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'Unchristened Flesh': The Woman's Breast and Breastfeeding in Traditional Slavic Culture, with Especial Reference to Belorussian

In the course of human activity the human body is transformed from natural material as such to a carrier of ethical norms and human culture. Traditional conceptions of the world and of man within the world are incarnated in the semiotic functions of organs and parts of the human body. The understanding of homo corporeus as at once homogeneous and manifold constitutes an important and ancient ethnocultural stereotype. Different socio-cultural and psychological realms — the spiritual and emotional worlds, the sphere of interpersonal relations, ritual, etiquette and texts from folklore — reveal different configurations of this understanding. While its ethnocultural status is in the process of being defined, almost any part of the human body can be seen to pass through separate stages, beginning with concrete biological functions and culminating in culturally abstract ones. Thus the process by which stereotypical perceptions of the woman's breast evolve manifests different stages of diachronic development, over the course of which the breast became one of mankind's most important social symbols.

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The breast as a symbol of motherhood

In the first period of their lives all mammals are dependent for survival on their mother's milk glands as the only source of nourishment. When close to this, they are assured protection from external dangers, stability and security. For humans too, the mammarys perform this role, and the breast has become a symbol of nourishment, protection, consolation and existence in general, thereby representing all things positive, as in the Ukrainian expression, *dobryi yak mamina tsitska* [kind as a mother's bosom, or 'very kind'] [Varkhol, Ivchenko 1990: 142]. This attitude to the breast is replicated in many languages, where the breast is assigned the very first syllable children are able to pronounce, 'ma': in Bulgarian, *mama*, *mamitsa*, 'teat, breast' [ESSYa 17, 183]; in Latin *mamma* or 'breast' (note also in this regard the words *mat* [Russ. 'mother'], *mater*, and even *materia*, matter). While no direct denotation of the breast as mother [*mama*] has been found in the eastern Slavic languages, it is implicitly present in the name for children's dummies in Belarussian dialects: *mamka* [Styashkovich 1983: 252],¹ and in the name used to denote a child's first non-milk food — *papka* or 'daddy':² "Here's a slice of *papka*, eat it up" [Rastorguev 1973: 196]; see also the saying *zakhochish' papki, pratyahnish' lapki*, [stick out your paw if you want some *papka*] [Dobrovolsky 1914: 577]. In the Russian Karelian dialect the breast was referred to as *nyanka*; *'nyanki nado dat, nu, titki mladentsu, ranshe govorili'* — [they used to say you should give a baby the breast, you know, your titty] [SPGK 4, 61].

This symbolic opposition between the mother-breast and the father-bread can be traced in folk medicine, where prescriptions are given magically to increase the production of breast milk. In traditional Belarussian culture the most frequently recorded prescription is 'bread' potions; this can be explained both from the point of view of the pragmatic similarity between milk and bread, the two staple foodstuffs, and from that of the symbolic dichotomy of milk/bread, referring to first/subsequent foods. A woman would sit at her doorstep and eat *abydzenny*, 'everyday' pies, made of mixed cereals; these had a moist dough shaped in the part of the kneading trough where a sign of the cross was stamped [Wereńko 1896: 127]; and she would also drink the water which had been used to brush the surface of bread loaves before they were baked. Crumbs from the bottom of an elder's knapsack [*kroshki iz kotomki startsa*] were considered particularly effective [Nikiforovsky 1897: 83]. The use of ordinary crumbs would facilitate the '*replenishment of faltering fertility*', because being

¹ *Mamitsa* in Serbian denotes baby food made from wheat flour and butter [Rechnik XII, 67]; in the Bryansk dialect, *sisya, siska*, 'nipple' [SRNG 37, 351]. [cf. Rumanian *mamaliga*, corn porridge]. [Editor].

² cf. 'pap' in English (meaning 1. the breast; 2. sloppy food as given to babies). [Editor].

the last remnants of the loaf they ‘*incarnated wholeness and plenitude and thus became the basis of prosperity*’ [Strakhov 1991: 78].

The use of the image of the breast to denote infancy is characteristic of all the Slavic languages:¹ in Polish, one says *być przy piersi* [to be at the breast] [Skorupka 1989: 670]; cf. the Russian phrase *ty eshche titku u mamy sosala* [back then you were still sucking at your mother’s breast], used ‘*about someone young and inexperienced by comparison with the speaker*’ [Mokienko, Nikitina 2003: 324]. In Ukrainian dialect, the phrases *materinu tsitsku ssav; od materinui tsitsku* [when you were sucking your mother’s breast, from the mother’s breast] mean ‘since childhood’ [Varkhol, Ivchenko 1990: 141]; note here too the expression ‘*moloko na gubakh ne obsokhlo*’ [the milk had not yet dried on someone’s lips] — (glossed here as ‘*about a young child*’). The infant itself comes to be called *grudnoi, grudnichok* [breastling] from *grud* [breast] in Russian dialects; in Belarussian *tsytsunok* [titling], and also *sis’kavik* (Lepelskii region, Vitebsk); in Moravian *cecoň* [Bartoš 1906: 35]; in Serbo-Luzhitan *sisanč’e* [Schneeweis 1935:73] and so forth. In the Belarussian dialects of Smolensk the mother’s breast and the young child are referred to by the same word — *tsira* [Dobrovolsky 1914: 972]; note also *tsyrvat’* ‘to milk’; Moravian *cerka* ‘daughter’ [Bartoš 1906: 35]; and Belarussian dialect *tsurka*, ‘daughter’.

Breastfeeding establishes an extremely close connection between mother and child that is both physiological (note the Belarussian superstition, ‘*Yak matsery malako ŭ hrudzyakh kal’ne, a dzitsyatsi pad toi chas nyama, to tady dzitsya tsytski zakhatsela i placha*’ [If milk starts to flow in the mother’s breast and the child gets none, then the titties will weep and feel sad like the child himself] [Federowski 1897: 208]), and emotional; during breastfeeding the infant not only receives nourishment, but also, according to traditional credence, assimilates immaterial values. Famous clichés such as *vpitat s molokom materi* [to absorb something with one’s mother’s milk], or in Polish, *wyssać co z piersi matki* [Skorupka 1989: 671] signify ‘to have learnt something from childhood’. Although there is a saying that warns ‘you can give a child your tit but not your brains’ (*sis’ki dash’ uma ne dash*), the folk consciousness retains strict rules according to which breastfeeding is essential if one is to avoid negative moral consequences — ‘*ni davai parozhnyuyu sis’ku — budzits’ maniuka*’ [never give a child an empty tit, or he’ll end up a fraudster] [SBGPZB 3, 31]. Luzhitz Serbs use an expression which directly links a person’s character to the particular way in which he was breast-fed — *Ko da te ciganka zadojila* — literally ‘*nursed by a gypsy, referring to a capricious, volatile person*’ [Schneeweis 1935: 73].

¹ Though not just: ‘to drink in with one’s mother’s milk’ is a set phrase in English too. [Editor].

Incidentally, current journalistic writing actively employs the image of the breast and breastfeeding specifically to describe any number of traits or qualities passed on through the mother's milk. So, an internet search easily turns up phrases like the following: '*Marketing, the offspring of design and trade, suckled by male academics of questionable integrity, has turned into a rather shady...*' [<http://zakonzhanra.com/texts/texts4.phtml>], or '*By appealing to their conscience, calling upon them to fulfil their civil duties to the Motherland which nursed them at her bosom*' [http://messir-draco.narod.ru/text/fate_12.html]; '*These are elements of the cabbala, at whose mysterious breast all religions, old and new, have been nourished*' [http://devilcry.narod.ru/product_3.html].

According to a Serbian custom the mother's breast is something that commands deep respect. One of the most terrifying curses was considered to be the one in which a mother cursed or damned her children with her breasts. Folk stories frequently describe how the mother would take her breasts from beneath her undershirt and curse her son with them. This particular manner of emphasising the importance of the mother's breasts is reminiscent of the custom according to which a bride kisses her husband's mother's right breast before she enters his house for the first time [Chausidis].

Breastfeeding as a medium for supernatural experience

The idea that certain kinds of knowledge are passed on through the mother's milk has been recorded among various peoples since antiquity; a representation of the Virgin Mary which has survived from the fifteenth century (*Aurora consurgens*) depicts her with a red face and golden crown, next to two bearded men drinking milk from her breasts. The men are presumably the apostles Peter and Paul; this is confirmed by the words of the Evangelical text, '*Ask to drink, like a new-born child, of the blessed milk so that you might mature and come to know sanctity*'. Iconographic tradition thus serves to confirm the ancient motif of respect for the mother's breast and its milk as a source of truth, knowledge and wisdom [Wickler, Seibt 1998: 132–7].

A universal phenomenon in ethnology is the motif of the child who is breast-fed by a mythological figure, and consequently takes on various new traits, including supernatural qualities. In southern Slavic folklore *samovils* [flying water spirits in the form of beautiful young girls] nurse giants; in Caucasian tales a Dev-Woman feeds the hero her milk and as a result considers him her own child, helping him in every possible way.¹ The Belarussians believed that an invisible protectress might feed a child who cried during the night if his mother were not close by. However the child would be taken

¹ In the East, the act of touching a woman's breast with one's lips symbolises adoption.

out of the cradle at once and put back again, lest he fall asleep once and for all [Koreva 1861: 613]. That is, there was felt to be a danger that he would never return to this world after establishing contact with the supernatural world as he fed.

In all world religions, nurturing characters such as these are represented with uncovered and/or disproportionately developed breasts. Diana of Ephesus has no less than 18 nipples; the African goddess Jemaya, who has four nipples, is worshipped as a symbol of abundance. Some specialists even consider that the portrayal of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding the baby Jesus was influenced by the representation of the ancient Egyptian Madonna, Isis [Wickler, Seibt 1998: 134]; 'Maria Lactans' (Latin for Maria nursing, in Greek *Galaktophousa*) is the most ancient image of the Mother and Child.

According to popular folk belief, the reciprocal bond connecting mother and child is unbroken even if one of them dies. For this reason a mother who loses her baby has to sleep on her back so that the child is able to feed during the night [Kabakova 2001: 132]. Folk ballads about a deceased mother returning to feed her child at night (usually resulting, however, in the child's death) are widespread. For example, one of them runs as follows: *'Dak byl zhyd, a u nego zhena umerla, Malka'* [There was once a Jew, and his wife died, Malka she was]. The ballad goes on to narrate how the child survived: *'Yak zaplache, en kalyshe, yak zaplache, en kalyshe'* [Whenever it cried, he rocked, whenever it cried, he rocked]. One night her husband hears the sound of chomping lips: *'En baitsya k kalyske padkhadit'. Sprashivaet u bab: "Shto mne rabit'?" A baby nauchyli ego: kupi bol'shyi horshok, postav' le koiki i svichku zazhhi i horshkom prikryi. Yak kalyska tsmokae, horshok sbros'* [He's afraid to approach. He asks the women: what should I do? And the women told him to buy a big pot and light a candle by the bed and cover it with the pot. When that chomping, comes from the pot, throw the pot into it]. That night the husband keeps watch: *'Malka stait' i tsitsku dae. En harshok atkinul. Ena i havorit': "Znai, Elya, kaby ty tak ne zrabil, ya b tabe Shuiku vskormila. A teper'ne pabachysh mene bol'she'* [There's Malka standing and giving the baby the titty. He throws over the pot. And she says, 'Elya, you know, if you hadn't done that, I'd have fed Shuika for you. And now you'll never see me again'] [PA: recorded by V.A. Bagryantseva in Zolotuka, Kalinkovich region, Gomel].

Meanwhile in Poles'ye there are recorded instances of belief in the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge and abilities through the deceased mother's milk: *'Kogda moya mati pomerla, polozhyli vo hrob, to pudyishla da perakinula nogu da ūlezla u truni da rasshchapila u mater ot takoho nahridnika da vussala tsytsku. I batiushko zaplakaŭ: primite reb'enka, nedobre, vussala hrud'. To ūse kazali lyudi, shto ona pomre, a buŭ cholovek taki stary, chto kazhe, ne bespokoites', ona ne*

umre, ale bide bohato shto bachyt'. To bat'ko roskazyvaŭ'; 'Ya u mertvoi materi tsytsku tsotskala... Kazali lyudi, shto ditya zhyt' ne bide. A batiushka kazaŭ, shto eto ditya koli vyzhive, to bide u ei rozum u holove i bude ona verushcha' ['When my mother died, they put her in the coffin, and I went up and put my leg over and slid into the grave, then I undid this collar thing on her and pulled out her tit. And my dad started crying: take the child away, that's bad, she's sucked the breast dry. And everyone said I'd die, except there was one old man who said, don't worry, she won't die, she'll see many wonderful things. That's what my father told me.' 'I sucked the tit of my dead mother. People said I'd not live. But my dad said, if the girl lives, she'll be clever and pious'] [PA: recorded by V.I. Karitonova in Stodolichi, Lelchitskii region, Gomel].

The traditional semantics of breast milk

Milk is seen as an incarnation of health itself, and the clichéd phrase used to describe a handsome, healthy person, *kak krov s molokom* [like blood and milk], corresponds indirectly to the ancient belief that milk, along with blood, is the basic stuff from which the future child's life is to be 'kneaded'.¹ This idea is concealed in the almost universal prescription that the mother should breastfeed her child for as long as possible by avoiding another pregnancy: *'Na beremennost ukazyvaet drugoe ditye; ono togda brosaet sosat grud'* [The child at the breast knows when his mother is pregnant again; it is then that he stops feeding from her breast] (Yenisei province). It is here that one can point to the veiled parallelism between breast milk and menstrual blood: the cessation of menstruation and of breastfeeding indicate that conception has occurred. Thus a developing pregnancy builds up the woman's reserves of milk and blood — the foundations of future life. The loss of one of these substances causes death, as one can see, for example, in the Ukrainian idea that *'Yak zhinka khode vazhkoyu ta buva pide moloko z tsitsok, tak ta ditina, shcho naidetsya <roditsya>, ne bude zhit'* [When a woman is pregnant and milk starts to weep out of her tits, as sometimes happens, then the child that's born won't live] [Baranov, <http://ivc.engec.ru/ev/zachatie6.htm>]. The idea of the influence of breastfeeding on a young girl's future menstrual cycle can be seen in the rules for weaning her from the breast: *'Kali dzitsya adluchyts' na maladzik, dzyaŭchynka budze mets' douhiya mesyachnyya i vyalikiya hrudzi, yakiya zvychaina mayuts' mala malaka'* [If the child is taken off the breast during a waxing moon, and it's a girl, then she'll have heavy periods when she grows up, and big breasts with not much milk in them] [Wereńko 1896:

¹ More obviously, it refers to the cream-and-red complexion of a person who is neither pallid nor sallow, as would be described in the English cliché (of a quite different semantic order) 'rosy-cheeked'. [Editor].

132]. The Kashubs also used to wean young girls from the breast when the cherries were red, so that she would be rosy-cheeked and would regularly *'dostavalě svoj čas'* [have her rightful time come to her, i.e. have a normal menstrual cycle]. But for boys weaning was to be at the time the moon waned, so that he *'nie latalě za dzěvčatami'* [doesn't go flying after girls] [Sychta 4, 255]; that is, his future sexual behaviour was programmed by magic during this process; this belief also explicitly recognises the undesirable nature of excessive sexual activity.

A mother's milk is also sometimes associated with mankind's original sin. There is a belief amongst Western Belarussians that if an infant dies before it is able to taste *greshnoe materinskoe moloko* [the sinful milk of its mother], its soul will go straight to paradise (these children become angels in heaven), while the soul of a child who has tried the milk goes first to purgatory [Federowski 1897: 220]. Thus the very first drop of milk transfers the mother's sins to the child, who loses her natural innocence. Ukrainian beliefs concerning the *zlivki* ritual of purification after labour point to the 'earthly' nature of milk: *'a yak zille baba, to tak pochus v sobi porodilya pereminu i zaraz pochue, shcho moloko est' v hrudikh, i do ts'ogo chasu, do zlivok, i hrude ne dae nikoli'* [After the midwife washes the mother's hands, the latter feels a change in herself, she senses milk coming into her breasts, and until then she doesn't give the baby the breast] [Kuzelya 1906: 200]. As Kuzelya testifies, a child was not breastfed by its mother before being christened — a wet nurse would take her place [Kuzelya 1906: 41].

The semiotics of the first feeding

As one can see from the description of the *zlivki*, milk appears after the ritual designed to 'cleanse' the mother after childbirth;¹ during this ritual the woman secretes something that embodies her former state of 'uncleanliness', otherness and connectedness with another world. After being cleansed, the woman would receive milk with which to feed the child who, though not fully 'socialised', is already a creature of this world. The milk he is given represents one step forward in the gradual process that connects him to 'worldly' life, as well as the 'receipt' of his mother's sins; that is, the milk is a symbol of everything human, sinful and belonging to social convention. In this example there is a temporary discrepancy between the physiological phenomenon (milk is produced from the moment of childbirth) and its social ratification: feeding does not begin at the moment that it becomes physiologically possible. Once again this

¹ Similar concepts are widespread; see for example Dr Ploss's note on the native American custom of cleansing the mother by making her vomit before breastfeeding for the first time [Ploss 1995: 221].

ritual demonstrates that *'the social does not necessarily follow the biological chronologically; it explicitly expresses the deep-laid tendency of any ritual involving the life cycle to "adjust" the "natural" reality of the individual so as to make it correspond with existing social patterns in the community, thus translating characteristically biological realities into social ones'* [Baiburin 1993: 102]. The activity that is biologically essential (in this case, feeding) only begins after it has been socially endorsed, and not at the moment that it becomes physically possible.

The first feeding, like the first of anything in folk tradition, was legitimated through ritual. Thus, the Serbs would dress the child in one of his father's long shirts so that he might live a long life. While the woman (who must by this point have been washed) fed her child, people gathered around her and held a round loaf of bread over the child's head as a symbol of fertility and a full life [Rozhdenie 1997: 85]. Among Bulgarians the breasts were 'assigned' on the basis of the child's gender: boys would be fed with the right breast first, and girls with the left [Rozhdenie 1997: 110]. At the same time the semiotic negation of the left hand side is preserved in the belief that the left breast should not be offered first, lest the child be left-handed or have the evil eye as a result. In extreme cases, to give the child the left breast first was equated to murder: *'Bilo [u sosedki] devetero detei i use umiraly, [potomu chto] davala [pervyi raz] levu tsits'ku. A kak pravu tsits'ku dala, tak i ostalas' [dochka] zhyty'* [[Our neighbour] had nine children and all of them died [because] she gave them her left breast [first]. But then she gave her right breast, so [her daughter] survived] [PA: recorded by A.A. Plotnikova in Radezh, Maloritsk region, Brest].

Ethnomedical problems with breastfeeding

Folk-medicine prescriptions show how the woman's breast is symbolically compared to a source of water or a vessel containing water (note folk similes such as *siski yak vyadro* [breasts like a bucket]; or the denotation, *miska* [bowl], part of a bra, and so forth)¹. Above all there are semantic parallels with the image of the well, whose semiotic interrelationship with womanhood and otherworldliness is confirmed by numerous folkloric and ethnographic sources: *'so the woman doesn't lose her milk, you must cover the bucket with a cloth when you're fetching water from the well and drink a sip of water four times through the cloth, placing the bucket at four points on the side of the well so you draw a cross shape when you move it around'* [Wereńko 1896: 127]. A nursing mother was forbidden from pouring water back

¹ The 'vessel' metaphor for the woman's breast is common in slang; note for example a selection of these in German [Borneman 2003: § 1.58]. [And cf. 'cup' for the front of a bra in English.] [Editor].

into the well or from giving water from her bucket for another woman to drink, lest the milk be transferred to that woman. If her milk dried up, the woman would go to the well with a bucket, collect some water, put her tongue under the hook on which the bucket hung, and wait until three drops of water had fallen onto her tongue. [Szukiewicz 1910: 116]. Cf.: *'When a woman feeds her child and the milk happens to dry up, let her go to the pump or the well, draw a full bucket of water and put the pump handle under her chin so she can drink the water through it, then take three sips and her milk will return straight away'* [PA: recorded by M.G. Borovskaya in Priso, Vetkovsky region, Gomelsk]. The Ukrainians would give new mothers who had lost their milk bunches of weeds¹ in untouched water, and would speak directly to the well: *'O well, give me water for my troubles, purify this new mother, blessed [name], I'm not asking you to give me a spring of water, I'm asking you to give me a spring of milk, as water runs down from hills and rocks, so let milk run from this new mother N* [Talko-Gryncewicz 1893: 85]. Here it is not the symbolic parallel between the breast and the bucket that is important, so much as the comparison that is drawn between the woman herself and the well — both are sources of nourishment and wisdom, which by their very nature ascend towards otherworldly abundance. It is significant that in folk poetry, after the sinner Voitonva who has killed her children meets Christ, a spring or source appears in the place of her breast: *'Her head fell away — and became a church, // Her eyes fell down — and became candles, // Her breasts fell — and became springs'* [Smirnov 1986: 255; emphasis added].

Breastfeeding often caused health problems, in particular inflammation of the nipple and mastitis (known in Russian as *grudnitsa*, from *grud*, breast), as well as problems affecting the child rather than the mother; note the Russian dialect expression, *'grudtsa podkhodit'* ['mastitis is on the way'] — used *'when a child cries as if asking to be fed but does not take the breast when offered'* [SRNG 7, 162]. In a therapeutic ritual to heal the breast it was customary to make the sign of the cross directly above the area that is hurt: *'When a woman's breasts are hurting while she is feeding, she sits down on a bench, and a wise man gets a splinter from that bench and runs over her breasts with it, making the sign of the cross, and then she is put to bed'* [FA: in Syadzitsa Vileyskaga region]. The ritual is also observed as a preventative measure — the village midwife stands the mother on two wooden splinters, laid in the shape of a cross in the middle of the hut, sprinkles some oats in a bucket of water and uses it to mark the breasts in turn with a cross, saying, *'Don't be afraid of the evil eye, may your milk never run dry'* [Wereńko 1896: 127]. This use of 'cross'

¹ *Zhitnye rozhki* (also known as *sporynya*) is a name applied to various weeds of cultivation that grow in rye fields. [Editor].

symbolism is particularly understandable when one considers that the breast is perceived as 'unchristened flesh', since when a young girl is christened it has not yet developed. In Belarus, young men playing the fool at parties would try to fondle a young girl's breasts, and when they were scolded, would reply, '*Eh, well it's unchristened flesh, ain't it, so what's the harm in it?*' [Recorded by the author from L.M. Solovei, in Minsk]. The association between bread and the breast (and feeding in general) is also reflected in therapeutic rituals: '*Yak maloe e, to shchos' yak porobyt'sya na hridekh, pry tsyts'kakh, to vichkom tako [ot dezhi] prytytskali*' [When the nursing mother had problems with her breast, then they'd rub it with kvas starter] [PA: Zabuzhe Lyubomlskii region, Volynsk].

The weaning ritual

The moment at which the child is separated from her mother's body is seen as a customary rite of passage, referred to in Czech tradition as *prodat (stratit) cici* [selling the titties] [Zaorálek 1947: 55]; the event is ritually confirmed by the custom of hanging a coin on the child's chest [Rozhdenie 1997: 43]. During the ritual participants once again ask questions about the future: '*When the child is taken off the breast, they put bread down in front of him, and money and a book. Whatever the child reaches for first will be the most important thing for it throughout the rest of its life*' [Romanov 1912: 305]. The transition from the untroubled, comfortable and pleasant period of breastfeeding to that of eating adults' food — a most natural transition for any human — takes on metaphorical meaning and comes to signify the end of a particularly carefree and rich period of life. The Ukrainian expression, *vidpala mu vid rota tits'ka* [the tit fell out of his mouth] [Nomis 1993: No. 13182], and the Czech *jučer je od sise otpao* [he's already fallen off the breast] [Matešić 1982: 608] signify not only the end of infancy, but also the loss of something kind and pleasant. The very process of feeding at the breast comes to symbolise the enjoyment of comfort and privilege: hence in Ukrainian dialect, *veliky titsku ssati* [lit., 'to suck the great tit', i.e. to live well, 'on the fat of the land'] [Varkhol, Ivchenko 1990: 142]; in Belarussian '*Lislivae shchane (tsyale) dzve tsytski sse*' [an affectionate puppy sucks two titties at once, i.e. enjoys benefits from a number of sources] [Styashkovich 1983: 597]; correspondingly a condition of poverty is described by the figurative phrase, *yak dzitsenak bez tsytski* [like a child with no tit], '*For so long she lived like a child with no tit to suck — now and again a neighbour would spare her a bowl of soup*' [Yurchanka 2002: 182].

The weaning ritual marked the severance of the most important communicative bond with the mother — the physical bond — and the cessation of its influence in directly transmitting the mother's culture to the child. This rather important event in the child's life

was dictated by natural and planetary cycles; it was one of the moments of confluence between the social and natural worlds. The time at which the child was separated from the breast was determined by both solar and lunar cycles, taking place when the season, natural transformations, and phase of the moon would be able to influence the child's future development. *'It is held best to take the child off the breast in the spring, when "the springs flow and the woods are dressed in leaves". It is not good to take the child off the breast in autumn, because the child will be miserable for a long time, but if this has to be done, then it should be arranged for around the time of the winter sowings. It is best to wean the child around the time of the waning moon; in that particular case, the child will not be very well-grown, but at least it will have a calm temperament. On the other hand, a child weaned during a waxing moon will be well-grown, but restless and greedy. Some mothers think that a boy should be weaned during a waxing moon and a girl during a waning moon. But sometimes the child is taken off the breast in the last days before a full moon, so it will grow up healthy'* [Wereńko 1896: 132].

One of the more utilitarian functions of weaning was to ease the transition from liquid to adult food — from milk to porridge and particularly bread. Among the Luzhits Serbs, the mother would breastfeed her child for the last time through a ring-shaped loaf (*kalach*), which she would then give to the child; or she would give him a small pie kneaded with her milk [Schneeweis 1935: 74]. The transition to adult food was also a further stage in the process of socialisation and the movement away from one's natural, biological state — a step towards being included in the heart of the family and taking one's place there as a 'mouth to feed'. That is, the mass of food available within the family (as opposed to the communal, village supply as used during the birth celebration) needed to be redistributed and the child received his or her first portion. It is significant that in Belarussian tradition, the symbolic first adult meal was often an egg.¹ The ritualised nature of the giving of the egg explains some semiotic aspects of the process itself: the child is given the egg through a sleeve or through a window. *'After the prayer, the mother and child sit down on the threshold, the mother rubs her nipples with soot with the child watching, then she spits on her nipples and says, "Mucky boy" [A vos' — kaka!], then she takes a roasted egg from out of her sleeve and says, "Lovely toy" [A eta — tsatsa!]. The child soon stops pining for the breast' [Nikiforovsky 1897: 26]. 'When the child is being weaned, an egg is boiled and then they pass it out through the window to stop the child pining. The child is in the house, the mother is in the yard, and she passes it through the window.'* [PA: Brest

¹ In Serbia, once the mother has breastfed her child for the last time at her doorway, she would also give him an egg [Rozhdenie 1997: 86].

Zabolotye, Brest]. Thus emphasis is placed on the idea that the egg comes not from the mother herself, but from a nonhuman space, or from the collective 'I' of the whole community which has agreed to accept another full member.

In such rituals the egg fulfils the same function as breast milk, and the semantic similarity between them — in their capacity as symbols of life and rebirth — are clear in many ethnographic contexts. But significantly, the egg was not to be consumed in parallel with breast milk (*'the child will be slow to start talking'* [Nikiforovsky 1897: 26]). Thus the egg represents a second stage in the process of the conception/development of life, after the milk/seed stage. The child is no longer given milk (two breasts) but three eggs, symbolically consolidating the next stage in his development: *'So the child doesn't pine for the breast, in the evening, when he's been fed for the last time, he should be put down at one end of the bed and the mother should sit on the other and show him three boiled eggs. She should lay him down in the cradle and put the eggs alongside him for the night'* [Federowski 1897: 306].

In this example we also see a process of transformation being realised within the subject — a process common to all rites of passage — as a result of which *'he [the subject] is divided into two parts: the first symbolising his former status and the other representing the "material" from which the individual in his new incarnation will be formed'* [Baiburin 1993: 94]. Breast milk takes on the role of a functional analogue to the bridal headdress (*devya krasota*) in the wedding ritual, and of the placenta in the birth ritual, both of which are sent 'back' to the world from which the child came [Baiburin 1993: 95]. In Poland, the mother would take her child from her breast and squeeze some milk onto the stove so that it would 'scorch' and stop her breasts from producing any more [Rozhdenie 1997: 17], although one could also see this as a way of sending the milk to the supernatural world. According to folk beliefs, the cessation of breastfeeding signified that the woman was ready for her next pregnancy — that is for a new life to be 'kneaded' in her loins (the bodily analogue for the other world).

A certain dualism can also be detected in attitudes towards the duration of breastfeeding. On the one hand, mothers tried to feed their children for a long time, since the child absorbed both material benefits (health) and immaterial ones, including knowledge, from the mother's milk. But on the other hand, there was a belief among Belarussians that *'you should not breastfeed a child for a long time, or he will turn out stupid'* [Romanov 1912: 305]; or, even more categorically, Ukrainians believed that *'a child who does not feed from his mother's breast will have a good memory'* [Talko-Gryniewicz 1893: 89]. The belief that mental deviancy occurs in children who have

been possessed by a demonic being such as a wood demon, is particularly revealing in this context. Even despite the perception of milk as a 'human' substance, breastfeeding is seen as a 'liminal' act, in that like birth it is a '*natural process that cannot be controlled by human intervention*' [Baiburin 1993: 99], and because in a certain sense it symbolically retains the child in a state of contact with the supernatural world. In order for the child's status as part of his social environment to be fully confirmed it is not only necessary for his physical appearance to be developed, for him to have a certain kind of bodily autonomy; any ties to alien influences must also be irrevocably severed. Lengthening a child's period of breastfeeding can be seen as synonymous to the phenomenon of an old man 'encroaching on another's time', since it artificially suspends the woman's ability to conceive another child.

The concept of the influence of breastfeeding specifically on the child's intellectual development is also worth discussing. The weaning ritual is the first in a chain of rituals in which knowledge is imparted to the child, the final one being the ceremonial 'unknotting of the mind', first examined in detail by Albert Baiburin. This ritual consists of the 'unknotting' of the child's umbilical cord. Essentially, the nature of 'cultural', 'reasoned' knowledge again reveals the continuing relevance of the theme of birth: this knowledge is transmitted within a space contained by *family ties*, in this case running from parents to children [Baiburin 2006; cf. Bogdanov <http://ivc.engec.ru/ev/rody.htm>].

A universal phenomenon in ethnology is the impermissibility of a mother breastfeeding her child after the weaning ritual has been performed, lest he be struck by, or himself acquire, the evil eye: '*If you have taken the child off the breast, but then felt sorry for him and begun feeding him again, then he's finished. Everything will go awry when he's an adult. If he watches a cow giving birth, the calf will die. He mustn't be allowed to look at baby animals, or at women giving birth*' [Lapatsin 2003: 6]. A wealth of material on this topic has been collected by Alan Dundes. In Serbia there was even a particular name for a child to whom this had happened — *povratnjak* [turnling]. Radenkovich sees the reversion to breastfeeding as a symbol of the child's estrangement from her surrounding society (from the world of the living), something that makes her 'unclean' and dangerous to that society [Radenkovich 1995: 33]¹.

As the above examples demonstrate, the semantic status of breast

¹ Radenkovich compares reversion to breastfeeding with the ancient Egyptian custom of breastfeeding the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh is thus marked out from his surrounding society; only this contact with the beyond enables him both to become wise and to be untouched by evil [Radenkovich 1995: 33].

milk fluctuates between the opposing poles of *own/other*, *clean/unclean*, *human/supernatural*, a phenomenon which explains the ambivalent status of the child and new mother.

The woman's breast in ethnophraseology.

Animals' 'tits'

Expressions in local dialects can combine the designation of the breast and reference to animals, in order to refer to something that resembles a nipple in form. Thus a skin infection such as a sty or a boil under the armpit is frequently referred to with the terms *suchya titka* (bitch's tit); *pesii sosok* (dog's teat) [Karelia], or *sobachya titka* (*siska*) (dog's tit, teat) [Novgorod]. Other variants in which references to the dog are not formally present but implied from the context, are also common: *sosok* (teat) [Arkhangelsk, Novgorod, Olonets provinces], *sisyok*, *siska* (teat) [Novg.]; if a 'teat' came up in one's eye, it was customary to rub it with warm bread, and then give the bread to a dog [see Berezovich 2001: 15–20 for more detail].

Furthermore, one can note the use of expressions in which nipples are attributed in a similar fashion to creatures that do not actually have them. The colloquial phrase 'a cockroach's tit' (*titka tarakanya*) is used as an oxymoron or comical expression of the impossible — 'term of abuse describing a disreputable person or someone who has behaved improperly' [Mokienko, Nikitina 2003: 324]. References to hens' breasts designate something entirely non-existent: cf. Belarussian '*znaesh kurynyuyu sisyu i tuyu nya ūsyu*' [All you know is hen's tit, and even that only partly], or Ukrainian, '*znaesh ti kuryachu tsits'ku* [you know hen's tit] [Nomis 1993: No. 6516], or Russian 'hens' tits' (*kuryachi titki*) meaning 'a fig, nothing' [Dal 4, 406].¹ The meaning of absence is also attributed to the Belarussian idiom *yak zhaba tsytski dasts'* [the toad will give its tits]: '*I took a great dish and went out for berries, but then the toad gave its tits*' [Stsyashkovich 1983: 615].

The expression '*the toad will give its tits*' (note also the Belarussian *dasts' zhaba malaka* 'the toad will give milk' [Danilovich 2000: 54] or Ukrainian *tam emu zhaba i tsits'ki dast'* [Nomis 1993: No. 4322]) characterises a person nearing death [Stsyashkovich 1983: 589] or refers to the fact that this person has been overloaded with cares, worries and troubles.² Significantly, this particular phrase is still in use today, even in urban areas. Here are a few quotations taken from the Internet: '*So basically being an intelligent kind of guy I slow down a bit and draw level with the Princess in the second lane behind the flat-top, letting the Octavia past so I could blast after it on the far right. But my mate on the right doesn't get that adrenaline rush for some reason, he's no-*

¹ Where modern conversational English might say, 'You know fuck all'. [Editor].

² Very rough equivalents would be 'to go belly up' or 'to end up in shit creek'. [Editor].

where to be seen — the toad gave its tits’ [zhaba siski dala: in the sense, ‘that’s him stuffed’] http://faq.saabnet.ru/_stories/aerostef/podstava.s...; ‘I was back home in a flash — wanted to give it a try. I got going on the Tallinn salami most of all. And that’s where the toad gave its tits [zhaba tsytski i dala]. Literally half an hour later my stomach starts giving me hell. Basically, I spent three days on the bog. And it turned out the salami was two weeks past its sell-by date’ <http://www.bratok.co.uk/archive/index.php/t-935>; ‘And finally, the most important, original emergency decision the old man took was to give Moscow a bit more autonomy, so that all the Jews and Masons there would tear each other to pieces — and so that they couldn’t eat in restaurants and could only drink toads’ milk — “and let the toad give them its tits there” [i khai im tam zhaba tsytski dast: roughly, ‘well fuck’em then’]. [[http://740.ru/anti/dgihad/1431/index.shtml? print=1](http://740.ru/anti/dgihad/1431/index.shtml?print=1)].

Thus the expression, ‘the toad will give its tits’, meaning ‘to harm, to destroy, to take someone to the brink of death’, is based on the idea of a toad using its breast as a means of attack or destruction. When one thinks of the breast as a symbol of nourishment, of safety and of life in general, this use of the image on a toad or frog seems quite illogical, and so must be examined in its wider cultural and ethnological context.

The woman’s breast in the context of the semantics of fertility and chthonism

The woman’s reproductive functions are conceptually identifiable with the fertility of the earth, a fact that is clearly illustrated by the paleolithic ‘Venus’ figures whose swollen breasts demonstrate how the breast reflects the idea of procreation and of natural, life-giving energy. Female fertility spirits or demons in Slavic (as well as German and Baltic) mythology are often depicted as women with enormous, swollen breasts, indicating their exaggerated fertility. The most striking representatives of the East Slavic fertility spirits, *rusalki* [water spirits] could have breasts that were unusual in other ways as well — sometimes made of iron or cast-iron, sometimes black or with green nipples; these breasts might swing over the *rusalka*’s shoulders as she moved, and so forth. This attribute even began to define the image of the *rusalka* itself, such that the spirits came to be named accordingly as *tsytsokha* [Ivatsevicheskii, Pruzhanskii region, Brest] (note also the German *Langetüttin* — literally translated as ‘long-titted’, a creature which, like the *rusalka*, lived in corn fields and would kill children who chanced upon her either with her iron breast or with poisonous milk) [Petzold 1990: 119].

The conception of the earth as the base of the universe is realised in the thanatological aspects of the image of the Blessed Virgin, in which womanhood rises up alongside darkness, destruction and

death. 'If one looks at the mythology of the emanation of the natural creationist potential of vegetation in the context of anima-animus vegetative associativity [...] the mythological figure of the *rusalka* reflects the expressive mythology of chthonism' [Sivitski 2004: 62]. Functional chthonism and the vegetatively generative 'horror' of the *rusalka* are incarnated in the vividly expressed teratomorphism of mythological motifs — those of the terrifying images and emanations of the earth's aggressive, defensive and inert elements. A connection should be made between the mythological *rusalka*'s chthonic teratomorphism and her exaggerated feminine characteristics [Sivitski 2004: 64]. It has been ascertained from ethnographic folklore recordings that the *rusalkas* or related mythological figures would kill their victims by using their breasts, as well as by tickling. The *rusalka* would offer her breast to feed on¹: 'The *rusalka*, it seems, would shove her iron tit at you, and it's got a green tail, that tit has' [recorded by the author in Lepel, Vitebsk]; she could also crush him with her breast, made either of iron — 'The *rusalka*'s supposed to kill you with her big breast. Her iron breast' [recorded by the author in Vetka, Gomel] or stone — 'Don't go there, or a *tsygra*² will grab you and kill you with her stone tit' [TS 5, 280]. There are also fairly frequent suggestions that the *rusalka* could torture her victim by tickling him with her breasts.

Like *rusalki*, South Slavic *boginki* used their unusual breasts as a dolly or pestle when washing clothes or crushing something in a mortar, as well as to kill their victims: 'the *rusalka* emerges from the water with a mortar' and crushes the child in it [PA: Opol, Ivanovsk region, Brest]. The phrase, *rusalka zatauche tsytskai u stupe* [the *rusalka* will grind you up in a mortar with her tit] would be used to deter children from going out into the standing rye. This symbolic parallelism between the breast and the pestle indicates a potential 'masculine' interpretation of the breast, which seems most plausible in the context of a symbolic identification between milk and sperm as sources of life.³

To interpret the pragmatics of the *rusalka*'s fertility in this way is consistent with the mythopoetics of death conquering the potential of life. Thus in folk culture the breast itself, as a source of nourishment and a symbol of feeding, incorporates the complicated interconnected motifs of life and death, eros and thanatos into its range of semantic possibilities, and so is able to become a weapon that inflicts harm or even death.

¹ This function was also ascribed to night spirits (*nochnitsy*): 'The night spirits give children their tit, only there's no milk inside, just poison, and the child falls sick' [Federowski 1897: 77].

² The local name for a *rusalka*. [Editor].

³ Or possibly because both are seen as offensive weapons: cf. the colloquial U.S. English term of the Vietnam War era, *bazookas*. [Editor].

The themes of milk and medicine in the image of the toad/frog¹

In many folkloric contexts the frog or toad is ascribed the status of one of the group of mythological characters who are genetically related to both humans and supernatural beings, and who also encapsulate the idea of female fertility. There is a popular legend according to which female frogs have long hair and women's breasts, while the males have beards. When the time comes the frogs will become people again, while those currently living as people will turn back into frogs. One of the toad or frog's more characteristic traits relates once more to the milk theme, which appears in various forms in popular beliefs about frogs. This includes the frog (or frog-witch) that can milk cows or cast a spell that stops the cow from producing milk; or on the other hand, the frog can have a beneficial influence on its yield of milk. There are also customs which involve using milk to extract the frog from a person's insides; treating fever with a milky potion made from frogs; predicting the yield of milk by the first croak of a frog in the spring; and the induced vomiting of milk as a punishment if one breaks the rule that forbids one to hit a frog [Gura 1997: 391]. If one were to cut a witch-toad, milk would flow from the wound. The frog was presumed to have the ability to cast the evil eye on a person, squirt urine into his eye causing blindness, make warts grow on his hands, and so forth.

Milk motifs in the semantics of the frog are even useful with regard to the naïve linguistic picture of the world. In the Belarussian tradition there are references to medicaments associated with frog's milk itself: a plant with the characteristic name, *toad's milk* (*zhabs'ke moloko*) was said to eliminate freckles — '*takoe zille e, to mazhut' iikh*' [PA: Sporovo, Berezovskii region, Brest].² It is also worth mentioning the fact that thrush in the mouth of a breastfeeding child is widely referred to in Russian, Belarussian, and Polish as *molochmitsa* (from *moloko*, 'milk'), or *zhabka* (from *zhaba*, 'toad'), and in Moravian, as *zaba* [Bartoš 1906: 555]. Thus it can be said that the folkloric belief in frogs with breasts and the fact that, not coincidentally, the frog is used in folk medical treatments, directly occasion the idiomatic expression, *the toad will give its tit*.

A typological parallel to the inclusion of the frog in the semiotic text of breastfeeding can be found in another chthonic animal — the mouse — who is also associated with motherhood. An internal

¹ In Belarussian and Russian folklore, unlike British or American popular culture, the toad and frog are to all intents and purposes identified, and both are considered ominous animals. The two animals can be considered interchangeable in the discussion that follows. My thanks to Tatiana Valodzina and Albert Baiburin for this clarification. [Editor].

² To eliminate freckles people would also wipe their face with real frogspawn.

connection between the pregnant or breastfeeding mother and mice can be traced in certain rituals designed to restore a woman's milk: *'If she doesn't have enough milk, the advice is that nursing mother should be given soup in which a mouse has secretly been boiled'* [Federowski 1897: 385]; a 'mouse potion' is prepared for the *dzyatsinakhi* [the nursing mother] — a soup made from the scraps left by mice, so-called *'myshynaha haroshku'* [mouse peas, i.e. mouse turds] and mice's excrement [Nikiforovsky 1897: 26].¹

The breast and demonology

Alongside the examples in which a demonic character offers a person its breast in one form or another, folk beliefs also present the other side of the coin — demons who are said to feed at the breast of a human. Ukrainians believed that the night spirit (*nochnitsa*) herself suckled from nursing mothers' breasts; I. Franko records the expression, *nichnitsi mi sse* [the *nochnitsa* is sucking me], commenting, *'that's how nursing mothers complain about the pain in their tits'* [Franko 1908: 454]. The *vitrenitsya* demon even manages to suck men's nipples, causing them to grow breasts [Khobzei 2002: 53]. In tales which told of women in mourning being visited by demons, there was often reference to a snake, who *'does not enter into full sexual relations with the woman, but just caresses her and sucks her breasts'* [Miloradovich 1993: 44]. This 'panich' [fine gentleman] would approach the widow, *'take her left breast and suck. He'd lie as long as he wanted to and go. No-one would hear a thing'* [Miloradovich 1993: 44]. After this visitation the woman would grow thin and soon die. Southern Slavs used to believe that a nursing mother's milk could be drunk by the spirit of a child who had died unchristened and become a demon, while according to Macedonian beliefs this role was attributed to the *smok*; in Moravia it was thought that the *mora* suckled at mothers' breasts. [Bartoš 1906: 205].

The representation of demons either with disproportionately large breasts or with no breasts at all is natural when one considers the fact that demonic characters were perceived as agents of the supernatural world, inherently 'reversible' and inverted in comparison with the human world. According to Ukrainian beliefs the witch did not have women's breasts [Khobzei 2002: 59; Janów 2001: 30], while the Belarussians of Smolensk described the *rusalka* as follows: *'You've never seen rusalkas, but I have. They're very beautiful. I was working through the village, and one of them was in the vegetable patch sitting and giving me looks with her darting eyes. She's damned and she has no breasts. She's not a woman at all!'* [Shein 1887: 198].

¹ The Ukrainians had similar beliefs and rituals; see: [Talko-Gryniewicz 1893: 84–85].

The erotic element in traditional perceptions of the woman's breast

The breast in mythopoetic tradition, therefore, is inseparable from the idea of feeding, fertility and abundance. In the medieval 'Kratkoe opisanie vnutrennikh i vneshnikh chastei i sostavov chelovecheskikh' [Brief Description of the Internal and External Parts and Organs of Humans], the woman's breast is only described with regard to its 'nursing' function: *'She whose breasts are far apart will not bear many children She whose shirt is fuller on the right hand side will give birth to more sons'* [Sobranie 2002: 363].¹ The size and shape of breasts do not affect the quality or quantity of milk, and for this reason any aesthetic or even more so erotic criteria for appraising the breast are simply absent in the examples given.

However it would not be fair to deny outright the status of the breast as a symbol of female beauty in the context of sexual relations. Russian penitential regulations stigmatised language or physical contact which concealed hidden sexual interest. Touching a woman's breast would be followed by a long period of penance [A se grekhi 1999: 333–4], and if one *'held the breast of another man's wife. Penance of 40 days'* [A se grekhi 1999: 61]. In the sixteenth century 'Isповедanie vsem pravoslavnym khristianyam, prishedshim na pokoyanie k otsam dukhovnym' [The Confession of Orthodox Christians to their Spiritual Fathers], one reads, *'I would think lustfully of another man's wife, or hold her breast, when drunk or sober I would trespass against another [...] I repent, father...'* [A se grekhi 1999: 85; emphasis added]. The expression *za persi derzhal* [I held {her} breasts] also becomes standardised and is used in its capacity as a poetic image in folk poetry as a fully acceptable manner of describing lovers' delights: in Smolensk, *'Mnogo tainykh rechei nagovoreno//Shto za beluyu grud mnogo derzhina'* [Many secret things were said, // And her white breast was held at length] [Dobrovolsky 1914: 147] or Belarussian *'En ne spits', ne lyazhyts' // Use za tsytski dzyarzhys'* [He neither sleeps nor goes to bed // He holds her by the breasts]. The use of the breast in love charms, with which we are familiar from fifteenth century confession questions (*'she would mix the milk from her breasts with honey and give it as a drink to her husband or some other man to make him love her'* [A se grekhi 1999: 37]) shows that the breast cannot be considered in isolation from questions of love and eroticism in folk tradition.

For female mythological figures the breast can also be described as

¹ Note also similar beliefs among Belarussians: *'If the woman's right breast is bigger after the birth of her child, then she will have more sons, if the left breast is bigger, then she will have more daughters'* [Federowski 1897: 207] and Ukrainians: *'If the right breast of the childbearing mother is bigger, the next child will be a boy, but if the pregnant woman's breast is hard and taut, it will be a girl'* [Kuzelya 1906: 4].

one of the most attractive parts of the body. Thus the Belarussian *rusalka* is often depicted with a full, shapely breast, and the Harpy — a creature from Greek mythology with the face and breast of a woman but the body of an eagle — embodies the idea of 'fierce when provoked', but can also be interpreted as a symbol of vice and passions.

In folklore recorded from the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the woman's breast is depicted as a unitary source of sensual pleasures. A somewhat understated manner of describing this is wholly consistent with the genres in which such appreciations appear — primarily the humorous *chastushka* '*Mae tsytski trasutstsa, // Z myane khlopsy smyayutstsa*' [My breast wobbles, and the lads laugh with me] and traditional wedding poetry, with its carnival hyperbole: '*A ũ starshae družhki // Tsytski yak padushki: // Adnaeyu parasya ũbila, // A drugoyu asmalila*' [The best man // Has tits like two cushions: // One has squashed a piglet to death // The other has singed its bristles off]¹ [Vyaselle 1978: 506]. Folk superstitions also had erotic subtexts: '*If a girl's tits are itching, it means two lads are fighting for her; both of them love her and neither of them wants to give her up*' [Serzhputoiski 1998: 127–8]; '*If a girl's tits are itching, she won't keep her garland*' [i.e. stay a virgin] [Federowski 1897: 209]. An understanding of the importance of the breasts' attractiveness led to a number of magical actions designed to increase their size. Thus a girl would rub her breast with a man's hat, or taste the dough while she kneaded it, saying: '*Pakashtui kis'li, kab sis'ki ras'li*' [Taste the dough so your tits will grow] [Sielicki 1992: 131].

Functional characteristics of the image of the breast in idiomatic language

Modern slang, based on old ancient meanings of words but indicative of modern ideological norms, has forged an entirely logical connection between the image of the breast as the fundamental, initial source of nourishment, and the motherboard of a computer: *siska* ('tit', here: 'motherboard') [Nikitina 2003: 634]; one can refer to the behaviour of a full-breasted, self-confident, forceful woman by saying *grudi na blyude* [breasts on a plate] [Nikitina 2003: 135]. A time of particular gaiety is described with the expression, *tit'ki do neba gulyali* [tits hit the sky] — '*Oh no, Natasha, in the old days — that was the life! Don't you remember how we danced ourselves silly celebrating? Tits hit the sky!*' [Kveselevich 2003: 846]; and someone who is drunk is described as being '*drunk to the tit*' [v sisku pyanyi] [Kveselevich 2003: 777]; in Ukrainian, *u tit'ku [tsits'ku] p'yanii* [Uzhchenko 2000: 174].

¹ As a way of preparing it for roasting (as is also done traditionally in parts of England — this is known as 'burnt pork', and is still popular, though illegal, and, with goats, in the Caribbean). [Editor].

However modern aphorisms demonstrate particularly rich colour and variety; to name just a few examples: *The breast is a woman's face* (A.I. Galaganov); *The bigger the tits, the less you remember her face*; *A woman's breast acts like a raised cross-bar*¹ (Tamara Kleiman); *What means my name to you,*² *when my boobs stretch four foot two*; *And thus the great Silicon puffed out his chest and fought in defence of women's honour*; *Life has got better, life has got jollier,*³ *boobs are getting bigger all the time*; *In spring a woman's breast stirs even if she doesn't have any* (Arkady Davidovich); *In the hands of an experienced man the difference between a woman's breast and a virgin's is clear — from the tone, the volume and the duration of the squeal*. The expression *a woman without breasts is like a bed without a pillow* has been attributed to Anatole France. These aphorisms clearly relate to the context of contact between the sexes, a context in which the breast, source of both aesthetic and sensual pleasure, figures as one of the components of female beauty. In this circumstance the functions of nourishment, defence and so forth, are irrelevant.⁴

Thus idiomatic expressions involving reference to the breast are above all distinguished by the contexts in which they are used: on the one hand we have dialects, uneducated speech and even slang; while on the other, the emotive journalistic style with its “breast-nourished” figures of speech. As they reflect ancient mythopoetic concepts, individual expressions qualify as ethnographic expressions, displaying their own internal structure in the broader context of the study of folklore. Over time their stylistic colouring undergoes certain changes, and the expressions come to be marked as *pej.*, *vulg.*, *coll.*, and so forth. The initial mythological or ritual units of meaning move to the periphery of the expression's semantic range, while potential meanings of an expressive nature come to define the context and frequency of usage. One must be cautious about highlighting the ways in which such expressions reflect the ideological norms of the time, in which the interpretation of the woman's breast as a symbol of nourishment is giving way to the perception of it as a component of women's sexual appeal. The fact that ethno-folkloric expressions have become active in contexts that are taboo in other kinds of text, has allowed them to retain their strong expressivity and has thus guaranteed their preservation in the mod-

¹ Note the phallic resonance here too. [Editor].

² First line of a famous poem by Pushkin, narrated by a man to a woman in the original. [Editor].

³ A famous 1935 slogan of Stalin's. [Editor].

⁴ Cf. objectivising descriptions in English such as ‘well stacked’, ‘two lovely big knockers’, as well as ‘bazoocas’ (see above), and the French *tout en balcon*, etc. On the other hand, the t-shirt company ‘Fruit of the Loom’ operating in Britain and America during the 1970s (this slogan was printed so it was displayed right across the wearer's nipples) was, no doubt unintentionally, evoking the breasts’ ‘fertility’ associations as well as its ‘erotica’ ones. [Editor].

ern-day language, in a form that has acquired new semantic and emotive connotations. This is what has happened, for example, with the Belarussian term for the female breast, *unchristened flesh*.

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