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Jamie Bulloch)

Christian Griffiths

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Review of Timur Vermes's *Look Who's Back* (trans. Jamie Bulloch)

CHRISTIAN GRIFFITHS
Monash University

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———. *Er ist wieder da*. Frankfurt am Maim: Eichborn Verlag, 2012.

For those of us in the non-German-speaking world, the mass appeal that was central to Adolf Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s remains something of a mystery, for the barrier of language has tended to shield us from the gift for oratory that was reputed to be one of the Führer's most effective weapons. Film footage of Hitler's speeches, such as we find in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) certainly provide us with a material record of its effect, but even if we observe these performances with subtitles, the synthesis of sound and meaning that is at the heart of effective oratory remains absent. Moreover, the mystery of Hitler's appeal is not solely one of language difference; it is also an issue of historical difference, and in this respect even modern Germans might find it baffling, for it is unlikely that any demagogue could win popular support today by speaking, however passionately, on such topics as the worker's struggle, or the glory of the nation. Timur Vermes's controversial comic novel *Look Who's Back*, attempts in part to solve this mystery by considering the kinds of issues a modern Hitler might exploit to win support and facilitate a rise to power. The novel has been recently translated into English by British historian and writer Jamie Bulloch, who extends this aspect of Vermes's project by providing Anglophone readers with a convincing simulacrum of the types of rhetorical strategy that might be used to this end, thereby offering us insight into how the most dangerous demagogues may effect their rise to power.

The novel is presented as a first-hand narrative in the voice of Hitler himself, who has mysteriously come to consciousness in twenty-first century Berlin, with no clue as to how he got there. With characteristic pragmatism, Hitler does not question the means by which this miracle has occurred, but instead accepts it as the hand of fate positioning him to fulfil his destiny by leading Germany to glory. The narrative contrasts Hitler's pursuit of this goal with the critiques of modern German culture that his comically mismatched ideology construes. For example, early in the novel, Hitler, having yet to secure a domicile, takes refuge in a news kiosk. When examining the works of print media that are housed there, with glossy magazines largely taking the place of newspapers, he offers the following observation:

One would develop an ulcer from reading the scribblings of the syphilitic, degenerate minds within the gutter press who, manifestly freed from all state control, were at liberty to publish the sick and profane view of the world they had dreamed up (26).

Although the comment is fashioned in the rhetoric of a National Socialist ideologue, the context in which it is presented ensures that there would be few modern readers who would not identify to some degree with its assessment of the modern media culture. Through this strategy, Vermes is able to offer more than a simple fish-out-of-water story; by reproducing Hitler's rhetoric and applying it to a modern context, he provides the reader with insight into

precisely the kind of engagements that Hitler's original supporters might have found so appealing.

Similarly, Vermes' feat of historical translation is matched by Bulloch's various feats of lingual translation, which offer the non-German speaker access to a rhetorical experience that may convincingly evoke the character of the original. For example, one of the novel's most effective and sustained set-pieces depicts Hitler's impressions of modern television programming (62–72), and this shows Bulloch's strategies at their most effective. Alone in a newly acquired apartment, Hitler initially mistakes the flat-screen TV in the corner for a piece of (decadent) modern art, and when he finally learns how to switch it on, he is bombarded with light and sound images that force him instantly to withdraw. Yet, concluding that television is one of the most important devices of modern mass-communication (he has, at this point, only the barest inkling of the existence of the internet), he makes a point of immersing himself in it.

Much of what is reported in this passage requires significant decoding, but it is clear that his channel-surfing experiment takes in several cooking shows, advertisements, some reality programming, a courtroom drama, a news program, possibly a soap opera, and (at least I think) *Judge Judy*. Bulloch's translation of Vermes' invective in this passage utilizes a command of diverse vocabulary and deft figures of speech to convey the comically mounting incredulity and dismay of the protagonist. Since the effect relies to a large degree on the cumulative effect of the rhetoric, isolated instances will hardly convey this convincingly, but one example may illustrate. On turning to a news channel, Hitler observes that,

while the man presented his reports, banners ran across the picture, some with figures, some with phrases, as if what the announcer was saying was so negligible one might as well follow the banners, or vice-versa. What was certain was that one would suffer a stroke if one tried to follow everything [...] Mobilising every last ounce of my inner strength, I spent several minutes attempting to grasp what was happening [...] On the verge of despair, I crouched in front of the machine and tried to cover the inconsequential swarm of words with my hands so I could concentrate on the spoken word. But more gobbledygook was shifting, constantly, in almost every corner of the screen. The time, the stock prices, the price of the American dollar, the temperature of the remotest corners of the earth [...] It was as if the information were being retrieved from a lunatic asylum. (67)

The vocabulary here is diverse, sustaining interest by offering multiple synonyms, but without ever having to rely on obscurity; the syntactic structures match the rhythms of good oratory; and the use of figures of speech is highly developed without ever really drawing attention to itself. The translator's skill is shown here in the degree to which the language has preserved rhetorical effects that can potentially transcend historical and lingual boundaries, resulting in a translation that conceives its transfer from one language to another as the act of building on the work of the author, rather than simply replicating its effects in a new context.

Clearly, one of the key strategies of the novel is its use of humour, and the withering observations on modern culture that this Hitler offers have the effect of making the character oddly sympathetic. Of course, this suggests a more serious purpose to the novel, where it may be interpreted as a warning against our cultural susceptibility to comedy, which may thereby be used by the mechanisms of mass communication to seduce us ideologically. However, comic writing is a rare talent, and the challenge of drawing humour out of a taboo subject is no doubt a significant one; indeed, for Vermes, it is an approach that has attracted considerable approbation. Setting aside the possible ethical questions, the degree to which the

literary feat is accomplished suggests that *Look Who's Back* is the work of a substantial talent. Similarly, while the choice of an educated and experienced translator confirms the cultural importance of the work, the quality of the translation itself, which is able to produce comic effects in the novel for Anglophone readers, and thereby deliver its central controversies to a broader market, suggests that Bulloch is a literary figure of comparable talent.