

## **Food as a Metaphor: A Long Poem about Milk by Imants Ziedonis**

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**Abstract:** For decades, the Latvian poet Imants Ziedonis (1933–2013) has exerted influence on and shaped public thought, shifting the point of focus in Latvian public thinking, drawing attention to forgotten aspects of Latvia’s history and reinventing them. During the Soviet period, Ziedonis maintained the idea of Latvian identity, the roots of Latvianness, and Latvian traditions. One of the works in which all of the aforementioned are perhaps the clearest expressed is *A Long Poem about Milk (Poēma par pienu, 1977)*. The objective of the present article is to view how the “gastronomic” word “milk” functions in the work by Ziedonis when used in several metaphors (milk-world-view, “milk boy”, milk song, etc.), and what content (poetic message) has been included in the work by its author. The analysis uses the notion of a “seme”, used as an instrument to reveal the course of formation of the various meanings that the previously mentioned metaphors have.

**Keywords:** Imants Ziedonis; *A Long Poem about Milk*; metaphor of milk; seme

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Imants Ziedonis (1933–2013) is one of the greatest Latvian poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having for decades influenced and even shaped public opinion. In the period of Soviet rule, Ziedonis used Aesopian language to maintain the idea of Latvian identity, roots, and traditions, presenting them as sources for his readers to draw perseverance and belief in the future. Simultaneously, it was him who successfully introduced the spiritual dimension in Latvian poetry to the seemingly prosaic items and notions un neapšaubāmi paplašināja latviešu dzejas poētisko arsenālu ar gastropoētiskajiem tēliem.

The present paper has a twofold goal: first – to provide an insight into functioning of the “gastronomic” notion of milk in selected metaphors of *A*

*Long Poem about Milk*; second – to attempt to infer the content (the poetic message) the author included in this work.

## **A History of the Problem in Latvian Literary Scholarship**

The origins of food studies can be traced back to the mid-1980s and the establishment of the Association for the Study of Food and Society, which initially focused on cookbooks. The term “food studies” entered the academic vocabulary in the 1990s, when the representatives of several disciplines – anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, women’s studies, culture history – started paying more attention to role of food in their respective fields of study. Separate study programmes began to be offered in North American universities with the aim to study food from an interdisciplinary perspective (see more in Coghlan, 2020, 1–14). Outside this research direction, already in the 1960s and 1970s a number of scholars had contributed to the topic, like anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss (*The Raw and the Cooked*, 1964) and Mary Douglas (*Deciphering a Meal*, 1972) or sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (*A Social Judgement of Taste*, 1979).

In studying the functions of food in literature, until now attention has been paid predominantly to prose texts, in which food has been studied in a great variety of aspects – as a manifestation of a specific age, from the perspective of food customs of particular ethnicities, and, for instance, as a taste of the postcolonial. Poetic texts have received much less attention.

The images of food and drink in Latvian poetry so far have not been the objects of complex studies, but it would be unfair to state that they have been completely left out of the range of study topics – in some aspect or another, images of food and drink have been included in a variety of studies, though not as primary objects of focus. Regarding that, at least a small and by no means comprehensive list is in order. In describing the neo-baroque in Latvian literature, a scholar of literature and folklore, Janīna Kursīte, also touches upon the super-abundant usage of food and drink in some poems by Eriks Ādamsons (Kursīte, 1999, 490–492). Kursīte has also studied the symbolism of food and drink in the epic *Lāčplēsis* by Andrejs Pumpurs – one of the most influential Latvian authors of the Romanticism era (Kursīte, 2010, 164–177). Kursīte has

also devoted an encyclopaedic chapter that covers the traditions of Latvian cuisine as well as food and drink in Latvian folklore and literature (Kursīte, 2012, 4–12). Literary researcher Fjodors Fjodorovs in his paper “Antons Austriņš: *Осип Манделъштам*” (Fjodorovs, 2006, 64–72) looks for common features in the works by the poets Austriņš and Mandelstam and discusses Antons Austriņš’s poem “The Italian Wine” (*Itālijas vīns*), wherein the image of wine, specifically its different varieties, participate in the formation of an “Italian text” in the poet’s work, uniting the enjoyment of wine with a sudden feeling of serenity, vividness, and inner freedom of the lyrical hero.

*A Long Poem about Milk* by Imants Ziedonis has been previously discussed by researchers: a paper by literary scholars Anda Kubuliņa and Margarita Lekomceva (1984, 224–228) discusses the mythologeme “milk”, where the authors seek to define the culturally rich symbol of milk not only in Latvian folklore but also in the cultural layers of the Indo-European common roots. Latvian exile linguist Velta Rūķe-Draviņa wrote a paper on “A Long Poem about Milk” (1990, 23–31) focusing on three areas of associations related to milk, namely that of a mother, a cow (an image of great importance within the country’s culture), and a mythological grass-snake as the zoomorphic proto-image of the mythological *Piena Māte* (“Mother of Milk”). The metaphor of *milk* has also been covered by researcher Zita Kārkla in her discussions of the relationships between the maternal and the feminine in a patricentric culture.

The present article is an attempt to view how the gastronomic image of milk functions in “A Long Poem about Milk” with respect to the peculiarities of forming a poetic image.

## **A Word as Used in Poetry**

Poetry is characterised by an imaginative (poetic) way of thinking, used to explore the world in a unique way, and images taken from the field of gastronomy also play a role in this process of exploration.

A quite widely developed associative field is related to food, rooted in how food is perceived using the senses: taste (sweet, salty, sour, bitter, pungent, etc.), smell (with its wide range of perceived aromas), vision (the appearance of food and drink, the “ornamentation” of the dish), and hearing (the sounds of

cooking, preparation, eating and drinking). Quite often it is exactly this sensory perception that contributes the most to the formation of the semantics (meaning) of the gastronomic poetic image. And it follows from the formative element of the image – the seme, which is created when in a poetic text the meaning of a word is divided into separate characteristics and features that the particular word triggers in one’s mind. So, for instance, the word *milk* is related to notions *white*, *sweet*, *sour*, *warm*, *fat*, etc. Through the actualisation of some of the semes of the word *milk*, and through the usage of that actualisation in combination with other words and their semes, by respectively forming (weaving) a complex poetic web, a poet’s unique (or less unique) poetic narrative is formed. The deeper the cultural historical roots a poetic image has and the less common semes the poet succeeds in finding/creating, the more capacious an image is formed. And the latter process in particular – the creation of new semes – is the process that imbues the poetic image with its uniqueness, providing a way to express an extended meaning that do not directly follow from the basic definition of a particular word.

## The Poet’s Strategy

Imants Ziedonis wrote *A Long Poem about Milk* during the years of the deepest stagnation of the Soviet regime, when the poet felt the need to return to the basic human values – both deliberately and inadvertently devaluated by the representatives of the totalitarian regime – through the word *piens* (Lat. “milk”), which is a shared linguistic property of not only the Baltic people but the whole Indo-European family.

*A Long Poem about Milk* was published in 1977 and is built as a collage of various texts, where original poems are supplemented by folk literature: sayings, charms and spells, dictionary entries, excerpts from chronicles, and small prose texts; “it is a play of styles and perspectives, but in its deepest essence – a journey on the Milky Way, looking for milk, rivers of milk, milk rules, harmony”<sup>1</sup> (Kubuliņa & Ļekomceva, 1984, 228).

Drawing from this rich material, Ziedonis actualises the values that have provided a timeless foundation for the existence of the Latvian nation.

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1 Here and hereafter all quotes are translated by Aldis Pūtelis.

The confrontation between tradition and reality (in this particular case – the reality of the Soviet regime) reveals the level to which the identity of an individual (both the ethnic and generally human) is endangered. Thus, “milk” is not only a notion denoting a single type of food, but it includes a whole system of values centred on the life-giving mother, the nurturing mother. She must teach the milk worldview and milk words, i.e. the ethical system that will enable a person to live a good life.

Ziedonis describes his poetic strategy somewhat later in relation to another poem of his, namely *A Long Poem about Bread* (*Viddivārpa<sup>2</sup>: Poēma par maizi*), which focuses on bread and the bread grower, the land-tiller; still Ziedonis’s statement can fully be also referred to the *Poēma par pienu*. In an interview for the newspaper *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Ziedonis reveals his strategy. According to the poet, the meaning and the content framework of the notions of bread and milk need no explanation:

The overall obvious meaning of these notions [bread and milk] appears to be on the surface, it is close to the reader. One can, for example, write something about Hemmingway or Rainis, take some documentary materials, facts, but add something imaginative. It will make it interesting for the reader, but he will never know whether the written is true... But, when you start speaking about bread, he [the reader] will respond immediately: say, I know this topic, indeed. And, if he will believe me in this case, then we will have reached understanding. (Ziedonis & Damianu 1983)

When *A Long Poem about Milk* was already published, Ziedonis found a kindred soul in the Moldovan (Romanian) poet Grigore Vieru (1935–2009). Ziedonis believed that “Vieru may have written probably the most beautiful poems dedicated to the mother in Soviet poetry” (Vieru, Ziedonis 1984, 5), so he translated some of Vieru’s works into Latvian and added a selection of poems his own passages from *A Long Poem about Milk* and his other books, thus creating a book by the two authors titled *Mother* (*Māte*; 1984). The element uniting both poets and their poetic strategy was the willingness to talk about the rudimentary

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2 *Viddivārpa* is a neologism created by Imants Ziedonis, denoting two ears grown on the same stalk, one might say – twin ears, known in Latvian as *jumis*. *Jumis* in Latvian mythology is also a deity presiding over the fertility of fields; the folklore mentions *Jumis* as presiding over barley, rye, hazelnut, and flax.

matters of being, expressed in the most basic language comprehensible to everyone, which Ziedonis mentions in his introduction to the book:

There are such basic matters without which one cannot build a thing – neither house, nor family, nor life, nothing at all. The basic characteristics, the basic conditions. Work, for example is one such human basic condition. Work creates the basic product – bread. [...] Mother is another basic being. The basic wise person. The basic good one. The basically dear mother.” (Vieru, Ziedonis, 1984, 5)<sup>3</sup>

The rest of this paper deals with the specific features of the image of milk in Ziedonis’s work.

### **The Milk-World-View. *Pienapuika*<sup>4</sup>. Mother**

Famine  
general  
spiritual  
incoherent  
is the cry of mine [...]  
I cry:  
long live the milk  
world-view!  
[Bads  
vispārīgs  
garīgs  
nesakarīgs  
ir kļiedziens mans [...]  
kļiedzu:  
lai dzīvo  
piena  
pasaules uzskats!] (Ziedonis, 1997, 33–34)

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3 Translated here and below by Aldis Pūtelis.

4 *Milk-boy*, meaning “milk-sop”.

In the word group **the milk-world-view** (*piena pasaules uzskats*) Ziedonis joined words that represent notions of different levels: the first – *milk* – is a concrete one, referring to the sphere of the mundane and denoting a foodstuff that the Dictionary of the Literary Latvian Language (*Latviešu literārās valodas vārdnīca*, 1987, 92) explains as follows: “a specific white secretion synthesised by special glands (of a mother), produced during the postnatal period and physiologically fit for feeding human and animal young”. The second level – *world-view* – contains a set of principles and views that determine one’s relationship with reality and provide meaning that justifies one’s existence. One of the senses of milk – “a substance sustaining and guaranteeing life” – adds some concrete meaning to the abstract notion of “world-view”: this is a world-view centred around life, the care of life and for life, and its continuation in generations to come.

The milk-world-view in the poem is promulgated by the *pienapuika* – literally “milk-boy” or “suckling”, which is a Latvian idiomatic construction, emphasising that the individual described with this word is inexperienced, young, and incapable. The poet himself in one of the roles of the poetic hero describes himself in the following way: “I still have mother’s milk in my mouth” [*man mātes piens aiz lūpām*], this expression meaning generally the same. For both these idioms Ziedonis cancels the explained above negative connotation, saying that he is “*pienapuika* by his nature” [*pienapuika pēc būtības*], as he “still holds steadfast to the mother’s dignity” [*ieķēries turas vēl mātes godā*]. The most substantial characteristic of *pienapuika* is the inability to kill and to accept killing (destruction) as a significant part of reality:

They killed a doe, / milk was still flowing from her teats. / I could not eat that  
meat, / and they beat me.

[Viņi nokāva briežu māti, / viņai vēl piens tecēja no pupiem. / es nevarēju tādu gaļu  
ēst, / un viņi mani sita.] (Ziedonis, 1997, 23)

The poem marks the opposition between the “meat world” and the “milk world”, emphasising the idea that where there is a lack of milk, the “meat world” dominates:

Both war and murder started because the earth ran out of milk

[I karš, i slepkavības sākās tāpēc, ka pietrūkās uz zemeslodes piena] (Ziedonis, 1997, 21)

Or:

Yes, the early men / hunted cows / and only then realised that they could milk them. //  
This only proves / how milk laws / are educated and learned / long and hard.  
[Jā, pirmie cilvēki / medija govīs / un tikai tad iedomājās tās slaukt. // Tas tikai liecina /  
cik piena likumi / ir audzināti un apgūti / ilgi un grūti.] (Ziedonis, 1997, 161)

Here the milk-world-view features words “educate” and “cultivate”; a human being and their surroundings must be cultivated (from the Latin *cultura*, “cultivation”, and *colere*, “to till”), they must be integrated into the world of culture, brought up in accordance with the norms of spiritual life and social behaviour as established by the folk tradition. As expressed in Ziedonis’s words – one must be acquainted with the “rules of milk” [piena likumi] (Ziedonis, 1997, 161) and the “responsibility of milk” [piena atbildība] (Ziedonis, 1997, 23).

The poetic image of the **Mother** adds a spiritual vertical to the milk-world-view, as the poet says in the beginning of the poem: “But in a poem about milk the mother is the most important one” [Bet poēmā par pienu galvenā ir māte] and “In this world there is a circle – it is eternal / whatever you search for, you will find a mother” [Šai pasaulē viens riņķis – tas ir mūžīgs / lai ko jūs meklētu, jūs atradīsiet māti] (Ziedonis, 1997, 19). In other words, Ziedonis equates the mother with her milk. Hence, all that matters in a human being’s life, and through the aggregate body of the individual, in the life of a nation come from the mother’s milk.

In this poem the mother is a summary image as it includes numerous hypostases of the mother. One might even say that for Ziedonis the image of the mother is three-faced, embodied in three beings and three personal names: Mother (giver of life, the dear one, the generous one, the selfless one), Maruža (the wise one, holding the milk charms), and Annele (the feminine one, the soulful one, searching for ways to fulfil her duty as the giver of life). Among those there poet also refers to his own mother, to whom this poem is dedicated posthumously. Ziedonis generalizes the various manifestations of the maternal with the Latin word *Mater*: “*Mater* – the eternal word, / *māte*, *matj*, *mutter*” [Mater – mūžīgais vārds, / *māte*, *matj*, *mutter*] (Ziedonis, 1997, 36). Latvian scholar Zita Kārkle is correct in her association of the mother’s femininity with the notion of abundance:



It is possible to relate the metaphor of milk in *A Long Poem about Milk* with abundance originating from the mother: “mothers give milk willingly/ also to the children of other mothers” [mātes dod pienu labprāt / arī citu māšu bērniem] (Ziedonis, 1997, 131). Milk is the drink of life that multiplies the life force. Drinking milk is also reflected in the poem as the consumption of spiritual food, while milk is created through not just a physical, bodily process, but also through creative activity: “The milk arises, / but milk does not just appear out of nowhere, / it must be created. The mother lies with her eyes open and creates the milk” [Piens rodas, / bet tā ne no kā piens neatrodas, / tas ir jārada. Māte guļ vaļējām acīm un rada pienu] (Ziedonis, 1997, 170). The mother thinks of her child as she creates the milk, and through breast-feeding the mother provides the child with spiritual values: “It is like / as if she was thinking about all that way the child / will get dressed from the inside” [Tas ir tā, / it kā viņa domātu par visu to, kā bērns / apģērbsies no iekšpuses] (ibid.). (Kārkla, 2014, 175)

The spatiotemporal model of the mother is that of the circle and the cycle – everything begins with the mother and returns into her. While Ziedonis also speaks of the “people of the milk hallmark” [piena raudzes<sup>5</sup> cilvēki]:

We are the people of milk hallmark / [...] / On top of us there is cream, / and, with all things coming and going, / we are standing here firmly / and giving to skim.  
[Mēs esam piena raudzes cilvēki / [...] / Pa virsu mums nostājies krējums / un, visam nākot un ejot, / mēs te stingri stāvam / un dodam krejot.] (Ziedonis, 1997, 95)

A hallmark indicates the quantitative contents of some precious metal, the ratio of the precious metal versus the admixtures in the mass. Speaking of milk, it would be more common to refer to the percentage of milk fat, but the poet has substituted this down-to-earth, mercantile description with a more poetic one of the hallmark, supplementing the aforementioned metaphor with the same ‘people valuable as precious metal. Ziedonis performs an “archaeological” research of the word *krejot* ‘to skim’, correctly relating it etymologically with “very small and very ancient little word: *no piena kriet*” (ibid.),<sup>6</sup> and then

5 While *raudzēt* would also mean “to ferment” – a word play not foreign to Ziedonis’s poetry.

6 The meaning being as follows: *kriet* – ‘to separate, skim cream (based on the ide. \*(s)ker – ‘to cut’) (Karulis, 1992, 425).

proceeds to conclude: “and from that originates our word *krietns* (‘honest, decent, thorough’) [emphasis by Ziedonis – *I. K.*] – [*un no tā mums cēlies vārds krietns*]”. Returning to the first quote “the people of milk hallmark, whatever happens, are decent, capable of retaining their decency – moral ethical characteristics (integrity, diligence, trustworthiness).

## The Milk Song

The metaphor “milk song” is based on a real action – when a cow is being milked, the milk is churning in the milking bucket. By describing this sound with the word “song”, Ziedonis poeticizes the prosaic action. For Ziedonis, folklore – folk songs, beliefs, charms, proverbs – is a vivid expression of the life of the spirit. It has already been said that one of the senses of milk is a ‘life-sustaining and life-guaranteeing substance’, while the song’s image contains the sense – ‘created in the process of creation’. The metaphor “milk song” thus highlights the spirit’s creativity and life as vital for the existence of man and nation. Folklore is both an aesthetic phenomenon and a code of folk virtues to be followed to live an orderly and honest life. The milk song also requires us to reconcile the beautiful with the ethical. Through the milk song, which has come down through the centuries to the present day, the milk worldview lives on from generation to generation. This is how it should ideally be, but modernity has fragmented it and lost much of its integrity.

The hero of the poem – the poet – returns to the countryside, leaving the town, where it is impossible to find pure, natural milk, as it is incarcerated “in the prison of packaging”, and all talk only concerns the gross and the net (Ziedonis, 1997, 34), respectively, where there is only the industrial production and commerce, he returns to search for and to pick up the fragments of the “milk song”, “this fragmented tape”, in order to renew it and write a contemporary milk song:<sup>7</sup> “but milk, / this tape recorded in prehistory, / this torn and fragmented tape, / to pick it up piece by piece from everyone, / having preserved some shred, some scent / or some marvellous word [*bet pienu, / šo aizmūžos ierakstīto lentu, /*

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7 The “search of the milk song” is comprehensively discussed by philosopher Jolanta Mackova (1983, 59–77).

šo sarauto un saraustīto lentu, / salasīt pa gabaliņam no ikviena, / kurš saglabājis kādu skrandu, smaržu / vai kādu brīnumainu vārdu]. (Ziedonis, 1997, 127)

First, the poem's hero – the poet – finds the song of milk within himself, remembering that he “grew up with an old mother and the land and the cow” (Ziedonis, 1997, 95). In this trinity, the milk song had a connection to beauty (the earth), generational inheritance (the grandmother), and work (the responsibility for the duty entrusted to oneself – the care of the cow).

The old Maruža, the sorceress, the keeper of folk virtues, also kept the milk song. She has the words of the milk, and, like the poet, she collects folk wisdom. Philosopher Jolanta Traile writes:

The poet glimpses through Maruža into the ancient view of folk virtues and its system of moral values, where milk is a special symbol of purity, clarity, selflessness and compassion. Maruža gives the poet the symbol of the Dairy Mother [...] and the firm conviction that it is necessary to prolong [...] the immortality of the values of the national spirit. The virtue of milk is also necessary for the formation of the ethical world of modern man. (Mackova, 1983, 66)

While searching for the milk song, the poet meets various people, both those who are still keeping the words of this song. And also those who have already lost it. Alina has dungy galoshes on her feet, but she washes the milk dishes so clean. And Ildze writes a letter to the poet about her cows so warmly and personally that it becomes clear – the milk song is still alive in her:

Briedala [the name of a cow] is as grey as an old teacher, and I am always embarrassed in front of her. I don't know why – I throw her a better beetroot. I can still pet the other cows. But I'm afraid of Briedala. It just makes me want to snicker.

[Briedala ir sirma kā vecā skolotāja, un man vienmēr neērti viņas priekšā. Pati nezinu, kāpēc, – es viņai atmetu pa labākai bieteī. Citas govīs es vēl varu paglaudīt. Bet Briedalu – baidos. Tā vien gribas kniksēt.] (Ziedonis, 1997, 67)

The worldview of milk, the people of milk and the song of milk form a unified poetic world, which presents the ethical values important to Ziedonis – honouring life and motherhood, guarding the heritage accumulated over generations and responsibility for the world in which one lives.

## Negative Connotations of Milk: Fatness and Leanness

Ziedonis's poem was created, as already mentioned before, during the stagnation period of the Soviet regime. There is no comprehensive study discussing how loyal or disloyal Ziedonis might have been toward the regime, especially considering the complexity of the issue. But *A Long Poem about Milk* allows to conclude that Ziedonis does not attempt to confront his readers with the image of an alien and hostile power, but he does not avoid the negative connotations of milk.

In his view these negative connotations arise from an insufficiently cultivated milk-world-view – or cultivated “only for the stomach” [tikai līdz vēderam] (Ziedonis, 1997, 93). In order to mark one of the reasons of alienation in the milk-world-view, the poet uses the binary features of milk as a foodstuff, namely its fatness and leanness. The fatness of milk is characterised by its percentage of fat. Ziedonis speaks of “100% butter” churned from milk in one poem. Thus metaphorically signifying man's oversaturation with material wealth, which excludes the vertical of spirituality. In the line of a folk song, a young girl says – “in milk (I) washed my face” [“pienā muti nomazgāju”] expresses not only the description of the physical health of that maiden, but in Latvian folksongs the epithet “white” (“white maidens”) also characterises the virtue and spiritual purity of the maiden. By referring the folksong line to Latvia and connecting it with the commonplace words *masher* and *100% (fat) butter*, the positive meaning is degraded and reduced to a calculable value, envisaging a perspective of a world without spiritual values:

Oh, Latvia, my rich sister, / will wash her face in milk, And you yourself as a huge masher / will be full of 100% butter. // Full stomach, full shops, the quintal and the quart!

[O, Latvija, bagātā mana māsa, / pienā muti nomazgās, Un pati gluži kā milzīga piesta / būs pilna simtprocentīga sviesta. // Pilns vēders, pilni veikali, centners un stops!] (Ziedonis, 1997, 101)

However, lean milk, with its percentage of fat artificially reduced – diluted – cannot provide the necessary nutrients, i.e., the moral values necessary for the preservation of the nation:

You are milking the correct milk, oh, mother, / your daughters sing songs diluted with water.”

[*Tu slauc pareizu pienu, māt, / tavas meitas dzied dziesmas, kam ūdens klāt.*] (Ziedonis, 1997, 102)

In this case, the metaphoric connection is first made between the words “milk” and “song”, giving the impression that these describe phenomena of the same level. But that is delineated by the epithet “correct” and the extended attribute “diluted with water”. And it is these attributes that draw the border between “milk” and “song” – as between the cultivated and already eroded milk-world-view.

Despite the fact that the author of the poem has revealed numerous negations in the everyday life of Soviet-era rural life, he calls for harmony, which, according to Ziedonis, is foremost the order of all things, where everything is “logical, neither slack, nor athwart” [sakarīgs, ne šļaugani, ne šķērsām] (Ziedonis, 1997, 27). This order must be present in the mother’s small circle – the family, then in one’s own parish, and in the state of Latvia as such, as order is the basis for the structure of this world and the Universe.

In sharp contrast to the image of milk used by Ziedonis (the mother’s milk), a negative and toxic connotation of milk is seen in Nora Ikstena’s novel *Mother’s Milk* (*Mātes piens*, 2015). One of the periods depicted in the novel partially coincides with the time when Ziedonis composed his poem in the 1970s, with the narrated events continuing until the late 1980s, when the fall of the Soviet system began. The character of a mother depicted in the novel refuses to breastfeed her newborn daughter out of fear that her milk is “bitter”, full of hatred, an agonising and depressing feeling of existence from living under Soviet rule. This aversion to milk is inherited by the daughter – when at school she is forced to drink milk, she cannot swallow it. The forced drinking of milk for Ikstena is a metaphor of the Soviet system enforcing obedience and oppressing the personal freedom of choice. Although in the poem by Ziedonis there is the mention of the clash of ideas between the “meat” and “milk” world-view, and he proceeds to indicate the negations of Soviet social life, in his work the milk metaphor is used to express that quintessential biological and ethical values of existence – the basis for a nation and an individual alike – are never doubted.

## Conclusions

One of the formants of the artistic polyphony in *A Long Poem about Milk* is the image of milk. The poet considers “milk”, the same as “mother”, is one of the basic words without which the world is unthinkable. By emphasising some of the word’s semes and by use of metaphors Ziedonis creates a peculiar world of milk centred around a mother, a woman. Through a metaphoric use of the image of milk, the poet communicates his system of values, which is based not only on his own personal experience, but also tradition, these being values that have to be maintained in force, in order for an individual and a nation to retain their identity.

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