

## The Mined Mind: Domination, Desire, and Melancholy in *The Corn is Green*

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### INTRODUCTION

Problems of domination, determination, and liberation have always gone hand in hand with questions of education. As in other political genres, those doctrines that have promised the most radical new freedoms and human flourishings through pedagogy have consistently served as education's great new tyrannies. The reversal or "unmasking" of modern education as ideologically suspect marks a "crisis of legitimation" in contemporary discourses on education, because the oppositional pole to which one would swing in rejecting emancipatory educational projects is presumably a conventionalism no less ideologically based and sustained in domination.<sup>1</sup> If all education is fraught with ideology and domination, however, perhaps we come to experience a bit of relief: not from the interest in educational freedom, but from the task of imagining freedom as something we might create. Instead, we might be drawn to mine the resources of more conventional approaches to education for forms of liberty and human flourishing that may have gone overlooked.

The piece of conventionalism that serves as the object of study in this essay is *The Corn is Green*, a film that operates entirely within traditional educational themes, yet achieves a rare degree of ambivalence regarding the ideals represented therein.<sup>2</sup> Staged as a story of emancipatory education, the film portrays the teacher, Lily Moffat (Bette Davis), as a messianic savior who descends upon a Welsh mining town to free a chosen student, Morgan Evans (John Dall) from the darkness of the mines, drawing him instead into the light of education. Teaching is situated as a "profound calling" in analyses of the film, a mission to reshape the world and the will of the student through a series of replacements: the light of the schoolroom for the darkness of the mine, the word of truth for pastimes of drinking rum and fighting, and ultimately the replacement of Moffat herself for the local girls who threaten the undoing of her work.<sup>3</sup>

This last replacement stands out, both for its sacrificial symbolism and for its pedagogical use of student desire. Erotic striving holds an ambivalent place in educational theory: it serves alternately as a means to achieve and to overcome domination. In *The Corn is Green*, desire plays an equally doubled role, drawing teacher and student together and pulling them apart. At this intersection between domination and desire, however, a third category of educational relation emerges — a melancholy for the object left out of the curriculum — that creates a different sort of freedom within the dominance of discourse.

## EMANCIPATION, DOMINATION, AND DESIRE

One position on freedom in education, rooted in a metaphysical belief in the word as the truth, might be called a positive freedom, in the sense marked by Isaiah Berlin, insofar as it considers the liberty of the individual as a function of her/his place within learned truth.<sup>4</sup> Another position, known widely in its manifestation as critical pedagogy, could be called negative freedom, again in Berlin's sense, insofar as it holds that education is a means of dominating young minds toward a reproduction of oppressive social norms, and only in breaking from the status quo can the individual find freedom.

Historically, both of these models have relied on students' erotic striving as part of their normative message but, as one might guess, in contradictory ways. The positive model holds that desire is a fundamental, irrational aspect of the human psyche that drives the individual to subject her/himself to reason: desire is the way we learn. According to the negative model, in which the rationales of the discourses taught by schools have been poisoned by power and human error, desire represents that aspect of humanity that does not conform and that presents a way out of educational tyranny: desire is the way we unlearn.

If desire allows a break from the status quo, however, critical pedagogies beg the question of what lies outside current conceptions of education. The implicit assumption in all critical pedagogies since Plato's cave allegory is that there is a truth outside, but the people just aren't getting it. If this is the case, then critical pedagogies begin to look quite a bit like their metaphysical precursors, insofar as the desire that breaks the student from ignorance is at the same time directing her/him toward some greater truth. The negative freedom sought in critical pedagogical theory is an *emancipation from* that takes place under the auspices of a more primary *domination by*.<sup>5</sup>

Elizabeth Ellsworth calls out the implicit metaphysical system at work within critical frameworks by noting that contemporary critical theorists rely on supposedly transparent, neutral notions of rationality in their attempts to obscure their own political commitments.<sup>6</sup> Her critique may attribute more self-understanding to critical pedagogy than is due, and it certainly lacks some degree of self-reflection itself in supposing that Ellsworth's own commitments are all on the table for examination. But taken as a descriptive account rather than a critique, Ellsworth's redescription of critical pedagogy as a sort of blind metaphysics posits a significant point about the domination common to all education. Specifically, it shows that the naturalization of some particular concept, perspective, or set of values is a primary condition of educational domination: students become subject to a discourse by taking a perspective for granted. Moreover, the naturalization of the teacher's authority in terms of her/his privileged position within the given horizon of values provides a model for students' desires — an empowered way of being in the world worthy of emulation.

## MAJOR AND MINER

Conditions of domination in films about education are often borne by a single individual, whose single-minded determination serves as a stand-in for the social

categories that define humanity. Moffat sums up her determination early in the film: “When I was quite a young girl, I looked the world in the eye and decided I didn’t like it. I saw poverty and disease, ignorance and injustice, and in a small way I’ve always done what I could to fight them.” Moffat’s missionary positioning is a direct reference to Plato’s premodern critical pedagogy: her aim is to draw poor boys up from the mines to allow their bodies to play in the light of the sun and their minds to play in the light of reason.<sup>7</sup> That light, alien to the people of Glensarno, is perfectly evident in Moffat’s appearance, which redescribes the local culture in terms of her privileged gaze. Her self-presentation, the arrival of her books, her demands made on locals, and the power associated with her upbringing are enough to convince her students of a superior way of life, another discourse outside their own, in which Moffat is clearly a powerful figure.

In order to transform her students in accord with their already established recognition of her authority, the next step is to allow them to be similarly recognized by becoming like her in body and taste. Seemingly incidental scenes and exchanges demonstrate Moffat’s insistence on students’ personal and pedagogical habits. Washing the coal soot from their faces, instruction on the use of a nail file, money spent on new suits and speaking in an educated manner are all examples of a performance of scholarly demeanor intended to reflect inward on the character of the students. The scholarly order inscribed upon their bodies works upon their identities: to speak in school is to espouse the attitudes and beliefs appropriate to scholarly ways of knowing, to replace untutored habits and instincts with those of the teacher.

In order to reinforce the students’ identification with their new behaviors, appearances, and values, the same recognition they have extended to Moffat is returned to them as a demand. As a delayed reply to Morgan’s accusation: “You aren’t interested in me,” Moffat states bluntly, “I don’t understand you.” An interest in Morgan as he was before Moffat rescued him from the mines is so far outside her purposes that the accusation does not make sense to her. Moffat recognizes her student as a student, but her gaze excludes any reference to who he was except in the negative. Moffat’s refusal to recognize Morgan except in the role of the student, on his way to where she stands, means that there is no negotiation or compromise between his way of life and hers. In order to be recognized, to gain an identity, he must not only behave as she demands, but shake off the constraints of his current state and take on her interests, her beliefs, her concerns as his own. It is not only his knowledge that must be changed, but his desires.

#### SEDUCING A MINER

Morgan’s emancipation from the mines requires his subjection to the educated order Moffat represents through the force of his own desire. Films traditionally represent the protagonist’s desires by a love interest, and while films about educational relationships are no exception to this rule, the presentation of desire between teachers and students tends to take on remarkable shapes in order to suggest the presence of desire without suggesting pederasty. Moffat and Morgan’s relationship is exemplary: there is clearly attraction and longing between the two, but in

order to show Morgan's desire on the screen another character must emerge with whom Morgan can enact the passion that he and Moffat cannot.

When first introduced to Moffat, Morgan is part of a group of boys freshly emerged from the mines, smiling and singing. Soot covering his face and clothes, Morgan's mouth is no cleaner: "Please Miss, can I have a kiss?" She bends him over and swats his backside instead, but it is important to note that Morgan first makes himself known to his teacher through his body. While his first words to her are disobedient, his body bends easily to her punishment as a malleable object that might be transformed by her attention. Under Moffat's discipline, Morgan is reborn: he forgoes the mines for private lessons, sports new clothes and a clean-shaven face. His recognition by Moffat, the authorized representative of the empowered, leads him to return to her for attention and approval, even as he raises her status well beyond his grasp. Even when he falls back upon his old hobby of drinking rum, his mind is still on his new passion: with chalk in hand, Morgan practices his Latin, declining *amo* on the wooden counter of a bar. He is in love with learning, language, and Lily.

Moffat confesses her love for Morgan in a similarly displaced manner, speaking to her assistant of her desire to be closer to her star pupil: "It is odd to have spent so many hours with another human being in the closest intellectual communion...I know every trick and twist to that brain of his...and yet not to know him at all." While Moffat can affect her student's striving, her pedagogical purposes define the limits of her relationship to Morgan: her knowledge stops before the carnal. She does not "know" Morgan and therefore cannot control him except at a distance. As Moffat describes herself as having a figure that insures cleverness and an age that excludes marriage, the love interest that commonly signifies the protagonist's desire must remain platonic. The sexual desire that represents Morgan's erotic striving must appear in the form of another woman.

After a fight in which Morgan lets Moffat know that he is tired of being known as "the school mistress's dog," of having his identity altered by being addressed as "Mr. Evans" instead of "Morgan," the stage is set for an object of desire who knows Morgan in ways the teacher cannot.<sup>8</sup> Up until this point in the film, Bessie Watty's character has developed as no more than a disobedient, recalcitrant child whose noisy interjections serve as the backdrop for Morgan's hard work. As Morgan carries out his fall from grace, however, Bessie falls in her escape from a second-story window directly into his path. Like Milton's Lucifer, she is reborn in her fall, suddenly emerging as the object that satisfies the desire between Morgan and Moffat.

Recalling Moffat's refusal to recognize Morgan as anything but a student — "I don't understand you" — Bessie's recognition is of everything in Morgan that goes unrealized in the school — "What a man wants is a little bit of sympathy." In their joint exodus from the school, Morgan and Bessie invoke an Adam and Eve in reverse, returning from knowledge to a point of innocent origin. The empowered language of the school disappears as she sings to him in their mother tongue — the

“native” language that Moffat cannot speak — as a chorus of Welsh miners echoes their song in the distance. Under a tree in an Edenic walled garden, a whiskey bottle replaces the apple that represents Moffat’s paradise of academic knowledge and a song replaces her words.

In realizing the desire between Moffat and Morgan, Bessie’s kiss undermines all that Moffat has been struggling to attain, reducing Morgan to acting on untutored impulse, according to a way of life over which Moffat has no control. Bessie’s place as a fantasy object for both Moffat and Morgan explains the structure of the educational relationship. While Moffat would like to have the interest in Morgan that he accuses her of lacking, she cannot because her desire for Morgan would be for precisely those aspects of him that differ from herself, specifically for his native character. To fall in love with Morgan would be to appreciate the very characteristics Moffat seeks to obliterate in him. Bessie accomplishes Moffat’s desire for her, but as that part of Moffat’s character that must be stilled in order for Moffat to dominate Morgan’s understanding of the world; Bessie emerges in the film only to be destroyed.

Morgan returns to his studies, but his dalliance with his former life has had greater consequences than he expected. While Bessie’s role is on the one hand no more than a fantasy object where Morgan and Moffat come together, on the other she also serves to represent the fertility of the teacher-student relationship. Like the representation of Morgan’s educational desires in extracurricular pursuits, the fertility of his intellectual pursuits is represented by precisely that which would undo his future as a scholar and Moffat’s success as a teacher: the symbolic realization of their love has become its potential undoing.

The battle for Morgan’s identity takes place entirely in his absence and ignorance. While he sits for his scholarship exams at Oxford, ostensibly determining his own fate offscreen, Bessie flaunts her pregnancy in front of the intellectually fertile but physically barren Moffat. “You couldn’t see what was going on under your nose,” Bessie asserts, speaking of her own tryst with Morgan, but alluding to Moffat’s unrecognized desires, “Well you can’t manage him any longer ‘cause he’s got to manage *me* now.” Moffat threatens to kill Bessie if she does not vacate before Morgan arrives, but settles for paying her off, quieting the desiring body she cannot destroy.

In a final sequence of convergences, Morgan returns from his exams, his scholarship at Oxford is confirmed, his fatherhood revealed, and Moffat agrees to raise his child as long as he agrees never to return to Glensarno. Morgan’s ties of love to his home and the girl he would otherwise be obligated to wed are severed completely by new ties to Moffat. By getting rid of Bessie — the symbol of her desire as well as her competition — Moffat has closed the circle of Morgan’s desires and her own. She has become not only the object of his educational desires but in keeping with her name, Lily, now also the virgin mother of his child.

The conditions under which Morgan learns of his fatherhood are telling: a telegram arrives via a local woman from Glensarno. “I’ve never seen a telegram,”

she announces and asks Moffat to read it aloud. Perhaps sensing an opportunity, Moffat does so: Morgan has been accepted. The woman immediately runs out to tell the town. Up to this point, Morgan has made clear his plans to renounce the scholarship, but only to a handful of people connected to the school. Through Moffat's reading — through language and learning — Morgan has had the opposite decision made for him. He will not be able to disappoint an entire town that has been anxiously awaiting the news. Moffat — speaking for herself and the town — explains that Morgan's duty is to the world and not to the child. His face, which moments before displayed angry conviction, is soft, malleable, and attentive. Before he speaks, Moffat has already achieved her aims: "I am going to have my way."

Moffat's location — seated next to Morgan — and her language are intimate: "Look at me Morgan. For the first time we are together. Our hearts are face to face unashamed. The clock is ticking and there is no time to lose." If Morgan is "at the crossroads," it is clear which path leads to salvation. He must go forth, achieve great things and renounce all else, but Moffat's words are as odd as her assumptions. Can Morgan, a good and moral person, simply forget his child? What is the implied shame: the pregnancy, the bribery, or the love between teacher and student? After all, why are their collective *hearts* emphasized?

Responding to the news of the scholarship, a mob gathers outside Moffat's door, cheering for Morgan, waiting to carry him off, to expel him finally from his hometown. He is lifted onto their shoulders as the music rises to mark the triumph of the teacher and the film closes.

#### DON'T LOOK BACK

As the townspeople triumphantly carry Morgan off, he glances back briefly as Moffat looks longingly in his direction. Watching at the window, Moffat's face displays deep sorrow, which is peculiar given that Morgan has fulfilled her expectations, acted at her command, and that their relationship has been consummated, through Bessie, in her impending motherhood. Her sadness is not a matter of the power she wields but its result: his future and hers, brought together in the educational moment, are now moving in opposite directions. Morgan's education and his future have been thoroughly dominated by the knowledge and values of his teacher. He has placed himself under his teacher's command to the point of agreeing that he will never return to his hometown again. But in doing so he occupies the academic position once held by the teacher while she in turn has taken the position of a humble townspeople in Glensarno. Each has been changed by their highly mediated erotic encounter, and each dominated by the educational relationship to the extent that both go forth with conviction that what they do is right. Why, then, do both look back at their former positions one last time before the closing credits fix each in place?

Part of the reason is that the film is over. The finality of Morgan's choice never to return is foreshadowed in an earlier statement in which he expresses his dissatisfaction with the limitations of his small-town life: "Since the day I was born, I've been a prisoner behind a stone wall, and now someone has given me a leg up

to have a look at the other side. They cannot drag me back again. They cannot. Someone must give me a push and send me over.” Morgan recognizes the wall as that which separates him from the life of power and knowledge that belongs to learned people like Moffat. Seen from the other side, however, the same wall excludes those with an education from participating in the provincial life of the miner and the townsfolk. The push over the wall that Moffat offers is an expulsion from his own life as well as a leg up. Having abided by Moffat’s commandments, Morgan has been banished from his former life, even forsaken. Far from any clear emancipation, the result of his education becomes another cross to bear.

The finality of the choice that closes the film, accompanied by the longing across the widening gap between teacher and student, underscores the fact that despite each character’s transformation, both Moffat and Morgan find themselves still quite attached to the roles of teacher and student they once occupied before their desires were realized. While the specific knowledge and attachments that defined their place in their old roles have no place in their new lives and have been forbidden to them by their pact, something of those former roles holds inside each of them that cannot be eradicated by their new positions.

According to Judith Butler’s reading of Sigmund Freud, the final scene in *The Corn is Green* is a perfect representation of melancholic identification with a lost or forbidden object: “the ego is said to incorporate [the lost] other into the very structure of the ego... The loss of the other whom one desires and loves is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbor that other within the very structure of the self.”<sup>9</sup> While Morgan will go on to participate in new horizons of meaning at Oxford, to be further dominated by the purposes embedded in the Oxford way of life according to his own erotic striving, his forbidden attachments to his home will become rooted in his identity as an aspect of the self that cannot be transformed by new desires. The melancholic object serves as a stumbling block to Morgan’s success as a student, insofar as his success is defined by his total transformation by the discourses of the school. But it also serves as a stumbling block to the totalizing forces of the school, a blot or stain upon Oxford’s discursive horizon that prevents Morgan from dissolving into his new environment.<sup>10</sup> Distinct from both the premodern, positive freedom of belonging to the word and the modern, negative freedom of escape, the melancholic identification presents a mechanism of educational freedom based in the subject’s erotic attachments to (and domination by) multiple discourses.<sup>11</sup> Morgan’s sense of expulsion and loneliness in relation to both his hometown and the scholar’s life ahead of him is reframed in a potentially positive light: his commitments to both discourses prevent total identification with either, and through his imperfect participation both might be reshaped.<sup>12</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The very possibility of a melancholic identification, of an alienated body within a dominating structure of education that remains undominated by the power of the school, suggests an incompleteness in the power of educational discourse to dominate the subject. Some space must exist within the totalizing discourses of knowledge and culture to accommodate the various melancholic identifications that

create differences and breaks within a discourse. Some of these accommodating spaces in discourse have become naturalized to the point of merging with the fabric of the discourse itself: consider, for instance, the melancholy of lost innocence in childhood, the nostalgia held for the “native,” or the experience of unmediated emotion between two people that are expected elements of Western liberal talk. When we expect such melancholy as part of a discourse, whatever challenge it may have once posed has been spent, while the space it has carved in the discourse remains as a fossil of the life it once had. These constitutive melancholic spaces stabilize and naturalize a discourse by creating innocuous spaces of resistance or protest which introduce no difference or conflict, but only reproduce the discourse as it is.

From the perspective of melancholic identification, the discourse of critical pedagogies, for instance, is so closely aligned to the humanist, individualist ideology that already dominates school culture that believing it requires no difference, no change in the way we think or practice education. Arguing Ellsworth’s point from a different direction, we might say that critical pedagogies serve to reproduce structures of oppression by engaging student and teacher energies in innocuous activities that leave those structures intact. Alternately, the idea of melancholy in education provides a new direction, not so much for legitimating education as describing the freedoms and potentials for change therein: as any discourse relies on its other for its self-definition, melancholy provides a description of how the other, as the new, enters into a discourse and changes the way we describe the world.

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1. “If modern education has been and is still legitimated by ‘metanarratives of emancipation’ that have been unmasked as ideological, how might education be legitimated in the postmodern condition?” Michael Peters, *Poststructuralism, Politics, and Education* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 1996), 10, quoted in Elizabeth A. St. Pierre, “An Introduction to Figurations — A Poststructural Practice of Inquiry,” *Qualitative Studies In Education* 10, no. 3 (1997), 279–80. See also Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geof and Brian Massumi Bennington (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

2. *The Corn is Green*, film, directed by Irving Rapper (Burbank, Calif.: Warner Brothers, 1945).

3. Mary M. Dalton, *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

4. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

5. Alexander Sidorkin similarly argues that all education proceeds by way of a domination that is inseparable from the educational goal of producing human subjects, suggesting that any notion of educational freedom that is premised on a radical departure from given practices will only find itself mired in another form of domination. Alexander Sidorkin, “Carnival and Domination: Pedagogies of Neither Care Nor Justice,” *Educational Theory* 47, no. 2 (1997).

6. Ellsworth herself makes this statement from within an ideology that poses individuals as bodies that bear the rights of recognition that their culture is due. Her point is to make the politics of her own teaching transparent, but each level of transparency she proposes necessarily presupposes a horizon of unrecognized commitments in order to frame the very notion of transparency. Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, ed. Carmen and Jennifer Gore Luke (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96.

7. Morgan is initially identified as a promising student in a line from an essay he writes for class: “If a light should come into the mine....”

8. In hearing Morgan's plea to be called by his Christian name one can't help but recall Pamela Dare, in *To Sir, with Love*, asking to be similarly addressed, in essence missing the point of her own education.
9. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 73–4.
10. Slavoj Žižek suggests that melancholy, redescribed as the *objet petit a*, is precisely that which creates authority in a discourse, as it prevents the individual from being absorbed entirely by the discursive mechanism already in place. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan In Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 94–6.
11. Bronwyn Davies is one of a number of theorists who have promoted the idea that the production of multiple or alternative discourses creates possibilities for change in schools. Bronwyn Davies, "The Discursive Production of the Male/Female Dualism in School Settings," *Oxford Review of Education* 15, no. 3 (1989).
12. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 53–4.