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JOSIAH ROYCE

1855—1916

A Biographical Memoir by
ROBERT S. WOODWORTH

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Biographical Memoir

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WHEN the University of California, in 1873, first opened its doors on the Berkeley campus, one of its entering students was a red-haired youth who had prepared for college in the San Francisco schools, after spending his early years in the gold-mining region. His parents had come across the Sierra in a covered wagon in 1849 and settled in the town of Grass Valley, where his father set up the "general store," and his mother continued her career as a school teacher by conducting a private school at home. Young Josiah's aspiration was to become a mining engineer, but he did not neglect the humanities—not by any means; his love of poetry and interest in religion converged into a graduation thesis on the theology of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*.

That commencement address of 1875 proved to be a decisive turning point in Royce's career. Its outstanding excellence convinced some men in the audience that here was a young man who should have the opportunity of studying philosophy at the fountainhead! They accordingly raised a fund enabling him to spend a year or more at the German universities. On the way over he managed to stay a few days in Boston and make the acquaintance of William James, George Herbert Palmer, and others, on whom he made a very favorable impression. William James, especially, became his lifelong friend, and was instrumental a few years later in adding Royce to the brilliant and stimulating group of philosophers at Harvard.

Meanwhile, on returning from Germany, he secured a fellowship

in the just-opened Johns Hopkins University from which he obtained the Ph.D. in 1878. No adequate position in philosophy being available at the moment, Royce went back to Berkeley as instructor in English literature and logic. He held this position for four years, keeping up his philosophical activity by writing and by offering occasional short lecture courses. He also published his first book, *Primer of Logical Analysis for the Use of Composition Students*, designed to combat a certain "vagueness" which he observed in their writing. The subject of logic was indeed an abiding concern of Royce, especially in much later years.

An important event of this Berkeley period was his marriage in 1880 to Katharine Head, well remembered by generations of Harvard students as the gracious hostess of his pleasant home in Cambridge and the mother of two boys. She kept in close touch with his work and was able to collaborate in certain studies. The students used to credit her with a humorous description of his mode of lecturing: "This is the way Josiah lectures. First he tells you what he is going to say. Then he says it. Then he tells you what he has said; and finally he points out that he has said what he said he was going to say!" Royce's lecture style was in fact flowing and conversational, repetitious and abounding in pat examples, but never losing the thread or wandering from the point. He aimed to keep the class well oriented, knowing at all times whence they had come and whither they were going. This lecture style appears clearly in his published lectures on the *Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (1892).

In 1882, through the influence of James and Palmer, Royce was called from California to Harvard, at first on a temporary basis, but he was soon made a permanent professor and at Harvard he remained for the rest of his life. He did not become a "sessile organism," however, but journeyed hither and thither, giving lectures and lecture courses at many colleges and universities. The most notable of these lectureships were at Aberdeen in 1898-1900 and at Oxford in 1913. Several of his lecture courses are perpetuated in well-known books.

Royce's distinctive personality was well described, years after his death, by his Harvard colleague, George Herbert Palmer:

"He was a picturesque figure, a prodigious worker, a stimulating teacher, a heroic character, a playful and widely loved friend.

"His appearance was strange. His short stocky figure was surmounted by a gigantic round head well sunk in his shoulders. The top of it was sprinkled with red hair, while the strongly freckled face seemed to himself and to every stranger unparalleled in homeliness. . . . But no one who knew him well could wish a line of that face changed. Every inch of it expressed wisdom, modesty, humor. . . . His slowly sauntering gait was characteristic. And if you were short of time, it was not safe to ask him a question, however simple. . . .

"All knowledge was his province . . . psychology, logic, metaphysics, . . . mathematics, biology, . . . music and poetry, . . . the literature of England, Germany, France, and Italy, . . . common affairs of the day. . . ." ¹

It was through religion that Royce was first attracted to philosophy. Bible stories read to him by his mother appealed to him strongly, while on the other hand rigid Sabbath observance was very repellent and the dogmatic theology he had to listen to aroused his "boyish fury." He felt that there were "problems" involved that could never be resolved by a dogmatic approach. His first major work was entitled *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885) and almost his last was *The Problem of Christianity* (1913). He was not concerned with specific denominational creeds; he wished to discover whether any basic, "absolute" knowledge was possible regarding reality and man's duty. He always insisted that knowing and doing were inseparable, so that what man could know and what he ought to do were integral parts of the same philosophic problem.

From his intensive study of Kant and the post-Kantian German idealists his own conclusion was a form of idealism. Reality must consist in experience—actual human experience continuous with in-

¹ In *Contemporary Idealism in America*, edited by Clifford Barrett (N.Y., Macmillan, 1932), pp. 3 ff.

finite realms of possible experience, our fragmentary experience continuous with a total, wholly organized experience. Any other philosophy he held to be radically self-contradictory, and he believed he could prove it to be so. Realism, for example, as an assertion of reality completely divorced from experience, independent of all experience and therefore unknowable, he held to be a self-destructive doctrine, a position which you could not defend without virtually abandoning it. "The realistic theory, . . . by its own explicit consequences, and just because its real objects are totally independent of its ideas, has nothing to do with any independently real object, and has no relation to the independent external world that its own account defines" (*The World and the Individual* [1900], I, 136).

The philosophical climate of the early twentieth century was by no means hospitable to Royce's idealism. Few of his many able students, devoted to him though they were, remained his adherents. His teaching fostered critical discussion and independent thinking, so that independence on the part of his pupils was to be expected. Yet, towards the end of his life, he "would sometimes express doubts about his own effectiveness as a teacher, because so many of the doctrines which he regarded as most distinctively original . . . seemed to him to have been still-born in the sense of having been received with barren respect, instead of being accepted, expounded, developed."² The realistic philosophy refused to die in spite of Royce's destructive criticism; a school of neo-realists emerged, some of them among his former students. Dependence, they argued, is a one-way relation so that our experience of a real object depends on the presence of the object, while nevertheless the existence of the real object is independent of our experience.

A glowing tribute to Professor Royce's personal interest in his students came from a leading member of the neo-realist group, W. P. Montague:

"I not only got from Royce my knowledge and appreciation of

² R. A. F. Hornlé, in Barrett's *Contemporary Idealism in America*, p. 300.

