

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 3
Issue 7 *August*

Article 3

August 1952

A Letter From William James

Julius Seelye Bixler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 3, no.07, August 1952, p.101-102

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Colby Library Quarterly

Series III

August 1952

Number 7

A LETTER FROM WILLIAM JAMES

By JULIUS SEELYE BIXLER

NEW letters from the pen of William James keep turning up. He was truly an indefatigable correspondent. The letter that Colby has just acquired illustrates some of his characteristic attitudes. Nietzsche the writer, with his gospel of courageous experimentation, fascinated James. Nietzsche the man, with his failure to live up to his own exhortations, interested him less. A cult of Nietzsche seemed to him particularly inappropriate. Why, after all, should believers in independence and individualism form a cult at all?

The article referred to in James's letter was an extended review by Huneker of *A Pluralistic Universe*, published anonymously in *Current Literature* (XLVI, 647-650), New York, June, 1909, under the title "Professor James's New 'Pluralistic' Philosophy." The review praised the book as a piece of literature but it did not take sides philosophically. To a pragmatist like William James this was a serious fault.

James's description of the hitherto unidentified article as "extraordinarily racy" and his reference to "the glittering atmosphere of allusion" in Huneker's style are especially interesting because of the glitter and allusiveness of his own work.

Huneker was a musician turned critic. William James could well be called an artist turned philosopher.

His letter reads as follows:

102 Colby Library Quarterly

95 Irving St.
Cambridge [Massachusetts].
June 15, 09

Dear Mr. Huneker¹ (or rather Huneker without the Mister, for it seems absurd to "Mister" a man whose mind and pen are as free as yours are)—

The receipt of your extraordinarily racy and ingenious article about my last book,² brings home to my consciousness with a sudden pang, the fact that I have never yet acknowledged the receipt of your second copy (lavish man!) of your *Egoists*,³ which I got in Cambridge and read through with much instruction and entertainment. I found the Niet[z]sche article especially good—extraordinary human being that he was, with his power of verbiage and truth of perception in some ways and debility, incurable debility, in others. The Nietzsche *Cult* is to me sickening, however.

You got yourself out of the scrape of giving any opinion which a German would call *consequent* about my book, with great dexterity. I thank you for all the flattering epithets, and for all the glittering atmosphere of allusion in which you have set it, and hope that the article may draw some readers.

Believe me, with admiring regards,
Yours very truly,

WM JAMES

¹ James G. Huneker (1860-1921).

² *A Pluralistic Universe*, published in New York in 1909 by Longmans, Green & Co.

³ *Egoists, a Book of Supermen*, by James G. Huneker; New York, Scribners, 1909. Nietzsche is seventh among eleven "supermen" discussed in the book.

