with anything and everything so that the projects arising from the interaction are discovered. Shirk has a problem with quality, however. Often he argues as if it were a simple matter to decide when one cultural artefact is better than another, as in his assessment of Gutenberg’s revolution, where he suggests that “abundance brings a rapid fall in average quality, but over time experimentation pays off, diversity expands the range of the possible, and the best work becomes better than what went before” — which seems close to asserting that the printing press allowed Shakespeare to improve on Chaucer. Elsewhere, he suggests that the public communication social media allows is intrinsically valuable “because there is no way to filter for quality in advance: the definition of quality becomes more variable, from one community to the next” — which seems unambiguously comforting with the notion that judgements made by groups of amateurs are no judgements at all.

Clear thinking about quality is vital not only to literary enthusiasts but also to those media companies struggling with the revolution Shirk proclaims. If publishing has only been taken seriously because it used to be costly and difficult, as he suggests, then as the act of publishing becomes cheaper and cheaper, endlessly, publishers face a grim future. But if the value in publication always consisted less in managing paper and more in making valuable judgements about what deserves attention, then the removal of the bottleneck which the printing press provides does not necessarily condemn them to oblivion. If you can indeed identify when one book is better than another, then those who can write them, or find them, will surely be able to turn that expertise into hard cash, printing press or no — though it is still unclear how mainstream media organisations can pull off this vital trick.

For Shirk the important step is not that of achieving excellence, but of getting off the couch at all, an attitude shaped by his discovery that people wanted to design their own websites, even if they didn’t measure up to the sites designed by professionals. The creative input in making a blog — an immensely popular combination of cute picture and witty caption — is enough to bridge the gap between “doing nothing and doing something”, the vital first step on the spectrum from mediocrity to good, which can be climbed bit by bit. There is no doubt in Shirk’s mind about the direction of travel. While he allows that the internet can be used for nefarious as well as inspirational purposes, his examples are almost uniformly positive. Perhaps the surprising fact that massive aggregations of small contributions can be turned into things of lasting value — that the software which allows me to write this piece was designed for free by strangers — demands an explanation, but there is no guarantee that it will. The procession of politically engaged teenagers, volunteer rubbish collectors and free software designers in Cognitive Surplus leaves unremarked the ballads, con-men and jihadi for whom the social web represents an equal and opposite opportunity. If Clay Shirky is right that new media allow people to “behave in increasingly generous, public and social ways”, then surely the realisation that mean, secretive and anti-social behaviour is just as viable an option should give us pause for thought when we suggest we should unleash “As Much Chaos As We Can Stand”.

Marilynn Robinson is one of America’s least imposing religious writers. 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 rival sounding like sermons riding on the heels of her hymns. In her books Mother Country, Britain, the welfare state, and nuclear pollution (1989) and, on modern thought (1998), she has railed against everything from the sins of nuclear reprocessing to the perils of Darwinism. Now, in Absence of Mind, Robinson tries to reclaim the mysteries of human consciousness from scientists who fear they are too eager to reduce the mind to a machine. The scientists in question are a group of “self-declared realists” who, based on 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 falsifiable 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 recognises 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 betray “a nostalgia for the lost certainties of positivism.” This kind of proping for definitive answers Robinson labels “parasience”, 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 parasience 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 nearly as bad at policing themselves as Robinson makes them seem. Richard Lewontin and Jerry Fodor, among others, have taken Pinker to task for mistaking the value 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 something we have to deal with the success 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 exhauled 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. “People have always forgotten the brain’s slumber,” one professor remarks, “but it’s a hard to viminate now. We have understood aspects of the brain before this. Such bridges between the two cultures ought to be welcomed, but not at the expense of treating novels as case studies for neuro-science instead of as stand-alone guides to subjective experience.”

Absence of Mind ends with a delightful 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 at school, the father of psychoanalysis is the parapsychist par excellence. Her Freud is constantly trying to drag science down to the level of the lowly, to get men and women to think of themselves as the sum of their unknown and fasting urges. She, alongside him, and his minor essays, making him into a realist who was trained psychoanalysis as a far as the racist politics of his fin-de-sicle 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 infantilism was not only correct 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-fulfillment). 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 reinvented 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 Freud’s struggle with his id, ego and superego. And yet it is Freud who is closer to many of the nine-teenth-century novelists that she holds dear, who dramatized the difficulties of learning to be true to oneself and the world. As much as he may be better served as Marilynn Robinson’s ally instead of yet another enemy.

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