# READING CORRESPONDENCES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LETTERS BETWEEN RIZAL AND HIS SISTERS

*Patricia B. Arinto*

This paper focuses on the epistolary or personal letter, a literary genre which is often ignored or marginalized in literary analyses. Several reasons account for this exclusion of the letter as literary form. First, because of its functional or pragmatic nature, it is not considered creative or imaginative enough. Secondly, the letter is not a public form of discourse. In particular, it is not a commodity as such in capitalist society and requires neither capital investment on the part of the producer nor editorial and packaging services. In short, the letter is assigned to the private sphere and as such is not considered literary unless it is "composed for artistic pleasure." The latter, according to Godfrey Singer, is 'the direct ancestor of the "epistolary" novel' (14) which rose to prominence with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela.* But even the early examples of the epistolary novel such as Padre Modesto de Castro's *Pagsusulatan nang Dalauang Binibini na si Urbana at si Feliza na Nagtuturo ng Mabuting Kaugalian* have been considered inferior forms of literature because of their hortatory or didactic character. The prevailing literary aesthetics dictate that "a poem must not mean but be."

According to Terry Eagleton, however, in the 18th century the epistolary or letter was considered a form of *belles lettres* or polite letters. Literature at the time also included such genres as philosophical and historical treatises and essays. Literature was not limited to fictional or imaginative works. In fact, the literary arbiters of the time had serious doubts regarding the literariness of the novel which had just been introduced at the time, as well as of popular romances and street ballads.

With the rise of Romanticism in 19th century England, literary standards changed. According to Eagleton, the Industrial Revolution had given rise to an excessive materialism which resulted in the enslavement of the masses to waged labor and a widespread alienation from spiritual and humanistic values. To counteract these negative effects,

the Romantics emphasized the value of creative imagination. The "intuitive, transcendental scope of the poetic mind" became the critical/aesthetic alternative to materialism and empiricism. Literature was seen as the embodiment of an "organic unity" and "spontaneity" which undermined/contradicted the "fragmented individualism of the capitalist marketplace" and its "mechanical rationalism."

However, the inital promise of this literary aesthetics soon turned sour. Towards the end of the 19th century, literature had taken the place of religion as a pacifying agent directed against the masses who had grown more restive in a hierarchical and inequitable society dominated by an elite minority. The literature praised by the major critics of the time was literature which promoted forbearance in the face of social injustice, nationalism rather than class solidarity, and solitary and contemplative enjoyment instead of collective political action.

This is the definition of literature which has been handed down to us and though it has been discredited by critics such as Eagleton, it continues to underpin many critical analyses, including those on the literary works of revolutionaries like Rizal. As a creative or imaginative writer, Rizal is renowned for his novels *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo,* and for his numerous poems and essays. But much of Rizal's literary ouvre took the form of personal letters and journal entries. These have been the focus of several studies which view them as historical, even political, rather than literary, works. Such a classification underscores a flawed dichotomy between literature and history.

In an essay titled "Politics as Literature," Petronilo Bn. Daroy notes that Rizal is often read as a political rather than a literary figure. This is interesting, writes Daroy, in view of the fact that Rizal was a writer and was in fact vilified and executed because of what he wrote. Daroy ascribes the status of Rizal as political figure to the fact that he wrote about nationalism and/or patriotism. According to Daroy, Rizal was an engaged writer, a writer committed to his society. For Rizal, the genuine writer is a critic of his society, or one who seeks social change for the genuine liberation of the masses. For Rizal the writer is a partisan who takes the side of the oppressed and exploited.

In his essay, Daroy focuses on Rizal's literary contributions, particularly the radical contribution of his novels not only to politics but also to literary aesthetics. According to Daroy, Rizal was one of the first

Filipino writers who employed the realist and naturalist techniques pioneered by the French writers Balzac and Zola. Daroy explains how Rizal used these techniques in order to put forward the radical ideological themes of his novels. In fine, Daroy shows how in Rizal's literature, form cannot be analyzed independently of meaning.

This is of course true of all literary works. There should be no dichotomy between form and meaning, or between style and substance. Form is not just a neutral vessel of meaning. According to Alice Guillermo, form as constituted by style, technique, and linguistic and literary devices, is "inseparable from the production of meaning and ideology" (166-167). Many critics have pointed out how certain ideologies have given rise to specific literary forms. Fredric Jameson, for instance, has written about the rise of a literature of imperialism in the form of the adventure tale, fable, and the science fiction fantasy by such authors as Rudyard Kipling, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. John Beverly has also written of the rise of the picaresque novel, Petrarchan sonnet, autobiography, secular theater, and the essay during what Marx calls the period of the primitive accumulation of capital. Because these forms are ideological practices, says Beverly, they also advanced the economic developments of the period (11-12).

This is not to say that the literary forms mentioned may not be used for the literary representation of an alternative and liberating ideology. Rizal's novels, as well as the works of revolutionary writers, prove that dominant or received literary forms can be used to subvert dominant discourses. But the use of such forms has its limits. According to George Gugelberger and Michael Kearney, "....the kind of counterstatement needed requires not only a different content, but also an alternative form of writing, which in turn requires an alternative sociology of production and consumption of writing" (5). Moreover, "the very attainment of such radically different kinds of representation requires the very transcendence of 'literature' as it is conventionally conceived" (5).

One such alternative literary form is the epsitolary or personal letter such as those Rizal exchanged with his parents, siblings, friends, and contemporaries. Rizal's penchant for writing letters is well documented in the multi-volume *Epistolario Rizalino.* In Rizal's hands, the personal letter became a legitimate venue for debate and protest and, more importantly, an expression of his sympathy and solidarity with his oppressed

and silenced compatriots. This is the value of his letter to the brave women of Malolos. In this letter, Rizal proves his solidarity with the women of his time, a sector of society bent under the yoke of patriarchy, feudalism and imperialism. This solidarity is evident not only in what Rizal says in his letters but also in his choice of the personal letter as a discursive form.

It would not be an oversimplification to say that the letter is a feminine form of discourse. As Jane Gallop puts it: "Women write letters—personal, intimate, in relation; men write books—universal, public, in circulation." In Rizal's time, this gendered classification was perhaps not very obvious especially because most of the intellectuals, who were of course all men, were prolific letter writers. But it may also be said that in Rizal's time, the only thing women could write, if they wrote at all, were letters.

How does the letter as form emphasize/make possible solidarity? In an essay titled "Reading Correspondences," Mary Jacobus advances the idea that correspondence or the act of exchanging letters is "a textual interchange or dialogue" and "a liberating exchange." This meaning, she notes, is embodied in the very word "correspondence." Jacobus differentiates "correspondence" from the words "analogy" and "homology" which both refer to sameness or symmetry. Analogy, she asserts, "is a means of denying difference; since it really works to superimpose likeness" (23). In reading for analogies, says Jane Gallop, a critic "is appropriating two things to like measure, measure by the same standard: for example the feminine judged by masculine standards" (qtd. in Jacobus 283) and inevitably found wanting.

Correspondence, on the other hand, consists not of symmetry or sameness but of "answering fitness, mutuality, and sympathetic response" (Jacobus 282). Letters between two people (lovers/friends/acquaintances/kin) express a desire for dialogue, for a mutually constituting exchange that maps and re-maps relationships, alliances, communities. Closure is not a characteristic of letters. For letters call forth responses/re-writings. And in the dialogue that letters constitute between writers and readers there is always the possibility of a reformulation, a re-presentation that may lead to "a future understanding" between writer and reader without eliding the differences between them. For this reason, their relationship is liberating as it allows for individuality and difference even as the door to solidarity remains open.

These qualities of the personal letter are evident in Rizal's correspondence with his sisters. In these letters, Rizal reveals a normal and healthy concern and affection for his sisters. But there is also in Rizal's concern for his sisters' well-being something unique, or something which sets him apart from many brothers of his time: his desire for his sisters to be well-educated even in areas not considered feminine. In a letter to his sister Trining dated February 16, 1888, he tells Trining "to work hard and be diligent in learning Spanish, arithmetic, writing, and most of all, good manners and right conduct, if these are being taught there." In an earlier letter dated March 11, 1886, Rizal writes to Trining of his admiration for German women because they are "formal/well-behaved, studious and industrious" and they are simple in their dress. In this letter Rizal expostulates that the proper adornment for women is not jewelry but knowledge. His desire for his sisters to grow in knowledge is also proven by his letters to each which are full of news and stories about his experiences abroad. He apparently does not consider anything to be beyond his sisters' understanding or even interest.

Although Rizal cannot be considered a feminist—indeed, his view of women remained quite conventional and traditional—he was also not a male chauvinist pig. In his letters of advice to his sisters he often held himself up as an example, thereby proving that he did not have a double standard for male and female behavior. One example is his letter to Soledad in 1888 in which he advises her to be honest, to respect their parents, to be assiduous in righting wrong, and to uphold the equality of all. All these are qualities that everyone should cultivate, whether young or old, male or female.

But it is not enough to read Rizal's letters to his sisters to prove the radical and liberating aspect of this correspondence. We must now turn to his sisters' letters to him. Rizal never forgot to exhort his sisters to write him and their numerous duties notwithstanding, his sisters found time to do so. Rizal of course did not have to exhort his sisters to write him back. It is part of the thesis of this paper that a letter by its very form requires the reader to respond in kind. A letter invites a discursive exchange, or at least a verbal acknowledgement of one's receipt of the other's missive.

There is much that may be of interest to us in the letters of Rizal's sisters. One is the brevity of their letters especially in comparison to those of Rizal, their brother Paciano, and their brothers-in-law. The sis-

ters often excused themselves by citing the lack of anything newsworthy and their numerous preoccupations as wives and mothers. The second reason proves what we have long known about the lot of women in the domestic sphere to which the patriarchal sexual division of labor assigns them. But what Rizal's sisters have to say about this matter remains of the utmost importance. Although they do not complain, there is an unmistakable awareness in their letters of the need to alleviate the lot of women in their time. Saturnina, for example, tells Rizal (in a letter dated July 16, 1885) to study obstetrics well because they who are married have one child after another and not everyone has an easy time of it. In a letter dated February 2, 1886, Lucia requests her brother Rizal to study painless childbirth and methods for increasing lactation. At first blush, such letters seem to prove an unquestioning acceptance of the equation of womanhood with wifehood and motherhood. But equally apparent is their realistic view of these roles. In their accounts of motherhood, for example, they express their desire for the well-being not only of their children but also of the mother as an individual, a separate body.

As to the statement that their letters to Rizal are brief because they have no news to write about, we can say that their own letters prove the opposite. The sisters keep Rizal abreast of family and community affairs, as well as of political events both in their town and in the seat of government. Indeed, these women's letters to their brother constitute an invaluable source of information on this period in our national history, particularly because the information they provide is detailed and specific, and their focus is the ordinary citizen, the masses who are usually absent or mute in more official historical accounts. Saturnina and Narcisa's letters dated September 6, 1889 and March 10, 1890, respectively, contain a detailed account of the eviction of the Calamba townspeople from their homes and lands by the Dominican friars. These letters document the names of the townspeople humiliated, beaten up, and cruelly driven away by the friars' men.

It may well be said that if not for his sisters' testimonies, Rizal's memories of his country and people would not have remained so vivid. And were it not for his sisters' constant reminders, as well as those of his brother and brothers-in-law, his desire to liberate his people from the clutches of the imperialists would not have remained so strong. His sisters in fact exhorted him to continue his campaign against the abusive

Spanish colonial government in spite of the insults and threats and humiliations heaped upon them by the friars. According to a letter by Narcisa dated October 17, 1890, they even recruited supporters for Rizal's campaign from among the Calamba townspeople and they sent Rizal some funds from time to time. Their unwavering support is all the more admirable when we read of the abuses they suffered because of their kinship to Rizal. Several times Saturnina had to bear the burden of raising her family and minding the small family business by herself because her husband was exiled by the government to distant provinces.

A different kind of courage is shown us by Soledad, the sister who married without their parents' approval and blessing. This for me is a particularly interesting episode in the correspondence between Rizal and his sisters. The first letter that alludes to the incident was written by Narcisa on June 2, 1890. Towards the end of her letter, Narcisa mentions Soledad's wedding which none in the family had attended and been invited to. The reason is not given. The next letter is Rizal's. Addressed to Soledad, the letter likens the sorrow his absence has caused their parents to the sorrow Soledad's marriage has caused them. In this letter he writes that "defeat with head unbowed and a clear conscience is not defeat but victory" and "what is cause for grief is falling with one's honor and purity besmirched." Rizal admonishes Soledad about how to conduct herself in her romantic affairs and he cites himself as an example of the honorable lover. This introduction of himself as lover to his sister is for me a very significant moment. Although he is admonishing his younger sister to proper behavior, Rizal nevertheless recognizes her status as an adult and as an equal.

There is no record of Soledad's response to this letter. Several questions at once came to mind when I chanced upon the letters mentioned. How was Soledad able to defy the wishes of her parents and siblings? Why was her family unable to accept her choice of a husband? Who was he? What was his status? How many women at the time had the courage to go against the wishes of family and friends for the sake of personal happiness, if this were indeed happiness?

Many more questions are raised by the letters mentioned but it is not necessary that these questions be answered. Indeed, even if the missing letter by Soledad were to be found, this does not mean the matter will be laid to rest. The response itself will call forth more questions and answers or responses. No one among the principals in this drama can

claim objective, absolute and complete knowledge of the situation. They can only bear witness to their own view, their own perspective of the events. This is true even of Rizal who in his lifetime was well-respected and admired.

In this light, it is all the more significant that his sisters did not feel awed by him and were not driven to silent acquiesence by his admonitions. An especially notable example of this is Maria's letter dated March 15, 1887. Maria is responding to a letter in which Rizal reproaches her for her failure to inform him of her recent marriage. Rizal finds out about this from their brother Paciano and their brother-in-law Silvestre. Instead of chagrin, it is with a distinctly reproachful tone that Maria reminds her brother that—

> ....you should not require this of a person like me who is swamped with work and who has many worries about the new life ahead of her. You should know how important it is for a person who has changed her status in life to concentrate on her new status and its attendant requirements and troubles. I shall write you about everything necessary in another letter because at the moment I have not yet achieved peace of mind.

Aside from Maria's assertiveness in responding to Rizal's reproach, this letter is notable for its writer's serious outlook on marriage. She apparently has no romantic illusions about her new role. Her letter also attests to a liberated consciousness that does not back away from criticisms and false accusations. This is particularly important because it contradicts the stereotype of the Filipina purveyed in many literary works and even in Rizal's novels. Indeed there is much evidence in Rizal's correspondence with his sisters that the women of Rizal's time were not all weak, easily frightened, and frivolous.

In closing, I would like to stress the idea that in our analyses of Rizal's correspondence with his sisters we should not subordinate form to meaning. The use of the epistolary form or personal letter by Rizal's sisters and by the women of his time to give voice to their experiences, opinions and aspirations, is not coincidental. Because of their inferior status in a male-dominated and colonial society, these women were denied access to intellectual and public discourses such as philosophy, politics and literature. For this reason, the personal letter was a valuable mode of expression for the women of Rizal's time and even in ours.

The liberating character of the personal letter is a function of its features. First, the personal letter does not require the writer to assume an all-knowing, authoritative stance. In fact the letter fosters in the writer a self-consciousness, an awareness that it is a particular telling, one version of an event, from a specific perspective. Paradoxically however, this awareness of the "personal" and "individual" becomes the basis for an aesthetics of solidarity as no claim of uniqueness and private ownership is made. Experience for the writer is not just her own but also that of others in the same community. Thus, Rizal's sisters will often note that so-and-so (usually their brother Paciano or their husbands or brothers-in-law) will write about a certain event in more detail instead of writing about it themselves.

Secondly, aside from some conventional parts such as the opening address and the salutation, there are no strict rules to follow in regard the format of the personal letter. Similarly, no topic is too trivial for the personal letter; one can talk about anything. For this reason, the letter in fact allows for creativity and innovation, contrary to the idea that one cannot be imaginative or creative enough in a letter.

Finally, the personal letter calls for a participatory mode of reading. It is not enough that the reader or addressee extract the message of a missive. For this message is not complete and final. Rather, it is a message or meaning produced out of the engagement and/or encounter between reader and writer, between style and substance, and between text and context.

## REFERENCES

Daroy, Petronilo Bn. 1968. Politics and Literature. In *Rizal: Contrary Essays.* Edited by Dolores S. Feria and Petronilo Bn. Daroy. Quezon City: Guro Books.

Eagleton, Terry. 1983. *Literary Theory:* An Introduction. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd.

Gallop, Jane. 1986. Annie Leclerc Writing A Letter, With Vermeer. In *The Poetics of Gender.* Edited by Nancy K. Miller. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jacobus, Mary. 1986. Reading Correspondences. In *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism.* New York. Columbia University Press.

*Letters Between Rizal & Family Members,* Vol. II, Book 1. Manila: National Centennial Commission, 1964.