

The Program in Cultures, Civilizations, and Ideas presents:

The Challenge of Aesthetic Skepticism and the Importance of Being Profound

Patrick Fessenbecker,
Assistant Professor in
CCI

Thursday 4 December 2014
7–10pm

Room G160

The twenty-first century has seen the development and spread of a variety of new methodologies for literary study, from Franco Moretti's "Distant Reading" to the "history of the book" approaches of Leah Price and others. Despite their diversity, these approaches share a certain refusal: they reject the notion of artistic value as a reason for and justification of literary criticism. In so doing, they represent a natural response to the widespread critique of the concept of aesthetic value as inevitably ideological that dominated cultural studies in the last decades of the twentieth century.

This paper will return to that critique and outline a strategy for responding to it, one borrowed from moral philosophy. In particular, it will argue that so-called "thick" concepts—concepts like "honesty" and "honor," which combine description and evaluation—have been under-utilized in literary aesthetics. Unlike traditional defenses of the literary canon, thick concepts avoid the circular logic of justification through sophisticated form alone. Moreover, they share with the ideological critiques of the aesthetic a rejection of the notion of aesthetic autonomy: to start from thick concepts is to commit oneself to aesthetic pluralism from the start.