The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce, Volume I

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Preface

Few travelers on the heavily used highway from Reno to Sacramento reflect on the names of the small towns as they are quickly passed, one blurring out the other. But one of these towns, Emigrant Gap, California, invites us to travel a bypass, rich with tall pines, clean air, and an invigorating breeze. On that road is the town of Grass Valley, California, where the philosopher Josiah Royce was born in 1855. Now resembling a suburban town, Grass Valley yields little of Royce's memory except for a commemorative plaque in the local library. Slightly to the northeast, however, on Route 20, one finds Nevada City, California. To this day, in Nevada City, we can encounter some of the mining camp atmosphere of Royce's childhood.¹ The saga of the trip west and the early struggles in Grass Valley have been told by Royce's indomitable mother, Sarah Royce.² Less than a year before his death Royce recalled these early days and cited their profound impact on his personal and reflective life.

My earliest recollections include a very frequent wonder as to what my elders meant when they said that this was a new community. I frequently looked at the vestiges left by the former diggings of miners, saw that many pine logs were rotten, and that a miner's grave was to be found in a lonely place not far from my own house. Plainly men had lived and died thereabouts. I dimly reflected that this sort of life had


apparently been going on ever since men dwelt in that land. The logs and the grave looked old. The sunsets were beautiful. The wide prospects when one looked across the Sacramento Valley were impressive, and had long interested the people of whose love for my country I heard much. What was there then in this place that ought to be called new, or for that matter, crude? I wondered, and gradually came to feel that part of my life’s business was to find out what all this wonder meant. (HGC, pp. 122–23; below, 1:31–32)

In his attempt to realize the meaning of this early wonder Josiah Royce left no stone unturned. Before his relatively early death at the age of sixty, Royce had pursued literally every field of inquiry known to his time. And his creative work shows an unusual range of genre: literary essays, geographical essays, popular and rigorously technical philosophical essays, theological treatises, formal papers in logic and mathematics—even a novel. Although the selections reprinted in these two volumes are basic to any understanding of Royce, and in terms of contemporary publishing practices generously extensive, they constitute only a small part of his work. An examination of the Bibliography will show this to be obviously true. It should also be noted that the present edition does not include selections from The Problem of Christianity, for the entire text is now published as a companion volume by The University of Chicago Press, with an introduction by John E. Smith.

The intention of this edition of Royce’s writings is threefold: first, to illustrate the range and quality of his thought; second, to present a detailed instance of a thinker who forges a viable relationship between affection for the local experience of community and the demands of a philosophical and scientific version of the entire human situation; third, to present anew the relevance of Royce’s judgment in matters cultural, moral, and religious.

We are long past the time when the thought of a single philosopher can redirect the historical situation in which we live. But we cannot afford to ignore any insight however removed from us in time and style. Royce spent much of his life developing his contention that true individualism is possible only insofar as one participates in a series of self-sufficient, complete communities. If true, such an insight is salvific for us in the present situation. We should pay careful attention Royce’s thought on this matter. He has much to teach us.

John J. McDermott