

8 contempts

rical, so compact, underwent, through the irresolution that cleft her mind, a process almost, as it were, of decay: one cheek seemed to have grown thinner (but not the other), her mouth was no longer exactly in the middle of her face, her eyes, bewildered and dim, seemed to be disintegrating within their sockets as though within a circle of dark wax.¹⁴

Emilia remains for Riccardo a locus of ambiguity. He cannot grasp her. Since she is “just a typist” he puts it down to her being irrational or corrupt or both. We never find out if this is true; Emilia’s character is **always out of focus**, seen through the lens of Riccardo’s exasperation. In the movie, when the Bardot-block takes over this character, its ambiguity is amplified **but the ambiguity takes on a depth of interestingness it doesn’t have in the book. Bardot is a secret. She remains a secret. I can’t analyze this.** I’ll give an example of how it works in the movie—of how she and Godard collaborated to make it work, to keep her secret.

There was a critical issue of profit involved. Oscar Wilde again: “Morality like art means drawing a line somewhere.”¹⁵ When he shot the film, Godard had drawn a line at Bardot’s body; he did not exploit it. There is a bathtub scene, but it shows **her lying in the bath with a very large book of film criticism (about Fritz Lang) obscuring her body.** When the American producer Levine saw the first cut of *Contempt* he was irate, felt he’d been cheated, and demanded nudity. He wanted to get his five million francs’ worth out of that body. So Godard added a scene at the start of the film, before the credits. It shows a naked Bardot lying on a bed with her husband beside her. They are talking. She is asking him if he likes her body. She itemizes every body part. “Do you like my toes, do you like my knees, do you like my ass?” she asks. “Which do you like better, my right toes or my left toes? My right knee or my left knee? My breasts or my nipples?” Meanwhile the camera roves around her body, dwelling most lengthily on her backside. Riccardo answers each of her questions solemnly and finally says, “I love you totally, tenderly, tragically.” To which Bardot with

majestic ambiguity replies, "Moi aussi," and the scene ends.

Bardot performs this scene entirely without contempt. Her gestures are simple, transparent; her tone of voice quietly banal; her attitude as innocent as water. And somehow from the pure center of this total and totally imposed exposure of herself, she disappears. Even as she puts herself on sale, toe by toe and nipple by nipple—to her husband's judgment, to Godard's camera, to the moviegoers' gaze—she eludes the transaction. She becomes something exorbitant, as a secret must be. We could never afford her.

And from this moment on she is the soft master of every scene. By far my favorite of her tactics of soft mastery is the wrap gesture. There are three (I think) places in the movie where Bardot puts on a bathrobe. In each case as a single action she shrugs it on, flings the belt around her waist, draws it tight with both hands, and leaves the scene. It's stupendous. She wraps herself and goes. She wins. Every time she does this, she wins the movie. "Are you an innately unbounded thing?" the movie asks Bardot, and instead of answering she wraps herself in boundlessness and exits.

Bardot is the hero of this epic. She too *knows profit*. From the opening shot, she comports herself as a *keimêlion*, as a treasure laid up, and she seems able to retain and to impose on us a sense of this *keimêlion* as exorbitant, beyond price. Like Odysseus, she has the power to possess it or to give it away. And in collaboration with Godard she manages to make us believe that profit, for those who know it, can have a transcendent face, or at least a transcendent ass.

notes

1. Alberto Moravia, *Il disprezzo* (Milan 1954); quotations from *Contempt*, translated by Angus Davidson (New York 1999).

2. *Odyssey* 1.351–52.

3. *Odyssey* 19.282–86.

4. Moses Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York 2002), 61.

5. Moravia (note 1), 233.