

ASPECTS OF THE “DARK” IN DAVID ALBAHARI’S DARK AND PAUL AUSTER’S *MAN IN THE DARK*

The idea of the paper is to demonstrate different aspects of the “dark” which occur as a central concept in two novels written by the Serbian writer David Albahari (*Dark*) and his colleague from the USA, Paul Auster (*Man in the Dark*). In the introductory part of the paper the two writers are presented, with the emphasis on various similarities which exist between them. The central part of the paper contains the overview of both novels, as well as the comparative analysis of the conceptual use and aspects of the “dark” in each novel. The “dark” is visible at three levels, where the first level marks the lives of the narrators of the two novels as they tell their stories, the second is related to the political situations in the narrators’ (and writers’) countries, while the third level refers to the personal losses (death of loved ones) which characterise the lives of the narrators of both novels and determine their fates in many ways. The final part of the paper investigates the “dark” while treating both novels together and partially relying on the trauma theory. Conclusions are given in the final part of the paper.

Key words: dark, David Albahari, Paul Auster, novel, trauma

* darko.kovacevic@etf.ues.rs.ba

INTRODUCTION: ALBAHARI AND AUSTER

From an initial perspective, it may seem that David Albahari and Paul Auster do not have many things in common, except they are almost the same age, both have great opuses of literary work and the fact that general classifications and categorizations within their national literatures treat both of them as postmodern writers.

To be more precise, David Albahari was born in Peć, Serbia, former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in 1948, while Paul Auster was born in Newark, New Jersey, USA, in 1947. Although he used to live in Canada, where he immigrated in 1994, David Albahari has continued to write in Serbian and within the literary space of that language. His works have secured him the status of “one of the most important Serbian authors”¹ (Šakić, 2018: 68) in the present time². At the same time, Albahari is also “the winner of all the most important literary awards in the country”³, who

[...] has left his traces everywhere, whether intentionally or accidentally, with the best possible alibi a writer can have – that, after all, it is not the writer who narrates, but his fictional character, whom he has nothing to do with, or does, but only as much as an actor with the role he plays on the stage every night.⁴ (Drčelić, 2017, internet)

As such, he has been widely recognized by “broad audience and mass media”⁵ belonging to “different political, cultural, aesthetic, ideological and other groups which constitute the contemporary Serbian society”⁶ and has gained the “status of a living classic, recognized by the entire community”⁷ (Kosmos, 2016: 1).

¹ „jednoga od najznačajnijih srpskih autora“.

² All the excerpts from texts originally written in Serbian and Croatian which are quoted in this paper were translated into English by the author of the paper.

³ „dobitnik (je) svih najvažnijih književnih priznanja u zemlji“.

⁴ „[...] ostavljao tragove svuda, namerno ili slučajno, svejedno, s najboljim mogućim alibijem koji pisac ima – da to, na kraju krajeva, i nije on, već njegov izmišljeni lik koji pripoveda, i s kojim on nema ništa, ili ima onoliko koliko glumac ima s ulogom koju tumači na pozornici svako veće“.

⁵ „široke publike te masovnih medija“.

⁶ „različitih političkih, kulturnih, estetskih, ideoloških i drugih grupa koje sačinjavaju suvremeno srpsko društvo“

⁷ „status živućeg klasika, kojeg priznaje cjelokupna zajednica“.

On the other hand, Paul Auster has been living in the USA, with Brooklyn, New York as both his residential location and “a central feature in his work” which

[...] inhabits his essays, novels and films both as a backdrop against which the plots unfold and as an active agent in their outcomes” (Brown, 2007: 1)

His literary opus is an important part of the contemporary American literature. Trying to summarize it in one sentence, Brown states: “Auster’s literature is centrally concerned with how we, as individuals, live collectively” (2016: 1). Martin gives a more detailed description of its features, stating that

Auster resorts to self-invention in the course of his fictional narratives and composes ‘autobiographical’ fictions based upon his own experiences. The predominance of narrative perspectives evident within Auster’s writings, ensure that Auster distances himself from authorial authenticity and accountability. Auster’s literary universe is one in which the contingent event is considered to be of monumental significance, and in his writings, Auster highlights the continual presence of random and arbitrary happenings. (2008: ix)

He also notices that Auster

[...] promotes the viewpoint that the author must critique his surroundings, and the policies enforced by the controlling elite. As such, there is a political dimension to many of Auster’s writings (2008: ix).

On the basis of topics, narrative techniques and other features which can be found in their writing, both writers have been treated as the representatives of postmodern literature. Regarding the novels, which, in terms of fiction, make the central part of both authors’ literary opus, Albahari has written sixteen of them by now, while in the case of Paul Auster the number of published novels is fifteen⁸. Although the focus of this paper is on the authors’ novels, it has to be stated that, besides the novels, David Albahari has written a great number of stories,

⁸ It is the case if *The New York Trilogy* is treated as a single novel, due to the fact that it consists of three mini-novels which had initially been published as separate works in 1985 (*City of Glass*) and 1986 (*Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*) before they appeared an integral work in 1987.

while Paul Auster has been writing poetry. Also, both authors have written screenplays for movies and a great number of essays on various topics.

However, behind this biographical, statistical and critical information and observations on the two writers, there are some, probably mostly coincidental but still obvious, similarities arising directly from their works, primarily from the novels. Of course, some such similarities occur due to the postmodern nature of their writing, as the shared, common features of postmodernism in literature. There are also those which are author-specific and comparable in terms of their existence in the authors' novels. Such similarities have probably occurred due to some general facts from the lives of both writers which must be mentioned, as both the common features of the writers and, consequently, the important constituents of their novels.

First of these facts is related to their education and professional interests besides the writing. Namely, both writers had finished the studies in English language and literature, and in their later life, parallel to the writing of fiction, they were also involved in literary translation. David Albahari has translated numerous books written by contemporary British, American, Australian and Canadian authors into Serbian, including the stories and novels by S. Bellow, I. B. Singer, T. Pynchon, M. Atwood, V. S. Naipaul and V. Nabokov. He has also translated plays by Sam Shepard, Sarah Kane, Caryl Churchill and Jason Sherman. Paul Auster, on the other hand, during his stay in Paris (1970–1974) translated the works by different French poets and writers, such as J. P. Sartre, S. Mallarmé and P. M. Blanchot (Shatzky and Taub, 1997: 13).

The second fact is the Jewish origin of both writers: David Albahari and Paul Auster are Jews, fully aware of the Holocaust, concentration camps and ghettos, the overall terrible fate of the Jewish people during the World War II and the antisemitism in general. As such, in many of their works they hint or emphasize the Jewishness of their characters, and they also write about the different aspects of the suffering of the Jews in the World War II. As stated in the observations on both authors quoted at the beginning of this section, and also on the basis of a direct insight into their literary opuses, it can be noticed that, in numerous novels, both Albahari and Auster use the fictional versions of themselves (male intellectuals who are Jews and somehow, professionally or privately, associated with writing and/or translation) as the main protagonists, and in numerous cases these protagonists are the narrators of such novels as well. The characterization, attitudes and general

behavior and actions of such characters, as well as the chronotope of the novels within which they have been introduced and presented, largely depend on the life circumstances and locations associated with the lives of the two writers. As such, they essentially differ, but there are still some elements which can be seen as significantly similar.

Among them, probably the most important and, for this paper, the most significant ones are the writers' observations of the life, political systems and overall situation in their countries which can be found in their novels. However, due to the course of the history from the last decade of the 20th century to the present time, the country in which David Albahari was born, the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia dissolved into six independent countries, and that process was followed by brutal and bloody wars. In the same period, communism and socialism gave way to the multi-party political systems. Under these circumstances, Albahari immigrated to Canada in 1994, and since that time he has included topics and moderate comments from former Yugoslavia (primarily Serbia) in his stories and novels. On the other hand, in his writing, Paul Auster has been a permanent chronologist and critic of American policy, government, and other similar issues. However, both authors do not criticize or talk about the situation in their countries completely directly, but from the (fictionally subjective) perspectives of their protagonists, placed in specific sets of circumstances, actions and events within a certain chronotope. In doing that, they often share the same symbolism embodied in the similar, usually metaphorical, way of using specific concepts. As it can be seen even from their names, in the novels *Dark (Mrak)* by Albahari and *Man in the Dark* by Paul Auster such a concept is represented by the noun *dark*, and the issues it (re)presents and symbolizes, logically and commonly associated with something bad, inappropriate, tragic or subject to criticizing, will be further discussed in the text that follows.

ASPECTS OF THE "DARK" IN THE NOVELS *DARK* AND *MAN IN THE DARK*

The novel *Dark* was published in 1997 and re-published in 2008. Its narrator and, at the same time, the main character is a literary translator who immigrated from Serbia fearing for his life after his love affair had ended tragically. Simultaneously, he had come in possession of compromising folders proving the cooperation of eight Serbian (former Yugoslav) writers – dissidents with homeland security services of former, socialistic Yugoslavia. While staying in his room in a Canadian

hotel and waiting for a man named Friedrich to come and kill him, the narrator writes a book trying to describe retrospectively the sequence of events and circumstances which had caused the situation in which he is. Iva Kosmos sees the narrator of the novel *Dark* as an introvert translator “who wants a peaceful life but accidentally comes into possession of confidential documents by which he could undermine the new authorities”⁹ (2015: 173) who came to power after the 1996–97 protests in Serbia.

Unable to deal with the pressure of the situation he did not choose himself, but which was imposed on him externally, the narrator leaves the country. However, even abroad he cannot escape the historical predestination, because he is being pursued by unnamed powerful people from his own country.¹⁰ (2015: 173)

Milanović notices that the narrator

[...] completely accidentally comes into the center of historic mayhem which starts by the reception at the American Embassy cultural attaché in 1985 and lasts until the demonstrations in 1996. [...] His story tells about the dark of the historic reality which gets additionally darkened by artists and in which he found himself, at first as an indifferent observer of the collapse of the one-party system and later as the possessor of compromising documents of the secret service. [...] *Dark* thus becomes a spy novel in which the life of a socially marginalized translator has become endangered due to the possession of documents [...] (which) talk about the eminent artists, who are, speaking in terms of genre, double agents: in public, they present themselves as dissidents, embittered opponents to the system, while they are, actually, ordinary informants. (2012: 186–187)

Relating to the novel *Dark*, it is interesting to mention that the text of its narrative even contains a mentioning of Paul Auster, and one of his novels, read by the narrator. The name of the novel has not been stated, but on the basis of the publication year of *Dark* it is clear that it

⁹ „koji želi miran život, no slučajno dolazi do povjerljivih dokumenata kojima bi mogao narušiti novu vlast“.

¹⁰ „Ne mogavši izdržati pritisak situacije koju nije sam odabrao, već mu je nametnuta izvana, pripovjedač napušta državu. No niti u inozemstvu ne može pobjeći povijesnoj predodređenosti, jer ga progone neimenovani moćnici iz njegove države“.

could only be one of the first six Auster's novels, which had been published before 1997: *The New York Trilogy*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance*, *Leviathan* or *Mr. Vertigo*.

Man in the Dark is a novel published in 2008. Its narrator and the main protagonist is August Brill, a retired literary critic who has been recovering from a car accident and suffering from insomnia. Every night, lying in bed and not being able to sleep, he invents stories. In the night in which the novel happens he invents an unreal war story about a hero named Owen Brick, who wakes up in a deep hole in the ground, soon discovering that he is a soldier in a civil war that takes place in an alternative version of America. In that alternative America, the elections held in 2000 led to the separation of the states from the federation, the World Trade Centre did not collapse under attack because the attack had not happened, the USA did not invade Iraq, but a civil war is in progress. Parallel to that, and after he has suddenly finished the story by "killing" Brick, Brill tells a story about the three generations of his family (his granddaughter, his daughter and himself) and their past and present lives and personal tragedies.

Regarding the novel, Gibbs expresses the opinion that

Man in the Dark concerns the traumatic impact of global political events upon a family, here consisting of August Brill, an elderly retired book critic, his daughter Miriam, also a writer, and her daughter Katya, a film student. Katya's former boyfriend, Titus, has recently been brutally beheaded while working for American contractors in Iraq, and August, Miriam and Katya are attempting to deal with the traumatic symptoms of having witnessed graphic footage of his final moments. Miriam is also suffering the effects of an acrimonious divorce, while August is recuperating from a car accident that has left him nearly immobile in bed and from persistent feelings of guilt related to his treatment of his now-dead wife, Sonia. (2014: 209)

As such, the novel is

[...] overtly focused on trauma, with the embedded counterfactual history explicitly framed as a means for August to address – or more accurately to avoid – various traumatic memories (2014: 209).

It can be noticed that the stories of both novels, at the initial, extradiegetic level happen in a short period, i.e. within the time range of one evening/night, while on the diegetic and hypodiegetic levels they

cover a wide range of events from the past. Also, both of their narrators/main characters are, practically, alone with their thoughts and narratives deeply immersed in sequences of past events and the analysis and observation of their present consequences both to the narrators and to their loved ones. Exactly those narratives are the first and the most comprehensive level of the “dark” which marks the lives of the narrators of the two novels in the point in time in which they tell their stories. Due to that, it can be said that all the other symbolizations and metaphorizations of the notion appearing in the narratives originate directly from there, the making of complex puzzles of events, relationships, social changes and traumas in both cases.

At the surface level, for August Brill the “dark” is, essentially, embedded in his everyday existence. After the accident, he spends most of his time in his bed or a wheelchair, incapable of walking, and the insomnia he has been suffering from prevents him from sleeping at night, so that the darkened room is, practically, the key place in which his present time reality is being created, as well as the virtual, imagined worlds of the stories he creates in his mind every night. On the other hand, for the narrator of the novel *Dark*, the “dark” on the surface level is embodied in his permanent necessity for motion and change of place of residence after he had left Serbia, which forces him to move from one city and country to the other, in constant fear for his safety and life, due to the set of circumstances to which he, practically, did not have any significant and direct influence, but which still partially happened and occurred as the consequences of his actions.

Another, very significant aspect, or better to say manifestation of the “dark” in both novels, is related to the political situations in the narrators' (and also the writers') home countries, former Yugoslavia/Serbia and the USA, as the narrators see the countries while they are telling their stories. Although the events and situations which have been depicted, commented and, indirectly or directly, criticized in the novels are largely different and specifically related to both countries, they still establish a direct or consequential impact to the life, actions, opinions and attitudes of both narrators, and, in that sense, their final results and effects can be treated as similar and akin. In the novel *Dark*, the narrator covers the events and phenomena that occurred at the territory of former Yugoslavia in the last two decades of the previous century, observed from the perspective of what was happening in its capital, later the capital of Serbia, the city of Belgrade. He does that from his own experience, starting with the situation in the spring of 1985 when he was contacted for the first time by a state security agent named

Davor Miloš and asked to give some information about the reception at the American Embassy Cultural Attaché's which he attended. In that and later contacts with the agent, the narrator realizes that he is being constantly monitored and notices the power of the state apparatus in following, tracking and contacting of all the persons whom they consider to be potentially interesting and problematic due to their public opinions, contacts or different forms of activities. Due to the fact that he is not an important figure of the time, and that the information he possesses is truly limited, the narrator does not become an informant in the true sense of the word, but he still communicates with Davor Miloš from time to time, on different topics and in different locations. At the beginning of the 1990s, the war starts in former Yugoslavia, resulting in the break up of the republics into independent states. In a sequence of events, Davor Miloš delivers the narrator a package with eight folders containing the files and transcripts which demonstrate that eight writers, with a public image of dissidents and system opponents, have actually been working for the state security as informants. It presents, in a way, a double shock for the narrator, both due to Miloš's act itself and the truly shocking information the package contains.

Having in mind their positions in the society, the size of Davor Miloš's act suddenly seemed so huge that I felt my back collapsing under the pressure. At this moment, in this town, countless people would put their hands in the fire for them, and many would rush under the flag which they would be holding.¹¹ (Albahari, 2008: 89)

Regarding the information contained in the folders and referring to the fact that, after the collapse of the socialistic system in former Yugoslavia which was happening simultaneously with the collapse of the country itself, some of the writers from the folders have become its loudest critics, the narrator also makes the following conclusion:

The confession that someone had been a part of that system and changed timely seemed to me more valuable than claiming that they had never changed, that they had managed to withstand every pressure, which was a constant plea from the names on the folders. Why none of them said that? By confessing their lie, they would confirm the falsity of the

¹¹ „Imajući u vidu njihov položaj u društvu, razmere postupka Davora Miloša odjednom su postale toliko velike, da sam osetio kako mi pleća popuštaju pod pritiskom. U ovom času, u ovom gradu, bezbroj ljudi bi stavilo ruke u vatru za njih i mnogi bi požurili pod barjak koji bi oni držali.“

previous reality and enable everyone to find an appropriate measure of forgiveness of sins and delusions within themselves. By lying about their lie, they were just laying the foundations for the construction of a new system of lies, the culture of lies which did not differ from the previous one at all. Surrounded by the aura of alleged immutability, they left the others in the mire of conviction that their guilt was inexpiable and that they had to pass through the rite of purification by fire.¹² (Albahari, 2008: 151–152)

Deeply disappointed, disgusted and horrified by the new knowledge, the narrator makes efforts to present the information in public, but he manages only to disclose to the state security that he possesses the folders and soon realizes that he has endangered his life directly. This knowledge, together with the horrifying tragedy in which the women he loved was brutally murdered and the general actually force him to leave Serbia and start its travelling from country to country, eventually ending in Canada, but still changing towns in constant fear for his safety. On top of that, the overall feeling of emptiness and loss brought on by the war events in different republics of former Yugoslavia which, consequently, greatly affected the life in Belgrade and Serbia in general, causing the rise of violence and hate also contributed to making the decision to leave. In such circumstances, the “dark” permanently enters his life, occupying a central position within it and causing the feeling of constant fear and a sort of paranoia. When the narrator comes back to Belgrade during the demonstrations in the winter of 1996, he does that expecting that the things have changed, and that, consequently, at least a part of the “dark” will disappear from his everyday existence. He was even thinking that it might be a proper occasion for him to present in public the information from the folders he possesses (especially due to the fact that he sees some writers from

¹² „Priznanje da je neko bio deo tog sistema i da se blagovremeno promenio delovalo mi je vrednije od tvrdnje, koju su stalno izricala imena sa fascikli, da se nikada nisu menjali, da su uspeali da izdrže svaki pritisak. Zašto niko od njih nije to rekao? Priznavši svoju laž, oni bi potvrdili lažnost prethodne zbilje i omogućili svakome da u sebi pronade odgovarajuću meru oprosta od grehova i zabluda. Laganjem o svojoj laži samo su udarali temelje za izgradnju novog sistema laži, kulture laži koja se nimalo nije razlikovala od dotadašnje. Okruženi aurom navodne nepromenljivosti, ostavljali su druge u glibu uverenja da je njihova krivica neiskupljiva i da moraju da prođu kroz obred očišćenja vatrom.“

them are still active in politics and public speaking within the apparently new social and political circumstances).

Every sound of a whistle, every sound of a trumpet and stroke of a drum, endlessly witty student events, artists in the front rows, order within a mess, sound without fury, all that was convincing me that the time of changes has come, the time in which my folders would not be the weapon of revenge but the criterion by which to calmly face everything we had been, that is, the time in which responsibility wouldn't be required from *others* but from *ourselves*.¹³ (Albahari, 2008: 156–157)

However, in a close and direct contact with the demonstrations, protestants and organizers, and later as the victim of the police brutality, the narrator soon realizes that, actually, nothing has changed since the beginning of the war on the territory of former Yugoslavia and its collapse. And so that the “dark” is still present, although the political and social circumstances seem to be new and changed, he concludes:

Those were the same words, the same rhetoric, the same revengeful encouragement of the dark as I was listening to a few years ago.¹⁴ (Albahari, 2008: 159)

That is why he soon returns to Canada. However, the events that followed have shown that even there he is not safe and secure, due to the sensitivity and potential danger of the compromising information he possesses.

When *Man in the Dark* is concerned, August Brill shows his feeling of darkness and dissatisfaction based on the political situation in the USA mainly through the fictional frame narrative he creates about Oven Brick and his adventures in the alternative America in which he woke up. The circumstances and information which Oven Brick has to face and deal with, besides their fictional and futuristic nature, actually, in a metaphoric manner, address all the issues which the writer himself considers as the problematic ones regarding the USA policy and government. Thus, an absolute dissatisfaction with the elections of 2000

¹³ „Svaki zvižduk pištaljke, svaki zvuk trube i udar bubnja, beskrajno duhoviti hepeninzi studenata, umetnici u prvim redovima, red u neredu, buka bez besa, sve me je to ubeđivalo da je došlo vreme promena, vreme u kojem moje fascikle neće biti oružje osvete nego merilo smirenog suočavanja sa svim onim što smo bili, rečju, vreme u kojem se odgovornost ne traži od *drugih* već od *sebe*“.

¹⁴ „Bile su to iste reči, ista retorika, isto osvetničko podsticanje na mrak koje sam slušao pre nekoliko godina“.

and their results can be noticed, as well as significant doubts regarding their regularity. The fictional separation of numerous states from the USA and the forming of the "Independent States of America" and "Pacifica", which the "official" USA (the Federals) try to stop by all possible military means in spite of the fact that the "new" states have been recognized by the European Union, Mexico, the countries of Central and South America, Russia and Japan, is actually directed towards the criticizing of the American interventional policy all over the world. One of the consequences of such policies is sending of American youth to fight wars all over the world and also America's, often lethal, interference with the societies, cultures and lives of ordinary people. That is the essence of the "dark" which occupies both the thoughts of the confused Oven Brick and its "creator", August Brill, lying sleepless and in pain within the four walls of his darkened room. George W. Bush, the American politician who served as the 43rd President of the United States from 2001 to 2009 is seen as the central figure, whose policy and decisions are responsible for the darkness and the general situation in the USA which is considered unacceptable. He even appears in the "new" alternative America (also) as the President of the Federation which has started the civil war to stop other states from separation and the creation of new ones, as it can be seen in a short dialogue between Brick and Molly:

I see. The independent states have a prime minister. But what about the Federals? Do they still have a president?

Of course.

What's his name?

Bush.

George W.?

That's right. George W. Bush. (Auster, 2008: 51)

Bush is also mentioned in Brill's narrative, when he remembers his talk with his granddaughter Katya's boyfriend Titus, when they discussed Titus's decision to go to Iraq, and quotes Titus's opinion from the past:

We haven't seen much of each other lately, but the last time you were here, I remember you said that Bush should be thrown in jail – along with Cheney, Rumsfeld, and the whole gang of fascist crooks who were running the country. (Auster, 2008: 172)

From the context of his entire narrative visible in the book, it is sure that he shares the same opinion on the topic.

Concerning that, there is also one more aspect of the “political dark” which has been symbolically and metaphorically presented in the novel, regarding the political issues in the USA, i.e. its foreign and domestic policy. Namely, the description of the basic postulates of the (planned) foreign and domestic policies of the “new” Independent States of America actually includes all the concepts which are in complete opposition to the real policy of the USA, i.e. occurs as an imagined, idealized “light” (although placed within a civil war as an obstacle) which stands as an opposition to the actual “dark”:

Foreign policy: no meddling anywhere [...] Domestic policy: universal health insurance, no more oil, no more cars or planes, a fourfold increase in teachers’ salaries (to attract the brightest students to the profession), strict gun control, free education and job training for the poor [...] all in the realm of fantasy for the moment, a dream of the future, since the war drags on, and the state of emergency is still in force. (Auster, 2008: 62–63)

One more manifestation of the “dark” in the two named novels can be found on a level closer to the narrators, in relation to personal losses (deaths of the loved ones) which characterize the lives of the narrators of both novels and determine their fates in many ways.

In David Albahari’s novel *Dark*, parallel to the reestablishment of friendship with his secondary school colleague Slavko, the narrator enters into a deeply emotional secret love relationship with his wife, Metka. After a series of events and occurrences including Slavko’s military mobilization at the beginning of the war in former Yugoslavia and Metka’s pregnancy with the narrator, that relationship ended brutally and tragically, when Slavko, after he had come back home and listened to Metka’s confession about everything, slaughtered Metka and then committed suicide in the presence of the narrator. All that happens at the same time when the narrator starts fearing for his life because of the compromising folders he possesses and accelerates his decision to move away from Serbia. However, both the fact that Metka is dead, and, in a way, his feeling of guilt for both betraying a friend and causing the friend and Metka’s deaths to happen, leave an unrecoverable trauma in his mind and surely contribute to his overall feeling of being emotionally dark and hollow. However, in his narrative, the narrator mentions Metka’s death very scanty and from a sort of distance. Before the actual description of her death and his visit to her grave when he came to Belgrade in 1996, the fact that she is dead was mentioned only a few times in the form of advance notices, anticipated remarks on the events

which happened, and which are described later in the text. From both of these notices, as well from the general tone of narration whenever Metka is mentioned, the narrator's feelings for her, including his grief and the darkness which appeared in his life after she has been killed, are constantly visible, and the careful reduction of information and choice of words and expressions only contribute to that visibility. Here is the part of the first description of Metka in the novel, when the narrator describes the first time he met her, referring briefly and indefinitely, in the last sentence, to the fact that she is not alive anymore. At the same time, is clear from the excerpt that he sees Metka's appearance and existence in his life (here reduced to her face) as a light, i.e. as an opposition to the "dark" in which he is in the present time of the novel.

I am writing about light, because that is the only remaining way in which I can talk about Metka's face. In the September night, when left the gallery, her face was dissipating so much glow that I wished to be a fly or a moth. I saw it even when I did not look at it. I saw it when I closed my eyes, too. I see it even now, when I know that I cannot see it anymore.¹⁵ (Albahari, 2008: 34)

In *Man in the Dark*, August Brill's emotional darkness is based on three events, or three losses, which actually involve the members three generations of his family: his granddaughter, daughter and himself, affecting Brill in different ways and further deepening the physical and psychical "dark" in which he has been because of the accident and insomnia. Namely, Brill has been living in the same house with his divorced daughter Miriam and granddaughter Katya, and, at the surface, it seems that the "dark", pain and grief are the only things which connect the three generations of family members. There is Brill himself, sleepless, with a crushed leg and attached to his bed and a wheelchair, mourning the death of his wife, Sonia, who died of cancer. Her death has been such a strong trauma for him that he still does not allow himself to think about her, fearing his possible unpredictable reactions:

I shouldn't be doing this. I promised myself not to fall into the trap of Sonia-thoughts and Sonia-memories, not to let myself go. I can't afford to break down now and sink into a despond of

¹⁵ „Pišem o svetlosti, jer jedino još tako mogu da govorim o Metkinom licu. U septembarskoj noći, ka da smo izašli iz galerije, ono je rasipalo toliko sjaja da sam pozeleo da budem mušica ili noćni leptir. Video sam ga čak i kada nisam gledao u njega. Video sam ga i kada bih zažmurio. Vidim ga i sada, kada znam da više ne mogu da ga vidim.“

grief and self-recrimination. I might start howling and wake the girls upstairs—or else spend the next several hours thinking of ever more artful and devious ways to kill myself. (Auster, 2008: 101–102)

Then, there is Brill's daughter, Miriam, trying to recover from a divorce by working on a book on Rose Hawthorn. Finally, there is Brill's granddaughter Katya who has constantly been watching old movies in order to find a way to disconnect from the reality in which her ex-boyfriend Titus was horrifyingly executed in Iraq, by means of decapitation, and she practically witnessed the event by watching the recording of the execution on the internet, together with Brill and her mother. In the novel, it is visible that the overcoming darkness has actually taken the entire house in which the three of them live, directly affecting the solitude, dark thoughts and general lack of wishing to live which characterize all three characters. It seems that all of them are immersed in the dark, being practically stuck at the critical points of the temporal axes of their lives both incapable of coping with the tragedies and finding a way to move on. Most of what was mentioned can be seen at the very beginning of the novel, in Brill's summarizing and introductory description of the situation in their house.

I am alone in the dark, turning the world around in my head as I struggle through another bout of insomnia, another white night in the great American wilderness. Upstairs, my daughter and granddaughter are asleep in their bedrooms, each one alone as well, the forty-seven-year-old Miriam, my only child, who has slept alone for the past five years, and the twenty-three-year-old Katya, Miriam's only child, who used to sleep with a young man named Titus Small, but Titus is dead now, and Katya sleeps alone with her broken heart. (Auster, 2008: 1)

An even more precise summary of the situation in Brill's house and life, presented as a brutal sequence of tragedies, can be found within Brill's story about Owen Brick when Frisk informs Brick about Brill:

A retired book critic, seventy-two years old, living outside Brattleboro, Vermont, with his forty-seven-year-old daughter and twenty-three-year-old granddaughter. His wife died last year. The daughter's husband left her five years ago. The granddaughter's boyfriend was killed. It's a house of grieving, wounded souls, and every night Brill lies awake in the dark, trying not to think about his past, making up stories about other worlds. (Auster, 2008: 71)

However, in the second part of the book, after August Brill “killed” Owen Brick in the story he had been imagining and thus ended it, he talks with Katya, and, in the dialogue, he gives a sort of chronology of his life, enriched with private details and more information about the rises and falls of his life and his relationship with Sonia. After that conversation, when Katya fell asleep, Brill narrates about all the details of Titus’s death and describes in detail the terrifying video of Titus’s execution which all three of them watched on Katya’s laptop the horror, sadness, helplessness and darkness they felt while they were watching it. Any kind of time flow simply stopped in front of the brutality seen in the video As Auster (2008: 176) puts it: “Impossible to know how long it has lasted. Fifteen minutes. A thousand years”. Apparently, the time continued to be stopped, stuck in the shock and deep “dark” which had already partially established its existence in the house after Sonia’s death, until the present moment of the novel in which Brill, after talking with Katya, finally makes a decision to continue with his life, to get out of the “dark”, stimulating, at the same time, both his daughter and granddaughter to do the same.

CONCLUSIONS

If the two presented novels are observed as a whole, it can be said and noticed that the essence of the “dark”, encompassing all of its meanings and symbolism, in both of them actually resides in different sorts of traumas experienced by the narrators of both novels. In her study *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1993), Cathy Caruth states that in the medical and psychiatric literature “the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (1993: 3). She further explains

[...] that the wound of the mind — the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world — is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (1993: 3–4)

The stated interpretation and elaboration of the term trauma, as well as of its consequences, is fully appropriate for the description of traumatic experiences of the narrators of both novels and the “dark” it triggers in their lives. Regardless of their nature, different

circumstances and causes in which the traumas occurred, they permanently changed the narrators' lives and darkened their continuation. It does not matter if one of them is stuck in a dark, silent room, as August Brill is, and the other on a constant run, fearing for his existence, as the narrator of *Dark*: the accumulated traumatic experiences prevent the life to continue normally and thus affect their actions, thoughts and the narration through which they express themselves.

Such traumatic experiences start from a global, more generalized level, embodied in the political issues, troubles and disagreements closely associated with the situation and events in the former Yugoslavia, Serbia and the USA at the time when the books were published and observed from the perspective of an individual ordinary citizen – intellectual, writer or translator, who is in the middle of them. In that sense, it can be said that Albahari's social and political criticism, presented through the narrator of *Dark*, is rather moderate, containing both a sort of lamentation and resignation in relation to the factors which brought to the disappearance of the former SFRY, with a direct criticism and contempt directed only towards the writers and other intellectuals who pretended to be the uncompromising figures in direct opposition to the communist system while they were working as informants for the state security. The direct criticism is also directed towards the overall "dark" in political thinking, decision making and public discourse which has been permanently present at territory of the former Yugoslavia since the 1990s. On the other hand, Paul Auster, through August Brill's thoughts and his fictional worlds, directly criticizes the policy, governmental and administrative system of the USA in almost all of its fundamental aspects, seeing it, practically, as a dark threat, primarily for its citizens but also on a more global, world level.

Framed by the mentioned politically and socially caused traumatic experiences, the narrators' traumas essentially based on the deaths of persons they loved could only become intensified, affect their identities and seriously disturb the way in which they continue with their lives, as a sort of a dark interruption. Both of them, although one is on the constant run and move and the other is in a darkened solitude, eventually try to find the way out of the "dark" by remembering the past and analyzing the sequences of events that caused the traumatic experiences. At the end of the novel *Man in the Dark* it seems that August Brill is on a good way to do that, while the narrator of the novel *Dark*, waiting alone in a hotel room for someone to come and kill him,

finds the only exhaust valve and a sort of satisfaction in writing the book about the events that put him in the position in which he is in the present time of the novel. However, due to the fact that, at the end of the novel, the narrator makes the decision to describe the “last moments” of his life in the future tense, after reading the novel it is not clear whether he has actually been killed by Friedrich (and thus “escaped” from the “dark” of life into the permanent “dark” of the death) or the presented events are just a possible scenario or sequence of events created in his imagination.

There are a few things I still have to do, and the shift to the future tense is among them. The evening is spread out against the sky like in that verse: like a patient etherized upon a table. Everything is clean, everything is crystal clear, especially the filth of the spirit. I cannot remember whether the evening plays a significant role in the T. S. Eliot’s poem; it only has one meaning in this book: the end. Instead of the word “evening”, you could read “the dark is coming”. That is why I have to step into the future, not in the literal sense, of course, but by means of the grammatical future tense. This shouldn’t surprise you by any means, because where the past is imposed as the source of future [...], the future becomes the petrified past. One does not live in the expectation of the morning and the uncertainty of the day but in the repetition of the emptiness of a night. In the dark.¹⁶ (Albahari, 2008: 170)

Finally, on the basis of everything that has been stated in the previous text, it can be said that the symbolism and metaphorical use of the term “dark” in both of the analyzed novels are greatly similar and close, in spite of the different chronotopes in which they have been positioned, the differences in stories and the overall political and cultural differences and circumstances which exist between the former Yugoslavia/Serbia and the USA, as the native countries of the two

¹⁶ „Još nekoliko stvari treba da uradim, a među njima je i prelaz u buduće vreme. Veče leži naspram neba kao u onom stihu: poput pacijenta eterizovanog na operacionom stolu. Sve je čisto, sve je kristalno jasno, pogotovo prljavština duha. Ne sećam se da li veče igra neku posebnu ulogu u pesmi T. S. Eliota; u ovoj knjizi ima samo jedno značenje: kraj. Umesto reči „veče“, čitaj „dolazi mrak“. Stoga moram da stupim u budućnost, ne u doslovnom smislu, naravno, nego posredstvom gramatičkog budućeg vremena. Nema razloga da vas to čudi, jer tamo gde se prošlost nameće kao izvor budućnosti [...] budućnost postaje okamenjena prošlost. Ne živi se u očekivanju jutra i neizvesnosti dana, nego u ponavljanju ispraznosti noći. U mraku.“

authors. The “dark” has been represented as existing on two levels, as the external, existential one caused and influenced by politics and social environment, and as the internal, based on and being a consequence of different traumatic experiences. Within such a representation, both David Albahari and Paul Auster have created, developed and used the character of an individual, intellectual, fully aware of the circumstances of his everyday living and with a definite attitude towards them, who has been exposed to an extraordinary set of traumatic experiences and strives to find a way out of the “dark” which such traumatization has turned his life and existence into. In doing that, through the depiction and narration of the characters they created, neither one of them tries to offer or provide any sort of a final and universal solution on what should be done to cope with traumatic experiences, overcome them and permanently leave behind the dark and emptiness they have created. Instead of that, in the mentioned novels the writers simply provide two remarkable insights into the minds tormented and preoccupied by the dark and the way or ways in which they work and operate. The writers wish to provide the owners of the tormented minds at least an illusion of the continuation of normal life, primarily on a surface level of their appearance, reserved for the interaction with other people. On the other level, deep within themselves, they constantly analyze the past chains of events, continuously searching for reasons, answers, causes, effects and at least a sort of consolation, although they are deeply aware that their search is futile and that whatever happened in the past simply cannot be changed by any form of present action.

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Darko M. Kovačević

ASPEKTI „MRAKA“ U ROMANIMA MRAK DAVIDA ALBAHARIJA
I ČOVJEK U MRAKU POLA OSTERA

Rezime

Osnovna ideja ovog rada jeste da se prikažu različiti aspekti „mraka“ koji se, kao centralni koncept, pojavljuje u romanima koje su napisali srpski pisac David Albahari (*Mrak*) i njegov kolega iz SAD Paul Auster (*Čovjek u mraku*). U prvom, uvodnom dijelu rada iznose se najznačajnije informacije o navedenim piscima. Pri tome se poseban naglasak stavlja na različite sličnosti koje postoje među njima. Centralni dio rada počinje prikazima romana, u smislu glavnih likova i tokova radnje. Nakon navedenih prikaza, slijedi analiza konceptualne upotrebe i aspekata „mraka“ u svakom od romana, koja se sprovodi komparativno. U oba romana, kao njihove zajedničke odlike, identifikovana su tri nivoa na kojima se „mrak“ manifestuje. Prvi od njih zasnovan je na činjenici da su u oba romana glavni likovi, koji su istovremeno i pripovjedači, praktično sami sa svojim mislima i narativima i teško opterećeni nizovima događaja iz prošlosti i analiziranjem i posmatranjem sadašnjih posljedica tih događaja, kako na njih same tako i na njihove najmilije. Upravo te analize i posmatranja, predstavljene kroz pripovijedanje, čine prvi i najsveobuhvatniji nivo „mraka“ koji obilježava živote pripovjedača dvaju romana u trenutku u kojem pričaju svoje priče. Drugi nivo na kome se manifestuje „mrak“ u oba romana vezan je za političke situacije u zemljama pripovjedača (a i pisaca), bivšoj Jugoslaviji/Srbiji i SAD, onakve kakve ih pripovjedači romana vide dok izlažu svoje priče. Iako su događaji i situacije koji su prikazani, komentarisani i, posredno ili direktno, kritikovani u romanima, u velikoj mjeri različiti i specifični za svaku od dvije navedene zemlje, oni ipak ostvaruju direktan ili posljedičan uticaj na život, radnje, mišljenja i stavove obojice pripovjedača, pa se zbog toga, i u tom smislu, njihovi konačni rezultati i učinci mogu tretirati kao slični i srodni. Konačno, treći nivo „mraka“ odnosi se na lične gubitke (smrt voljenih osoba), koji karakterišu živote pripovjedača oba romana i određuju njihove sudbine na mnogo načina.

Treći i posljednji dio rada posmatra oba romana kao cjelinu i rezimira nivoe manifestovanja „mraka“ u njima, pri tome se djelomično oslanjajući na teoriju traume, a potom se izvode i određeni zaključci.

Ključne riječi: mrak, David Albahari, Pol Oster, roman, trauma