



The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche

H.L. Mencken

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Not, of course, that Nietzsche threatens, today or in the near future, to make a grand conquest of Christendom, as Paul conquered, or the unknown Father of Republics. Far from it, indeed. Filtered through the comic sieve of a Shaw or sentimentalized by a Roosevelt, some of his ideas show a considerable popularity, but in their original state they are not likely to inflame millions. Broadly viewed, they stand in direct opposition to every dream that soothes the slumber of mankind in the mass, and therefore mankind in the mass must needs be suspicious of them, at least for years to come. They are pre-eminently for the man who is *not* of the mass, for the man whose head is lifted, however little, above the common level. They justify the success of that man, as Christianity justifies the failure of the man below. And so they give no promise of winning the race in general from its old idols, despite the fact that the pull of natural laws and of elemental appetites is on their side. But inasmuch as an idea, to make itself felt in the world, need not convert the many who serve and wait but only the few who rule, it must be manifest that the Nietzschean creed, in the long run, gives promise of exercising a very real influence upon human thought. Reduced to a single phrase, it may be called a counterblast to sentimentality—and it is precisely by breaking down sentimentality, with its fondness for moribund gods, that human progress is made. If Nietzsche had left no other vital message to his time, he would have at least forced and deserved a hearing for his warning that Christianity is a theory for those who distrust and despair of their strength, and not for those who hope and fight on.

To plat his principal ideas for the reader puzzled by conflicting reports of them, to prepare the way for an orderly and profitable reading of his own books—such is the purpose of the present volume. The works of Nietzsche, as they have been done into English, fill eighteen volumes as large as this one, and the best available account of his life would make three or four more. But it is sincerely to be hoped that the student, once he has learned the main paths through this extensive country, will proceed to a diligent and thorough exploration. Of all modern philosophers Nietzsche is the least dull. He was undoubtedly the greatest German prose writer of his generation, and even when one reads him through the English veil it is impossible to escape the charm and color of his phrases and the pyrotechnic brilliance of his thinking...

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