David N. Myers’ *Resisting History* is a welcome addition to the study of early-twentieth-century German-Jewish thought. Few recent periods are as intellectually rich or as fraught with so poignant a sense of lost possibility as the years that span the waning reign of Kaiser Wilhelm and the brief flourishing of Weimar. Myers, who has previously written authoritatively on historicist dimensions of Zionism, here takes on a rival group of Jewish scholars and thinkers: Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Leo Strauss, and Isaac Breuer. To be sure, these thinkers differ significantly among themselves on such issues as the relation between reason and faith, their respective understandings of the perils and possibilities of Jewish diaspora, and their own religious commitments or lack thereof. At the same time, Myers argues, they have importantly in common a shared resistance to the historicist habits and convictions that shaped the views of many educated Germans of the period.

What most provoked that opposition and distrust in the four thinkers under review was the tendency of historicism to undermine belief in or adherence to any transcendental understanding of truth. For all its varied meanings, historicism signifies, above all, a rejection of timeless standards, be they understood as laws of God, necessities of nature, or overriding patterns of history. The historicist seeks to know the individual event “in context” and as a unique, unrepeatable moment, without presuming to transcend his own ephemeral horizon. According to the “logic” of historicism, says Myers, each event is to be understood “as an individual unit, assessed on its own terms and according to its own unique development” (p. 2). Whether such events are understood as “organisms” or (in keeping with more recent intellectual trends) as the nodes of cross-cutting cultural vectors, they ultimately constitute no more than “pearls” collected on a string, without transcendental meaning.

Myers is very helpful in tracing the history of this important intellectual and cultural movement from its early-nineteenth-century roots to its

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postmodern radicalizations, and he has a fine ear for the many ironies and intellectual cul-de-sacs in which historicism is culturally embedded. He also brings clarity and insight to his discussion of the nationalist focus of early German historicism, and related Jewish responses both against and for history, as Jews sought their own uneasy path between assimilation and a nationalism of their own. Alike in their rejection of Zionism as an adequate solution to the problem of diasporic exile in the modern world, each of the thinkers in question seeks a way to remain a Jew in the face of an historicizing liberal culture that calls traditional Jewish practice into question. And each finds his answer in claims to a transcendent standard, be it neo-Kantian reason (Cohen), an existential experience of Revelation (Rosenzweig), medieval rationalism (Strauss), or traditional Orthodoxy (Breuer).

Throughout, Myers is frank about his own “ambivalence” toward historicism. On the one hand, he is unable to escape its intellectual grip; on the other, he is disturbed by its corrosive implications for a serious Jewish life as it has always been understood. The traditional Jewish view of secular history is represented by the following Orthodox injunction which Myers aptly cites: “Rather than write the history of our forebears, every generation has to put a veil over the human failings of its elders and glorify the rest which is great and beautiful” (p. 30). In short, Myers “historicizes” anti-historicism, while at the same time openly confessing his own yearning for transcendence. Thus his appraisal of the four thinkers on which he trains his gaze is also strikingly sympathetic, or, in his own words, personally “invested.”

At the same time, Myers’ historicizing approach to intellectual history is not without its perils. This becomes especially clear in his analysis of the thought of the young Leo Strauss. Though Myers gives a perceptive account of Strauss’ background and early leanings, he fails to read Strauss’ own statements with the care that they deserve. For example, Myers claims that “the highest ideal for Strauss was a noble atheism” (p. 117). Myers bases this claim almost wholly on the following passage from Strauss’ preface to the English edition of Spinoza’s Critique of Religion: “A new kind of fortitude which forbids itself every flight from the horror of life into comforting delusion… reveals itself eventually as the ultimate and purest ground for the rebellion against revelation.” This new atheism, which reveals itself “as a descendant of biblical morality,” confronts Orthodoxy “with a combination of gratitude, rebellion, longing, and indifference.” In repeating this line, however, Myers omits what follows. As Strauss goes on to say, such an atheism, however eloquent, cannot disguise the “fact that its basis is an act of will” and that it is as such “fatal to any philosophy.” As Strauss laconically concludes, “other
observations and experiences confirmed the suspicion that it would be unwise to say farewell to reason.” In short, the strange mixture of “gratitude, rebellion, longing and indifference” is a quality that he attributes, not to himself, as Myers avers, but to a “modern atheism” that Strauss specifically rejects.

Myers similarly errs in calling the later Strauss a “radical historicist” (p. 129). In fact, Strauss’ most famous book, Natural Right and History, is a critique of historicism in all its guises, and not least the “radical historicism” associated with the thought of Heidegger and Nietzsche. In accusing Strauss of “veering between historicism and anti-historicism” (p. 124), Myers mistakes historical analysis with an anti-historicist purpose for historicism as such.

These serious errors by a generally meticulous scholar are not only jarring in themselves; they also suggest a larger defect in Myers’ approach: Myers tends to treat arguments as illustrative “symptoms” of a cultural era rather than as truth claims in their own right. He thus takes Strauss’ respectful entertaining of religious arguments as a sign of psychological “ambivalence” typical of certain Jewish thinkers at a particular historical moment, rather than as the serious philosophic inquiry that it claims to be. For similar reasons, Myers fails to treat Strauss’ critique of historicism on its own merits and thus fails to take it sufficiently seriously. It is especially unfortunate, in this regard, that Myers does not engage Natural Right and History directly, especially the chapter entitled “Natural Right and the Historical Approach.” As Strauss there makes perfectly clear, he turns to history not out of ambivalence but in order to uncover historicism’s largely forgotten premises—premises, in his view, that are by no means self-evident. Strauss may, of course, be wrong. But there is nothing in Resisting History that addresses his challenge, let alone refutes it.

Such difficulties raise larger questions of intellectual history, especially when it concerns thinkers as demanding as the four under consideration in Myers’ study. Whatever the merits of cultural contextualism when applied to lesser figures, those under review resist such treatment, if only because their thought is difficult to capture accurately without extensive engagement on its own terms. Where such individuals are concerned, the intellectual historian cannot, it seems, escape the

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task of thinking philosophically. Here, Myers’ avowed desire for companions in “despair” may well deter him from engaging his subject as fully as he might.

None of this is meant to take away from the general achievement of Myers’ book. The author illustrates, with a rare sensitivity and poignancy, the dilemmas facing German Jewish intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century. German nationalism proved a particularly difficult venue for German Jews dealing in their own way with modernity’s discontents. Myers makes a powerful case for the particular challenge posed by historical consciousness for theology, both Jewish and Christian, attempting to respond to the joint assault of modern science and modern democratic politics. Historicism as an intellectual movement proves in his hands a particularly instructive prism through which to view the troubled and complex interdependence of Jewish and Christian thought during this period. Myers sheds light on affinities between Rosenzweig’s work and related developments among some German Protestants. The chapter on Cohen points suggestively at the Kantian provenance of much of the disturbance over history. And the chapter on Breuer is an especially welcome introduction to a thinker not widely known outside Orthodox circles. Finally, Myers is surely right in suggesting that historicism remains a dominant intellectual current, albeit often under new names.

In sum, this is a fine study of a group of early-twentieth-century German-Jewish thinkers who have generally received too little attention. Their mainly skeptical attitude toward Zionism presages later intellectual and political quandaries. And their appreciation for the theologically and morally destructive implications of historicism is in many ways equally prescient. One must regret, however, that Myers does not take more seriously the arguments they marshal not only to “resist” historicism but also to refute it. His conclusion—that the thinkers in question, for all their “anti-historicist intentions,” cannot escape their own “historicist impulses” (p. 172)—may seem premature to readers who do not share the author’s sense of historicist entrapment.

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