

# Dreadful Noise

## Jean-Claude Pecker on Loss, Remembrance, and Silence

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**Abstract** French astrophysicist Jean-Claude Pecker, who passed away in early 2020, left behind a rich body of work that reflects his active engagement with areas beyond the scientific, among them the visual arts, social activism, and poetry. This paper follows Pecker as he grapples with the loss of his parents in the Holocaust and articulates the impact of this loss on his life and work. My discussion draws primarily on Pecker's poetry collections *Galets poétiques* and *Lamento 1944–1994*, with occasional references to other writings, among them a provisional draft of the opening chapter from Pecker's memoir and letters recounting his family history. Allusions to Pecker's Jewish heritage are absent from the poetry collections yet are prominently present in other writings in the context of antisemitism as the core of his "feeling Jewish" on the one hand and the rejection of Judaism among all other religions on the other. Reflecting on the violence that afflicted his life during the war years and admitting his deep pessimism regarding the future of both humanity and the environment, the elderly Pecker conveys in his writings a sense of diminished agency both in his own life and in that of the sun, the celestial body broadly considered a mainstay of his scientific work. Contextualizing Pecker among his peers, I suggest that while the themes of deportation and death figure centrally in the poems, Pecker is less in conversation with Holocaust poetry or poets and more in dialogue with a group of French artist-friends, united in the knowledge of nature's timeless beauty and in the recognition of the presence within humanity of love, friendship, and the unlimited capacity for inflicting harm and great pain.

**Keywords** Jean-Claude Pecker, Holocaust, antisemitism, memory, astronomy

THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES TWO POETRY COLLECTIONS BY FRENCH ASTROPHYSICIST Jean-Claude Pecker (1923–2020), *Galets poétiques* (2015) and *Lamento 1944–1994* (2017), with the goal of shedding light on a less-known side of Pecker the scientist.<sup>1</sup> As I read through the poems, I highlight the way in which Pecker commemorates his parents Victor and Nelly who perished in the Holocaust and reflects on the effect of their loss on his life and work. I consider the poetry collections with other writings by Pecker, addressing his sense of self, Jewish identity, perspective on life, and thoughts on the human condition. Concluding, I suggest that the poetry collections rest less in the sphere of Holocaust poetry and are more attuned to the general human capacity for violence and the infliction of suffering. Oscillating between despair and love, between writing for the sake of remembrance and writing for its own sake, Pecker evokes the shared sensitivities and great amity found within a small group of like-minded writers, who, like him, concede the simultaneous existence of pain and beauty in humanity and nature alike.<sup>2</sup>

## “WAS IT NECESSARY TO WRITE THESE TEXTS?”

Jean-Claude Pecker’s *Galets poétiques* (*Poetic Pebbles*) pays homage to the pebble art of French artist Bernard Reyboz. The opening poem, inscribed on a pebble and framed by Pecker’s storm-cloud sketches, offers an observation of a lone turtledove on a stormy, gray evening, fighting to keep her balance against the wind. The observer knows that he will return to the same place on the following day: The wind and the turtledove will be gone, but the pebbles will be there as before. Mankind and pebbles are tied together in Pecker’s musings about life, and the volume in its entirety is a reflection on the tenuousness of human existence, captured in the motion of pebbles that are launched into the sea from the shore: They may ricochet and leap forward, or just splash and sink when launched at the wrong angle.

Tenuousness hovers over Pecker’s two poetry collections. Pecker introduces himself on the back cover of *Galets poétiques* in the following words, capturing the troubled tone that permeates the volume:

The author throws pebbles at random into the calm sea of his island. What else can one do on a desert island? Stones slide, pebbles fall; ricochets follow one another. So what about all this except that life passes with the pebbles and soon there will be no more pebbles to throw and perhaps no more sea to receive them. The author is always in motion from anywhere to elsewhere like the pebbles he launches at random from the shore. Let us leave him in peace. He has not had any for a very long time.<sup>3</sup>

A condensed biography of Pecker is sketched on the back cover of *Lamento 1944–1994*: “Born in Reims in 1923, Jean-Claude Pecker is an astrophysicist, honorary professor and chair of the theoretical astrophysics section of the Collège de France, and member of the Académie des Sciences. He has published numerous scientific books and papers, as well as various works of art and poetry.”<sup>4</sup> The biographical blurb, augmented by a photo of Pecker, is eclipsed by the author’s personal note regarding the volume:

Was it necessary to write these texts?

After the apocalyptic drama of the Shoah, “only silence is great, everything else is weakness.”

I kept silent. For fifty years . . .

But I am weak, very weak. . . . At the time of the fiftieth anniversary, in 1994, I could not continue to remain silent. I wrote the first pieces of this little book, and, over the years, a few others.

Should all this be published? When the hundredth anniversary of their departure comes, what else will be left of Victor and Nelly? . . .

My children, and my children’s children, and their children, must understand, and know what was . . . I wish . . .<sup>5</sup>

Flip to the front cover of *Lamento 1944–1994*: A photo of a man, a woman, and a young man standing on a balcony, close, touching tenderly, smiling.<sup>6</sup> With the title *Lamento*, the year 1944, and the reference to the Shoah now in relief, the first text, an untitled preface on the fourth page of *Lamento 1944–1994*, removes any doubt regarding what “all this” (as per the *Galets poétiques* back cover) is about:

The following texts were written long after the disappearance of my parents in the Auschwitz abyss.

They were arrested in May 1944. May 10, to be more precise, that is, the day of my 21st birthday.

Nelly was a thoughtful, sweet, and loving woman.

Victor was a strong, vibrant, and active man.

I have never recovered from their disappearance. They were arrested because they were Jews. After a stay in Drancy, a dreadful train carried them to Auschwitz.

They never returned<sup>7</sup>

Nelly and Victor Pecker lived at the time in Paris with Nelly’s mother Anna Herrmann, who happened to be out of the apartment at the time of Nelly’s arrest. Victor was arrested at the metro on the same day. They were transported from Drancy

to Auschwitz on May 30, 1944. Nelly was gassed in Auschwitz shortly after her arrival, on June 4, 1944. Victor died in Ebensee, a subcamp of Mauthausen, on March 28, 1945.<sup>8</sup> *Lamento 1944–1994* grapples with their loss, giving voice to a man who is in constant mourning, entrapped in a liminal emotional space defined by his perpetual efforts to hold on to his memories of Nelly and Victor while validating their final memories of him, neither of which is attainable. *Galets poétiques* overlays the emotional space with a physical one, the shore of an island where thoughts reach high, far, and deep beyond Pecker and memories of his parents, yet liminality remains the defining state of the speaker. Nelly and Victor are not mentioned by name in the volume, but their loss hovers over the poems, calling attention to the interconnectedness of the two poetry collections. With transience as the backdrop of both volumes, *Lamento 1944–1994* wrestles with the nature of remembering and forgetting, leaving the reader with a sense of uncertainty about both; *Galets poétiques* expands the uncertainty to encompass the meaning of life cycles in both the human and the natural environments.

## STRUCTURE AND VOICE: *LAMENTO* 1944–1994 AND *GALETS POÉTIQUES*

*Lamento 1944–1994* is structured in eight sections, each holding a single poem: “Lost” (*Perdu*); “Ashes” (*Cendres*); “Extinguished sun” (*Soleil éteint*); “Them” (*Eux*); “Sleep” (*Sommeil*); “Dreadful noise” (*Un bruit épouvantable*); “In memoriam”; and “Oblivion” (*Loubli*). The poems, ranging from eight lines to three pages, are spaced out considerably: They are framed within seventeen empty pages, with poem titles centered on eight additional otherwise-empty pages, contributing to a sense of emptiness and silence that subsume the written text. The opening poem presents the question of whether it is possible for the speaker to have lost the memories of his beloved, and the closing poem acknowledges the feasibility of oblivion and the possibility that his parents never really knew him, attaching a strong element of doubt to what they had supposedly remembered of him as they were led to their death. The question of what and how one remembers or forgets, present throughout the volume, remains open, with no answer or resolution. It thus poses a lasting challenge to Pecker’s wish for his children, his children’s children, and their children, who might read the poems, to “understand, and know what was,” as he states on the back cover. Readers may gain access to scenes from Victor and Nelly’s life and death, but the knowledge that these provide is limited at best.

The stage setting of *Lamento 1944–1994* involves a collection of elements from death scenes: a beach that turned into a black hole with evaporated water; air that

is cold, sad, and clammy; a faraway stretch of uncultivated land by the foothills, the backdrop of a train that travels north; ashes; a pallet on which a body is passed out; the stench of the dead; hard, frozen ground; a gas chamber. These stand in contrast to two elaborate images: One is a blue lagoon where “the sea rises lined with the white of slow waves / over the feet, and the perfumes of flowers / heavy and red / mingle with these waves in lascivious happiness”<sup>9</sup>—a scene that the speaker finds difficult to think of or talk about. The other is a black train moving north, mentioned repeatedly and described in great detail, emerging, in the longest poem of the collection and elsewhere, as the dominant item in the speaker’s imagined stage scene. Worm-eaten, black and sinister, a rusty carcass of scrap metal with shoddily joined boards and poorly lubricated axles, the sealed train runs on rusty tracks, producing a dreadful noise. Packed, its cars carrying the carcasses of those already defiled by death, this train of silence and dead hopes, void of memories, moves toward the north, its noise overpowering the landscape and drowning all childhood memories of love and comfort and everything else in the speaker’s past and present.

The speaking voice in *Lamento 1944–1994*, then, is not an abstract poetic voice—it is Pecker himself with a distinct perspective on a life shaped by the calamity and trauma of World War II. The speaker in *Galets poétiques* is, more generally, a man who confesses to a gloomy outlook on life and on the passage of time as he watches the shoreline of his island. His language reveals none of Pecker’s enthusiasm for the harmony in the geometry of the white sand floating in the breeze, the mist, the dunes, and the sea licking the shore of the *Grandes Conches* beach of L’Île-d’Yeu, his place of residence and refuge.<sup>10</sup> *Galets poétiques* emerges from a much darker surface of the island, drawing on the rocky, rough stretches of its shoreline. Sitting on the beach and looking “at the pebbles / all men and all pebbles,”<sup>11</sup> the speaker contemplates a set of images and scenarios: those of many men and ideas and love; of refusal to accept the inevitable; of the probable; of fate; and of the unknown, all framed within the life cycle of a beach where cliffs have slowly eroded into stones, “and the stone to pebble and the pebble to sand / and the sand to the sea—and what about the sea?”<sup>12</sup> This is an unanswered question that projects anxiety regarding the natural environment as well as the human existence, and encapsulates a set of others: “Where is the time that passes?”; “Where is a man alive?”; and “What becomes of joy, of rage” once eternity does away with all children who once danced on the shore?<sup>13</sup> The final note of the collection comes in the form of an out-of-body experience as the speaker watches an old man on a long and bare coast that extends to infinity, asking himself “is it me?” and again the same question as he watches the old man getting up and departing: “Is it me?”<sup>14</sup>

The graphic design of *Galets poétiques*, like that of *Lamento 1944–1994*, is fully integrated with the content. The front cover presents a photograph of two hands,

the index and thumb framing a single pebble on top of others like it, signaling the simultaneity of individuality and shared destiny, a quality ascribed to both men and pebbles in the image of “A pebble like a thousand others / a single man, like a thousand others”<sup>15</sup> and throughout the collection. Whether the human hands are just touching the pebble, about to remove it, or placing it on the heap, human intervention in the environment is underscored upfront in the cover image. A dedication to Reyboz, to poet René Char and to literary critic Georges Blin is followed by a two-page poem that presents the main themes of the collection. It offers an image of pebbles launched toward the sea—either thrown with a well-aimed motion to ricochet, or thrown poorly when the thought driving the motion is not parallel to the sea, yielding then only a splash. Here, the “horizontal calm and secret / of our innermost sea” is not to be found.<sup>16</sup> Opposite the poem is an illustration by Pecker, in simple lines, of a rocky beach, strewn with pebbles, a snail and a crab up front, seagulls flying up high. The rocks grow increasingly smaller as the gaze of the observer moves away toward the distance, morphing into obscure lines in the horizon.<sup>17</sup> The illustration is followed by forty-one poems, unnamed yet numbered with Roman numerals. Unlike the poems of *Lamento 1944–1994*, which combine into a narrative of extinguished lives, the poems of *Galets poétiques* are four to fifteen lines long, forming a web of single observations about life, most of them stated in four to six short lines. The minimalistic language of the text and the largely empty pages collide with elaborate photographs by Jean-Paul Fouques that punctuate the collection: pebble-like shapes in a variety of designs, patterns, and textures are meticulously placed in different formations, signaling the absolute power of the artist to sculpt and arrange them at will, a stationary visual parallel to the random launches that govern the existence of the pebbles on the shore.<sup>18</sup> The volume concludes with another unnumbered poem and a beach illustration by Pecker in simple lines—this time it is of a man holding the hand of a child, moving away from the rocks at the front, the rearguard of a long line of humanlike figures that grow increasingly smaller and abstract and morph into obscure lines in the horizon, as the gaze of the observer moves further toward the distance. Here too there are seagulls flying up high. The two illustrations bookend the collection as a visual expression of a shared destiny of vulnerability and disruption, a theme that informs the poems:

*Seagulls—a thousand living stones  
lifting as the man arrives.  
walking alone in the storm  
stone, seagull, man:  
all the same*<sup>19</sup>

While “all the same” is an overarching theme, the dynamics of *Galets poétiques* are shaped by multiple opposites. The speaking voice is at once that of an observer and actor; the subject of a violent strike who exercises the power to rattle the existence of the pebbles with his own random act of tossing them into the sea; an old man reflecting on life with the occasional perspective of a child, observing the golden tide of dreams overpowered by the tide of life, dark like a pebble encased in black tar. The pebbles on the shore are hard or soft and fragile; smooth and rounded or fractured by life, broken by the world’s afflictions; they are camouflaged or too visible; naked and exposed yet capable of holding their own if not disturbed by human touch. The pebble that is the flattest and smoothest among a thousand others may ricochet and leap, sustaining itself and surviving, but for the one that is too rough, individual, fractured, the first leap is the last, and the bottom of the water is the destination of its hopes.<sup>20</sup> These and many other polarities contribute to a sense of uncertainty that emerges from the volume. Combined with references to diminished agency that are present in both collections, they deliver an impression that is strikingly antithetical to what one would imagine as the mindset of Pecker the scientist, known in the professional realm and in his public pursuits as a confident, assertive, and energetic scholar and intellectual.

## THE LIVING DEAD

Inspired by a white, hard, and smooth pebble in his possession, inscribed with words of amity by poet René Char that harness “the breath of the wind the race of the water the heat of the sun,”<sup>21</sup> Pecker is moved to pen his own pebble poetry as an echo of the words launched by Char. But when he projects himself onto a pebble, his words are neither of love nor of hope or comfort: “On this pebble my loneliness/is the only firm and sad inscription.”<sup>22</sup> His pebbles are neither those polished by the torrents of the Provence Alps,<sup>23</sup> nor are they the shimmering pebbles of Borneo in Alfred Russel Wallace’s *Malayan Archipelago*.<sup>24</sup> The pebbles that he encounters on the rocky shore of his island are often dead, soiled, moldy, rotten, and mute, with great vulnerability associated with their exposure in a world that is “naked hard dense cruel.”<sup>25</sup> Yet, in line with the polarity that characterizes the speaker’s observations, in this very exposure rests the potential for one to remain true to oneself, like a stone, “Clean of froth, naked, and more than free / to not imprison anything anymore.”<sup>26</sup>

The imprisonment theme comes into view in poem XVII, where the references to the World War II death-camp environment are unmistakable, as is the impact of the eternal torment confining the spirit of a child deprived of his parents:

*Dead pebbles of a thousand desires  
annihilated, one by one,  
no sand, no sky, no waves,  
pebbles deprived of identity,  
pebbles deprived of liberty,  
scattered on an oppressive shore;  
concentrations of passive impulses,  
a sea-camp of a thousand stolen hopes,  
dead like millions of humans  
where I see only two faces,  
oh! so present are these two faces  
that do not stop looking  
beyond the sea of pebbles.  
I, nude and lost on a shoreline  
where children are prisoners<sup>27</sup>*

This poem is anchored in a position that dominates *Lamento 1944–1994* as well: Pecker approaches the memory of his departed parents not as his current, elderly self nor as a man in his early twenties helplessly experiencing the brutal separation from them. The absence of agency in both circumstances sends him back to a distant childhood, a natural state of diminished agency.<sup>28</sup> He holds on to his childhood memories, knowing full well how fragmented they are, how faded are the scents, tastes, and sights stored in his memory.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, he is haunted by a reconstructed memory of himself as, he imagines, was carried by his parents on their way to the death camp and to their ultimate deaths. They keep seeing and feeling him at a point in time and place that no longer exists—he is no longer there to sustain what they may have remembered, a predicament that weighs heavily on him to the point that he implores with his parents and others like them to stop looking at “the one absent who still goes on”:

*Go on your way  
turn away your gaze  
  
it has been a long time  
that I am no longer here.<sup>30</sup>*

The sense of a physical presence that is as good as an absence, an existence of a living dead, emerges in full in *Lamento 1944–1994*, beginning with a sleep that lasted fifty



years.<sup>31</sup> The sleep is followed by an awakening within a physically withered body that allows for mechanical living only:

*We were with them like big clouds  
but do we remember it alas?  
Because they disappeared carrying away my image  
bright for them alone  
I still have the shriveled body of the living  
we will await during our mechanical life  
the pain of these men my father  
who died without forgetting us.<sup>32</sup>*

Similarly in *Galets poétiques*, Pecker, often quoted as having referred to his scientific work as a source of great happiness,<sup>33</sup> presents a speaker reduced to perfunctory living, a man who goes through the motions as he passes his days living for his work obligations.<sup>34</sup> The import of this very work seems to be questioned in *Lamento 1944–1994* as the shadow and noise of the train that carried away his parents overpower not only his occasional attempts to consider beauty and love, think about his beloved as “more real than life more alive than death,”<sup>35</sup> or find solace in his commitment to the betterment of the world. His achievements in the realm of science are also overpowered by the dreadful noise, rendering his lifetime of engagement in complex problems of cosmic magnitude and participation in heated scientific debates inconsequential:<sup>36</sup>

*I have watched the sky with eyes of glory  
as if my vocation and the science of everything  
could give me a serene view  
regarding all things  
I saw the red stars, the vile vortices  
and the false clouds of the world's dust  
the noise of galaxies that constantly rotate  
it is nothing, I do understand it well,  
when I hear the old black train,  
with rotten planks, rolling toward the north  
the dreadful sound  
of a rusty carcass  
rolling toward the north, rolling towards death  
I thought I would be useful to all those who remained  
a few small gestures, pitiful initiatives,  
as if I did not believe in what I was doing*

*meetings committees  
boards of directors  
the sound of polarized voices in the amphitheaters of the century  
is but a pale murmur  
in my ear remains a terrible sound  
that passes and passes again.<sup>37</sup>*

While the train is in perpetual motion northward, the speaker is in perpetual motion downward, trying in vain to step off the train but remaining trapped in his attempt to disembark—in his words, he “cannot stop descending,”<sup>38</sup> another expression of the liminal state that characterizes his existence as the living dead.

The little measure of agency afforded to humankind is expressed in the ability of Pecker’s departed parents and others like them to remember their loved ones, which generates a sense of responsibility attached to the desperate attempts to sustain these memories. Such attempts are challenged by the realization of how fickle memories, his and theirs alike, are, and by the knowledge of oblivion that is likely to come with the passage of time. Out of this struggle emerges the strongest expression of agency in a memory of Pecker’s mother, living in her smile and imagined far into her final moments:

*She had that smile for life for life  
She had that smile  
even for her executioners  
especially for her executioners  
especially before her death  
In the sinister train-car she had that smile  
And in the gas chamber she had that smile  
Like a dreamy sun anxious in the face of death.  
She had that smile that I would not see again  
Alas had I known!  
She will have that smile forever forever . . .<sup>39</sup>*

The association of agency with the mother necessitates further examination of the reference to Alfred De Vigny’s line “everything else is weakness” chosen by Pecker as a reflection on his fifty years of silence.<sup>40</sup> De Vigny’s “Death of the Wolf” recounts a nighttime hunting party that encounters a pair of wolves and their two cubs. The hunters shoot the male wolf and finish it with their knives, watching it die in silence and with great dignity. The speaker-hunter has no desire to follow the female wolf and her cubs, grasping the grave choice that she had just made: this beautiful, dark

widow, he suggests, would not have left her mate to die alone, but she knows to act on her duty to care for their young and teach them independence and life skills. The closing stanza, encapsulating De Vigny's romantic, awe-infused view of the natural environment, is a reflection on the lesson learned from these "sublime animals": De Vigny gives the final word to the wolf, whose dying gaze pierces the speaker-hunter's heart, allowing him to fully grasp the state of humankind, haughty and too stupid (*débiles*) to realize how little humans bring to this world or leave behind when they depart. Like the wolf, De Vigny suggests, a man must be studious and thoughtful in following the path carved for him by life; should that path involve suffering, he must not resort to the cowardly acts of moaning, crying, or praying (*Gémir, pleurer prier est également lâche*); he should rather endure his suffering with stoic pride and die in silence. Pecker's rejection of De Vigny's "die in silence" position, fifty years in the making, does not pertain, then, to stoic suffering only: the reader knows that unlike the beautiful, dark widow who chooses to abandon her dying mate in order to prepare their cubs for life, Pecker's fair, blue-eyed mother never had the chance to do that and was forced to leave him behind, deprived of all that she could have given him had they had a future together; and while human existence is perilous, constantly threatened by man-made disasters, the very little that victims of violence like Pecker's parents and millions of others may have left behind is worth fighting for and preserving, with laments and expressions of pain as part of the effort, at times the only efficacious part. The quiet agency of the mother's smile is contrasted with the father's roaring laugh which used to surge over everything, but never rose over his muted life,

*in a camp over there  
in a camp of dust in a camp of grayness  
in a death camp*<sup>41</sup>

The father's fate is associated with a death-march scene, most likely a reference to his transfer from Auschwitz and onward to Mauthausen:<sup>42</sup>

*They marched at night on the frozen heath  
they cried without a voice  
they devoured the scrapings  
which others did not want  
and drank dried tears  
they waited for centuries so short  
crouched on the hard ground  
they shriveled on the hard ground  
beaten endlessly.*<sup>43</sup>

The trauma of the father's muted life creates a permanent trigger for the speaker: "I do not like to hear laughter anymore" he declares.<sup>44</sup> With it comes the question "can one forget that laugh and that smile?"<sup>45</sup> This question is a variation on the question "How could one ever forget all that?" offered by Pecker in support of an argument about the violence against Jews, his parents among them, as the core of his Jewish identity.<sup>46</sup> But unlike the certainty that comes with the answer to the "How" question, for one cannot forget, the question in the poem remains unanswered, leaving the speaker in a state of permanent uncertainty: "Nothing remains for me but fog . . ."<sup>47</sup>

## ON JEWISH IDENTITY, RELIGION, AND SCIENCE

The deportation and death of Pecker's parents, noted as formative life events in autobiographical accounts and memoirs, and occasionally in academic papers and talks delivered by Pecker, were accepted as such by his peers, as is evident in Pecker's biographies and obituaries, most of which make reference to the parents' fate.<sup>48</sup> The violence inflicted upon them and millions of others like them served as a catalyst in Pecker's endeavors to use the power of science as a tool for healing postwar Europe and in his fight for human rights across the globe.<sup>49</sup> It found direct expression in his professional life, as is evident, among others, in his lifelong friendship and collaboration with his mentor and colleague Evry Schatzman, whose father, Benjamin, was deported via Drancy and died in Auschwitz in 1942,<sup>50</sup> or in a dramatic event within the International Astronomical Union (IAU): In 1967, when German astronomer Otto Heckmann was asked during a phone conversation with Belgian astrophysicist and then IAU President Pol Swings to serve as the next IAU president, he declined, noting that as a former member of the Nazi Party it would not be appropriate for him to take the position. Pecker, who was present in the room during the conversation, recalled picking up the phone and saying: "Hello, Heckmann, well, this is Pecker. I want to tell you that my father and my mother died in Auschwitz. Please, will you accept to be the next president of the IAU?" "This was, of course, decisive," Pecker recalled, "and for the next three years Heckmann was the next president . . ."<sup>51</sup>

Pecker reflects on the loss of his parents and on his own experience during the war years through the perspective of the human experience, with Jewishness acknowledged yet kept strictly outside the realm of religion. Pecker was raised as an atheist and regarded himself as French by conscience and heritage. "As far as I am concerned," he is quoted as having said, "although I feel Jewish, I reject the religion of Judaism just like any other religion. I am French and I wish to remain French for as long as possible."<sup>52</sup> It stands to reason, then, that French culture serves as his frame of

reference in the poetry volumes, while reflection on the Holocaust from a Jewish perspective is deliberately absent from the poems. Indeed, the note “They were arrested because they were Jews” in the statement that opens *Lamento 1944–1994* is the only reference to Jewishness in the poetry collections, allowing the designation “Jews” to emerge as an arbitrary, even if momentous, fact of birth much like the arbitrary strikes that afflict both humankind and the pebbles on the shore.<sup>53</sup> As is evident in “I feel Jewish,” Pecker was well aware of his Jewish heritage and acknowledged the import of this heritage in the history of his maternal and paternal grandparents and great-grandparents, in the lives of his parents and their siblings, and in his own life.<sup>54</sup> Distancing himself from Zionism as well as from Judaism as a religion, he defined the essence of “feeling Jewish” as acute consciousness developed in reaction to a constant existential threat:

My grandparents, Jews who had chosen France, who had fought for the values of the French secular Republic, never considered Zionism as a valid alternative . . . [W]ho knows the future? Who knows if one day those who threw stones at my grandfather, those who condemned Dreyfus, the children of Drumont and Maurras, those who hailed Pétain, those who vote for the National Front, those who are after my skin, will again be in power? If that were to happen, I would have to go into exile and it is precisely this constant threat, for centuries upon centuries, in country after country, which builds up the feeling of being Jewish and of solidarity with other Jews. Sartre or Memmi realized it. It is antisemitism which feeds the consciousness of being Jewish!<sup>55</sup>

Auschwitz and the yellow star, two quintessential signifiers of the Holocaust, figure centrally in Pecker’s narratives of the war years. The reference to Auschwitz takes the form of “my parents died in Auschwitz” or, in a more true-to-fact articulation, “never came back” after their deportation to Auschwitz. Pecker highlights the symbolic presence of the yellow star, worn by himself, his parents, grandmother, and his uncle André during the war years. In his 1998 letter to Christiane DeWitt, he notes in reference to his undergraduate days: “End of 1942, I take my exams (the only one to have passed them with a yellow star!)”<sup>56</sup> and in a similar manner in his conversation with David Ibry observes: “I was probably the only student in the École Normale in the Rue d’Ulm having passed my entry examination in 1942 with a yellow star on my suit.”<sup>57</sup> In another letter he reflects on the life of his maternal Grandmother, Anna Herrmann, who served heroically as a head nurse of the military hospital installed in the Reims Cathedral during World War I, for which she received the *Croix de Guerre*; whose life was damaged by three consecutive wars; and who would see her family

dispersed and her daughter and son-in-law deported and killed by the Nazis. “What a life hers was!” he proclaims. “It sums up, I believe, what our experience as a ‘Jew in France’ was . . .” Anna’s father, Rabbi Joseph Herrmann, he notes, was very cultured and tolerant. His son, Léon, married a non-Jew, but “this was no problem.”<sup>58</sup> Rabbi Herrmann was a good friend of British Zionist leader Herbert Bentwich, but he himself rejected Zionism on religious grounds. In parsing out a web of family relations, Pecker also refers with measured sarcasm to a family history of conversion to Catholicism: his cousin Jean, he notes, was influenced by his history teacher, Catholic writer Henri Petiot (Daniel-Rops) and considered conversion to Catholicism. Jean’s father Raphaël, risking his life, traveled secretly to Montpellier to convince him not to convert (which he nevertheless later did). Pecker notes that he too had Rops as a teacher in Bordeaux—Rops “tried to seduce me . . . without success!” He writes and adds: “A curious family tendency for mysticism: my father, in the 1920s, had a similar crisis, and Grandma Véra had done everything to prevent his conversion, which did not take place. Then see Nath . . .” with “Nath” a reference to his aunt Anne Nathalie Pecker, known by her married name Anne Carlu, who converted to Catholicism.<sup>59</sup> Sarcasm aside, the weight that Pecker assigns to his Jewish heritage is unmistakable: “I cannot dissociate my parents from the war, from the status of the Jews, from the École Normale, or from Annie,” he would later write in his memoir, evoking the memory of the most central people and events in his life, all of them inextricably associated with the war years.<sup>60</sup>

Pecker’s rejection of religion was not just a matter of his upbringing—it was deeply rooted in his understanding of the nature of human knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Pecker insisted that knowledge cannot be mediated by ideology or depend on revelation, and that religion and science have nothing in common: “One looks inside toward given knowledge already known, whereas the other looks outside toward discovering new knowledge. As far as I am concerned, my choice is to look out at the sky, at the world outside as well as at my inner world in a continuous effort to know more.”<sup>62</sup> “I am convinced,” he was quoted as having said,

that there is indeed a real world, accessible to my eyes, my ears, or the instruments man can build. The reality of the external world is the only safe basis for scientific knowledge. My brain is part of that world; so is yours; and the brains of all human beings as well as all animals. Even religions are part of the real world, which does in no way mean that religious belief represents a description of reality. The only description of the real world we can have is imperfect, just like the shades of Plato’s cave. But science is the way to get out of the cave, a safer way than to close our eyes and dream.<sup>63</sup>

Science, then, produces the language of knowledge, with mathematics as its tool and “the only language which can be understood in any human tongue.”<sup>64</sup> As for an actual language of communication, Pecker, eulogized as “*amiko de Esperanto*” upon his passing, regarded Esperanto as a reasonable, even if unlikely, candidate for scientific communication.<sup>65</sup> The quest for a common language that expresses the shared knowledge and destiny of humankind may explain not only the choice of Esperanto as the first language into which *Lamento 1944–1994* was translated: the collection’s title, *Lamento*, most likely drawn from Esperanto and kept as such in all translations, is a reflection of Pecker’s position on the universality of the human condition.<sup>66</sup> The perils of the human condition emerge forcefully from Pecker’s poetry and later writings, with “science as the way to get out of the cave” losing its power as a safer way “to close our eyes and dream,” giving way to despair over humanity and the natural world alike.

## AN ACCOUNT TO SETTLE WITH THE SUN

Pecker, a solar physicist, “heir to the great French solar tradition,”<sup>67</sup> who had an asteroid that orbits the sun named after him (1629 Pecker), who loved the sun with great passion and dedicated his career to its observation, had an account to settle with the celestial body, which found compelling expression in his poetry. A memory of “a sunny childhood in a peaceful provincial town, Bordeaux,”<sup>68</sup> where he would walk hand in hand with his mother observing “the sun on the fields all glistening with dew,”<sup>69</sup> morphs in his poetic retrospective gaze into the foreboding image of an old, pallid sun of yesteryear, shining over a childhood where “the odors of disaster never penetrated” and “everything was in place and futures were open.”<sup>70</sup> A moment of warmth on the shore, his forehead flooded with sun, produces a fleeting illusion of immortality for him and his pebbles, of time that “can pass without harm.”<sup>71</sup> Yet the prevailing image in *Galets poétiques* is that of an eroded sun, battered by relentless wind and rain, by tears and cries that leave the grains of dust flickering in the light and the pebbles rolled by the water exposed and lifeless,<sup>72</sup> much like “people who dance / people who die.”<sup>73</sup> The question of whether it might be possible to once again imagine a rising sun or find a future<sup>74</sup> receives a decisive answer: like a tomorrow that promises only a grim reality of neither summer nor spring but an eternal winter only,<sup>75</sup> the rising sun (*soleil émergeant*), an accomplice in a violent disaster, is destined to remain invisible, pointless, selfish, forever extinguished.

*The sun shines for whom? for you? for itself? for me?*

*The sun does not shine*

*In the sealed car of the final stops  
in the shut car where one dies of stench  
the stench of slow death, of filthy men.*

*The sun shines outside  
only for the dead  
but not for the dying  
not for the eternity of awaited death  
not for the eternity of suspended life*

*Yet nothing for the living  
but the pointless confession of an invisible sun  
beyond all walls, beyond all spaces  
the pointless confession of life that goes on  
and the living who go on  
without crying without blinking over the dying shadows  
the sun shines for them  
to confess its crime  
so pointlessly  
they—they know nothing . . .<sup>76</sup>*

The concept of an extinguished sun (and, for that matter, the title phrase of the poem, “*Soleil éteint*”) as a metaphor for a world gone awry is not unique to Pecker:<sup>77</sup> The disappearance of the sun (or the moon) during an eclipse, a natural phenomenon interpreted as a “dark disturbance in the world’s rhythm,”<sup>78</sup> is as old as human culture. In the ancient world it gave rise to stories involving devouring, dismemberment, piercing, beheading, and similar acts of violence; prognostication or interpretation of wars, floods, volcanic eruptions and other natural disasters; and collective musings about battles between good and evil or other binary forces. And even in our scientific age, according to cultural astronomer Anthony Aveni, when we are taught to seek rational explanations to rare cosmic events, we are still provoked, surprised, awed, and even unsettled, wondering if there is a message “that accompanies this fractious cosmic behavior.”<sup>79</sup> The motif of blaming the sun and other elements or natural objects—freezing-cold weather in particular—for having contributed to human suffering, or for having behaved as usual, out of indifference or powerlessness during the Holocaust and other calamities in the course of human history, is likewise recognized as a trope.<sup>80</sup> But coming from Pecker, a scientist for whom the sun, “eclipsed some with his departure,”<sup>81</sup> was the star best accessible as an observable research tool, “a celestial body on which our very existence depends,” one that



is “at its midway point . . . at high noon in its life” with several billion years of life left,<sup>82</sup> the argument is jarring: the sun is actually already dead, going through the motions of rise-and-shine and produce-light-and-warmth, an existence that parallels Pecker’s own sense of existing as the living dead, going through the motions of life. This image encapsulates Pecker’s despair over the future of humanity and the environment alike, a sentiment that finds clear expression in the introductory chapter of his memoir. Evoking the site of his childhood memories, the city of Bordeaux, he uses the nostalgic reflection, mediated through the trauma of the war years, to express fear over what he sees as a pending global catastrophe and to minimize the value of his fight for denuclearization, much like he did with his scientific work in “Dreadful noise”:

Although for a very long time I have not lived in Bordeaux, this city remains my city, the one I love, the one where I feel at home. But I am still afraid of the eruption of another catastrophe . . . At the precise time of this writing, Messrs. Trump and Kim have just signed a denuclearization agreement. Good! Many people are happy about that. I am thinking of the Munich Agreement in September 1938, and what followed. . . . Besides, nuclear war is no longer the only threat. Global warming and great migrations are inevitable consequences of a differential, but exponential, population growth in our world. How long will it take for humanity to disappear as we know it? Who knows? Probably much less time than we think today . . .<sup>83</sup>

Noting how he had started to write down his memories a few times in the course of his younger years, Pecker writes:

I was young then and to some extent had a share in the future. Things are different now: I am ninety-five years old. I must really revisit my permanent desire, that of leaving something behind me, an irrational, absurd desire. Generations follow one another and quickly forget. Today’s world tends to disappear—slowly, inexorably. What, then, is the point of leaving something? I don’t believe in the survival of mankind, I don’t believe in the survival of anything about us. Can I believe in the survival of our work, at least for a few years, perhaps a few centuries? At least I hope that humanity will last for some time—which is surely not very long. But what will humanity be interested in, in, say, 50 years? Not in me anyway! And yet, I am writing this text, aimlessly, without expectation, evidently without hope.<sup>84</sup>

Determined to write without restraint, for his own pleasure, or, better put as he notes, for a measure of “gloomy delight,” Pecker admits occasional confusion regarding events and people and the way they intersect in his reflections. He acknowledges the

inevitably skewed vision of his parents, who “died when I was 21 . . . . In other words, I only have a vision of them that is for sure a bit idealized. I loved them . . .” and is acutely aware of his own mortality:

Soon (when? I’m already tired. . . . Will I get to the end?), I will put the word “end” at the bottom of this confused text. But what would this mean? For the writer, for the reader, for the man? I don’t like the word “end.” It does not mean anything, since in writing the writer is always there, since after having read it, the reader will open another work. . . . The end is also death. I am not afraid of death, I am afraid of hurting before I die, but I am not afraid of death. Besides, when I’m dead I will not know; so why bother?<sup>85</sup>

The “why bother?” echoes the “was it necessary to write these texts?” of *Lamento 1944–1994*, and in both cases the reader, holding the evidence of a physical document in hand, is presented with an answer in the affirmative that acknowledges doubts yet is strong enough to transcend them. For the poetry collections, it is the imperative for the younger generation to “understand, and know what was.”<sup>86</sup> For the memoir, it is the desire to write for the sake of writing, with no expectation of appealing to the interest of others. The effort to remember and put words on paper for the sake of the process itself becomes a catalyst in the emotional and intellectual reckoning that comes with sorting out Pecker’s own memories and separating them from those that were conveyed to him by others, and by denying pain, uncertainty, and pessimism the power to drive him back into silence.

## FOR POSTERITY, FOR FRIENDS

Applying the principles of Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson’s relevance theory (1995) to the art of translation, Jean Boase-Beier discusses the relevance of stylistic devices representing authorial choice and argues for their preservation in the translated text “in order both to recreate the mind style of the text and, as far as possible, to reproduce its effects for the reader of the translation.”<sup>87</sup> Acknowledging that the actual author is not accessible and subscribing to the idea that we need to “construct an author in order for literary communication to work,” she notes that we must not only “think we know what someone is saying, even if we have few guarantees of being right,” but must also act on this assumed knowledge.<sup>88</sup> The translator, looking for “the author’s intention and attitude to the content,” must thus pay attention to a “set of weak implicatures which can be derived by inference from [the text’s] various stylistic devices,” broadly defined as “elements in the text which are unusual, striking,

or simply indicative of attitude,” and take responsibility for the creation of meanings as it relates to the inferred author.<sup>89</sup>

Pecker was acutely aware of the impact of stylistic devices, especially those that stand out visually. Having pointed out the abundance of empty space on the pages of both poetry collections, I should also note Pecker’s frequent use of sentences ending with a question mark or ellipses. While *Lamento 1944–1994* poems end mostly with periods, allowing for indication of the finality that he chose to convey, only four of forty-one poems in *Galets poétique* conclude with a period—the rest end with ellipses, question marks, or no punctuation at all, calling for continuous exploration of statements that remain open. The use of open-ended questions and ellipses appears frequently in Pecker’s other writings as well.<sup>90</sup> The account of his wartime experience in the 1998 letter, for example, is raw, highly fragmented, consistently punctuated by ellipses, moving back and forth in time and between people and places, possibly signaling Pecker’s discomfort with putting his recollections in writing fifty plus years after the fact. Use of the bold-face font style was not unusual for him either: The comment on the back cover of *Lamento 1944–1994*, which indicates his wish to make the memory of Nelly and Victor available to future generations of his family, receives a somewhat different, urgent treatment in an undated typed note referring to the collection:

I wrote these texts with my children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren in mind . . .

**There are things that we cannot forget, that we must not forget.**

I hope that those who read this text will spare a thought for Nelly and Victor, who would have so much liked to know my children and their children and then the children of those . . .<sup>91</sup>

Pecker does not, however, use the boldface font style for emphasis in any of the poems, allowing the naked written word itself to convey even the most jarring content. Likewise, while the use of italicized text to draw attention to key phrases or sentences is common in his published work, he does not use it in the poems except for the two long poems that bookend *Galets poétiques*.<sup>92</sup> I use this very cursory discussion of stylistic devices to argue the need to pay close attention to what Pecker chose to do, or not do, as he put his poetry on paper. With that in mind, I transition into Boase-Baier’s “set of weak implicatures,” based on which I make inferences regarding the dialogic dimension of Pecker’s poetry and suggest contextualization of his work within the work of his peers.

A reader may wish to seek parallels between Pecker’s literary work and that of Primo Levi, like him a scientist and secular humanist, or examine his poems through

the prism of Foucault's "knowledge as power" as has been done with Levi's work.<sup>93</sup> She may also want to consider his work in conjunction with that of Paul Celan in his elegiac tribute to his mother, mourned and commemorated in poems like "Lupin" (*Wolfsbohne*) and "Aspen Tree" (*Espenbaum*). Indeed, like Nelly, Celan's mother Friederike was an avid reader and literature enthusiast and a dominant figure in her son's life, and like Nelly she fell victim to Nazi brutality.<sup>94</sup> Like Celan and Levi, Pecker experienced the war when he was in his early twenties, but unlike them, having lived under a false identity, he was not interned. This set of circumstantial facts, even those that receive thematic expression in his work, is not sufficient grounds to consider him their peer, first and foremost because his literary output is not comparable to theirs in terms of its volume but also because of the different timeframe in which he composed his poems (starting in the 1990s when he felt compelled to come out of his silence), and the specific venue he chose for publishing the volumes. Having searched for the authorial intent in his poetic expression, I am inclined to think that his poems are not in conversation with what we consider Holocaust poetry. They may surely be read and interpreted as such or incorporated in compilations like Boase-Beier and de Vooght's *Poetry of the Holocaust: An Anthology* (2019), which links together authors of multiple backgrounds and venues of literary production. Considering contextualization within a peer group, I take my reading in a different direction.

While framed by the historical circumstances of the war years and rife with deportation and camp themes, the poems address neither the Holocaust nor Auschwitz directly. Pecker, who made it a point to mention Auschwitz time and again as a personal data point in papers, talks, memoirs and letters, does not mention it even once in his poems. Unlike Levi's "Shema" or Celan's "Wolfsbohne," for example, he does not converse with Jewish content nor, for that matter, with Jewish authors. And Pecker had certainly made it a point to converse where he chose to—I have already mentioned de Vigny, Reyboz, Blin, and Char, but Pecker's work was also at different points in time in direct conversation with French poet and artist André Verdet. In fact, one of his earlier *galets* poems was offered as response to Verdet's poem "Avant tout l'Espace."<sup>95</sup> Before taking to his publisher the poems that were to be included in his collection *Le ciel et son fantôme* (1975), Verdet went to see Philippe Delache, then Director of the Nice Observatory, and asked him to opine on the scientific validity of his poetic text. Delache reassured him of the accuracy of his observations and introduced him to Pecker, the three of them forming an intense artistic collaboration and friendship. Pecker recalls a meeting between them in the following words addressed to Verdet:

The three of us were drunk, drunk with the sky, with colors, with ideas, drunk with shared friendship, with anxious yet confident sensitivity; drunk with beauty

quite simply—oh, not that of my paintings nor that of our astronomy, not even that of your poems, some of which you had read to us—drunk with this beauty that we had a glimpse of at the point of convergence . . . of our different gazes, of exact complementarities, the overwhelming beauty of the reflection which, upon the sky, upon our distinct skies, could nevertheless lead to some dazzling unity.<sup>96</sup>

This shared friendship resulted in a number of creative collaborations: Delache and Pecker contributed text to Verdet's 1979 exhibition at the *Maison de la culture et des loisirs at Saint Etienne*; Pecker hosted, with Michel Hulin, director of the Palais de la Découverte in Paris, Verdet's "Cosmogonies" 1985 exhibition, branding Verdet as "Ariel de Buchenwald" in reference to the stars which, radiating freely, had kept him alive while he was interned; Verdet introduced Pecker and his work in Pecker's "Plage d'encre" 1988 exhibit brochure;<sup>97</sup> Delache wrote the preface to Verdet's *Le ciel et son fantôme*; and when Daniel Ziv of Z4Éditions published his own collection *Poèmes de vide* (2015) devoted in part to Verdet, Pecker wrote the preface, making clear references to the cold nights of Auschwitz and Buchenwald as reflected in Ziv's poems and referencing Verdet's torturous experience during the war, out of which he emerged "open to all human beauties."<sup>98</sup> Noting that he is not surprised to find Primo Levi in Ziv's "pantheon of the unhappy," Pecker still makes no reference to the Jewish experience as such, like Ziv allowing the plight of Jews during the Holocaust to be considered within an infinite chain of violence and human suffering.<sup>99</sup> It was no coincidence that Pecker published the poetry collections and other creative works with Z4Éditions, "an independent publishing house that publishes the books it deems important, irrespective of language or country, as long as they follow a humanistic path."<sup>100</sup> The independent, humanist-oriented nature of the publishing house suited him, as did the company of interlocutors, all of whom shared interests that allowed their worldviews to intersect: the phrase "astrophysicist, painter, poet, member of the Academy" with which Pecker signs the preface to Ziv's *Poèmes de vide* intersects with the way Ziv introduces Verdet—as a poet, sculptor, astrophysicist, and musician who "was interested in everything and excelled in many fields."<sup>101</sup> Introducing himself, Ziv offers a long list of occupations and interests (including, among many others, ice cream seller on the beaches of Saint Tropez, film director and lecturer at the film school la Femis and The University of Paris VIII), and describes himself as "currently an editor."<sup>102</sup> I choose, then, to point out Pecker's strong sense of amity with like-minded artists and the drive to offer a tribute to their spirit as the element that defines the peer group where his creative expression found a home, where, to quote Verdet, he felt free to know "that culture can be both one and plural, that it can diversify itself, as in the times of the Renaissance, in one and the same person."<sup>103</sup> This was the space

where he felt safe sharing his gloomy delight in writing, “the constant feeling that the future is not a wide road, but an increasingly dark and narrow one,” and the realization of the cruel reality of the passing of time, while observing the tenderness of a beautiful day, the sweetness of the night, and the staying power of love—incompressible and indelible,<sup>104</sup> an affirmation of Verdet’s 1945, post-Buchenwald observation: “Despite the hell on earth, men had thought, not literally thought but humanly thought, thought that somewhere, outside of that hell, the world still retained an immense amount of beauty and goodness.”<sup>105</sup>

As I conclude this paper, I am yet to learn whether Pecker ever put the word “end” at the bottom of his memoir and disembarked the train that took his parents to Auschwitz, leaving its dreadful noise behind.<sup>106</sup> This will become known with time, once we discover the extent of what he had left behind. Reflecting on his work as I know it, I go back to his criticism of pseudoscience, the dream that promises liberation from reality, that invites people to partake in a marvelous tale, and brings them reassurance and hope—the hope of survival, a chance of healing from that which is judged by science as incurable.<sup>107</sup> For scientists, Pecker wrote, it is the logical structure of the laws of nature that satisfies their aspirations and holds the key to beauty—difficult, painful, often irritating, observed yet not immediately understood. Nothing is simple in life, and time, a long time, is essential if we seek to harmonize the complex world around us with the logic of our spirit. The works I discuss here are each a step in the process of harmonizing events, people, and places in Pecker’s life with the logic of his spirit: long in coming, honest, painful, and never completely finished, this harmonization process is what the reader is bound to witness as she puts down each work and opens another.

## NOTES

1. Pecker, *Galets poétiques; Lamento 1944–1994*. A bilingual French-Esperanto edition of *Lamento: 1944–1994* was published by Z4Éditions in 2019, and an Italian/English translation by Salviati & Sagredo the same year.

2. I am grateful to my friends Cécile DeWitt-Morette, who introduced me to the story of the Pecker family, and Chris (Christiane) DeWitt, who shared with me many hours of reminiscence and reflection and made available personal communications and stories that would have otherwise remained unknown to me. I also wish to thank Laure Pecker, who generously allowed me to make references in this work to the yet unpublished chapter from Jean-Claude Pecker’s memoir, and to Daniel Ziv, Pecker’s friend and publisher, for the permission to include Pecker’s poetry in this paper and for having shared with me some of his memories of Pecker.

3. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted. The island referenced is *l'Île d'Yeu*, an island off the Vendéen coast of western France, where Pecker lived.

4. The French/Esperanto edition adds to the biography “and a true humanist-scientist,” a reference to Pecker’s humanistic approach to science and his secular-rationalist philosophy of life. Pecker was a laureate of the International Academy of Humanism and held a position with UNESCO as a representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) which in 2005 awarded him the International Humanist Award for services to humanism.

5. The “only silence” quote included in Pecker’s text is from the closing stanza of Alfred de Vigny’s “Death of the Wolf” (“La Mort du Loup,” 1843): “Seeing what we were on Earth and what we leave behind / Only silence is great; everything else is weakness.”

6. The picture was taken in the Paris apartment of Pecker’s uncle, André, on May 7, 1944. A 2019 edition of the book features a cover photo with the fenced structures of Auschwitz blurred in the background, and barbed wire in sharp focus in the foreground. The family picture appears inside following the title page.

7. The reference is to Drancy, an internment camp in northern Paris, where French police and later the SS detained Jews on their way to Auschwitz and other death camps.

8. A 1996 issue of the *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, the government gazette of the French Republic, records the dates of death of Nelly and Victor. According to a memorial piece by Pecker in which he writes about his uncle Raphaël, a French *résistant* who died in Auschwitz on August 1, 1942, Victor died of typhus in Mauthausen on April 25, 1945. (Jean-Claude Pecker, Raphaël PECKER [1891-1942]). The piece, given to me by Chris DeWitt, appears on pages 385–91 of a volume that I was not able to identify. I am grateful to Marie-Laure Pelosse from the *Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah* for assisting me in the attempt to track the document. Elsewhere (letter to Chris DeWitt, August 7, 1998, henceforth August 1998 letter) Pecker notes that Victor died three days before the liberation of Mauthausen, which would make it May 2, 1945 (the Americans liberated Mauthausen on May 5, 1945 and Ebensee on May 6). A former student of Nelly, Ida Petit (later Barret), took the elderly Herrmann in and sheltered her until the liberation of Paris, for which she was recognized in 2006 by *Yad Vashem*, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, as one of the Righteous among the Nations.

9. Pecker, “Dreadful noise,” *Lamento 1944–1994*, 35–37.

10. See Pecker’s “L’abstraction géométrique,” where he discusses the inspiration for his artwork and the 1988 exhibit “Plage d’encres,” inspired by the geometry of the Grandes Conches beach. See also Armengaud’s “Plage” on Pecker’s obsession with the sea.

11. Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, 12.

12. Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, 70.

13. Pecker, poems XXXIX, XXIX, XXXII, *Galets poétiques*, 66; 55; 58.

14. Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, 70.

15. Pecker, poem IV, *Galets poétiques*, 18.



16. Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, 12.
17. An earlier version (2015) titled *Galets*, has the Pecker illustration of the crab-snail scene on its cover page. Another version, *Galets . . . Poétiques* has a humanlike figure constructed of pebbles holding a pebble to its face with the index and thumb of one hand only.
18. Z4éditions publisher/editor, Daniel Ziv, notes that the original request was for Fouques to illustrate the cover page, but he was so excited by the project that he offered to illustrate the entire volume. See Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, back cover.
19. Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, 47.
20. Pecker, poem XIV, *Galets poétiques*, 36.
21. Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, 11. The poem on the pebble is “Like growing larch-trees / Above conspiracies / You, my days, are the wind’s tracing / And a fire-wall.” It is the fourth stanza from Char’s first out of “Seven Fragments of Luberon.” Fowlie and Char, “Sept Parcelles,” 285.
22. Pecker, poem IX, *Galets poétiques*, 26.
23. Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, 10.
24. Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, 12. The reference is to *The Malay Archipelago* written by the British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913). In chapter 5, detailing his travel up the Sadong river in north-west Borneo, Wallace makes a number of references to the delight he experiences watching the pebbles along the way, such as “The river bed was a mass of pebbles, mostly pure white quartz, but with abundance of jasper and agate, presenting a beautifully variegated appearance.” Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, 80.
25. Pecker, poem VI, *Galets poétiques*, 21.
26. Pecker, poem VIII, *Galets poétiques*, 25.
27. Pecker, poem XVII, *Galets poétiques*, 25.
28. Pecker worked in 1944 at a Paris factory under an assumed name. A possible allusion to his absence when his parents were arrested may emerge from the lines “He was my father / she was my mother / I am not proud of the sudden death that erased them / I am not proud.” (*Lamento*, “Them”). His August 1988 letter mentions the announcement of their arrest while he was taking a bath, discussions about freeing them from Drancy, and a final realization of their deportation to Auschwitz.
29. Pecker, “Lost,” *Lamento 1944–1994*, 11.
30. Pecker, “Oblivion,” *Lamento 1944–1994*, 45.
31. Pecker, “Sleep,” *Lamento 1944–1994*, 31. The fifty years of sleep echo Pecker’s note on the back cover of *Lamento 1944–1994* regarding the silence out of which he emerged after fifty years. See also Evry Schatzman’s 1988 homage to Pecker: “We did not dare to believe in extermination, in the Shoah; the pain was so intense that it was necessary to hide it, refrain from expressing it, in order to live.” Schatzman, “Hommage,” 311.
32. Pecker, “In memoriam,” *Lamento 1944–1994*, 41.
33. See, for example, Pecker’s “Petite et grande.” When asked by the interviewer for a concluding note, addressing what astrophysics is about, he says, after a provocative “nothing,



fortunately": ". . . I think it is an element of culture in its own right! . . . Astrophysics is used to understand the Universe. It is essentially an intellectual process—the pleasure of understanding, the pleasure of knowing, the accumulation of knowledge. Astrophysics is about being happy." See also his reference to his personal history as of 1940: "Then France became a place of fear, of hunger, of despair. Hope came only much later. . . . There is no point here to speak about this period. I emerged in 1944, at the liberation of Paris. But by then my parents had disappeared in the Nazi concentration camps; I learnt of their deaths only at the end of 1945. I was alone, as a soldier, then as a student, facing the future with the permanent feeling of having been thrown out from paradise, the 'lost paradise,' with the eagerness to live anyway, to achieve something, perhaps to achieve what my parents would have liked me to do . . . Writing now for this 'invited review' in *Solar Physics*, I hesitate to tell everything about my life, scientific or otherwise. Shall I say that the Sun has been my only love? That is untrue! Or shall I claim that astronomy was only a minor preoccupation? Of course not! My life since the war has been still indeed a very exciting one, damping only quite slowly. I was young, eager to do things, to compute, to observe. I threw myself into the maelstrom and found myself caught up indeed in many of the beautiful aspects of life; and perhaps it is that aesthetic feeling which made an astrophysicist out of me." Pecker, "Solar Research," 1.

34. Pecker, *Galets poétiques*, 12.

35. Pecker, "Dreadful noise," *Lamento 1944–1994*, 35.

36. Pecker was known for his "often unyielding nature . . . or his tendency to express frankly and fearlessly political and scientific views capable of causing offence because they go against the prevailing tide." Bonnet, "Closing," xxv. He insisted that actual observations must be at the core of any theory and raised an impassioned challenge to the idea of a single theory of the evolution of the universe. He thus rejected the notion that the Big Bang is the only framework available for understanding the history of the universe, and the exclusionary practices of research funded within this framework. See Lerner, "Open Letter."

37. Pecker, "Dreadful noise," *Lamento 1944–1994*, 37. I am grateful to Daniel Jaffe for his insights regarding the scientific references in this poem.

38. Pecker, "Oblivion," *Lamento 1944–1994*, 45.

39. Pecker, "Them," *Lamento 1944–1994*, 25. In his memoir draft, written during the late 2010s, Pecker remembers his mother as "a frail woman, even fragile," often beleaguered by migraines. Unlike his father, she was not athletic, but she did read, incessantly. She was a smiling, silent, modest woman, but very spiritual and, on occasion, caustic. Her life motto was an adaptation of the cricket's words in Florian's fable "*Le Grillon*": "In order to live happily, one should live hidden" (*Pour vivre heureux, vivons caches*). The poetic depiction of internal strength that transcends external circumstances fits well with this characterization.

40. Pecker, *Lamento 1944–1994*, back cover.

41. Pecker, "Them," *Lamento 1944–1994*, 26.

42. In January 1945, in anticipation of the Red Army's arrival at Auschwitz, the Germans

marched some fifty-six thousand prisoners from Auschwitz to the towns of Wodzislaw Śląski, Gliwice, and other locations in western Poland, where they were loaded on freight trains and transported to different camps in Austria and Germany, including Mauthausen, where Victor Pecker later died. Thousands of prisoners perished during these marches.

43. Pecker, "In memoriam," *Lamento 1944–1994*, 41.

44. Pecker, "Them," *Lamento 1944–1994*, 26.

45. Pecker, "Them," *Lamento 1944–1994*, 27.

46. Pecker tells about his life in Grenoble and Paris during the War and notes "Life in hiding followed and then, in 1944, it was June when my father and my mother were despatched by cattle train to Auschwitz. They never came back, like millions of others. How could one ever forget all that?" Pecker, "Solar Research," 1.

47. Pecker, "Them," *Lamento 1944–1994*, 27.

48. See, for example, in Z4Éditions, "Pecker," a compilation of obituaries written by colleagues, where ten out of fourteen pieces note the deportation and death of Pecker's parents.

49. See his reference to the IAU 1964 Hamburg General Assembly, in Andersen, Baneke, and Madsen, "Jean-Claude Pecker," 78: "The idea of having to shake hands with people who might have been Nazi officials was painful. But I was general secretary. And I was not against the idea of having the meeting in Hamburg. In fact, that was good—I'm for a united Europe; it was just a personal thing."

50. Schatzman in "The Desire," 20, describes this friendship, which began at the *École normale supérieure* during the winter of 1944–1945, as "a brotherhood that has never weakened."

51. Pecker, "With the IAU," minutes 20–21. Heckmann, who, according to Pecker, was a natural choice for the position after the Hamburg IAU General Assembly in 1964, had signed the Vow of Allegiance of the Professors of the German Universities and High-Schools to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialistic State, and was a member of the Nazi Party. He served as IAU president between 1967 and 1970. The episode is also recounted in Andersen, Baneke, and Madsen, "Jean-Claude Pecker," 78. Here, Pecker also notes having told Heckmann that he was one of those who recommended him for the position.

52. Ibry, *Exodus*, 18, quoting Pecker. Ibry argues for humanism as a form of maintaining a Jewish identity. He leans on Pecker and Schatzman, both scientists and members of the *Union Rationaliste*, at strategic points in his book, in arguing for the separation of Jewishness from the religion of Judaism.

53. Pecker, "Il y a cinquante ans." On May 12, 1994, the family posted in *Le Monde* an announcement of the fiftieth anniversary of the arrest of Victor and Nelly Pecker, with the sentence "they were arrested by the Nazis because they were Jews," noting their deportation and death, and signed "their son, Jean-Claude, their family, their friends, do not forget them."

54. Ibry, *Exodus*, 18, quoting Pecker: "From a tender age, as far as I can remember, I knew I was a Jew. My parents had told me: "You are a Jew, just like both of us, like your grandparents, the parents of your grandparents, and so on from generation to generation. But you are

not following the religion of Judaism . . . Though we are Jews we do not follow the laws of Moses . . . However, having made that clear, we also state that we do not deny our Jewishness!” Similar reflections on his Jewishness and on his extended family history, personalities, Jewish identity, and different political and social positions, can also be found in Pecker’s August 1988 letter and the segment from another letter (1988?) to Chris DeWitt; in his article about Raphaël Pecker, and in the provisional draft of the first chapter of his memoir. The draft includes an opening statement (*Avant-propos*) and the sections “Father, mother” (*Papa, maman*) relating the family history of his parents and grandparents; “The very first years” (*Les toutes premières années*) recounting what he was told about his birth as a premature baby; “Mowgli” (his memory of the family dog); and “From Champagne to Gascony . . .” (*De la Champagne à la Gascogne . . .*) recounting the family move to Bordeaux around 1925.

55. Ibry, *Exodus*, 19. Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who was of Jewish descent, was falsely accused and convicted of treason in 1894, and his trials became a watershed moment in French politics and a symbol of political antisemitism. The anti-Dreyfusards; Édouard Drumont, the publisher of the antisemitic newspaper *La Libre Parole*; Charles Maurras, the principal ideologist of the monarchist and counterrevolutionary political movement *Action Française*; Philippe Pétain, the Chief of State of Vichy France; and the National Front, the far-right French political party, are all listed as potential precursors of sentiments and political developments that may, at any time, turn against him as a Jew.

56. Pecker, August 1998 letter to Christiane DeWitt.

57. Ibry, *Exodus*, 18.

58. From a segment of a letter written to Chris DeWitt. This letter was probably from 1998 as well, for in it Pecker mentions a follow-up letter (most likely the August 7, 1998 letter) in which he would recount his experience of the war years.

59. Pecker, letter to Chris DeWitt (1998?). Nath, who lived in the US, apparently offered to bring her siblings André and Victor to the US, but they would not leave the old Anna Herrmann, who could not travel, behind.

60. Annie, Anne-Marie Vormser, was Pecker’s love and fiancé during the early years of the war. They were separated in 1943 and he later married Charlotte Wimel. After their divorce (1964), he married Annie (1974), with whom he lived until her death in 2002.

61. In a similar vein, Pecker rejected anything that had to do with pseudoscience and the paranormal. In 1979, together with Evry Schatzman and others, he created the French Committee for the Study of Imaginary Paranormal Phenomenon (*le Comité français pour l’étude des phénomènes prétendus paranormaux*, CFEPP), whose mission was to combat the propagation of pseudoscience. See his “Le paranormal,” where he argues that the paranormal is the projection of human fantasies into the real world, rooted in the desire to find healing and reassurance where they do not exist. Science, in contrast, insists on reality, complex and uncomfortable as it might be, as scientists satisfy their aspirations in uncovering the beauty in the logical structure of the laws of nature.

62. Ibry, *Exodus*, 113.
63. Ibry, *Exodus*, 113.
64. Ibry, *Exodus*, 112.
65. Masson, “Mortis.” Pecker is quoted in a biography of Ludwik Zamenhof, the man who invented Esperanto, as having said: “I am completely in favor of Esperanto—for 60 years!— . . . but I am obliged to state that the world is not moving in this direction. . . . A common auxiliary language can only be effective if imposed by the public authorities of many countries at the level of elementary schooling. . . . It is not unhealthy to swim against the current: it requires considerable strength!!” See *L’homme qui a défié Babel* by René Centassi and Henri Masson, 1995, quoted in Masson’s post.
66. A 2014 publication of speeches and short essays by Pecker, *Cahiers Jean-Claude Pecker n° 1*, also has an editor’s introduction in both French and Esperanto.
67. Lecourt, Introduction to *The Future of the Sun*, 18. *The Future of the Sun* was translated from the French *L’Avenir du soleil* (1990) by Maurice Robine. In “Solar Research,” 1–2, Pecker in a way takes exception to the “solar physicist” label. He writes: “I worked always as a physicist of the celestial media, but in many subfields, from solar physics to cosmology, from stars to nebulae . . . in ‘astro-politics’ also . . . in many other things, at UNESCO or elsewhere, battles arising from the past, against racism, xenophobia, and the absurd colonialist wars. A battle for human rights, a battle against the mystical and irrational tendencies of the end of this century, against the false pretenses of the ‘para-sciences’, a permanent battle for rationality and lucidity . . . One can guess nevertheless that, yes, I feel that I should be categorized as a ‘Solar Physicist,’ as I have been sometimes immersed in solar physics, although more often I looked at it from the side, with a detached point of view, progressively less and less competent, as the field has tremendously evolved in one half of a century.”
68. Pecker, “Solar Research,” 1.
69. Pecker, “Dreadful noise,” *Lamento 1944–1994*, 36.
70. Pecker, “Ashes,” *Lamento 1944–1994*, 15.
71. Pecker, poem XXXVII, *Galets poétiques*, 64.
72. Pecker, poem XXV, *Galets poétiques*, 50.
73. Pecker, poem III, *Galets poétiques*, 16.
74. Pecker, poem XXX, *Galets poétiques*, 56.
75. Pecker, “Ashes,” *Lamento 1944–1994*, 15.
76. Pecker, “Extinguished sun,” *Lamento 1944–1994*, 21.
77. See, for example, Guy Gilles’s 1958 movie by this name, about the Algerian War, portraying three persons contemplating leaving Algeria.
78. Krupp, *Beyond*, 161.
79. Aveni, *In the Shadow*, 7.
80. See, for example, Roth, “The World.” In reference to Elie Wiesel’s memoir *Night*, Roth outlines three nature-related observations in memoirs of Holocaust victims and survivors: a

tendency to highlight the contrast between the beauty of nature and the brutality of mankind, the portrayal of nature as a conspirator in compounding the suffering of Holocaust victims, and reproach of nature's indifference to Jewish plight during the Holocaust: "The sun rose and set, night came and went, the stars shone and the moon beamed, the seasons passed, the earth stayed in its orbit while devastation raged and seemed to make no difference in nature's order." (15) Pecker's statements on the demise of the sun as an accomplice in the violence perpetrated by humankind and on the fallacy of embracing the notion that nature has healing power echo arguments developed within a subfield in the area of Holocaust studies known as the natural history of the Holocaust. A discussion of environmental history of the Holocaust as an emerging subdiscipline of Holocaust studies is beyond the scope of this paper. For an overview see Malczyński et al. "The Environmental History." Their basic premise is that "Rather than treating it merely as the background to events," they consider "nature to be an important participant in events as a witness (and not only in the metaphorical sense), a shelter for victims and perpetrators, and as something that often masks crimes." (186). On the futility in hoping to rely on the healing power of nature see Katz, "Nature's Healing Power."

81. Association Française, "Jean-Claude Pecker."

82. Pecker, *The Future of the Sun*, 22, 32.

83. Pecker, "From Champagne to Gascony . . ." The Munich reference is to the September 29–30, 1938 meeting of the leaders of Nazi Germany, Britain, France, and Italy. The meeting ended with an agreement which surrendered the Sudetenland, a region of western Czechoslovakia, to Germany, with the promise of averting the war threatened by Hitler. The agreement, nullified in 1942, became a symbol of appeasing an aggressor and surrendering one's own interests against false promises. The denuclearization agreement refers to the meeting of Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un in Singapore in summer 2018. On Pecker's position on nuclear disarmament see Redaction JDD, "L'appel," a 2017 appeal to incoming French president Emmanuel Macron to which Pecker was a signatory.

84. Pecker, "Avant-propos."

85. Pecker, "Avant-propos."

86. Pecker, *Lamento 1944–1994*, back cover.

87. Boase-Beier, "Saying," 276, referencing Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson, *Relevance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

88. Boase-Beier, "Saying," 279.

89. Boase-Beier, "Saying," 280; 282; 278.

90. See, for example, "Que sont mes amis devenus?" a question repeating an earlier exclamation with the same wording in his preface to Ziv's poems (2015), a piece where seven out of twelve paragraphs have one or more ellipses, or the repeated "où es-tu, André" in "André Verdet, où es-tu?", both discussed below.

91. A note with Pecker's initials, in the possession of Chris DeWitt, possibly inserted in a copy of *Lamento 1944–1994* given to her, with emphasis in the original. With similar empha-

sis but different focus, Pecker closes a letter (1998?) with a comment on the US during the war—the Americans waited three years before entering the war, he writes, which they did only when American interests were at stake and when it was certain that they would win. They were not better than those Frenchmen who showed weakness during the war while suffering under the Nazis. He ends with the sentence “Only one conclusion. **Remember. But forgive,**” again emphasis in the original.

92. See also the multiple italicized portions of “André Verdet, où es-tu” in Armengaud, *Pierres*, 31–38.

93. See, for example, Jonathan Druker’s “Levi and the Two Cultures,” in Puglieses, *Answering Auschwitz*, 103–13.

94. Celan’s parents were deported in June of 1942. His father, Leo Antschel, died, possibly of typhus, and his mother, Friederike “Fritzi” Antschel (nee Schrager), was shot at a labor camp in Transnistria.

95. The poem, in Pecker’s “André Verdet, où es-tu” (38), is not included in *Galets poétiques*. Armengaud’s *Pierres de vie* also has a discussion by Pecker of Verdet’s *Le ciel et son fantôme*, “Approche du Ciel et son fantôme” (183–89).

96. Pecker, “André Verdet, où es-tu,” 33.

97. Verdet, “Rencontre,” n.p. Pecker used “d’encres” intentionally (as opposed to “d’ancre”), possibly contrasting, according to Armengaud, the plurality of “inks” with the singular “beach.”

98. Pecker, introduction to *Poèmes de vide*, 9. Verdet, “prisoner number 186524, always captive of the SS in Auschwitz-Birkenau” (Forneris, in Armengaud’s *Pierres*, 354), was arrested by the Gestapo as a *resistant* in February of 1944. He was deported to Auschwitz and later to Buchenwald and released in 1945 when Buchenwald was freed by the Americans. In 2018, Ziv published *Entretiens avec André Verdet—SEUL L’ESPACE S’ETERNISE*, documenting some of his own conversations with Verdet between 1985 and 2002 with photos of illustrations and sculptures by Verdet.

99. Pecker, introduction to *Poèmes de vide*, 9.

100. Z4Éditions home page, <http://z4editions.fr/>. A book on astronomy with Pecker’s own illustrations, which he had written for his daughter Laure, then a seventh grader, was published by Z4Éditions in 2022.

101. Pecker, introduction to *Poèmes de vide*, 9; Ziv’s reference to Verdet’s multiple pursuits appears on the back cover of *André Verdet: 100 années d’étoiles, en vrac et dans le désordre*. Z4Éditions has a page on its portal dedicated to Verdet: <https://z4editions.fr/andre-verdet/>.

102. Compère-Demarcy, review of *Ce n’est rien*.

103. Verdet, “Rencontre,” n.p.

104. Pecker, Preface to *Poèmes de vide*, 10.

105. Verdet, *Anthologie*, 9.

106. An email message from Pecker to Chris DeWitt, October 29, 2019, mentions in addition

to the opening chapter two others that are in progress, arranged chronologically: “*Enfance et adolescence* (1923–1939)” and “*La guerre* (1939–1946),” but I do not know whether they were completed or followed by other chapters.

107. Pecker, “Le paranormal.”

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