The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce, Volume I
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Part II

The American Context

It has become a truism for many commentators on Royce, that he is the most European of the Classical American philosophers. Although based on Royce's affection for the European Romantic tradition and his commitment to the philosophical strain of German Idealism, this judgment is nevertheless seriously misleading. In fact, a case can be made for Royce as the philosopher most profoundly and explicitly influenced by his American experience. Even John Dewey, a lifelong student of American democracy, did not conduct so extended a scrutiny of his own cultural roots as did Royce.

In addition to his outstanding history of California and his novel about California life, Royce wrote many essays on "American Problems" throughout his life. His Philosophy of Loyalty is devoted to specifically American themes and his understanding of "Provincialism" is inseparable from the American federal experience. Royce's original doctrine of "Interpretation," as found in The Problem of Christianity, is in keeping with the tradition of sectarianism in American religion. In experienced root and in structure, Royce's view of the Church is that of an American Puritan. His analysis of living American communities has much in common with the self-consciousness of the Puritan attempt to forge a new relationship between religious covenant and the polis.

The distinguished American philosopher, George Herbert Mead, misjudged the significance of Royce's work when he stated that: "it was part of the escape from the crudity of American life, not an interpretation of it." To the contrary, as witnessed by the selec-

tions in this section, as well as throughout these volumes and their companion edition of *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce's writings were never more relevant. The following text, taken from the selection from *California*, should show that Mead's judgment cannot hold.

The lesson of the whole matter is as simple and plain as it is persistently denied by a romantic pioneer vanity; and our true pride, as we look back to those days of sturdy and sinful life, must be, not that the pioneers could so successfully show by their popular justice their undoubted instinctive skill in self-government,—although indeed, despite all their sins, they showed such a skill also; but that the moral elasticity of our people is so great, their social vitality so marvelous, that a community of Americans could sin as fearfully as, in the early years, the mining community did sin, and could yet live to purify itself within so short a time, not by a revolution, but by a simple progress from social foolishness to social steadfastness. Even thus a great river, for an hour defiled by some corrupting disturbance, purifies itself, merely through its own flow, over its sandy bed, beneath the wide and sunny heavens. (*CAL*, pp. 375–76; below, 1:117)

During the turbulent years of the second half of the American twentieth century, it is to be hoped that the thrust of this text maintains its relevance.