The particular disdain for official culture … is itself an expression of democracy and commitment to it.

*Stanley Cavell*

When does pedagogy end? I take this question to name the real stakes of canon debates: where is the point at which we are self-reliant enough not to need to take recourse to ready-made standards with which we are continuously presented? The contemporary debate about the canon is after all only a small fragment of what has been over the ages one of the most continuous preoccupations of human beings—seeking standards and seeking to transcend them—and it might gain in explicitness by placing itself in this context. A canon, etymologically referring to a reed or a rod, is primarily an instrument of measurement (hence an instrument in support of judgment) and the debate is thereby one of seeking, questioning and accepting or rejecting standards, conceived as conditions of understanding, reading, thinking and of judgment: scientific, legal, religious, aesthetic and ethical.

Burcht Pranger’s work testifies to the desire to approach texts with ever greater precision, without concessions to pre-given measuring tools, even if this means having to acknowledge hesitation and admit the perplexities riddling the discourses of his major historical personas: Bernard of Clairvaux, Anselm of Canterbury, Augustine of Hippo. He employs to this end two strategies: on the one hand, relaxing the grip of periodization, suspending any standard temporal presuppositions, so as to uncover the unique voice emitted by the given work; on the other hand, measuring the resonances of thought across time: between Johannes Scottus Eriugena and James Joyce; Augustine and John Henry Newman and Cavell; Pseudo-Dionysius and Ignatius Loyola; Bernard of Clairvaux and Schleiermacher. It is this double gesture of declining recourse to standards in our approaches to history that allowed him to discover and explore those most difficult and problematic features of the early Christian manifestations of thought,
its central points of obscurity: the indeterminacy and artificiality of the “properly” religious, the unfathomability of the sincerity of faith, the indifference—and what he calls the “facelessness”—of devotional practices.

Another focus of Pranger’s work, closely related to this, is the question of the seriousness of texts, their being meant by the author, the author’s taking responsibility for them—all ways of referring us to some core property that would guarantee that the sound they emit from the distant past comes from trustworthy sources. Significantly, Pranger qualifies this core property as “unfathomable,” which is to say, unstandardizable, immeasurable (fathom, just like “canon,” was originally a standard of measurement). This resistance to judgment at the heart of texts is one reason to be suspicious of canons. Another is a common intuition, defended among others by Nietzsche, that to give a work its due, both to find such a work and to judge it on its merit, one should not need a canon: a good ear should suffice. But then the ear itself becomes a standard of measurement and the problem of unfathomability returns: what is it about an ear that can be trusted?¹ Here the core of the canon debates reveals itself as responding to the problems of skepticism: if skepticism always returns to the formula of “how can we be sure that…”, then in this particular case it takes the form of the question of how can we be sure that we know how to judge the work of others and how to judge our own judgment (how can we be sure that our judgments are transmittable, shareable). Then skepticism about canons is the skepticism about the precise interrelation of three sources of our criteria: inheritance (i.e., teaching, pedagogy), individual expression (the inner ear) and the critical evaluation in the public cultural space.

When we consider this, it becomes clear that Pranger’s pursuit and strategies for realizing it bring with themselves the questioning of the canon in its very principle, as the problem of measuring, or in other words,¹

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¹ One might say, these texts are in themselves the sources (or the guardians) of their standards, and it is solely by surveying them that we find the measure against which they are to be read. The idea that each text contains an access to its own law was expressed by the readings of literature performed by Jacques Derrida, for example in his reading of Kafka’s “Before the Law.” On that account each literary work produces its own law, instantiates it by internal repetitions to be uncovered in the process of reading; it is those repetitions that present themselves to us as measurement instruments: they are so to speak the rhythms of perspective guiding the reader’s eyes towards the horizon of its law. But even Derrida had to concede that no such intrinsic standard of judgment can exist in isolation, that always at least one other work is needed to confirm, co-sign it, so that we always have to begin with at least two works, a minimal canon. The idea of a canon as a set of points in a particular configuration replaces here the single work viewed as a unique Archimedean point of its own suspension.