

Metamodern Sincerity in Musiienko’s Novel “In Search of Hay for Horses and Lovers: A Diary in a Time of War”

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Abstract. In this article, the author has discussed Viacheslav Musiienko’s novel *In Search of Hay for Horses and Lovers: A Diary in a Time of War* (2025) as an example of the metamodern narrative. This diary reinforces memories from the initial days and months of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The narrative is meant to serve as a medium for expressing existential pain and for sharing the narrator’s psycho-emotional feelings. Moreover, this diary genre reinforces precise event documentation, yet the narrator’s reflective approach is a key that offers comparisons with past events and philosophical reflections on the wartime reality and ecology. This results in a distinct narrative voice that eschews excessive embellishment while allowing for existential insights into the “new normality”. It has been stated that this diary effectively chronicles events with broader political implications during wartime, depicting personal experiences with detailed chronology. It analyses the media representation of these events, highlighting humanitarian and anthropocentric intentions. It was found out that these elements illuminate the narrator’s worldview, engaging readers in a search for psychological anchors amidst the chaos of war. It has been outlined that Musiienko’s fiction is ecological and anthropocentric, erasing traditional hierarchies and creating a metamodern narrative. The narrator considers societal entropy linked to chaos. Musiienko’s diary is a model of philosophical fiction that emphasises insights into human and animal experiences – victims of missile attacks. It has been found that this narrative stresses the true tragedy of war while minimising metaphorical constructs, focusing instead on historical storytelling that captures psychological, ethical, ecological, and humanitarian aspects.

Keywords: metamodernism; New Sincerity; historical narrative; humanism; ecology; ethics.

Introduction

In Viacheslav Musiienko’s novel *In Search of Hay for Horses and Lovers: A Diary in a Time of War* (English translation was published in London in 2025 by “Waterloo Press”), history plays a pivotal role. The novel-diary is based on recollections of the first days and months following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

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Musiienko, born on November 19, 1954, in Andijan (Uzbekistan), currently resides in Ukraine, living in Kozyn, the Kyiv region. After completing his studies at Secondary School No. 57 in Kyiv (1962–1972), Musiienko pursued higher education at the Kyiv Institute of Civil Aviation, graduating with honours in 1977 with a degree in engineering. He continued his education in postgraduate studies at the Institute of Cybernetics, where he earned a PhD in Economics (1980–1983). Musiienko’s professional background includes working as a software engineer at the Civil Aviation Plant No. 20 in Kyiv and conducting scientific research at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. Moreover, Musiienko has garnered significant recognition. His book *In Search of Hay for Horses and Lovers* won the Irpin Literary Prize (2025). Furthermore, his novel received critical acclaim and was honoured by the jury of the Mykhailo Slaboshpytskyi’s Literary Award with a special diploma.

Musiienko’s historical narrative becomes a work of fiction that conveys the endured pain, and its documentation allows the storyteller to convey the psycho-emotional state of himself and those close to him during those challenging months to readers and future generations.

The discussed narrative provides a new form of language to describe the “new normal” situations of Ukraine’s wartime.

The protagonist briefly experiences relief, thinking it is just a dream. However, the sound of another powerful explosion quickly makes them realise the situation is real. Reaching instinctively for the phone, the character intends to check the news but is interrupted by a call. The friend Sasha confirms the dreadful reality, and there is an unsettling recognition of being on the brink of war. This creates an atmosphere of urgency and disbelief, effectively conveying the chaos and fear in such moments. The narrative structure and dialogue intensify the emotional impact, illustrating a personal encounter with the uncertainties of conflict.

The narrator highlights the loss of horses due to death, sales across Europe, and theft in occupied territories, with a stark parallel drawn to the kidnapping of Ukrainian children. The author strongly disapproves of these actions, underscoring the tragic consequences for young equestrian athletes, many of whom have left the sport or may not return. This observation is particularly noted in Kyiv, where the number of young riders continues to dwindle.

The ethics of social and ecological narratives are connected to the reality of war, which becomes crucial for the narrator seeking to convey the truth about events in Ukraine to the world. He supports his account with cited sources and personal experience.

I’m relieved that the card terminals are working and I pay with my card. Cash will surely come in handy later on. I notice that the store is already full of people. Loaded with packages, I go outside and see a long queue pulsating like a living organism near the entrance. ATMs no longer dispense cash. (Musiienko, 2025, p. 12)

Emphases in the work shift from static description to an emotional capture of the writer's inner world: fear, instability, and fragility of existence. The onset of war becomes a symbolic apocalypse, suggesting a potential global cataclysm, akin to works such as David Mitchell's *The Cloud Atlas*. This narrative outlines not only ecological disaster but also a biblical, essentially apocalyptic vision of a "nightmare" and human end through possible nuclear weapon attacks.

1. Methodology and theoretical approach in the representation of contemporary humanism in wartime

This research provides a theoretical framework that synthesises approaches and literary critiques (Demska-Budzuliak, 2025; Shymchyshyn, 2022; Vaskiv, 2025, etc.) concerning metamodernism and contemporary literary discourse. This framework is built upon "Historical Contextualization: Investigating the transition from postmodernism to metamodernism", as elucidated in Bentley's "Trailing Postmodernism" (2018), "Narrative Techniques: Unpacking narrative structures and the integration of affective elements in contemporary autofiction", as discussed by Gibbons (2017).

M. Shymchyshyn states that the markers of metamodernism, conceptualised by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, have intensified in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Metamodern historicity compensates historical amnesia of postmodernism and gives grounds to imagine a historical moment. Affect, as a metamodern intensity through which we articulate emotional reactions and responses, has gained new currency during the Russia-Ukraine war. Thousands of Ukrainian refugees are receiving help and support from governments and people around the world. This situation exemplifies a desire for metamodern subjectivity for a meaningful personal emotional experience and interconnectedness. (Shymchyshyn, 2022, p. 57)

A thematic synthesis approach is utilised to aggregate findings from various scholarly discussions to understand how the oscillation between modern and postmodern elements manifests in metamodern fiction, for example, in Musiienko's narrative. Moreover, this research aims to illuminate how Musiienko has navigated the evolving literary landscape shaped by metamodernism. The key focus of this research is determined to synthesise various perspectives to understand the nature of metamodernism and its impact within both literary theory and practice.

Musiienko's narrative style and thematic explorations reflect metamodern characteristics. Metamodernism often blurs the lines between fiction and nonfiction, allowing for a deeper exploration of human experience and emotion. In nonfiction, authors can employ a metamodern sensibility that emphasises the subjective experience and the search for meaning in a fragmented world. While Musiienko may not rely heavily on metaphor, the emotional and philosophical grounds of his work aligns with metamodern principles, particularly in its exploration of the human condition.

In recent years, the concept of metamodernism has gained traction in the analysis of contemporary Ukrainian literature. This paradigm, characterised by a return to sincerity, emotional reality, and the search for meaning, is embodied in the works of several prominent authors, including Neda Nezhdana (Неда Неждана), Maria Matios (Марія Матіос), or Ihor Pavlyuk (Ігор Павлюк).

For example, Yu. Skybytska (Skybytska, 2017) examines the works of playwright Neda Nezhdana as examples of metamodern drama. Her analysis seeks to establish their affiliation with a qualitatively new literary movement, even though certain elements of postmodern poetics are present in Nezhdana's dramatic works. According to Skybytska, Nezhdana presents the reader with a range of harmonising principles that have the potential to save a disillusioned individual of the 21st century from the absurdities of life, profound loneliness, and the fear of death. The playwright revitalises the scale of universal human values, restoring faith in the greatness of Humanity, its kindness and (new) sincerity.

Maria Matios is a significant figure in contemporary Ukrainian literature whose works reflect a metamodern sensibility. Her narratives often explore themes of identity, memory, and the human experience. Moreover, Ihor Pavlyuk (Pavliuk) is another key figure in Ukrainian metamodern literature. His poetry and prose often grapple with the search for authenticity (Pavlyuk, 2014). Pavlyuk's poems reflect an engagement with both personal and cultural narratives, drawing on his experiences and the broader historical context of Ukraine. His writing embodies the metamodern ethos by navigating the tension between hope and despair. Authors like Matios, Nezhdana, and Pavlyuk, along with their contemporaries (such as Lesia Mudrak, Artur Dron, etc.), engage with issues of the human experience, reflecting a desire for authenticity.

Generally, the methodology for analysing Musiienko's novel is rooted in a multidisciplinary approach that combines literary theory and psychological analysis. Focused on the philosophical underpinnings of the text, this study recognises the narrative as both a diary and a broader reflection on war-induced existential sublevels. By emphasising the psychological states of individuals during times of extreme uncertainty and their connection with the natural world, the analysis seeks to unravel how Musiienko dissolves boundaries between human and non-human experiences in the context of Ukrainian resilience. This method allows for a comprehensive exploration of the novel's layered meanings, including its anthropocentric and humanistic aspects.

The theoretical framework is also grounded in contemporary metamodern concepts as introduced by Vermeulen and Van den Akker. This study examines how the text minimises metaphorical abstraction in favour of a raw and unfiltered portrayal of war's psychological and social reverberations. Simultaneously, Musiienko's focus on the individual psyche within a shared human condition situates his work within the continuum of Ukrainian fiction's anthropocentric traditions, while echoing similar movements in mid-20th-century English literature.

Additionally, this research highlights the grounding elements of Musiienko's narrative: the interconnection between humans and animals as mutual victims of aggression, as well as the overarching theme of preserving life and finding moments of calm amidst chaos.

The novel stands as a testament to emotional authenticity, achieving psychological depth by portraying resilience in the face of destruction. By exploring emotional liminality – a space between despair and tranquillity – the narrative echoes metamodern ideals that reconcile classical humanism with contemporary global uncertainties. This methodological blend affirms Musiienko's work as not only a historical documentation of war but also a profound philosophical exploration of humanity's ongoing quest for security and meaning.

Moreover, Shaw and Upstone (2021) introduce the term "transglossic" to explore contemporary fiction's engagement with modern constraints. Gibbons' examination of Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* links anthropology with environmental themes, discussing how entropy relates to literature's depiction of nature's decline. Her work on contemporary autofiction explores metamodern affect, focusing on how personal narratives reflect the depth and historical context that post-postmodernism aims to address. Kersten and Wilbers (2018) introduce the concept of metamodernism in English literature studies, outlining the groundwork for understanding its principles and significance in contemporary fiction.

For example, Martin Paul Eve states that

sincerity is in the interpretation that I will advance here, a type of honesty that is not merely concerned with an accuracy in one's statements to others but is rather based on checking future actions against previous speech and behavior. ...

Of course, it is possible and frequently necessary to believe someone else is speaking sincerely before one has been the public proof that he or she will follow through on his or her words – it would be a grim world were it otherwise ... Sincerity is an ongoing negotiation between trust, public performance, and proof, between the rhetoric of the present and the action of the future. (Eve, 2019, p. 37)

Musiienko also reinforces irony in his "sincere narrative", e.g., "Today, in the first days of the war, the worst thing is to lose the chance to refuel the car or buy bread or medicine. [...] Supermarkets and pharmacies have long queues, too. I have never seen anything like this in my life. The comparison to queues in Lenin's Mausoleum, so revolting and inappropriate under the circumstances, came to mind (an example of irony in the novel)" (Musiienko, 2025, p. 19).

The narrator captures the frantic atmosphere as people, filled with tension, rush to fuel stations, resulting in extensive queues stretching for kilometres. Similar scenes unfold at supermarkets and pharmacies, where people wait in line, underscoring a level of scarcity and urgency previously unseen by the author. The text also offers a striking comparison – albeit deemed unsuitable and distasteful given the situation – to historical queues for Lenin's Mausoleum, suggesting a surreal contrast that serves to emphasise the gravity of the current situation.

Theoretical approaches presented in the works of Abramson (2015), Bentley (2018), Shaw & Upstone (2021), Brunton (2018), Gibbons (2017, 2019), James & Seshagiri (2014), Kersten & Wilbers (2018), and Lavery (2018) serve as primary nodes in this analytical

framework. For example, Abramson discusses the intersection of metamodern literature and the emerging concept of the metaverse, exploring how this new literary framework responds to digital innovation. James and Seshagiri define metamodernism as a literary movement that bridges continuity and revolution, suggesting it operates as a synthesis of historical narratives and progressive thought. Lavery analyses how metamodern novels depict consciousness and the extended mind, exploring themes of interconnectedness and cognitive extensions in literature.

Furthermore, Bennett argues that in order to better understand what David James and Urmila Seshagiri term “metamodernism”, we must first be attentive to the contemporaneity of another well-known strand of present-day literary discourse: postcritique. Focusing upon representations of paranoia and surveillance in the metamodernist works of Ali Smith, and Virginia Woolf’s quintessentially modernist *To the Lighthouse* (1927), it argues that postcritique and metamodernism are linked beyond the fact of their simultaneity. It demonstrates that a shift towards a postcritical theory of positive affects was already being formulated in high modernist writing. Finally, it concludes that, if there are aesthetic imperatives to metamodernism, such as re-energising the idea of “Making it New”, Smith does so by creating a postcritical synergy between fiction and criticism.

2. The human condition during war: exploring new sincerity

In *In Search of Hay for Horses and Lovers: A Diary in a Time of War*, the protagonist interacts with Irene, who is initially unaware of the impending crisis, and the protagonist’s reaction upon awakening to the news is highlighted. Her initial irritation gives way to shock and disbelief as she grapples with understanding the reality of war. The passage juxtaposes this surreal experience with the stark, sobering calm of dealing with mundane tasks, such as feeding horses. This calm doesn’t offer comfort; instead, it feels rooted and realistic. It is like finding steadiness by leaning against a solid wall after facing harsh truths. This contrast highlights the intricate nature of human reactions to significant challenges, intertwining deeper self-reflection with practical resilience in daily life. “Sometimes I pretend we are on an island. Our country is a solitary island. We have no access to the mainland via boat or plane. We have been deprived of our freedom of movement: the resource base has changed, and there are several technical challenges” (Musiienko, 2025, p. 193).

Ukraine, likened to a solitary island, is cut off from external support and opportunities for growth, reflecting a dwindling resource base and numerous technical challenges. This isolation extends to education and cultural exchange, with all programs and events suspended, leaving only rare competitions that barely resemble their intended form. While the internet offers a connection to foreign friends, conversations have shifted away from personal interests towards survival necessities. The text conveys a sense of nostalgia and loss, in which friends attempt to help but are ultimately powerless against the harsh realities that continually erode progress and stability. The metaphor underscores a poignant truth: isolation forces people to cling to what is familiar, yet this clinging cannot stop the gradual loss and stagnation experienced daily.

The struggle to confront the reality of an impending invasion is reflected in the imagery of news presenters attempting to maintain composure amidst confusion. The dilemma whether to engage with the news further underscores the narrator's internal conflict: "Post-traumatic stress disorder, – Irene explains. – I read that in a state of trauma, the very things that could be most healing appear impossible, outlandish, even wild" (Musiienko, 2025, p. 189).

The mention of Mykyta from Mariupol highlights a real-world example of this phenomenon. The character, described as being frozen in response to his traumatic experiences, perceives joy and laughter as disrespectful to his memories – a sentiment Irene suggests is a misunderstanding of what is actually therapeutic. This dialogue underscores the struggle between trauma's isolating effects and the potential for recovery through embracing life's simple joys. The subject matter connects to new sincerity by addressing genuine human emotions and vulnerabilities in a complex world, as one described in this piece.

3. The human experience within the framework of war

It is worth emphasising that the diary genre enhances the precision of event depiction; however, an important aspect of the work is the narrator's reflectiveness. This involves not only recording dates and personal experiences but also engaging in analytical comparisons, excursions into the past, and offering a philosophical understanding of reality in wartime conditions.

Familiar surroundings create a primal urge, driven by survival instincts, in which the mind is dominated by the need to gather supplies out of fear of scarcity. The primitive part of the brain urges immediate acquisition, dismissing careful examination. Meanwhile, the analytical side struggles with reasoning and decision-making. Observing others' frantic behaviour amplifies this internal conflict. The image of a woman carelessly piling goods into her cart exaggerates the chaotic clash between rationality and impulsiveness, emphasising how basic survival instincts can overpower sophisticated, logical decision-making in times of presumed need or crisis.

In Musiienko's novel, the analysis and introspection help perceive the tragedy of the war in Ukraine not only as an emotional trauma but also enable distancing from it through analytical narrative techniques. These techniques, characterised by the use of deductive and inductive methods, essentially reflect a scientific-like vision of the world. This approach aids in detaching from the heavy emotional moments described in Musiienko's novel, e.g., "It was scary. No one knew what would happen next, or when it would be over. Should I run away? And where to run? Or maybe tomorrow everything will calm down? Thoughts were confused, waves of panic rolled in. The decision to leave Ukraine was very difficult for us" (Musiienko, 2025, p. 21).

The nature of Musiienko's metamodern novel is a narrative that is humanistic, existentialist, philosophical, and historical. He revives the ancient concept of *kairos* as a flow of events with significant value to the narrator.

The full-scale invasion has stirred the unconscious, naturally generating societal entropy linked with chaos and absurdity – fundamental components of the existential worldview. Musiienko’s novel can be seen as a unique guide to exploring complex psycho-emotional relationships between the husband and wife and their immediate surroundings. Dedicated to the writer’s wife, Irene, and presented as a diary, it offers a distinctive narrative model. The writer’s humanism creates an authentic experience, not just concerning events in the narrator’s inner world, feeling threatened, analysing news reports, and witnessing horrific events at the onset of the full-scale offensive.

The novel’s plot is based on internal emotional jumps and fluctuations during the war-induced turbulence. This scenario unveils a new world of humanism, awakening a desire to live and create a space where the lives of both animals and people are preserved. Thus, Musiienko’s diary becomes an example of philosophical prose and a psychological-philosophical treatise in which the profound psychology of people is pivotal, along with attempts to decipher the feelings and “being” of animals that are also victims of missile attacks. “How strange the human psyche’s reactions can sometimes be when responding to circumstances that tend to shock it. Somewhere in the middle of September, I realized that sometimes I can feel a long-forgotten calm. When I immerse myself in work or when I am preoccupied with domestic affairs that are not related to the war...” (Musiienko, 2025, p. 124). The author reflects on an unexpected sense of calm that occasionally emerges amidst turmoil. This observation occurred in mid-September, illustrating a contrast between the overwhelming external chaos and a personal sense of tranquillity. This highlights how individuals can find pockets of peace even in the most unsettling times, suggesting a nuanced emotional resilience. Moreover, the diary’s descriptions focus on the true tragedy of war, leading to a minimisation of metaphorical constructs while emphasising the historical narrative that captures psychological and humanistic aspects.

Furthermore, Musiienko’s narrative is *anthropocentric*, determining the cultural cult of the individual, which was relevant in Ukrainian fiction in the second half of the 20th century, and also reflected in English prose of that time and the present days (for example, David Mitchell’s *The Cloud Atlas*, Ian McEwan’s *Solar*). Anthropocentric fiction is oriented toward the re-thing of climate and ecology issues in the context of global terrorism, wars, social instability, etc. Margaret Atwood’s works, such as *Oryx and Crake* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* engage with themes of environmental degradation and the Anthropocene. Barbara Kingsolver, in her novels like *Flight Behavior* and *Kingsolver* addresses the impact of climate change on rural communities and the natural world. J. G. Ballard’s works often reflect on the relationship between humanity and the environment, as seen in *The Drowned World*. Richard Power, in his novel *The Overstory*, links human stories and environmental themes. In addition, John Thieme, in his *Anthropocene realism: Fiction in the age of climate change* (2023), discusses the paradigm of anthropocentric fiction of the contemporary literary discourse, analysing Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior*, Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, Liz Jensen’s *The Rapture*, Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins*, Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*.

Musiienko, in his *In Search of Hay for Horses and Lovers: A Diary in a Time of War*, develops such literary trends by focusing on internal psychological states amid socio-political and ecological turbulences. Aggression affects not only people but also animals, which are less protected and need survival and safety strategies.

Such configurations of humanism and rational analysis affirm the concept of emotional authenticity and psychological credibility explored by Dutch metamodernists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. Musiienko's diary emerges as a response to fundamental security challenges in today's world. This anthropocentric reality is characterised by a holistic connection among all subjects striving to preserve what is most valuable: life.

Particularly moving are the scenes of horse rescues set against the backdrop of human psychological suffering. V. Musiienko's metamodern novel reveals a distinct ethical layer in these depictions, bringing to light the grand narrative of death that challenges the foundations of human existence. Events in Bucha, Hostomel, and Borodianka intensify the narrative of pain and horror, which, from the first pages, terrify the reader by exposing the situation of an existential liminal state. "The enemy made its way to the outskirts of Kyiv almost in a flash. Hostomel, Vorzel, Irpin, and Bucha – miles of quiet, serene places had been turned into the front line in a matter of hours once the invasion began. No one was prepared for this" (Musiienko, 2025, p. 24).

The war in the novel becomes a backdrop for reflecting deep internal conflicts and wounded souls. In this way, the new sincerity in V. Musiienko's work not only documents events but also unveils a complex ethical and psychological landscape of the war in Ukraine, particularly in the Kyiv region.

Conclusion

In Musiienko's novel, the narrative is distinctly metamodern, with one of its key elements being the concept of "new sincerity." This approach emphasises direct experience and the author's personal involvement in the described events. One way this sincerity is expressed is through stories about animals, rescuing loved ones, and operations to remove dangerous fragments from a horse. New sincerity is characterised by its use of first-person storytelling, in which the narrator simultaneously serves as witness, participant, victim, and observer of events. The narrative of new sincerity outlines the ethical dimensions of war, where fundamental values, such as safety and life assurance, are disrupted.

In addition, Musiienko's metamodern diary encapsulates its narrative layers, combining humanism, existentialism, and historical reflection. The text reveals how the resurrection of the ancient concept of *kairos* imbues the flow of events with a profound meaning, positioning time as both a personal and collective dimension in the face of war-induced chaos. The author intertwines emotional depth with rational clarity, creating a framework for intellectual resistance against existential absurdity.

What distinguishes Musiienko's narrative is its seamless weaving of the true emotional landscape with external historical coincidences in 2022. By centring on the

intimate psychological dynamics of a husband and wife amid wartime disorder, the diary transcends mere historical recounting to explore the deeply human dimensions of resilience and survival according to the German classical philosophical discourse. The diary format, underscored by its dedication to the author's wife Irene, lends authenticity to this exploration, grounding it in personal experience while simultaneously addressing universal human struggles.

The narrative underlines a poignant interconnection between humanity and the broader ecosystem of living beings affected by war in Ukraine. Moreover, Musiienko expands the scope of humanism to include a compassionate acknowledgement of all forms of life. His novel emphasises coexistence and the ethical responsibility to preserve life, offering flickers of hope through the protagonist's efforts to find stability in mundane tasks or creative pursuits amidst chaos. This connection between war's absurdity and moments of fleeting calm could be defined as a testament to human resilience in contemporary Ukraine. Furthermore, the novel's anthropocentric focus highlights how internal psychological states mirror socio-political upheavals.

To conclude, Musiienko's *In Search of Hay for Horses and Lovers: A Diary in a Time of War* leaves readers with a profound meditation on the coexistence of fragility and strength within the human paradigm of world perception. While grounded in contemporary historical contexts, the novel transcends them through its universal themes of existential belief and ethical humanism.

Source

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