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The American Road Story Redefined? Paul Auster's Dialogue with Tradition in *The Music of Chance*

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Abstract. The paper propounds to discuss Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance* in reference to generic and spatial concerns. In its specificity, the novel may be regarded as belonging to American road fiction since it exhibits tenets of the genre, such as the protagonist's automotive journey through the country as a consequence of a personal crisis, or exploration of the possibilities offered by the road. However, some of the fundamental elements of the genre are redefined by the author. Particular emphasis is laid on issues such as identity, randomness, disorientation, or axiological transformations within the spatial dimension. Hence, by relying on the tradition of the American road story and, at the same time, engaging in a dialogue with it, Auster proves the postmodern character of the novel.

Key words: Paul Auster, American road story, journey, formula, center, peripheries

1. DEFINING GENRE

Examining the concept of the genre in literary and media studies, John Frow (2005) points out that it “indicates the formulaic and the conventional” (1) that constitute the reference point for generic categorisation of texts as based on recurring characteristic features. As Daniel Chandler (1997) expounds, generic categories are established on the basis of “particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts” (2) belonging to them. Hence, Frow's and Chandler's explanations of the genre accentuate the existence of the literary formula that further defines dominating spatialities – the chronotopes – that are key indicators for particular generic categories

A formula, according to John Cawelti (1997), can be understood as “a structure of narrative [...] employed in a great number of individual works” (5). In other words, formulas function as “principles for the selection of certain plots, characters, and settings” (Cawelti 1997, 33) that serve as the basis for construing the storyline in diverse

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genres. To illustrate, the traditional formulaic pattern for the Bildungsroman implies the young protagonist's journey from familiar, often rural environment to the city in order to gain practical experience and, consequently, undergo gradual metamorphosis. As such, the convention presupposes the dominance of two chronotopes – the countryside and urban space. The ordering principle in detective fiction, to further exemplify, is the existence of the detective investigation. The sleuth's field of action, yet, differs depending on the subgenres of the story of detection and may be represented by the city, the country house, or the locked room, among others.

The American road narrative, which is the focal point of the paper, can also be examined in reference to the recurring formulaic pattern. Motivated by personal reasons, the protagonist commences a journey, usually signifying a pursuit of specific goals. Hence, the defining chronotope of the genre is the road that the character explores as the plot unfolds. As such, the dominating spatiality “functions not only as a passive background, a scene characters pass through, but emerges as a distinct narrated space as people and places interact” (Ganser 2009, 40), and it is this interaction that facilitates the character's transformation. *The Music of Chance* written by Paul Auster can be discussed in terms of the recurring tenets of road fiction as the novel is structured around the formulaic pattern distinctive for the genre. However, as I shall prove, although Auster preserves its traditional formula represented by the automotive journey through America, the author, at the same time, engages in a literary dialogue with the tenets of the convention to create its postmodern variant.

Discussing the evolution of the genre, Andrzej Zgorzelski (1979) explains that “[w]hen a new genre is born, it is often diametrically opposed not only to its own immediate tradition, but also to the rest of the previously accepted genre hierarchy” (296). During the evolutionary process, a given generic convention is subject to diverse transformations. These literary structures may differ significantly from their predecessors in terms of the representation of space, the construction of characters, or the prevailing themes. Yet, their genre memory imposes the existence of invariants – aspects of the text that “do not undergo any changes in the historical evolution of the genre, decide about its generic identity, and allow to identify it in its diverse variations” (Głowiński, 51, *translation mine*). Hence, as Głowiński (1998) adds, each literary convention “has an enormous realm of possibilities – different variables, sometimes contradictory ones” (52, *translation mine*) that evolve during the process of generic evolution.

The Music of Chance cannot be regarded as a typical representative of American road fiction due to the spatial organisation of the novel. Whereas, traditionally, the genre is dominated by the chronotope of the road, in Auster's novel there is a disproportion between two spatio-temporal continuums – the road and the billionaires' microuniverse where the protagonist's journey is terminated. Although the automotive travel across America takes place within the first forty pages of the book and the rest of the story revolves around the man's imprisonment, the storyline is structured around the traditional formula of the American road narrative. Hence, although the novel violates the spatial order of the genre, as I shall prove, Auster's application of the invariants defining the road novel enables to discuss *The Music of Chance* as its generic variant. The implementation of recurring concerns of literary postmodernism, such as disorienting, decentralised character of space, emphasis put on contingency, or the problem of identity and the search for it, makes it possible to perceive the work as a postmodern variant of the American road story.

2. AMERICAN ROAD FICTION

The American road fiction linking “the road with a larger national ideal of freedom” (Brigham 2013, 18) became a recognisable convention in the 1950s, after the publication of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, a novel generally regarded as the protoplast of the genre. The convention will be hence understood as “fiction and nonfiction prose narratives by and about Americans traveling the highway” (Primeau 1996, ix), which stresses the importance of the vehicle for the genre. As Ronald Primeau (1996) claims, Kerouac’s novel “brought formal recognition of the cultural ritual, and the genre began to accumulate its own distinctive features” (8) that have become defining for the American convention.

The American road narrative is a relatively recent genre defined by the chronotope of the road; yet, this spatio-temporal continuum is not associated solely with this convention since it has been present in literature for ages. The foundations for its formal theorisation were laid by Mikhail Bakhtin in the innovative essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”. In his understanding, time on the road is primarily governed by randomness, whereas space serves as the locus of chance occurrences. Bakhtin (1981) points out that “[t]he road is especially (but not exclusively) appropriate for portraying events governed by chance” (244). Contingent situations build up cause and effect chains of consecutive occurrences that affect characters’ adventures. It is the openness and unexpectability of the road that promote the emergence of unexpected conditions. Moreover, “[t]he spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages-intersect at one spatial and temporal point” (Bakhtin 1981, 243) and, therefore, the road, as an arena for accidental encounters, may be defined in terms of its social heterogeneity and diversity.

Taking into consideration the meaning of the road, Ann Brigham (2013) maintains that “the road promises escape, freedom, and discovery” (16). Similarly to Bakhtin, she associates spatial openness and expansiveness with a multiplicity of possibilities that can be offered by the path. As such, it allows liberation from quotidian constraints and daily routine or a momentary break from the restraining difficulties. Brigham (2013) adds that the road “twists and turns, offering new directions, exciting detours, unprecedented access, and a beckoning horizon” (16), which emphasises the idea of freedom. The road stretches along a particular territory and easily leads to the chosen destination, or bifurcates in various directions and promotes the need for choices, often spontaneous ones, intensifying the appeal of the path and putting the character in the role of the explorer.

However, in American road fiction the issue of freedom is not only explored in relation to opportunities to cross diverse borders and travel anywhere the protagonist wants. Of great importance is also the “debate about whether the car is a liberating means of transportation or an insulating and confining compartment” (Primeau 1996, 83), whether it frees people from quotidian constraints or leads to further confinement. It is worth highlighting that the confinement may refer to both – the enclosed, usually private space of the vehicle, or it may be treated more psychologically as social isolation represented, for instance, by an addiction to travel. The vehicle serves as “a womb-like refuge” (Collet and Marsh 1987, 25), “a protective shell” (Primeau 1996, 83), or as “a badge of identity, an extension of our homes” (Primeau 1996, 83). As such, the automobile enables safety since it protects the driver from outside influences or possible

dangers. The driver becomes liberated from constraints and routines; vision and senses are directed only towards what is being experienced in a given moment, towards flickering images, changing landscapes, and the soothing speed of the vehicle. Yet, these sensations, apart from providing pleasure to the character, may also threaten his identity since they are so addictive that it is becoming more and more difficult for the individual to terminate the journey at any point. The paradox of the vehicle being at the same time liberating and confining is not only noticeable in the case of the influence it exerts on the individual, but also in the opposition between civilisation and nature. The car is supposed to be a means for escaping from technologized society; in other words, to liberate the driver from the constraints imposed by urban civilisation. The longed-for freedom is found on the road often associated with nature. Yet, paradoxically, even during the journey the driver still remains attached to technology by means of his vehicle. As such, the road explorer is at the same time both – freed from civilisation but still attached to it.

The road chronotope in American stories enables not only movement through space, but also the metamorphosis of the protagonist since the path may function as “the route to finding oneself” (Brigham 2013, 19) or as a means of establishing one’s sense of identity. The vast space of the road, the places passed and visited, as well as the people encountered function as the triggers for one’s development. The transformation can be achieved on many levels – from physical changes to psychological, moral, or ideological growth.

Yet, it is not only the road itself, accidental encounters, and various conditions found there that have their part in shaping the protagonist’s character and moral codes. Critics claim that what is often commenced on the path is the character’s quest, which facilitates their inner growth, usually represented by the final destination (Ganser et al. 2006, 6). They maintain that “the path to this land of glory is long, winding, and troublesome, and often initiates the travellers into maturity and adulthood” (Ganser et al. 2006, 10). In a vast majority of road narratives in which travel is not presented as a purposeless endeavour, the road is identified with a pursuit of certain goals. In some narratives, the “land of glory” is represented by the countryside which offers an escape from what is quotidian and restricting. The journey is also an escape from civilisation towards more remote parts of the country. The characters desperately seek possibilities to abandon their previous lives in favour of liberating simplicity.

The road not only offers freedom or enables the character’s transformation, but it also has its part in facilitating interpersonal relations by fostering the bonding between the protagonist and his fellow journey companions – either the one that sets out on the road with him or the person met on the road. The bond between the travel companions has its particularity since “the formula is usually same-sex relationships – two men travelling together, or more rarely, two women” (Ireland 2003, 481). Yet, usually, the bond between companions does not last since the relation as well as “the mutual understanding starts and ends in one space, the road, sometimes originating in a purely pragmatic or even forced relationship” (Ganser 2013, 6). It is the openness and expansiveness of the path that unite people with similar aims. However, these relations cannot be characterised as stable since, as Ganser notices, they are developed on the road, cultivated until they are no longer necessary, and finally end also on the road.

As the chronotope, the road determines the major themes and motifs, shapes the action and the characters. In addition, in American road novels, significant is also the very construction of the plot imposed by the chronotope. The run of the events can be

discussed in terms of a relatively stable structure of the journey as defining the traditional formula of the genre. In *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America*, John Jakle (1985) discusses various stages of travel that one completes: “trip preparations, departure, outward movement, turnabout, homeward movement, return, and trip recollections” (10). In traditional representatives of the genre, the road serves as the locus of the action where these stages are completed. Numerous stops that the protagonist encounters during their spatial movement are mainly marginal ones, serving as places for relaxation from travel. Although indeed, they may exert some influence on characters, the major part of metamorphosis occurs while on the road.

3. *THE MUSIC OF CHANCE* – ROAD FICTION TRADITION REDEFINED?

The Music of Chance features the protagonist – Jim Nashe, a fireman from Boston – who experiences a life crisis. His wife has left him and, being unable to raise his daughter, the man decides to ask his sister to bring Juliette up. Soon after, the man inherits a large sum of money, which enables him to change his life dramatically. The power of randomness is what ultimately drives him to experience the allure of the road, which marks a border between his old life as a fireman and new one as a free-spirit driver. Consequently, as in road narratives, the protagonist decides to abandon his life in order to experience the volatility of the road. Yet, as it turns out, the unpredictable path not only offers him freedom, but it also contributes to his fall and consequent confinement. The accidental meeting of Jack Pozzi, a young gambler, results in an unplanned engagement in a poker game with two wealthy billionaires, Flower and Stone, the loss of Nashe’s fortune and an enormous debt. The dramatic defeat ends in the characters being forced to pay back the debt by building a “Wailing Wall” behind the billionaires’ mansion, which becomes their imprisonment in the meadow.

The travel that Nashe commences as a result of the received inheritance seems to fit into the established formula of the American road narrative since it is primarily structured around the metaphor of the path. The automotive journey across the American landscape that the man undergoes entails his search for identity – the spiritual exploration of the self. Hence, Austerian road assumes the function of the spatial dominant that shapes the storyline. However, although *The Music of Chance* can be categorised as road fiction, the author does not rely exclusively on the tenets defined by traditional representatives of the generic convention. To exemplify, Auster plays with the spatial dimension of the road story by dividing the action between two chronotopes – the road and the millionaires’ micro-universe. Although the former occupies less space in the novel, they both are equally significant for the storyline as they allow to discuss *The Music of Chance* in terms of the opposition between freedom and its lack, or the openness and enclosurement.

Considering the most common construction of the narratives belonging to American road fiction, in *The Music of Chance* there can be identified the fundamental components of the formula. The protagonist’s road adventures consist of significant phases, namely “preparations to departure, routing, decisions about goals and modes of transport, the arrival, return and re-entry” (Primeau 1996, 1), which cannot but have an impact on his identity. Jim Nashe’s exploration of the open space of the road is divided between two travels that considerably affect his self and, as such, contribute to his metamorphosis. While describing the typical stages of the journey, Primeau (1996) also mentions “the

recording or reconstruction of events in the telling of the story" (1) which is usually done by the protagonist; nevertheless, not every road story is construed according to the fixed structure¹. In comparison to Sal Paradise's travels from Kerouac's *On the Road* which, as the genre prototype, contains all aforementioned phases, Nashe's ultimate journey leading him to the billionaires' mansion lacks some components.

The protagonist's automobile adventures consist of two travels which oscillate between the road and several houses, and are terminated at the billionaires' property. Due to the interplay between these diverse spatialities represented by rigidly defined places and indefinite space, *The Music of Chance*, initially revolves around a typical formulaic pattern of the genre that determines the recurring settings and their interrelation. When the road explorers follow the established structure of travel, "the journey at least for a while becomes all – and then they go back home" (Primeau 1996, 143). The road, hence, functions as a means of exploring the disparity between what is familiar and unknown, between the openness of space and the enclosure of place, or civilisation and nature, above all. The quester's home, on the other hand, apart from being the starting point for the journey, is usually the locus of intimacy and the stage for re-living the experiences. As such, these spatialities can be discussed in terms of Yuri Lotman's notions of the semiosphere constructed in terms of the tension between rigidly constructed, familiar, and private centre and public peripheries that are explored during the journey.

However, in *The Music of Chance* the traditional roles of the chronotope of the road and of one's home, as described by Primeau, are considerably reformulated, which disrupts the balance between the centre and the periphery of the man's universe. The primary difference lies in the physical construction of space. Even though initially there is an optimal balance between the space of the road and homes, in the further part of the novel, Nashe's automotive adventure is terminated with his stay in the billionaires' property. The other, equally significant, discrepancy in regard to typical road stories arises from the axiological status of the road and domestic space since the fundamental function and values attached to the latter are noticeably altered.

As Primeau emphasises, the importance of home for the road protagonist cannot be overlooked since it is a place where the journey is both commenced and terminated. Travel epitomises an interruption to the protagonist's routine, a momentary break from temporal dissatisfaction; yet, even though the road becomes one's whole world for a moment, the home does not cease to be the centre of their universe. As such, in its traditional understanding, it constitutes the ideological and domestic centre of one's semiotic space since "[i]n addition to being a haven for the individual, it is also a place for a social unit, which has for long been the family" (Madanipour 2003, 62). Due to serving as the locus of intimate relationships, of one's precious memories and, above all, of identity, it "is our corner of the world [...], it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (Bachelard 1994, 4), a place to which the road explorer can return in order to share their experiences or re-live them.

Yet, Nashe's family home in Boston, from which he sets off on both journeys, seems to be a problematic construct since, although it constitutes the starting point for the man's

¹ The structure of the journey as described by Primeau and Jakle is, indeed, the most typical one. Yet, whereas it seems to be obligatory for a protagonist of the road story to have a motivation for commencing a journey and a more or less specified goal, not every narrative revolves around their comeback. Sometimes it is the arrival to the planned destination that is the culmination of the plot and, at the same time, the completion of the narrative.

road expeditions, it also lacks some crucial defining aspects of homeliness. In its specificity, it adheres to Bachelard's understanding of the home as one's centre of the universe and, at the same time, diverges from Madanipour's connotations of intimacy and firm stability that are the fundamental components of domestic space. Due to that, with time, Nashe's home ceases to function as a reliable point of reference for the man, which results in the destabilisation of his identity.

The abode still represents "the private intimate space that is separated, and protects its members, from the public impersonal outside" (Madanipour 2003, 62); yet, it does not function as home in the traditional understanding. After Nashe's wife, Thérèse, left him and his job as a firefighter "kept him out of the house at all hours of the day and night" (Auster 1992, 2), the man had no other choice but to ask his sister to take care of his daughter, which contributed to the deterioration of his family life. Hence, no longer functioning as the locus of the social unit represented by the family, "the bottom half of a dismal two-family house in Somerville" (Auster 1992, 2) loses its status as "place of living for a handful of people in a close, intimate relationship" (Madanipour 2003, 62). In comparison, his sister's abode may be seen as a representative model of home since Ray Schweikert, her husband, "was Mr. Good, the big-hearted American dad, and with Donna there to hold things together, the family was as solid as a rock" (Auster 1992, 5). Hence, the disparity between the man's and Juliette's foster family's dwelling makes Nashe soon realise that taking the girl from her familiar surroundings would not be beneficial for her. The protagonist's home no longer functions as a place appropriate for leading happy family life.

Yet, it would be wrong to regard Nashe's abode as a meaningless location since, although devoid of intimate relationships, initially, it functions as "a point of reference through which the individual finds a place in the world" (Madanipour 2003, 65). The stability found in private, domestic space is for the man what Bachelard calls the centre of the universe; however, it rather defines his professional sphere. All the significant places located in Boston, such as his abode or the fire station, "are the result of metaphorical projections of cultural values onto geographical space" (Nöth 2015, 13). Such locations constitute Nashe's space of significance – his micro-universe – and are imbued with meaning. Nevertheless, since there is no longer a border between private, family life and public, professional one, the only values the man attaches to his micro-universe and, at the same time, to his abode, are defined through the lens of his job, the only one "that had ever meant anything to him" (Auster 1992, 8). Hence, it is solely work that defines Nashe's semiosphere and motivates him to come back home after his first journey, initially regarded as a holiday trip to visit his relatives in Minnesota.

Being a journey with the intention of the comeback, Nashe's first travel is consistent with Primeau's concept of travelling in road fiction, in which a typical road explorer makes a circular movement first away from and then back home. As such, his first travel retains the traditional circular structure since the abode functions as Nashe's centre and the reference point for locating himself in the world, and the road serves as peripheral space of significance. However, the man's dwelling proves not to be an axiologically stable construct since, after Nashe's return from holidays, it gradually ceases to define the protagonist as a social being whose sense of life is seen through the lens of his professional sphere.

It wasn't that he wanted to quit his job, but with no more time coming to him, what else was he supposed to do? [...] He still had over sixty thousand dollars in the bank, and maybe he should use it to get out while he still could (Auster 1992, 8).

Edward Relph (1976) points out that "to be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with the place" (49). Yet, taking into consideration the reversed situation that the protagonist is confronted with, the diminishing attachment to the place results in weaker identification with it and, consequently, in its losing the status of a meaningful centre. Considering Nashe's attachment to his job, before setting out on his first journey,

it would have been impossible for him to imagine leaving the department, but that was before his life had turned into a soap opera, before the earth had opened around him and swallowed him up. Maybe it was time for a change (Auster 1992, 8).

Far-reaching changes that have recently occurred in the man's life triggered a chain reaction that could not be stopped. The man's internal struggles intensify all the experiences linked with the road, motion, or speed. When Nashe's emotional attachment to his abode weakens, seeing no possibility of continuing the life that he used to have, the protagonist decides to abandon it altogether for the random possibilities offered by the road. Each step increases the distance between the man and his past, which ultimately leads to his temporary lack of any spatial point of reference in his world. Discarding all his material belongings before commencing the second journey signifies Nashe's final separation from his old life.

[H]e spent several hours gathering up Thérèse's belongings and loading them into trash bags, finally getting rid of her in a systematic purge [...] and when he began to consider his own possessions the following afternoon, Nashe acted with the same brutal thoroughness (Auster 1992, 9-10).

The order in which the man carries out the "cleansing" of his life is not devoid of significance. By disposing of his wife's possessions first, Nashe behaves as if he wanted to permanently close a certain chapter of his life. Only when he dissociates from Thérèse, it is possible for him to deal with his own life and implement necessary changes. Yet, the protagonist's every action, although strictly associated with discarding things, is for the man a source of pleasure and satisfaction that is difficult to explain. In his reasoning, "the farther he took himself away from the person he had been, the better off he would be in the future" (Auster 1992, 10). It cannot be denied, then, that Nashe's final preparations diverge from typical ones made by characters in road fiction. They seem to be more imbued with emotions and, as such, can be compared to a farewell with the past and, consequently, with the character's search for a new identity. Hence, the final preparations in Nashe's case signify a disruption of the typical structure of the journey since there is no comeback planned.

"Going on the road signifies a total liberation or flight from that which constraints us – society, self, the family, the past, or the familiar" (2015, 6) argues Brigham. Thus,

special circumstances found on the road enable Nashe to liberate from all that has been left behind and what functioned as the determinants of his position in society. Usually, the journey signifies an attempt to liberate from particular restrictions or a desperate craving for a change. In that, *The Music of Chance* does not diverge from road fiction tradition since the pursuit of liberation is primarily motivated by Nashe's crisis that cannot be eased. The momentary contentment after inheriting the money transforms into despair when Nashe visits Juliette in Minnesota and realises that it

was where the roof started to cave in on him [...] Nashe gradually understood that the situation was beyond repair. He had been away from Juliette for too long, and now that he had come back for her, it was as if she had forgotten who he was (Auster 1992, 4).

Not only has he lost his wife, but also the distance between him and his daughter has grown to such an extent that the situation cannot be repaired. His sister's family home has become for her the centre of intimacy and stable relations, aspects of domestic life that do not define Nashe's domestic space.

If Nashe's dwelling initially stands for the central point of reference that helps the man locate himself in the world and leads him back home, the road, signifies the unpredictable peripheries that become an answer to his crisis. Being aware that his life can no longer be fixed, on coming back home from his sister, the man misses the right turn to Boston and drives in the opposite direction. The unexpected twist of fate entails unforeseeable consequences. Instead of turning back, Nashe

impulsively went up the next ramp, knowing full well that he had just committed himself to the wrong road. It was a sudden, unpremeditated decision, but [...] Nashe understood that there was no difference, that both ramps were finally the same (Auster 1992, 6).

Although the situation is to a great extent coincidental, the man's choice is, by all means, a conscious one, taken at the spur of the moment, yet without hesitation and reconsiderations. Even though choosing the wrong road is not a planned step, it has been inevitably affected by Nashe's critical moment experienced in Minnesota.

The peripheries explored by characters in American road fiction are primarily associated with independence, freedom, but also with contingency and randomness. On the one hand, they offer a chance for the protagonist to be whomever they want or to go whenever they want. On the other, they allow explorers to totally subject themselves to unexpected twists of fate. Nashe gets to know the liberating force of the road when he suddenly misses the right ramp to the highway. The unexpected mistake functions as a reasonable excuse for continuing the journey in the opposite direction. Randomness becomes the defining feature not only of travel, but also of his whole life since it becomes "an adventure waiting to be experienced" (Mills 2006, 35) on the open road.

The solitude, freedom to go anywhere he desires and the overall appeal of the path are so overwhelming for Jim that driving very quickly becomes for him an intoxicating obsession. As it turns out later, one that cannot be willingly stopped. At one point, after many hours spent in the car, a disoriented man notices a tremendous influence that the road exerts on him.

Nashe realized that he was no longer in control of himself, that he had fallen into the grip of some baffling, overpowering force [...]; no matter how many resolutions he made to stop, he could not bring himself to do it (Auster 1992, 6-7).

As it turns out, the freedom to go anywhere offered by the openness of the road for the protagonist seems to be only apparent. The need to be in motion, to feel the liberating speed, transforms into an addiction. He experiences a strange loss of control over his actions and decision – an indecipherable force pushes him to go forward each day with no chance to take a break and return to the old habits and routines. When the first part of Nashe's road adventure has come to an end, he notices that it is no longer possible for him to exist in the same way as he used to do before the journey.

With time, his desires to find himself on the road again come back with even more intensity. "He struggled to settle down again, but his mind kept wandering back to the road, to the exhilaration he had felt for those two weeks, and little by little he began to give himself up for lost" (Auster 1992, 7). Nashe's relives his experiences so profoundly that he unconsciously rejects what previously defined him as a social being, namely his job as a fireman. What used to be his whole life, after the road adventures, becomes only a mere recollection, an insignificant aspect that can be easily put into oblivion. Hence, under the influence of the overpowering, yet promising setting, the man transforms from a social being who defines his world through work to a loner for whom experiencing becomes an unstoppable obsession.

The intimate experience of the road results in Nashe's transformation and, consequently, in his redefining the axiological statuses of centre and peripheries of his semiosphere. Whereas, as it has been pointed out before, the significance of home has diminished to such an extent that it no longer represents the man's central point of reference; the importance of the road, on the other hand, grows in power with each day spent in the car. The path, thus, from space enabling Nashe to distance himself from his preoccupations after leaving Minnesota, evolves into an ambiguous construct. The man not only further explores its liberating force, but is also confronted with its addictiveness. Even though the road still functions for Nashe as a means of liberation from the recurring pain and sense of loss as thoughts "no longer seemed to bring any of the old anguish" (Auster 1992, 12), the growing addiction restricts considerably his freedom of choice that he used to have during his first journey.

Although the protagonist does not demonstrate emotional vulnerability due to his unsatisfactory family life, it cannot be said that rejecting the centre has made him an invulnerable individual. The change in values attached to the house and the road has entailed a subsequent transition from being vulnerable to painful thoughts and memories linked with the domestic sphere to susceptibility to the enslaving character of the path. Hence, commencing a journey with no return, Nashe, indeed, has liberated himself from the past since "[a]s long as he was driving, he carried no burdens, was unencumbered by even the slightest particle of his former life" (Auster 1992, 12). Yet, the stronger he perceives his life through the lens of the road experience, the more his actual freedom is, in fact, restricted. The effect of the road is so overpowering that the protagonist starts to resemble a "crazed animal, careening blindly from one nowhere to the next" (Auster 1992, 7). The desire to 'unify' with the road may be compared to animal instincts that cannot be controlled yet have to be satisfied. Therefore, driving becomes the sole sense of

his existence whereas the road functions as a means to realise it. As such, portraying the road as an enslaving construct violates the traditional convention of the path presented as a liberating setting.

Nashe's remark that the drive relieves him of the past burdens, and his intense sensations while sitting in the car testify to his inner change. In its specificity, his transformation may be compared to the one that is undergone by the users of non-places. While discussing the notion of non-places, which are primarily regarded as places of transportation and transit, Marc Augé argues that "a person entering the space of non-place is relieved from his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver" (1995,103). Nashe's situation, hence, is consistent with the one described by Augé since when getting into his vehicle, the man, similarly to the people occupying the area of non-places, becomes freed from his daily determinants and from what defines him. Typical protagonists of road narratives temporarily abandon their quotidian positions in favour of becoming fervent road explorers. Yet, Nashe takes one step further and rejects completely what has previously defined him and his life, which leads to the transformation of his identity. The man's immediate world is narrowed down to the space of the road and the interior of his automobile and no point of reference represented by home exists. "What reigns there [in non-places] is actuality, the urgency of the present moment" (Augé 1995, 104) and, hence, the very act of driving and exploring the openness of the road becomes the only meaningful activity for Nashe and, at the same time, what defines his new identity.

Hence, during Nashe's voyages, the car takes over the function served previously by the home – it signifies the man's centre of universe, the only point of reference that he identifies with. Apart from providing "a sense of cosy seclusion" (Collet and Marsh 1987, 25), the automobile becomes "a sanctum of invulnerability, a refuge in which nothing could hurt him anymore" (Auster 1992, 12). As such, for Nashe the border between the practical function of the vehicle as a mere means of transportation and its soothing and comforting qualities becomes blurred that the man does notice when it has been crossed. At one point, the very act of getting into the car and initiating a ride is compared to a sublime and almost divine action. As trying to describe his sensations, the man feels as if his soul was detached from the body and, then, he and his vehicle became a unity.

After three or four months, he had only to enter the car to feel that he was coming loose from his body, that once he put his foot down on the gas and started driving, the music would carry him into a realm of weightlessness (Auster 1992, 12).

However, there is a certain paradox about Nashe's resigning from his previous lifestyle. The man has abandoned the relative stability of the home and his job, and a predictable routine in favour of the newly-discovered liberation of the road. Having left his abode, Nashe believes that that "[h]e could go anywhere he wanted, he could do anything he felt like doing, and not a single person in the world would care (Auster 1992, 6). He no longer suffers from isolation and confinement found in the private space of the dwelling. Paradoxically, while exploring freedom of the road, he still experiences the seclusion in the enclosed space of his car. The vehicle, indeed, provides him with liberation he has longed for, but it also evokes in him the sense of alienation, social

isolation, and loneliness when he feels “that solitude again, that nightlong rush through the emptiness, that rumbling of the road along his skin” (Auster 1992, 7). Thus, by establishing a relation, however superficial, between the man and his car, Auster comes into a dialogue with a common dilemma in road fiction regarding liberating and empowering qualities of the automobile.

Nevertheless, the soothing seclusion experienced while driving is not permanent since an unexpected encounter disturbs Nashe's drive. It is common for road stories to depict relations established as a consequence of random meetings. *The Music of Chance* is not an exception since the interpersonal relations depicted in the novel adhere to the ones that are developed in traditional representatives of the genre; in the case of Nashe the path is where he unexpectedly meets his travel companion – Jack Pozzi. On seeing a solitary figure of a possibly drunk man

Nashe's instincts told him to keep on driving, but he could not bring himself to ignore the young man's distress. Before he was aware of what he was doing, he had already stopped the car, had rolled down the window on the passenger side, and was leaning over to ask the stranger if he needed help (Auster 1992, 20).

The moment the protagonist stops his vehicle to help the man marks the end of his purposeless travel across the roads of America which, up to this point, has not been represented by any specific destination. Yet, after getting to know Pozzi's adventures, the aimless journey begins to take shape and to be oriented towards something more concrete – a possibility to win money in a poker game. As such, it loses its status as a quest for the unknown and the unexpected that were supposed to appoint the protagonist's further targets.

Although the characters' journey together lasts only a few days, there can be enumerated certain features of the relationship that dominate the plot of road novels. The characters are the same sex, male, and relatively young, which is consistent with the portrayal of the great majority of road explorers in the genre. Both Nashe and Pozzi set out on the road in order to seek a new sense in their lives – whereas for Jim the path represents an escape from the past and the quest for something not specified up to the moment of the meeting, for Jack it signifies opportunities, especially the ones linked with money.

These two men meet at critical moments in their lives. As Nashe's fortune has been shrinking, the protagonist finds himself in a worsening financial situation since he has neither discovered a new sense in his life nor has he taken any steps in order to settle down. Therefore, the man has realized that “if something did not happen soon, he was going to keep on driving until the money ran out” (Auster 1992, 19). Pozzi's critical situation, similarly to Jim's, also results from the lack of money. As he confesses to the protagonist, “I was supposed to be in one of the biggest games of my life, and now it's not going to happen” (Auster 1992, 29). Hence, Nashe becomes his companion's saviour since he proposes to lend him some cash for the big poker game. In turn, Pozzi seems to be for him an unexpected stroke of luck – if the young gambler wins, the protagonist will get the half of the money as a retribution for a significant risk he takes. Therefore, the primary bond that is created between the men is of a financial character. Yet, whereas in a great majority of road narratives the bonding between characters is maintained as long

as they are travelling, in *The Music of Chance* the relationship is preserved even after the men lose the game and have to work off their debt at the billionaires' mansion.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In *The Music of Chance*, Paul Auster engages in a literary dialogue with the tenets of American road fiction, giving it a postmodern character, especially in terms of spatialities and their axiological statuses. The novel also foregrounds the “the significance of random contingent happenings” (Brendan 2007, 27) which is regarded as one of the tenets of literary postmodernism. The author redefines some of the fundamental components imposed by the formula, which results in a greater emphasis put on the power of contingency, identity, disorientation and confusion, and manipulations within the spatial dimension of the novel, which are widely recognised concerns addressed in postmodern novels. The invariants of the generic convention as well as its principal formulaic pattern are realised in the narrative since Nashe commences journeys as a result of not being complacent about his current situation and the adventures enable him to discover the lure of the road: “escape, and the offer to break the routine” (Primeau, 15). The sensations experienced are so profound that they result in the man's destabilisation of identity. Moreover, the axiological status and the previously stable border between the centre of his home and peripheries represented by the road are reformulated.

However, at the same time, the man's travel diverges from tradition since Auster does not close the story with the protagonist arriving at this destination, nor has Nashe any goal to accomplish. His experience of the road terminates the moment the protagonist exchanges his semiotic space to the billionaires' micro-universe, which results in an unequal distribution of the action between two chronotopes – the road and the bucolic micro-universe. The unexpected relationship between Nashe and Pozzi, although initiated on the road and fairly consistent with the one portrayed in American road fiction, is transferred beyond the path, to the billionaires' property. Hence, Auster's plays with the genre result with the creation of its postmodern variant. The defining features of the convention – the invariants – are retained, which enables to consider the novel as placed under the umbrella term of American road fiction. Yet, the presence of some alterations within the formulaic pattern of the genre, postmodern character of space, and general emphasis on concerns of postmodernism prove that *The Music of Chance* represents only a variant of the genre, the one of a postmodern character.

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