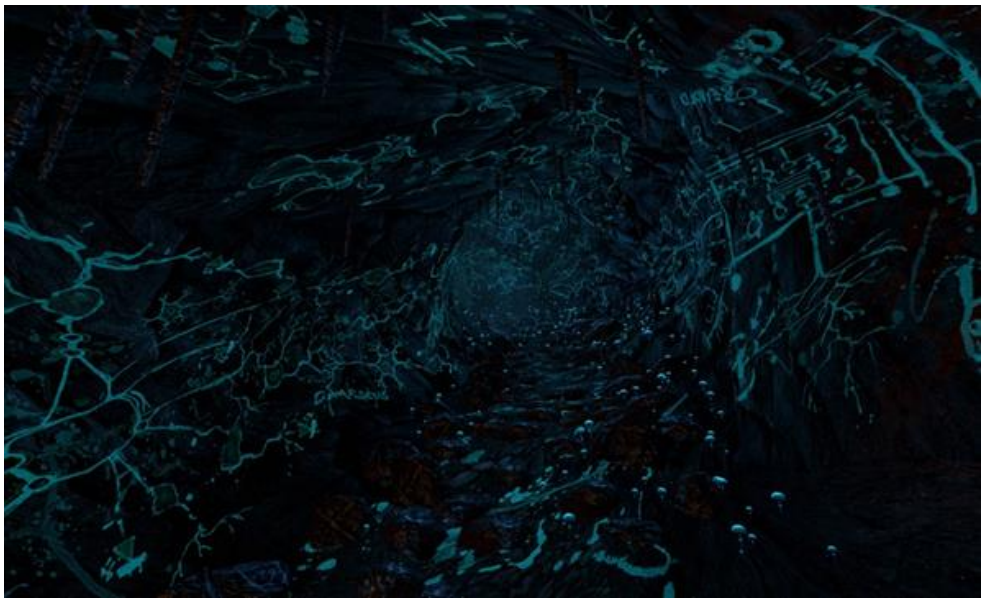
Dear Esther's narrator has suffered a greater loss than Ballard's; this should not blind us to the fact that the *extremity* of his isolation has been similarly willed…

In both *The Enormous Space* and in *Dear Esther*, the protagonists' pain makes them radically solipsistic. Inner life and outer landscape become hopelessly blurred. Esther's narrator talks of giving birth to the Hebridean island, of its shoreline and stone as an extension of his flesh. In 'Home', the BBC adaptation of *The Enormous Space*, the house 'responds' to the narrator's presence, the rooms seeming "larger and less confined, as if they too have found freedom". The characters, turned terminally inward, inhabit a world they can only understand as extensions of their obsessions, selves and wounds.

These characters possess obviously tenuous grasps on reality. The streams-of-consciousness of Ballard, the cliff-side etchings of *Esther*'s narrator: each is littered with chemical compounds, allusions to theology, the half-understood junk-jargon of twentieth century science. For the narrator of *The Enormous Space*'s, food is an extravagance: the elements of "time and space" are enough to sustain him. He boastfully claims that his "senses [are] tuned to all the wave-lengths of the invisible". Similarly, *Esther*'s narrator believes that he:

> "must […] venture even deeper into the veins of the island, where the signals are blocked altogether. Only then will I understand them, when I stand on the summit and they flow into me, uncorrupted."

Spun off their axes by sudden and senseless trauma, these characters are inevitably disoriented in their attempts to rediscover (and reconstruct) reality. They are attempting to find meaning in meaningless, shattering loss.



Everyday common-sense structures of thinking, of feeling, of relating to others and to the world: these things are neither natural, nor inevitable. They are the result of socialisation. Our sociality as a species is a hard-won achievement. We must reinforce it daily, like rocks submitting themselves to be smoothed down by the force of the sea.

You can choose not to do this work.

I was struck last summer by Mark Fisher's observation that what distinguishes depression from sadness are the *ontological* claims that depression makes. One suffers sadness knowing that it will end; one suffers depression certain that it will never end, that if it ends it will only be an illusion, that one's depression is a raw and unfiltered glimpse into the bleakness of the world *as it really is*. Depression should be understood first and foremost, he argues, as an attack on one's sense of reality. It seemed to me that the effects of long-term isolation were similarly corrosive.

The neuroticism and distorted thinking and stunted sociality that isolation births: these are not experienced simply as a series of temporary impairments to one's functioning. Emerging from isolation is not like taking off a blindfold, blinking for a moment, and re-emerging into the world you knew (and knew was there all along). That world has gone, and you have gone too. The blindfold has fused with your skin.

Dear Esther and Ballard do diverge in a crucial place. Ballard's dedication to capturing the language of mental illness suggests he thinks there are perspectives worth salvaging from within its rubble. His narration, however, is usually marked by a stark and utilitarian prose. While his protagonists are given free reign to spout their bizarre speculations, Ballard's framing of them retains a careful ambiguity. Is he taking these speculations seriously, or is this dry ironic humour? The reader is never quite sure how she is supposed to respond.

In *Dear Esther*, the narrator alludes to pills, painkillers and alcohol, his ramblings progressively deteriorating; towards the latter stages of the game, he audibly struggles to remain conscious. His similes and metaphors are too flowery to inspire the same tentative credulity that Ballard's jagged

and jarring prose does. The game, then, is clear in its diagnosis: this man is grieving; his thoughts are irredeemably mad.

What is striking is that the cold clarity of this diagnosis does not reach the game's tone. Tonally it is borderline histrionic, full-throatedly emotive. *Dear Esther*'s narrator is mad; the game wants us to experience this madness as beautiful.

Nowhere is this clearer than in your ascent to the island's peak. The candle-lit calm of the bay is now dizzyingly far below, obscured visually and aurally by a howling wind; the strings sway queasily, piano keys hammering a deliciously delirial atonal dirge. In the depths of the narrator's suffering, you begin to detect a strange note of pleasure. His clipped, plummy, Radio 4 accent never misses a beat. As his voice surges and strains luxuriantly, his lucidity crumbling exquisitely away, he never wavers in exhibiting a self-consciously *literary* madness.

The reader of Ballard is caught in an uneasy suspension: half seduced by Ballard's characters, their warped outlooks and their self-destructive spirals; half guarded against them. The player of *Dear Esther* is carried along *rapturously*. The game identifies and unrestrainedly capitalises upon the pleasures to be found in confected suffering.

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I made my first suicide attempt in Glasgow. I had lived there for eight months, bunkered down in a bedsit: alone, unemployed, speaking to almost no-one. I felt a sense of claustrophobic, omnipresent judgement whenever I left my front door. I experienced the outside world only as an extension and confirmation of my panicked mind.

I had moved there on a whim. Finding a night-class in the city, I was making a last-chance attempt to qualify for university, and re-join the generation I'd left behind years before. I meant to outrun my certainty that I had *no future*: that I'd withdrawn terminally inwards, and was trapped in my head; that I was nothing, at my core, and would be forever.

With no friendships to anchor me to a sense of myself or the world, I felt myself cut adrift, untethered, laid open and exposed.

Sat up at night alone, studying philosophy with a vulnerable credulity, I came to decide that I'd accumulated some kind of *cosmic debt*. To spend money, to pay tax, to vote, to stay alive – to be in any way enmeshed into the fabric of the world – was to be personally responsible for all the suffering of your species. I was unforgivably complicit in the torture of children, the bombing of far-off lands, all the banal dissatisfactions that the world would ever produce: the sufferings of the all soon-to-be-born and the yet-to-be. I lived my life by this.

Walking slowly through the city, swallowing pills at every other park bench I passed, I couldn't seem to shake off a kind of giddy excitement. Nor could I shake, as I moved through the dark, a dim awareness of the *dramatic weight* of my actions – the marked *theatricality* of this solemn procession.

My brother and my cousin both suffer psychosis. They are gripped by paranoid ideas that terrify them, convictions they feel no hesitancy in proclaiming to be true. When the nurse asked me why I had overdosed, I lied. I knew how flimsy my reasoning would look. I would have been far too *embarrassed* to have him – or myself – examine my thinking too closely.

> *"Depression, panic, suicide attempts; a machine-gun-fire of nervous tics, mutterings, murmurs and muscle spasms; torn and mismatched clothes, no eye-contact, night buses, no friends. This has been my life for a decade."*

Every item on this list, the composite picture that they present of me: all of it is painful, humiliating, and true.

I can't help but notice, though, that in writing out that list I took careful, almost affectionate care.

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It is unfair to single out *Dear Esther* as a lone pedlar in aestheticized suffering. The aesthetics of poverty, of a detachment from the bonds of all social life – these have long held a fascination for the comfortable classes. In his book *Nightwalking*, Matthew Beaumont charts the shifts in London's early modern nightlife. Under a curfew that lasted centuries, walking through London after dark was made criminal. A 'night-walker', then, was invariably homeless and hopeless, a person suffering total exclusion from all safety or comfort. With the introduction of street lighting (in only the most affluent areas) came the rise of a middle-class nightlife. In the process the curfew was de-facto eliminated, but a residual stigma – a sense of night-walking's deviancy and subversion – still lingered.

The Grub Street poets and Romantic writers of the eighteenth century came to occupy this space. They could walk the midnight streets at their leisure, and though each had homes and careers to return to, they could enjoy the countercultural frisson of feeling adrift from society. Some – like Wordsworth, William Blake – walked the streets to foster a sense of commonality with the poor. Some, like Thomas De Quincy, walked among the homeless poor to foster self-pity: to relish and indulge in their *own* feelings of marginality and hardship.

The writer William Pattison is a strange case. Beaumont pauses in the book to dwell on him – not because his work had much merit, but because of the indeterminate position that Pattison occupied. His father's landlord arranged for him to be sent to school, and he later attended Cambridge. But instead of graduating, in his final year he ran off to London, in pursuit of his dream of writing poetry.

During his childhood he would retreat to caverns and caves, and would regularly stay the night. He luxuriated in what he called their "sadly-pleasing melancholy". In London as an adult, he slept on park benches. He would stare up at the starless sky, writing rather melodramatic poetry about the bleakness of it all. It all seemed a little artificial.

Play-acted.

What Pattison came to discover, is that it is possible to make real the *spectacle* of your own suffering. You can cultivate and relish in a dramatic show of pain, and then find that this 'artifice' now refuses to leave you. You do not have control of what you've helped into being. Your fantasies of existential suffering and heroic isolation can become real, overwhelm, pull you under and consume you. He died homeless and hungry, aged twenty one years old.

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I'm doing okay, by the way. I thought that I ought to interrupt this to say that, to stop this sounding like a suicide note. That's not what this is.

I've become increasingly aware of the role that *desire* has played in determining the course of my life. Neither my mental health nor my isolation have been uncomplicatedly *imposed* on me from somewhere outside. Nor can I be said to have suffered my distorted thought patterns unwillingly. I have long been at least somewhat aware of my stunted thoughts *as* stunted, embarrassingly and obviously illogical.

At different stages of this, and to very different degrees, I have been complicit. I let fantasies in.

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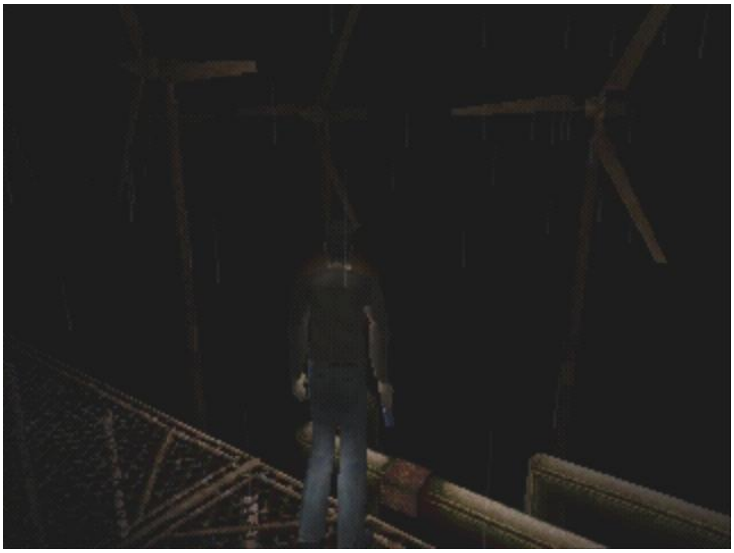
I played through the *Silent Hill* series in those first months I stayed home from school. The games held me with an intensity that nothing ever had.

Silent Hill is a ghost town you explore at your leisure. Suddenly and strangely emptied of all people, you're in a holiday resort that has gone quickly to seed. I was enthralled by its lonely warrens of rain-soaked alleys and blotchy concrete, fog bleaching and saturating everything it touched. I was fascinated by a crumbling architecture abandoned, buckling and warping and twisting in on itself, eroded and corroded down to skeletal wire. I loved the terrible stillness of its shopping mall, only just closed (voices fading, and body-heat cooling): the tiles and storefronts and smiling mascots now robbed of all possible meaning or purpose. It was an alien landscape, bracing itself for impact against a suddenly dead night air.

Silent Hill posited that a more beautiful landscape lies dormant within our architecture. Our offices, hospitals, schools – our built environments are grimly functional. They are subsumed in a grinding frenzy of work and convalescence, drowned out by stresses that are unrelenting and unremarkable, quotidian and crushing. At night, and on your own, these places are different.

Lying obsolete and barren, staring out at the dark: the series showed me how wonderfully alien the most banal of buildings can be, how glinting and strange. And how peaceful, too: how radically different they are when freed from the logics and rhythms of everyday life. How haunted and mournful and magnificent.

But only when you're alone.



The central horror of *Silent Hill* is also its central promise. You are in darkness, and you are alone. The town is a terrible trap, but it is also a solipsist's dream. This world is not one that you have to share. It is yours.

The solipsistic logic of *Silent Hill* is merely an acceleration of the logic underlying almost all games, all pulp fictions. Games are designed and are programmed around *me*. They place me at the centre of their worlds, and work to construct a running façade of forest and desert and cityscape, constructed only to be visible from my point of view. They disappear behind me when I choose to turn my back.

Silent Hill and *Dear Esther* are no different in their priorities, and yet they feign hostility. I am not welcome here, they brag. This offers me a seductive fantasy. I can play as a lone man, walking on into a cold and uninhabitably hostile night, suffering heroically. Of course, what I am actually doing is embracing my deepest wish: to be cocooned by a world that accommodates only me; to never be confronted by the anxieties of a competing gaze or desire or will; to never again contend with anything that intrudes upon the pathological interests of my self.

This, it seems, is what I have come to want. I have to contend with this.

I want to be left alone, undisturbed, and at the centre of the screen.

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