

MIRRORING DYSTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAN MIRRORS IN PATRICK NESS' *MORE THAN THIS*

Alexandra MĂRGINEAN¹

Abstract:

This paper begins with a presentation of fictional facts and a few elements of dystopia, namely its geography, mechanism and vocabulary. From these unpretentious, even simplistic rudiments, we demonstrate how a complex meaning can be weaved, through mirrors and composite symbols. The second part of the analysis focuses on these, examining their functions and role: Picasso's painting Guernica, the prison, the coffin-like chambers, drowning, the characters, and books and reading. The culmination of this scrutiny is the concept of "more", revealed as a skeleton key to the novel. We show it to bear, as a symbol, various facets, impacting the individual and general planes, the movements of giving and receiving as basic interaction coping strategies in life (with their multiple aspects), ending up as a nutshell mirror for the human existence itself. The conclusions sum up the results of the exploration of More than This, stating again its complexity despite its unsophisticated plot.

Key words: identity, dystopia, *mise-en-abyme*, virtual reality, double

The mind and language give each other mutual pushes to break convention and above the commonplace; without the push, they would remain thawed and plain.

1. Introduction – Fictional "Facts"

The novel begins with the drowning of a teenage boy, who seeks his death by going into a stormy sea in winter, sure to find his end in this way. The suicide is introduced abruptly, without any explanation, and death is presented as certain, as the first sentence of the novel is: "Here is the boy, drowning" (Ness 2013: 9), completed then, as if to emphasize the outcome, by "He dies" (*Ibidem*: 11) – the last sentence of the first chapter.

Therefore, our horizon of expectations regarding what is to come in the novel is not very large. We expect it to be a story of how one imagines afterlife, a type of spiritual awakening, perhaps with moral overtones, possibly occasioning a retrospect of one's existence, or, in the best case scenario, the description of a near-death experience. However, it turns out to be something completely different. The boy wakes up in a deserted place that seems to resemble what used to be an England suburban landscape, except that it has no inhabitants and looks as if having gone through apocalypse. He finds means to survive by plundering a nearby store, taking clothes and canned food. He makes peace with the idea that this is hell, but has doubts and tormenting thoughts that cannot be appeased. When he has lost all hope of understanding what is going on, three more figures enter the scene unexpectedly. He sees a black van driving and as he starts running for it, trying to make contact with what in his mind can be nothing else but human

¹The author is a lecturer at the Romanian-American University of Bucharest, e-mail address: marginean.alexandra.roxana@profesor.rau.ro.

presence, two kids, an African American girl that is older than him, Regine, and a Polish younger boy, Tomasz, prevent him from getting to the van and, he subsequently realizes, rescue him from the Driver, whom they suspect is not human.

At this point the story seems to be a horror one. If the first part of the novel unfolds at a slow pace, which nevertheless keeps us alert because of the suspense the narrator creates, in the second events precipitate progressively fast. We find out that the landscape that Seth woke up to is actually the real world depleted of resources, in which people decided at some point to immerse themselves into an online program, a sort of virtual reality where to lead their lives with fewer losses and shortages. The moment Seth and the others met their “deaths” violently inside this virtual reality, they got disconnected and ended up back into the real world, where the Driver is a robotic entity attempting to reconnect them to the virtual system and their virtual lives, wiping memories so as to provide for them a plausible continuation.

The few facts concerning the three teenagers’ lives shed some light on their situations and on the way the virtual system works. Seth used to be a regular seventeen-year-old boy, leading his life more or less happily surrounded by a group of friends: Monica, H (Harold) and Gudmund. This normality is broken by the drama of his younger brother Owen being kidnapped from the family home in England by criminal Valentine, who makes Seth choose which of the two boys will go with him. The subsequent murder of Owen by his kidnapper faces the family with an impasse that none of them can overcome, so they decide to enter the virtual reality in which their memories are tampered with and a realistic version of their dead son is recreated so that they can pretend he has never died. However, the drama of the kidnapping cannot be erased completely, even though the outcome is changed. Hence, there is a feeling of something being not right all the time, which affects the behavior of the family. Candace, the mother, blames Seth for what happened to Owen, as Seth opened the door to the stranger (when the latter promised that, if the boy did it, he would not break the door himself and kill them both on the spot). She neglects her kids, goes out for runs, plans on leaving her husband and prepares the separation by robbing him of the family money, making secret withdrawals from the bank. The father, Tim, needs psychiatric therapy, part of which is taking appropriate medicine and getting involved in do-it-yourself manual projects, the effect of which is that he is forever refurbishing the kitchen and avoiding serious conversations. Seth gets involved intimately with Gudmund, in a relationship that he characterizes as being love, and we get this same feeling from the friendship and conversations that they share. At some point, though, some phone photos with the two of them in an intimate hypostasis get out in the open on a social network, posted there by Monica, who is jealous of Seth as she loves Gudmund too. This impacts the boys very seriously as they have to endure the abuse of both their colleagues and the adults in the community, as Seth’s parents decide they should move to America, and Gudmund’s send him away to another college. This throws Seth on the verge of suicide.

Regine is part of a broken family as well. Her mother remarries an abusive drunkard, and Regine dies thrown off the stairs one night as he pushes her. Tomasz dies on a ship, shot by the men who promised his mother a better life after fleeing Poland along with other people of poor means.

What the three teenagers have in common is the way they died. Seth got crushed against a rock at sea by the fury of the waves; he broke his shoulder blade and cracked his skull at the back. Regine hit her head as well, as a result of the fall on the stairs, and

Tomasz was shot in the back of his head. We will see why the head injury is relevant, what it means in our context and how it is connected with the way the virtual reality works.

2. The Geography of Dystopia

One of the characteristics of dystopia, probably its primary, is being a catastrophic world that has either gone through an apocalypse (-like event) or been transformed in such a way as to become nefarious, usually due to technologization. "Environmental disaster" is the first aspect that springs to mind as far as its appearance (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dystopia>). When Seth wakes up, he is surrounded, as mentioned before, by a desolate English suburb. Upon examination, he realizes that he experiences "a soft tremor in his blanketed mind", "a brush, a hint, a featherweight" of "familiarity" towards the place, that it actually is his old home in England, and that he has come to consciousness in his old house (Ness 2013: 19). The geography of the place is created so as to suggest a natural disaster and in fact the end of the world as people knows it. There is overgrown vegetation in yards, enormous, six feet high weeds, cracks in the pavement everywhere, and dirty, dusty cars with deflated tyres. The neighborhood consists of small houses that are crumpled together, as if out of lack of space. When Seth starts exploring the surroundings, in search of food and clothes, he finds a train station, a burnt football arena, a supermarket where he gets spaghetti and custard cans, and a mountain and hiking gear shop where he finds some t-shirts and sneakers. Interestingly enough, he sees some fauna, which he first deems to be the projections of his tired and desperate mind: a fox and its kits, ducks, bats inside a dark store, deer, some birds and a horrifying wild boar. The boar attacks him while he searches inside a train pulled at the platform of the old train station, which initially looks as barren as everything else. The enraged beast suddenly appears from the train toilet and is probably the one animal that Seth is not pleased to see, as the sight of all the others gives him a lost sense of hope.

3. The Mechanism and Vocabulary of Dystopia

Firstly, we should understand, besides what the existence of the online reality is all about (which we more or less saw above), how it works. People are placed in padded coffin-like containers or chambers. Unlike coffins, they are all glossy black and a little more rounded at the edges, the result being an aerodynamic shape. Each coffin has a screen that displays information in case anything is changed in the state of the person inside or in its own functionality. They close and seal airtight, and when somebody opens them, the lids rise smoothly unless broken.

Inside the coffin, people's limbs are covered in some kind of metallic wraps which Seth knows are called "conductive tape" (*Ibidem*: 73). They are made of a special material that contains metal, with special properties such as keeping a constant temperature and performing some sort of activity upon the muscles to prevent them from getting atrophied. This tape is present all over the body, including the head and face, with the exception of the genital area, and for a good reason. A tube is inserted in the subject's mouth, and with it, a mysterious substance that somehow brings about oblivion and the possibility to invade and reprogram the memory. Another tube is inserted in the subject's lower body orifices in order to collect residua. At the same time, there is a sort of chip at

the back of everyone's head, inserted under the skin or perhaps even deeper, that connects the subject to the system and puts her/him on the grid. It gives information about the subject having been disconnected in case this occurs, as it also contains a transponder. Normally the led of this device is green, but any alteration from the natural state undergone by the subject changes its color. When Seth is feeling unwell it shows blue, whereas in Regine's case, when she is badly injured, it turns red. Since the chip connects everyone to the system, it means that if a connection is established between chips directly, telepathy may emerge between them. By touching with his hand Tomasz's chip, Seth is able to tap into the boy's memories, and sees how he died as if he were there.

All the details above are proof of the way people get dehumanized in the system, becoming nodes of information that can be tapped into and intervened with. They mirror the condition of the individual in dystopia as seen by Fukuyama, who contends, unlike other writers of the genre who see people living in mechanized sci-fi futures as particularly adroit and somewhat upgraded, that dystopian humans lose most of precisely what makes them humane: they "have ceased to be human beings. They no longer struggle, aspire, love, feel pain, make difficult moral choices, have families, or do any of the things that we traditionally associate with being human. They no longer have the characteristics that give us human dignity" (Fukuyama 2002: 4-6).

The system has its glitches and loops, as, when Regine is reconnected by the Driver and Seth interrupts him in the process, since she has swallowed some of the substance that makes her immerse (but not enough), she is caught in a loop, reliving her death moment, when she was thrown off the stairs, over and over again.

The vocabulary connected with the whole process is interesting. The system is presented as the Link. The substance used to change memory is called Lethe, just like the river that the souls of the departed had to cross in Greek mythology in order to reach the underworld, and which made them forget their lives so as not to regret them, this being more or less the core function performed by this substance. The entrance to the system is called, again suggestively, an "actualization", as it entails an update of the person's memory to the previously agreed-upon requirements. When Seth reaches the prison and searches for his parents in the system by tapping on the information boxes on the huge touchscreen attached to the main computer, based on his fingerprints that the system reads, he is identified and the system attempts his retrieval. A light descending from somewhere in the ceiling brushes over the room and eventually shines and stops upon him, while the screen displays the messages: "DAMAGE NODE DETECTED" (meaning him), "SCAN IN PROGRESS", "RESTORATION POSSIBLE [...] RE-ACTUALIZATION BEGUN" (Ness 2013: 287).

4. *Mise-en-Abyme*

There are elements in the novel that make it a "narcissistic" text, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, or metafiction (Hutcheon 1984: 1). She calls it that because the presence of mirrors for its making, or for the essential meaning, which constitutes its ideatic skeleton, may be detected inside. The text likes to look at/admire itself into mirrors, just like the mythological character of Narcissus. Self-referentiality is achieved very effectively through these *mises-en-abyme* (*Ibidem*: 9).

At some point the mention of a painting inspired after Picasso's *Guernica* draws our attention, since the narrator Seth comes back to it a few times, almost obsessively. It was made by his uncle and it copies, with a difference, the Cubist artist's work. It hangs on the wall of his home, which means, interestingly enough, and revelatory to our interpretation, that it is present in both worlds. When Seth finds himself back into the real, post-apocalypse landscape, he finds the picture in his derelict house and mentions it to us again, insisting on the impact it has always had on him ever since childhood. His uncle's version depicts a "shrieking, wrongly-proportioned horse with terror in its eyes and that awful spike for its tongue", the horse being surrounded, as in the original, by "broken skies and broken, bombed-out bodies" (Ness 2013: 40-1). The insertion of this reference to an actual painting in the novel functions as a "vertical" *mise-en-abyme*, as it merges "two levels of fictive reality and narration" (Hutcheon 1984: 54).

Picasso's original work was meant to be a protest against war on the background of the Spanish civil unrest and the bombing of Guernica by German-Italian Nazi-Fascist air forces in 1937 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_%28painting%29#Significance_and_legacy). However, due to the ordinariness of the items depicted in it, it has come to surpass the historical context it refers to and bear universally on the idea of chaos, oppression, destruction and violence, on the one hand, and the resilience of hope in the midst of them, on the other. In other words, its message is "timeless" (*Ibidem*).

To our story, it is a powerful symbol, as it is a concentration of the basic meaning in the novel, functioning as an "*aporistique*" *mise-en-abyme*, i.e. an object that includes "the work in which it itself is included" (Hutcheon 1984: 56), because it symbolizes what goes on with the character, in his mind and at the level of the narration. Seth points out its importance: "He watches the painting as long as he can bear, long enough to try and turn it into just a painting, nothing more than that, but he can feel his heart thudding as he looks away from it" (Ness 2013: 41). It functions as a mirror for the subject of the novel, comprising in an essential manner the concepts of destruction, intermingled realities, illusion. It is there in both worlds, the online one and the real one (both before and after its destruction), thus being a reminder of the "more" of things, of the way in which what is surpasses what meets the eye, i.e. a reminder of truth. It functions as a window to the world and reality, and because it does so in a synthetic way, as a skeleton key, it can be considered a *mise-en-abyme* object. Let us explain exactly how this works, by mentioning a few details in the painting and coupling them with their signifieds in the fictional world.

Besides the obvious signification of destruction and chaos, which is a mirror of the end of the world in the novel, there are other details that represent subtle symbols of meaning. Firstly, there is the black-white-grey quality of the painting, which may point to one of the following things. It can be a warning that what is being said or narrated is a half-truth, or a dream, symbolically (as even Seth thinks at some point), i.e. something unreal. Also, it may refer to the destruction of the world, the way the world has, symbolically speaking, lost its colors, or hope, or beauty. Moreover, it symbolizes the depletion of resources that caused the current state of affairs, the planet's poverty or barrenness. Secondly, the juxtaposition of elements in the painting is suggestive of the overlap of two realities – the online one and the real. Thirdly, the presence of the light bulb that reminds us of the evil eye of modern lore (see *Lord of the Rings*, the conspiracy theories of the Illuminati, masonry symbolism etc.), which often refers to a totalitarian, oppressive presence. In our case, it mirrors the authorities that convinced people to sign

in the online program, capitalizing on their misfortunes and luring them into a world that could simulate presences of departed people or remedy other bitter aspects of their imperfect existences, all for the sake of economy: “It started as a fun thing to dip in and out of. And then people began staying there, leaving the real world behind, and the governments of the world think, *Hang on, this could be useful*. Then people started being *encouraged* to stay, because hey, you’ll save us money and resources and maybe, as a bonus, we’ll try offering you things that aren’t even there anymore. But then maybe everything just got too bad too fast. People were *forced* to stay, like the woman said, because the world became unlivable.” (*Ibidem*: 360)

The presence of the version of *Guernica* in both worlds, the simulated one and reality, makes it a double *mise-en-abyme*. It shows destruction present in both, though be it in different forms and degrees of subtlety. The real world has come to be a desert that can no longer sustain life. The simulated reality is broken because it is illusion, and what it misses, even when it has managed to repair damage and perpetrate human life artificially, is exactly truthfulness and authenticity, thus being imperfect, despite all potential perfection, because unreal, unoriginal, lacking genuineness.

The painting may be understood as not only a mirror for chaos, but also a criticism of a mechanized world, in the spirit of Nietzsche and Heidegger, who considered the solution of opposing art to science in excess, in order to free the human spirit: the “god of machines”, i.e. the dictatorship of science should not determine people to be obsessed with it or with explaining everything rationally, as some things cannot be explained that way (Nietzsche qtd. in Booker 1994: 7). Nietzsche’s view also militates for the open-mindedness of accepting plural perspectives or truths, of avoiding the limitation of holding only one explanation for the world as valid (as in both science and religion), of preserving some mystery and mysticism in one’s life (Booker 1994: 7-8). This openness to plurality of vision is ultimately, as we will see, the outlook supported by the omniscient narrator in the novel. The *Guernica* – the present piece of art in the novel – epitomizes then the solution to one’s attitude to human existence and to reality: in answer to life’s dilemmas, one can adopt fluid perception and the acceptance of ambivalence (illustrated by the superposition of images in the painting).

Another allegorical item in the fictional world is the prison. The old suburb jailhouse is the place where all the coffin-like chambers filled with people connected to the online system lie. These tanks populated with the virtual reality participants, which are referred to, not accidentally, as coffins, compose, in tandem with the prison, complex metaphors for the basic idea or underlying comment of the narrator relative to the situation depicted in the novel. For one, people are obviously not physically free, “existing” in a simulated world. Then, their mind is entrapped, manipulated, and their memories wiped and reprogrammed to accommodate certain needs and intentions. They have accepted lie and deceit as their everyday reality. Moreover, since they only “live” in their imagination, without the actual participation of their physical bodies, this form of existence may not even be called life at all, being more a form of death – hence, the coffins where they are placed and stranded. When we find out that the new technology has somehow evolved enough to ensure reproduction and birth without real human contact, the artificiality of this advancement makes us perceive it as something monstrous instead of a laudable breakthrough. It is something deprived of the very thing that makes people human and humane – human touch and warmth. It is monstrous precisely because it suggests that humankind could go on

without actually living and/or being free to experience things and move about. It is a perpetration of life in death and seclusion, which is a nonsense.

Drowning is a powerful, complex symbol as well. It is, firstly, an allegory for the process of actualization of people, i.e. for their entering the online system. It synthesizes, as an experience, the figurative "death" and oblivion that comes with swallowing the Lethe substance through the tubes inserted in the subjects' mouths while passing out into the simulated reality. Secondly, it is an allegory for the concept of being deprived of something crucial or dear. Drowning occurs as a result of, literally, air/oxygen deprivation, which mirrors a lack of something nurturing or essential to life that is getting or has gotten depleted or unavailable, such as food (earth's resources), love, access to the person one loves, or truth and what is real. Thirdly, drowning also contains the paradox of being filled and at the same time devoid of or out of a plenitude, showing how saturation does not necessarily entail sustenance. The characters are filled with or fed a version of their existence that is in fact unreal, they are fulfilled by something that actually does not exist.

The nature of the characters that meet in the post-disaster earth is an allegory. The main hero's name, Seth, and his death by drowning has religious overtones. The Biblical character Seth was the son of Adam and Eve whom they conceived much later than Abel and Cain, more precisely one hundred and thirty years after the murder of Abel by his brother. Thus, Seth was seen as the new Abel, a better version of human being who became the ancestor of humankind. He is a new beginning in a different way as well, namely in the sense that he comes after the seventh generation that bore the curse of atoning for the primordial sin, and thus represents the emergence of the human race from this dark period, with the hope of forgiveness and a start with a clean slate. The legend goes that Seth also survived the biblical deluge, but the Seth of our novel drowns (even though in a figurative sense), which makes the protagonist an ambivalent symbol of both hope and destruction.

Also, let us have a look at the nature of the characters that accompany Seth in his journey of discovery and self-discovery once he is out of the simulated reality. Tomasz is Polish, he is aged thirteen or fourteen (but looks twelve), is short and the youngest of the three friends, but appears to be the cleverest, or at least the most ingenious, coming up with the best solutions to get everyone out of dire straits. Despite his young age and innocence, he otherwise displays the sharpest mind and a courage that would flatter even an adult. Regine is an African American girl, older than Seth, and extremely protective towards the other two. She seems the most reasonable, responsible and practical of the three and a sort of a mother figure, perhaps compensating for the lack of attention that her own mother treated her with. Despite her feminine, mother-like care manifested towards the others, she is very rational, commonsensical and somewhat rough at times, combining therefore some extremes in her personality. Even Seth is a hybrid in some sense, more precisely in his background; although born and raised, for all his childhood, in England, he moves with his family to the opposite side of the globe, to America. Some differences in mentalities and vocabulary are mentioned along the story, regarding the way, for instance, his family treats the taboo subject of same-sex relationships in comparison with their American neighbors, or the vocabulary Seth uses, like the English torch versus the American flashlight (Ness 2013: 77), the "*allotments*" with vegetables (*Ibidem*: 121) or the "*blocks of flats*" instead of "apartment buildings" (*Ibidem*: 122) or calling the boar "*a bloody boar*" (*Ibidem*: 129).

The hybridity of the characters in various aspects of their personality is a *mise-en-abyme* for the overlap of worlds in the novel and for the ambivalence of truth or its never-ending deferral. Appearances tend to be deceiving, regarding quite a number of aspects: Seth's death, the nature of his relationship with Gudmund, what is real, what the place Seth ends up in really is. The beneficence of the online virtual reality is questionable.

A most interesting *mise-en-abyme* is achieved with us, the readers, and our reality outside the fictional world(s), through a few references to books and reading. After he wakes up from his slumber, Seth finds a book in his old house and starts reading, with a pleasure and greed he has never had, only to think, as he approaches the ending of this piece of literature, that a book is “*a world all on its own, too*”, “*where you live for a while*” “And then it's over”, “And then he'll leave that world forever” (*Ibidem*: 144). This is exactly what *we* do, as readers of *this novel*. The mirror and the reference is dedicated to us, with a hidden message – and we will see what it is. There are other hints that shape, little by little, this hidden message, functioning as bits next to bits of meaning that will finally compose a bigger picture. Upon other two or three occasions, terrorized by the fact that the Driver may come back, resurrecting from the dead (so to speak, if such a technological device may be said to have met its “death” or, rather, disablement), Seth thinks that if this were a book or a movie, then the villain would always find a way to return (*Ibidem*: 448). Of course, this *is* a book, i.e. fiction, and that is why we again perceive his remark as teasing, but do not fully grasp his intentions with this metaphorical leg-pulling.

At first glance, the effect of these comments would be to remind us that we are reading fiction, a sort of attention drawn to that by the implicit narrator through the intermediary of the main character, functioning as a “covert” self-referentiality, a way of teaching the reader in an indirect manner about the writing of books (Hutcheon 1984: 139). But, then again, this does not amount to much, as we already know it, so the reminder does not really make any sense, except, of course, if it had a different function. If we couple it with another comment made by Seth while admiring the clear, dark blue, starry sky at night, then its hidden meaning and, at the same time, real purpose, comes to light: “Billions and billions of stars. Billions and billions of *worlds*. All of them, all those seemingly endless possibilities, not fictional, but *real*, out there, existing, right now. There is so much more out there than just the world he knows, so much more than his tiny Washington town, so much more than even London. Or England. Or *hell*, for that matter.” (Ness 2013: 146)

The idea behind these comments is not to understand that what we are reading is not real, but to offer the passionate-reader-Seth as a mirror for us, the implied readers, and to make us imagine, be it even as an exercise of the mind, a *what if* type of context, i.e. how things would be if we had the certainty and proof of the existence of something out there still unknown to us, greater than us (surpassing our condition), but as real as we are. Conversely, it could also inspire us the exercise of picturing that what we perceive as real may be an illusion, in the old spirit of the Romantic tradition of perceiving the world as a dream. For a second, we are made to fill Seth's shoes and thus have more empathy with the character and his situation, especially since we do live in a world of depleting resources that has started to more or less straightforwardly leave us cues for a soon-to-be urgent need for “plan Bs”. Hence, in a way, his situation is everyman's situation, at least everyone who is aware of the state of affairs as far as the environment is concerned, globally. Therefore, the ultimate intention could be, for instance, to draw an alarm signal

as to the responsible use of resources on a planetary level, or our excessive use of and immersion in human communication via virtual channels. Overall, the message contained in the analogy of reading a book is thus complex, aiming at both the enhancement of the pleasure of reading by bringing the fictional idea closer, i.e. decreasing its unfamiliarity and our detachment from it, and the moralizing implications that we have seen.

5. The “More”

Of course, there is the interesting problem of the “more” that has to be dwelled upon at this point, as it appeared in the quote above and is connected with the discussion so far. Its allegorical value is supported by the prevalence of this concept: it is in the actual title of the novel, a title which is all about this “more”. Also, it is part of an introductory sentence to the book, actually the first words that we get to read, as a preamble: “Haven’t you ever felt like there has to be *more*? Like there’s more out there somewhere, just beyond your grasp, if you could only get to it?” (*Ibidem*). Thirdly, there is another reference to this concept in the second motto of the novel, which is an excerpt from Peter Gabriel’s song “More than This”, a song that gives the title of the novel: “Nothing fades as fast as the future/Nothing clings like the past” (*Ibidem*). This obsession with the “more” is like striking the chord a number of times in order to point to its importance, ubiquity and urgency.

To begin with, the concept of more seems versatile, having more than one meanings. There is a universal-level more, and a personal-level more. The understanding of the concept is hinted at upon various occasions as we read the novel, but it is facilitated for us in a concentrated marathon of symbolical exchanges of the characters in an apparently prosaic scene that gives the key to all the facts presented in the story. Details of it are important, though in appearance trivial, because they function as *figurae* for the philosophy behind the facts. This scene is the last dream that Seth has, after passing out from the blow dealt to him by the Driver.

In his unconscious state, he sees himself at an apparently interminable table, against a background of white light, without being able to distinguish much else around, as the setting of the scene is blurred. Almost everyone he knows has taken a seat at this supper: his parents, Owen, Gudmund, his friends Monica and H, Tomasz; even Regine makes an appearance. They are discussing the tuna noodle casserole that is being served by Seth’s mother, which is Owen’s favorite, but also Seth’s most disliked dish. A little annoyed by the comments made on the food she has prepared, Seth’s mother exclaims at one moment: “*So much for a world full of different viewpoints, huh? [...] I think it’s delicious.*” And she is seconded in this observation by Seth’s father, who reiterates her stand in other words: “*Taste has become opinion [...] When any fool knows they’re two different things.*” (*Ibidem*: 462) As Seth is contemplating the prospect of having to eat the food he likes the least in the world, Gudmund offers some of his portion, miraculously changed into chicken mushroom pasta, Seth’s favorite, while Monica and H offer him some food from their plates, which has also instantaneously and uncannily become chicken mushroom pasta. Tomasz’s preference for a red vegetable and meat stew ever since he was a little boy turns the tuna noodle casserole into stew on his plate. This turn of events determines the mother to utter another key sentence: “*Everyone thinks they know what’s best. Everyone.*”, and is replied by Regine, who at this point makes an entrance, “*Sometimes you need to find out that you don’t, though*” and we get the impression that Regine is addressing Seth (*Ibidem*).

The initial comments made by Seth's parents announce the right to difference and to having a different taste, opinion or outlook. The message borne by the types of food that the characters like to serve becomes universal and bearing on any and all aspects of existence. This right to difference is reinforced by the metaphorical presence of all the characters peacefully around the table, bickering comically but in a friendly manner, accepting and tolerating one another, although they all had differences among themselves that at this particular time seem to have been left behind. The idea of conviviality and sharing, especially food (but also opinions, lines), has something almost biblical to it, prefiguring brotherhood, peace and forbearance. Moreover, among the people gathered here there is Gudmund, Seth's lover and love, sitting next to Seth, offering him food from his plate, while Seth's parents seem to have nothing to object, which strengthens the message of tolerance and open-mindedness.

Although all have been served the same food, what they have in their plates eerily changes into something else that represents their preference in each case. The cue that we are ourselves "served" here is that everything might be a matter of perception and even though one may not like reality, the way one chooses to look at it and filter it can modify what that reality means or does to one. This idea is retrieved at the end of the dream, with Regine's words to Seth, as an answer to his repeated wonderings about what all this (scene) means: "*Real life is only ever just real life. Messy. What it means depends on how you look at it. The only thing you've got to do is find a way to live there.*" (*Ibidem*: 464) In other words, perception can alter something unpleasant into something enjoyable or at least something bearable, or, as the saying goes, beauty may lie in the eye of the beholder.

Another valuable idea that can be extracted out of the exchange taking place between the characters is connected with accepting that sometimes one does not know what is best – as both Seth's mother and Regine put it. What they mean is that one should accept more easily one's limitation as far as deciphering the ultimate meaning of life or the mechanism and logic behind human existence, as these may just not be available. Making the most of what one has may be a wiser attitude and life philosophy than chasing ultimate understanding that could remain forever elusive. That is not to say that one should give up the pursuit of one's ideals, i.e. the "more", or that one should be deprived of any ambitions or dreams. On the contrary, what is required is the ability and wisdom to discern between what is worth and noble pursuing, and at the same time within one's power, and what is chimerical and will remain a waste of time and effort. The pursuit of one's dreams is one meaning of the "more", and Seth conforms to that: "Look, I want both. I want them *and* I want you. Now that I know there's more? I want to *have* more. If there really is more to life, I want to live all of it. And why shouldn't all of us? Don't we deserve that?" (*Ibidem*: 444)

The philosophy of accepting doubt is repeated in the last chapter of the book by the omniscient narrator – the counterpart of the author himself. Here he performs an "overt diegetic self-consciousness" (Hutcheon 1984: 53), i.e. an almost direct address to (or at least involvement of) the reader in the process of writing and in the philosophy behind it. The omniscient narrator explains once again that, in any story as well as in real life, uncertainty is part of human condition: "He's uncertain about what's going to happen next. But he *is* certain that that's actually the point. If this is all a story, then that's what the story means. If it *isn't* a story, then the exact same is true." (Ness 2013: 479) One facet of the concept of "more" is revealed here: "more" means, in this case, precisely the

uncertainty and surprises that life has in store. This “more” exists because of the limitation of human beings of peering into the future, i.e. this less/limit becomes our more, an apparent doom which, approached with the right perception, may be seen as a gift from life and as the gift *of* life. People sometimes wish they knew what awaits them, but do not realize that life’s not only beauty consists in the very fact that they do not, but also the possibility of hope. If one knew the misfortunes that one goes through in one’s lifetime, then hope might become impossible. Hope is a second meaning of the rich concept of “more”. Paradoxically, although we have seen that the “more” refers to the uncertainty that lies ahead, it is also the one certainty that we have – that life goes on no matter what, that there is always something else to come, to be expected.

The various acceptations of the concept of “more” that we have seen above refer to what an individual is receiving – from reality, life, contexts – to how (s)he needs to accept difference, uncertainty, limitation. However, there is one meaning of the “more” that has to do with giving, offering, in which “more” is the equivalent of all the good in human beings and of the “good” they can produce, i.e. their capacity for love, sacrifice, generosity and, ultimately and somehow implicitly, self-discovery and evolution: “And love and care have all kinds of different faces, and within them, there’s room for understanding, and for forgiveness, and for more. More and more and more.” (*Ibidem*) Also referring to what human beings give or produce, the “more” can be understood as their ability to change reality, to make it more than it used to be by enriching possibilities, opportunities, meaning and experience: “People who looked at the world in a completely different way and by doing so, *made* it different.” (*Ibidem*) We feel that here the narrator refers to everything from scientific breakthroughs, walking on the moon, discovering and mapping outer space, accomplishing all the things that initially seemed science fiction, to the fight for people’s rights and minority groups. The efforts made in all of these brought about changes and modified reality, effected the alteration of mindsets and mentalities, the result being a different, always new and renewable world. When Tomasz asks Seth what was the more in Gudmund (the “Good Man”), Seth replies: “The more is in the things that made him so safe, that made him so *good*. They were exactly the same things that made him be with Monica [...] Gudmund couldn’t stand to see people he cared about suffer. And he didn’t know how to stop their suffering, so he offered himself.” (*Ibidem*: 436) Gudmund’s “more” was the desire and ability to *give*, to offer love, to make people happy.

One other possible reading of the “more” is the religious interpretation that “more than this” refers to “more than this ... life”, i.e. the existence of afterlife. Seeing what happens in the book through this filter is not definitively discarded, as, at some point towards the end, Regine and Tomasz no longer oppose Seth as he implies that they might still be projections of his mind, but go along with his interpretation, wondering themselves if it might not be true after all: “‘Guardian angels’ Tomasz says. [...] Does this mean we *are* angels? Because I would be very cross that I was such a short one.” (*Ibidem*: 475)

As an allegory, the “more” contains the situation of having two worlds (or, perhaps, a multiplicity of them) in the novel, each representing the “more” of the other. Again, there is an allegory in the mirror, a double that may potentially extend to an uncountable multiplicity of worlds, or “worlds” in a figurative sense, i.e. perspectives, opinions, tastes. Hence, the material fact of having multiple worlds is in itself a *figura* for the symbolical worlds, outlooks or “truths” that individuals may hold on existence. Moreover, the “more” is an allegory and mirror of the act of reading books, of plunging

into these different fictional realities, each with its own truth or decoding. Again the mirrors are endless, as we have Seth reading books in the novel, obviously mirroring us, but also mirroring his own vacillation between the two worlds in the story (the post-apocalypse one and online one), between the continents of England and America, between life experiences, between believing in Gudmund and love and disbelieving, understanding and closing his own mind, always reconsidering, second-guessing, wondering, weighing things, surviving, just like the reader does with the meaning of this book, and just like the reader does in her/his real life. The “more” ultimately becomes an allegory for living itself, thus acquiring gargantuan proportions and representing an “*aporistique*” mise-en-abyme (Hutcheon 1984: 54), because it includes, as a concept, the work i.e. (the essence in) the novel which includes it – let’s remember the fragment from Peter Gabriel’s song, bearing on the “more”, which is the story’s motto.

6. Conclusions

We detect in *More than This* not only criticism towards some of the most prominent mistakes of modernity, i.e. the irrational use of natural resources, instances of manipulation by representatives of authority, people’s acquiescence to replace social life with virtual communication etc., but also a tinge of hope. Besides presenting the above-mentioned evils more or less overtly, the novel also offers some solutions in terms of mentality and philosophy, extending an outlook the reader might embrace on existence, teaching it to her/him. In this respect, since hope can be envisaged, we might say this piece of writing has the key element of a “*critical dystopia*”, as it “suggests that the possibility of utopia exists within [...] dystopia[s]” (Sargent qtd. in Vieira 2013: 2). In our case, it would be a utopia in the mind.

We have seen that meaning is built in subtle ways, through the use of mirrors and allegories, the “more” being the richest, as we have argued. Sometimes mirrors get doubled and then even reproduced *ad infinitum*. The ultimate goal of the philosophy of the story is moral, pushing people to take steps to remedy the mistakes of (post)modern existence, and therapeutic, pursuing to appease torment induced by life’s dilemmas, ugliness and deterioration.

References:

1. Booker, Keith M. (1994). *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
2. Fukuyama, Francis (2002). *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. New York: Farrar.
3. Hutcheon, Linda (1984). *Narcissistic Narrative. The Metafictional Paradox*. London: Methuen.
4. Ness, Patrick (2013). *More Than This*. London: Walker Books Ltd.
5. Vieira, Fátima (2013). “Introduction” in Vieira, Fátima (Ed.). *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. pp. 1-7.
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_%28painting%29#Significance_and_legacy; March 20, 2015, 13:35.
7. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dystopia> (April 9, 2015, 17:15).