

"In Honor of Professor Palmer." Harvard Graduates' Magazine,
19 (1910-II): 575-78.
Speech at a banquet in honor of George Herbert Palmer, held on
February 25, 1911.

THE
HARVARD GRADUATES' MAGAZINE.

VOL. XIX. — JUNE, 1911. — No. 76.

IN HONOR OF PROFESSOR PALMER.¹

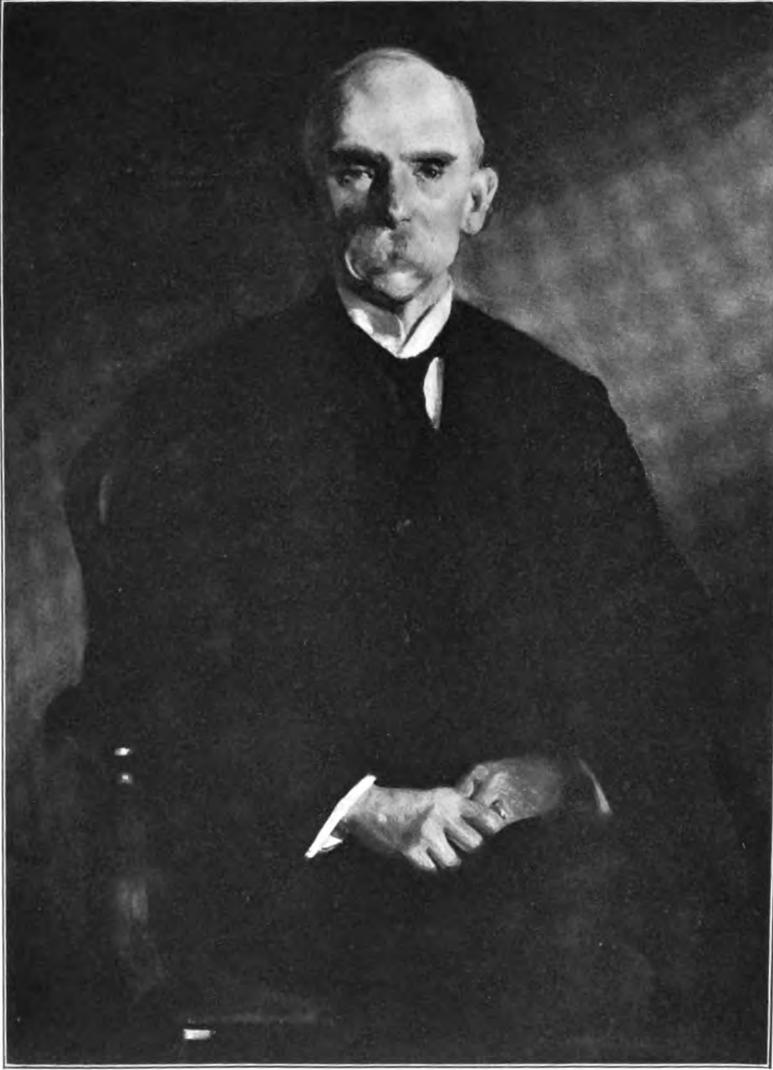
PROFESSOR PALMER in his own work, both as a teacher and as a writer, has very highly developed and has beautifully applied the art of characterizing men. Few teachers of philosophy have used that art more skilfully as an aid to the exposition of the doctrines of philosophers. And Professor Palmer in his published works has also employed his art of personal characterization for purposes far more intimate and more beautiful still than are those which can be expressed by any classroom teaching. I am now called upon to take my little part, upon the present occasion, in the grateful, but vastly difficult task of saying something that may in a measure serve towards characterizing our guest himself. We should all be glad indeed if in a few words any of us could portray him as a philosopher. We should rejoice still more if we too could succeed in the more intimate and beautiful office of portraying him as a friend.

But in order to accomplish either of these tasks, I myself feel that I should need, if that were conceivable, to be able to borrow for this evening his own literary style, — a style without which his art of personal characterization could not be imagined. For

¹ At a banquet held in the Trophy Room of the Union, on Feb. 25, an oil portrait of Prof. George Herbert Palmer, '64, was presented to the University. Last June, when Prof. Palmer had been a teacher at Harvard for 40 years, a committee of 27 of his former pupils, of which Prof. C. M. Bakewell, of Yale, was chairman, decided to have the portrait painted as a token of their deep appreciation of his work. The portrait was painted by Charles Hopkinson, '91. The banquet at which the picture was presented was attended by over 40 of Prof. Palmer's friends and close associates — members of the University Faculty and men who were formerly his students. Prof. R. B. Perry, '97, of the Department of Philosophy, presided. Addresses were delivered by Pres. Eliot, Prof. J. Royce, Prof. E. K. Rand, '94, Dr. D. W. Roes, '75, Prof. George P. Baker, '87, Pres. Hyde of Bowdoin, Pres. Lowell, and Prof. Palmer.

only by use of his own typical literary method could his own qualities be suitably depicted. Yet just such a borrowing, even for this one occasion, is for me as impossible as it would be for a barnyard fowl to soar like a sea-bird. I cannot characterize our guest. I can only say a few of the things that years of work near to him have taught me.

Since I myself am an officer, I must first speak of how I have known him as the organizer, and in many respects as the creator of our philosophical department. If, throughout our history since the modern system of departmental work at Harvard was initiated, we who have taught in this department have been able to win and to hold in unity the services of men of decidedly various philosophical interests and doctrines, it was Professor Palmer who foresaw the need for such a coöperation of various opinions and methods, who from the beginning was very long the principal adviser of the department in all its plans for growth and for unity, and who alone possessed those arts of counsel and that practical wisdom which first endowed our department with a definite self-consciousness. When, in 1882, I first began work here, Professor Francis Bowen, then nearing his time of retirement, was not planning in any very positive way for the future of philosophy at Harvard. Professor James indeed, through the essays and volumes that he was writing, was building for the future of philosophy in general, as he conceived that future; but he was always unwilling to give much of his personal attention to the task of reducing the pluralistic universe of current opinions and of academic activities to any official sort of unity. Professor Palmer, alone amongst us teachers of philosophy in those days, looked forward to the future work of our department as a whole, saw what our place in the University ought to be, and labored and counseled accordingly. The organization that has resulted would have been impossible without him. As Professor Bowen approached his time of retirement, we three, Professor Palmer, James, and myself came more and more to find ourselves with what may be called the "problem of the three bodies" upon our hands, — a problem that, as you are aware, is insoluble except in special cases. It was Professor Palmer's intuition, joined to his careful attention to detail, that made the solution which we temporarily obtained possible for us. It is to him that the stability of our since so much enlarged sys-



From a painting by Charles Hopkinson.

GEORGE HERBERT PALMER,

Alford Professor of Philosophy.

tem is due. In those days of our problem of the three bodies, James used, in his somewhat doubtful acceptance of our common general plans of work, to revolve about the centre of gravity of the system with occasional, although always memorable and beautiful if somewhat sudden changes of orbit. I myself, as asteroid or satellite, as you please, spent in those days most of my time revolving in the neighborhood of James. But the centre of gravity was long situated within the person of Professor Palmer himself. Without him, I at least should have become a wandering meteor.

Now the "union of opposites," the "synthesis of conflicts," is, as you know, the art to which those philosophers aspire with whom Professor Palmer, in his own independently thoughtful way, has always expressed a certain very deep sympathy. I wish to point out that upon this art the very existence of our department has depended. If the synthesis of opposites is any part of the proof of Idealism, our department is then a living proof of that doctrine. The more we have practised the art, — the more opposites we have united, — the more conflicting tendencies we have undertaken to bring into synthesis, the more stable our little system has become. Our consciousness of union has increased with every added influence, — not because we have all thought alike; but because we have all learned our art as we have worked in this way together. Yet I also assure you that this art of the synthesis of opposites is no easy one. We certainly do not learn it by merely reading about it, or even by preaching it. Somebody must show us how to live out that art. In case of our own department, its history has shown that it was our first chairman, whom tonight we honor, who not only taught this doctrine of the synthesis of opposites in some of its deepest and most winning forms, but who as leader, as administrator, as counselor, as far-seeing maker of plans for the common good, as principal adviser regarding new appointments and regarding the union of courses, as patient critic, and still more patient, sympathetic friend, has accomplished in the conduct of the life of our department just that union of contrasting forces which now we are, and which makes us really one in spirit.

But our guest is not only leader in our common department work. He is also philosopher. It has been his office to apply the doctrine, which he has first lived, to the interpretation of life in the form of theory. His restraint, his self-sacrifice, and above all

his exquisite skill in expression, have given to us, instead of the voluminous systematic works which he has always seemed to us to have quite ready for their final expression, those briefer volumes, those summaries of thought which he has deliberately chosen as his own mode of philosophical writing. I refer especially to his two principal contributions to Ethics. And yet, brief as they are, how fully these books embody the meaning that they at first sight only seem to outline. They appear, — his ethical volumes are of course the ones to which I still especially refer, — they appear, externally, as if they were sketches. They bear reading and re-reading as if they were exhaustive treatises. The wisdom of a lifetime is in them, as it so often is in any single sentence that our guest utters in even a casual conversation upon deeper topics. My own earliest personal observation of Professor Palmer, at our first conversation when I came here in 1882, convinced me of his marvelous power of saying what seems at the moment very easily uttered, clear as a crystal, but too clear to appear, when thus momentarily and superficially regarded, as deep as it is, — while, when you go away and think matters over, his word remains with you, and glows as it were in the dark in your mind, until it becomes a centre of illumination, and enters into your whole reflective later life. There were some words in that first conversation of ours which our guest has no doubt forgotten, but which have determined many of my trains of thought ever since. And now when I speak to pupils of his, and to readers of his books, I know that you will agree with me as to this power of the single word, of the so patiently adjusted expression, of the gemlike sentence or paragraph in Professor Palmer's books, in his lectures, in his conversation. Of his wider literary influence, apart from philosophy, I have spoken, only by distant allusion. But of the philosopher and of the teacher we can all say that, whatever we may think of recent pragmatism, we agree that Professor Palmer has told the truth so impressively, so devotedly, so skilfully, so transparently, that the truth which he tells does indeed work.

I have been privileged to be a fellow laborer in his company. I deeply regret that I was not in the ordinary sense his pupil. You who have been his pupils know that herein I have lost much. But this I know, that we can none of us ever lose him or his influence so long as we continue either to reflect or to love.

Josiah Royce.