



Ingmar Bergman's film *The Silence* (1963) opens with a scene on a train in which Ester, an ill translator, coughs up blood. The boy is Johan, a son of Ester's sister, Anna, who is not a translator, and therefore not ill. The only time when Ester the translator is not coughing up blood or deathly ill is when she is typing up her translation or taking notes while she's reading. And we are also introduced to Bergman's made-up language posted on the glass window of the cabin: NITSEL STANTNJON PALIK. Little Johan points out the foreign words to his translator aunt, Ester, and asks, "What does it mean?" She answers, "I don't know." They are travelling in a foreign country, and an impending war or military takeover is suggested by the images of tanks and men in military uniforms with berets and sunglasses at a town called Timoka.

Bergman's genius lies in the use of mirrors throughout the film. I see Bergman's mirrors as sites of translation, deformation zones. This scene takes place almost entirely on a large mirror in Ester's room. Soon after their arrival in Timoka, Ester, needing more drink, has called the hotel waiter and asks him whether he speaks French, English, then German. The framing of the shot is such that we have a close-up of the waiter's face, outside the mirror, and Ester is seen standing reflected in the mirror, holding an empty bottle of booze. The waiter's mouth moves but the sounds he utters are silence with occasional incomprehensible jibberish. Obviously, he's speaking a foreign language. Then miraculously, the bottle makes its way into the hands of the waiter, outside the mirror. This miraculous act, taking place in the mirror, is an act of translation, a translation performance. It's only natural that the translation is conducted in the mirror, for it is a site of various reflections, languages, a site where things are already mirrored, re-represented, a site where language "goes from a second party to a third party, neither of whom has seen." Like translation, Bergman's mirror is a site of mapping. Foreign words appear first posted on the glass window of a train cabin, then spoken foreign words are exchanged in the mirror of a hotel room. And what moves across the mirror, is also a glass, an empty bottle. The clear bottle, like silence,

like jibberish, is a glass among glasses, a sign among signs, language among languages.

Kim Hyesoon's genius also lies with the way she uses mirrors. In her poem, "Memories of Giving Birth to a Daughter," crossings take place through mirrors, they are zones of intensities through which an intensity passes:

I open a mirror and enter,
mother is inside a mirror, sitting.
I open a mirror and enter again,
grandmother is inside a mirror, sitting.
I push aside this grandmother mirror and step over a doorsill,
great grandmother is inside a mirror, laughing.
I place my head inside great grandmother's laughing lips,
great-great grandmother, younger than me
turns around inside a mirror, sitting.
I open this mirror and enter,
enter, and
enter again.
All the ancestral mothers are sitting
inside a darkening mirror,
and these mothers mutter and call in my direction,
"Mommy, Mommy."¹³

Mirrors have been long used in Korean shaman's rituals as armor, to intensify energies, to induce trances,

or to light a path to the underworld during spirit-travel. Within the oral tradition of Korean shamanism, the realm women were expelled to, women were free to express and explore their identities. It was the only zone in which women, as performers of rites, songs, and storytelling, were not subservient to men. In this zone of shamans, the lowly outsiders, the spoken and written *hangül* thrived. So Kim Hyesoon's mirrors derive from a historically and linguistically expelled zone. And Kim points out that this was where women could redefine their prescribed identities through shaman narratives, such as "Princess Abandoned." The place Princess Abandoned "travels to via death is a place of death within life...a feminine space of creation. It is *hyonbin*." Kim explains *hyon* as "closed eyes therefore everything is black and *bin* as a signifier for female reproductive organs, a mouth of a lock, a valley, a mountain spring ... inside this dark womb the possibility of all life is held. At that place patriarchy, the male-centered thing breaks, the universality of all things breaks."¹⁴ I call it a place of women's chorus (not to be confused with KORUS, which stands for Korea-US free trade agreement). There is another layer to Kim Hyesoon's expelled zone. While Kim Hyesoon was working as an editor she had to go back and forth between the publishing house she worked for and the military censors. Many of the manuscripts

were handed back to her all blackened with ink. I think of Kim Hyesoon's mirrors as shields. Her poems also induce in me a trance-like state because, afterwards, I can never remember how I translated her poems. Most importantly, Kim's mirrors are translation surfaces—they house mothers with motherless tongues, making endless crossings from one generation to another, from woman to woman, from language to language, creating what Benjamin calls an “embryonic or intensive form.”¹⁵



Bergman's translation mirrors are pregnant with illness, homesickness, and even puns. Here is another remarkable translation image. A newspaper carrier hands a newspaper to Ester's sister, Anna, and she quickly flips through the paper written in jibberish, in a foreign language, and briefly notices the only thing she is familiar with—an announcement of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. And then to a

shot where we see the newspaper board on the back of the carrier (also with foreign words) and at the same time Anna's eye in the mirror of her compact powder case. The powder case is empty, so she didn't really open it to powder her face, but to translate, and what's mirrored is her own eye, a variation of her eye. She is not a translator, but her eye is already a site of variations. I like to think that Bergman is punning here: "She may not be a translator, but she does have an eye for translation."



While Anna is out and about chasing her bodily desires, Ester is more or less confined to bed. And the hotel waiter who tends to Ester's illness, when not uttering silence or foreign words, retreats into his own room. It's not uncommon to find foreign words in a dark cubby-hole, perhaps enjoying a morsel of cornbread, when they are not performing translation.

Like Kim Hyesoon's ancestral mothers, Ester practically lives inside the mirror amongst other mirrored images—those “fancy books” that she translates, as pointed out by Anna with a tone of envy, sarcasm, and disapproval. Anna despises her ill sister who lives inside the mirror, perpetually working on fancy books written in a foreign language. To Anna, Ester is practically a foreigner. So it's only natural that Anna hates Ester. Like translation, foreigners are despised. Anna's son, like his Aunt Ester, is prone to foreign words and, therefore, homesickness. Ester asks Johan, Are you homesick? And he nods, Yes. Little Johan is also confined to bed, reading a Russian novel in translation, *A Hero of Our Time*, and asks his aunt why she translates. *The Silence* ends with Little Johan reading the foreign words that his aunt has written down for him. He has become a foreigner like his translator aunt.

