

# “Homosexual Desire and Existential Alienation in Renato Pellegrini's *Asfalto*”

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(published in *Confluencia: Revista Hispánica de Cultura y Literatura* 20.1 (Fall 2004). 120-137. Refereed. An early version of this article was published in Spanish as “Subjetividad y cultura gay en la novela *ASFALTO* de Renato Pellegrini” as a special appendix to the re-edition of his *Asfalto*, Buenos Aires: Tirso, 2004. C19-C38.)

[1]

Renato Pellegrini is the author of two unusually controversial novels: *Siranger* (1957) and *Asfalto* (1964).<sup>1</sup> While both novels present the existential “problem of being” in the context of a dark and sinister Buenos Aires, the controversy surrounding them has more to do with the fact that both --particularly *Asfalto*-- explore the problems associated with homoerotic desire from within a strongly homonegative Argentine society.<sup>2</sup> While *Siranger* presents an early and more understated treatment of homosexuality --relegated primarily to secondary characters--, *Asfalto* instantly created a firestorm of controversy for its direct and explicit portrayal of a homosexual sub-culture in Buenos Aires. In fact, it is one of the few novels ever temporarily banned in Argentina for reasons of “obscenity,” rather than political content. The censorship case went to the Argentine Superior Court where judges finally decided to permit distribution of the novel after the edition had been seized. But by that time, however, the damage to both author and novel had already been done: as a result of the devastating legal proceedings, Pellegrini abruptly stopped publishing and has since been relegated to the periphery of the Argentine and Spanish-American literary canon, his work remaining almost completely unknown both inside and outside of Argentina.

In addition to the legal attempts to make it disappear, the Argentine critical community contributed to the novel's obscurity as well. In contrast to the modest, but positive reception for *Siranger*, critics greeted *Asfalto* with a stunned silence. In an article that appeared in the Buenos Aires magazine, *Gente*, an unnamed journalist notes that despite the fact that the publisher supplied critics with review copies of the novel, only one of the critics for the major Argentine newspapers and magazines even acknowledged having received a copy, and he expressly declined to review it. In the *Gente* article, Pellegrini states that he had heard that that critic, writing for *Primera Plana*, refused to write a review because “esas cosas ya las contó Gide en el ‘Corydon’ hace muchos años” (“La homosexualidad, tema de un libro prohibido” 29). Perhaps more disappointing for the author, was the lack of courage displayed by his friend and mentor, Manuel Mujica Láinez, who wrote a laudatory prologue for the novel and then refused to sign his well-respected name to it.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their relative obscurity, however, this novel and its author deserve greater critical attention from specialists in the literatures of Spanish America, particularly those interested in issues of gender and sexuality: *Asfalto* is an amazing work of fiction for its piercing staccato prose, its bold problematizing of sexual identity, its blistering critique of certain aspects of Argentine society, and its distinctive use of existential precepts in connection to sexuality. *Asfalto* is not only a novel with excellent literary qualities, but it also serves as a significant socio-cultural document that furnishes crucial information for understanding the nature of homoerotics at a specific time and in a specific place --the Buenos Aires of the early 1960s--, providing insight into how sexual identity is conditioned by its historical, social, and cultural context. Employing existentialist concepts that were in vogue among certain writers of the time, the author illustrates the modern philosophical “problem of being” and its attendant alienation, anxiety, and meaninglessness by connecting it directly to the problem of homosexual desire within a homonegative culture.

Although Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) is often popularly cited as the first Argentine novel to treat issues of homosexuality openly --without the traditional attitude of moralistic condemnation--, Pellegrini's *Asfalto*, pre-dating Puig's novel by twelve years, is a more revolutionary work of fiction in terms of both content and approach.<sup>4</sup> The novel unflinchingly documents the enormous difficulties of an innocent seventeen-year-old youth who leaves the provinces and arrives in the capital city, where he finds himself the target of men's sexual advances. The graphic content describing his experiences in a sexual "underworld" presents quite a radical break with the Argentine literary production of the period: *Asfalto* is virtually the first Argentine novel to portray the vivid details of a sexual encounter, either homo- or heterosexual. And while the main character struggles intensely with issues surrounding his sexual identity, his erotic desires, and the consequences involved in acting on them, the author, in an audacious move, makes it clear that the protagonist's overall existential conflict is the consequence of being forced to create an authentic existence within a world that judges his sexual desire as deviant and disgraceful.

The novel relates the story of Eduardo Ales, a handsome teen-aged *cordobés* who, lacking guidance and direction in his life, loses a scholarship and is forced out of school. As he wanders around in a park contemplating his future, he is approached by a man who eventually forces himself on Eduardo, making Eduardo masturbate him until he reaches orgasm. From the very first pages of the novel, the author makes it explicitly clear that men are powerfully attracted to Eduardo Ales. Realizing that he has no future in Córdoba and taking what little money he has, Eduardo buys a bus ticket for Buenos Aires where he arrives alone and penniless. In effect homeless, he spends his days aimlessly wandering the city, and begins to uncover the existence of an "openly concealed" homosexual sub-culture on the streets of Buenos Aires.<sup>5</sup> With his good looks and obvious sensuous appeal, he becomes involved with a series of men who promise to help him find a job or who offer him a place to stay, and then attempt to take advantage of him sexually, sometimes with success. Over time, Eduardo is befriended by several

sincere and compassionate young men, and comes to live finally with a man named Ricardo Cabral who helps Eduardo maneuver through the intricacies of the Buenos Aires homosexual community. Cabral teaches him, for example, about the differences between *putos*, *maricas*, and *homosexuales*, about lesbians and lesbian sex, and about famous homosexual figures in history.<sup>6</sup> He also learns about sex in public bathrooms. In one café, for example, a shoeshine man offers to pay him 30 pesos to let him perform oral sex on him.<sup>7</sup> Eduardo violently rejects the offer by grabbing the man and choking him until he falls unconscious. At the end of the novel, he meets a young woman named Julia whose “purity,” Eduardo thinks, will “rescue” him from the dreary and impoverished life that he leads. Finally, prompted by a letter from his father who threatens to take him back to Córdoba, Eduardo is pushed into making a fateful decision. In order to escape with Julia from both his father --who represents the smothering conformity of the provinces--, and the city of Buenos Aires --which represents the abusive pimping of his being--, he will need to get a tidy sum of money. Remembering the bootblack who offered to pay for sex, Eduardo finds him and goes into the restroom with him. But the bootblack is out for revenge and he attacks Eduardo. The novel ends with Eduardo first strangling the man to death, then leaving his body in one of the bathroom stalls, and finally walking out into the dark city night.

## [II]

The existentialist concept that human beings create their own existence through the actions they perform is a fundamental principle at the core of the novel. But what makes this novel unique among other works of the time that employ literary interpretations of existentialist philosophy is that the adolescent protagonist’s existential quest in *Asfalto* is tied intimately to his non-traditional sexual identity. Although existentialist philosophy rejects the idea of an “essential” human nature, positing that all individuals are unique in ever changing circumstances, most literary works with an existential foundation do take heterosexuality for granted as the essential *sexuality* for all living beings. In contrast to those works, Pellegrini’s *Asfalto* brings

sexual orientation directly into question and contextualizes it under the specific circumstances of the Buenos Aires of the early 1960s. In other words, the novel's protagonist must create his complex existence through choices and actions, and a major part of that existence involves the active creation of his own very complex and fluid sexuality in the frenzied urban center of Buenos Aires.

As the novel's title suggests, one of the most important conditioning factors in the development of the protagonist, his actions and his sexual identity, is the city of Buenos Aires, symbolized by the dark, dirty, hard asphalt of its streets. In the novel, Buenos Aires represents the quintessential modern dystopia in which twentieth-century humankind is condemned to a constant struggle with circumstances that result in anguish, loneliness and isolation from fellow human beings. But in Pellegrini's *Asfalto*, however, the author focuses on one particular stratum of society, the homosexual subculture, as a dark microcosm of the larger urban landscape. As many scholars have shown, the existence of a distinct homosexual community is directly related to the development of large urban areas which attracted not only foreign immigrants and rural national migrants, but also men and women whose non-traditional sexuality required the relative protection and anonymity of heavily populated urban centers.<sup>8</sup> Chauncey notes that it was in the city's "open spaces, less easily regulated than a residential or commercial venue, that much of the gay world took shape... Streets and parks where many men --'queer' and 'normal' alike-- went to find sexual partners, where many gay men went to socialize, and where many men went for sex and ended up being socialized into the gay world" (179).

Significant, too, is the long-standing Argentine tradition that links a barbaric *machismo* with the "interior" provinces and a civilizing "femininity" with the city of Buenos Aires. Foster insightfully notes that "Argentine machismo is typically associated with the mythified countryside: witness the figure of the Gaucho, the suburban *compadrito* (tough), the Peronista/unionized laborer, many of whom are either urban marginals or rural immigrants. For these groups, individuals who enjoy metropolitan privilege are viewed as dandies, which is often a

euphemism for effeminate” (*Buenos Aires* 87). Following Foster’s insight, it becomes evident that as Eduardo Ales makes the move from the province of Córdoba to the capital city, he is also making the symbolic move away from a primitive, undifferentiated masculinity --that is, an unexamined heterosexuality-- to an urbanized femininity and the development of a homosexual identity. It is significant that in the novel, immediately following Ales’ first sexual encounter with another man (14-15), he makes the life-altering move to Buenos Aires where he will be forced to confront his own sexuality in a place where the choices to live according to one’s authentic identity are more plentiful.

But while the rise of the urban metropolis may be responsible for fomenting nascent homosexual subcultures and identities, the city is also the source of great suffering and misery for many of its residents. In *Asfalto*, the city of Buenos Aires is not a protective, nurturing place where the adolescent protagonist might thrive and grow, where he might create an “authentic” existence through careful choices and responsible actions. On the contrary, the metropolis is portrayed in the novel as an openly hostile, coercive, and vicious force. In fact, the narrator describes Buenos Aires as a heartless, devouring pimp that prostitutes and exploits its inhabitants by preying on their innocence, weakness, and defenselessness. For example, early in the novel Ales speaks of the demonic power of the city when he states “[t]emía entrar nuevamente en la ciudad, en sus fauces devoradoras. No perdonaba. Engullía seres con tranquilidad pasmosa. Sin pausa” (53). The young and the inexperienced --especially if they are attractive, poor, and alone-- become the ready victims of the city whose agents carry out its corrupting impulses. While the sinister side of Buenos Aires is a motif in other twentieth-century Argentine novels --those of Arlt and Sábato, for example--, the portrayal of the city’s potent and seemingly willful evil in *Asfalto* lifts Buenos Aires from a negative background setting to a full-fledged antagonist with the potential for annihilating its own inhabitants.

Compounding the consequences of the city possessing the power to place the protagonist in the most compromising and dangerous situations, Pellegrini has created an adolescent main

character who is poorly equipped to make good decisions. In addition to his youth and inexperience, Ales does not seem to have any relationship to other people in the world; he lacks intimate friends, a caring family, and responsible adult role-models upon whose behavior he may mold his own. In other words, he exists in almost complete isolation, as if he were a laboratory experiment.<sup>9</sup> With an inadequate preparation for surviving in a city as complex as Buenos Aires, he finds himself trapped, forced into choosing between several dreadful options, only later to suffer the consequences of his decisions. The author has created a cloud of powerlessness and defenselessness surrounding his protagonist, but it is important to note, however, that Ales is not caught in a web of powerlessness due to the vagueries of chance or fate --a notion that would contradict the existential framework of the novel--, but rather because he must make conscious and unconscious choices that are, in many ways, determined by two immediately apparent features: his physical beauty and his ambiguous sexuality. In a very real sense, Ales actually *attracts* those characters to him who will place him in a position in which he must select among desperate and unfortunate alternatives.

### [III]

Like other recent arrivals in Buenos Aires, Ales embarks on the task of finding purpose and meaning for his existence in the city, but in his case, he finds himself consistently drawn into the homosexual subculture of the city. It is as if there were something about his person, something distinctively “visible” on him that makes him the object of other men's attention. It does not take long for Ales himself to come to the realization that there is something mysterious about him that permits others to “read” his sexual inclinations: “Entrada del subte, a la derecha, succionante. Hombres apostados. Me miran con ojos redondos de animales dañinos. Un gordo barrigón me hace guiños. Lo miro, colérico. El sonrío, tiernamente. ¿Me conoce, acaso? A su lado, otro hombrecito, me sonrío también. Por un momento pensé si no tendría en mi cara algo que les llamase la atención. Una mancha, quizá” (40). Although he is a stranger in a strange

place, it becomes clear that certain men easily *recognize* him as someone like themselves. In effect, Ales is “marked” with a stigma that announces his sexual orientation to those who know how to read it.

The recognizable homosexual mark on Ales is a powerfully contradictory phenomenon: the sign can be employed to target certain persons for public persecution, or it can be helpful to members of the same marginalized group in identifying each other. Contradictory, too, is the fact that the mark of homosexuality can be recognized or go unnoticed --it can be legible or illegible, both to the general public as well as to group members. As Edelman has insightfully noted, dominant cultures in the West have long held the belief that “homosexuals themselves have been seen as producing --and, by some medical ‘experts,’ as being produced by-- bodies that bore a distinct, and therefore legible, anatomical code” (5) which has made them “inherently textual--as bodies that might well bear a ‘hallmark’ that could, and must, be read” (6). In other words, Ales’ existence in Buenos Aires is conditioned by a clearly identifiable and recognizable sexuality which has the double function of drawing him into a community of similar persons (whether or not he understands it or desires it) and at the same time targets him for abuse by those who would take advantage of his innocence, defenselessness and sexual ambiguity.

Edelman further insists that the need for bringing the mark into interpretative visibility revolves around notions of control, regulation, and the enforcement of hegemonic sexual and gender practices. By hypothesizing that homosexuals are physically “marked,” “[h]eterosexuality has thus been able to reinforce the status of its own authority as ‘natural’ (i.e., unmarked, authentic, and non-representational) by defining the straight body against the ‘threat’ of an ‘unnatural’ homosexuality --a ‘threat’ the more effectively mobilized by generating concern about homosexuality’s unnerving (and strategically manipulable) capacity to ‘pass,’ to remain invisible...” (4).<sup>10</sup> The ability to “pass,” undetected by mainstream society, is particularly worrisome in masculinist cultures --such as the Argentine-- in which notions of sexuality depend so forcefully on notions of gender role and gender deviation, because enforcers of sexual norms

cannot account for homosexuals who do not adopt behaviors and mannerisms of the “opposite” gender. And because Ales does not display that stereotypical cross-gendered appearance, he passes as just another good-looking young man to most people, but not to those who are highly attuned to reading certain signs.

Ironically, as it turns out, the legible signs by which homosexuals are readily able to recognize and “read” others like themselves --when the metaphorical anatomical “mark” that identifies them frequently goes unnoticed by the general population-- has been a vitally important aspect in the creation of an urban homosexual subculture that must exist within either a homophobic or homonegative majority culture. Chauncey notes that homosexuals had to develop “tactics that allowed them to identify and communicate with one another without alerting hostile outsiders to what they were doing. Such tactics kept them hidden from the dominant culture, but not from one another” (187). And one of the most important tactics that homosexuals developed for recognizing each other is identical to one of the main problems explored by Sartre: the inescapable gaze of the Other.

Some of the mystery of the seemingly inexplicable recognition of Eduardo Ales as one of “them” is clarified by how they look at him and how he looks back. Chauncey remarks that homosexuals have traditionally taken “full advantage of the cultural injunction against men looking at other men in the sexually assertive way they gazed at women; a ‘normal’ man almost automatically averted his eyes, if they happened to lock with those of a stranger, whereas a gay man interested in the man gazing at him returned his look” (188). Looking, gazing, staring, and watching are incessantly reiterated actions that have enormous power in *Asfalto*. In the first few pages of the novel, for example, when Ales is still in the relative safety of his provincial surroundings, he links masculine sexuality with the penetrating stares of different males with whom he comes in contact: “pecho velludo. Nos miramos. Sin pestañear. Pupilas metálicas. Soplo electrizante bajo los árboles” (12); “le encanta hablar de relaciones sexuales entre muchachos y más de una vez he sorprendido en sus ojos miradas inexplicables” (15). What the

novel suggests, then, is that if homosexual men find a commonality in Eduardo Ales, it is because he is returning their gaze in a manner that implies an unconscious identification with them that sometimes stimulates his fascination and desire.

Later, in Buenos Aires, when the stakes are higher and the opportunity for abuse is more intense, the gaze of men becomes less stimulating and more aggressive: “los hombres apostados en la vereda de la joyería parecieron alertarse ante mi presencia. Una especie de movimiento subterráneo los recorrió. Un vistazo en derredor me permitió verlos desplegarse en abanico, tomar posiciones. Se hubiere dicho un ejército silencioso avanzando hacia el enemigo desarmado” (82). Ales is suddenly forced to see himself as something grotesque because he is being observed by others and what they see is an object of forbidden desire. The existential notion of “being-for-others” has enormous ramifications for the protagonist here because Sartre’s generalized “shame” caused by the permanent possibility of being seen by “the Other” is magnified by Ales’ stigmatized sexuality, a sexuality that society has taught him is shameful in itself. As Ales is being looked at, observed, and desired, he is forced to see himself as others see him, externalizing his own sense of self for public scrutiny, and experiencing his own being as an object that reflects the illicit desire of other men. And while he may not realize it consciously, Ales is being *penetrated* by the gaze of men, they possess him and hold power over him. And in Hispanic culture, the man who permits himself or desires to be penetrated by another man must be considered unequivocally homosexual.<sup>11</sup>

The desiring gaze of others has identified him as one of “them” and the realization that he forms a part of an abhorrent class of men makes Ales feel even more isolated. In spite of what might appear to be the kind of recognition that could provide him with a sense of community and connectedness, Ales continues to suffer a profound sense of isolation within himself, alienation from others, and even a discontinuity of his own existence: “todo perdía perspectiva, se volvía difuso, irreal. ¿Había continuidad en mí?, ¿era yo, siempre yo, quien cruzaba la línea recta, acerada, del tiempo, de un tiempo que crecía, destruyéndome?, ¿vivía todos los instantes o

alguien, un extraño, ocupaba espacios de mi tiempo, produciéndome lagunas?” (137-38). He views himself as disconnected in time and in space, even occupied --penetrated-- by strange beings, and much of this feeling of isolation is due to the fact that he does not have a clear sense of his gender role and sexual identity in a society that has very restrictive and limiting scripts for those aspects of human existence.

[IV]

In essence, the protagonist does not and cannot feel joined to any other person because he does not feel connected to his own self. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Ales remarks on a disturbing absence of identity. For example, he is always surprised when he hears his own name spoken aloud and is then forced to relate it to himself: “[s]ensación imprevista de irrealidad. ¿En verdad, existo?, ¿quién, qué soy? En voz baja, lentamente, casi temeroso, pronuncié mi nombre y apellido: Eduardo Ales. ¿Qué valor, qué sentido tenía todo eso? Eduardo Ales. Eduardo Ales. En el colegio, al pronunciar mi nombre un profesor, experimentaba, también esa extraña sensación de desconcierto” (21). Furthermore, Ales even has trouble recognizing his own face when he sees it: “[m]i cara pasó por la ventanilla de un automóvil. Mi cara. Servía para diferenciarme. Al verme, pensaban que era yo. Otros, que no eran yo, pasaban a mi lado. Se veían, también, reflejados en la ventanilla. Sabían, entonces, que eran ellos” (117). Ales seems to be truly alone, even unique, in the realization that he possesses no continuous identity, recognizable, at least, to himself. While it seems to Ales that most people in the world (read the “normal” world, the “straight” world) seem to have no difficulty with such a basic component of conscious existence, Ales finds himself truly adrift in a sea of meaningless faces. And as he moves through the homosexual sub-culture of Buenos Aires, he finds that even those men who have accepted their identity as homosexuals seem to possess a sense of self --an identity that has been, by and large, thrust upon them by heterosexist notions of what “a homosexual” should look

like and act like, particularly with regard to negative stereotypes such as “feminine” behaviors and insatiable promiscuity.

This alienation from his own essential self is enormously significant, considering the fact that Ales simply cannot imagine himself as a homosexual based on the disjunction between what society has taught him that means and what he feels inside his own self: “¿Era yo homosexual? [...] ¿Qué era, en verdad, un homosexual? No seguramente uno de esos putos de mierda que andan buscando encamarse con media humanidad. ¿Entonces? ¿Tenía yo algo de común con ellos?, ¿me parecía, aunque más no fuera, en algo, a Barrymore, al doctor, a los tipos del asfalto, a Ricardo?” (154) Ales’ questioning of his own identity is emblematic of a well documented phenomenon: researchers have demonstrated that feelings of disconnectedness and alienation felt by homosexuals are greatly exacerbated by the fact that they have traditionally been considered --and consider themselves-- outsiders in their own nation, society, culture, and even family. As Bergman adeptly points out: “Although a sense of otherness affects us all, the otherness that affects the homosexual --or affects his sense of homosexuality-- is more profound. For while otherness is an unavoidable part of any self’s awareness of its own subjectivity and its difference to other persons around it, the homosexual suffers a categorical, perhaps even ontological, otherness since he is made to feel his ‘unlikeness’ to the heterosexual acts and persons who gave him being” (30). As a result, in the process of building ego consciousness, young homosexuals are often destined to fail in their struggle to find self-sameness and continuity in others simply because they do not see themselves *reflected* in others until much later in life and, consequently, their sense of isolation and alienation becomes greatly magnified. The problem is compounded even further when adolescents like Ales are forced to find themselves reflected in persons that are considered by the majority culture disgusting and despicable.<sup>12</sup> Ales, clearly, struggles to find someone, anyone, who might provide him with a model for his existence, a guide for coming to an understanding of his own self.

Ales does get some guidance from Ricardo, one of the few trustworthy and compassionate men who tries to pick him up for sex. It is through Ricardo that Ales becomes aware of a distinction between “homosexuals” and “faggots”:

“No parecés homosexual”.

Lo miré, extrañado. Homosexual. Notó mi asombro, pues preguntó:

“Sabés qué significa homosexual?”

“No”.

“Homosexual es aquel que mantiene relaciones sexuales con personas de su mismo sexo”.

“El invertido”.

“No precisamente. El invertido es generalmente lo que la gente llama marica o puto. Resultan, en verdad, algo así como la degeneración del homosexualismo. Por culpa de ellos, el vulgo no establece distingos. Llama putos a todos y se acabó”.

Sus pupilas azules cobraron animosidad insospechada. La ciudad develaba su secreto.

Bebí, mientras trataba de ordenar mis conocimientos recientes. Maricas. Pesquisas. Homosexuales. El no era nada de eso, pues atacaba a unos y me defendía de los otros”. (84-85)

For Ales, though, the distinction that Ricardo draws does not seem to help him as he labors to discover an identity that he can accept for himself. What Ricardo is telling him is that he may be a homosexual, but he does not have to be a “puto,” the detested and degenerate version. To the modern reader, the distinction is, of course, uncomfortably homophobic and indicates just how strong the patriarchal dictates for conformity have been in Western societies. If a man is quietly, privately, and discreetly homosexual, maintaining masculine behaviors, appearances, and attitudes, he may occupy a higher place on the hierarchy of marginalized persons. The more he imitates the norms for monogamous, heterosexual males, the more acceptable he is. If, however, his identity violates those norms, he is not only considered vile and degenerate by the majority culture, but also by those marginalized people whose precarious status in the hierarchy is threatened by the existence of these more non-conformist persons.

Ales, faced with two possible identities --one that is marginally acceptable and one that is totally unacceptable by mainstream Argentine culture-- finds himself trapped in an existential bind because neither one of those personas really corresponds comfortably with the vision he has of himself.

[V]

One element that could help Ales connect to the world is the one that is missing from the discussions he has with friends and the interactions he sees around him: love. In other words, because he does not have anything in common with those men whose seemingly sole interest lies in sexual activity (which, in the case of the penniless seventeen year-old Ales, generally involves some form of coercion, violation, or abuse), Ales cannot see himself as one of “those” men. The lack of a positive, trustworthy, and loving role model serves to amplify the protagonist's aloneness in the world. It is important to note here that the heterosexist majority culture has created the category of homo-*sexuals*, which primarily focuses on non-hetero-normative sexual desire and sexual activity as the essential defining feature of their identity as human beings. As a result of that definition and the outright prohibition of homosexual unions as valid emotional and spiritual configurations, homosexuals have been forced throughout history to express their erotic desire almost exclusively in physical sexual terms. The spiritual and the emotional aspects of homoeroticism, the aspects that Ales desperately seeks, suffer under the weight of mainstream heterosexist cultural norms. For Ales, love between men does not seem to be an option or even a possibility.

Clearly, Ales needs and wants the compassion, the warmth, the comfort, and the emotional connection of a caring other. Towards the end of the novel, Ales becomes closer to anyone he had ever known, a young painter named Marcelo. Marcelo introduces Ales to French bistro music, to foreign films, to art, and to the kind of desire that one man can have for another that transcends the purely physical. For Ales, Marcelo becomes a guide, a model of homosexual

existence that, for the first time, has resonance for the protagonist: “A su contacto, mi vida se desdoblaba en otra vida más profunda, auténtica. Atmósfera especial lo circundaba. Entrar en ella, significaba entrar en el sentido de uno mismo, en nuestra razón de ser. Me asombraba el valor que, desde él y por él, adquirirían las cosas más simples e insignificantes” (175).

But despite the love between Ales and Marcelo --a love that could have mitigated Ales’ intense feeling of alienation and loneliness-- Ales, after so many bad experiences with men who had used him merely for their own physical gratification, is able to love Marcelo only on a spiritual level, not on a physical one. The young Ales has never been satisfied by sexual contact with other men because it had always been divorced from the kind of emotional or spiritual union that he desperately craved and, indeed, required and, in many cases, such experiences were abusive, possessive, and even violent. In an interesting dialogue between the two, in which Ales asks Marcelo to explain love and desire, it becomes clear that the protagonist is trying to develop a mature understanding of the passion that can connect two people, but still has trouble seeing how the emotional and the physical might be related:

“... ¿Podemos desear físicamente, sin amor?”

“Por supuesto. Desear es tomar y dejar, olvidar. El deseo físico nace y termina, es violento y fugaz. En cambio, el amor es todo lo contrario, y, así como podemos desear a muchas personas, sólo podemos querer a una o a poquísimas. Amamos solamente a quienes crean en nosotros exaltación especial y por cuyo intermedio amamos todo lo que existe.”

“Y esa persona a quien amamos, puede atraernos físicamente, producirnos deseo sexual?”

“El deseo sexual, en el amor, es una forma de unión, que en nada lo resiente o rebaja.”

“No lo veo muy claro.” (176)

In an interesting narrative move, once Ales is presented with a person who could fulfill him emotionally and open him up to the world around him, the author complicates the situation at the end of the novel by introducing a heterosexual female character, Julia. Julia represents the

possibility of a “normal” life for Ales, a life which simply conforms to the “compulsory heterosexuality” required in Argentine society, a life in which Ales would not need to question his identity or think carefully about the nature of his existence and his place in the world. He would be able to escape the sordid and difficult life of the city and settle down into a comfortable, familiar world. In fact, the power of societal norms to make certain behaviors and beliefs seem so “natural” because they are so familiar, is evidenced when Ales and Julia, in a moment of passion, have a sense of *déjà vu*:

“Pasarías, Julia, una noche, desnuda, conmigo?”

Noté su temblor. [...]

“Pasaría contigo, Eduardo, no una, sino todas las noches de mi vida. Te se puro, tanto como yo”.

“Tu pureza, Julia, me salvará”.

[...]

“No sé por qué, Julia, me parece haber vivido ya este momento”.

“¿Nos habremos conocido en otra vida?”

“Quizá”. (173)

Given his unpleasant experiences on the streets of Buenos Aires, alone, and confused about his sexuality, the temptation to fall into established and comfortable patterns of accepted behavior -- monogamous heterosexuality-- is very powerful and alluring to Ales. Powerful, too, is the desire to reject a highly stigmatized sexual identity that would make life so much more difficult at a time and in a place that so forcefully discourages it. Julia serves as the key to Ales’ escape from a world that causes him to doubt his own existence because it abhors the sexual portion of his identity.

The tragic ending of the novel, however, nullifies all of Ales’ attempts at finding his authentic being. In order for Ales to secure the salvation that Julia seems to offer him, he makes a fateful decision to commit a crime that will provide him with the money necessary to escape with her. In order to rob the shoeshiner, he assumes the false identity of the *macho* who accepts the advances of a *maricón* as long as he maintains the role of the dominant masculine “inserter.” But

when the man attacks him in retaliation for his homophobic response earlier in the novel, Ales unleashes all of his frustration and internalized homophobia and murders the bootblack. In effect, he takes on the all-too-familiar persona of the violent fag-bashing *macho* who is tormented by his own insecure sexuality. While the murder seems to be accidental, his malicious intent to get revenge on the type of man who had taken advantage (or tried to take advantage) of him is very clear. By accepting a false and abusive identity and trying to profit financially from the sexual encounter --effectively making the decision to become the hustler that the pimping city had consistently conspired to turn him into-- Ales, in existential terms, chooses to destroy whatever authentic existence he might have developed had he selected the more difficult path of creating his own unique self, even though it might be one marginalized by mainstream society.<sup>13</sup> Instead, he mimics a very negative pre-established pattern for Argentine males, that of the aggressive *macho*. In stark contrast, the victim of his abuse and violence is a man whose only crime was to make the dangerous decision to accept his identity as a homosexual and to find the fulfillment of his sexual desires by paying other men to let him perform fellatio on them.

Ales' desperate need for money is due to his desire to escape the "*asfalto*" of a world made intolerable by homonegative pressures and homophobic oppression. He envisions that escape in the form of a woman, Julia, who, he believes, offers him the last chance for a "normal" life. Ironically, in trying to escape and find that "normal" life, he has actually succeeded in trapping himself even deeper within the destructive forces that make modern life so miserable and unbearable. In the end, then, Renato Pellegrini's *Asfalto* demonstrates that although the general human condition in the modern world is one of anxiety, meaninglessness, and alienation from nature, society, and self, the situation is made even more hopeless for marginalized peoples. Condemned to live out their existence in the Sartrean hell made up of Others --the "privacy in public" of the hostile city streets--, the novel shows how great a toll the majority culture exacts from members of a minority culture who do not or cannot conform to established societal norms. In the case of Eduardo Ales, the all-pervading reach of an anti-homosexual environment forces

him to make decisions that only reinforce the power of hegemonic culture and lead him to his own destruction.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the IUPUI Office for Professional Development, the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts, and the Indiana University Office for International Programs for their generous funding of research trips to Argentina in the Summer of 2000 and Fall of 2001 which made it possible for me to meet with the author and develop this study for publication. I also thank my colleague, Gustavo V. García, for his invaluable insights and helpful suggestions on drafts of this work.

<sup>2</sup> I employ the adjective “homonegative” in contrast to the more commonly used “homophobic” in order to draw a subtle distinction between the way homosexuality is viewed in Hispanic and (Northern) Euro-American cultures. I agree in principle with those scholars who view most Hispanic (and other Circum-Mediterranean) cultures as more “homonegative” than homophobic. That is, in these cultures, pressures to conform to established gender and sexual norms are primarily social and cultural. In general, personal and societal sanctions are more often applied --particularly through family and community--, and there is a surprising level of acceptance of sexual activity between members of the same sex --within strict parameters, of course. In contrast, northern European and American cultures display a more “homophobic” attitude which aggressively rejects all forms of homosexuality by bringing the weight and power of official institutions to punish it legally, treat it medically and condemn it morally --in addition to the social pressures of family. For more on this distinction, see Fernández-Alemany and Sciolla, 67-73.

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<sup>3</sup> The unsigned prologue was published with the novel. And while Mujica Láinez's name is nowhere to be found on it, the author provided me with a photocopy of the handwritten version in Manucho's quite distinctive script. It is interesting to speculate whether a prologue signed by such an important literary figure as Mujica Láinez might have lent the novel greater respectability and might, therefore, have prevented the legal case brought against Pellegrini.

<sup>4</sup> Not only is Puig's novel not the first Argentine novel to deal with homosexuality openly, it is not even the only novel published in the same year to do so. Ernesto Sábato's *Función de gala*, Carlos Arcidiácono's *Ay de mí, Jonathan*, and Manuel Mujica Láinez's *Sergio* all appeared in the fateful year of 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Because terminology dealing with minority cultures is both fluid and sensitive, I must clarify my use of the word "homosexual." For many, the term "homosexual" has acquired strongly derogatory connotations because of its use in legal and medical literature to indicate criminality and disease. However, because of the cultural and temporal specificities of the text under scrutiny, I cannot employ the modern term "gay" --a term that at present has achieved widespread acceptance throughout Spanish-speaking America and, indeed, the world. The use of the word "gay" would not only be anachronistic, but it would also imply a specific sexual identity that is highly contested within Hispanic cultural contexts. For an excellent discussion on the application of the term "gay" in Latin America, see Foster's *Sexual Textualities* (1-15).

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<sup>6</sup>According to Sabino, not until Pellegrini's *Asfalto* had such a “catalog of homosexuals throughout history” ever been “mentioned in Argentine literature” (311). Among the figures listed are classical heroes such as Achilles and Patrocles; emperors such as Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and Caligula; and writers such as Virgil, Plato, Goethe, Rimbaud and Proust (140).

<sup>7</sup> Public bathrooms where sex could be had by men --both hetero- and homosexual-- are known as “tearooms” (from the abbreviation “t-room” or “toilet room”) in English, and *tetera* (by means of an amusing analogy) in Spanish. Chauncey remarks that “...public washrooms became a locus of homosexual encounters [...] not only because of their accessibility to men of little means, but also because it was easy to orchestrate sexual activity at even the most active of tearooms so that no one uninvolved in it would see it, thus providing the participants, as Humphreys put it, ‘privacy in public’” (197). As *Asfalto* demonstrates clearly, the existence of tearoom sex is not restricted to the United States, indicating that it is a common worldwide phenomenon. For an analysis of the function of *tetera* sex in Argentina during the 1970s and early 1980s, see Rapisardi and Modarelli’s fascinating recent study, *Fiestas, baños y exilios*, 21-72.

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<sup>8</sup> The stunning growth of Buenos Aires, due to mass immigration at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, created a kind of hysteria among institutional officials regarding the nature of the people who would compose the modern Argentine nation. Since most of the immigrants were single men, detached from the care --and control-- of family, there was a powerful fear that these foreign men would step off the straight and narrow heterosexual path and “contaminate” the flower of Argentine male youth with their degenerate ways. This fear was fuelled, of course, by sociological, psychological, and criminological research being conducted in Europe which spread, naturally, to the city of Buenos Aires where the perceived need for such investigation was intense. Argentine researchers were ultimately responsible for numerous criminological discoveries at the turn of the century that had to do with the identification of those persons who were believed to pose a threat to the hygiene of the national “body” (fingerprinting for criminal identification, for example, was developed in the 1890s in Buenos Aires by Juan Vucetich --a foreign-born immigrant himself--). A significant result of this type of work clearly documents the existence of a rapidly growing and identifiable homosexual subculture there. See Bao and Salessi for excellent analyses of the period research and its uses in Argentina at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to French existentialism, the influence of Zola and the French naturalists is evident throughout the novel in its focusing on the “experimental” quality of the character’s choices within a “controlled” environment which highlights the darker, more unpleasant aspects of modern life.

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that not long before the publication of this novel the problem that homosexuals might pass without notice was resolved in Nazi Germany by marking them with a pink triangle. See Haeberle and Lautmann for a fuller description of the Nazi's use of this marker.

<sup>11</sup> The research on this particular aspect of Hispanic sexuality is extensive and dynamic. Due to the traditional and historical masculinist or *machista* organization of Hispanic and Circum-Mediterranean societies, most researchers agree that sexual economies in those societies are based primarily on distinctions between sexual behavior and gender role, rather than on object of desire. In other words, the Hispanic system would identify a man as homosexual, not because he desires other men (as North Americans, for example, would view it), but because he abdicates the prerogatives of the male in a patriarchal culture--domination, aggressiveness, and power--and permits himself to be penetrated by other men, thus adopting a "feminine" (i.e. submissive, passive, and inferior) stance in relation to other males. For discussions of the construction of male (homo)sexuality in Hispanic context, see Almaguer, Archetti, Brandes, Lancaster, and Prieur.

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<sup>12</sup>Bergman emphasizes that the “homosexual male is made to feel the weight of his otherness in yet another manner that distinguishes it from the general alienation of society, for the homosexual is made to bear the onus of the heterosexual's homophobic paranoia” (34). In other words, not only are homosexuals deprived of admirable models that reflect their identity as they grow up, but they are also incessantly reminded of their status as detested and repellent outsiders in the majority culture through overt and covert homophobic messages. In Hispanic culture, the ludicrous figure of the swishy, highly effeminate homosexual is ever-present in popular film, television, and print media.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that this aspect of the novel saved its author from a stiff legal penalty and saved the novel from complete oblivion. The judge who wrote the decision on Pellegrini's case of obscenity noted that the novel had, in fact, redeeming social value because it furnished an important cautionary lesson for society. The judge concluded that the ending furnished a warning against negative behaviors and proclaimed the “ethical value of pure love.” It is difficult to imagine nowadays how a judge could possibly have considered the ending positive, since the protagonist, suddenly rejecting his sexual orientation, murders a man in order to run away with a girlfriend. Probably without intending it, it appears that the judge's statement suggests that it is acceptable to assassinate a homosexual for the greater good of establishing an acceptable heterosexual relationship.

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