

Arts Forum 1996

The third annual UNB Arts Forum, an event designed to inform the university and the general public about current research in the Faculty of Arts, took place on the evening of Thursday March 21. The four speakers were Dr. Diana Austin (Department of English), Dr. Beverly Lemire (Department of History), Dr. Robert Larmer (Department of Philosophy) and Dr. Nancy Nason-Clark (Department of Sociology). The audience included students in English 3110 (Expository Writing), whose assignment for the week was to write up the talks they heard. A selection from their articles follows. Dr. Mary Rimmer, who teaches English 3110, organized the Forum and acted as editor for her students.

Physics, Philosophy and Pool



Hume believes miracles defy the laws of nature

At the Arts Forum Professor Robert Larmer took on David Hume's famous argument against miracles. Hume defines a miracle as involving a violation of the laws of nature. He then poses the question of whether it is more likely that the laws of nature suffer violation or that the testimonial evidence for miracles is mistaken. His answer is that there is always more evidence for the laws of nature than there is for miracles and hence that belief in miracles can never be justified on the basis of testimonial evidence.

To dispute this view, Larmer suggested that a miracle need not involve a violation of the laws of nature but rather the creation of the "stuff" (i.e. mass/energy), to which the laws apply. This being the case, there is no conflict between the evidence taken to establish the laws of nature and the testimonial

evidence supporting belief in miracles, and hence no reason to dismiss a priori the possibility of testimonial evidence being strong enough to establish a rational belief in miracles.

To illustrate, Larmer asked the audience to imagine a billiard table, where a physicist is just about to make a shot. On the basis of the laws of motion and the initial position of the balls, the physicist can predict what will occur. Imagine, however, that just as she makes the shot someone introduces another ball onto the table. What would otherwise have taken place is changed, but at no time were the laws of motion suspended or broken. Similarly, if God creates more of the "stuff" of nature He changes what would otherwise occur without breaking any of the laws of

nature. Thus, for example, the Immaculate Conception might be conceived as the creation of a fertilized egg in the Virgin Mary's womb.

To the objection that the creation of mass/energy would involve the violation of at least one law of nature, namely the First Law of Thermodynamics, Larmer replied that we must distinguish between two commonly used versions of the law. These are (1) "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed," and (2) "In an isolated system energy is conserved." Larmer argued that, although these two versions are used interchangeably, they are not logically equivalent, inasmuch as the truth of (1) implies the truth of (2), but not vice-versa. He went on to argue that the experimental science taken to establish the law bears directly on the second form, but not on the first. Significantly, a miracle need not be taken as violating the second form of the law, since the theist denies not that energy is conserved in an isolated system, but that the universe is an isolated system in the sense of suffering no interventions by God. Put a little differently, the first law of thermodynamics tells us only that the amount of energy in the universe will be conserved if the universe is an isolated system; not whether in fact the universe is an isolated system.

Larmer's talk offered an interesting view of physics, philosophy, pool and logic. He ended by noting that scientists' views on philosophical and theological issues need to be scrutinized as carefully as philosophers' and theologians' views on scientific matters.

by Derek Winchester, with additional reporting by David Miller.

Bridging Gender Gaps



Finding the female presence in British World War I trenches

Dr. Diana Austin opened the Arts Forum with "The Girl They Thought I'd Left Behind Me: Tracing the Feminine Presence in British World War I Trench Literature." Her study explores a new way of understanding World War I British literature—by recognizing the continuity, rather than division, of masculine and feminine experience. The war experience, Austin said, has for too long "been framed, institutionalized, and given ideological content by readings of the trench literary canon as incontestably male, just because it was written by male writers participating in an activity that is normally defined as masculine." War writings, she argues, should instead be read as the "slippery terrain of an experience that was truly No Man's Land."

The dominant analysis of war literature has focused on two related wartime experiences—masculinity and division. More recently there has been an effort to reclaim a place for women's relationships and experiences in the historical, social, and literary narrative of World War I. Yet as Austin pointed out, even in these feminist approaches "the literature is still being read through

It is in trying to come to terms with this marginality that soldiers reach for "cultural repertoires of meaning," including modes of language and behaviour normally coded "feminine."

a binary model of division and difference that seems rooted in traditional assumptions of the front as incontestably gendered space—that is, male space." War and the approaches to the literature about it, she said, "point to a crucial site where meanings about gender are being produced, reproduced, and circulated back into society."

The focus of Austin's research is to deconstruct the reading of war literature as a reinforcement of gender stereotypes. She does not believe that "soldiers necessarily write from a male position nor that they necessarily reinscribe the values of their culturally constructed gender position as males." Drawing on **see Gender Gaps, on page 13**

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