H. L. Mencken occupies a unique if ironic place in the history of Friedrich Nietzsche’s American reception. Through the first full-length account of Nietzsche in English, Mencken did more to popularize the German philosopher in America than any other writer. Published in 1908, The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche was widely and (on the whole) favorably reviewed, and for a book of its kind, sold remarkably well. Within a year a “second edition” (actually a second printing) was issued, and a “third edition,” revised and expanded, appeared in 1913. A decade later the book was still selling and its author (now a famous journalist) was honored by Vanity Fair for “contributing more to the popular understanding of Nietzsche than any other American.”

Even a few scholars deigned to acknowledge Mencken’s “racily written book” and to praise it as “one of the most valuable Nietzschean commentaries in English.” As late as 1941, a noted intellectual historian called Mencken’s study “still one of the best and liveliest accounts of Nietzsche’s ideas” available.

In the new era of Nietzsche studies that followed World War II, Mencken’s book was totally eclipsed by the work of scholars such as Walter Kaufmann who sought to rescue the much-maligned philosopher from popular and scholarly misconceptions. As we shall see, Mencken’s Nietzsche could be of no assistance in this task and was conveniently ignored. And yet the book itself, unlike Mencken who died in 1956, refused to stay buried. Between 1967 and 1978 it was reprinted no fewer than four times, albeit by small publishers with limited circulation. This revival neatly paralleled both the surging scholarly interest in Nietzsche and the ongoing canonization of Mencken as an “American iconoclast.” Among those contributing to the latter, Charles A. Fecher observed that Mencken’s Nietzsche “may have been replaced by more authoritative treatises, but to this day no more readable study of Nietzsche has appeared.”

Quentin Taylor is professor of history and political science at Rogers State University in Claremore, Oklahoma. His publications include The Republic of Genius: A Reconstruction of Nietzsche’s Early Thought.
proof of this statement, Mencken’s Nietzsche was again resuscitated in a 1993 reprint with a lengthy introduction by political theorist Richard Flathman. While noting its faults, Flathman praised the work as “a singularly accessible and continuously provocative account of Nietzsche’s complex and elusive ideas.” Like earlier reprints, however, Flathman’s edition was too obscure for popular success and proved just as ephemeral.

And still the corpse continued to kick. In 2006 Mencken’s Nietzsche was given new life and near-classic status in a Barnes and Noble paperback edition reprinted as part of its “library of essential reading.” Now one could find Mencken alongside Dickens, Franklin, Yeats, and other approved masters in the largest bookstore chain in America. In his introduction, Dennis Sweet leaves little doubt regarding the merit of making Mencken’s Nietzsche widely available to twenty-first-century readers. It is a work “rich in insights and extremely thorough,” “a clear, no-nonsense presentation of all the major themes contained in Nietzsche’s writings.” Mencken’s skillful synthesis of these themes is nothing short of “remarkable,” and, given the dearth of secondary sources at the time, his ability to produce “such a useful, readable book” is “truly amazing.” Moreover, it is—unlike most books on Nietzsche—“well written” and contains “one of the best biographical essays” ever penned on the philosopher.

Indeed, Mencken is in some respects a better expositor of Nietzsche than Nietzsche himself—often “clearer and more comprehensible,” and “mak[ing] Nietzsche’s point better than Nietzsche does.” Like Flathman, Sweet acknowledges “obvious flaws” in Mencken’s presentation, but its many virtues—substantive and seminal—more than compensate for its shortcomings. All in all, The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, a century after its appearance, remains for Sweet the best popular account of the iconoclastic philosopher in print, a verdict recently echoed by the author of American Nietzsche, who characterizes the work as “a rollicking master narrative” by the writer who “did more to establish the persona of Friedrich Nietzsche in America” than any other.

The popular success and longevity of Mencken’s Nietzsche is not without its ironies. First, the idea for the book was not Mencken’s but was suggested by the publisher of his first book, a short treatise on the plays of George Bernard Shaw. It was during the composition of this book that Mencken first took an interest in Nietzsche, whether inspired by Shaw or through the articles of the popular critic James Huneker. The moderate success of the Shaw book (which included references to and an epigram supplied by Nietzsche) led its publisher, Harrison Schaff, to solicit a book by Mencken on Nietzsche, hoping to cash in on the emerging “Nietzsche vogue.”

But Mencken initially declined to write it. “The task,” he told Schaff, “is one for a man of ample leisure and thorough scholarship. I have little of the former and make no pretense to the latter.” Mencken’s assessment was accurate on both counts: he was busy journalist not a scholar, and his German was rudimentary at best. Schaff, however, persisted, and Mencken, though “not enthusiastic,” agreed. As a full-time editor at the Baltimore Sun, Mencken had to research and write the book in his spare hours. Its success not only popularized Nietzsche but catapulted the twenty-seven-year-old Mencken into the national spotlight, where he would—with varying degrees of magnitude—shine for the next four decades as America’s most well-known and inveterate contrarian.
The role of Nietzsche in Mencken’s rise to fame is clear enough, but what of its role in shaping Mencken’s inimitable style and “sham-smashing” ideas? Students of Mencken disagree but tend to place more weight on Nietzsche’s stylistic influence. According to a study of Mencken’s literary criticism, “Nietzsche showed the young newspaperman how to express himself in a vibrant, muscular manner, employing a metaphoric language that was often outlandish and shocking and that possessed, above all else, the quality of unexpectedness.”

Thomas A. Huxley, the British agnostic whom Mencken worshipped, may have “provided a model for Mencken’s style,” but “Nietzsche was to give Mencken the perfect example of a style that was explosively alive.” Menken was certainly a great admirer of Nietzsche’s style: for its power and persuasiveness he ranked it second only to Huxley’s. Just as Nietzsche had praised “the tempo” of Machiavelli’s Prince—with its “boisterous allegrissimo”—so Mencken celebrated the “violent eloquence” of The Antichrist—“beginning allegro, it proceeds from forte, by an uninterrupted crescendo to allegro con moltissimo molto fortissimo.”

Menken reconsidered his debt. “I must say now that your argument rather shakes me. I was picking up Nietzscheisms without being aware of them, and they undoubtedly got into my stuff.” Whatever his actual debt to Nietzsche, he followed up his book with a volume of Nietzsche quotations (1910), a translation of The Antichrist (1920)—which he considered Nietzsche’s best book—and an introduction to a translation of The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence (1922). Later he would draw upon the themes and structure of The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche to develop his own line of thought in Treatise on the Gods, In Defense of Women, and Notes on Democracy. Needless to say, his countless essays and articles abound in Nietzschean thoughts and influences. “Nietzsche’s ideas and image,” it has been observed, “were for Mencken gifts that kept on giving.”

Nietzsche was clearly “good” to Mencken. But did Mencken return the favor? To popularize a writer—particularly one as complex and nuanced as Nietzsche—is not always a laudable achievement. Darwin had his Huxley and Marx his Engels, but was Mencken a worthy expositor of Nietzsche? The preceding account of the reception of Mencken’s Nietzsche and subsequent criticism tells but one side of the story. In truth, the book’s success was owing to a convergence of timing, ignorance, and Mencken’s peculiar “use” of Nietzsche. Interest in Nietzsche had been growing since the philosopher’s death in 1900, which was noted in an obituary of the New York Times.

Mencken was far more equivocal regarding the influence of Nietzsche’s ideas on his thought. On one occasion he acknowledged that his attacks on American culture “were plainly based in Nietzsche; without him I’d never have come to them.” Later he would refer to Nietzsche as “a work of my youth” and distance himself from his popular association with the philosopher. “In my mind my debt to Nietzsche seems very slight,” he wrote decades later, “though I confess that other people seem to have put a larger value on it.” Yet in response to a graduate student writing a thesis on that very subject,
Huneker was the “first [in America] to sense the true stature of Nietzsche.” By the time Mencken wrote *Nietzsche*, modernists like Shaw and Ibsen were just beginning to gain an American audience: the ground had been plowed and scattered and only awaited the seed. Mencken’s publisher saw this more clearly than did Mencken.

This is not to say that many turn-of-the-century Americans had actually read Nietzsche or understood him. Only a few of Nietzsche’s writings had been translated into English when Mencken’s book first appeared in 1908. Nietzsche was still new, and besides Huneker few in America were qualified to review it. This, no doubt, accounts for much of the praise it received in the press. Yet not all the reviews were favorable, and at least one exposed the true character of the book. Menken’s most recent and thorough biographer notes that the first reviews were actually “tart and scornful,” while others were lukewarm. On the whole, there was more praise for the style than the substance. As *The Nation* observed, “We can commend the exegesis, though we repudiate the conclusions.” But were the rejected conclusions Nietzsche’s or Mencken’s? As the reviewer for *The Dial* explained, Mencken’s presentation made it hard to tell, for “the reader is often left in doubt as to where the author is speaking his own views and where he is merely presenting those of Nietzsche.”

This doubt is not only understandable but also speaks to a defining quality of Mencken’s treatment of Nietzsche. Like Shaw and Ibsen, Nietzsche was a vehicle for the conveyance of Mencken’s ideas—ideas he had already absorbed before he approached these writers. The most important of these was *social Darwinism* with its attendant atheism. By the time he wrote *Nietzsche*, Mencken had drunk deeply from the wells of Spencer, Huxley, and Sumner—the leading social Darwinists on either side of the Atlantic. This accounts for the recurring Darwinian theme that runs like a leitmotiv through Mencken’s *Nietzsche*.

That Nietzsche sneered at Darwin and scoffed at Spencer did not deter Mencken—these would be explained away as a function of the philosopher’s intolerance, egotism, and acute Anglophobia. For all his efforts to deny his kinship, Nietzsche was “the successor of Spencer,” a “thorough Darwinian” who stood on the shoulders of these giants and labored in the same vineyard. Clearly, Mencken believed he understood Nietzsche’s intellectual debts and trajectory better than Nietzsche himself and, in the act of “correcting” him, transformed the thinker in his own image. In the first scholarly biography of Mencken, William Manchester gave this feature of the book its classic gloss, repeated by virtually all subsequent biographers. “The subject of *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, it is well to remember, is Mencken’s Nietzsche, not Nietzsche’s Nietzsche.”

Although Manchester did not pass judgment on the substance of the book, a number of his successors have. A few have judged it for what it is: the work of a propagandist who “used” Nietzsche to give a certain intellectual vogue to his own brand of iconoclasm. One biographer observes that “Mencken transformed the Will to Power into the Darwinian contest for the survival of the fittest,” an interpretation that was “not only arbitrary but superficial.” Another notes that Menken distorted Nietzsche by “viewing his subject in the perspective of evolutionism and scientific naturalism.” A third avers that Mencken’s “book has never been highly regarded [by scholars] as a treatment of Nietzsche,” while yet another pegs it as a work of “journalism, not scholarship” that has been justly ignored by all but students of Mencken.

46
Only two writers, however, have provided sustained and penetrating accounts of Mencken’s appropriation of Nietzsche. According to William H. Williams, Mencken was hardly unique in treating Nietzsche like a “philosophical ragbag” to be raided for partisan purposes. Long before the Nazi appropriation, Nietzsche had been enlisted by anarchists, socialists, Christians, and even feminists. Mencken was none of these, but as a commissioned author expected to “deliver the goods” he faced the challenge of introducing a decidedly un-American author to an American audience. As Williams observes,  

Because Nietzsche’s philosophy challenged so many basic American values, Mencken faced a formidable task in trying to make him palatable to an American audience. He needed some familiar frame of reference within which Nietzsche might be fitted. Therefore, Mencken forced the German into the one mode of American popular thought that Mencken himself enthusiastically accepted: social Darwinism. By Darwinizing Nietzsche, Mencken also Americanized him.  

Even a “Darwinized” Nietzsche still challenged a number of basic American values, yet if Williams is correct in his interpretation of Mencken’s intent, it proved a winning strategy—for Mencken if not for Nietzsche. Mencken seized upon Nietzsche as a highly serviceable tool to “stir up the animals,” vent his prejudices, and indulge his fantasy of a “new aristocracy of efficiency.” More than simply appealing to an American audience, Mencken sought to synthesize Darwin and Nietzsche on behalf of a radical elitist vision. More specifically,  

He wanted to turn social Darwinism into an apologia for pure elitism. In trying to graft what he took from Nietzsche onto social Darwinism, Mencken sought to use the former to purify the latter by reestablishing individualism at the center of social philosophy. Nietzsche helped Mencken rid social Darwinism of the “corrupting” influences of Christian altruism and Progressive idealism. At the same time, Mencken sought to arm Nietzscheism with the Darwinian weapons of the struggle for existence and the law of natural selection, which he hoped would provide the liberating force for his aristocracy of iconoclasts.  

In light of this enterprise, one may doubt that Mencken “Americanized” Nietzsche at all. Not only was social Darwinism in decline at the turn of the century, but Mencken’s extreme version went well beyond the bounds of its American (democratic) setting. As cultural historian Henry F. May has observed, Mencken’s collected writings represent “a complete repudiation of all the most fundamental tenets of the dominant American credo of his time.” Whether he actually believed all he wrote, as some of his friends doubted he did, is for May beside the point. The success of his book on Nietzsche, with its healthy dose of invective and bombast, only emboldened Mencken in his iconoclasm.  

He certainly succeeded in tickling the ear of America, but it would in the end prove a hollow triumph that Mencken himself downplayed and careful readers of Nietzsche could only deplore. For in addition to his grotesque caricature of the philosopher, Mencken “totally missed” Nietzsche at a deeper level.  

The emotional and psychological storm center flashing behind Nietzsche’s work
was totally lost upon Mencken. He was poorly equipped, both philosophically and temperamentally, to understand the existentialist side of the German’s thought. Comfortably and uncritically immersed in social Darwinism and a firm believer in progress, Mencken was completely insensitive to the spiritual crisis of the nineteenth-century intellectuals who had agonized over the challenge that science and materialism had presented to the metaphysical and spiritual side of their culture. Oblivious to the sense of crisis, Mencken missed the heart of Nietzsche’s work and found it relatively easy to gloss over the philosopher’s condemnation of Darwin as a nihilist.32

In his article on Mencken’s “uses and abuses” of Nietzsche, Manfred Stassen repeats a number of these observations and implicates Mencken in the American “misunderstanding” of Nietzsche as well as the “backlash” that followed the outbreak of war in 1914.33 He does, however, credit Mencken with starting “a serious debate over Nietzsche in America” even if it was “for the most part without tangible results.” What Stassen fails to note, however, is that the debate’s lack of results was in large part due to the untoward influence of Mencken’s Nietzsche and the discredit his iconoclasm brought upon himself and the philosopher. He helped dig Nietzsche into a hole that took serious scholars nearly a half-century to excavate. It may be “Mencken’s merit to have introduced Nietzsche to an American audience as a serious and catalytic thinker,”34 but it was done meretriciously.

Almost from the beginning, serious students of Nietzsche were aware of Mencken’s fabrication and his lack of any real affinity with the philosopher. The typical response was simply to ignore Mencken, but a few paused to express their distress at his influence. In the best of the first books on Nietzsche, William M. Salter (1917) identified Mencken as the source “from whom many seem to get their ideas of Nietzsche, but who unfortunately more or less vulgarizes him.”35 Salter also led the effort in the United States to defend Nietzsche against charges of militarism and barbarism that followed the onset of the Great War. Mencken’s Nietzsche had prepared the ground for such charges, and his pro-German stance during the first years of the war only multiplied them. The attempt of a federal agent to incriminate him by placing a manuscript on Nietzsche in his possession provided an ironic sequel to his success as a popularizer.36

It was silence, however, that greeted Mencken in Morgan (1941), Copleston (1942), Reyburn (1948), and other competent accounts of Nietzsche prior to Kaufmann’s landmark study (1950). Among scholars only Crane Brinton (1941) praised Mencken for his “good, colorful exposition” of the “tough” (in contrast to Salter’s “tender”) Nietzsche.37 He also portrayed Nietzsche as a kind of intellectual godfather of the Nazis, an interpretation that gained widespread currency with the popularity of Brinton’s book during World War II. In an indirect way, Mencken had again contributed to the vulgarization of Nietzsche. It was left to Walter Kaufman and others to clean up the mess, but Mencken was never held accountable.38

There is little point in documenting Mencken’s century-old errors—they are many, gross, and palpable. Yet they are not simply errors of interpretation or of shoddy research or even of journalese. They are the smudged fingerprints of a forger who used Shaw, Ibsen, and Nietzsche to counterfeit a likeness of Shaw, Ibsen, and Nietzsche—a
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likeness that in the end was Mencken himself. Why, then, have otherwise responsible scholars like Flathman and Sweet seen fit to recirculate and pass off as true coin this counterfeit Nietzsche? And why have others overlooked the irony in Mencken’s “success” as the great preceptor of Nietzsche in America? The first question is even more troubling in light of the racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism that mark Nietzsche and other parts of Mencken’s oeuvre. Mencken’s brand of politics—a kind of libertarian fascism—is no less embarrassing to contemporary readers.

The failure of recent scholars to draw attention to Mencken’s leading role in vulgarizing Nietzsche is far more forgivable than dubbing him a “classic,” but it remains a regrettable oversight. In her authoritative biography

Mencken: The American Iconoclast, Marion Rogers merely repeats the story of Mencken’s success as a popularizer of Nietzsche, with no reference to the content or merit of his book. Similarly, in American Nietzsche, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhaghen chronicles the book’s origin and influence but little more. Brinton, not Mencken, is indicted as the primary source of the “vulgar” Nietzsche.

Had The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche sat moldering in the stacks of the library annex for the last fifty years, none of this would much matter. Yet its recent appearance in the guise of a “classic” is a provocation that calls for a response. A century after the book’s publication, the fitting response is a critical “observance”—for Mencken’s Nietzsche could never merit a tribute."

2. M. A. Mügge, Friedrich Nietzsche: His Life and Work (London: F. Fisher Unwin, 1911), 7; Willard H. Wright, What Nietzsche Taught (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1917), 331. Wright, it should be noted, was a colleague of Mencken’s on the staff of the Smart Set.
6. Dennis Sweet, introduction to The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2006), vii. It is this edition that is quoted below.
7. Sweet, introduction, vii, ix.
12. Mencken, Nietzsche, 93.
13. Quoted in Ratner-Rosenhaghen, American Nietzsche, 56.
15. Quoted in Fecher, Mencken, 135.
18. Ratner-Rosenhaghen, American Nietzsche, 41.
21. Quoted in Bode, Mencken, 84.
22. When Mencken took the side of Germany after the outbreak of the Great War, he would also explain away Nietzsche’s criticism of German politics and culture as a youthful aberration and insist that with Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1889), “Germany becomes Nietzsche; Nietzsche becomes Germany.” Quoted in Hobson, Mencken, 140.
26. Stenerson, Mencken, 118.
29. Williams, Mencken, 13.
30. Williams, Mencken, 16.
32. Williams, Mencken, 15.
34. Stassen, “Nietzsche vs. the Booboisie,” 107, 112.
36. Rogers, Mencken, 182. This incident appears to be the source for the apocryphal report that Mencken was arrested as a war agent of “the German monster, Nietzsky [sic].” Rudiger Safranski, Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography, trans. Shelley Frisch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 329.
37. Brinton, Nietzsche, 294.
38. Because of its popularity and the author’s scholarly credentials, Brinton’s Nietzsche (not Mencken’s) was a central target of Kaufmann’s critique of “vulgar” Nietzscheism. In his review of Kauffman’s study, Brinton modified or withdrew many of his findings. See Ratner-Rosenhagan, American Nietzsche, 240–43.
39. Steilberg goes beyond oversight and praises Mencken as a precursor to Morgan and Kauffman, the very scholars who rescued Nietzsche from Mencken’s vulgarization. “From Dolson to Kaufman,” 259.
40. Ratner-Rosenhagan does cite the few prior studies of Nietzsche’s reception and early influence in America, but does not build upon them in the case of Mencken.