

DANI RADO

Review of Martha Baillie's *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel: A Novel*

The Search for Heinrich Schlögel: A Novel, by Martha Baillie. Portland: Tin House Books, 2014.

There's a lot happening in the plot and on the pages of Martha Baillie's fourth novel *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel*, but to begin it's easiest to say the book is about a young man who goes on a two-week hiking trip through the interior of Baffin Island, part of the Nunavut territory of Canada, and returns to find that somehow thirty years have passed. The twenty-year-old Heinrich quickly runs through the predictable struggles one would imagine if he fast-forwarded those thirty years—finding a menial job to replace the outdated currency in your pocket, convincing strangers to trust and help you, getting new identification cards and wondering if you can still claim to be you, being overwhelmed by the internet, and trying to explain to an elderly parent that you are alive after all and still twenty years old. That is, Schlögel finds the world familiar yet foreign, but what makes this novel both fantastic and realist is the extent to which he remains irrevocably himself.

Told from the point of view of an archivist and including her carefully accumulated materials, we get the impression that before his departure Schlögel was less the adventurer and more the pensive loner who mapped his course on the suggestion of others—his mother, his sister Inge, and Jeremy, the young Canadian who befriends him working the hops fields in Germany, for example. Indeed, his journey began because he decided to retrace the path of eighteenth-century British explorer and Hudson Bay Company employee, Samuel Hearne. Despite the fact that, as we learn, he did something as incredible as travel through time, which included going into the past to witness Hearne's expedition, when Schlögel returns from his trip he quickly settles into the background of the events around him. He takes up a job at a fish factory and leads a mostly mute existence in the house of Sarah Ashevak, an elderly Inuit woman from whom he rents a room.

He establishes a friendship with Sarah's granddaughter Vicky, who affectionately calls him "Deadman" in reference to his being listed as deceased after so many years missing. But he never associates with her or her friends (nevermind friends of his own) outside the house. As he hasn't aged, neither have his thoughts, which even in this future remain what they were while he was in the wilderness. Then he only thought of how he might stay on in Frobisher's Bay and get a job, which "would mean that Heinrich could stay in one place and attempt to understand what was expected of him" (146).

But before we get to this point, the book takes its time to walk us through Schlögel's quaint childhood in Tettngang, a small town in West Germany. In a progression of vignettes, we see the impressions left on him by his mother, father, and most notably his sister Inge. Although we feel close to this narrative, we are occasionally reminded through footnotes and other commentary that the novel really follows an unnamed and self-appointed archivist who is obsessed with discovering Schlögel and his story. She's spent years and vast sums of money tracking down letters, journal entries, photographs, and interviews that relate to the life and mystery of Heinrich Schlögel. While the annotations can occasionally feel like more of a distraction than integral to the story, this narrator's opening "Archivist's Note" establishes both the elusive nature of the search and the narrator's own justification for future bouts of omniscience in a manner similar to Melville's "Extracts (Supplied by a Sub-Sub Librarian)" that begins *Moby Dick*.

That is, the novel takes us through the process of making history, of piecing together the primary accounts one gathers through diligent, almost obsessive work into a coherent narrative in an attempt to capture some larger understanding of the subject at hand and thus the world at large. Of course there are necessary uncertainties and questions of truth that come along with any such project, but *Heinrich Schlögel* does not play that familiar game with the reader. It does not undo itself; old facts are not thrown into doubt as new ones are gathered. Rather, the novel works by accumulation. Each new piece of information or new story, though ultimately given full shape only in the narrator's imagination, is presented as truth. Or as close to it as we can get.

The narrator's interjections and footnotes don't overwhelm the story of Heinrich Schlögel, or even cast the narrator's mental state in doubt as such devices normally do in this type of surrealist fiction. The brief forays into her personal life, such as, "After I left home, my parents acquired gambling debts of which I was unaware, debts that more than devoured their estate. Am I becoming as compulsive as my parents and will I end by owing as much as they did? Soon we will all

have to pay off our debts," sound less like someone truly anxious about her own state of affairs and more like someone groping for melodrama in order to feel some connection to the protagonist (237). It is difficult to believe that she might be compulsive when this is only the twenty-third footnote and it occurs on page 237. A note every ten pages is rather measured. Most of the time though, the narrator reports events so matter-of-factly that we forget she is there, that there is another person between us, the readers, and this character of Heinrich Schlögel. When she writes things like, "He washed and stored his cooking gear, he packed the last of his food, checked the ropes of his tent to be sure they were secure, and he set off to explore his surroundings more closely," we simply accept that that is what he did (179).

The compelling aspect of the novel is that although we don't question the veracity of past events, the past never actually is. It changes as our present perspective changes, and thus we are always responsible to and for it, even if not in a direct way. Heinrich has no direct link to the explorer Hearne, nor does the archivist have any direct link to Schlögel. It even takes us past the accountability for past atrocities, though there are elements of that in the way the novel deftly touches on the Church's violation of Inuit children. Instead the book rests on the notion that we are accountable to the aura of the past, and it to us. As Heinrich accuses Samuel Hearne (the actual man stuck in a time warp as well, or just an hallucination of the explorer), "You disgust me. I despise your arrogant certainty that you've been chosen somehow to understand the world . . . to ram your laws in place, here, there, and everywhere you like. . . . Where are the answers you promised?" (161). Like Heinrich and Hearne are bound across two hundred years by the explorer's journal that Schlögel faithfully follows, we are all bound to any past event we adopt to help inform our present lives. Perhaps both past and present would answer any charge in the same way Inge does when Heinrich finds her thirty years after his disappearance, expecting her to offer him some sort of explanation or reason for what has happened to him: "In a voice quivering with fury, she told him, 'You've always wanted me to know everything.'" (326).

Kafka's story "The Trees" reads in its entirety: "For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can't be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance." The trees, like people, give the impression they are movable, but remain firmly rooted to past and place. But then again, not. This is the story of Heinrich Schlögel, a man who travels not only halfway around the world but through time, yet seems to remain stuck. It is

only during his travels through Canada's northern region that Schlögel slips through a wormhole and becomes figuratively and literally uprooted from civilization. He thinks how "The complete absence of trees in no way bothered him. He felt disloyal however, for not missing the presence of trees" (146). In her novel *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel*, Martha Baillie pushes this theme even further. Nothing can be absent. Even if the object is gone, we're bound to its trace.