

# Neuro-stories

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Marilynne Robinson

ABSENCE OF MIND  
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Marilynne Robinson is one of America's least imposing religious voices. In *Gilead* and *Home*, her stunning pair of novels set in 1950s Iowa, she avoids any kind of preaching in favour of delicately eavesdropping on the spiritual and domestic travails of her characters. For this reason, Robinson's non-fiction can risk sounding like sermons riding on the heels of her hymns. In her books *Mother Country: Britain, the welfare state, and nuclear pollution* (1989) and *The Death of Adam: Essays on modern thought* (1998), she has railed against everything from the sins of nuclear reprocessing to the pieties of Darwinism. Now, in *Absence of Mind*, Robinson tries to reclaim the mysteries of human consciousness from scientists who she fears are too eager to reduce the mind to a machine.

The scientists in question are a group of "self-declared rationalists", who believe the physical world exhaustively describes reality. Despite their differences, scientists such as Steven Pinker, E. O. Wilson and Daniel Dennett agree that consciousness is a faulty instrument designed for human survival and that metaphysics has no place in the mind. Their view would not worry Robinson if it were not so readily adopted by the culture at large. She recounts that, when she read a passage of Emerson's "American Scholar" to her students at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the very notion of meaningful introspection was met with blank stares. "The self is no

longer assumed to be a thing to be approached with optimism, or to be trusted to see anything truly", she laments. Instead, it has been simplified as a series of genetic expressions or evolutionarily conditioned behaviours. "We are organisms, not angels," Pinker writes, "and our brains are organs, not pipelines to the truth."

For Robinson, the first problem with Pinker's claim is its sheer hubris. She argues that the dubious evidence he marshals behind his arguments betrays "a nostalgia for the lost certitudes of positivism". This kind of groping for definitive answers Robinson labels "parascience", which is distinguished from genuine science by its unwillingness to revise or correct itself. Still, Pinker's reductionism probably owes less to the fact that parascience grew out of a conflict with religion, as Robinson suggests, than that scientific fields commonly cling to unified theories in their adolescence – cognitive science today no less than chemistry in the age of Lavoisier. Moreover, philosophers of mind are not nearly as bad at policing themselves as Robinson makes them seem. Richard Lewontin and

Jerry Fodor, among others, have taken Pinker to task for neglecting the important role of culture and other variables in shaping the human mind.

The main flaw in Robinson's argument is that she mistakes the implications of what it means to say that the mind was not designed for self-discovery. When E. O. Wilson tells us "the brain is a machine assembled not to understand itself, but to survive", he does not deliver a death blow to consciousness's confidence in itself. The fact that the mind has an inbuilt interest in survival – that it does not, for instance, recall physical pain with any degree of accuracy – is not something we have to deny for the sake of our subjectivity, as Robinson believes. Regardless of what our minds are allegedly programmed to do – or whatever evolutionary ends they may serve – we can still feel exalted by what we choose to devote them to – whether it be art, religion, or metaphysical speculation. Nevertheless, Robinson is right to worry if Wilson and Pinker's understanding of the mind affects the way we tell stories. The current craze for "neuro-novels", which try to account for the latest brain research in describing characters' consciousnesses, has coincided with a number of popular books by neuroscientists explaining how novelists such as Proust understood aspects of the brain before they did. Such bridges between the two cultures ought to be welcomed, but not at the expense of treating novels as case studies for neuroscience instead of as stand-alone guides to subjective experience.

*Absence of Mind* ends with a spiteful chapter on Sigmund Freud. Here Robinson engages in just the sort of reductiveness her book tries elsewhere to upend. For Robinson, who clearly still resents being force-fed Freud as a college student in the 1960s, the father of psychoanalysis is the parascientist par excellence. Her Freud is constantly trying to drag culture down to the level of sex and to get men and women to think of themselves as the sum of their unacknowledged urges. She selectively quotes from his letters to Jung and his minor essays, making him out to be a secularist scourge who used psychoanalysis as a prop against the racist politics he faced in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna (a point once made more eloquently by Carl Schorske).

There is no point in defending Freud's writings on religion from Robinson's attack. His claim that religious belief originated in an infantile wish was not only coarse but, as Jonathan Lear has argued, it fails to give religious people a good reason to give up their illusion (after all, maybe God purposely designed religion to be an infantile wish-fulfilment). But there is another, more humane side of Freud that Robinson refuses to acknowledge. This is the Freud who tried to break free of the positivist straitjacket and revised his theories right up until his death, who believed psychoanalysis was "a cure through love", and who reintroduced Plato's idea of the tripartite soul back into modernity. Robinson says she prefers the old Cartesian myth of a man thinking pure thoughts alone in his room to the Freudian's struggle with her id, ego and superego. And yet it is Freud who is closer to many of the nineteenth-century novelists that she holds dear, who dramatized the difficulties of learning to be true to oneself and the world. As such he might have better served as Marilynne Robinson's ally instead of yet another enemy.

## Daily Help

You seem so small  
now you are old  
and I am not a child.  
Your hair is yellow-white,  
your eyes have paled

to the colour of the sea  
on summer evenings  
and the hands  
that cleaned our house for years  
are puffed and painful.

You don't need us now –  
your children care for you;  
their grandchildren  
demand your company  
as eagerly as we did.

Yet that huge photograph  
of us remains in place.  
And when I visit you  
you say, "I can't help  
loving you, you know."

Others taught us to be prudent,  
thrifty, fold our serviettes –  
all those important lessons.  
We hug. Tears disarrange  
my manners as I leave.

WENDY COPE