

**JOSÉ
AGUSTÍN**

**VICIOUS
CIRCLE**

TRANSLATION
BY
ERIC W. VOGT

**UNIVERSITY PRESS
OF THE SOUTH**

2021

Copyright 2017 by José Agustín.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Publisher.

Published in the United States by The University Press of the South. Printed in France by Monbeaulivre.fr.

E-mails: unprsouth@aol.com; universitypresssouth@gmail.com

Visit our award-winning web pages: www.unprsouth.com

www.punouveaumonde.com

José Agustín.

Vicious Circle.

Second Edition in English. Translation by Eric W. Vogt.

134 pages. Latin American Studies Series, 65.

Front Cover Art by Manuel Cardona. Reproduced with Permission.

1) Latin American Literature. 2) Mexican Literature. 3) José Agustín. 4) Mexican Criminal Justice System. 5) Mexicanism. 6) Mexican Slang. 7) Incarceration. 8) Literatura de la Onda. 9) Alain Saint-Saëns. 10) Eric W. Vogt.

ISBN: 978-1-937030-75-9 (First Edition: USA, 2017)

ISBN: 978-9-403638-26-3 (Second Edition: Europe, 2021)

“Behold, I send you forth as sheep among wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16, KJV).

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. (Matt. 25: 35-36).

DISCLAIMER

This book contains and discusses language involving drug use, violence and sexuality which some readers may find offensive. It is not intended for readers under the legal age of majority. By purchasing, reading or sharing this book, you implicitly give your consent to consume this material and hold harmless and blameless the author of the original play, the translator editor and the publisher.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication	iii
Disclaimer	iv
Foreword by Alain Saint-Saëns	vii
Preface	ix
Critical Introduction	xix
Select Annotated Bibliography	xxix
The Play: <i>Vicious Circle</i>	1
Author's Note	103
Notes to the Play	115
Glossary	119
About the Translator-Editor	133

Vicious Circle:
Paradigm and Mirror
of Current Mexican Society

From French author Jean Genet's *Lou, Divine, and Seck* in his novel, *Our-Lady-of-Flowers*, to Argentinian author Manuel Puig's Valentín, Arregui and Molina in his novel, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and Spanish playwright Clara Pérez' five jailed women in her play, *We are already four of us*, twentieth-century literature is full of unforgettable characters painted within the troubled and grey penitentiary universe.

Beto, Raúl, Héctor, and Gómez, heroes from Mexican novelist and playwright José Agustín's play, *Vicious Circle*, certainly belong with this long list of magnificent losers. Beyond their insane quarrels, silly debates, and short-sized, shared dreams in order to decide which of them has to assume total responsibility for the three others possibly to get out free, this is the logic and the rule of the penitentiary world that José Agustín invites us to discover with his chief (*Mayor*), his 'legal expert' (*Licenciado*) and even his King's fool (*Loco*).

Although the story, *per se*, may seem plain and almost boring at first sight, it is far from being the case. José Agustín excels at describing the family, neighborhoods and regional backgrounds of each and any of his urban jungle farcical representatives. In a pointillist manner, the Mexican playwright builds a sad puzzle of the 1970's society of his country, where politicians and police men abuse simple citizens; lawyers and judges are totally corrupt; drug dealers are the true deciders; money buys death or freedom. In an interview in 2013, José Agustín declared "Reality is the main theme of my whole work." Not only does he transcend it in *Vicious Circle*, he puts it almost acceptable and certainly unavoidable.

Written in the beautiful street language characteristic of the period, replete with imagery, the American translator, Eric W. Vogt perfectly succeeded in translating José Agustín's play, *Vicious Circle* from the Mexican culture to that of the USA, such that it appears today neither dated, nor obsolete. At a time when Mexican drug cartels continue to build and break state governors and police chiefs; murder students, journalists and professors alike; and openly laugh at the Mexican democratic ideal, José Agustín's acute theatrical vision is reminding us that there is still a long way to go on the road toward equality, justice, and freedom for all, as imagined by Emiliano Zapata at the time of the Mexican Revolution.

Alain Saint-Saëns
Playwright, poet, and novelist
Universidad del Norte

Asunción, Paraguay
September 5, 2017

PREFACE

The first draft of the translation you are about to read was completed thirty-four years ago, in 1982, while I was studying for my M.A. at the University of Missouri-Columbia. At the time, in addition to the coursework for the M.A., I had the good fortune to take a series of classes culminating in a “certification in literary translation” within the M.A. program, under the direction of Dr. Margaret S. Peden. Her name is familiar to anyone involved in literary translation and also to non-translators who have noticed that she was the translator of all of Isabel Allende’s novels, except for *House of the Spirits*, in addition to many other works by various Latin American and Peninsular authors. A few years later, I had the honor of having her as the second reader of my Ph.D. thesis in the field of Golden Age Drama and Poetry, a role she was superbly suited for, having been the translator of many works by and about Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

I also was fortunate to have Dr. Peden suggest José Agustín’s play, *Círculo vicioso*¹ as my project for the series of translation courses, which she conducted as very energetic workshops. Because of my love for slang and dialects of every kind, in English and Spanish, she suggested this play to me as an intellectual challenge. When I had completed twenty pages or so, impressed by my translation into the pithy vernacular, surfer-druggie slang of southern California, she encouraged me to see the translation through to the end and publish it. She enabled me to obtain Mr. Agustín’s address and write to him for permission to publish my translation, which I was delighted beyond measure to obtain, in 1982. Yet, as things in life go, it was not until September, 2015 that I finally returned to the project, and I again reached out to Mr. Agustín with some trepidation, since so many years had passed. I wrote to him at the same address to reintroduce myself and included my e-mail address. I was all the more delighted when very soon afterward, Mr. Agustín sent me an e-mail message in which he said that he had not forgotten about me or my project to translate his “aged work,” and commented that “the little work” has been “a source of unexpected joys” to him through the years and that he was anxious to see me finish what I had started so long ago.

Mr. José Agustín Ramírez Gómez needs and deserves an introduction to English-speaking audiences. He was born August 19, 1944, in Acapulco and studied at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM), *Centro Mexicano de Escritores*, *Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos*, *Instituto de Bellas Artes* and the *Asociación Nacional de Actores*.

¹ Agustín, José. *Círculo vicioso*. México, D.F.: Editorial Joaquín Mortíz, S.A., 1974. Segunda edición, 1977. Despite intense political opposition to allowing its production, after being staged with public acclaim 104 times, Mr. Agustín was awarded the Premio Nacional Juan Ruíz de Alarcón by the Asociación Mexicana de Críticos de Teatro.

In the wake of the triumphant Cuban Revolution, in 1961, when José Agustín was only seventeen years old, he was involved in its highly successful literacy campaign *Yo sí puedo*. Later, he was one of the founding writers of the newspaper *Reforma*, a columnist for the rock magazine *La Mosca* and is the author of several novels, his first being *La tumba* which he published in 1964, when he was only twenty years old. In 1986, he published an autobiographical work entitled *El rock de la cárcel* based on his own nearly eight-month incarceration in the infamous Lecumberri prison,² where *Vicious Circle* is set and where many left-wing dissidents were imprisoned by the oppressive PRI government. While imprisoned in Lecumberri in 1970 for possession of drugs, he wrote *Se está haciendo tarde*, which was published in 1973. In addition, he has authored many essays and short stories and screenplays. From 1977-1981, Mr. Agustín was a visiting professor in the United States.

In 1994, he translated Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* into Spanish. He has been active in the movie industry and in television documentaries, including a series on *Canal 22* about modern Mexican political history. *Círculo vicioso* is the first of his works to be translated into English. Another interesting association, at once literary and personal, is that Gabriel García Márquez was godfather to Mr. Agustín's son, Andrés.

Mr. Agustín remains one of the principle voices of once young writers and artists in the boom period of the 1960s. Indeed, he is the last living among five influential writers and intellectuals of the period that came to be known as *la onda*. The other four *ondero* writers, with whom Agustín's works can be profitably compared are Gustavo Sainz (1940-2015), whose novel *Gazapo* (1960) launched the literary and cultural movement known as *la onda*, Parménides García Saldaña (1944-1982), the tragic figure known as the *rey de la onda*, whose first novel, *Pasto verde* (1968), had originally been entitled *La onda*, and José Revueltas, a former member of the Mexican Communist Party and the Sparticus-Leninist League, who wrote *El apando* (1968), a novel mentioned in the play which also deals with Lecumberri prison, where he also was briefly imprisoned in 1968 (see Endnote 11) and René Avilés Fabila (1940-2016), a university professor and author of dozens of works of literature, including three autobiographical works, one of which was *Memorias de un comunista* (2002), a work that recounts his twenty years of vigorous political involvement. By many, he will be remembered especially for his efforts to expose the barbarous treatment of prisoners at Lecumberri.

As anyone who lived through the 1960s or who is a student of modern history can attest, it was a tumultuous decade, and the US and Mexico had some parallel experiences. For the US, it meant the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Cold War, Vietnam, three assassinations, race riots and Civil Rights marches, the

² This infamous prison for political prisoners opened under Porfirio Díaz in 1900 and was closed in 1976 by José López Portillo. It currently serves as a National Archive.

Space Race, student protest and Kent State (May 4, 1970); for Mexico, it meant government corruption and violent suppression of dissent and the Tlatelolco Massacre (October 2, 1968). And everywhere, it meant sex, drugs and *Rockanrol*, which soon came to be known by the English short form, *Rock*, which young people listened to in countercultural establishments that Parménides García Saldaña called *hoyos fonkys* (roughly meaning “funky holes in a wall”).

In brief, the international youth movement was a cultural phenomenon bursting with mutual borrowings, loving and loathing, suspicion and curiosity, imitations and adaptations of an aesthetic and thematic nature.³ Just as the youth movement was international, so also was the persecution of leftist youth (or of anyone suspected of being a leftist) an international concerted effort, notoriously orchestrated within the US by the FBI⁴ and internationally by the CIA⁵. The result of this melting pot in Mexico is known as *la onda*. The usage of the word has expanded, as its use in the play and as our Glossary shows.

In Mr. Agustín’s original correspondence with me, he noted that jailhouse slang might present challenges, and, not knowing me, also general Mexican slang. The issue of dialect I was prepared to tackle, due to regular contact with Mexican and American slang. Significantly, I did *not* come to the knowledge of either through the media, but rather from the beaches, schools and streets where I came of age, in Hawai’i and subsequently in Sinaloa in the 1970s. For the sake of translators, interpreters, writers and their readers, it is important to note that large companies in the entertainment industry, particularly those involved with movies and television programs, tend to flatten, or reduce the wide spectrum of regional, social class and racial dialects to a universally recognizable, but therefore artificial version. This responds to an economic reality. Worldwide distribution requires that the English used in Hollywood be understandable and thus marketable, not only to the general US audience, but beyond. Still, as any disgruntled native Bostonian will quickly tell anyone willing to listen, “they” never get the Boston accent right unless “they” use real Bostonians. Thus, while translating *Círculo vicioso* to become *Vicious Circle*, I had to “listen to the voices in my head” to produce a believable translation, in the brand of US English as I knew it and spoke it in the early 1970s, which is a

³ For an expansive treatment of these mutual cultural borrowings and their impact on a generation, see Adams, Rachel. “Hipsters and Jipitecas: Literary Countercultures on Both Sides of the Border.” *American Literary History*. 16.1 (2004): 58-84, included in the Select Bibliography.

⁴ Writing of the McCarthy era, a.k.a., the Red Scare, and its impact on intellectual and artistic life in the USA, Herbert Mitgang reveals (with declassified documentation) the following about President Reagan: “[...] Mr. Reagan himself surfaced as a onetime FBI source with a code number of his own: Confidential Informant “T-10’.” *Dangerous Dossiers: Exposing the Secret War Against America’s Greatest Authors* (New York, NY.: Donald J. Fine, Inc., 1988), p. 31. See Select Bibliography.

⁵ See Endnote 3.

brand of regional US English more typical of coastal, southern California than, for instance, New York City. As Dr. Peden would often remind her students, “finding the *voice* in translation” is the first and most important challenge that must be overcome if a translation is to be believable; a believable translation being one that does not “read” as if it is a translation.

Being set in a prison, the raw language of *Vicious Circle* also required a courageous, no-holds barred approach to translation, such as one must have if translating or interpreting for law enforcement, to cite one example. As Mr. Agustín observes in his Author’s Note (found after the text of the play), prison populations do not speak like characters in a soap opera. A responsible, ethical translator is not at liberty to re-cast characters into something they are not by sanitizing their speech. To expand a bit on the Disclaimer, if violent language, or a text sprinkled abundantly with racial and sexual slurs offends you, then do not read Shakespeare, or this translation – and wear earplugs when in public, because this sort of language (in English and Spanish) can be overheard at any shopping mall. The raw language of the translation necessarily reflects the original and is not an endorsement to use this sort of language in one’s own speech.⁶

As if to once again prove the veracity of the warning of the Arçipreste Juan Ruiz in the introduction to his often bawdy, mid-fourteenth century work *El libro de buen amor*, when he observed: *Non ha mala palabra que non es a mal tenida* (“there are no bad words, just words that are badly taken”), José Agustín confronted byzantine bureaucratic opposition in Mexico, prudishly, ostensibly and falsely directed at *Círculo vicioso*’s raw language. The real reason for official opposition to *Círculo vicioso* was not its language. This excuse was propped up to prevent or hinder its production on stage due to its political message wherein Lecumberri prison is presented as a dark allegory and indictment of corruption in Mexican society.⁷ Mr. Agustín’s experience was a vicious circle of its own, getting the run-around for years in order to obtain permission to stage it professionally.⁸

⁶ “Political correctness” stifles free speech, particularly speech anyone in polite society would be offended by, but which would be better to tolerate openly, rather than relegate it to the backwaters of society where often ferments and expresses itself in violent ways, as the USA has seen in the wake of the 2016 election year. It would be healthier to expect ideological transparency from all.

⁷ See the Author’s Note following the text of the play, in which Mario Álvarez, the director of the *Oficina de Espectáculos del Departamento del Distrito Federal*, used an obscenity when he expressed his opposition to grant authorization for staging the play – because of its language!

⁸ See Author’s Note at the end of the play for Agustín’s own account of this bureaucratic resistance and, in the Select Bibliography, Calvillo, Ann Luisa. Calvillo, Ana L. *José Agustín: Una biografía de perfil*. México, D.F.: Blanco y Negro Editores, 1998, pp. 157-163.

This sort of opposition and censure does not occur only in the lives of public figures such as playwrights, artists, musicians or politicians. Even a professor may experience mob rule, when his *words* are said to be offensive, or more absurdly, when others decide for him what his words or body language mean. *Words or body language* which a hasty consensus of people takes offense at become the means of attacking an individual in this politically correct age instead of maturely dealing directly with substantive issues and differences of opinion. The real goal of such a mob's ire is to silence the *messenger* whom some people in power (and those currying their favor) resent, by isolating him whenever the message uncomfortably reveals their collective or individual intellectual fraud, incompetence, corruption, cronyism or plain old not following institutional rules or applying them unevenly.

Consider how "questioning authority," something Americans used to encourage their young people to do, came to be called "treason" after September 11, 2001. As the body counts in Mexico show, journalists also are targets of the powerful, whether they be politicians or drug lords (or both working together).⁹ Hopefully, the best those in power can do is to belittle, sideline, shun, ignore, ostracize or exile an individual. Ultimately, the voices of protest about legitimate concerns ooze out from institutional walls – from prisons, government, banks and even from universities, whether it be in the voices of poets like Fernando Catedral, S.J., or songwriter-singers, such as Joan Baez, Bob Marley, Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés, Mercedes Sosa or the tragic cases of the Chilean singer, Víctor Jara and the Argentine Facundo Cabral or playwrights such as José Agustín – or his humble translator.

As mentioned at the beginning of this preface, this translation of *Círculo vicioso*, now presented as *Vicious Circle*, was completed thirty-four years ago, so I over-abundantly, but not deliberately, heeded the advice about letting one's writing sit for a while until later when one can come back with a fresh point of view. When I sat down in late 2015 to review my translation from 1982, I found very little to correct and in fact, was amused by how much my own vernacular US English had changed over three-and-a-half decades. This realization confirmed that, ironically, I had before me a "period piece" produced by *someone I used to be*, employing a US English vernacular that was contemporary with the Spanish original.

Vicious Circle is a play that will appeal to a wide range of audiences. Some of these audiences are the "usual suspects," consisting of scholars of literature and theater, actors, directors, screenwriters, all who are involved in contemporary drama, along with translators of such works. There are other audiences not so obvious. These include those who work bilingually in law enforcement, prisons, parole officers, substance abuse counselors, and others in

⁹ See Select Bibliography: Corchado, Alfredo. "Faces from the Border: The Devil is on the Loose." *New Yorker Magazine*, Nov. 2015. Online.

auxiliary roles, specifically those transcribers, translators and interpreters who are vital for surveillance operations conducted by wiretap (known as “analytic linguists”), lawyers and judges (on both sides of the border), in short, potentially anyone who interacts with both legal and penal systems. *Vicious Circle* may also be of interest to sociologists, psychologists, therapists and political scientists, historians and policy makers.

Vicious Circle also ought to be of interest to those who work in prison ministries. Although priests and pastors would not use the sort of language found in the original play and (necessarily) in its translation, if Jesus’s followers are to be effective preachers in a fallen world, they must understand how that world expresses itself. Jesus, who was accused of keeping the wrong company by some of the hypocritical religious leaders of the day, specifically compared many characters in the world to “wolves,” and that certainly fits the characters in *Vicious Circle* to varying degrees.

Whatever readers’ roles in life or interest may be, it is hoped and believed that this translation, being presented alongside the original, will provide useful professional, personal and linguistic insights to all mature readers.

Observations about This Translation and its Presentation

As Mr. Agustín predicted, one challenge in translating this work was jailhouse slang. At the time the first draft was completed, there were scarcely any print resources to consult. The erudite work in 1978 by Grimes was consulted frequently at that time, but it did not delve into prison jargon, since his focus, as an anthropologist and as its title states, was on linguistic taboos. In 1987, while my focus was on Golden Age Spanish literature and writing my doctoral thesis, Sánchez published his dictionary *Así habla la delincuencia*. This lexical treasure chest has been frequently consulted to confirm or polish the translation, but could not resolve all my lingering doubts. In addition, the brief lexicons included by Lee, Clark and Gutiérrez were helpful inasmuch as they focus on the slang of *la onda* and to a lesser extent, jailhouse slang. All of these sources are included in the Select Bibliography.

As is often the case, dictionaries often fail to provide solid answers, either because they omit words or because, even when they include them, they do not or cannot account for usage in various and unpredictable contexts. Only primary, field research fills such gaps, and that requires finding native informants, not just for jailhouse slang, but for Mexican slang in general. Mexican slang can be so odd, often enriched with indigenous words, or just words and phrases that are “so Mexican,” that it can confound native speakers of other dialects of Spanish.¹⁰ Too many of my Mexican native informants for this

¹⁰ Naturally, this statement is applicable to other dialects as well, such as Cuban with its wealth of words of African and Andalusian gypsy origin or Argentina’s *lunfardo*. The

sort of slang have come and gone over the years for me to remember –from beaches, parties, bars and travels– so I can only acknowledge three recent ones by name, all Mexicans. First, Ms. Elena Rojas, a translator, interpreter and trainer with forty years of experience, mostly involving criminal investigations in southern California. Ms. Rojas not only reviewed my translation alongside José Agustín’s original script but, after I had been confused off and on for thirty-five years by the enigmatic phrase *un pollito y unas tortugas* (36), she enabled me to decipher it. Her judgment about this phrase was confirmed by José Agustín’s own account in *El Rock de la cárcel* (see Critical Introduction, Endnote 6 and lexical entries in the Glossary). The second and third native informants of Mexican Spanish are brothers: Mr. Raúl Cardona González, a Mexican attorney, whose familiarity with jailhouse slang and, of course, the Mexican judicial system comes from his practice and work with defendants, and his younger brother, Mr. Manuel Cardona González, a graphic artist who designed the cover for this book, a self-proclaimed ex-hippie whose knowledge of *la onda* and the international *Rockanrol* scene made for rousing and culturally informative conversation while preparing the final version of this translation.

Two other problems remained at the lexical level. First, the judicial system of Mexico is not administratively organized like that of the US, meaning that job titles, such as *Procurador* and the office where he works –the *Procuraduría*– defy any attempt at finding a genuine equivalent. I settled on “D.A.,” so as to make the translation viable from the US cultural perspective. Similarly, the names of government offices, artistic and educational institutions in Mexico, which Mr. Agustín discusses in his Author’s Note are retained in Spanish, for two reasons: The first is practical, because if translated, no one would be able to locate these entities. The second is aesthetic, since any attempt to translate many of them would come off as forced. After all, how else can one say *tamale* in English?

The second problem was how to deal with the names of monetary units. It seemed obtuse to consider converting *peso* amounts into their 1972 USD value. I opted for retaining the number amounts of the original and avoiding the use of the name of the monetary unit “dollar,” and opting for slang terms for money in English. After all, Spanish slang terms are often used in the original; therefore, this choice was the most economical one for reducing the difficulties of a would-be director so that the translation of the play could be staged without having to edit it in order to make its performance more culturally accessible.

In the interest of clarity, the only edits to the original Spanish text involved a handful of changes in the punctuation. All else was left as it appears in the second edition of 1977, such as the tendency of *ondero* writers to run

combination of jailhouse slang, *ondero* speech and other instances of uniquely Mexican slang encountered while translating *Círculo vicioso* made much of Mario Moreno’s (“Cantiflas”) slang seem easy.

words together in imitation of speech. The English translation I had done in 1982 was then polished and corrected, whenever I encountered better solutions in the many new resources that were available to me by 2015. The Spanish and English texts have been aligned for presentation in bilingual format. Finally, to facilitate this bilingual presentation, separately numbered endnotes are used for the play instead of footnotes (as in this introductory material) and are numbered on the English side of the pages. All translations in the footnotes found in the introductory material are mine.

In order to make *Vicious Circle* useful to the wide audiences mentioned above, a Glossary has been provided, indicating the meanings of the words and phrases that are likely to puzzle some readers who know Spanish. Many terms have one meaning in standard dictionaries and usage but another in the context of *la onda*, in the drug subculture in Mexico and in a prison environment. In fact, some words and phrases are used in no other social contexts.

In addition to José Agustín himself and those individuals mentioned above, namely, Ms. Elena Rojas, for her incomparable knowledge of the vocabulary of *delincuentes*, Mr. Raúl Cardona González for his perspectives on the legal system in Mexico and Mr. Manuel Cardona González, for his knowledge of Mexican youth culture and artistic talents, there are others to whom I am indebted for their expertise. My thanks go to Ms. Liz Gruchala-Gilbert and Mr. Steve Perisho, research librarians who enabled me to prepare the section of the Select Bibliography dedicated to works of, or about José Agustín by their adept navigation through modern methods of procuring items through inter-library loans. I am grateful to the Hon. Judge Runston Maino, San Diego Superior Court, for bringing to my attention recent articles by Alfredo Corchado relating to the topic of drug trafficking and for graciously reading the final translation and offering his praise. I also ever indebted to Dr. David Shirk, associate professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of San Diego and Principal Investigator, Justice in Mexico, who kindly read the original and my translation, along with the introductory material and offered his assessment of the play and my translation. As ever, for his help and professional friendship over the past twenty years and his graciously offering to write the Foreword to this volume, I am deeply grateful to Dr. Alain Saint-Saëns, a playwright, a versatile intellectual and fellow Golden-Age scholar.

The field of *ondera* literature is vast, and steeped in much social and political history. Despite my great confidence in my *translation* in the process of transforming a very Mexican work like *Círculo vicioso* into one that will ring true for US audiences as *Vicious Circle*, surely there are gaps and, horror of horrors, even errors in my understanding of the Mexican *zeitgeist* at the time when José Agustín wrote and staged it amid tremendous opposition. If filled, these gaps or errors, unbeknownst to me, might have altered my perception of the work and my judgement in the following Critical Introduction of the play.

In many discussions about research and publishing over the past few years, one fellow scholarly literary translator (of Japanese literature), Dr. David Michael Ramírez II,¹¹ has frequently offered me some solace for this sort of intellectual-existential anxiety in the form of some wisdom passed to him by his doctoral dissertation director in Japan. Dr. Ramírez related that this professor told him that “there are no perfect books, and that even if one were free of errors, it could not say all that could be said about the subject.”

I hope others will pick up where I am leaving off. Hopefully, future scholars will explore the dark topics and issues that the generation of *ondero* writers articulated in unmistakably Mexican ways, and make intelligible to the world the society in which these writers flourished and suffered.

Eric W. Vogt
Seattle, Washington

February 14, 2017

¹¹ Henguchi, Yoshinori. *Lizard Telepathy Fox Telepathy*. Trans. David Michael Ramírez, II. Seattle: Chin Music Press, 2014. Print.

Fujita, Yu. *Aritsugu: An Inside Look at Kyoto's Renowned Artisanal Knife Maker Since 1560*. Trans. Asher Ramras, David Michael Ramírez, II. Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2016. Print.

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The most succinct description of *Vicious Circle* is that it constitutes, as a one-act play, a condensation of the actual experiences of José Agustín when, as a young man of 26 years of age, he was incarcerated at the infamous prison of Lecumberri for nearly eight months (Dec. 1970 – July 7, 1971) on a charge of drug possession. To be a bit more technical, it is a *drama à clef*, albeit a very thinly disguised one and, of course, a biting critique of Mexican society and politics. In his autobiographical work *El Rock de la cárcel*, José Agustín records in lengthy and often heart-wrenching detail his experiences amid the sordid and violent conditions in Lecumberri. That environment was best characterized by him when he recounted how several prisoners were being moved from cell block H:

El cambio de dormitorio fue desolador. A pesar de los chismes, las intrigas, las traiciones, las condiciones tan poco propicias para hacer amistades, todo mundo se puso a llorar. En la cárcel los afectos se desmesuran y lo mismo duele la desgracia ajena como su buena fortuna: cada vez que alguien salía libre, los demás, más que envidiarlo, recuperábamos conciencia de la desgracia de seguir allí.¹²

Specifically, following this transfer of some prisoners to other cell blocks, Agustín describes the change in mood of cell block H, where the action of *Vicious Circle* takes place:

La H estaba tristísima: perdió su connotación de vecindad brava y el patio siempre estaba solo, silencioso, revelando las grietas y la necesidad de pintura. En la noche nos entreteníamos viendo, desde el barandal del segundo piso, el deambular de ratas en el patio, las bancas y la fuente, en busca de comida.¹³

The conditions of Lecumberri, and of prisons in general, are serious matters for study, and although they are beyond the scope of this Critical Introduction, many of these concerns are palpably present and are mentioned by

¹² Agustín. *El Rock de la cárcel*, p. 110: “The room change was devastating. Despite the gossiping, the intrigues, the treachery, the conditions so unfit for making friends, everyone cried. In prison, emotions have no bounds: every time someone went free, the others, instead of envying him, would remember all the more the misfortune of remaining there.”

¹³ Agustín. *Ibid.*, p. 111: “Cell block H was tremendously sad: it lost its air of being a brave neighborhood and the yard was always empty, silent, revealing cracks and the need for paint. At night, we entertained ourselves by watching from the railing of the second floor, the wanderings of rats in the yard, on the benches and the fountain, looking for food.”

the characters in *Vicious Circle*, as well as in the Prisoner's Song at the close of the play. Serious discussions of this play could serve as catalysts or talking points for professionals who deal with a long list of issues plaguing the criminal justice system on both sides of the border: disproportionate and harsh sentencing for non-violent crimes, three-strike laws, racial disparity in incarceration rates, capital punishment, solitary confinement, the use of prisoners for cheap labor, private prisons, prison crowding, sexual violence and drug trafficking within prisons. Regarding the latter, which is a major theme in the play, Agustín records (as he also re-enacts, through the Janitor in *Vicious Circle*):

Desde la primera noche nos ofrecieron mota (diez pesos una cantidad insignificante), tecata (quince), alcohol (desde ron hasta coñac), cocaína, ciclopales, dexedrinas y libros pornográficos¹⁴.

In the set design, described at the beginning of the play, Agustín, as playwright, addressed these conditions in a summary manner, including a few details capable of highlighting on a stage the physical space and the mood that prevailed in Lecumberri: the discolored walls, the Christmas lights, the dim lighting, the railing, Ernesto "Che" Guevara's famous slogan on the wall and the *patio*.¹⁵ In summary, the descriptions of the various cell blocks, open spaces, actual cells and corridors of the prison along with vivid descriptions of their various levels and types of misery, desolation and abuse which Agustín provides in *El Rock de la cárcel* are redolent of the circles of Dante's *Inferno*.

Attention shall now be given to the identification of characters in the play with real persons, as revealed by Agustín in *El Rock de la cárcel*. In addition to painstakingly transferring salient environmental details he had recorded in *El Rock de la cárcel*, Agustín retained the names of three of the young men incarcerated with him, namely Héctor, Raúl and Beto.

The character of Gómez is a composite character of José Agustín himself and Salvador Rojo (to whom, along with Alicia, he dedicated the play);¹⁶ he likewise retained the names of some wives and girlfriends of the characters which are named repeatedly in the autobiographical work. Even the character described as the "gordito" or chubby fellow in the office of the *Procurador*, who gives his recommendation to take to the Major, while not named in *El Rock de la cárcel* either, Agustín recalls the real person as being a chubby fellow.¹⁷

¹⁴ Agustín. *Ibid.*, p. 100: "From the first night, they offered us pot (ten pesos for an insignificant amount), beer (for fifteen) alcohol (from rum to cognac), cocaine, quaaludes, dexedrine and pornographic books."

¹⁵ Translated as "yard," in the play, since *patio* is not a word used to describe prison spaces in English.

¹⁶ Calvillo, p. 160.

¹⁷ Agustín. *Ibid.*, p. 95.