Stalin's "Cold War Cathedral" as Architext and Autofiction:

The Identities of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, Poland'

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ABSTRACT

I examine the past and present discourses about the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, Poland. I demonstrate that these discourses make it clear that the seductive power of some architectural forms arises from their unique ability to encode and compel constructions of individual and collective narratives of identity. For structures like the Palace carry both ideological and political messages inscribed onto them by their designers and builders, while also serving as repositories of their individual spectators-readers desires and fantasies. The fact that no other postwar building in Poland has been featured in so many diverse texts — from communist tracts, through poetry and fiction, to sociological studies, cultural critiques, specimen of visual art, and a unique lore of legends, letters, and anecdotes — proves that the Palace in Warsaw is not just a building, but also a text-book of national and cultural identities. In a truly postmodern fashion, it can be also seen as a metaphorical representation of the collective. post-binary East-West transition into the post-totalitarian, millennia1 moment.

COLD WAR ERECTIONS

A faiy-tale Palace is rising
in Warsaw
For ever it shall last — like love
for a child
For ever it shall last — like friendship
of the Soviet kind[2]

The architectural form described in this early-1950s, *shamelessly social-realist poem stands 230.68 meters high in the center of Poland's capital, Warsaw. Boasting 44 floors, 3288 rooms, and* 33 *elevators, the Palace of Culture and Science has survived Stalin, the Cold War, and the fall of communism in 1989. Now it thrives under new masters and amid dynamic changes that have been brought about by Poland's rapid plunge into free market economy.*

The fairy-tale Palace, whose very name seems to evoke forbidden bourgeois associations, was a "gift of the Soviet peoples to People's Poland" that Warsaw could not refuse. It was erected with great propagandistic fanfare and named after Joseph Stalin upon its completion in 1955.' It rose with one Stakhanovite record being broken after another and claimed the lives of fifteen Soviet workers. Busy printing prescribed paeans to Soviet-Polish friendship symbolized by

Fig. 1. Palace of *Culture* and Science.

the building that was to shed its rays all over Warsaw, the press never mentioned the casualties or the gossip about their ghosts haunting the structure.[4] As Marian Szczygiel remarks, the bodies of two or three drunk workers who fell into the freshly poured concrete of the square surrounding the building were left there, as it would have been too expensive to recover them.

The Palace, the square, and the park that was designed for the urban pleasures of the proletariat occupied such a large area that about 3500 people had to be evicted and the most prominent post-war neighborhood in Warsaw razed to the ground to provide space for the monster-building. The construction of Stalin's Palace took three years. It claimed human lives, destroyed what the press dismissed in passing as the bourgeois district, and was a serious economic burden on war-ravaged Poland. One of the cult-of-personality songs popular at that time that my mother still recalls sounds like an ironic plea to a blood-thirsty, vampiric demi-god: long live Joseph Stalin whose lips are sweeter than raspberries.

The Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw was actually one among many similar buildings that Big Brother forced upon his satellite countries to commemorate their political and economic subordination after the Yalta agreement.[5] As such it has been a persistent reminder of the times of Soviet hegemony and Stalinist terror in East and Central Europe. As Mark Lewis notes, "[a] public monument... like architecture is to some extent the image of the social order, [and] guarantees, even imposes that very order."[6] Filled with theaters, cinemas, museums, a swimming pool, as well as luxurious ballrooms, offices, conference and exhibit halls, the gigantic building served the party and the people in a truly socialist fashion—it was **both** a specimen of civil architecture and a publicly used monument that confirmed the hegemony of communist ideology. Even after Stalin's death, it continued to embody the persona and the cult of its namesake. The despot's image "is not so much a representation, but constitutes his very public embodiment. *The image is his power."* (Lewis, p. 4). In its function as apublic monument, the Palace thus stood for the physical aspect of Stalin's ideology, power, and actual violence; its spire personified and gendered them through its unfailing, or unfalling, phallic presence that towered over and surveyed the city around it.

STALINS CATHEDRAL

Erected to embody Stalin, who was not god, but who loved cathedrals, the Palace wasaparadoxically church-like monument to communism – the god that failed.' Its full name, Palace of Culture and Science, denoted a truly socialist space that was to bring together the Muses of the workers state art and the state-supported scholars in the social sciences and Marxism-Leninism. Their joyful joint labor teeming inside that stone flower that has sprung up on the flower bed of the city was to transform the lives of the people in truly miraculous ways.[8] The form was thus to symbolize a better and brighter future, while also standing proudly as amonument to

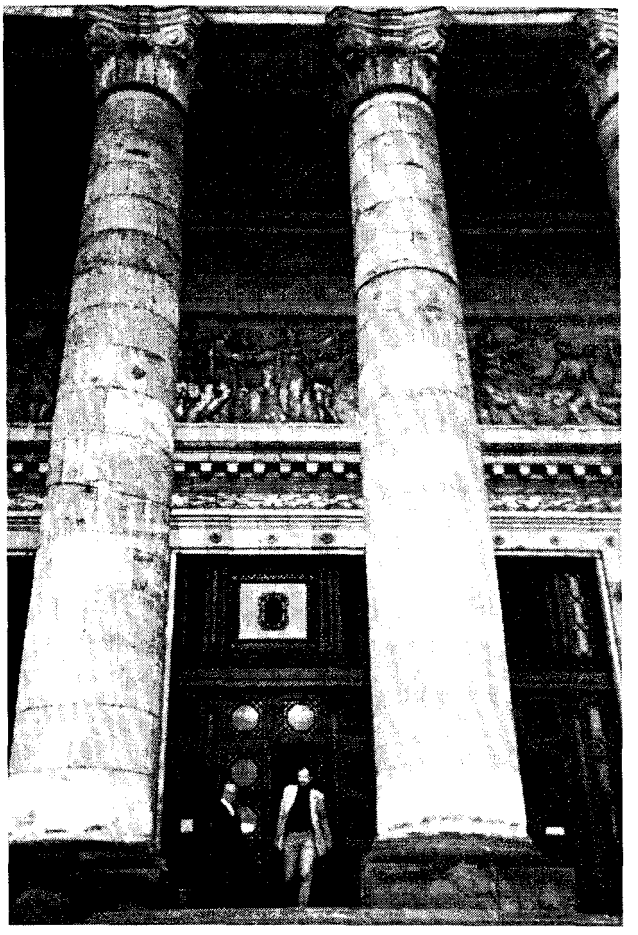


Fig.2. Entrancefront.

the unbreakable bonds of Soviet-Polish friendship and a symbol of victory over the dark forces of war. In a sense, then, the palace became a sacred form, a paradoxical temple, where the civic religion of socialist progress towards that ever-receding horizon of communism found an outlet and space for celebration and worship.

Stalin's Palace still fascinates with its scale and the odd combination of architectural styles and interior decor that were so characteristic of the postwar Soviet buildings. Designed by the architect who was already famous for his Moscow skyscrapers, Lev Vladimirovitch Rudniev, the structure fuses the form of the Western high rise with Russian decorative lavishness, while also using elements of pseudo-classicist and Polish national faux-folk styles. It sports a spire worthy of a gothic cathedral that rises above the wedding-cake-like structure. Its schizophrenic mixture of curves, attics, and columns once inspired a witty journalist to call it Russian Greece.'

This symbol of Soviet power and dominance is also an architectural representation of the East-West struggle for hegemony during the Cold War. As Poland's only skyscraper, it crossbreeds Eastern European critiques of fantasies about Western cities. Jan Dabrowski, author of a book about the Palace's genesis, The *Sky-High Monument of Friendship*

(1953), describes the despised Western high rise as "a stone cuboid, deprived of character and beauty... [that] is a symbol of the rat race for profit, a symbol of indifference about man, beauty, and national artistic tradition." That decadent American form was to be forgotten, negated, and transcended by the new socialist architecture, which was to "serve the people" and challenge both the architectural and social design of the capitalist city.[10] Paradoxically, the Social-Realist propaganda that flows throughout Dabrowskis book relies on the despised spaces in the West, and especially American cities — New York and Chicago. In Dabrowsk's text, pictures of ugly and congested Manhattan are placed side by side with those of the proletarian Palace in Warsaw." In the eyes of Stefan Kisielewski, a more recent writer who thought the Palace to be the worst thing that had befallen Polish capital, that building also expresses the uniqueness of Warsaw, which has always been a meeting place for all the insanities, and regular quirks of the East and West. As a synecdochal representation of the city and Polands post-war history, the Palace thus becomes a symbol of weirdness so peculiarly hinged on various psychic and chronological worlds that there is no way to express it.[12]

Kisielewsk's insistence on the form's unspeakable ideological and cultural hybridity explains some of the extreme reactions that it has always evoked. Some hate it and would like to see it demolished; others, like the chronicler of the Palace since 1960, Halina Szczubelek, love it and passionately collect stories and anecdotes about it. No matter how one feels, it is true that the Palace has become such an integral part of Warsaw that it is impossible to imagine the city without it. A look at any postcard stand should be proof enough.[13] Perhaps it is simply too big and too weird to be ignored. It is apresence that haunts the landscapes of Tadeusz Konwicki's four novels, and its absurdity seems to go well with the legendary stage set designs of Andrzej Szajna, whose famous Studio theater is still located inside the Palace. Similarly to Polish poster art, the ugliness and grandiosity of this building are both repelling and fascinating to a visitor; they seduce and tease him or her with their decorative arrogance, shocking contrasts, and phallic excess.

The past and present discourses about the Palace make it clear that the seductive power of some architectural forms arises from their unique ability to encode and compel constructions of individual and collective narratives of identity. For structures like the Palace carry both ideological and political messages inscribed onto them by their designers and builders, while also serving as repositories of their individual spectators-readers desires and fantasies. The fact that no other postwar building in Poland has been featured in so many diverse texts — from communist tracts, through poetry and fiction, to sociological studies, cultural critiques, specimen of visual art, and a unique lore of legends, letters, and anecdotes — proves that the Palace in Warsaw is not just a building but also a text-book of national and cultural identities. In a truly postmodern fashion, it can be also seen as ametaphorical representation of the collective East-West transition into the post-totalitarian, millennial moment.[14]

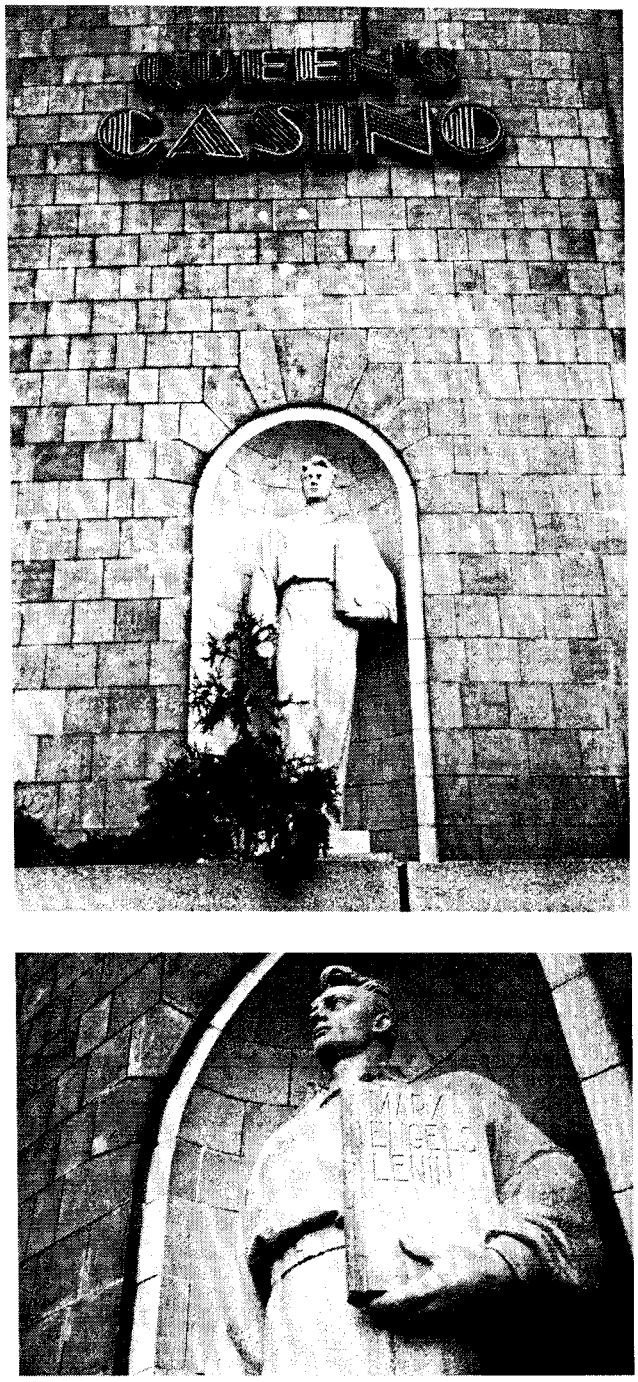
AUTOFICTIONS OF IDENTITY

The Palace of Science and Culture was a Vatican governing the church of State.

> The Palace was located in the center of a barren square nicknamed the Tundra. Every morning, whipped by northern winds that penetrated their inadequate coats, thousands of people rushed across the Tundra to work. From my room on one of the Palace's highest floors, they resembled faceless extras in a silent-movie crowd scenes ... As I crossed the Tundra in the darkness, the Palace looked like a Byzantine basilica, incarnating the State (19, 39).
>
> – Jerzy Kosinski, *Cockpit* [15]

In thus thinking of the Palace in Warsaw as a semi-sacred form thrust amid the god-less wasteland of communist Warsaw, Jerzy Kosinski joins many other writers who have fallen under the spell of Stalin's cathedral. Kosinski's perspective, however, is that of a writer in exile. somebody who in fact became an American writer, as he started writing after having defected to the United States and adopted American English as his auto-lingua. The memories of Poland that he carried abroad with him are thus necessary translations, if not Americanizations. Interestingly, the city within which this writer rewrites Warsaw and the Palace of Culture in his novel, *Cockpit,* is New York, that space of his literary autofocus.[16] Kosinski explains his perspective on identity caught in between cultures and linguistic traditions by pointing at its social and cultural constructedness. In his work architecture, literature, and national and individual identities all come together due to the individuals power to re-make and reinvent him- or herself in different worlds. Like writers, like architects, people ... [are] imaginative... [they are] architects of their own realities, he says upon his visit in Poland in 1990.[17]

This power to be an architect of one's identity is presented interestingly in Kosinski's 1975 novel that I have mentioned above, *Cockpit* (1975). Its narrator plots his fantastic escape to the United States in one of the hundreds of impersonal rooms of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. By exploiting the very tactics and principles of communist bureaucracy, he is able to construct a story that fools his superiors into letting him out of the country. His location inside the colossal Stalinist Palace allows him a dual vision of his predicament under communism that is crucial for understanding the East-to-West narrative trajectory of Kosinski's Cold War text. In thequotation, the narrator's downward gaze at the crowds milling around the Palace blends with that of an overawed pedestrian, who beholds this Stalinist monument while looking up. From both vantage points, the Palace seems an architectural incarnation of the state. It embodies the economic and political systems that constitute the mandatory



Figs. 5-6. Sala Kongresowa (Congress Hall) and Casino Queens/ view and detail.

Kristevas image of the city seems to refer to the well-known urban spaces in Western Europe and the United States. But, even if we narrow the perspective down to just Europe, this picture doesnt make sense without its other, the *Other* Europe or the former communist countries.

However, in an attempt to live up to the bimodern, millennial moment we may need to examine closely our individual reflections in the mirror provided by Kristeva's dystopian metropolis. Susan Suleiman claims that in writing about

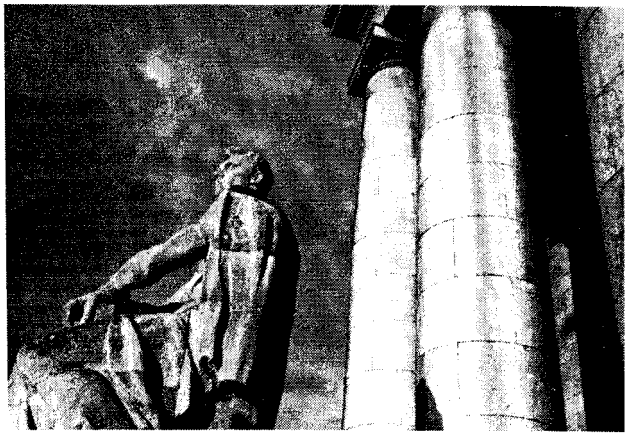


Fig. *7*. Exterior sculpture.

culture and texts one always "risks who one is."[28] As I have shown, reading Stalin's Palace as a metaphor for the post-totalitarian moment necessitates interweaving of private and public national, gendered, and (auto)biographical narratives. As a structure-text that illustrates the paradoxes and complexities of the post-totalitarian mind, the Palace functions as an "architextural" construct—a meeting space for gendered collective and individual narratives of national memory. As Mary Ann Caws defines it, the term "architexture" means to "call attention to the surface texture of the construction made by reading." She emphasizes that the interplay between the "concept of origin and that of the building process," which is characteristic to architecture, is crucial to the reader's passages through texts, which, like buildings, are always placed and constructed in the context of other structures-texts. In employing Caws's approach, and especially her claim that reading functions as "performance and as passage . . . in relation to texts of exchange and city-scapes of passage," I hope to have demonstrated that the cultural meanings inscribed into structures/monuments such as the Palace of Culture actually contain and "predict" historical processes that make and transform not only them, but also their reader~.?~

In our passages through the architexts representing the post-totalitarian moment, we should remember that we are constructed selves and that identity is "an evolving process . . . something made and always subject to revision." This realization, inspired by Susan Suleiman's work. should help us diagnose Kristeva's "new maladies of the soul" that threaten nations and individuals with the "neurosis of nonrecognition" after the end of the Cold War (Suleiman, 226). The awareness that we are identity representations and reflections, much like the images and monuments we see around ourselves, should not make us succumb to the demise of the "empire of the sign," but rather inspire new and productive interpretive dialogues about our identities as men, women, ethnics, gays and heteros, working class members and the intelligentsia. As Suleiman stresses, the politics of postmodernism should place more emphasis on the "political status of the plural self rather than of the plural text—not

postmodernist intertextuality, but postmodernist **subjectivity.**" In the world torn by ethnic strife, when "whole populations are murdered in the name of (ethnic) identity," it is not possible to construct texts and architectural forms in a vacumm (Suleiman 229-30). Suleiman's appeal for intellectuals and writers to engage in a "rhetoric of doubt" results in an argument for adopting a "feminine" perspective that distrusts any hegemonic ideology and moves from margin to center. Such an approach implies a new postmodernist *subject,* who embraces his and her difference, and who finds themselves in the center of the private/public sphere where difference can become the norm. At the turn of the millennium, when sometimes "it becomes obvious that conversation, dialogue. translation have failed," the "rhetoric of doubt" should inspire not only feminist critics but also architects to "make the world safe for dialogue," although the exact means to achieve this end might be as yet unclear.

NOTES

[1] Some of the points in this project grew out of a paper that I wrote two years ago and that is currently forthcoming as "Lire I'esprit post-totalitaire" (Engendrer l'autre de l'Europe de l'ouest) in *La Memoire des Dechets — essais sur la culture et la valeur du passe (Memory of Waste: Objects and Images in the Economy of the Past)*, eds., Claude Dionne, Brian Neville and Johanne Villeneuve. Trans. Johanne Villeneuve. (Quebec: Nuit Blanche Editeur, 1988).
Quoted in Szczygiel, Mariusz. Kamienny kwiat, *Gazeta wyborcza.* Nr. 299. December 24-26 (1991). All translations from the Polish are mine, unless indicated otherwise. I omit the original text in the interest of space.

[3] Of course, Stalin died in 1953, but the original name of the building was erased only after its completion, when Moscow allowed Warsaw to do away with the cult of personality.

[4] See also, n.a. Od akademii do kasyna. *Gazeta wyborcza.* Nr. 169. July 22-23 (1995), pp. 12-13.

[5] By the time the Palace was being built in Warsaw, there had been already several "Stalin's skycsrapers" all over Moscow. As "finest example[s] of an architectural school which embodied the cumulative ideals of the Soviet State," they were designed to "stand apart from other city buildings by virtue of their exceptional expressiveness, unique architecture, picturesque style, unprecendented size and visual power." See Thomas, Ronan. "Stalin's Skyscraper." *Architectural Design* 119 (1996), pp. viii-xi.

[6] Mark Lewis, "What Is to Be Done? Art and Politics after the Fall . . ." *Ideology and Power in the Age of Lenin in Ruins.* Eds., Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. (New York: St. Martin's Press. 1991), p. 6.

[7] See Richard Crossman, ed.. *The God that Failed.* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965). See also Thomas on Stalins love for cathedrals in "Stalin's Skyscraper"; see note 5.

[8] Quoted after Szczygiel.

[9] Quoted after Szczygiel.

[10] Jan Dabrowski, *Podniebny pomnik przyjazni (Sky-High Monument of Friendship).* (Warszawa, 1953), p. 20.

[11] Of course, it never crosses the authors mind to compare the Palace to the Washington Monument in D.C., perhaps because the aims and central set ups of the two structures, against the backdrop of other buildings and amid vast empty squares/parks, might be seen as too disturbingly close.

[12] Quoted after Szczygiel.

[13] See also, Hanna Krall, Palac. *Polityka.* Nr. 29 (1975): 5, and Koczot, Stanislaw.. Piramidalny rodowod. *Rzeczpospolita.* Nr. 169. July 22-23 (1995).

[14] For a discussion of Social Realist art that seems to exist in a state of time suspended, recreating styles from the past on the one hand, but anticipating postmodernism on the other, see Tarkhanov. Alexei and Sergei Kavtaradze, *Architecture of the Stalin Era.* Designed and compiled by Mikhail Anikst. (New York: Rizzoli, 1992).

[15] Jerzy Kosinski, *Cockpit.* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 18, 19, 39.

[16] Jerzy Kosinski, New York: The Literary Autofocus. *Passing by. Selected Essays, 1962-1991* (New York: Grove Press. 1992), pp. 91-96.

[17] Ewa Matuszewska, Ameryka Europy: Rozmowa z Jerzym Kosinskim *Tygodnik Solidarnosc* 41 (108) 12 Oct. (1990), p. 17.

[18] Jerzy Kosinski. Death in Cannes, *Paassing by. Selected Essays, 1962-1991.* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), p. 15, 20.

[19] Leslie Kanes Weisman. *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of rhe Man-Made Environment.* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 2. Rv, Istvn et al., ed. Introduction. "Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe Before and After 1989." *Representations.* Winter (1995), pp. 8-9.

[20] Obviously, this would be true of any building and public space.

[21] Eva Hoffman's immigrant narrator in *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) has similar impressions, especially when prompted to "testify" about how horrible it must have been "there" by her Western peers.

[22] Cynthia See Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politicsatthe End of the Cold War.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[23] Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture.* (Cambridge: MIT Press. 1964), p. 10.

[24] Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, *Ideology and Power in the Age of Lenin in Ruins.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. x.

[25] Starn, Randolph at al., eds. Introduction, "Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe Before and After 1989." *Representations.* Winter (1995), p. 13. See also. Esbenshade, Richard S. "Remembering to Forget: Memory. History, National Identity in Postwar East-Central Europe, in the same issue, pp. 72-90: [in the West] there is a temptation to view history and memory in Eastern Europe as 'out of control.' with tribal passions, blood feuds, and 'primitive' ethnic strife 'threatening stability in Europe'" (p. 73).

[26] Elizabeth Grosz, *Bodies-Cities. Sexuality and Space.* Princeton Papers on Architecture, ed. Beatriz Colomina. (Princeton, 1992), pp. 242-3.

[27] Julia Kristeva, *New Malcidiesof the Soul.* Trans. Ross Guberman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 27.

[28] Susan Rubin Suleiman. *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 2-3.

[29] Mary Ann Caws, *A Metapoetics of the Passage: Architextures in Surrealism and After.* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1981), pp. xiv-xv. I am oversimplifying Caws's theory for the sake of clarity and brevity.