

Religious in Form, Socialist in Content: Socialist Narratives and the Question of Civil Religion

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Abstract:

Socialist narratives have a long history of being interpreted as religious in content and form. Scholars draw on concepts such as ‘political religion,’ ‘secular religion,’ and ‘civil religion’ to describe an alleged world-transcending quality of socialism. These concepts possess, however, normative implications since they often suggest a difference from ‘true’ or ‘real’ religion. The following article does not select a specific definition to confirm or repudiate the alleged character of socialism as a civil religion; nor will it suggest another term to describe this character more appropriately. Instead, it addresses the as-religion reflex evidenced in such acts of classification themselves by asking the question: what are the aesthetic conditions for a political system to be perceived as religious? By analysing various implementation strategies of the German Democratic Republic’s master narrative—captured in the motto “socialism will triumph”—this paper examines the narrative structures through which real socialism produced meaning. Literary-aesthetic analysis reveals that meaning and relevance were created through a carefully selected set of literary patterns. These patterns can induce the as-religion reflex even when the narrative content is considered to be secular. Reflections and analytical differentiations of form and content prove crucial to classifying narratives as expressions of civil religion.

Keywords: socialism; civil religion; narratology; aesthetic response; classification

1. How ‘Civil Religion’ Became a Concept for Describing Socialist Politics

‘Civil religion’ has a double history: initially invented as the ideal religion of the enlightened citizen, ‘civil religion’ later became an analytical term to describe the relation between religion and politics. The emergence of the concept is associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in chapter 8 of his 1762 *Du contrat social*, outlined the principle of sociability as a new model of religion. Rousseau differentiated between the religion of the individual and the religion of the citizen, the latter referring to a public religion or a “purely civil profession of faith [une

profession de foi purement civile].”¹ Designed as a consensual and integrative rational religion, Rousseau’s *religion civile* recasts religion as a legal principle that was necessary for the creation of good citizens and faithful subjects. This new understanding of religion was intimately linked to the formation of the modern nation state: the idea of the nation made it necessary to rethink the relation between religion and politics as two distinct social domains and gave way to a final separation of citizenship and confession.² The emerging gap between religion and politics was bridged by the concept of civil religion. By creating civil religion, Rousseau invented a new type of religion and, at the same time, provided the concept that would later be used for describing this new type of religion.

Two hundred years later, civil religion has become a common term of academic language in political science, theology, and religious studies. It is used descriptively to address whether a “religious dimension of [modern] political culture” exists or to elucidate the “particular way in which religion is present in the political.”³ However, the term is not uncontroversial. Critics emphasise that ‘civil religion’ refers to a vague “type of abstract

¹ Rousseau further qualifies: its articles are defined by the sovereign (“appartient à la loi de prescrire”) and are thus “not religious dogmas in the proper sense but are rather to be understood as a principle of sociability necessary for becoming a good citizen and faithful subject [non pas précisément comme dogme de Religion mais comme sentimens de sociabilité sans lesquels il est impossible d’être bon citoyen ni sujet fidelle].” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 162.

² Dagmar Comtesse, “Zivilreligion (Rousseau),” in: Thomas M. Schmidt & Annette Pitschmann (eds.), *Religion und Säkularisierung: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2014), 77–89, at 77.

³ See, respectively, Rolf Schieder, *Civil Religion: Die religiöse Dimension politischer Kultur* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1987); Carsten Bagge Laustsen, “Studying Politics and Religion: How to Distinguish Religious Politics, Civil Religion, Political Religion, and Political Theology,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 6/4 (2013), 428–463, at 440. The latter author also discusses four different approaches to studying the entwinement of religion and politics.

religion” that is open to interpretation.⁴ Robert Bellah, the major twentieth-century theorist of the concept, has especially been criticised for his religious rather than analytical concerns.⁵ Many of Bellah’s critics argue that his use of the term does little to elucidate general typological features of religion and instead stresses national peculiarities. In his article “Civil Religion in America” from 1967, Bellah refers to Rousseau only to sketch a national deconfessionalised religion of the citizen based on the American English language and public culture. Russell T. McCutcheon therefore suggests abandoning the concept since it “[spiritualises] what are all too obviously political concerns.”⁶

Despite this critique, investigating allegedly religious aspects at the interface of popular and political culture remains attractive to many scholars; this is especially true in the case of socialism. For example, José Casanova interprets socialism as an attempt to create a new civil religion; James Thrower applies the concept of civil religion to the socialist worldview of Soviet Marxism-Leninism; and Thomas Schmidt describes East German politics by identifying work, equality, and peace as core elements of a ‘labourer’s civil religion.’⁷ In contrast to Bellah, most of these authors evaluate negative implications of religion in the political sphere. In the US,

⁴ Laustsen, “Studying Politics and Religion,” 440.

⁵ See Thomas Hase, *Zivilreligion: Religionswissenschaftliche Überlegungen zu einem theoretischen Konzept am Beispiel der USA* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2001), 50.

⁶ According to McCutcheon, distinguishing civil religion from ordinary power politics contributes to a strategy of revaluation that makes “nationalist rhetoric deserving of study.” He calls this a “wonderfully effective depoliticization of politics.” Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), 180–181.

⁷ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 95; James Thrower, *Marxism-Leninism as the Civil Religion of Soviet Society: God’s Commissar* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1992); Thomas Schmidt, “Vom Bürger zum Werktätigen: Die arbeitliche Zivilreligion in der DDR,” in: Christel Gärtner, Detlef Pollack, & Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (eds.), *Atheismus und religiöse Indifferenz* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2003), 315–336.

religious references do not necessarily invalidate political arguments. Hence, Bellah understands civil religion to be a positive category that sacralises US politics in the best sense of the word. In Europe, however, a religious component in politics calls for critique, not trust. This negative view on religion in politics is related to the twentieth-century European experience of political dictatorship, in which religion was used to explain the emergence and success of these dictatorships, particularly of fascism and National Socialism. The most common example is Eric Voegelin's *The Political Religions*, published in 1938 in National Socialist Austria. Based on 'political religion' as a connective concept, Voegelin expounds the religious elements of National Socialist political collectivism so as to prove that evil results from a relation between 'false' religions and politics, which he understands to be the consequence of secularisation. 'Political religion' then became *the* negative concept to describe the disastrous effects of the "estrangement from God" in modernity.⁸ Voegelin's 'political religion' is by no means the only attempt to explain the relation between modern religion and politics, but it was probably most influential in shaping the negative view on the role of religion in politics and persisted well after National Socialism.

After World War II, the concept of totalitarianism implied a criticism of structures in politics that were seen to be similar to religion. In Cold War political discourse, for instance, pointing out socialism's 'religioid' character was intended to invalidate both socialist politics and its worldview. At that time, political dispute revolved around the question of ideological legitimacy, and the semantic field of religion became its focal point—again in a negative sense: in a normative debate on 'good' and 'bad' religion, on 'pure' and 'ideological' politics, socialism was not considered to be a full-fledged religion or genuine politics but rather a

⁸ Eric Voegelin, "The Political Religions," in: Manfred Henningsen (ed.), *Modernity Without Restraint*, vol. 5, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 19–73, at 23–24.

surrogate. References to religion became the dominant strategy of political criticism.⁹ As Carsten Bagge Laustsen points out, these normative connotations are also inherent in concepts, such as civil religion, that seem to be more neutral: “[I]t is an ongoing discussion to what extent civil religion is connected with positive consequences or with negative ones such as war and violent expansion.”¹⁰ The classification of socialism as a civil religion carries this negative connotation.

2. The Aesthetic Foundations of a Socialist Civil Religion

The academic reception of socialism is often characterised by the use of vocabulary and formats derived from religious discourse that are then applied to the political domain: master narratives, like the founding of the socialist state, become ‘myths’; iconographical traditions are analysed as personality cults; and events like the GDR’s youth-initiation ceremonies are interpreted as compensating rituals based on religious models.¹¹ These classifications stand in an

⁹ On the connection between socialism, ideology, and religion in twentieth-century political discourse: Anja Kirsch, *Weltanschauung als Erzählkultur: Zur Konstruktion von Religion und Sozialismus in Staatsbürgerkundeschulbüchern der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), especially 36–55.

¹⁰ Laustsen, “Studying Politics and Religion,” 445.

¹¹ Münkler, Herfried, “Antifaschismus als Gründungsmythos der DDR: Abgrenzungsinstrument nach Westen und Herrschaftsmittel nach Innen,” in: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung e.v. (ed.), *Der Antifaschismus als Staatsdoktrin der DDR*, (St. Augustin & Berlin:

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2009), 31–49; Gottfried Korff, “Personenkult und Kultpersonen: Bemerkungen zu profanen ‘Heiligenverehrung’ im 20. Jahrhundert,” in: Walter Kerber (ed.), *Personenkult und Heiligenverehrung* (München: Kindt, 1997), 157–183; Nikolai Vukov, “Secular Rituals and Political Commemorations in the GDR, 1945–1956,” in: Esther Peperkamp & Małgorzata Rajtar (eds.), *Religion and the Secular in Eastern Germany*,

interpretative tradition that has not lost its plausibility yet. The early twentieth-century social psychologist Hendrik de Man already viewed the socialist hope for the future as an evidently eschatological belief.¹² More than eighty years later, this identification of socialism with religion is still a common pattern of academic interpretation:

[P]eople shall have no other gods but those approved by the system. The communist philosophy of history was constructed around the concept of the struggle of good against evil; it was a Manichaeic vision that constantly drew upon the image of a secular Satan. Communist ideology held that history was preordained—just as a religious perspective insists that our fate is the manifestation of God’s will. [...] Just as Moses led his people through the desert, so Lenin and Stalin have led the Russian working class to the Promised Land.¹³

De Man’s 1927 interpretation was driven by the interest to demarcate religion from politics, apparently considered to be a necessary distinction by the author. De Man’s interpretation seemed all the more natural since the greatest theorists of socialism already used religious vocabulary to refer to their foundational principles. In 1847, Karl Marx considered naming a preliminary draft of *The Communist Manifesto* “Draft of the Communist Confession of Faith.” And this was nothing unusual. In early socialism, ‘catechism’ and ‘gospel’ were common terms to denote political documents.¹⁴ Eventually, Friedrich Engels convinced Marx to give up the title so as to distance himself from the religious tradition of early socialism. However, the adoption of religious language and formats persisted into later socialist parties. For example, when East Germany’s head of state, Walter Ulbricht, presented the socialist code

1945 to the Present (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 41–60, especially 55.

¹² Hendrik de Man, *Zur Psychologie des Sozialismus* (Jena: Diederichs, 1927), 94–95.

¹³ Marcin Kula, “Communism as Religion,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6/3 (2005), 371–381, at 371–372.

¹⁴ August Hermann Ewerbeck’s *Katechismus des Bundes* (1844) and Wilhelm Weitling’s *Evangelium des armen Sünders* (1845) are only two examples of the numerous political catechisms that began appearing in the second half of the eighteenth century.

of behaviour as the *Ten Commandments of the New Socialist Man* in 1958, the religious frame was meant to underscore the aspiration of the document—even though the contents of these “commandments” were rather secular and general rules of conduct.

While this and similar instances of religious language remained exceptions in German real socialism, critics and historians willingly adopted them to characterise the religious or ‘religioid’ nature of socialism. The description of socialist doctrines and practices in religious terms and the—sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit—identification of socialism and religion stands in striking contrast to socialism’s long history of anti-religious positions. If even anti-religious manifests are designated as religious in character, then classification seems to prefer formal over content-related similarities. The differentiation between content and form not only points to the implied substantive or functional theories of religion, respectively, but also to the *aesthetics of socialism*. The question is thus: besides political reasons such as demarcation and ideological competition, what constitutes the *aesthetics of reception* that allows for classifying socialism as religious? Consider, for example, socialist narratives. Marxist historiography has often been depicted as a “history of salvation in the language of national economics,” as Karl Löwith phrased it.¹⁵ Not only is the content debatably equivalent to a secular eschatology but also the *emplotment* or formal structure of socialist historical narratives suggests such a close relation to Christian master narratives. In the following, I want to address these structures of socialism on the level of aesthetic form by investigating how pictorial and textual traditions trigger the as-religion reflex. I will reveal these structures of socialism using narratology since it has developed a technical and analytical approach to narrative form.

¹⁵ Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen: Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1961), 48.

3. A Literary-Aesthetic Approach to Socialist Civil Religion

That forms trigger meaning-making processes is the insight of an analytical perspective that first emerged in art criticism and literary studies. In her 1964 essay “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag challenges the idea of an artwork’s true content that could be discovered and interpreted in a right way. Sontag instead stresses the formal aspects of art as crucial to its impact. She argues that a “descriptive [...] vocabulary [...] for forms” would help reveal art’s “sensuous surface” and explain “how it is what it is [...] rather than to show what it means.”¹⁶ Sontag’s programmatic input led to a methodological turn in hermeneutics, particularly in literary studies, where it developed into an aesthetic theory of literary experience. The *act of reading*, the relation between a text and its reader, became the object of elaborated analysis.¹⁷ Starting from the ideal reader’s active perception, aesthetic theory focuses on *formal* criteria such as textual structures and patterns that govern and guide the reader’s perception and interpretation of a narrative. Related approaches in religious studies theorise the efficacy of religious narratives accordingly. For example, Fritz Stolz uses a structural feature—how texts

¹⁶ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in: idem, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1966), 4–14, at 8–9.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). As a theorist, Iser is not interested in analysing actual readings of texts. Instead, he proceeds from an ideal “implied reader.” His theory of aesthetic response (*Wirkungstheorie*) therefore differs from other reader-response theories (*Rezeptionstheorien*). A concise and informative overview of the historical conditions of reader-response theory is provided by Winfried Fluck, “Why We Need Fiction: Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, Funktionsgeschichte,” in: Laura Bieger & Johannes Voelz (eds.), *Winfried Fluck: Romance with America? Essays on Culture, Literature, and American Studies* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009), 365–384, especially 365–369.

resist clarification—to identify religious narratives.¹⁸ No longer just a “‘vessel’ for content,” formal and structural elements are now considered essential to understanding how religious narratives engage their readers.¹⁹ What Laura Feldt has recently outlined as “literary aesthetics” for historical religious texts can easily be transferred to a secular context with the thesis question being specified as follows: besides thematic or subject-related references, what are the formal elements or signals of the object that would suggest similarities to religion?²⁰ Narratology is the tool to search for these elements, as it focusses on forms and thus provides the instruments to address how religious associations might be evoked by aesthetic form.

Socialism serves as a classic example of a political phenomenon that is perceived as (civil) religious. This not only applies to historical and critical studies of socialism. As a narrative culture, socialism uses specific aesthetic forms: particular emplotments that aim to make socialism plausible and to prove its truthfulness and efficacy as a life-changing worldview. I assume that these forms most fundamentally trigger the comparisons of socialism with religion. To understand the narrative forms of socialism would mean to gain insight into the literary-aesthetic conditions of its classification as a civil religion. With its systematic focus on the semantics of literary structures, narratology is useful for examining the formal elements of socialist narratives that invoke religion. It is thus a tool for understanding how narrative forms are the aesthetic preconditions for classifying socialism as religious.

¹⁸ Fritz Stolz, “Verstehens- und Wirkungsverweigerung als Merkmal religiöser Texte,” in: Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (ed.), *Fritz Stolz: Religion und Rekonstruktion; Ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 45–61.

¹⁹ Quote from Alexandra Grieser, “Aesthetics,” in: Robert Segal & Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), vol. 1, 14–23, at 14.

²⁰ On “literary aesthetics,” see Laura Feldt, “The Literary Aesthetics of Religious Narratives: Probing Literary-aesthetic Form and Sensory Effects in Exodus 7–11,” in: Alexandra Grieser & Jay Johnston (eds.), *The Sensory Sacred: Aesthetics as a Connective Concept* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, forthcoming).

4. Literature and the Narrative Culture of Socialism

Narratives play a significant role in the invention of tradition.²¹ Imaginations of the past come in the form of narratives: topics, motifs, and plots shape collective identities.²² “[E]very conscious remembering of past events and experience—individual and collective—is accompanied by strategies which are also fundamental for literary narrative.”²³ At least in modern societies, the significance of literature in this process cannot be overestimated since literature participates in meaning-making strategies of cultures of remembrance. Literature can be seen as a representation of a “culture’s memory” (Lachmann); it manifests the culture of

²¹ Narrative theory knows a range of different understandings of ‘narrative.’ I use ‘narrative’ as a general term that is not restricted to literature. Literary narratives are a specific form of narrative and can be, as a working definition, understood as a sequence of causally related events that are bound together in a specific form (the *emplotment*) and that can be transferred to a comprising plot (beginning, midst, end). Literary narratives therefore feature temporality, a difference between an initial situation and a final situation or a change of state in the narrative world. A broader understanding of the term as a theoretical concept allows taking the sense-making aspects and problem-solving activities of narrative into account. As such, narrative is both a “particular mode of thinking” and “an instrument of power” that “creates and transmits cultural traditions.” See Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narrative,” in: David Herman, Manfred Jahn, & Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), 344–348, at 345.

²² Ansgar Nünning, “Wie Erzählungen Kulturen erzeugen: Prämissen, Konzepte und Perspektiven für eine kulturwissenschaftliche Narratologie,” in: Alexandra Strohmaier (ed.), *Kultur – Wissen – Narration: Perspektiven transdisziplinärer Erzählforschung für die Kulturwissenschaften* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 15–53.

²³ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. by Sara B. Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 146.

remembrance (ErlI); and it participates in the negotiation of national (or religious) identity (Böhme).²⁴

Socialist countries often created strong founding narratives, enactments of a new temporal beginning or changes in the history of humankind.²⁵ To build social cohesion, East Germany's political community was actively engaged in generating such narratives. Its society consisted on specific conceptions of the past used as historical meaning-making processes in which an antifascist tradition was linked to Marxist philosophy of history and socialist anthropology. Both were supposed to substantiate the success of socialism as a historical and ethical necessity. Numerous slogans and mottos referring to the increase of production, antifascism, and peace, aimed to highlight the superiority of the socialist system in general and the friendship with the Soviet Union as the winner of the Second World War and, thus, the winner of history in particular. They became versions of the socialist core narrative: that socialism will ultimately and inevitably triumph and that this could be proven by history, i.e., the Marxist historiography. Encapsulating the idea of historical determination, "socialism will triumph" was more than just one of the slogans circulating in the GDR's culture. Official heading of the 1958 Fifth Congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, the motto became

²⁴ Renate Lachmann, "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature," in: Astrid ErlI & Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 2008), 301–310, at 301; Astrid ErlI, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart & Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2011), 88 and 173; Anna Katharina Böhme, "Challenging Englishness: Rebranding and Rewriting National Identity in Contemporary English Fiction" (PhD diss., Justus Liebig University Giessen, 2014). <http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2014/10515/> (accessed 25 February 2016).

²⁵ These could be narrated either as revolutions, as was the case with the Soviet Union and Cuba, or as demonstrative breaches within a former political system, like in East Germany. In both types, the 'dawn of a new era' is the key motif.

the focal point in which the Marxist interpretation of history culminated.²⁶ It can thus be understood as society's master narrative, an all-encompassing interpretation, legitimisation, and collective sense-making strategy that pervaded the narrative tissue on which real socialism was built upon.

Literature played an essential role in the conception of this issue. As a specific *way of worldmaking*, literary genres allow for possibilities of substantiating abstract ideas beyond those of non-literary texts, making literature a particularly efficient tool for creating a collective identity in the sense of a narrative community that consists of shared stories and modes of storytelling.²⁷ East Germany's narrative community was doubly reliant on literature. First,

²⁶ The Party Congress, held in East Berlin in July 1958, was influenced by the domestic political crisis caused by the uprisings of June 1953, when strikes against the increase of the work quotas developed into a general revolt against the East German government, as well as the ideological shock that followed the disclosure of Joseph Stalin's crimes by Nikita Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. The ambitious economic and social objectives drafted by GDR's leader Walter Ulbricht at this congress are a response to these crises which made the reaffirmation of the superiority of the socialist system all the more necessary.

²⁷ Originally coined by the philosopher Nelson Goodman, David Herman adopted the term 'ways of worldmaking' to study narrative. Herman's focus lies on the cognitive conditions for "how readers of print narratives, interlocutors in face-to-face discourse, and viewers of films use textual cues to build up representations of the worlds evoked by stories, or *storyworlds*." Investigating the engaging structure of narrative—how it encourages the recipient's imagination of a narrated world—Herman's approach draws on classical reader-response theory to specifically conceptualise the mental aspect of ways of worldmaking. Storyworlds are looked at as "mental models of the situations and events being recounted." See David Herman, "Narrative Ways of Worldmaking," in: Sandra Heinen & Roy Sommer (eds.), *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research* (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 2009), 71–88, at 72 and 73, emphasis original. With the broader question as to "how narratological categories can serve to illuminate the worldmaking power of narratives and of storytelling," the concept is now also common in cultural narratology. See Ansgar Nünning, "Making Events – Making Stories – Making Worlds: Ways of Worldmaking from a Narratological Point of View," in: Vera Nünning, Ansgar Nünning,

literature was considered crucial in socialist education; and, second, as the forum to substantiate new socialist values, literary narratives also became the form in which socialism would become manifest. Thus, socialist literature can be understood in two ways: as a *medium* of communication and as a *form* of representation. Establishing a narrative culture in which people joined in by just knowing the stories that constituted this culture was a political attempt to create a collective socialist identity.

4.1. The Politics of Worldview and Utopia: Literature as the Medium of Socialism

According to socialist politics of art, narratives and storytelling were not just a didactical strategy in primary-school instruction but a central tool of political education and ideological persuasion. Literature was supposed to function as a framework and reference structure that would prove the efficacy of socialism in general and the socialist worldview in particular.²⁸ Thus, it was supposed to contribute fundamentally to the socialisation of the citizen. The political idea of building a deep relation between worldview and literature had its roots in the aesthetics of socialist realism, which made no distinction between reality and fiction. Socialist realism was a programmatic approach that Joseph Stalin had declared to be the mandatory movement of Soviet art in the 1930s. After the end of World War II, this artistic movement spread to all socialist countries and endured throughout the whole period of socialism.²⁹ In

& Birgit Neumann (eds.), *Cultural Ways of Worldmaking: Media and Narrative* (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 2010), 191–214, at 192.

²⁸ Art was supposed to form and confirm “individual political and moral decisions made for socialism.” See Hans Koch, “Die Ausbildung der ästhetisch-künstlerischen Erlebnisfähigkeit der sozialistischen Persönlichkeit,” *Pädagogik* 28/2 (1973), 351–357, at 356.

²⁹ Reinhard Lauer, *Geschichte der russischen Literatur: Von 1700 bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Beck, 2000), 665. The concept turned out differently in the various socialist countries. In East Germany, socialist realism was

general, socialist realism encompassed all kinds of art. Its use as a tool of social engineering was, however, most obvious in the case of literature. At the first Soviet Writers' Congress, held in 1934 in Moscow, socialist realism was officially declared to be the only artistic method in Soviet literature. In a technical metaphor attributed to Stalin, writers were declared "engineers of human souls."³⁰ The movement's educational aspiration to form socialist human beings explicitly included the criticism of religion. Writers were supposed to contribute to the fight against obscurantism, mysticism, and any kind of clericalism. The new Soviet person was secular, and literature was the instrument of humankind's higher development. Consequently, the list of literary taboos included all references to religion or religious topics.³¹ But what were the topics, then?

Socialist realism was based on several principles such as, most significantly, ideological commitment, the rejection of an art for art's sake, and the depiction of the typical, which qualified the realist approach for portraying everyday life.³² Aesthetic peculiarities of socialist

enforced in the context of the Bitterfelder Weg, a cultural and socio-political programme promoting the development of proletarian lay art. It was implemented through the political decision of the socialist party in 1958 and was explicitly supposed to contribute to the education of the people's worldview. The basic idea of the programme—with its slogan "Put pen to paper, miner!"—was a close contact between writers and workers. The artist was to participate in the production process to better understand the worker. The Bitterfelder Weg was primarily focussed on the depiction of everyday professional life and technical development. Initially successful, the initiative failed after a few years. See Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (Berlin: AtV, 2000), 129–130. However, some influential writings resulted from the movement, shaping the development of literature in the GDR toward socialist realism, for instance Erik Neutsch's *Trace of Stones* (1964) which was later made into a film starring the famous Manfred Krug, and Brigitte Reimann's *Arrival in Daily Life* (1961).

³⁰ Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic: 1890–1934* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 51.

³¹ Lauer, *Geschichte*, 679 and 690.

³² Evgeny Dobrenko, "Socialist Realism," in: Evgeny Dobrenko & Marina Balina (eds.), *The Cambridge*

realism specifically included the heroic spirit, that is, the characterisation of the protagonist “as a builder of a new life, overcoming all obstacles and defeating all enemies.”³³ The socialist hero topos evolved to become the heart of the romantic mythology that soon characterised socialist realism, especially in the sub-genre of heroic realism.³⁴ This mythology was indeed romantic in the sense of Hayden White’s classification of those aspects of nineteenth-century historiography that shaped the twentieth-century socialist understanding of history.³⁵ White understands romance as the “narrative form to be used to make sense out of the historical process [in Marxist understanding: the assumption of historical teleology] conceived as a struggle of essential virtue [communism] against a virulent but ultimately transitory vice [the oppression of the working class].”³⁶ Using the example of Jules Michelet’s *History of the French Revolution*, White explains how this mode of historiography is constructed around an ultimate symbol or metaphor.³⁷ In the romantic plot structure, this metaphor can be denoted with essentialisms like nature, god, the individual, humankind, or history, categories that become agents of the historical process. If a plot structure affects the content as well as the form, like White argues, then it is no coincidence that socialist hero narratives were

Companion to Twentieth-century Russian Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 97–114, at 100–102.

³³ Dobrenko, “Socialist Realism,” 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 102–103.

³⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 150.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ It is no coincidence that Michelet’s interpretation of the French Revolution serves as White’s example for the romantic emplotment of history. Its narrative of progress, idea of liberation and development, and attitude of revolutionary enthusiasm seem to provoke a romantic emplotment. Could revolution ever be described differently?

microcosmic reflections of the utterly romantic poetic structure of the Marxist utopia.³⁸ The hero became the agent of history and his story the main evidence in socialist meaning-making strategies.

That the principle of ideological commitment demanded the exclusion of religious topics and motifs in favour of accounts of the typical does not mean that realist novels amounted to nothing more than observations of everyday life.³⁹ The depiction of ordinary working life was an essential component of socialist stories, but, as Boris Groys argues in reference to the utopian dimension of socialism, socialist realism was “realist in form and socialist in content.” For Groys, this content had an explicitly visionary potential that directly derived from the Russian avant-garde as an artistic movement that “sought to change humankind, not art.”⁴⁰

³⁸ White, *Metahistory*, 152.

³⁹ It is interesting, however, that Maxim Gorky’s novel *The Mother* (1906/7), which included aspects of religious discourse, was supposed to serve as a role model for socialist realism. Gorky became the flagship writer of the socialist realist style, even though his relationship to the party during his life was ambiguous. He temporarily fell from favour and belonged to the ‘God building’ movement before he was finally reintegrated and hailed as a socialist hero.

⁴⁰ Russian avant-garde, or post-symbolism, refers to a broad and influential movement in modern art, approximately ranging from the mid-nineteenth-century Russian Empire to the mid-twentieth-century Soviet Union. The term encompasses different developments, which were sometimes related and sometimes largely distinct, and includes all kinds of art. The Russian avant-garde’s initial goals were based on the utopian religious ideas of an ideal humankind and future society. See Guskin, *Cultural Origins*, 7–12. Quote from Boris Groys, “Utopian Mass Culture,” in: Boris Groys & Max Hollein (eds.), *Traumfabrik Kommunismus: Die visuelle Kultur der Stalinzeit / Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalin Era* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 20–37, at 21 and 23. Groys’s idea of a direct relation between the visionary avant-garde and socialist realism, which was considered to be very rigid, has been criticised as ahistorical. See Andreas Guski, “Sozialistischer Realismus und russische Avantgarde im historischen Kontext,” in: Hans Joachim Piechotta, Rainer Wuthenow, & Sabine Rothemann (eds.), *Formationen der literarischen Avantgarde*, vol. 2, *Die literarische*

At first glance, the genre system of socialist realist novels—which distinguishes between production novels, educational novels, and historical novels—seems to cover up their utopian dimension.⁴¹ Many critics have judged socialist realism to be of poor quality in style, composition, and taste, and they have criticised it for being based on a static ideology.⁴² The programmatic foundations of this type of literature, however, might have triggered this critical reception:

The most intriguing aspect of Socialist Realism is precisely that no one liked it when it was being produced. This art satisfied no existing tastes, fulfilled no existing social demands. It was produced in the relatively firm conviction that people would come to like it when they had become better people.⁴³

Moderne in Europa (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994), 40–52; Gutkin, *Cultural Origins*, 3–4. The way Groys approaches utopia as a category of form is, however, inspiring for the analysis of its literary roots, for instance in Russian science fiction. See Nikolai Kremontsov, *Revolutionary Experiments: The Quest for Immortality in Bolshevik Science and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Matthias Schwartz, *Die Erfindung des Kosmos: Zur sowjetischen Science Fiction und populärwissenschaftlichen Publizistik vom Sputnikflug bis zum Ende der Tauwetterzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003).

⁴¹ Socialist realist novels have been classified in more detail in Lauer, *Geschichte*, 696–711. Katerina Clark mentions six basic types: Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 255.

⁴² For the former critique, see Groys, “Utopian Mass Culture,” 22. Regarding the latter, Clark, for instance, distinguishes between the traditional coming-of-age novel and its socialist version by criticising the highly ritualised character of the latter. In socialist realist literature, the hero’s development would be “neither individual nor self-valuable,” but rather always the signifier for the transformation of society with the individual being just its background actor. Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 17.

⁴³ Groys, “Utopian Mass Culture,” 24. Sometimes, the socialist players adopted this critique and translated it into a virtue. See Lauer, *Geschichte*, 681.

The initial resentment of socialist realism was seen as a necessary step in the educational process, in which the consumer would, again, become an integral part of the artwork. According to this logic, it is no longer of interest if the writer's style is good or bad. All that is significant is whether he contributes to the change of the world by stories that intend to convince. The writer's task was to produce life-changing books, not popular literature.⁴⁴

While socialist realist novels cover a broad spectrum of topics, they are easily recognisable. The stories share what Katerina Clark calls a “master plot,” a recurrent structure that addresses the—historically and philosophically necessary—political “awakening” of a character that represents the hero. The master plot is a “parable for the working-out of Marxism-Leninism in history”—evidence for the triumph of socialism:

The phases of his [the hero's] life symbolically recapitulate the stages of historical progress as described in Marxist-Leninist theory. The novel's climax ritually re-enacts the climax of history in communism. [...] [T]he master plot personalizes the general processes outlined in Marxist-Leninist historiography by encoding them in biographical terms: the positive hero passes in stages from a state of relative “spontaneity” to a higher degree of “consciousness,” which he attains by some individual revolution.⁴⁵

Clark emphasises that this master plot was not only a literary phenomenon but also played a significant role in the creation of the collective socialist identity. Her concept is a useful tool to reveal the literariness of socialist society in general and the engaging structure of socialist literature in particular.

4.2. Implementing the Master Narrative in the German Democratic Republic: Literature as the Form of Real Socialism

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, which refers to a programmatic speech by Ilya Ehrenburg, one of the most prominent Soviet writers.

⁴⁵ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 9, 10, and 16.

An ideal-typical GDR version of the socialist master plot reads as follows:

During the next weeks, I worked as never before. In the evenings, I collapsed into bed, exhausted. Sometimes, before falling asleep, I listened to my inner voice. There was something new. I began to feel the energy Hennecke [a labour hero] and his comrades were always waffling on about. I was forty-five and considered myself to be full-grown. And now, this came over me. So tremendously, so overpowering. I was so awed by it that I could only backslap this Hennecke. I could not talk about it for years. Our being just develops faster than our consciousness.⁴⁶

By describing the very moment in which the ordinary worker becomes the working-class hero, this quote from the well-known reportage novel *Days with Sepp Zach* (1960) fulfils Marxism-Leninism in a literary character. Written by the East German author Regina Hastedt, the story is about a female writer's stay in a public coal company in order to portray the coal miners' everyday work. Mining was a common setting of literary reportage, a typical sub-genre of the socialist realist production novel in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Regina Hastedt, *Die Tage mit Sepp Zach* (Berlin: Verlag Tribüne, 1960), 113. The source text states: "In den nächsten Wochen arbeitete ich wie nie zuvor, und abends fiel ich wie tot ins Bett. Manchmal, vor dem Einschlafen, lauschte ich in mich hinein. Da war etwas Neues. Ich began die Kraft zu spüren, von der Hennecke und seine Genossen immer faselten. Ich war fünfundvierzeig und dachte, ich sei ausgewachsen. Und nun kam das über mich. So gewaltig, so überwältigend, daß ich nicht wußte, wohin mit mir selbst. Da schlug ich dem Adolf einmal richtig auf die Schultern. Bis ich darüber sprechen konnte, das dauerte noch Jahre. Aber unser Sein entwickelte sich schneller als das Bewußtsein." Translation by author.

⁴⁷ Hastedt wrote several novels on miners in the GDR. Her literary reportage is typical of a GDR socialist realist documentary, which is journalistic in style but subjective and personal in perspective. Socialist realist literary reportage reveals its fictional character particularly through distinct narrative features like a present narrator. In GDR literary politics, the reportage novel was considered to be an instrument of ideological education that was supposed to trigger the recipient's emotional response. See Mirko F. Schmidt, "Reportage," in: Michael Opitz & Michael Hofmann (eds.), *Metzler Lexikon DDR-Literatur* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2009), 275–276, at 275.

The moment of change is depicted through the eyes of the protagonist, a forty-five-year-old ordinary (male) worker who, in retrospect, reflects on a life-changing experience. The change seems to be triggered by introspection: first described with an auditory metaphor (“inner voice”), it transforms, stimulated by exceptionally hard work, into an underdetermined but apparently tangible power. The cognitive process of the protagonist’s political awakening is transferred to the level of emotion. The worker witnesses his own socialist experience, which he grasps in relation to the rest of his life as an unprecedented energetic phenomenon. The reference to his age of forty-five as a sign that he is “full-grown” is a strategy of confirmation in the character’s meaning-making rhetoric. It emphasises, again, the peculiarity of this energetic phenomenon as being something utterly new, which means here something that was not yet part of the narrative world and so evoked some kind of epiphany. At this point, it seems, the reader is left in the dark about the phenomenon’s essence. However, the narrative invokes specific stylistic conventions and plot devices from literature. The narrative stages a turning point in life; it is characterised by the attribute of newness and the metaphor of power; and it invokes energetic phenomena to depict an experience as tremendous, overwhelming, and, above all, ineffable. Stories of character transformation became the format in which the efficacy of socialism was expressed.

The new social utopia clearly needed a new kind of narrative that coalesced in the GDR in the slogan “socialism will triumph”—a phrase that encoded the master narrative of the GDR’s real socialism. The challenge was to implement this narrative as the core of the commoner’s identity. The presence of the slogan on all levels of societal life undoubtedly helped to entrench it as a fundamental interpretive pattern on which the narrative community could be built. For this community to actually come into being, however, it was necessary to get people involved: they had to become collaborating narrators of the socialist success story. The centralised system of education guaranteed an awareness of these stories, omnipresent not just in novels on the required reading list of every pupil in the GDR but spread in a wide range

of media. The “success” of the attempts to create a narrative community lies in the fact that people *knew* and could re-tell these stories, even if they did not like them. Enabling society’s members to co-narrate or echo the stories is a simple but effective way of inclusion.

The educational ambition of the political elite in the GDR exceeded, of course, a mere ‘narrative participation,’ aiming at the formation of conviction. The slogan “socialism will triumph” was meant to be a highly emotional call to action.⁴⁸ The social utopia did not just require a new master narrative but also a specific, plausible structure: a new emplotment. The “fictional privileges” of poetry were used systematically to translate the slogan into a persuasive

⁴⁸The 1965 GDR education act explicitly states that education should enable the pupil to “think, feel and act in a socialist manner.” Deutsche Demokratische Republik, “Gesetz über das einheitliche sozialistische Bildungssystem,” 25 February 1965. <http://www.verfassungen.de/de/ddr/schulgesetz65.htm> (accessed 30 March 2016). Once codified, this became the motto of the all-encompassing socialist education.

form of everyday working life.⁴⁹ Carefully designed and pre-selected narratives were spread with considerable effort.⁵⁰

The story of the coal miner's political awakening illustrates the aesthetic mechanisms and typical features of the narrative culture of socialism. To express its message, socialism employed strong, recurring narratives with simple plots, easy to remember and to reproduce. The story of the worker's transformation into a confident socialist became the defining feature of socialist realism; it was omnipresent in all socialist countries.⁵¹ Understanding the story of the coal miner as a story of his political awakening entails categorising it under the socialist

⁴⁹ This term "fictional privileges" derives from the debate on the complex structure of fictional texts. It was invented to outline the features of fiction as opposed to non-literary or 'factual' texts. Iser's model, which he designed in his literary anthropology, became influential to conceptualise this relation. To explain the act of literary simulation (or fictionalising acts), Iser analyses what he considers to be an interaction of a triadic relation between the real, the fictive, and the imaginary. According to him, fiction differs from reality not so much in its contents but in the mode in which these contents are presented: "The elements that are [...] incorporated into the text are not in themselves fictive, but their selection is an act of fictionalizing." See Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 5. Research profited from these conceptual reflections, although Iser's approach was much criticised. The debate on a well-defined distinction between the fictional and the factual continues with all contributors fully aware of the fragility of this binary. But the act of fictionalising is still considered as one of the most important differences between literature and other forms of symbolic communication. See Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 149.

⁵⁰ Socialist pedagogy was also built upon the premise that emotionally presented teaching materials, for which literature was considered to be the ideal instrument, would consolidate pupils' moral stances. By means of aesthetic identification with the sender, the recipient was to adopt his perspective. See Kirsch, *Weltanschauung*, 146–153.

⁵¹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 10. Despite some variations in narrative settings or style (see Clark's systematisation of basic novel types in *ibid.*, 255–260), the working-class hero was an inherent part of Eastern European narrative cultures. See Silke Satjukow & Rainer Gries (eds.), *Sozialistische Helden: Eine Kulturgeschichte von Propagandafiguren in Osteuropa und der DDR* (Berlin: Chr. Links, 2002). The anthology contains Soviet, Czech, Polish, and Hungarian versions of the working class-hero narrative.

master plot. Unfolding a story's meaning is, in other words, an act of cognition that arises by way of the recipient's participation in the narrative. This participation creates the impression of relevance, which can be reinforced by further stylistic devices, particularly a rather indirect communication of the message. Camouflage belongs to the structure of every meaning-making process. The metaphor of a perceptible energy, for instance, initially opens up a certain range of interpretation. The narrative situation leaves no doubt about the significance of the events depicted. Denoted with the term "energy" as its signal word, the nature of this energy remains, however, unsaid. The reader has no knowledge of what exactly is so tremendous, overwhelming, and ineffable. This peculiar semantic indeterminacy can be interpreted as a blank, to use a theoretical term coined by Wolfgang Iser. Blanks are strategically placed gaps in a narrative that have to be filled in by the reader's or listener's imagination. Completion, however, never happens randomly but is always a controlled process, fundamentally triggered by narrative revelation and concealment.⁵²

Just like the signal word 'energy,' the moment of character change remains undefined. The text does not inform the reader about exactly how the miner becomes a socialist; nor does it reveal the nature of the protagonist's emotions. In fact, the opposite is the case: the question remains open, and the mystery is even intensified. The reportage novel ends with a letter written by the author to the foreman Sepp Zach, who accompanied her during her visit to the mine. She thanks him for the transformative experience because she now feels she has "woken up" and

⁵² Iser understands a blank to be the very condition of the successful aesthetic involvement of the ideal reader: "What is missing from the apparently trivial scenes [...] is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. [...] [I]t is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to meaning. [...] Communication in literature, then, is a process set in motion and regulated not by a given code but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment." See Iser, *Act of Reading*, 168–169.

been “carried along” by the miners, referring to the powers revealed by the heroism of socialist work. The language that describes her character transformation is even more radical. She says she has been “born a second time,” and “has now fully come into the world.” The specifics of the transformation remain, however, enigmatic. The reader only learns that there is a long road ahead before she will complete her worldview, which also remains undetermined. From the narrative context, the reader can only presume that this worldview might have something to do with practical skills, a positive outlook, and certainty in the victory of socialism.⁵³ But in this context, there is no further explanation. The text just sends contradictory signals such as the coal miner’s words did before. “I was forty-five and considered myself to be full-grown” do little to explain the new perception of power, but the laudatory gesture and hint of Marxist theory at the end of the episode are very suggestive of a clarification. Colloquial speech and informal behaviour imitate a blue-collar type of ‘conversion’ narrative. Both elements are supposed to contribute to the authenticity, and thus the plausibility, of the narrative. Moreover, the protagonist’s inability to express the event adequately in words emphasises that the enactment of socialism is something that can only be experienced. The worker’s speechlessness leaves a blank space, which the reader is certainly not intended to fill in arbitrarily. The blank refers to the master plot of the working-class hero, which is embedded in this ‘conversion’ narrative and encodes a time- and genre-transcending message that could be easily transferred from one book or novel to another.⁵⁴

⁵³ Hastedt, *Tage*, 167–168.

⁵⁴ Among the most famous heroic stories in the GDR were Bruno Apitz’s *Naked Among Wolves* (1958), Dieter Noll’s *The Adventures of Werner Holt* (1960/63), Hermann Kant’s *The Great Hall* (1965), and Jurek Becker’s *Jacob the Liar* (1969). Also, especially famous in the GDR were Soviet novels such as Gorky’s aforementioned work, *The Mother*, Nikolai Ostrowski’s *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1932/34), and Arkady Gaidar’s *Timur and His Squad* (1940). For a list of Soviet novels circling around the hero pattern, see Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 261–263.

In its literary history, the socialist metaphor of energy, for instance, was put into different narrative frameworks, creating an interpretative spectrum for the nature of this energy. The first generation of GDR writers characterised it as antifascist. In Anna Seghers's novel *Das Siebte Kreuz* (The Seventh Cross, 1942), it is the framing metaphor. In the preface, an undefined voice speaks of a sudden awareness of its vitality: "For a long time we had permitted ourselves to regard that power as being merely one of the earth's common forces, calculated with measurements and numbers, but it is the only force that is suddenly able to grow immeasurably and incalculably."⁵⁵ The novel ends with a final reference to this force.⁵⁶ In the second generation, the antifascist power was turned into a life-transforming energy. Catalysed by hard labour, this energy leads to the inner transformation of the individual worker, who finally becomes a member of the socialist collective. Ultimately, both are variations of one and the same thing: the inexpressible power of socialism, which became society's central metaphor for its master narrative: socialism will triumph.

5. Conclusion: Socialist Civil Religion as a Form of Narrative Discourse

The "life-transforming aesthetic" of socialism was omnipresent during the whole period of the GDR's existence (1945–1989).⁵⁷ It circulated in a broad spectrum of media, such as dailies, textbooks, political speeches, party documents, and iconographic images. Literature, however,

⁵⁵ See Anna Seghers, *Das Siebte Kreuz: Ein Roman aus Hitlerdeutschland* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2001 [1942]), 10; translated from the source text into English. Translation by author.

⁵⁶ Translated from the source text into English: "We all felt how external powers could ruthlessly and fearfully strike to the very core of man, but at the same time we felt that at the very core there was something that was unassailable and inviolable." *Ibid.*, 425.

⁵⁷ Gutkin, *Cultural Origins*, 38.

played an accentuated role in the narrative culture of socialism. As a testimony of socialist reality, it was the medium that was supposed to realise the great vision of an improved humankind and better society. The late-1950s reportage novel is, in many ways, typical of the narrative culture of real socialism. Seen out of context, these novels seem to be about the personal experience of ordinary workers. But, actually, they meticulously realise the omnipresent socialist proto-story. This proto-story merged the labour topos and the hero pattern, two essential elements of socialist meaning-making, to create the master plot of the working-class hero. The master narrative “socialism will triumph” manifests itself in the prototypical character of the labour hero. The labour hero was both a role model and the most important witness to the efficacy and triumph of socialism. The well-defined narrative form provided a “new cultural model of biography” by combining society’s need for a new kind of narrative with a new kind of hero.⁵⁸

As part of an education that appealed to all the senses, socialist realism blended art and politics. Aesthetic education and moral education merged; art and everyday life became one. In contrast to what the term suggests, socialist realism was not about peoples’ everyday real experience or their perceptions of socialism; rather it was about “the *production of reality through its literary aestheticization*. [...] Socialist Realism produced the symbolic values of socialism instead of its reality.”⁵⁹ Thus, it was never merely a genre among others but a means for improving humankind and a principal witness to the power of utopia as an agent of change.⁶⁰ The top-down implementation in socialist countries demonstrates the political topicality and

⁵⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁹ Dobrenko, “Socialist Realism,” 110.

⁶⁰ Andrea Jäger, “Sozialistischer Realismus,” in: Michael Opitz & Michael Hofmann (eds.), *Metzler Lexikon DDR-Literatur* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2009), 319–322, at 321.

the importance ascribed to literature by the ruling elite.⁶¹ Socialism was built upon narrative tissue, and literary techniques became its main instruments of meaning-making. As I have shown, these techniques were carefully selected to contribute to the political strategy of involving citizens in the socialist master narrative, demonstrating how socialism succeeds in a person.

That the most pronounced features of this master plot—an ineffable experience of a temporary but life-changing insight, which is accompanied by the protagonist’s impression of being overwhelmed—might remind the academic recipient of religious experiences as famously described by William James is no coincidence.⁶² Specifically, (comma?) the ineffability motif has become a crucial indicator for narratives to be analysed and interpreted as mystical experiences or conversions in the study of religion. A look at literary history reveals, however, that they are far less specific for religion than it seems. James’s description was an attempt to capture religious experiences by a *narrative pattern*. He contributed significantly to establishing the *plot structure* of ‘religious experiences’ by defining the features that should be classified as religious, laying the groundwork for an understanding of plot structural (“life-changing”) and rhetorical (“ineffable”) features as referring to the domain of religion.⁶³ To understand the story of the working-class hero as a religious story means, first and foremost, to subsume it under the narrative scheme of conversion. In itself, however, its plot structure is

⁶¹ Like the case of Stalin’s Soviet Union demonstrates, socialist realism was not just government policy; it could also be a matter of life and death: approximately two thousand non-conformist writers were arrested during the Stalinist purges of the Communist Party of which about fifteen hundred were either executed or died in camp imprisonment. See Lauer, *Geschichte*, 668.

⁶² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004 [1902]), 295–296.

⁶³ See Timothy Knepper, “Ineffability,” in: Robert A. Segal & Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2015), vol. 2, 244–245, at 244.

quite flexible: although it seems to suggest a religious framework, it can be filled with secular contents such as the transformation of the working-class hero. It is thus the employment of the narratives and not necessarily their content that evokes religion. And while the academic understanding of religion is able to cover a broad array of phenomena, it is worth reflecting on how narrative structures determine the act of classification.

The academic debate on the relation between socialism and (civil) religion turns out to be an example of the pitfalls of classification. This article argues that the narrative form of socialism plays a central role in its interpretation. Narrative forms and formats are powerful; they trigger what I have called an as-religion reflex in the reader's perception. Thus, to posit a socialist civil religion means, first and foremost, to refer to similar *formal* features of socialism and religion that need not necessarily have similar thematic contents. Interpretations of these formal features can also still be strikingly different. One can plausibly read the same narrative as a conversion to socialism and as transformation of the labour hero. The narrative's form allows for a range of interpretation in which civil religion is one possibility. It thus makes sense to look at civil religion as the classificatory result of specific forms of narrative discourse.

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