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Temporality, Exile, and Freedom: Reconstructing Rachel Bespaloff's Political Philosophy

Temporalità, esilio e libertà: ricostruire la filosofia politica di Rachel Bespaloff

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Abstract. This article reconstructs Rachel Bespaloff's political philosophy through the intersecting themes of exile, corporeality and temporality. Focusing on "Twofold Relationship" and "On the Iliad," it examines her concepts of the instant and embodied freedom. In dialogue with Hannah Arendt's philosophy of action and her notion of natality, it reconstructs Bespaloff's ethics forged under violence and war. It finally contrasts their respective political visions, arguing that statelessness reveals the limits of the nation-state while enabling new forms of beginning.

Keywords: Rachel Bespaloff, political philosophy, exile, Hannah Arendt, freedom.

Riassunto. Questo articolo propone una ricostruzione della filosofia politica di Rachel Bespaloff a partire dall'intreccio tra esilio, corporeità e temporalità. L'analisi dei saggi "Twofold Relationship" e "On the Iliad" chiarisce i concetti di istante e libertà incarnata. In dialogo con la filosofia dell'azione e con il concetto di natalità di Hannah Arendt, l'articolo ricostruisce un'etica elaborata nel contesto della violenza e della guerra e mette a confronto le rispettive visioni politiche, mostrando come l'apolidia riveli i limiti dello Stato-nazione e apra a nuove forme di inizio.

Parole chiave: Rachel Bespaloff, filosofia politica, esilio, Hannah Arendt, libertà.

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1. Introduction

Few thinkers of the twentieth century wrote from within exile as intimately and profoundly as Rachel Bespaloff (1895–1949). A luminous yet still peripheral figure in early existentialism and phenomenology, Bespaloff transformed the ruptures of her life – geographical, historical, and metaphysical – into a philosophy attuned to the fleeting instants in which meaning can emerge amid catastrophe. Leading French intellectuals of her time, including Albert Camus, Gaston Fessard, Daniel Halévy, Boris de Schloezer, Jean Wahl, Lev Shestov, Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel, all read and admired her works.[1] Bespaloff corresponded extensively with many of them, first in Paris, then from exile in the US during World War II. Prolific during her life, cut short in 1949, Bespaloff is only gradually rediscovered today. Thanks to a new wave of recent editions, translations and studies, we can reconstruct Bespaloff's existential-political project: a project that sets human existence as constitutively exilic, never fully at home, never reconciled.[2]

Born into a Ukrainian-Jewish family in Nova Zagora, Bulgaria, Bespaloff's life was marked by a relentless series of exiles, both voluntary and forced, from Geneva to Paris and Mount Holyoke. Transit and migration stamped an indelible mark on her philosophy. Exile, for Bespaloff, was not merely a biographical or geopolitical fact, but the very foundation of human existence, which she theorised in her major philosophical works, from "On the Iliad" (1943/1947), to "Twofold Relationship" (1943), "The Humanism of Péguy" (1947), and the unfinished "L'instant et la liberté" (1950, post.). Bespaloff's philosophy explores temporality and force, articulating a thought in perpetual exodus shaped by a distinctly rhythmic, embodied vision of human life.

In this article, we argue that Bespaloff did not consider exile merely a historical predicament of European Jews persecuted during World War II; she drew from it a full-fledged philosophy of existence, one that resonates across contemporary thought, aligning her with, but also distinguishing her from, other Jewish women philosophers of her generation such as

[1] On Camus's reading of Bespaloff, see Jacobs, "Dancing and Time" and Lombard, "Albert Camus and Rachel Bespaloff." For her correspondence, see Bespaloff, *Lettres à Jean Wahl* and "Lettres à Gabriel Marcel."

[2] The most complete edition of Bespaloff's works has recently been published in Italian, see Bespaloff, *L'eternità nell'istante* and *La sfida della libertà*. Among other new editions are her early writings on music, edited by Olivier Salazar-Ferrer under the title *De la compréhension musicale à la métaphysique de l'instant: Écrits sur la musique et la danse* (2022). Our analysis of Bespaloff has been shaped by current scholarship, in particular by Laura Sanò, Cristina Guarnieri, Nadia Fusini, Claude Cazalé Berard, Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, Christopher Benfey, Massimo Palma and Monique Jutrin.

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) and Simone Weil (1909–1943).[3] In what follows, we will analyse specifically Bespaloff's affinities and divergences with Arendt's reflections on exile, statelessness and the idea of beginning, situating their thought within a shared yet distinctly inflected horizon. Where Arendt's essay "We Refugees" (1943) explored the existential and political dimensions of exile, statelessness, assimilation and uprootedness (*Entwurzelung*), Bespaloff's essay on Homer's *Iliad* dealt with freedom, force, and the hopelessness of exile. Their liminal perspectives – as Jewish women refugees between Europe and the United States – provided them with a novel, if tragic view on human existence.

Both thinkers share one insight: exile is not simply a loss but an aperture to radical experiences of time and freedom. Yet Bespaloff's accent is unique: a musical, plastic vision of existence as metamorphosis, rhythm, interrupted gesture. Entwining philosophy, dance, music, and writing, Bespaloff offers a reflection on exile that, we argue, is not primarily a nostalgic lament for lost origins, but a call to re-birth from nothingness, to suspend the noise of history in order to access "instants" of freedom.[4] This approach sets her apart from Arendt, with whom she shares an awareness of modern statelessness but from whom she differs in her insistence on the corporeality and musicality of philosophy.

This paper unfolds in three parts. The first reconstructs Bespaloff's understanding of exile as a fundamental condition of human existence, focusing on her reflections on Jewishness and the "twofold relationship" as a lens through which she rethinks identity, belonging, and the political meaning of exile. It situates these ideas in dialogue with Arendt's analysis of statelessness and the collapse of political community in the modern age. The second explores Bespaloff's philosophy of embodied temporality and the instant, critically connecting her inward, rhythmic conception of freedom with Arendt's political concept of "natality." The final section develops her tragic ethics of fidelity into a politics of exile – one that understands freedom not as mastery or restoration, but as the fragile capacity to act and endure meaningfully within the ruins of history. The concluding remarks gesture towards the continuing relevance of Bespaloff's thought for contemporary crises of displacement, migration and the precarious search for dignity beyond the bounds of the nation-state.

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[3] On Bespaloff and Weil, see Nadia Fusini, *Hannah e le altre.*

[4] As her correspondence reveals, Bespaloff never found herself at home in American exile which she perceived as "chronic," as she tells Wahl shortly after the end of the war. See Bespaloff, *Lettres à Jean Wahl*, 109 (cited in Sanò, *Un pensiero in esilio,* 130, note 40).

1.1. Twofold Relationship: Bespaloff and the Jewish Diaspora

Written amid World War II and the persecution of millions of European Jews, Bespaloff's 1943 essay "Twofold Relationship" diagnoses with painful lucidity the inescapable tension at the heart of modern Jewish identity: between the universal and the particular, between the ethical demand for integration into broader humanity and the persistent burden of distinctiveness – one imposed as much by external hostility as by internal memory. In this text, Bespaloff identifies a "twofold relationship" that shapes the Jewish condition: Jews, she argues, are caught in a historical double-bind – summoned to universalism but excluded by nationalism, invoked as ethical exemplars yet condemned as perpetual outsiders: "Where we see a possible and desirable reconciliation, the state discovers only inconsistency and duplicity. When we strive for a more exact loyalty to ourselves and to the state, it accuses us of playing both ends."[5]

Her vision resists the liberal ideal of assimilation and remains ambivalent toward the nationalist promise of Zionist ideology. As she puts it: "if the assimilationist Jew aspires to be a *citizen like all the others*, the Zionist wants the whole Jewish people to become a *nation like all others*."[6] Although she did not directly follow in the footsteps of her father, Daniel Pasmanik – a prominent leader and ideologist of the Zionist movement in the Russian empire – Bespaloff adhered to the Zionist project, which she saw as the most effective political response to genocide, as she wrote to Jean Wahl.[7] Amid the horrors of the Holocaust and under the weight of an aggressive nationalism that saps the religious core of the Jewish diaspora, Bespaloff upholds her own interpretation of Zionism. Rooted in biblical and prophetic tradition, her vision affirms that "the return of Israel to his own land with his temporal order must, according to the Bible, serve as a prelude to a new covenant with God."[8]

However, Bespaloff's "prophetic Zionism" does not harbor illusions that a "homeland" in Palestine will resolve the "Jewish question" once and for all.[9] While in an exchange of letters with right-wing thinker Daniel Halévy – first published in the *Revue juive de Genève* in 1938 – Bespaloff passionately defends the need for the constitution of a Jewish state in Palestine, in "Twofold Relationship" she seems to be more cautious. Similar to Arendt, she emphasises the difficulties of cohabitation with "the Arabs" – the multiethnic population inhabiting the territory – in Palestine, as

[5] Bespaloff, "Twofold Relationship," 251–252.
[6] *Ibid*., 245.
[7] Bespaloff, *Lettres à Jean Wahl*, 25 and 126.
[8] Bespaloff, "Twofold Relationship," 245.
[9] See Borsari, "Bespaloff, un sionismo ostile a che Israele rinasca."

well as the non-effectiveness of any national solution for the problem of statelessness:

> if Zionism is to insist upon nothing less than the full attainment of its objectives, it will have to contend with the limited territory in Palestine and the resistance of the Arabs to any expansion [...] even if Zionism restores to life and liberates the decimated Jewish communities of Europe, a considerable portion of our people will continue to live in the Diaspora.[10]

Bespaloff's prediction echoes Arendt's remark in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that far from solving the problem of statelessness, "like virtually all other events of our century, the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people." Most importantly, for Bespaloff, Jewish identity could not be reduced to sovereignty, territory, or bloodline. Rather, it was an existential orientation: a commitment to memory, to prophetic witness, and to the fragile endurance of dignity amid catastrophe. This stance also resonates with Arendt, whose early engagement with Zionism evolved into a critique of the dangers of state-centred politics and imperialism.

The paradox Bespaloff identifies in "Twofold Relationship" – the impossibility of full belonging coupled with the ethical demand to remain faithful to one's estrangement – becomes the seed of her wider philosophical project. For her, exile comes to define the structure of modern human existence itself: to live without fixed ground, to endure displacement as the condition of thought. This transformation marks a decisive passage from the analysis of Jewish identity to a philosophy that treats exile as the essence of being-in-the-world. It is from within this expanded horizon that Bespaloff articulates her philosophy of tragic temporality, trusting in the brief and precarious instants where human beings, torn apart by history, can still escape pure necessity and listen – with their entire bodies – to what she called, using existentialist terms, the silent music of being.

Like Arendt, Bespaloff did not see exile as passive uprootedness but as a locus of dignity, responsibility, and tragic endurance. Yet, Bespaloff's account diverges in its insistence on the intimate, embodied dimensions of exile. In this sense, "Twofold Relationship" stands at the threshold of her broader thought: it translates the historical trauma of the diaspora into an ontology of displacement, from which Bespaloff would later articulate a vision of dignity and responsibility without foundations. It is from this

[10] Bespaloff, "Twofold Relationship," 246. The letters between Bespaloff and Halévy turned into an essay later republished in the journal *Conférence* under the title "Sur la question juive" [On the Jewish question].

threshold that the next section turns to Bespaloff's philosophy of exile, and to its resonances and tensions with Arendt's reflections on statelessness.

1.2. Philosophy of Exile: Arendt and Bespaloff on Statelessness

When Bespaloff fled occupied France for the United States in 1942, exile became the very medium of her thinking. Her philosophical writing from this period – letters, essays, fragments – emerges from the tension between intellectual continuity and geographical rupture. Teaching at Mount Holyoke and corresponding with other émigré thinkers, she forged a conception of philosophy as a practice of survival: a way of holding thought together when history and homeland had collapsed. This "philosophy of exile" transforms displacement into a form of awareness that human existence is always provisional, exposed, and yet capable of fidelity and freedom.

The dislocation that shaped her ideas also structured her daily life. Bespaloff joined a community of displaced Jewish and European intellectuals seeking refuge in America, a generation, as she wrote, "which history forced to live in a climate of violent death."[11] Together with her mother and daughter, her library and piano, in 1942, Bespaloff boarded a cargo ship to New York, among the last to leave France. She got a job with the Voice of America's French broadcast before moving to Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, where she taught French literature. Mount Holyoke became an important outpost for French culture in the US during the war.

At gatherings of exiled scholars organised by Jean Wahl, Bespaloff met Jacques Maritain, André Masson, Marc Chagall and Claude Lévi-Strauss.[12] Bespaloff also made an impression on Hannah Arendt who visited Mount Holyoke in August 1944 to deliver a lecture on Franz Kafka. Arendt's reading of Kafka, later published in *Partisan Review*, echoed Bespaloff's existentialist despair. Under the shadow of war, Arendt describes humanity as inescapably trapped in history's meshes. Kafka's "nightmare of a world" had become reality.[13]

Before eventually meeting in Mount Holyoke, Bespaloff and Arendt might have crossed paths in Paris, where Arendt briefly found refuge after leaving Berlin in 1933.[14] Although not a frequent visitor in émigré circles, in

[11] Cited in Jacobs, "Dancing and time."
[12] See Benfey and Remmler, *Artists, Intellectuals and World War II.*
[13] Arendt, "Franz Kafka."
[14] Bespaloff and Weil also crossed paths – without actually meeting – in 1942, in Marseille, where both obtained visa papers to leave France and made their way to the US.

France Arendt made acquaintance with a group of Russian political refugees thanks to the intercession of the novelist Nina Gourfinkel. This was the first time she heard of Bespaloff, whose later work on Homer's *Iliad* deeply impressed her.[15]

Bespaloff and Arendt – two displaced Jewish women thinkers – each forged a distinctive existential-political philosophy in response to the cataclysms of the twentieth-century. While they shared a common experience of statelessness and marginality, their philosophical responses to catastrophe diverged significantly. Reading them together reveals not only different diagnoses of modernity's crisis but also different strategies for survival, action, and fidelity in the face of historical collapse. Despite their divergences, these philosophers offer alternative readings and perspectives to mainstream positions at that time, offering a political lexicon centred on plurality, embodiment, and vulnerability that, we argue, can constitute a conceptual source to address contemporary crises, including populism, migration and war.

Both thinkers recognised exile not merely as a biographical accident but as a fundamental condition of modern existence: if, for Arendt, it signaled the collapse of the nation-state system as an institutional form able to guarantee rights and political belonging; for Bespaloff, it became the existential ground from which what we call *tragic fidelity* could emerge: the demand to remain loyal to a history that offers no redemption, to affirm meaning amid devastation, and to endure without the promise of resolution.

In works like *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951/1958), Arendt understood exile as revealing the modern state's fundamental betrayal of human rights. Statelessness exposed the fragility of political belonging and the need to rethink political action and community as detached from sovereign claims and the exclusionary nature of the nation-state system. Like Bespaloff, Arendt refuses to romanticise exile; but where Arendt seeks to re-found political spaces through action, plurality and laws, Bespaloff emphasises the silent endurance of being. We might say that, while Arendt politicised exile, Bespaloff "existentialised" it – grounding homelessness in the tragic temporality of embodied life.[16]

Two years after emigrating to the US, Arendt explored the crushing conditions of exile in her essay "We Refugees," first published in 1943. Here, Arendt describes the existential anxiety of the Jews of Europe who

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[15] See Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt,* 137.

[16] As Nadia Fusini underlines, Mary McCarthy was a key figure who connected the two philosophers in exile. One of Arendt's closest friends and editor of important works such as her last, unfinished manuscript, *The Life of the Mind*, she also translated Bespaloff and Weil's essays on the *Iliad*. See Fusini, *Hannah e le altre*.

fled their homes, with words that echo Bespaloff's own notes and letters of that time:

> We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gesture, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in the Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives [...] We were told to forget; and we forgot quicker than anybody ever could imagine [...] But sometimes I imagine that at least nightly we think of our dead or we remember the poems we once loved.[17]

Arendt, Bespaloff and the other European Jews who left their countries lost everything that was familiar to them, often ending up living ghost-like existences in their host countries. Many émigrés attempted at finding footing in these countries via assimilation, largely pursued through patriotism. Arendt unveils how these personal and social conditions can push one to the edge of political non-existence.[18] Previously the word "refugee" was synonymous with "exiled", that is, someone who was expelled from the state for a crime, someone guilty for an action. In twentieth-century Europe, however, we might say that Jews were persecuted solely for being "guilty" of being Jews. A bureaucratic contingency – being stateless – becomes an existential condition. A large number of Jews and other persecuted, stateless minorities tried to escape this "guilt of being", as well as the condition of being exiled from their countries and going through endless bureaucratic processes, by committing suicide, like Bespaloff eventually did.[19] In "We Refugees," Arendt prophetically anticipated that uprootedness (*Entwurzelung*) and homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*) would become common existential and political conditions in the globalised world. However, she eventually claims that these conditions can constitute a new political frame and paradigm:

> Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples-if they keep their identity. For the first time Jewish history is not separate but tied up with that of all other nations. The comity of European peo-

[17] Arendt, "We Refugees," 264–266.

[18] For a closer analysis of the topic of exile in Arendt's thought see Argirò, "Hannah Arendt and Exile."

[19] The reasons for Bespaloff's suicide in 1949 are complex and cannot be only attributed to her exile condition. As Sanò reports, in 1939 Bespaloff was hospitalised in a clinic for mental illness in Switzerland (the same where Weil spent a few months the year before). See Sanò, *Un pensiero in esilio*, 129–131.

ples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted.[20]

Like Arendt, Bespaloff understood the crisis of Jewish existence in Europe not as a peripheral or accidental phenomenon but as a revelation of the modern world's failure to sustain any stable notion of political belonging. Bespaloff's own philosophical temperament resisted the idea of rooting identity in statehood or territorial sovereignty. Her philosophical and existential path aligned more closely with what Arendt would call the necessity of embracing a "conscious pariah" status.[21]

This stance became even more crucial in the face of the historical catastrophes that unfolded in her lifetime. The failure of assimilation, the rise of anti-Semitic nationalism, and the creation of new categories of stateless peoples sharpened her awareness that exile was not an anomaly but a structural condition of modern political existence. Like Arendt, she saw that the emergence of the nation-state system had condemned countless individuals to the precarious status of having "no right to have rights" – a fate from which neither Zionism nor assimilation could offer permanent escape.[22]

Bespaloff's exilic existentialism offers a crucial alternative to both assimilationist visions and nationalist projects. Hers is a philosophy of identity that embraces vulnerability, plurality, and the tragic consciousness of history. It is, ultimately, a philosophy of exile that refuses both absorption and enclosure, affirming instead the fragile, embodied endurance of the human spirit in a broken world.

Both Bespaloff and Arendt thus transform the catastrophe of statelessness into a philosophical resource: exile, for them, is not a suspension of life but the very space in which thinking and acting remain possible. Yet Bespaloff's exilic consciousness remains more inward, tragic, and embodied, while Arendt's seeks to rebuild the world through action, plurality and laws. The tension between these two visions – endurance and renewal, silence and speech – marks a fertile dialogue in twentieth-century thought.

If exile, for both Bespaloff and Arendt, revealed the loss of political and existential ground, it also prepared the space for thinking about beginning. Arendt would later find in *natality* the capacity to start again after devastation; Bespaloff, in turn, would locate that same capacity in the embodied rhythm of the *instant*– the moment when the self, stripped of

[20] Arendt, "We Refugees," 274.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism.*

belonging, briefly experiences renewal. It is this transformation from exile to freedom, from endurance to beginning, to which the next section turns.

2. Freedom and the Instant: Philosophy of Beginning

Shortly after Bespaloff's suicide in 1949, her friend Jean Wahl published fragments from her final unfinished project. "L'Instant et la liberté" condensed themes that occupied the philosopher throughout her life: temporality and rhythm, corporeality and movement. Here, Bespaloff's reflections on exile culminate in a philosophy of freedom grounded in the lived experience of time. The *instant* – less a fragment of duration than a life-changing event, a moment of embodied metamorphosis – becomes the point where exile turns into creation. Read through the prism of Arendt's concept of "natality," as we will explore in more depth later, the instant can indeed be interpreted not only as a rupture but also a point of beginning, a liberating creation *ex nihilo*. The instant gives birth to a new and original way of being amidst the repetitive rhythm of history.

For Bespaloff, the instant is a suspension of historical noise, a bodily metamorphosis where the human being glimpses silent freedom. Fusing existentialism with avant-garde aesthetics, Bespaloff believed that a more authentic sense of time, lost in modernity, still lurked beneath our skin. Bespaloff's concept of time – plastic, non-linear, fluid – is intimately bound to musicality, the body, and a radical conception of freedom: it is our embodied day-to-day existence that measures and gives rhythm to time. In this sense, Bespaloff reclaims the body not as a site of suffering or burden to be transcended, but as the very medium through which freedom and transformation can be experienced.[23]

This emphasis on the body and rhythm distinguishes Bespaloff's existentialism from her more famous contemporaries. Philosophy, for her, is not an abstract, disembodied speculation but a corporeal, dynamic engagement with Being. It is an act of listening, a patient readiness for the irruption of meaning into the fabric of time. Actively creating and meas-

[23] If not otherwise stated, all translations from German, French and Italian are ours. Bespaloff's intellectual formation was shaped by her training as a musician and choreographer. She studied piano and composition at the Geneva conservatory, philosophy at the university, and notably *eurhythmics* with Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, which helped her develop a unique sense of time and movement. Dalcroze eurhythmics is a holistic method of musical education; it turns the body into an instrument. Different temporalities are concretised through movements, arm gestures, and steps. For Bespaloff, eurythmics became an intimate practice of listening with her body – an embodied temporality that permeates all her subsequent philosophical work. See Bespaloff, *De la compréhension musicale à la métaphysique de l'instant.*

uring time, the individual sensually experiences freedom less through duration and continuity than in *instants* of metamorphoses. The instant, for Bespaloff, represents a break in the continuum of historical time, a moment when the monotonous flow of events is suspended, and eternity briefly shines through. As she put it: "the suspension of the historical rhythm, a break that opens a passage into eternity."[24] It is in these brief instants of suspension that the human being glimpses freedom, not as a permanent possession but as a fragile, fleeting event.

2.1. Repetition as Rebirth: Heidegger and Kierkegaard

It was Bespaloff's encounter with Heidegger and Kierkegaard that left a decisive mark on her conception of temporality. In dialogue with both philosophers, she developed a non-linear conception of time that tied repetition to the idea of rebirth, where the instant becomes a moment of beginning.[25] Fluent in German, Bespaloff read *Being and Time* in the summer of 1932. Heidegger's greatness, she wrote in "On Heidegger", was that "he situates himself in the inextricable; he does not want to detach himself."[26]

Heidegger's philosophy proposes a hopeless entanglement with the world. For Bespaloff, interpreting Heidegger, choice is not a matter of free will but of irrevocable commitment. By actively choosing, we dash beyond ourselves into an uncertain future. While she was among the first French intellectuals to engage seriously with Heidegger's thought, recognising the depth of his analysis of *Dasein*'s entanglement in time, she diverged from Heidegger in crucial ways. While Heidegger's existential phenomenology was grounded in the temporal horizon of being-toward-death, Bespaloff emphasised the somatic and musical aspects of time. Where Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit* (*attunement*) discloses the world as "noise that deafens,"[27] Bespaloff insists that human beings can, in moments of metamorphosis, attune themselves to a silent interior music. Silence marks an experience of both rupture and rebirth.

Bespaloff's enthusiasm for Heidegger's musical metaphysics was tempered by her discovery of Kierkegaard. In 1934, she published notes on Kierkegaard's *Repetition* (1843), a work that emphasised the creative musi-

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[24] Bespaloff, "L'instant et la liberté," 122.
[25] Bespaloff became well-known in French philosophical circles for the publication of her "On Heidegger (Letter to Daniel Halévy)" in *La Revue philosophique* in 1933, one of the very first discussions of Heidegger's thought in France.
[26] Bespaloff, "Sur Heidegger (Lettre à Daniel Halévy)", 45.
[27] *Ibid.*

cality of repetition as continuous transformation. In Kierkegaard, she found a model for understanding repetition not as mechanical recurrence but as rebirth – the repeated possibility of beginning anew. In Bespaloff's reading of Kierkegaard, repetition does not add anything, it only accentuates what is irreducible to human existence. Repetition is an affirmation of existence itself: the will to live again, despite the absence of guarantees. Bespaloff's conception of repetition is less an eternal return than what Gilat Sharvit has recently conceptualised as "dynamic repetition."[28] Rather than concerned with a linear succession of events, repetition offers a temporal model of redemption as the reliving of an event. Kierkegaard allowed Bespaloff and other Jewish thinkers of her generation to view repetition as a "return which allows one to relive the past in the present in different ways," a return that "generates a different understanding of the present and, consequently, a different future."[29] Repetition allows the individual to transcend the limits of her own history, embarking onto what Kierkegaard calls a "recollection forward."[30]

In Bespaloff's nonlinear conception of time, marked by rhythm and repetition, the instant emerges as a "beautiful moment," a pure manifestation of life's capacity to renew itself against despair. Repetition in Kierkegaard is "the will to live again and the refusal to survive."[31] Only by repeating can we become authentic subjects. The absence of a path, she wrote on Kierkegaard, is the only path philosophy can follow. This image perfectly captures the meandering trajectories of her own thought, which Laura Sanò has called "nomadic."[32] The exilic condition is once again echoed in her philosophy of repetition, where movement is embodied in melody and metamorphosis. Through dance and music, Bespaloff revealed an inner world where the rhythms of history are momentarily transcended, and the individual reclaims a sense of integrity. Already in the early fragment "The Dialectic of the Instant," she wrote:

> Consciousness of time is therefore nothing other than a certain way of grasping the relationship between finitude and infinity in the instant. I recognise duration by what does not last, time by what separates itself from time, freedom by an involuntary experience whose very brevity, beyond itself, leaves a

[28] See Gilat Sharvit's *Dynamic Repetition: History and Messianism in Modern Jewish Thought*, which, however, omits Bespaloff's contribution to modern Jewish discourse on messianic repetition.
[29] Sharvit, *Dynamic Repetition*, 5.
[30] Cited in *Ibid.*
[31] Bespaloff, *Cheminements et Carrefours*, 107.
[32] Sanò, *Un pensiero in esilio*, 23.

> kind of wake [*sillage*] that points us in the direction of a continuity that needs to be re-established.[33]

In her final unfinished project Bespaloff increasingly turned to the notion of the *event* instead of the instant. The event is a break in the repetition, an interruption that escapes time.[34] The event cannot be placed in the past; as Bespaloff insists, the event demands to be lived and relived, as something that concerns us in the here-and-now. It represents a point where history's oppressive rhythm breaks, opening up a space of silent, *embodied freedom*. This reorientation brings Bespaloff unexpectedly close to Arendt, for whom freedom also appears as a beginning, though for Arendt that beginning takes place in the public realm of action rather than in the interior rhythm of the body.

2.2. Natality and the Instant

First developed in her doctoral thesis on *Love and St. Augustine* (1929/1996) and later central to one of her major works, *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt's notion of "natality" is foundational to her understanding of political freedom. Drawing on Augustinian ideas of creation and new beginnings, Arendt defines natality as the capacity to initiate – an existential condition of human beings grounded not in death, as in Heidegger's "thanatological" framework, but in birth. It is through this capacity to begin anew that freedom manifests itself politically, specifically in speech and action within a shared world. While natality has an implicit theological echo in Augustine's notion of *initium*, Arendt secularises it, framing political action as a kind of second birth.

In contrast to Arendt's focus on appearing in the public realm, Bespaloff's existential metaphysics locates the power of beginning not in public speech but in a bodily metamorphosis – the instant – experienced through dance, rhythm, and silence. Where Arendt articulates political freedom as the capacity to bring forth the new in the world of others, Bespaloff finds liberation in an inward and somatic suspension of time.

Both thinkers, however, root the possibility of freedom in an experience of beginning, echoing Augustine's insight that *initium ut esset homo creatus est ante quem nullus fuit,* "that there be a beginning, man was created, before whom there was nobody."[35] Indeed, Bespaloff, too, engages deeply with Augustine, particularly in her reflections on the

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[33] Bespaloff, *De la compréhension musicale à la métaphysique de l'instant*, 43.
[34] See Bespaloff, "L'instant et la liberté."
[35] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, vol 12, 20.

instant.[36] As Bespaloff remarks, thinkers like Augustine and Montaigne responded to historical crises by redefining time not as an external sequence but as something rooted in human consciousness. According to Augustine, time, created by God alongside the world, becomes the arena in which human freedom is exercised and tested.

For Bespaloff, the instant is a suspension in time – a site where the finite meets the infinite – resonating with Augustine's view of time as a tension between memory, attention, and expectation. Both thinkers read Augustine as offering a philosophical vocabulary of beginnings, but where Arendt moves toward a public notion of natality, Bespaloff's engagement with Augustine supports a more inward orientation. In a way, Bespaloff and Arendt's readings of Augustine reveal two complementary sides: Bespaloff's emphasis is on an interiorised experience of freedom, while Arendt stresses the outward dimension of beginning – freedom realised through action, speech, and appearance before others in the public realm.

Bespaloff's philosophy of the instant offers an existential counterpart to Arendt's politics of natality. Each transforms exile into a site of renewal: the loss of the world becomes the precondition for its recreation. Freedom, whether spoken or silent, begins in the moment when human beings, against the inertia of history, dare to begin anew. Yet for Bespaloff, freedom is not only the capacity to begin again; it is also the strength to remain faithful to existence once the beginning has passed. If the instant discloses the possibility of freedom, fidelity determines its endurance. From the ecstatic moment of beginning, her thought turns toward the ethical question of how to inhabit that freedom within a world marked by violence and war. It is precisely in this passage from freedom to fidelity that Bespaloff's philosophy of the instant deepens into an ethics: a "tragic humanism" forged in dialogue with Shestov, Nietzsche and Homer.

3. Fidelity, Force, and Freedom: Bespaloff's Ethics of Weakness

After her early career as a choreographer and dance critic, Bespaloff met her second important teacher in 1925, the Ukrainian-Jewish existentialist philosopher Lev Shestov, a central figure in the émigré milieu of interwar Paris. Bespaloff's engagement with Shestov's existentialism was transformative. She admired Shestov's iconoclastic spirit, his assault on philosophical rationalism, and his passionate insistence that human existence resists all systematisation. In Shestov's emphasis on despair, personal

[36] See Bespaloff, "L'instant et la liberté," 65–68.

revelation, absurdity, and the limits of reason, Bespaloff found a response to the crisis of modernity. As she recalled, "What Shestov opened for me was not a doctrine, but an experience [...] of groundlessness."[37] Shestov's radical rejection of reason first inspired, then profoundly troubled her. With and against Shestov, she developed her own variation on existentialist life-philosophy. She came to find in his radicalism a dangerous slide toward nihilism. His rejection of all rational claims left no room for fidelity to existence itself, a concept that was to become central in Bespaloff's tragic humanism.

3.1. Tragic Fidelity: Bespaloff's Method of Facing the War

Briefly before the war, in 1938, Bespaloff published one of her major works, the essay collection *Cheminements et Carrefours (Paths and Crossroads*).[38] The chapter "Shestov before Nietzsche" declares war on her teacher's denial of any possibility of truth. By refusing to think, she writes, Shestov had returned to another dogma, a radical relativism that ultimately turned into nihilism. Against Shestov's rejection of reason, Bespaloff adopts Nietzsche's attempt to reach truth through and within one's life. Nietzsche's concept of the Will to Truth, she claims, could reconcile us to the tragedy of existence. Where Shestov saw an unbridgeable gap, Bespaloff made a leap of faith – in the instant, happiness is in our reach.[39] It is a leap not of abandonment but of recommitment.

Bespaloff's evolution away from Shestov's thought signals a decisive move toward a *tragic political humanism* grounded in affirmation, responsibility, and an existential affirmation of life even in its brokenness. Thus, Bespaloff's break with Shestov was not merely personal; it signaled a profound philosophical realignment. Against the temptation to abandon reason and meaning altogether, Bespaloff asserts the necessity of *tragic fidelity*: a commitment to human dignity, freedom, and responsibility even in the absence of metaphysical guarantees.

Her tragic humanism embraces the abyss without falling into it, sustaining the silent, rhythmic endurance that defines her politics of exile. Turning to Nietzsche, Bespaloff discovered a model of reality that neither denies suffering nor surrenders to it. In Nietzsche's Will to Truth, she finds the idea that affirmation of life, *amor fati*– even when tragic –

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[37] Bespaloff, *Lettres à Jean Wahl,* 89.

[38] Dedicated to Shestov, the book includes texts on Julien Green, André Malraux, and the essays on Kierkegaard.

[39] Bespaloff's "happy consciousness" made a deep impression on Camus who read the book in the summer of 1939 (see Jacobs, "Dancing and Time").

remains possible. This Nietzschean turn marks a radical reorientation of Bespaloff's thought. Fidelity becomes an existential virtue, not a passive acceptance of suffering, but an active, conscious affirmation.

In the spring of 1938, Bespaloff began rereading Homer's *Iliad* with her daughter, later turning her extensive notes into a brilliant essay capturing the atmosphere on the eve of World War II.[40] Her work on the *Iliad* essay became an existential "method of facing the war."[41] Living as a Jewish intellectual under the Vichy regime, narrowly escaping deportation, and witnessing the collapse of European civilization firsthand, Bespaloff understood intimately the forces she described. As she notes, Homer's greatness lies not in glorifying war but in capturing its double face: an intense love for life and a profound horror of destruction. War, for Bespaloff, is an existential ordeal not because it offers redemption, but because it strips existence to its tragic core. It forces human beings to confront the finitude, vulnerability, and yet inextinguishable dignity of their condition. Through Homer, Bespaloff discovers that even in the darkest moments of history, fleeting instants of freedom and humanity remain possible – not through victory, but through tragic fidelity until instants of freedom arise.[42]

3.2. Ethics of Weakness: Force in the Iliad

Upon escaping Europe in 1942, joined by Wahl, Bespaloff began to rework her notes on the *Iliad*, eventually completing the essay in yet another exile: New York City. Published in English translation in 1943, "On the Iliad" frames war as an absolute "question of losing it all to gain it all."[43] Following Homer, Bespaloff saw in war "an authentic proof of value."[44] Homer's characters have a desire for immortality; and the gods grant their heroes brief "invulnerability that makes the precariousness of force in its short-lived assurance all the more apparent."[45]

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[40]On her desperate situation as a Jew in France, see Bespaloff, "Lettres à Gabriel Marcel."
[41]Quoted after Benfey, "Introduction: A Tale of Two Iliads," XVII.
[42] Bespaloff soon became aware of a similar text, written coincidentally, that appeared in *Cahiers du Sud* in 1940: Simone Weil's "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force" which presents force as an absolute power that transforms all it touches into stone: "The true hero, the true subject, the center of the Iliad is force." Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," 156. For Weil, the experience of force annihilates the soul's freedom; only radical non-resistance – the consent to obliteration – can redeem human dignity. Bespaloff began to revise her essay, critically responding to Weil's condemnation of force.
[43] Bespaloff, "The Humanism of Péguy," 102.
[44] *Ibid*., 101.
[45] Bespaloff, "On the Iliad," 93.

There is no unchanging good or bad in the *Iliad*. War is indifferent to the individual: "Call him Achilles or Hector, the conqueror is like all conquerors, and the conquered are like all the conquered." Bespaloff argues that "there are only men suffering, warriors fighting, some winning, some losing."[46] To condemn force, however, as Weil did, would be to condemn life itself: the inevitable, slow unfolding of events. War, while revealing the precariousness of human existence, also opens brief instants where human beings affirm meaning against fate. "Force is not simply a curse," she writes, "but a revelatory ordeal."[47]

Arendt similarly emphasises the impartial and ambivalent narration of the Trojan War in the *Iliad*. Homer gives voice to both the Greeks and the Trojans, seeing the battle simultaneously from the viewpoint of victors and vanquished. This ability to see from multiple perspectives is what Arendt calls "impartiality", a position essential to any political judgement.[48] In her own "impartial" reading of the *Iliad*, Bespaloff argues that force is the superabundance of life itself, "a murderous lightning stroke, in which calculation, chance, and power seem to fuse in a single element to defy man's fate."[49] Force, in Bespaloff's reading of Homer, reveals the human being's finitude but does not obliterate the capacity for tragic fidelity.

One of her central interlocutors in the essay is, again, Nietzsche whose musical interpretation she critically reappropriates. Like Nietzsche, who described the *Iliad* as a rhythmic "threading [*Auffädelung*]"[50] Bespaloff modulates the fluctuation of fortune through "the changing rhythm of the battle",[51] creating ever-shifting suspense. She develops a unique *ethics of weakness* which is not a reversal but a radicalisation of Nietzsche. Force in its finite, human form is Nietzsche's "will to power," an idea that is tied to the belief in immortality. The man of resentment, for Bespaloff, is not the weak but the one who can bend everything to his will. It is the fight for brief instances of happiness that makes someone a hero, not the will to power. Achilles, counterposed to Hector, represents the "revenge-hero" or "force-hero":

> Through cruelty, force confesses its powerlessness to achieve omnipotence. When Achilles [shouts] "death to all" and makes fun of the child who is pleading with him, he lays bare the eternal resentment felt by the will to pow-

[46] *Ibid*., 50.
[47] *Ibid*., 36.
[48] See Berkowitz, "Impartiality and Objectivity," and Arendt, "The Concept of History."
[49] Bespaloff, "On the Iliad," 47.
[50] Nietzsche, *Homer und die klassische Philologie*.
[51] Bespaloff "On the Iliad," 49.

> er when something gets in the way of its indefinite expansion. We see weakness dawning at the very height of force.[52]

Force is "identical with the Becoming that determines it, without origin and without end."[53] Bespaloff's reading suggests that justice can only be restored in moments of total weakness. Homer's heroes attain their highest lucidity at a point when they have been absolutely crushed or obliterated. The hope for survival shows itself more tenacious than ever in Hector's resolution: "I do not intend to die without a struggle, nor without glory, [...] the tale of which will reach the ears of men to come." Hector's song, Bespaloff suggests, will be heard by those in the future who learned how to listen. Eternity and survival are intimately bound to the individual will. Bespaloff is less interested in Nietzsche's "triumph of victorious force" than in "man's energy in misfortune, the dead warrior's beauty, the glory of the sacrificed hero, [and] the song of the poet." In other words, she is drawn to "whatever defies fatality and rises superior to it, even in defeat."[54]

3.3. Flight from Fate: Freedom and Survival

At the heart of Bespaloff's reading of Homer are two figures: Hector and Helen. Hector, the "resistance-hero", embodies justice and courage. Like every human in the *Iliad*, Hector cannot flee his fate – and he fully knows it. Hector's flight from force is short but has "the eternity of a nightmare."[55] That is the horrifying *temporality of war* – the fateful simultaneity of brevity and duration, both distortion and disclosure of the human experience of time. Hector embodies resistance to force, that is, *freedom*. Aware of his inescapable doom, he chooses to confront fate with dignity. Hector's wish for immortality is his redemption, his survival. The tale of his heroic deeds is "a promise of immortality outside and beyond history."[56]Thus, freedom survives not by escaping force but by asserting meaning within its inescapable framework.

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt defines action as a spontaneous, unpredictable, and relational event through which the human being discloses herself to others. Where Bespaloff emphasises the inextricable enmeshment of freedom and force, Arendt defines the political nature of freedom: "To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to

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[52] *Ibid*., 54.
[53] *Ibid*., 94.
[54] *Ibid*., 69.
[55] *Ibid*., 45.
[56] *Ibid*., 48.

begin."[57] Freedom, for Arendt, is located not in endurance or sacrifice but in "natality" – the capacity to begin anew through action. Hector's acceptance of inevitable death is not a passive resignation but an act of tragic freedom. Bespaloff highlights Hector's heroism as a refusal to be wholly defined by force, a luminous testimony to human agency within the constraints of historical catastrophe.

Helen, by contrast, represents the exile's gaze: she waits at the sideline of the front, paralyzed and condemned to watch the destruction for which she is both responsible and powerless to stop. Clothed in long white veils, Helen is the most austere character of Homer's poem. Unbearably beautiful and unfortunate – *misfortune* being another leitmotif in Bespaloff's reading – Helen awoke in exile and felt "nothing but a dull disgust for the shrivelled ecstasy that has outlived their hope."[58] She is the prisoner of her own passivity, forced to live in horror of herself. In Helen's figure, Bespaloff recognises the pathos of those who, like herself, are witnesses to devastation yet deprived of the ability to intervene. Helen's experience mirrors the temporality of war: long stretches of violent despair punctuated by rare instants of freedom. Ultimately, Helen's promise of freedom, like Bespaloff's own, remains unfulfilled. Helplessly, Helen watches the men who went to war for her, observing "the changing rhythm of the battle."[59]

Bespaloff's treatment of the battlefield scenes is particularly significant. She isolates moments when the clamor of combat ceases, when opposing armies pause and, face to face, contemplate the coming annihilation. In these fleeting instants, suspension opens a passage to inner freedom. Such instants are fragile and ephemeral, yet they allow for a glimpse into reality beyond force – a reality rooted in tragic lucidity and silent endurance. The breaks are rare instants of silence:

> The battlefield is quiet; a few steps away from each other, the two armies stand face to face awaiting the single combat that will decide the outcome of the war. Here, at the very peak of the *Iliad*, is one of those pauses, those moments of contemplation, when the spell of Becoming is broken, and the world of action, with all its fury, dips into peace.[60]

Just as her earlier writings on Heidegger and Kierkegaard, dance and eurythmics, Bespaloff's "On the Iliad" is a distinctly musical text, circling back to the motif of the instant as a silent pause interrupting the repetitive rhythm of history. War is a peculiar rhythm of Becoming, "a kind of

[57] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.
[58] Bespaloff, "On the Iliad," 57.
[59] *Ibid.*, 49.
[60] *Ibid.,* 62.

prolonged spasm related to the rhythms of anger." Using Heideggerian terms, Bespaloff argues that Being reveals itself through war. Homer does not capture this disclosure by describing events but by extending "those planetary pauses, those musical rests, over an event where history appears in its perpetual flight beyond human ends." The individual facing history escapes the flow of Becoming in rare moments of silence or, what Bespaloff calls *inwardness*. Only in an instant of crisis can the human being experience her own continuity:

> The crises which disrupt the individual do not alter the constants of human Becoming. History remains a tangled succession of catastrophes and breathing spaces, of problems provisionally set, resolved, or conjured away. But the man who has felt the terrible pressure of total impotence and *survived* that experience does not resign himself to living as if that had never happened to him. He tries to keep hold of the supreme resources revealed to him by despair. He tries to integrate the subjective intensity of such moments to the continuity of his existence, to capture spontaneity through repetition.[61]

Through repetition, the survivor can develop a style of life that perpetuates "the memory of these instants of inwardness."[62] This attitude is what Bespaloff calls, evoking Kierkegaard, the ethical experience. "Ethics itself is felt primarily as an *instant of resurrection* where man and God triumph together over decay."[63] This instant of survival is simultaneously timeless and restores time. It is not, however, individual survival, invulnerability or immunity from death. It is *another* survival that is at stake here. Nothing remains from the hero who died in battle, everything he loved, everything particular goes with him. What survives, however, is a *duration* or *continuity* that can only be grasped through what has been lost.

Bespaloff's philosophy of survival, intimately tied to her conception of temporality, the instant and repetition, is also shaped by exile, not only as a historical condition but an existential horizon. The experience of being torn from a world, whether by force or history's rhythm, discloses instants of inwardness, a possibility for meaning arising from displacement. Her reading of the *Iliad* ultimately culminates in the encounter between Priam and Achilles, when the king of Troy comes to reclaim his son's body. "The Becoming of the Universe," writes Bespaloff, hangs suspended in such a silence, "whose duration is an instant and forever."[64] After Achilles

[61] *Ibid*., 90
[62] *Ibid*., 91.
[63] *Ibid*., 95.
[64] *Ibid*., 80.

held Priam's hand, he gently pushed him away, before both sink into their memories.

4. Concluding Remarks

Bespaloff's philosophical and political vision, shaped by exile and war, emerges from the shattered landscapes of the twentieth century with a singular voice. Refusing both Weil's mystical transcendence and Arendt's activist political reconstruction, Bespaloff crafts a politics of exile that is tragic, somatic, and grounded in an existential commitment to the frailty of human life. Unlike Arendt, who strives for reconstituting the world through action and plurality, Bespaloff accepts the impossibility of full restoration. Her politics of exile is not a programme of salvation but an ethics of endurance: a call to uphold the responsibilities of existence even when history offers no redemption. At the centre of Bespaloff's thought lies a radical revaluation of what it means to be human under conditions of extreme violence. Exile, in her view, is not merely the loss of homeland or citizenship; it is the exposure of the human condition itself: precarious, finite, burdened by force, yet capable of silent metamorphosis. She does not seek to overcome exile but to inhabit it, to endure displacement, force, and catastrophe without surrendering to nihilism or despair. It is within exile that the human being discovers the fragility of meaning and the necessity of fidelity.

In an era increasingly marked by wars that bring new forms of displacement, statelessness, and existential uncertainty, Bespaloff's thought offers a vital resource. It does, however, not promise any active resolution. Her tragic fidelity is the silent endurance of existence without guarantees, the stubborn affirmation of fragile instants of meaning. In the quiet steadfastness of her thought, Bespaloff teaches us that to endure without illusion is not to surrender but to remain faithful amidst the ruins. Oscillating between freedom and force, fidelity is neither blind optimism nor stoic resignation. It is the tragic capacity to affirm life even when stripped of illusions. Bespaloff's heroes are neither the victors of history nor the saints of transcendence; they are those who endure catastrophe without betraying the silent music of existence. Hector, standing before the walls of Troy, facing death, becomes for her the paradigmatic figure: a man who, knowing he is doomed, nonetheless acts with dignity and lucidity. Bespaloff's tragic humanism insists that freedom is not the absence of necessity but the courage to act meaningfully within it. Against the overwhelming force of history, her philosophy identifies fleeting instants where human dignity survives.

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