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Mutual Indebtedness: Unpublished Letters of Edward Bellamy to William Dean Howells

IN the Howells Collection of the Harvard College Library are thirteen holograph letters by Edward Bellamy to William Dean Howells that document a fruitful relation of mutual encouragement and aid. Though these letters help illuminate the path to fulfillment of two eminent figures in American literature, only a few fragments from them have been printed in scattered places. With permission, the eleven most important letters are published here in full for the first time.

These letters describe two stages in the relations of Bellamy and Howells, the first literary, the second primarily political. The first stage, covering the years 1881 to 1888, exhibits still another case of the altruistic Howells employing his literary prestige in aid of an obscure but promising writer (as with Henry James,¹ Stephen Crane, and so many others). The second stage, covering the years 1888 to 1893, reveals Bellamy, renowned as a utopian novelist and leader of a political movement, stimulating Howells in the artistic orientation of his freshly-awakened social consciousness.

When Bellamy and Howells entered into correspondence, Bellamy was in need of encouragement. Disillusioned by his experiences as a lawyer and as a journalist, and convinced that all trades and professions were 'states of involuntary servitude,'² Bellamy had turned to freelance writing and had published several short stories and novels that attracted little attention. In need of adequate income, he had re-entered

¹ For a masterly analysis of this relation, see Oscar Cargill, 'Henry James's "Moral Policeman": William Dean Howells,' *American Literature*, XXIX (1958), 371-398.

² See his strongly autobiographical, unfinished novel, 'Eliot Carson,' in the Bellamy Collection of the Harvard College Library. This collection includes Bellamy's original manuscripts, as well as his notebooks and journals, parts of which are still unpublished.

the newspaper world as co-owner and co-editor of a Springfield paper, but he continued to long for a literary career.

During this period, Howells had risen to literary eminence as editor-in-chief of America's foremost periodical, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and as close associate and literary adviser of many of America's leading authors. Finally, desiring full time for his own creative writing, he resigned the *Atlantic* editorship. However, he remained characteristically solicitous of young talent.

Howells appears to have been the first prominent literary figure to write encouragingly to Bellamy, praising the young writer's second novel, *Dr. Heidenhoff's Process*. This remarkable (though still neglected) novel, poignantly indicting the guilt complex and prophetically envisioning electric shock therapy, came to Howells' attention when he was completing *A Modern Instance*,³ which contained a similar study of the harm wrought by blind conscience. Understandably Howells became deeply moved in reading Bellamy's novel. Years later he was able to recall the experience vividly:

The first book of Edward Bellamy's which I read was "Dr. Heidenhoff's Process," and I thought it one of the finest feats in the region of romance which I had known. It seemed to me all the greater because the author's imagination wrought in it on the level of average life, and built the fabric of its dream out of common clay. The simple people and their circumstance were treated as if they were persons whose pathetic story he had witnessed himself, and he was merely telling it. He wove into the texture of their sufferings and their sorrows the magic thread of invention so aptly and skillfully that the reader felt nothing improbable in it. One even felt a sort of moral necessity for it, as if such a clue not only could be, but must be given for their escape. It became not merely probable, but imperative, that there should be some means of extirpating the memory which fixed a sin in lasting remorse, and of thus saving the soul from the depravity of despair. When it finally appeared that there was no such means, one reader, at least, was inconsolable. Nothing from romance remains to me more poignant than the pang that this plain, sad tale imparted.⁴

Though it is impossible to reproduce Howells' letters to Bellamy, since they were apparently destroyed by fire in 1906,⁵ we can be cer-

³ See William M. Gibson's account of the genesis of this novel in his *Riverside Edition* (Boston, 1957), pp. v-xviii.

⁴ The first paragraph of Howells' prefatory sketch to Bellamy's *The Blindman's World and Other Stories* (Boston, 1898), pp. v-vi.

⁵ In the home of Mason A. Green, who had been entrusted with Bellamy's literary

tain that Howells praised Bellamy highly in his first letter and that he offered to bring him out of literary isolation into contact with publishers. To this welcome letter Bellamy replied:

Springfield Aug 21 1881

W. D. Howells

Dr Sir

Your note speaking of the gratification given you by "Dr Heidenhoff's Process" was as refreshing to me as you may suppose a note from Hawthorne in commendation of one of your earlier efforts would have been to you. A few have spoken well of the story, but I think it has been caviare to the general. Before the MS was accepted by Appleton, it had been unceremoniously rejected by Putnam's Sons, Scribner's Sons, Roberts Bros and Lee & Shepard. I am very sorry not to be able immediately to avail myself of your kind invitation to send MS of something new to [James R.] Osgood [Howells' agent and publisher]. I forsook literature some time ago and have since been wholly absorbed in money getting as proprietor of a new daily paper here in Springfield "The News." Thanks to the good luck which has attended the enterprise I foresee already and ere long a time of leisure and serenity when I shall be free for fresh essays in romance. Then you may hear from me, and until then (for after that you may regard me as your persecutor) I remain

Respy yrs

Edward Bellamy.

Within a few months Bellamy did leave the newspaper world to return to free-lance writing, though apparently not with the complete approval of some of his family. As late as August 1886, even after the publication of another novel, he wrote a short note to Howells thanking him for a further favor in connection with *Dr. Heidenhoff's Process*:

Chicopee Falls, Mass.

Aug 26 1886

Mr Howells

Dear Sir

Your sending me that letter of Dr Hastings about "Dr Heidenhoff's Process," was a kind thought. Such little testimonials are particularly useful in reconciling female relatives to one's choice of the literary profession despite its uncertain income. I do not know that I act according to your intention in retaining Dr Hastings letter. If not I will return it. A story of mine ["The Blindman's World"] is to appear in the Atlantic, in November probably, Mr Scudder [the editor] says, which I remains for the purpose of writing his biography. This work, never completed, is now deposited in the Bellamy Collection.

should be pleased to have you read. I am, with much appreciation of your considerateness

Yrs Respy
Edward Bellamy

Before this date, however, there had been considerable correspondence between the two, primarily concerning Bellamy's second novel, *Miss Ludington's Sister: A Romance of Immortality*. Two and a half years after the first letters had passed between them, Bellamy wrote to Howells, offering to send him the newly completed novel:

Chicopee Falls Mass March 18

Dr Sir

1884

Some two years ago you wrote me a letter commending my book "Dr Heidenhoff's Process," in very kind terms. You were so good as to say that if I had another romance in MS you would be glad to have me send it to you for reading with a view to publication, by Osgood & co, if available. I quote from memory having mislaid your letter. After some years of idleness I have just completed a romance, considerably longer than Dr Heidenhoff, which I shall be glad to send you if you are still of the same mind. If not please do not hesitate to say so.

Respy Yrs
Edward Bellamy

W. D. Howells Esq

Howells must have replied immediately, wishing to see the novel, for Bellamy soon wrote again:

Chicopee Falls Mass.
Mch 22 1884

Dr Sir

I send you by express tonight in accordance with your kind permission the MS of a romance entitled "Miss Ludington's Sister." I have mulled over it so long that whether it is best suited for publication or the waste basket, I am utterly unable to judge. The MS is certainly not handsome in point of chirography, but it is all there and I think decipherable. In his note informing me that he had got out a British edition of "Dr Heidenhoff," Mr [David] Douglass [of Edinburgh] said that his attention had been attracted to the book by a literary friend in America. That it was you to whom I owed this kind office I did not know till the receipt of your note two days ago. I assure you that the discovery adds much to the satisfaction which the republication of the book in England, has caused me. Trusting that you will feel no hesitation in telling me frankly your opinion of "Miss Ludington's Sister" I remain

Yrs Respy
Edward Bellamy

W. D. Howells Esq
Belmont Mass.

PS. By the way, in case you dont see your way to recommending the publication of the MS I send you please do not return it, until you have notified me by letter as it might not be convenient for me to have the package sent to my present address.⁶

Though *Miss Ludington's Sister* is an inferior novel, lacking in vitality, Howells, ever interested in the question of immortality, thought highly of the book. He offered valuable criticism, and informed Bellamy that he had already brought the book to Osgood's attention. Upon hearing this good news the delighted author replied:

Chicopee Falls
April 10 1884.

Dear Sir.

Your very kind note of the 9th inst saying that "Miss Ludington's Sister" found favor as a whole in your eyes, is at hand, and gives me much pleasure.

Your criticism that [the protagonist] Paul's theory [claiming individual immortality for each phase of a person's existence] is set forth with undue prolixity, quite agrees with my own feeling. I was aware that this was a weak point of the story. If Mr Osgood sees his way clear to the publication of the book I shall wish previously to revise it in this particular. I appreciate very highly your kindness in wading through my book and introducing it to Mr Osgood, the more as I have not even the claim of an acquaintance upon your good nature. I should never have had the presumption to ask this favor of you, had you not intimated your willingness to confer it.

I am Respy

Edward Bellamy

W. D. Howells Esq
No 4 Louisburg Square.
Boston.

When *Miss Ludington's Sister* was published by Osgood, Howells wrote what amounted to a review of it (and of E. W. Howe's *The Story of a Country Town*) in an 'Open Letter' to the *Century*, in the

⁶ After mailing the manuscript of the novel to Howells at Belmont, Massachusetts, Bellamy feared that it had 'miscarried,' and wrote Howells of this on 29 March 1884. Then, realizing that Howells had returned to 4 Louisburg Square, Boston, Bellamy wrote him there on 8 April, informing him that the American Express Company had been instructed to forward the manuscript from Belmont.

These letters, though forming part of the Howells Collection, are not printed here because of their slight intrinsic interest.

course of which he compared Bellamy with Hawthorne and then went on to develop his theory of an appropriate American 'realism':

It has always seemed to me that Hawthorne had some ironical or whimsical intention in his complaints of the unfriendliness of the American atmosphere and circumstance to his art; and the success of Mr. Bellamy, who is the first writer of romance in our environment worthy to be compared with Hawthorne, goes far to confirm me in this notion. . . . Mr. Bellamy shows us that the fancy does not play less freely over our democratic levels than the picturesque inequalities of other civilizations, and both books [Bellamy's and Howe's] enforce once more the fact that, whatever their comparative value may be, our own things are the best things for us to write of. . . . It would be easy to multiply instances on every hand of the recognition of the principle of realism in our fiction.' ⁷

Howells obviously mailed Bellamy a copy of his 'review' together with a characteristically encouraging letter, to which Bellamy replied at length:

Chicopee Falls, Mass.
August 7 1884

Mr W. D. Howells
Dr Sir

I write to thank you for your notice of "Miss Ludington's Sister," in the August *Century*. You must not suppose that I took your flattering estimate of my work at the foot of the letter, but I was quite as much pleased for all that. Coming from you such an indorsement is sufficient in itself to make my book a success in my own view whatever may be its degree of popular acceptance. I can only hope that should I ever attain such a position in literature as would make my words of value, I may prove as generous in giving encouragement to others as you have shown yourself toward me. For the rest, as to the special purport of your criticism, you have certainly interpreted aright my motive and manner so far as I myself understand them. Whether I belong to the school of the realists or not I do not know. It is the business of the author to write as the spirit moves and of the critic to classify him. But my own belief is that while the warp, that is the framework and main lines of the story, should be of the author's own invention, the woof and filling should be supplied from his observation of the real life about him. I think that every writer of fiction, when his fancy seduces him too far from this real life which alone he really knows, has such a sense of weakness and uncertainty as Antaeus might have felt when Hercules lifted him into the air, a weakness to be cured with the novelist as with the giant only by a

⁷ *Century*, XXVIII (1884), 633-634.

return to earth. If this be true of the novelist, it is yet more true of the romancer, for it is the undertaking of the latter to give an air of reality even to the unreal. Though he build into the air, he must see to it that he does not seem to build upon the air, for the more airy the pinnacle the more necessary the solidity of the foundation. In regard to another suggestion of your criticism, namely the autochthonous quality of my work, it strikes me that the simple necessity of sticking to the life one knows if one would write intelligently, is reason enough why American authors should write as Americans for Americans about America. But this necessity, far from being a limitation, is to my notion the best of all fortunes to those on whom it is incumbent. If I had the genius of Hawthorne, George Eliot or Dickens and could choose the environment from which I was to draw my material, I should by all means prefer of all possible fates to be an American born and bred. I am most heartily yours
Edward Bellamy.

Though the modern reader would probably disagree with Howells' high opinion of *Miss Ludington's Sister*, along with his idiosyncratic description of it as belonging to the school of 'realism,'⁸ his evaluation must have been enormously influential in turning Bellamy's attention to the prospects and realities of American civilization as a field for blending romance and realism. In rereading Howells' review, one can almost catch the cue for a novel rooted in the harsh circumstance and fervent hope of America of the eighties.

In the wake of Haymarket, *Looking Backward* (1888) appeared and soon became the industrial world's most influential utopian novel. Begun by Bellamy as 'a mere fairy tale of social perfection,' it had transformed itself into a 'vehicle of a definite scheme of industrial reorganization,'⁹ moving millions all over the earth to hope for a better world, among them Bellamy's main literary benefactor, Howells.¹⁰

The impact upon him was profound. Hamlin Garland, another young writer favored by the 'Dean of American Letters,' recalled that Howells was 'deeply moved by the social injustice which we had all recently discovered, and often as we walked and talked he spoke of

⁸ For an analysis of this problem, see Louis J. Budd, 'W. D. Howells' Defense of the Romance,' *PMLA*, LXXII (1952), 32-42.

⁹ 'Why I Wrote "Looking Backward,"' in *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!* (Kansas City, Mo., 1937), p. 202.

¹⁰ Edward Bellamy's widow told me (in conversations during 1950-52) that she was 'amazed' by the contents of *Looking Backward* when it appeared, since her husband had never discussed the book with her while it was in progress. Thus far in my research, Howells appears to have been Bellamy's closest literary confidant.

Bellamy's delineation of the growing contrasts between the rich and poor.¹¹

In this mood Howells intensified his study of economics, politics, and sociology, which eventuated in the publication of two of his most memorable novels, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), set in New York during the streetcar strike, and *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894), a utopian romance clearly inspired both politically and aesthetically by Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. The initial relation of patron and protégé became a friendship engendering mutual stimulus.

Howells noted that the world-wide success of Edward Bellamy's utopian novel 'revived throughout Christendom the faith in a millennium.'¹² Along with other earnest thinkers he proposed to Bellamy that a political party be founded with the aim of bringing into existence the fraternal-paternal state envisioned in Bellamy's novel. Bellamy replied to Howells' proposal in a lengthy letter stating his views on such germane questions as the proper name for such a party, socialist theory, and American needs:

Chicopee Falls Mass
June 17 1888

Dear Mr Howells

What you say about "nationalist" having occurred to yourself also as a good designation for a party aiming at a national control of industry with the resulting social changes, strongly corroborates my belief that the name is a good one and will take. Every sensible man will admit there is a big deal in a name especially in making first impressions. In the radicalness of the opinions I have expressed I may seem to out-socialize the socialists, yet the word socialist is one I never could well stomach. In the first place it is a foreign word in itself and equally foreign in all its suggestions. It smells to the average American of petroleum, suggests the red flag, with all manner of sexual novelties, and an abusive tone about God and religion, which in this country we at least treat with decent respect. For the rest, *socialist* is as genuine slang as those choice phrases *Society man Society-woman* etc. It is, so far as the real meaning of the word is concerned, as proper to call a lady of fashion a socialist, as to

¹¹ 'Meetings with Howells,' *Bookman* (New York), XLV (1917), 6. To be sure, Howells' philosophic concern with social problems was deepened by others besides Bellamy, notably by Tolstoy, Henry George, and Laurence Gronlund; and his readiness to deal with such problems in creative literature was similarly strengthened by others besides Bellamy, notably by James Russell Lowell, Henry James, Jr, and Björnstjerne Björnson—see George Arms, 'The Literary Background of Howells' Social Criticism,' *American Literature*, XIV (1942), 260-276.

¹² In his prefatory sketch to *The Blindman's World*, p. vi.

call a man interested in industrial reforms by that name. Whatever German and French reformers may choose to call themselves, socialist is not a good name for a party to succeed with in America. No such party can or ought to succeed which is not wholly and enthusiastically American and patriotic in spirit and suggestions. This reminds me that you speak in your Harper's Monthly notice [June 1888, pp. 154-155], of the similarity of the scheme outlined in *Looking Backward* to that of Mr Gronlund's *Cooperative Commonwealth*. I have never been in any sense a student of socialistic literature, or have known more of the various socialist schemes than any newspaper reader might. Mr Gronlund's work I read only on having my attention drawn to it by a letter from him after my book came out. There are certainly many resemblances between our suggestions, some of them remarkably close, and I do not wonder at his intimating that probably I was familiar with the *Cooperative Commonwealth*. On the other hand there are broad and essential differences. *Looking Backward* contemplates the nation as a vital organism, a moral being, the industrial organization being an incident and consequence of that fact and not the main thing in itself, as made out by the German socialists, if Mr Gronlund interprets them rightly. They seem only to contemplate a sort of federation of trades-unions, separately organized, mutually independent, bargaining together for the price of their respective products. In any such system there would be from the outset more than an entering wedge for trade jealousies and factional intrigues. Under it a man's membership in his guild would be more important to him than his membership in the nation, and guild interests than national interests. Such a scheme or any scheme of society in which is lacking a cohesive and unifying principle securing the prime allegiance of the citizen to the whole as opposed to any part, would be destined to fail in practice, while in any event morally unsatisfactory. If there is any particular merit in the plan of *Looking Backward*, it is that it provides this principle of cohesion and of solidarity by making every citizen's maintenance depend solely upon his membership in the nation, by making the maintenance of all equal, and dependent on the total combined product of all.

I am, I may add, in cordial correspondence with Mr Gronlund, who has shown an unselfishness certainly very rare by directing his agents who have been disposing of his books to labor organizations, to stop selling them and sell *Looking Backward* instead, as better calculated to do good. I should like to feel sure that I am capable of equal unselfishness.

I assure you that there is something profoundly refreshing and inspiring in the enthusiasm which these socialists have for their cause, as expressed in the letters which I am constantly receiving. No wonder they are enthusiastic. What party ever had a cause so well calculated to call forth self devotion, as theirs?

The length of this letter I have inflicted on you, will show you how much I should prize a few hours talk with you on the practical aspects

of this big business which we have in hand. If it is possible I shall avail myself of your invitation and get an afternoon with you this Summer.

Yrs Cordially

Edward Bellamy

On 1 December 1888 the First Nationalist Club of Boston was informally organized by a distinguished group of Americans including Thomas Wentworth Higginson, General Arthur F. Devereaux, the Reverend Edward Everett Hale, Julia Ward Howe, and Howells. Although Howells avoided formal membership in the Nationalist Movement, it is clear that he approved its aims and that he 'was regarded as a warm supporter by its leaders.'¹³ In an undated note, Bellamy asked Howells for an appointment, apparently to discuss the Nationalist Movement:

Waldo House
Little Chebeague Island
Portland Me.

Dear Mr Howells.

I have been a few days up here and shall go home via Boston reaching that city Friday morning next. If you are at home and it is entirely convenient at this time I should like to get an hour's talk with you. Please drop me a line at Boston care of Cyrus F. Willard [prime mover and Secretary of the First Nationalist Club of Boston] Globe office.

Yrs truly

Edward Bellamy

In his columns in the *New Nation*, the weekly journal of the Nationalist Movement, Bellamy welcomed Howells' *Annie Kilburn*, *The World of Chance*, and *A Traveler from Altruria* as furthering their mutual political aims,¹⁴ and in his letters to Howells during this period (1889-93), he praised his new social novels, unavoidably mixing political with literary comment:

Chicopee Falls Mass
Oct 17 1889

Dear Mr Howells

I cannot refrain from congratulating you upon the Hazard of New Fortunes. I have read the last numbers [in *Harper's Weekly*] with enthu-

¹³ Abundant evidence of this is contained in Louis J. Budd's unpublished dissertation, 'William Dean Howells's Relations with Political Parties' (University of Wisconsin, 1949), pp. 278-288.

¹⁴ *New Nation*, II (1892), 701-702, III (1893), 458.

siasm. You are writing of what everybody is thinking and all the rest will have to follow your example or lose their readers.

Yours most heartily
Edward Bellamy

Chicopee Falls
Aug 14 1893

Dear Mr Howells.

Your cordial words were even more welcome to The New Nation than your check for the missionary fund, although you may be sure we have plenty of use for the latter sort of testimonials.

I am awaiting the September *Cosmopolitan* [for another installment of *A Traveler from Altruria*] with impatience. Yours in the sympathy of a common aspiration

Edward Bellamy

And in his final letter to Howells, Bellamy discusses political, literary, and personal matters in a gamut of expression ranging from playful humor (a rare note for Bellamy) to the full confession of mutual dedication that one reserves for a kindred spirit:

Chicopee Falls Mass
Nov 7 1893

Dear Mr Howells

The amiable fiction that your subscription had probably expired, by which you sought to extenuate your contribution to the New Nation fund for raising Cain, is too thin.

I am informed that you had some time ago subscribed in advance for the publication in question far into the middle of the twentieth century, when the New Nation will have long been an old story.

As to my health, whereof you kindly make mention, it is middling poor. I have not been in Boston for a month and more and am trying to run the paper by mail.

My book [*Equality*, sequel to *Looking Backward*] is very little yet and as you may have notice[d] one's book is prettiest when in the cradle, although not even then so pretty as before it is born at all.

If I publish a poor book I ought to be stoned. The responsibility upon us who have won the ear of the public, to plead the cause of the voiceless masses, is beyond limit. You have stood up to it nobly in your *Altruria*; but the trouble is the better a man does the better he has got to do. "There is no discharge in that war."

Sincerely yours
Edward Bellamy

The warmth of this letter to Howells, remarkable for a man as reserved as Bellamy, betokens the mutual worth of their friendship. Mrs Bellamy paid fitting tribute to the empathic quality of this friendship when, upon being widowed in 1898, she turned to Howells for a biographical sketch of her husband to serve as a preface to the posthumous collection of his short stories, *The Blindman's World*.

JOSEPH SCHIFFMAN

List of Contributors

- PAUL H. BUCK, Francis Lee Higginson Professor of History, Director of the Harvard University Library, and Librarian of Harvard College
- GLANVILLE DOWNEY, Associate Professor of Byzantine Literature at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Harvard University
- ERNEST H. WILKINS, President, Emeritus, Oberlin College
- KIMBALL C. ELKINS, Senior Assistant in the Harvard University Archives
- ANNE W. HENRY, Bibliographer in the Harvard College Library
- JOSEPH SCHIEFFMAN, Professor of English, Dickinson College
- ELEANOR M. GARVEY, Assistant, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, Harvard College Library
- GEORGE KIRK, Lecturer on Government and on History, Harvard University
- NINO PIRROTTA, Professor of Music and Librarian of the Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library, Harvard University

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