LITERATURE WITHOUT BORDERS

On the Novel *Angel of Oblivion* by Maja Haderlap, Which Has Changed Slovenian and Other Literature for Good

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Maja Haderlap
Photo: Arnold Poeschl

When something resonates with you, you might feel it for years to come as if it had just happened yesterday. This is especially the case with works of art; when a book speaks to you, the feeling you get when you read the last page may remain with you for a long time. This happened to me when I read *Angel of Oblivion* by Maja Haderlap when it was originally published in German in 2011. Seven years is a decent time, and yet I still remember how I asked a friend who had travelled to Munich to bring me a copy of the novel, which I then read on a beach in Dalmatia in late summer. In a way, the book was published a long time ago, in a time when ordering any book in the world and having it delivered to your mailbox wasn't just a mouse-click away; but at the same time, I still feel I remember each page of this novel.

POETIC BRILLIANCE AND THE SHATTERING OF POLITICS

This novel is a masterpiece that impressed me as the best contemporary Slovenian novel I have ever read.

> Even though it wasn't written in Slovenian - this is the first dilemma posed by Maja Haderlap, and it has changed the basic understanding of what constitutes Slovenian literature. Is it literature in Slovenian? Literature that takes place in Slovenia? Literature written by Slovenian citizens?

All these questions seemed self-evident once upon a time, but after Haderlap's first novel, they have become obsolete. Art, true art, is too complicated to fit into a concept as simple as nationality. This is even more significant today with the renewed construction of barbed wire fences on European borders and the rise in popularity of political parties that want to eliminate from society whatever they consider to be "foreign". Haderlap received the prestigious Max Frisch Prize from the city of Z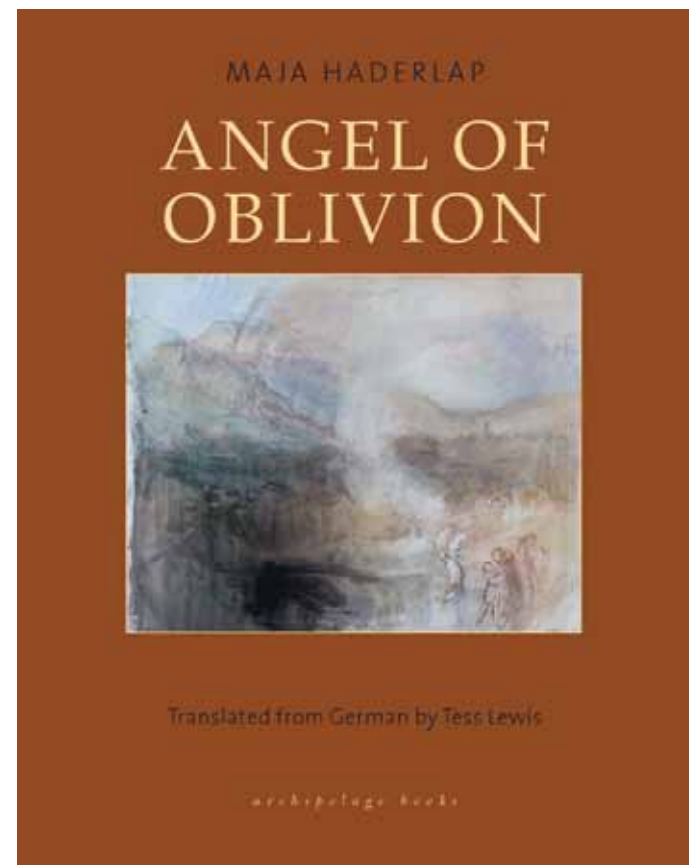ürich this year, which attests to the fact that her poetry and prose are wonderful examples of poetic brilliance and the shattering of politics. The jury of experts emphasised that " in times when identity politics is taking over Europe and wants to separate people, cultures and languages, Maja Haderlap's work is an example of literature that knows no borders".

Angel of Oblivion is a novel about a border, a frontier that always constrains Others. Haderlap's novel is autobiographical and talks about her experience living by the border where the differences between both sides burdened the minds of children as well as older people, men and women, the guilty as well as the innocent. The book can be considered a historical novel as it discusses World War II in the forests of Carinthia and how those who resided there were forced to take sides. It is a family novel depicting in detail the fate of a family confronted by uncertain times which, despite the change in historical circumstances, they are unable to withstand. It is an intimate novel about a woman growing up. It is a political novel that condemns those who chose opportunism rather than the truth. From all points of view, *Angel of Oblivion* is a comprehensive work of art, a first-person narrative – at first of a young girl, later of a woman – about issues too complicated to be addressed by any other language than the language of literature.

A EUROPEAN NOVEL

Maja Haderlap's first novel proved that literature is still capable of surprising readers: her narrative about Carinthian Slovenians, about partisans in Austria who rebelled against Nazism – Austria still uses their rebellion as an example of its anti-fascist actions – is the most read book of a contemporary Slovenian author in Germany. Haderlap received mostly positive critiques from all the prominent newspapers, and the story was staged in Vienna's Burgtheater. The story might seem marginal, archaic and even mythological at first, but it puts the periphery in the foreground and shows that true struggles for one's homeland and one's right to have a home don't happen in the centre, but are hidden behind mountains and in the forests where they can easily, perhaps on purpose, be overlooked by the government.

In the next school year, *Angel of Oblivion* will be listed as required reading for all Slovenian high school students in their final years. The novel has thus entered the Slovenian literary canon and will at the same time leave a mark in the consciousness of teenagers born in the new millennium.

It will be interesting to see how these young people experience this novel, since they grew up in a world of disappearing borders that are now, at the beginning of their adulthood, beginning to re-appear. Will they find Angel of Oblivion to be a historical novel, a memory of the far-away past, or will it serve as a warning against the borders and exclusions happening at the moment? Due to this, Angel of Oblivion is now more than ever a European novel; not only does it take place in the heart of Europe (while realising that regarding somewhere or someone as the heart makes Others peripheral), not only does it question European history, but it also poses questions to which Europe still has no answers.

It is art's job to attempt to answer the unanswerable questions, and even the most difficult question of all: what if putting up borders won't save anyone, what if it will destroy many more people instead?

Maja Haderlap is a poet and an author who writes in Slovenian and German. *Angel of Oblivion*, her first novel, was written entirely in German. It was published in 2011 by Wallstein Publishing, and became the most read contemporary Slovenian literary work in German-speaking Europe. The novel has received several Slovenian and foreign literary awards, among them the Prešeren Foundation Award, the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, the Bruno Kreisky Prize for the Political Book of the year, the Vinzenz-Rizzi-Preis and the Max Frisch Prize from the city of Zürich.

MAJA HADERLAP

ANGEL OF OBLIVION

Translated from German by Tess Lewis

Maja Haderlap at the presentation of her book at Konzorcij bookshop.
Photo: Daniel Novakovič/STA