ALCHEMY

for ASSASSINS

[overture]

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©

ALCHEMY FOR ASSASSINS

on education, production, and collective action

> *the winds of faith*
> *terror for terror*
> *nineteen students*
>
> (3 titles from *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*)

Introduction to Alchemy

Greetings and praise.
Help and forgiveness.
Refuge from evil,
    our souls,
    bad deeds.
Who guides will not go astray.
Who leads can have no guide.
I testify, but not alone.

I write this poem at a pivotal moment in the long history of Euro-American state craft: Burdened with the bleak realities of a failed post-modern crusade, neocon hawks accuse their critics of moral confusion in contending with the "new fascism" of Islamic extremism. Meanwhile, opportunists on the liberal left cozy up with a new anti-war majority and ready themselves for battle against the chieftains of the new world order. Their chief target, of course, is GWB—their primary weapons an array of impeachment articles, any one of which (warrantless wiretapping; torture and illegal detention; pre-war lies; arrogation of executive authority) could justify censure and removal from power.[1]

For any who oppose the man who self-identifies as the 43rd President of the United States, this recourse to political impeachment may seem like a mild solution to rather grim historical circumstances. If you feel this way, you are not alone. Consider the words of Sen. Arlen Specter who, as Republican chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, understands how the law works in this country: "After impeachment, you could have a criminal prosecution, but the principal remedy … under our society is to pay a

[1] Center for Constitutional Rights, *Articles of Impeachment Against George W. Bush*, Hobokin: Melville House Publishing, 2006.

political price."[2] That "price"—as humane political *remedy*—buys a sort of socio-political healing via public reprimand.

However, those whose appetite for restitution (or revenge) is not satisfied by impeachment alone can turn to "criminal prosecution" to implement a stricter, if equally humane, set of punishments. Impeachment and legal prosecution, in short, are the two sanctioned remedies, under current social arrangements, for political plagues that come in the form of lying, cheating, war-mongering presidents—as opposed to solutions exacting a far greater (and bloodier) price, such as assassination, armed rebellion, and public execution.

The title of this research paper may lead some to suspect that I'm about to recommend some version of the latter. I assure those concerned (my family, the NSA?) that I am not. To the contrary, my topic here is education—in particular, the institutionalization of educational products, programs, and practices designed to create compliant but eager consumers via remedial training techniques. This leap from impeachment as political remedy to education as social remediation is admittedly a big one, but the two are linked by a shared emphasis on healing and remedy in the interest of creating and maintaining social order. As the modern ordering mechanism par excellence, education advances a remedial project grounded in the notion that ailing or unworthy generations can be healed or made better (improved, developed, *alchemized*) through disciplinary learning rituals that come in the form of institutionalized schooling.

Indeed, the "Alchemy" of my title is meant to suggest the historic link between ideals of "educational transformation"[3] and the ancient art of exoteric alchemy. As Ivan Illich argued in *Tools for Conviviality*, educationists in post-industrial economies have long sought an ideal "alchemic process" for creating a "new type" of human being better suited to a new "environment created by scientific magic."[4] In recent years, this search has assumed roughly two forms. On the one hand, corporate execs and social conservatives advocate for more skills-based training and vocational preparation as the ideal "process" for alchemizing undeveloped (raw, base) humans into productive workers and consumers. On the other hand, liberal progressives argue for the freeing up of "action and inquiry"[5] as a way to grow young minds toward active participation in democratic society.

These are gross reductions of complex historical and cultural arrangements. However, I hereby invoke the "alchemical" mandate in education as a way to investigate alchemical formulae that reside, by and large, somewhere between these two programs for educational progress. Thus, "Alchemy for Assassins" begins where education has always begun: in

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[2] Quoted in Lewis Lapham's "The Case for Impeachment" (*Harper's Magazine*, March 2006: 27-35).

[3] The phrase comes from John Dewey's 1900 *The School and Society* (Chicago: U Chicago Press) and will figure prominently throughout this report.

[4] Illich, Ivan. *Tools For Conviviality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973 (pp.18-19).

[5] Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education.* Institute for Learning Technologies, 1994 (1916) [online].

the search for "an alchemic process." The difference here is that my goal is not a new type of human so much as a new set of methods for imagining, designing, and deploying constructive practices to replace those that breed, among other things, the kinds of failures now occupying positions of power in this country.

As for the second half of my title, I begin below with the story of a real-world assassination, albeit one that occurred over one-hundred years ago but in a world remarkably similar to our own. In this historical event lies one key to understanding the alchemic process we recognize today as institutionalized education. Lessons learned from this story may also help us craft new solutions, or remedies, to an educational system plagued by moral confusion and the bad doctrine of late capitalism. This research paper, therefore, should be read as a prelude to a curriculum yet to be written, as well as a query into past efforts to radicalize education in the interest of social change.

1. Teaching Alchemy in the School of Assassins

When, on September 6, 1901, Leon F. Czolgosz fired two shots at close range into the bloated belly of President William McKinley, he was, to put it one way, the end-product of a flawed educational system. At the time of the shooting, he was twenty-eight years old and, by most measures, certainly not school-aged. But consider his record:

Born in 1873, Leon Czolgosz was the son of Polish immigrants and the fourth of ten children. He had some early education in a Detroit grade school but entered a life of fulltime wage labor at the age of twelve following the death of his mother. Evidently an avid reader, and considered the "best educated" in his family, Czolgosz lost interest in formal education after his mother's death and when the demands of work grew too difficult. As a young man, disenchanted with life as an underpaid factory worker, Czolgosz joined a growing labor movement and soon developed a taste for anarchist literature. Historians suggest that Czolgosz's anarchist beliefs were grounded not only in his early exposure to "the hardscrabble life of the foreign-born laboring classes" but also in a long series of national disruptions (e.g., the 1886 Haymarket riot, the 1892 Homestead Steel strike, the 1894 Pullman strike, and the 1897 Latimer Mines massacre), news of which most likely weakened his and others' faith in the American Dream.[6]

In any event, by 1901 Czolgosz's preferred learning materials included labor journals and anarchist tracts written by such notables as Emma Goldman. By most accounts, Czolgosz enjoyed no formal connections with Goldman or really any anarchist organizations at the time of the shooting but nonetheless professed a deep commitment to the anarchist cause. By

[6] Much of this portrait is based on Jeremy Kilar's "Madman or Manifestation of a Brutal Society? The Michigan Roots of Leon Czolgosz" (*Fifth Estate.* Detroit: Spring, 1996. Vol. 31, Issue 1 (347).

early fall of that year, he had, in his own words, decided to "do something heroic for the cause [he] loved."[7] Dismissed over time as a lone gunman, Czolgosz himself claimed that he had "no confidants" and no "help"; he had acted "alone absolutely." Indeed, Czolgosz was never directly linked to any covert anarchist plot—and this despite the short-term incarcerations of Goldman and others in an effort to ferret out such links.

Still, conservative analysts of the time propagated the myth that Czolgosz had acted on behalf of a highly organized anarchist faction—or, at the very least, that he was the inevitable product of a focused Anarchist schooling campaign whose roots had penetrated deeply into U.S. soil. This schooling, of course, came in the form of anarchist lectures and writings—and, as noted, Czolgosz was an avid reader who by this time had honed his critical interpretation skills.[8]

Reactionary diatribes came in many forms in the months following McKinley's death. Note, for example, the charged words of Murat Halstead, who in his 1901 *The Illustrious Life of William McKinley Our Martyred President* is quick to denounce the disease of anarchy:

> The lessons taught by the tragedies of the murderous martyrdoms of Presidents, are that public opinion must be formed—active, organized and aggressive—for the effective war upon anarchy, or the glory of our government of ourselves will decline. There is more than the assassination of our first citizens and officers, more than the murders and attempts at murder of Presidents, that is involved. It is the liberty of the land that the anarchist strikes with his assassin's hand. Liberty and order must be inseparable. It is anarchy that is the foe of freedom, that is the everlasting enemy of free government.
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[7] From his written confession.

[8] Carlos F. MacDonald, physician in charge of examining Czolgosz in the weeks following his arrest and leading up to his trial and execution, had this to say about the assassin's anarchist education: "That Czolgosz was an Anarchist and actuated in his crime by the motives which spring from the teachings of that sect, are clearly shown by: I. His declarations after his arrest, namely, that he did not believe in any form of government or law and that all rulers were tyrants who ought to be put down. 2. His admissions to the District Attorney that he was a member of anarchistic societies or circles, and had frequently attended the meetings of the same; also that he had been influenced in his views by the "lectures" of Emma Goldman; and that when apprehended anarchistic literature was found on his person, and 3. The recognition and commendation which he has received at the hands of Anarchists at their meetings both in this country and abroad since his death, several of these societies having openly recognized him as such and lauded his action." From "The Trial, Execution, Autopsy and Mental Status of Leon F. Czolgosz, Alias Fred Nieman, The Assassin of President McKinley." *The American Journal of Insanity*, Vol. LVII No. 3, January, 1902.

> It is one of the terrors of the anarchist murderers that they are usually ready to die if they can take the "Great Ruler" with them, and they will throw the dynamite where their own legs will be shattered, if the great ruler can be destroyed. This pupil in the school of assassins seems not to have quite reached this point. He had been taught by anarchist lectures, by inflammatory sheets, smeared with foul doctrine, that he had a 'duty' to perform, that to commit a murder of a ruler was a matter of heroism, that this country was the greatest of frauds and the worst of despotisms, the most wretched, false and horrible of lies, that he would at one stroke lift himself to immortal fame.
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> Some of our statesmen have urged the passage of a law in this country to restrict the immigration of anarchists. But the anarchists are at our doors. What they need is expulsion, and we have a few Asiatic islands to which they might be deported. Let there be no mistake about it—there are many of these people. It is not worth while to bother about importation unless we can devise an effective system of exportation.[9]

While condemning the "foul doctrine" read and assimilated by this "pupil in the school of assassins," Halstead has little to say about the actual classroom education Czolgosz received as a Detroit schoolboy, exploited factory laborer, school dropout, and "smeared" Polish-American living under the threat of forced "expulsion." Obviously we can't expect the author of *The Illustrious Life of William McKinley* to wax eloquent on the injustices of nineteenth-century labor and immigration policies, let alone the shortcomings of primary school education under industrial capitalism. To the contrary, the rhetoric makes perfect sense for a conservative elite faced with the epidemic, the scourge, the plague of "these people": "the anarchists"—like the terrorists today, no doubt—"are at our doors."

Putting locks on those doors was, of course, one of many proposed solutions. Public hysteria after the assassination led to widespread conservative efforts to crack down on the "school of assassins" by executing, among

[9] Halstead, Murat. *The Illustrious Life of William McKinley Our Martyred President*. Copyright 1901 by Murat Halstead (pp.68-74). The "Asiatic islands" of the last paragraph refer to Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines—annexed in 1898 "for the purpose," according to another McKinley apologist, "of safeguarding that matchless possession secured in all the preceding century, and of insuring to the millions who inhabit this land the certainty that they shall continue in the enjoyment of that prosperity their past labors and the sacrifices of their fathers have placed in their possession." (Everett, Marshall [Henry Neil]. *Complete Life of William McKinley and Story of His Assassination: An Authentic and Official Memorial Edition, Containing Every Incident in the Career of the Immortal Statesman, Soldier, Orator and Patriot*. Copyright 1901 by Marshall Everett, p.252).

other things, a comprehensive "remedy" campaign in U.S. schools, colleges, and universities. Certainly Czolgosz's "heroic" act was not the only impetus for such reform efforts in education and U.S. culture at large. Indeed a whole slew of political and economic forces—the depression of 1893, persistent poverty, the "threat" of socialism, the increasing influence of corporate business interests on U.S. domestic and foreign policy (with McKinley seen as both cause and effect of that trend), growing and changing populations, renewed interest in imperial expansion (to "uplift and Christianize" the "heathens" abroad, in the President's words), urbanization and unchecked industrialization, and finally the entrenchment of a new state university system in the years leading up to September, 1901—all contributed to a post-assassination social readjustment campaign for which Czologz's two bullets served as exclamation point.

But what a point that exclamation made! As catalyzing event, the McKinley assassination served well to harden conservative, reactionary, high Christian sentiment already bristling before a rapidly changing society. Public anxiety after McKinley's death—later exacerbated by the events surrounding World Wars I and II—fed the growth and hardening of "state capitalist trusts"[10] whose chief mandate was to "uplift" both heathens abroad and those corrupt and/or undeveloped souls at home (anarchists, socialists, utopians, immigrants, non-Christians, non-whites, children, and so on) threatened by the onslaught of "foul doctrine." In short, the first two decades of the twentieth century saw widespread efforts "to protect traditional moral moorings" against an array of sociopolitical formations and transformations.[11] Some of these protections took the form of anti-protestor ordinances and other "criminal syndicalism" laws targeting, for example, the radical unionism of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). Another poignant example is the "Criminal Anarchy Law" (New York, 1902) that made it a felony to advocate for the overthrow of "organized government." What emerged, in short, was a "vast system of organized manipulation"[12] and one manifesting in all aspects of public life—including, of course, in education.

One example of the latter is Frederick Taylor's meeting in 1909 with Henry Pritchett, president of the newly formed Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Seeking an economic study of education, Pritchett enlisted the help of the "father of scientific management" and Taylor responded with a new system for managing student time that included such now-familiar concepts as the "student hour."[13] In fact, the

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[10] James, C. L. R., Grace C. Lee, and Pierre Chaulieu. *Facing Reality*. Detroit: Correspondence Publishing Committee, 1958. Reprinted in 2006 (under the editorship of Joel Kuszai) in the Factory School Southpaw Culture series (p.113).
[11] Shor, Francis Robert. *Utopianism and Radicalism in a Reforming America, 1888-1918*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997 (p.102).
[12] *Facing Reality* (p.90) [see note 10].
[13] Downing, David B., Claude Mark Hurlburt, and Paula Mathieu, eds. *Beyond English Inc.: Curricular Reform in a Global Economy*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2002 (p.5).

Pritchett-Taylor alliance reveals just one facet of a larger campaign to bring education in line with corporate demands for vocational and time-management training at all educational levels.

Conservative reformers also hoped that new management strategies in education would help heal a society plagued by industrialization and social decay. Some were quick to capitalize on premillenialist anxieties about pending doom in the midst of industrial gloom. Halstead's impassioned claim that "[l]iberty and order must be inseparable" was realized in the systematic deployment of "ordering" techniques meant to reinforce the historic coupling of capitalist expansion and conservative Christian doctrine. As the new boot camp for capitalism, education in the U.S. also functioned as the new "church" of high moral remedy.

This project was alchemical—or, at the very least, steeped in an "alchemical view of the New World" that associated the "innocence" of the North American continent with the human search for "spiritual perfection *as well as* material abundance."[14] With business leaders infiltrating the educational field, the alchemical pursuit of "material abundance" took the form, in part, of a search for a better and more profitable student product. As one ingredient in capitalist expansionist policy, education—otherwise understood as "the prime instrument for human enlightenment and liberation"[15]—became the new commodity that in turn produced effective producers and consumers.[16]

For some, it was (and continues to be) the perfect system that simultaneously dispenses with two problems: While cultivating "vocational proficiency," skills-based education also breeds "political incompetence," and the finished output of this "educational factory" is a politically passive but hard-working citizenry operating collectively under the false impressions that "servility is freedom, ignorance is strength, war is peace, and capitalism is democracy."[17] For Ivan Illich, the false impressions (for Marx, "false consciousness") of consumer society are the "myths" required to keep the system going. School ritualizes these myths by teaching what amounts to a Taylorist view of human progress—i.e., "that learning can be sliced up into pieces and quantified" and "that learning is something for which you need a process."[18] Illich's critique goes further, however, for in his view it is not just institutionalized, compulsory "schooling" that propagates

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[14] Bey, Hakim. *T.A.Z.* Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1991 [1985] (p.116).

[15] Perlman, Fredy. *"The New Freedom" : Corporate Capitalism*. Factory School / Southpaw Culture, 2006 (p.132).

[16] Liebniz's concept of *Bildung*—or "the cultivation and perfection of individual character through a progressive educational journey"—also factors in here as the mythic substrate justifying capital's appropriation of that "journey" to service the march toward more efficient production. For more on *Bildung*, see Downing, David B. *The Knowledge Contract: Politics and Paradigms in the Academic Workplace*. Lincoln and London: U Nebraska P., 2005 (p.27).

[17] Perlman (p.135) [see note 15].

[18] Cayley, David. *Ivan Illich in Conversation*. Anansi, 1992 (p.67).

destructive myths but "education" itself, in so far is it fosters "the belief that people have to be helped to gain insights into reality."[19]

John Dewey and other progressive educators took a similar view. For example, Dewey's primary emphasis in his 1914 *Democracy in Education* was the socialization of human beings via training not in "vocational proficiency" but in what today might be called "critical thinking" skills: the movement from "doubt or uncertainty" toward "an inquiring, hunting, searching attitude, instead of one of mastery and possession." Through this idealized "critical process," knowledge of the world would be "revised and extended, and our convictions as to the state of things reorganized."

Dewey's interest in "educational transformation" was in some ways an easy target for rightwing reformers equally committed to an understanding of education as a progressive, transformative process. Dewey himself—at least in his early writings on education—helped reify the notion that the learning work of young people is, fundamentally, a kind of capitalist conversion of raw materials into the "gold" of intellectual growth. As he writes by way of a rather unfortunate metaphor, a child's passion for conversation, inquiry, construction (or "making things"), and artistic expression—the "fourfold interests" of children, in short—"are the natural resources, the uninvested capital, upon the exercise of which depends the active growth of the child."[20]

All the same, Dewey championed education as the instrument most useful to social liberation and did so throughout his life despite the capitalist-progressivist "march toward a more efficient, more economically productive society."[21] That "march" continued well into the twentieth century and continues today in the form of "state capitalist trusts" very similar to those forged at the end of the nineteenth century. Richard Ohmann describes the new "accountability" movement in higher education that operates as "part of a complex reaction against the social movements of the sixties and seventies."[22] Fueled by both an "intense fiscal crisis of the state" and a conservative "counterthrust" against mid-century open education experiments, the accountability movement denotes, more broadly, "capital's project of recomposing itself" in order to exploit new domestic and international markets in knowledge production.[23] Marc Bousquet notes, as well, that where corporate interests continue to infiltrate the educational field, an increasingly willing (and well-paid) administrative

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[19] Ibid (p.206).
[20] Dewey, John. *The School and Society*. Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1956 [1900] (p.47).
[21] Gallagher, Chris W. *Radical Departures*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002 (p.40).
[22] Ohmann, Richard. "Accountability and the Conditions for Curricular Change," in Downing et al. (p.66) [see note 13].
[23] Ibid (p.68).

class moves closer to full "acceptance of market logic, and toward increasing collaboration with a vocational and technical model of education."[24]

This "neo-pragmatist" capitulation, in higher education especially, leads many to dismiss colleges and universities as "ideology factories" serving "the capitalist class"[25] and certainly not ideals of democratic liberation through "freedom of action and inquiry." Indeed, where "accountability" is the order of the day, student life in today's educational systems often begins with a tacit acceptance of one's roll as "student-commodity" in an increasingly lucrative educational market. To be sure, many thrive within this system as "raw material" for capitalist (re)appropriation and classification along professional lines. Dropouts, conversely, assume the status of "waste product" and, with neither skills nor credentials, join an increasingly alienated surplus labor market. As Bousquet argues, even degree holders often function as "waste" in a "labor system that primarily makes use of graduate schools to maintain a pool of cheap workers."[26]

In short, education is no guarantee of upward mobility under capitalism and yet a rhetoric of career success (fueled by a culture of academic "excellence") continues to issue from institutions of higher (and lower) learning in competition for today's human "raw materials." Moreover, those who succeed, by and large, are those for whom secondary and postsecondary degrees serve as "new privilege," in the words of Ivan Illich, to compound an already enjoyed "native privilege."[27] Elizabeth Ferm made a similar point decades ago in *Freedom in Education*: Institutionalized education, despite the rhetoric of "freedom," conceals a system of "[r]ule or privilege" that issues a simple mandate to today's aspiring students: enjoy privilege (natively) or submit to "the law" of education.[28]

For many radical educators, including Ferm, there were clear alternatives to the culture of industrial servitude masquerading as modern education in the twentieth century. Counter-hegemonic education movements have always sought, in a system favoring top-down bureaucratic and corporate control, to dismantle the "monopoly of schools over the very definition of education."[29] For some, the first step in this dismantling process has been to seek the "disestablishment" of schools, in Illich's famous formula, and to breach institutional barriers by taking education (back) to the streets, homes, and communities where practice in democratic learning remains, perhaps, most sorely needed. As Ferm wrote, "The true educator

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[24] Bousqet, Marc. "Composition as Management Science," in Bousquet, Marc, and Scott, Tony, and Parascondola, Leo, eds. *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004 (p.13).
[25] Kiefson, Ruth. "The Politics and Economics of the Super-Exploitation of Adjuncts," in Bousquet et al. (p.149) [see note 24].
[26] Bousquet et al. (p.2) [see note 24].
[27] In Cayley (p.68) [see note 18].
[28] Ferm, Elizabeth Byrne. *Freedom in Education*. Factory School / Southpaw Culture, 2005.
[29] Cayley (p.8) [see note 18].

finds in the organized street gang a clue to the child's needs."[30] The ideal "laboratory" for learning, she continues, is not the conventional classroom but the individualized "play" that emerges when a child "makes an inquiry" into life.[31] Education, for Ferm, is thus "the development of self-knowledge, self-consciousness through 'spontaneous self-activity.'"[32] A culture of intellectual and creative spontaneity could not be cultivated in standardized classrooms.

Some educators, particularly in higher education, have chosen to resist "accountability" campaigns and other reactionary assaults by launching counter-campaigns from within the walls of academia. Taking to heart Charles Bernstein's optimistic claim that "universities remain among the few cultural spaces in the United States in which there is at least a potential for critical discourse, for violation of norms and standards and protocols,"[33] adherents of "critical pedagogy," for example, promote methods and curricula designed to help students forge connections between personal experience and "broader social and political issues." As a focused effort to reclaim schools "as a space for the analysis of power," critical pedagogy rejects administrative "output" and measurement protocols and works to salvage, where possible, a liberal democratic faith in an educational system that "enables" and "animates" student thinking via interactive learning techniques.[34]

Efforts such as these are stifled, no doubt, by the culture of personal, individualized success that continues to permeate education at all levels. While progressive educators arm themselves against privatization in the new "managed" universities, often the chief hurdle for those who want to believe in education as a means to democratic socialization are the students themselves (and their families), many of whom take a pragmatist approach to education in an understandable effort to secure careers and/or increase their marketability. Allies in university administrations continue to insist, on the students' behalf, that education translates to a broad-based utilitarian skills training or, in the words of Robin Goodman, to a kind of "consumerist freedom" emphasizing the "pursuit of happiness outside of any collective constraints."[35]

In the fine arts, the cult of consumerist freedom finds its apotheosis in what Mark Nowak calls the "stereotypes of the hermetic, visionary artist" and the "market-socialized neoliberal artist." Linked respectively to early and late capitalism, these two versions of artistic "success" and "excellence" can be traced most recently to the market success of the "American MFA

[30] Ferm (p.64) [see note 28].
[31] Ibid (p.94).
[32] Ibid (p. 66).
[33] Bernstein, Charles. "'A Blow Is Like an Instrument': The Poetic Imaginary and Curricular Practices," in Downing et al. (p.48) [see note 13].
[34] Goodman, Robin Truth. "The Righting of Writing," in Bousquet et al. (p.237). For more on critical pedagogy, also see Gallagher, in Bousquet et al. (p.79-98) [see note 24].
[35] In Bousquet (p.232) [see note 24].

industry" specifically and, more generally, the "neoliberal language industry."[36] Where neoliberal, market-oriented cultural production dominates, artists and writers may enjoy a certain productive freedom, but this freedom comes at the price of ideological imprisonment. As Hakim Bey writes, poets in the U.S. "are allowed to publish anything at all," but this expressive freedom is in truth a form of "punishment" or "prison without walls" since most of what's published finds no traction in the political mainstream.[37] Bey goes on to suggest that "[i]f rulers refuse to consider poems as crimes, then someone must commit crimes that serve the function of poetry, or texts that possess the resonance of terrorism."[38] A tall order, no doubt, but one that takes on an intriguing resonance in light of the current administration's penchant for data-mining "terrorist" nuances in a wide assortment of electronic texts, many of which are surely "poetic."

It's quite possible that Leon Czolgosz committed, in 1901, a crime that served "the function of poetry" and did so, as both fans and detractors believed, under the influence of "texts" resonating with the sounds of anarchism if not "terrorism." Tabling for the time being this notion of the "criminal" potential of textual production, I want to adopt Bey's call to make art "a condition of life"—as opposed, that is, to a commodity designed to satisfy "consumerist freedom," in education and elsewhere. However, it is one thing to centralize and prioritize "art," broadly conceived, as a "condition of life," and quite another to determine just what kind of "life" (personal? expressive? social? communal?) this "art" will foster. To render art and other cultural production activities a true "condition" of life requires more than just a theoretical commitment to democracy and "the social." Deeper adjustments are required at the level of *practice*, particularly in those "few cultural spaces"—such as education in its myriad forms—where the "violation of norms" remains, at the very least, a viable option.

2. Learning & Production in the School of Collective Action

> *Look, observe, think and assimilate and thus create your own book.*
> —Elizabeth Ferm, *Freedom in Education*

This modest directive—central to the new "freedom in education" that Ferm and others advocated—is as old as education itself. In the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne also encouraged the cultivation of a "careful spirit of inquiry about everything" by which young (male) pupils in the school of early modernism would "digest and assimilate" the masters and so "change the substance" of what they had learned.

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[36] Nowak, Mark. *¡Workers of the Word, Unite and Fight!* Palm Press: 2005 (pp.8-10). See Nowak's essay for a statistical summary of the trends noted here.
[37] In Bey (p.19) [see note 14].
[38] Ibid.

However, Ferm's call to think, assimilate and thus "create your own book" had the added appeal of post-industrial possibility. Modern School students could and often did create their own print materials in ways that Montaigne's hypothetical pupils could not.[39] Of course, Ferm's philosophy of creative assimilation in *Freedom in Education* is, like Montaigne's, meant to theorize the abstraction of knowledge toward intellectual and social growth. Her emphasis, in other words, is not on the physical act of making books but on achieving personal "union" with authors read. Practice in reading, for Ferm, authorizes introspective self-awareness, not to mention a deeper critical awareness of the world.

But Ferm also insists that book learning—or "reading and acquirement of words"—can sometimes do damage to the "inner life of the individual," particularly where it interferes with the kind of experiential "freedom of action and inquiry" that Dewey championed. Echoing Montaigne (and the American Transcendentalists), Ferm cautions that "no book should be allowed to overlay the search of the individual for further disclosures and discoveries."[40]

Reading, in other words, is a dangerous thing—but not only where it threatens to undermine personal growth. History is riddled with formal constraints designed to regulate literacy and to defend social, religious, and political norms against the emerging "vice" of individualized reading and writing. For example, as silent reading became popular in eleventh-century monasteries, strict injunctions were required to protect against this new "private abuse." Visual reading (reading with the eyes alone) and silent, written composition "removed the individual's thoughts from the sanctions of the group" and thus "fostered the milieu in which the new university and lay heresies of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries flourished."[41]

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the call to "create your own book" was perhaps equally heretical in so far as it challenged state bureaucracies and "capitalist trusts" seeking ever tighter controls over systems of knowledge creation, distribution, and use. The Modern School emphasis on DIY (even POD[42]) techniques in the classroom marked not only a radical counter-assault on conservative education protocols but also an activist turn to the means/technologies of textual production as a way to

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[39] The hand press on which the *Modern School Magazine* was printed, for example, was also used in the School to teach the art of printing.

[40] Ferm (p.131) [see note 28].

[41] Saenger, Paul. *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997 (pp.260-265). Saenger points out that, in the fourteenth century, "forbidden writings themselves were ferreted out and destroyed" in an effort to censor heretical reading and writing practices—"as in 1323, when the general chapter of the Dominican Order decreed that all privately held writings on the prohibited art of alchemy be burned" (p.265).

[42] "Do-it-yourself" and "print-on-demand"—the latter arguably applicable to Modern School printing practices where "demand" is understood as the local urgencies associated with learning and production activities that took the form of collaborative writing, editing, and printing.

bolster that defense through the creation of homegrown educational materials. One of the chief objections to an anarchist "hands-off" educational philosophy, of course, was that it made life difficult for those trying to capitalize on educational markets better served, they believed, by standardized textbooks meted out to homogenized educational institutions. Letting the kids create their own books—both figuratively and literally—meant in the extreme that schoolbook monopolists could not mass produce their books, and their educational experiences, for them.

Textbooks are somewhat unique in the world of print: As educational products, they bring sizeable profits to an increasingly centralized industry; as communicative objects, they mediate not just knowledge production in particular academic disciplines but also knowledge transmission in their function as the chief "arbiters" of classroom experience.[43] The word "textbook," however, first referred to "a Classick Author written very wide by the Students, to give Room for an Interpretation dictated by the Master, &c. to be inserted in the Interlines."[44] In other words, the early text-book was not mass-produced for classroom consumption but individually produced by each student as an aid to knowledge assimilation. The "Classick" in this case served in part as the blank "text" on which students inscribed their class notes, albeit notes highly influenced by a "Master" interpretation. Early eighteenth-century student reading materials thus also functioned as writing surfaces, and this read-write practice was a production activity: students created their own (text)books.

Nowadays, at the junction of Ferm's "create your own book" and new digital printing technologies, we see renewed interest in custom text production in higher education. Self-publishing services target college and university professors looking to resist textbook standardization through course-pack customization. Figure 1—which reproduces the back panel of a Pearson Custom Publishing brochure[45]—illustrates the neat pairing of neoliberal ownership motifs and the trope of Romantic creativity:

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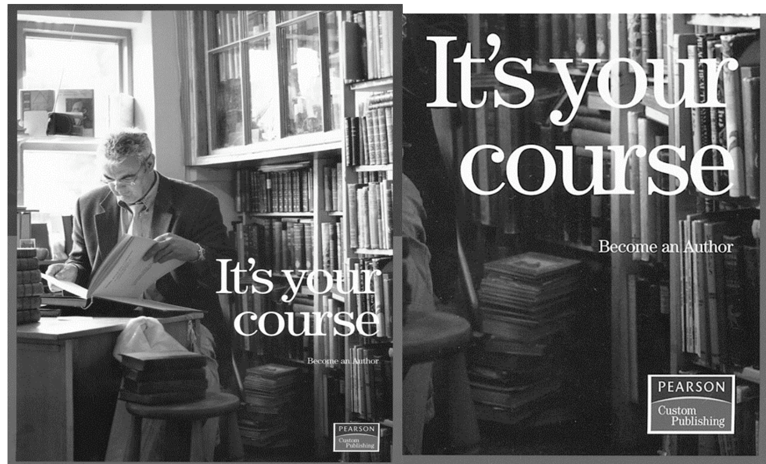
[43] Connors, Robert. (1997). *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press (p.15).

[44] McKenzie, D.F. *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*. London: The British Library, 1986 (p.50).

[45] Source: Conference brochure distributed at the 2006 *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, Chicago).



Note that many of the books on the floor, on the stool, and on the shelves are "Classicks" in the classic sense—leather-bound tomes (first editions?) not easily reproduced for student mass consumption. In the early eighteenth century, students might have owned or used books like these for the slow creation, over time, of their own text-books. In this case, Pearson does the work of binding the Master's "Interpretations" and selling them back—at a markup so students can mark them up—as a custom-published reader. Illuminated from without (please compare Vermeer's *The Geographer*), the scholar-author culls real books for knowledge to be organized and streamlined for transmission in the classroom.

It's a powerful ad and a seductive idea. After all, Pearson and other custom publishing vendors offer a convenient service to meet an age-old pedagogical challenge: coming up with good teaching materials and organizing them in an appealing, effective way. And Pearson knows how to get the job done: The "industry leader in custom publishing," Pearson is "committed to meeting your needs by offering flexible and creative choices for your course materials." Their products and services "include high quality content, editorial expertise, award-winning textbook design, on demand database publishing, and innovative media solutions."[46] These customized "solutions," of course, remedy the implied problem of hardened, rote, cookie-cutter textbook curricula that Pearson is nonetheless happy to sell via any of its other major holding companies, such as Pearson Longman, Pearson Longman ESL, Pearson Allyn & Bacon, and Pearson Prentice Hall ("the world's largest publisher of academic and reference textbooks").

PearsonCustom is an easy target rendered all the easier by its unabashed appropriation of the language of cultural "revolution" (in the words of one of its posted testimonials) and Romantic authorship. However, beyond the innocent allure of "becoming" a published author lie the nefarious indecencies of a textbook industry run amok in newly colonized educational

[46] These and other quotes taken from the website: <www.pearsoncustom.com>

spaces. Pearson glorifies the professor-consumer as a free producer of educational content but nonetheless binds the transaction—the flow of goods and information—in a tight web of corporate controls (among them restrictions on copyright and royalties, preset design templates, and of course product pricing). Furthermore, it offers the freedom to be your own disciplinary "Master" but nonetheless owns the material knowledge product sold back at a profit as the "finished book." And finally, students who buy the books as a requirement for course credit are, as always, the ones who pay the premium on the professor's authoring project.

Granted, services like Pearson custom publishing *work* because they deliver up the dream of academic freedom and self-determination. They effectively replace the cold dark shadow of textbook totalitarianism with the warm glow of just-in-time production and other neoliberal efficiencies. In short, they bring cultural workers—in this case, teachers, instructors, adjuncts, grad students, and professors, if not students—back into the knowledge production game, and this, I dare say, is a good thing. The chief problem, of course, lies in the system similarities between delivering education in the form of mass-produced textbooks and delivering education in the form of custom-made textbooks. Education as product-delivered, in other words, remains central to this postmodern "revolution" in educational publishing.

And yet, "at its best education delivers nothing—it enables, animates; that is, the value imparted is embedded in an interaction not measurable by output alone."[47] This notion—that education does not "deliver" but "animates" through "interaction"—resembles the "hands off" educational philosophy of Elizabeth Ferm and her Modern School compatriots. For Ferm, action and reaction "are the two great factors in developing self-knowledge in the individual.... The re-action must have direct relation to the act—it must be recognized as the outcome of the act.... The act must be a free act and the re-action must be the natural re-action."[48] Dewey's 1902 *The Child and the Curriculum* makes a related point regarding the "fundamental factors in the educative process." Two social "forces," according to Dewey, interact in the movement from childhood to adulthood, namely, the "immature, undeveloped being" of the child and the "social aims, meanings, [and] values incarnate in the matured experience of the adult." How one adjudicates the "due interaction" of these forces—in other words, how one conceives of "each in relation to the other"—is the "essence of educational theory."[49]

These are knotty formulations, no doubt, but all turn on related notions of action, re-action, and interaction (for Ferm, free acts and re-actions) as essential to the "educative process." This process also intersects with time-honored notions of intellectual transformation—a kind of personal or social alchemy—also central to educational theory in so far as an

[47] Bernstein, in Downing et al. (p.50) [see note 13].
[48] Ferm (p.55) [see note 28].
[49] Dewey, John. *The Child and the Curriculum*. Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1956 [1902] (p.4).

individual's educational progress translates to a marked change (improvement, refinement) in one's capacity for both "self-knowledge" and critical social awareness. The interactive, transformative nature of education is perhaps best crystallized in Chris Gallagher's recent definition of pedagogy as "*the reflexive inquiry that teachers and learners undertake together*." As "reflexive inquiry," Gallagher continues, pedagogy is also "always a form of collective action."[50]

As I see it, the social democratic ideals of "collective action" pedagogy and "reflexive inquiry" are not too far removed from the core dream of custom publishing. We can learn a lot, that is, from the Pearson model even while questioning (and challenging) this and other corporate incursions into new educational "markets." As Gallagher writes, echoing Dewey, education for progressive and anarchist educators has always been "practice *in* democratic living, not practice *for* it."[51] Teaching students *how* to print and self-publish using digital editing tools, POD, and other reproduction technologies is tantamount to the kind of "practice" that may, under certain conditions, communicate a lived sense of citizenship as more than just a "recreational choice."[52]

This interactionist impulse, however, must be realized via radical retrenchments of democratic knowledge-making practices in those spaces where the "due interaction" of social forces lends itself to the kinds of educational transformations that inspire true democratic consciousness. Ferm likely had this mandate in mind when she defined education as "one and the same as creative evolution."[53] This semantic equation also performs the kind of eradication work that Ivan Illich would later embrace in his rejection of "education" as inherently displaced and displacing. The front line of social change, in other words, is not Education narrowly conceived (and thus, in that narrowness, made ripe for capitalist exploitation) but rather "creative evolution" and the organization of creative beings working in defiance of institutions designed to thwart creativity, teach conformity, and breed nationalist loyalties.

This kind of transformative cultural work—one that could also double as curriculum development in the school of collective action—requires networked production infrastructures that operate both within and against today's formal educational institutions. Mark Nowak's discussion of "book work" is relevant here. Nowak defines "book work" as that constellation of activities that writers, librarians, editors, book designers, bookstore workers, and teachers engage in when interacting over books in today's language industries. The usefulness of the term lies in its direct linking of "creative" activities—such as composition, design, production, even sales and distribution—with "economies of creative effort," to borrow Nowak's borrowing of Shklovsky. Applied book work strategies, especially when

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[50] Gallagher (p.xvi) [see note 21].
[51] Ibid (p.13).
[52] Ohmann, Richard. "Citizenship and Literacy Work: Thoughts Without a Conclusion," in Bousquet et al. (p.43) [see note 24].
[53] Ferm (p.9) [see note 28].

coupled with labor organizing activities, also go far to de-link creative production from the ideologies of introspective personalism, artistic hermeticism, and other myths of human creativity that have served the language industries since, arguably, the dawn of modern authorship.

Such strategies are clearly linked to Marxist labor theory and historic efforts to organize workers and build coalitions through, among other things, the coordination of creative (literary, editorial) activities. C. L. R. James and his collaborators, for example, argued that the key to labor organizing was to provide workers and "other oppressed classes" with a "medium" for monitoring "the stage they are going through." This medium—as locally produced newspaper or newsletter, for example—was also meant to provide "the opportunity to coordinate their experiences and thoughts, which are sometimes quite contradictory."[54]

The classroom, as well, can be readily understood as a "medium" for the coordination of intellectual and experiential knowledge, and perhaps vice versa: any medium that serves to coordinate knowledge production activities can function like (in lieu of?) the classroom. Classrooms are also privileged spaces designed, ideally, for sharing skills and expertise and, perhaps, recovering and deploying the kind of "accurate information" that James et al. insisted was the "first necessity of democracy."[55] Educators and reformers often identify *information literacy*, of one kind or another, as key to this intellectual recovery work. Illich went further in arguing that we need to recover practice in multiple forms of literacy in order to *recover from* the culture of "original stupidity" that permeates today's educational institutions.

The idea that technology—understood generally as those tools, devices, and techniques designed to facilitate human activities—serves to aid human beings in the "recovery" of something lost is, to be sure, an old idea that can be traced in part to the Christian concept of original sin and the search for divine remedy. Illich is helpful here once again in pointing out how medieval theologies of technology—exemplified in the writings of the twelfth-century teacher, Hugh of St. Victor—recognized technology as "an activity" by which human beings recover part of what "has been lost" through "ecological intervention" or "sin." Tool-making and use in this view serve as both "remedy" and "recovery"—in the Christian sense, a kind of "penitential activity"—serving a broader effort "to make the sin with which we are born, which we have inherited, a little less unpleasant by reducing cold and hunger and weakness."[56]

For radical educators like Hugh the most available and appropriate technology in the twelfth century was the book, understood as that class of textual objects which certainly included, but was not limited to, the Book of Christian doctrine (the Bible). Hugh's *Didascalicon*, in fact, was a primer on medieval reading practices that departed significantly from the Augustinian didactic tradition in its insistence on teaching the art of reading—to

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[54] *Facing Reality* (p.156) [see note 10].
[55] Ibid (p.106).
[56] Cayley (pp.221-2) [see note 18].

student monks and lay people alike—as a form of pilgrimage or "return" in this life and not, as in Augustine, a ritual practice in divine redemption whose rewards were "reserved" for post-mortem reunion with God. As Jerome Taylor notes, for Hugh the "restoration of divine likeness" was "a process which begins with a study of the arts in this life,"[57] and this twelfth-century pedagogy of divine recovery, in Hugh's own words, begins "in reading."[58]

Education theorists throughout recent history, and all across the political spectrum, have taken up this idea that literacy training recuperates or remedies—in secular parlance, *remediates*—human beings otherwise lost to original sin, original stupidity, or fundamental ignorance understood as the lack of either an appropriate skill (for social functionality) or a necessary tool (for democratic participation). The historic conjoining of esoteric alchemical doctrine and Christian dogma, as well, can be easily spotted in this general interest in *transforming* human beings—understood as base metals, undeveloped minds, and/or untapped resources—into good, productive people via social engineering techniques installed, most noticeably, in the churches and schools (and nowadays in movies, video games, TV, and advertising, as well).

In this context, it becomes clear that the Modern School emphasis on hands-off interaction was a significant departure from even Dewey's progressive program for "educational transformation." What sets the Fermian philosophy apart—and what made the Modern School program truly radical and therefore threatening to school monopolists and cultural conservatives—was the idea, realized in practice, that educators in effect remove themselves and their educational "products" and let the students *find themselves* through "play" and free-form inquiries into the world around them. Educators in the alchemical tradition tend to think that learning requires the formal introduction of tinctures or elixirs into the murky broth of undeveloped minds in order to affect change, improvement, excellence, and success. Dealers in textbooks, handbooks, prefab curricula, educational software, plagiarism-detection services, and online courseware capitalize on this alchemical myth and are sometimes praised as magicians or priests in the fight against intellectual sloth and decadence.

For Ferm and the Modern Schoolers, conversely, learning requires only that educators make available a particular medium for "spontaneous self-activity" so that the individual "may make his [or her] own life concrete and tangible"—coordinating thought and experience, that is, in the manner discussed above—and so realize that "the meaning and purpose of all life is to express itself."[59] The vagueness of the formulation is necessary, it would seem, in order to avoid recourse to naming (and introducing) concrete remedies and recovery protocols which would, ultimately, serve as yet another layer of bureaucratic solution to a problem that doesn't really exist.

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[57] Taylor, Jerome, tr. *The Didascalicon of Hugh of Saint Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991 [1961] (p.30).
[58] Ibid (p.93).
[59] Ferm (p. 66) [see note 28].

In short, the best learning technology for Ferm is "play" itself, and in this context we get the startling (if gender-exclusive) statement that "[i]n his play [the child] is in his laboratory, analyzing and synthesizing the things with which he is familiar."[60] Educational projects of this order are truly anarchist, and thus democratic, in their insistence that no one can "give freedom," or deliver education, but that each must "earn it" for oneself.[61]

All the same, even the most anarchic, non-hierarchical, hands-off approach to learning requires a point of contact, a medium, a space for interaction, inquiry, collective action, and critical reflexivity in all the senses discussed so far. Recognizing this, Illich wanted to prioritize projects emphasizing the "convivial" use of technologies (books and reading in this case) as agents, yes, of "recovery" but in the sense of recovering "information" toward the cultivation of ideals of community, solidarity, collaboration, and reciprocity. These are clearly utopian aspirations with roots not only in early experiments on the North American continent in communal living and federalist alliances but also in late medieval reading "pilgrimages" toward "regions ever lighter, towards the light, into the light…."[62]

Granted, this point—that literacy is fundamental to liberal, enlightened consciousness—is familiar to the point of sounding silly, but let's add to the mix the idea that *reading* and what it entails—thinking, assimilation, synthesis, creating "your own book"—is also *writing* in ways neither abstract and primordial (as in Derrida's grammatology) nor merely metaphorical. Montaigne's *assays* were famously both writing as commonly understood today (inscriptions penned by an individual) and readings of classical authors "rummaged" and "ransacked," to use his terms, in a process of skeptical inquiry. The technology of modern "essay" writing, therefore, can be directly linked to pre-modern or high Renaissance technologies like the "common-place" book and other examples that combine the acts of reading and writing.[63] Today's digital read-write technologies—weblogs, for example—might be the most useful and appropriate *mediums* not only for coordinating thoughts and experiences but also for conducting the kind of information "recovery" work necessary to democratic participation and "convivial," socially-conscious living.

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[60] Ibid (p.94).
[61] Ibid (p.102).
[62] Cayley (p.232) [see note 18].
[63] As Max Thomas points out, to be "composed" in the sixteenth century meant "to be made of parts or to be elaborately or artificially put together"—in other words, to be *assembled*. Engaged in a process of both "mediation" and "production," the sixteenth-century composer of commonplace books was thus also "a kind of reader" moving through texts and marking them up with comments. (Thomas, Max W. "Reading and Writing the Renaissance Commonplace Book: A Question of Authorship?" *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*. Eds. Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi. Durham: Duke UP, 1994. 401-15.)

I wonder, in fact, what blog-based research "pilgrimages" would look like, what educational purposes they might serve, and how the actions and interactions inherent to research blogging would intersect with ideals of community, reciprocity, and collaboration. Twelfth-century pilgrims were often equipped with guidebooks containing travel tips and suggestions for how to enrich their journeys and find, in the end, what they were looking for. We need similar guidebooks today—not textbooks and handbooks with their monochrome, reductionist rhetoric, but guidebooks designed to enrich individual and collective journeys whose destinations and pathways will be determined, finally, by the travelers themselves.

Final Examination

Let me reintroduce Leon Czolgosz to conclude this report on alchemical transmutation in the age of angry assassins. I began by proposing that Czolgosz was the product of a bankrupt educational system and that his enormous success in the "school of assassins" was due largely to the systemic inequities inherent to late-nineteenth-century industrial-age schooling. We can only speculate, of course, as to what degrees Czolgosz would have earned—to what professional heights he would have climbed—if he had finished school (as his parents had hoped), gone to college, gotten good grades, and walked down the aisle on commencement day. But who knows? Even had he graduated, *summa cum laude*, from Yale or Harvard, Czolgosz may still have walked the very same path he did in Buffalo on that day in September, 1901, when he stole inconspicuously into the Temple of Music at the Pan Am Exhibition and blew two holes through McKinley's starched white shirt. There is, of course, no knowing.

Most do agree, however, that Czolgosz's "heroic" act did nothing to stem the tide of late capitalist imperialism, as he had planned—that, to the contrary, his violent deed helped reify, embolden, and streamline the same conservative, tyrannical impulses he had aimed to thwart. To use the tired cliché, his was the desperate act of a desperate man, and in his desperation, he helped incite not class revolution but widespread social hysteria, fueling in turn a massive social engineering campaign whose effects can still be felt today, as they will no doubt be felt tomorrow.

All the same, his desperate act was informed by anarchist ideas considered "foul" by conservative reactionaries but which the young Czolgosz found inspiring, edifying, and liberating. His lengthy tutelage in the school of assassins left him, as he confessed, with no choice but to "do something" for the cause he loved. His love, however, was a lonely, introspective affair born in a "hardscrabble" life devoid, we must conclude, of community support networks, health and education infrastructure, and economic opportunity. He had no "confidants," no "help." He had acted "alone absolutely." That Czolgosz acted alone, in fact, is perhaps the saddest part of this whole story.

So it wouldn't hurt to remember Czolgosz when we entertain notions of doing "something heroic" to combat the despotic lunacy of our current

political leaders. For my own part, I have no desire—to borrow the recent "lie" told by Ben Metcalf—"to hunt down George W. Bush, the president of the United States, and kill him with my bare hands."[64] For the abrupt and fruitless violence of assassination, I'd rather substitute the ongoing work of learning and production, wrought in the crucible of collective action.

True change in education, though, begins quite simply in looking at what we do as teachers and knowledge workers and thinking about how that work either does or does not help cultivate "creative being" in those around us. Instead of an alchemic process, we need a more effective medium, more appropriate media. At the very least, as Ferm and others taught us long ago, we need to make learning less about products delivered and more about communal interaction, reflexive inquiry, and deep reflection on the current "state of things." I retain a fondness for the idea that we can effect real change (growth, improvement, transformation) in those with whom interact, and that they, in turn, can effect change in us. I doubt our success, however, if instead of putting people in charge of their own (alchemical) transformations, we continue to insist on alchemizing those "substances" we feel compelled to transform.

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[64] "On Simple Human Decency," in *Harper's Magazine* (June 2006). Worth reading at <www.harpers.org/OnSimpleHumanDecency=1149635660.html>.