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### National and Personal Traumas in Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*

*Paul Auster'in Karanlıktaki Adam Romanında Toplumsal ve Bireysel Travmalar*

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#### ÖZ

Çağdaş Amerikan romanının en önemli temsilcilerinden olan Paul Auster, *Karanlıktaki Adam* (2008) adlı eserini çok katmanlı bir anlatı biçimi içinde oluşturarak okuyucusuna sunmuştur. Yazar, romanında travmatik bir deneyimin etkilerine odaklanmanın yanı sıra, okuyucuyu varoluşumuzun özünü sorgulamaya iten alternatif bir tarih bakış açısı da ortaya koymaktadır. Auster, bireysel ve toplumsal birçok öyküyü iç içe geçirerek oluşturduğu kurgu aracılığıyla karakterlerinin iyileşme sürecini tetiklemekte ve geçmişten beri anlatılan hikâyelerin kuşaklar üzerindeki etkilerini okuyucuya ustalıkla sergilemektedir. Travma çalışmalarına dramatik bir şekilde yeni bir boyut kazandıran 11 Eylül olayları, Auster'in anlatısının merkezinde yer alıyor. Bu bağlamda 11 Eylül saldırıları sonrasında Amerikan edebiyatında ortaya çıkan travma temalı romanların öne çıkması, ulusal travmaların edebî eserler aracılığıyla nasıl ele alındığını ve bireysel deneyimlerle nasıl etkileşime girdiğini incelemektedir. Böylece tarihsel olayların kolektif hafızayı nasıl şekillendirebileceği ve bireysel öykülere nasıl yansıdığını irdeleyerek toplumsal olayların bireysel yaşamlar üzerindeki uzun süreli etkilerini eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla incelenmektedir. Bundan dolayı makalenin ana odak noktasının güncel travma çalışmaları bağlamında karakterlerin iyileşme süreçlerini incelemesi olarak belirlenmiştir. Savaşın yıkıcılığı ve yarattığı travmanın toplumun üzerindeki etkileri ise bireysel ve toplumsal travmaların kesiştiği noktaları ortaya koymak bu makalenin diğer hedefidir. Dolayısıyla bu makale; tarih, hafıza ve iyileşme arasındaki karmaşık bağlantıları çözmeye çalışmakta ve Auster'in insanlığın içinde bulunduğu çıkmazın anlaşılmasına yaptığı katkının kapsamlı bir incelemesini sunmaktadır.

#### ABSTRACT

Paul Auster, one of the most distinguished contemporary American writers, creates a multi-layered narrative within his novel *Man in the Dark*. Published in 2008, this literary work addresses essential themes and concerns relating to American history as well as social and political agendas of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Precisely the events of September 11, which dramatically added a new dimension to the trauma studies, lie in the core of the Auster's narrative. The author besides focusing on the effects of a traumatic experience on a human being, creates an alternative vision of history that pushes the reader to question the essence of existence. By merging countless narratives, both personal and national, the author initiates a journey of healing for his characters, ultimately guiding them toward recovery. Thus, one of the major focuses of this article will be to follow the evolution of traumatized personalities within the frames of current trauma studies. On the other hand, investigating the subtle bond between national and personal traumas will illuminate the reciprocal relationship between collective memory and individual experience, shedding light on the profound ways in which historical events can shape personal narratives. Hence the article seeks to disentangle the intricate connections between history, memory, and healing, offering a comprehensive exploration of Auster's contribution to the understanding of the human predicament.

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## Introduction

*It is during our darkest moments that  
we must focus to see the light.  
Aristotle*

*Deep into that darkness peering,  
long I stood there wondering, fearing,  
Doubting, dreaming dreams  
no mortal ever dared to dream before;  
The Raven, Edgar Allan Poe*

Studies of trauma in fields such as psychology and psychiatry have a long history but the formalization of the concept as an interdisciplinary academic idea is a more recent development. Predominantly, the late 20th century witnessed a significant number of researchers who centralized their studies on the concept of trauma and its aftermath. Furthermore, concentrating on the representation of trauma and how it is processed within literary text brought literary scholars to this circle as well which created an intersection between the fields. Scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dominick LaCapra, and many others came out with in-depth studies and groundbreaking ideas and established the basis for further discussions.

Likewise, postmodern authors, whose desire to demolish the metanarratives and their prolonged ideological supremacy, brought forward a considerable number of narratives that unveiled previously untold traumatic experiences of recent history. The experience of the World Wars, Holocaust, atomic bomb, and traumatic effects of colonization and oppression provided impressive material for the writers of the contemporary period. Novels like *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, *The Things They Carried* (1990) by Tim O'Brien, or *Schindler's Ark* (1982) by Thomas Keneally are just a few to be mentioned. The perspective of these and other narratives of contemporary literature on the trauma's enduring impact on individuals as well as society significantly contributed to the further literary and philosophic discourse.

As for the American society, the beginning of the 21st century was marked with a tragedy that would transform into a solemn trauma carried by the nation throughout the following decades. According to Dominick LaCapra, the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers on September 11 became a new "myth of origins" for trauma after the Civil War. Analyzing the atmosphere of the period he states, "9/11 provided a new enemy that could unite the country in solidarity against the terrorists or even the more abstract notion of terror itself" (2014, xiii). Hence, numerous American authors focused on the tragedy and how it transformed the American state of mind. Several prominent examples like *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer or *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo can be mentioned at this point.

Among numerous writers who would focus on traumatic experiences, Paul Auster appears as a remarkable example. With all his postmodern aura embroidered with metafictional, sometimes existential, frequently dark and mysterious details, Auster is a deeply committed and spiritually driven writer, and apparently an optimistic man. In one of his interviews with Mark Irwin, he states:

I'm part of the great human enterprise of trying to make sense of what we're doing here in the world. There are so many moments of questioning why you do it and what the purpose of it is – it's important to remember sometimes that it's not for nothing (2013, p. 47).

Hence, such philosophical perspective vividly resonates in numerous narratives by Auster whose characters frequently find themselves on a quest for meaning and purpose in the world they live in. Moreover, his tendency to reveal the role of simple coincidences and chance in life reveals the intriguing character of the author and his authentic perspective on the world.

Auster prefers to see each of his stories as a living entity with an autonomy of its own that he has to delve into. Precisely that is why the author still would not use a computer, which, according to him, sabotages the process of connection between the writer and the text. Writing, again and again, each paragraph of every story, rewriting and recreating them numerous times generates a specific bond between the author and the text according to Auster. Hence, he still continues to take notes and type on his old companion Olympia, a typewriter he bought from his friend in 1974.

Among the names who inspired Auster and whom he continues to count as his favorite prose writers are Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, while the philosophical perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin is “the most brilliant, the one that comes closest to understanding the complexity and the magic of the form [novel]” (McCaffery, 2013, p. 25). Frequently categorized as a postmodern writer, Paul Auster clarifies his perspective as follows:

... it’s a term that doesn’t mean anything to me. People keep using it, but I truly don’t understand what it means. And I don’t put labels on what I do. If other people want to do that, that’s their privilege, but I’m not interested in looking at myself from the outside (Burns, 2013, p. 131).

Despite the claims of the critics Auster prefers to be called a realist and obviously sees himself as such, “In the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself a realist” states the author in another interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory (2013, p. 13). Still, among all the theories and approaches that Auster embraces, there is only one source that he unconditionally trusts the most, and it is the oral tradition. Whenever he is asked about the source that has been nourishing him throughout the years, he always points to the stories and fairy tales that travel across the centuries and build up generations. Moreover, the author also stresses the significance of the process itself and its effects on the human psyche, “I believe that stories are the fundamental food for the soul. We can’t live without stories. In one form or another, everybody is living on them from the age of two until their death” (Irwin, 2013, p. 46). Storytelling with its nurturing as well as healing traits remains one of the most ontological and archetypal characteristics of humanity. “These are bare-bones narratives,” assures the author, “narratives largely devoid of details, yet enormous amounts of information are communicated in a very short space, with very few words” (McCaffery, 2013, p. 30). Inspired by this kind of narrative, Auster’s major target is to leave space for the reader to experience the story, read between the lines, and participate in it rather than being squeezed and enframed by the enormous amount of details provided by an author. Christopher Donovan calls this kind of space within the narrative of Auster “white spaces ... in which what is unsaid is more important than what is” (2005, p. 3). Hence, Auster’s readers frequently find themselves mesmerized or even overwhelmed by the mental labyrinths created by the author. Consequently, reading Auster’s novels always evolves into meticulous mental participation rather than a passive observation of events.

One of his novels that provides its reader with a perplexing narrative and which is also heavily dependent on the activity of storytelling is *Man in the Dark*. Published in 2008, this relatively short narrative of August Brill can be divided into two phases; the first one with a delicate touch of alternative history and the second one that is dominated by a personal psychological retrospective journey and eventual healing of the traumatized characters. The reader is following a complex narrative that represents a process of acceptance and personal internal negotiation to overcome a trauma that continues to dominate the characters’ psyche. Jonathan Boulter underlines this tendency in Auster’s novels and states that his “real focus in

all his novels is the specific relations between narrative – story telling – and interiority, how narratives work to shore up a sense of the fading self” (2011, p. 15). In the case of August Brill, the result of this mental archeology takes him out of the darkness to the morning light of a new day but firstly he has to deal with the numerous thoughts to reach that salvation. Hence, the major focus of this article will be to follow this evolution of a traumatized personality as well as to investigate the subtle bond between national and personal traumas.

### **War and Trauma as the Heart of Darkness**

The novel begins with the main character, August Brill, inviting us to his house and his mind simultaneously: “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” (Auster, 2008, p. 1). Somewhere in Vermont, a dark and gloomy geography of New England region, an old man (August Brill) lies in his bed, apparently unable to move freely due to some kind of injury, and tells us that his daughter (Miriam) and granddaughter (Katya) are staying with him. It becomes obvious that all of the characters are mourning and struggling with some kind of trauma and all of them deal with it differently. Miriam, for example, is escaping from her reality by working on a book about Rose Hawthorne, while her father, a successful journalist and a writer, who as we understand in the following pages received a Pulitzer Prize, reads his daughter’s draft and questions her choice, “I’ve often asked myself why Miriam chose to take on this project, but I think I’m beginning to understand now” (pp. 44-45). Brill realizes that “two lives, the first one tormented, failed, the second one remarkable” of the “Rosebud” clearly appealed to the inner world of his daughter whose tormented life story that will eventually be told to the reader will justify her choice (p. 44).

Similarly, Auster’s choice of the setting, as well as the subject of Miriam’s book, is not a simple coincidence since the author is known for his affection for the primary writers of the American Renaissance. He even stated once that the accepted idea that the tradition of the American novel started with Huck Finn is not right for him and that the initial point is actually *The Scarlet Letter* (Morris, 2013, p. 175). “Auster bemoans the loss of a ‘philosophical dimension’ from recent American writing; he sees it in Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, and Thoreau, but finds that it has all but disappeared from contemporary fiction in his century” explains Alike Varvogli (2001, p. 4). In this context, the philosophical backbone of the novel emerges precisely at this point because Miriam’s evaluation of Rose Hawthorn’s poetry brings her to the phrase “The weird world rolls on,” which is a line from one of her poems (Auster, 2008, p. 45). The phrase works on every level of the novel so well that the author would eventually finalize his story with it. Obviously, the world continues to roll but somehow this family’s world is stuck for a moment and they have to deal with a tragedy. The foreshadowing for that part of the story comes immediately at the beginning when August lying in the dark descends into his thoughts and states:

I think about Titus’s death often, the horrifying story of that death, the images of that death, the pulverizing consequences of that death on my grieving granddaughter, but I don’t want to go there now. I can’t go there now, I have to push it as far away from me as possible (Auster, p. 2).

Auster lets his reader see just a vague image of someone’s death the details of which will be explained at the end of the novel but the whole course of the narrative is determined by that unexplained trauma.

At this point, it is significant to underline that besides August and Miriam, the third character that is struggling in this house of grief is Katya, who is trying to punish herself by postponing her life and blaming herself for what happened to “Katya’s Titus” (p. 2). Here Jonathan Boulter’s perspective on melancholy and mourning helps us understand Katya’s inner world. Boulter explains that mourning is “a difficult process – it is “work” – but eventually the

subject accepts that the loved one ... is no longer here to make claims on the subject” which resembles the evolution of Katya’s emotions towards the end of the novel (2011, p.5). While, on the other hand, melancholia according to Boulter “is an abnormal response to loss and situates the subject in a continual position of narcissistic identification with the lost object” (p. 5), which precisely suits Katya who locks herself in her grandfather’s house, believes that she is the reason why this tragedy happened and rejects to move on with her life. Another significant insight on trauma that helps us understand the mental phase of Katya is Dominick LaCapra’s concept of “traumatropism.” LaCapra analyzing the origins of trauma and the way it can transform states:

...in victims themselves, trauma, instead of calling processes of working-over and working-through, may be valorized as a limit experience or as stigmata demanding endless melancholy or grieving, whose mitigation or rendering in narrative is perceived as objectionably consoling or even as sacrilegious (2014, pp. xiv-xv).

Thus, throughout the novel, we see Katya who accepts a traumatic event as a part of her identity that she has to embrace, and instead of “working through” she obviously prefers to punish herself for the death of Titus. However, her healing process would begin with her grandfather’s stories that dominate the second part of the novel where we learn the gravity of the events and see her slow but eventual recuperation.

Nevertheless, Auster before throwing us into personal stories creates an authentic perspective on a national level and takes the reader to a completely different horizon of the story that eventually prepares us for the personal tragedy of the family introduced at the beginning. August Brill, in order to escape the terrorizing memories starts to write his own story in his mind. “Give me my story. That’s all I want now – my little story to keep the ghosts away” (Auster, 2008, p. 48), states the protagonist every time he is swayed into the reality of his darkness. August throws us into a different world, a plausible reality, where Owen Brick, his protagonist, is on a secret mission. Auster, at this point, stretches the boundaries of his novel toward the alternative history genre and provides us with a vision of a completely different America. Alternative history novel, which was born out of counterfactual history writing, usually engages in stories with an escapist character, and “In terms of trauma, the counterfactual history form may also be seen as marking a retreat in its sometimes wistful contemplation of alternative scenarios” (Gibbs, 2014, pp. 202-203). However, what is authentic concerning the genre in Auster’s novel is that it represents an “unsuccessful attempt at escapism” (p. 203) since the alternative America created by August Brill in his mind will not help him escape the realities of his real life. Hence, although the story keeps the “creator” busy throughout the first half of the novel, eventually he terminates it to face the darkness around him. Still, the role of alternative America sheds light on the mental state of the protagonist and becomes a medium “to explore the potentially traumatic effect of domestic and international politics upon family life” (p. 202).

The product of August Brill’s mind, Owen Brick, awakes in the middle of nowhere in a military uniform, and “he has no idea how he has landed in this spot” (Auster, 2008, p. 3). Moreover, besides finding ourselves in Owen’s unknown position, we also learn that there is a third layer of reality where Owen is a man in his thirties, works as a magician and is married to Flora. However, the environment in which he awakens indicates that it is an alternative world so we find ourselves entangled in three different layers of reality following stories within the stories. Furthermore, since the world explored by Owen is the mental creation of August Brill, the reader, through the numerous details, can easily analyze the traumatized subconscious of its creator. Hence, Owen finds himself in the United States of America at the beginning of the 20th century, the year is 2007 and what is more salient is that the 9/11 attack never happened. Still, as it is sarcastically mentioned “One nightmare replaces another” (p. 31), as a result of a

secession crisis two different factions, the Independent States of America and Pacifica, emerge in the following years of the elections and a direful war erupts. The Independent States of America is recognized by numerous foreign powers as well as the European Union. Brill's imagination goes as far as the noninterventionist foreign policy and universal healthcare insurance within the emerging new state. However, the ongoing fight and the growing number of casualties create an apocalyptic environment for Owen who, incidentally, appears to be an assassin on a mission to kill a man who is writing this war in his mind. At this point, besides realizing the suicidal mood of August Brill, we also see the political and historical concerns of the author. Again, Auster refers to Hawthorne and the original Civil War of the United States and makes a general statement that scrutinizes the concept of war in general:

Hawthorne didn't care. If South wanted to secede from the country, he said, let them go and good riddance. The weird world, the battered world, the weird world rolling on as wars flame around us: the chopped-off arms in Africa, the chopped-off heads in Iraq, and in my own head this other war, an imaginary war on home ground, America cracking apart, the noble experiment finally dead (p. 49).

Brill sarcastically refers to the ideological background of the USA to build "a city upon a hill," a noble mission for a tiny nation that after a long time of isolationist politics eventually found itself in numerous military conflicts around the globe, particularly during the last century. Just as Vermont is not a coincidental setting for August 2007 is not a random date as well. Ironically the USA again finds itself in trouble because "America without war. It's hard to digest. You get so used to the fighting, it kind of creeps into your bones, and after a while, you can't imagine a world without it" comes the explanation as if the author of Owen's universe, August Brill, tries to explain his imagination (p. 111).

During his conversation with Frisk, when Owen tries to understand what is happening around him, Frisk tells him about Giordano Bruno, "A sixteenth-century Italian philosopher. He argued that if God is infinite, and if the powers of God are infinite, then there must be an infinite number of worlds" (p. 68). While Brick is struggling to leave the idea of a linear and one-dimensional world, Frisk continues:

There is no single reality, Corporal. There are many realities. There's no single world. There are many worlds, and they all run parallel to one another, worlds and anti-worlds, worlds and shadow-worlds, and each world is dreamed or imagined or written by someone in another world. Each world is the creation of a mind (p. 69).

The author pushes his reader to evaluate quite an existential idea, "whose world are we living in?" Obviously, throughout history, there were leaders who had a vision for the world in which other people had to survive or adopt, the stories, for example, of WWII told throughout the novel prove this point of view. So, do we live in a world imagined by people in power? Or do we have to live in it? The author stresses the power of imagination and how it can lose control under pressure. Recollecting the race riots and violence against black people in Newark, Brill says:

That was my war. Not a real war, perhaps, but once you witness violence on that scale, it isn't difficult to imagine something worse, and once your mind is capable of doing that, you understand that the worst possibilities of the imagination are the country you live in (p. 82).

Thus, drifting back and forth between the real and the surreal brings August to the verge of questioning his own existence, "The story is about a man who must kill the person who created him, and why pretend that I am not that person? Or else I become unreal, yet one more figment of my imagination" (p. 102). Alan Gibbs analyzing this "traumatic metafiction" states:

The complex narrative structure adopted by Auster is compounded when the Brill and Brick layers begin to bleed into each other... In combining a type of inscribed narration – Brill takes decisions about the Brick narrative as it is communicated to us – with counterfactual history, Auster produces a challenging

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narrative structure through which the characters' numerous experiences of trauma are explored (2014, p. 210).

Similarly, analyzing the traumatic narrative and debating whether trauma is an event or "structure that affects individuals differently," Altındış counts several significant characteristics that determine this type of narration (2022, p.57). One of the underlined aspects by the author is the fragmented narrative voice and "mixture of fiction and non-fiction" which is used to "mimic the collectivity and impact of trauma" (2022, p. 60) which, at this point, helps us connect the personal and collective or national traumas. Hence, towards the end of the novel, we eventually realize that the core problem of the characters is the tragedy and horror experienced after 9/11 and the war in Iraq. Precisely that is why Auster projects a USA that could have had a completely different destiny had the controversial elections between George W. Bush and Al Gore finalized differently. Frequently remembered as "the stolen election of 2000," this period in American history still remains one of the most controversial and chaotic times, and being followed by the 9/11 attack and the Iraq war turned it into an even greater reason for various presumptions.

From the psychological aspect, it becomes obvious that Brill's subconscious is terrorized by the idea of war. In this context, creating a cataclysmic atmosphere in Owen's layer of reality again shows that war is what bothers him. "My subject tonight is war," thinks Brill, "and now that war has entered this house, I feel I would be insulting Titus and Katya if I softened the blow. Peace on earth, good will toward men. Piss on earth, good will toward none" (Auster, 2008, p. 118). The author bitterly shows how a national trauma turns into a personal one when war enters someone's home. Thematic connections between the layers of the novel skillfully developed by the author eventually unveil common ground for all of them. Therefore, at this point of the novel, although well-developed with numerous details and parallel stories within, the alternative story of Owen Brick is hastily resolved and finalized by the author. Auster shifts his vantage point and starts a retrospective journey of August Brill to resolve the major conflict of the novel.

As if to prove that throughout history people experienced unbelievable events, particularly during World War II or the following Cold War, Auster starts a session of stories that are spinning in the head of his protagonist who is still lying in the dark. August recollects one conversation with a friend who says:

At one time or another, every family lives through extraordinary events – horrendous crimes, floods and earthquakes, bizarre accidents, miraculous strokes of luck, and there isn't a family in the world without secrets and skeletons, trunkfuls of hidden material that would make your jaw drop if the lid were ever opened (p. 122).

This contemplation of Brill is followed by three different stories all of which remind us of tragic times in history. The first one is Jean-Luc's story about a Belgian girl who was "drawn and quartered" (p. 121) in a concentration camp; the second story is told by Alec Foyle to August and his wife Sonia where an SS soldier falls in love with a Jewish girl and helps her escape Nazi Germany in 1933; and the third story that Brill recollects is told by Sonia's nephew Bertrand about Françoise Duclos and her husband who had to hide for fifteen years during the Cold War just to be killed by the Russians, "Death by defenestration. Another classic method, the execution of choice among spies and policemen for hundreds of years" (p. 128). Just as the reader is following several stories, all of which represent national as well as personal tragedies of the 20th century, and questions why Auster lines up all of them in front of us, Katya enters her grandfather's room and the novel proceeds to the final phase.

In a manner of a therapy session, August descends into his past, unveiling the most intimate moments as well as mistakes of his life to his granddaughter. Katya, on the other hand, lies down next to her grandfather in the dark and listens to the stories of her family, and

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eventually spills what the reader expected from the beginning. “Why is life so terrible, Grandpa?” she asks, and August gives her the simplest answer, “Because it is, that’s all. It just is” (p. 163). Inspired by her grandfather’s stories about her grandmother and her mother, their failures, and personal struggles, Katya starts questioning her own life:

All the bad times with you and Grandma. All the bad times with my mother and father. But at least you loved each other and had your second chance. At least my mother loved my father enough to marry him. I’ve never loved anyone (p. 163).

She tells August that after she decided to break up with Titus he went to war so she is the reason why he is dead now. August, on the other hand, tries to explain that “He died because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time” (p. 164) and tries to wean her off this idea that had been terrorizing her for months. He asks her to return to her life which she vigorously rejects as if she had no right to do so. So, he decides to tell her funny stories, “We’ve turned into a couple of sad sacks, you and I, and what I’m proposing is a cure, a remedy to ward off the blues” (p. 168). While listening to her grandfather trying to sway the mood with another story Katya falls asleep and August again dives into his memories.

Recollecting his conversation with Titus before he left for Iraq, August projects a typical young man who is looking for meaning in life. However, the situation with Titus appears even denser due to the post-9/11 atmosphere that has dominated American society ever since. LaCapra, analyzing the mood within the USA after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, states:

To be a good American or even a good human being, you were in a sense obliged to have been traumatized by 9/11 and to bear the signs of its post-traumatic effects, including support for the war on terror, which could involve violent actions such as war even in the absence or doubtful nature of evidence that might lend support to it (notably, the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq) (2014, xiii).

A similar mood is projected through Titus and August’s conversation when Titus, who was essentially against war and who believed that the war in Iraq was one of the greatest historical mistakes, decides to go there, “I haven’t done anything. That’s why I’m going away. To experience something that isn’t about me. To be out in the big rotten world and discover what it feels like to be a part of history” (Auster, 2008, p. 173). In search of self-worth or to prove that he is a decent human, Titus finds himself in “some unidentified room with cinder-block walls, surrounded by four men with hoods over their heads and rifles in their hands” (p. 174). Twenty-four years old Titus Small, who was just a driver for a company is abducted while going to Baghdad. Despite all the efforts to save him, seventy-two hours later, August, Miriam, and Katya are left with a tape of the assassination that they watch together:

I still don’t understand why the three of us felt driven to watch the tape – as if it were an obligation, a sacred duty. We all knew it would go on haunting us for the rest of our lives, and yet somehow we felt we had to be there with Titus, to keep our eyes open to the horror for his sake, to breathe him into us and hold him there – in us, that lonely, miserable death, in us, the cruelty that visited on him in those last moments, in us and no one else, so as not to abandon him to the pitiless dark that swallowed him up. ... He has become the idea of a person, a person and not a person, a dead bleeding thing: *une nature morte* (pp. 175-176).

August finally completes the missing parts of the story so that the reader realizes the gravity of the tragedy this family experienced. At this point of the narrative, the vivid terror of death and the subconscious of a survivor collide. Professor Cathy Caruth, who is known for her comprehensive analysis of trauma, in her *Unclaimed Experience* focuses on the very core of trauma and questions the essence of such calamity:

Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? ... I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival (1996, p.7).

On the one hand, the reader realizes how terrifying it must be to witness a familiar human being terrorized and eventually brutally killed. On the other hand, s/he senses “survivor guilt” (LaCapra, 2014, xv) that vividly manifests itself through the grief and melancholia of August, Katya, and Miriam.

It appears mandatory at this point to mention that Paul Auster was inspired by the true story of a young man, Uri, whose tragic death in the war between Israel and Lebanon tormented a family. Therefore, the novel is dedicated to David Grossman, Uri’s father and a friend of Auster, and his family. David Grossman, on the other hand, published an incredibly emotional article titled “Writing in the Dark” in 2007 in which he besides displaying the inescapable realities of the political arena also stresses the significance and power of writing, or in other words, storytelling. Grossman refers to Kafka’s *A Little Fable* in which a mouse is entrapped by a cat and when threatened by its magnitude the mouse states “Allas... the World is growing narrower every day” (2007, p.63). Through this connotation, the author develops a tragic parallel between the story and the actual political arena:

Indeed, after many years of living in the extreme and violent reality of a political, military and religious conflict, I can report, sadly, that Kafka’s mouse was right: the world is, indeed, growing increasingly narrow, increasingly diminished, with every day that goes by (p. 63).

Moreover, the writer also stresses the insufficiency of language to describe the pain and horror experienced by people, “Language gradually becomes a sequence of clichés and slogans” (p. 64). However, the only thing that apparently kept this man afloat, besides medications, was writing and telling stories of every kind. “All of a sudden I am not condemned to this absolute, fallacious and suffocating dichotomy – this inhumane choice to ‘be victim or aggressor,’ without having any third, more humane alternative” (p. 67). And when we write “The world is not closing in on us” (p. 68) states the author which precisely suits the position of August Brill, who, by creating an alternative vision, gets through the darkness and eventually awakens in a room bathed with morning sun. Katya is still asleep next to him while August and Miriam decide to arrange a farmer’s breakfast with “scrambled eggs and bacon, French toast, pancakes, the whole works” (Auster, 2008, p. 180). A feast to celebrate a minuscule possibility of Katya’s healing who already thinks about going back to school because tragically “The weird world rolls on” (p. 180). Finally, David Grossman mentions a novel that he started to write when his son Uri joined the army, “A novel that depicts how external violence and the cruelty of the general political and military reality penetrate the tender and vulnerable tissue of a single family, ultimately tearing it asunder” (Grossman, 2007, p. 65). Paul Auster in his *Man in the Dark* manages to reflect a similar tragedy and its effects on August Brill’s family.

### Conclusion

To conclude, skillfully reflecting on how a national trauma turns into a personal one and how a traumatized psyche tries to render the new reality, Paul Auster delves into the human condition as well as the collective experience of a nation in distress. Through August Brill’s struggle with his own internal demons within the alternative universe he creates, Auster masterfully depicts the enduring impact of war and the trauma caused by it on individual lives and the wider societal fabric. Particularly after a traumatic experience like 9/11 the thematic landscape of the American novel vividly shifted towards the trauma narrative and triggered new perspectives and approaches within the trauma studies. Hence, Auster also contributed to the extensive catalog of post-9/11 fiction with his *Man in the Dark* and on a microcosmic level succeeded in showing us that we are a part of greater history and that it is just a matter of time before it enters our home. Grappling with loss, regret, and guilt, August projects the intricate web of emotions that trauma casts upon the human psyche. The complexity of experience pushes the reader to develop sympathy and realize the vulnerability of our own selves. Through the imaginative narrative and introspective portrayal, Auster invites us to engage with the

trauma's aftermath and stresses the significance of compassion, resilience, and collective healing.

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