lost clothes by Elfriede Gerstl, Translated from the German with an Introduction and a Translator’s Note

by

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Will Bellamy
**Introduction and Commentary: Elfriede Gerstl’s *lost clothes***

Like most of the books in her oeuvre, Elfriede Gerstl’s volume *lost clothes* brings together a series of shorter texts that span a variety of interlocking themes. The title piece, her longest poem, anchors the collection. Six prose pieces follow, treating topics such as the Austrian avant-garde writer Konrad Bayer, the hobby of collecting, and Viennese coffee culture, among other things. The collection includes a series of semi-blurry, black-and-white photos of Gerstl’s apartment on the Kleeblattgasse in Vienna, taken by her life partner, Herbert J. Wimmer.¹ The collection signals a shift toward the autobiographical: Gerstl uses her characteristic wit and offhand style in these texts to reflect on a long and turbulent life, to shed light on her hobbies, interests, and memories from over sixty years in twentieth-century Europe. While the collection treats personal themes, it is no memoir, and no poetry collection either. The volume is difficult to categorize, unusual in its approach: the author avoids chronology and conventional narrative as a whole, and the reader finishes the collection not feeling much closer to the author, despite the distinctive stamp of her character in each sentence. How, then, should we read this short assortment of texts?

Gerstl wrote the opening poem, “lost clothes,” in 1993, to accompany an installation called “Time-Steps” at the Theatermuseum in Vienna. Highlighting Gerstl’s long-standing interest in collecting clothing, the installation presented pieces from her wardrobe as a “series of dresses hung on a moving carousel, which visitors

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¹ In the original volume, Wimmer’s photos were placed at the end of the collection, after Gerstl’s writings. In my edition of the volume, I’ve chosen not to include all of Wimmer’s photos (26 in total, one for each letter of the alphabet), and have also chosen to disperse them throughout the collection. In this way readers can have a visual aid to Gerstl’s writings as they become acquainted with her style and character.
could set in motion at two different speeds by inserting a five-shilling coin, combined with a parade of shoes from six decades, arranged on a red carpet,” as well as portions of the poem printed and placed around the room (Gürtler/Wedl 2017, 365; my translation). One early draft seems to describe the scene: “There they hang and fly, these dresses that remind me of those I lost, left, had to leave behind, those I sacrificed while moving or fleeing, in order to get by with lighter luggage” (Gürtler/Wedl 2017, 365; my translation). The first line of the final version states it even more succinctly: “six decades present themselves in clothing” (32). If Gerstl has decided to write about her life and times, she has chosen to do so through garments, through dresses, hats, shoes, blouses, and pants, through the many fabrics she would feel and wear over the course of her life. The thirteen sections of the final poem—revised in 1995 for publication—present a sort of vestiary montage, with specific garments serving as markers of time and place. It is the story of a collector, fascinated by fashion, dress, and appearance, who due to her poverty and circumstances rarely had the means to build or house a collection. The poem’s central tension arises from this combination of desire and limitation: during the six decades that the poem covers, we find a woman teetering between acquiring and losing, between finding and leaving behind.

Gerstl has turned impermanence into the poem’s dominant motif, and any quick overview of Gerstl’s life story would support this characterization: Born into a wealthy Jewish family in Vienna in 1932—a year before Hitler’s rise to power—Gerstl spent her adolescent years in hiding, surviving Nazi persecution in
various underground locations in the city. She endured years of chronic poverty after the war, moving from apartment to apartment in Vienna and Berlin; without a stable living situation, she would write on trains or in local cafés. Not until the 1970s did she move into an apartment of her own, staying there until her death in 2009.

Friends told Gerstl that she could easily write a mass-market and presumably best-selling memoir to launch herself out of poverty; her experience as a Jew during and after WWII in Europe would be captivating enough, in line with that of the German-Polish literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki or the Austrian writer Ruth Klüger (see interview with Fichte/Gerstl). Instead, the author wrote “lost clothes,” fairly late in life, in her 60s. In many ways the text appears as a kind of memoir-poem, but it exhibits too much restraint and leaves too much unsaid to fit neatly into the category. “I don’t want to be seen as an Anne Frank who survived,” she said once in an interview (Kitzmanat 43; my translation). Much of her earlier writing exhibits a similar refusal to be pigeonholed by history. The poet seems to choose authorial distance over sentimentality; she experiments with language and meaning instead of indulging in personal narrative centered on memory or trauma.

One example here, from Gerstl’s 1982 collection *new viennese blend*, entitled “weiter” (“on”):

```plaintext
it’s going fine
it goes on
it goes on so that something in going goes on
so that something will go on something goes on for now so that something stays
so that something remains for now
so that the something that remains can remain for now
so that the something that remains remains for now. . . (Gerstl 2012, 103;
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In an interview with Gerstl, the writer Hubert Fichte notes how he encounters a certain emotional strain in these early texts: “For me your writing takes place on very thin ice. What is under the ice is never fully spoken of.” To which the poet says: “It’s hidden. But you can still sense it. Fear. Fear of sickness, hunger, death. It’s touched on lightly—but never fully explained. I’ve never allowed myself to fully explain it” (Fichte/Gerstl 165; my translation).

The interview with Hubert Fichte took place in 1979. By 1995, when “lost clothes” first appeared in print, one could perhaps deduce from this collection of autobiographical material that Gerstl had finally allowed herself to speak of these fears, that she was no longer concealing her experience. But this is not necessarily the case, as Gerstl never completely abandons the restraint manifested in her early work. And regardless of the author’s proximity to her own life—regardless of how close she stands to her own experiences—it would be reductive to say that the poem revolves solely around Gerstl’s story, since in it the author also comments on fashion and cultural history, apartments and living spaces, and life as an impoverished female writer in the second half of the twentieth century. In the following sections, I will look more closely at these central aspects of the poem, and in doing so I hope to reveal the deeper connections between the poem and the accompanying prose pieces, which treat such disparate topics as collecting, housing, experimental writing, social conventions, coffeehouses, and amusement parks. The volume lost clothes presents itself as wide-reaching collection, but also a collection written with humility and
moderation, with a strong sense of the ephemerality of life; one is constantly
reminded of Gerstl’s motto, both a play on Wittgenstein and a maxim for her work:
“What can be said at all can be said in passing” (Gerstl 2012, 141; my translation).2

Living in Transit: The “read-write-chat cafés”

The German verb *wohnen*—used 26 times in this collection, in one form or the
other—has no direct equivalent in English. On the surface it means “to live,” but only
as we would use it in the domestic sphere, to describe “living” under some kind of
roof, in a home, a city, an apartment or rented room. The word has roots in the Old
Saxon *wuon* and the Old English *wunian*, which denote “staying” or “residing”; one
philosopher has noted its ties to “resist,” while others have seen connections to the
Old Icelandic verb *una*, meaning “to feel pleasure” or “to be happy” (Beckers 39). A
seemingly mundane word in the German language, *wohnen* in fact describes the
complex relationship between humans and residential spaces. When Elfriede Gerstl
thus begins one of the essays in *lost clothes* with the proclamation that, during her
childhood, she “never learned what it meant to ‘live’ [*wohnen*] in the strict sense of
the word,” she is alluding to her own lack of protection, defense, and happiness,
starting early in her life (46).

2 In the original Gerstl’s motto reads: “*alles, was man sagen kann, kann man beiläufig sagen.*”
Wittgenstein famously said that his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* could be summed up thus:
“*Was sich überhaupt sagen lässt, lässt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muss man schweigen*” (What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak
thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein 26-27).
When her parents divorced, Gerstl was first forced to move, at age five, out of a large grand apartment\(^3\) and into a small flat that she would share with her mother, aunt, and grandmother: “in 1936 mother packed the first go bag / leaving father – to grandma’s by taxi,” she recounts in the poem (Fichte/Gerstl 179; 32). In 1938, when Hitler’s troops marched into Austria, the family became more and more isolated from ordinary life. Gerstl remembers how the SS would search their home in the early years of the Nazi occupation. By 1942 the family went underground, staying for short periods with a succession of strangers. Between the ages of 10 and 13, Gerstl had virtually no connection with the outside world: she viewed “the various apartments we lived in during the Nazi era” as “no more than hideouts, refuges, prisons” (46). After the war, the author was finally freed from the constant fear of deportation, but her living situation did not change much. She moved from one provisional home to another in Berlin and Vienna, temporary living spaces that she alludes to in this collection: the apartment on Rembrandtstraße in Vienna, for example, in which Gerstl lived right after the war, or her room on Kleiststraße in West Berlin.

Many writers and philosophers have written on the concept of home, often in an abstract sense; the existential condition of “homelessness,” for example, became a philosophical motif in the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka. While Gerstl surely experienced a similar kind of existential struggle, the practical realities of home, shelter, and homelessness find the most direct expression in these texts:

- constantly moving – noisy lodgings – needing peace-quiet
- when no dough – need to be needless.

\(^3\) In German the common word for “apartment” or “house” is Wohnung, which derives from wohnen; this is form of the word that Gerstl uses the most.
a woman poor and odd-looking – getting bossed around
on-the-go living – changing in park restrooms (42)

The poem attests to Gerstl’s resourcefulness, as she finds ways to get by in
day-to-day life with little money and few possessions. Along with this
resourcefulness comes a certain creativity, since Gerstl was forced to create forms of
“makeshift living” [substituiertes wohnen], forced to find places in which she could
feel at home, however briefly (42). For some people with difficult housing situations,
these temporary homes may be train stations, restaurants, parks. But for Gerstl, it was
the inimitable Viennese coffeehouse that provided the most comfort.

Like many other European intellectuals of the twentieth century, Gerstl spent
much of her time in urban cafés, frequenting some of the same establishments in
Vienna that Freud or Trotsky had visited a few decades before her time. One of her
favorite “read-write-chat cafés” in Vienna was Café Korb, a small coffeehouse in the
center of the city (42). I believe Gerstl visited cafés like Korb not only because of
their engagement with the arts—for decades, Korb has had a program of readings and
performances for avant-garde artists and writers like Gerstl—but also because of her
basic need for shelter. In a way, with the cafés Gerstl created an alternate, extreme
version of Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own.” Where to write when one can’t
write at home, or when one doesn’t have a home at all?

Many writers have noted how a visit to a typical Viennese coffeehouse
provides an escape from daily concerns, while at the same time the establishments
thrust their visitors into a sort of microcosm of life, where people speak, read, and
reflect on the world outside. One character in Joseph Roth’s novel Zipper und sein
Vater (“Zipper and his Father”), for example, is described as wanting no more than “to sit in a coffeehouse, nowhere else but his coffeehouse . . . Only on entering this coffeehouse was Arnold free of his day” (Roth 174-75). Stefan Zweig noted in the 1940s how the Viennese café for him had been “a particular institution which is not comparable to any other in the world . . . a democratic club to which admission cost the small price of a cup of coffee” (Zweig 39). Egalitarian by design, the Viennese coffeehouses are welcoming to anyone; as Shachar Pinskar observes, “The Viennese ritual of serving a glass of water with any order of drink signal[s] that the patron—whether an occasional visitor or a habitué—[is] welcome to stay as long as he want[s], including the pleasure of being alone to write and think” (Pinskar 106). It shouldn’t be hard to imagine why the Viennese coffeehouse provided the sort of “makeshift living” that Gerstl needed most in her life. Here she could write and think, away from the chaos of shared rooms and messy apartments.

In her essay on the coffeehouse she reflects on the surprising ability these establishments have shown to survive well into the late twentieth century. Gerstl echoes those other writers who found escape here: “. . . the coffeehouse is the only media-free location (apart from the occasional dreadful piano player) where people can discuss the day’s usual and unusual occurrences undisturbed. The so-called good coffeehouse doesn’t exhibit the group-specific insularity of a trendy meet-up or club, but rather features a wide array of people, mostly dominated by lower-middle-class folk” (78). The typical Viennese coffeehouse is an underdog of the city’s culture, a remnant of earlier times. Many fight for its continued existence out of
nostalgia—which may have been true of Gerstl too. But most importantly, the author had not only an emotional connection to these cafés, but also a practical, existential one; without them, we might well not have much of Gerstl’s writing. A framed photograph in Café Korb today, on the wall by the entrance, attests to this dynamic: in it, the author gazes thoughtfully into the distance, with a coffee cup and a small stack of papers on her table, a pen in her right hand.

“to mix or compose an attire-compilation”: Clothing and Collecting

In her book *The Fashioned Self*, Joanne Finkelstein argues that an individual’s physical appearance is inescapably tied to how others view the person’s character, “even though our awareness of how physical appearances can manipulate our sympathies and reactions. . . is well enough known” (Finkelstein 50). Appearance, though notably superficial, can mean everything in the highly visual world of today. And if the twenty-first century has seen this emphasis greatly strengthened, especially by the proliferation of visual media, then the second-half of the twentieth century was the long prologue leading up to it. In “lost clothes” Gerstl consistently points out how her appearance influenced her status in the world. “Polished look – no success without chic,” she writes, imitating the language of fashion (33); “only money looks right all the time,” she concludes (43), reflecting on her poverty as the “woman poor odd-looking – getting bossed around” (42). Yet Gerstl does not always lament the modern world’s obsession with appearances, as some writers have done. While
appearance often played a detrimental role in her life, she also seems to embrace it, play with it, and use it to her advantage.

The greatest tool for experimenting with appearance is, I think, clothing: when compared with surgery, exercise, or other ways to alter one’s physical presentation, clothing offers a relatively easy method for modifying appearance, and, by extension, the way one is perceived in society. Gerstl knew this: she lived through the biggest revolution in fashion history—from Christian Dior to the grunge-look of the 1990s—when styles of clothing became both available and influenced by a larger public sphere. Gerstl had the ability to participate in fashion trends, as did many others in the Western world at this time. From the second half of the twentieth century on, as Ewing puts it, “Fashion is no longer dictated by high society; as often as not it is triggered off and swept into favour by the anonymous but compulsive force of this or that section of the masses. It is news. It moves under a constant floodlight of publicity” (Ewing 1). Swept up in this wave of fashion, Gerstl would manage to acquire a number of outfits and “pieces” that epitomized the European fashions of her six decades. An incomplete list of these items would include stilettos, nylon stockings, petticoats, polkadot dresses, wooden clogs, ribbed sweaters, corduroy skirts, pillbox hats, t-shirts, bell-bottoms, and berets. Gerstl not only participated in the game of fashion by wearing these items in public and private, but also by investigating the language of fashion, as other great twentieth-century writers such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Pierre Bourdieu have done. Each

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4 See Benjamin’s analysis of fashion in Convolute B of The Arcades Project, Barthes’s essay-collection The Language of Fashion, or Bourdieu’s book Distinction.
Gerstl indeed paid close attention to the fashion world and participated in its
ebb and flows, but at the same time she also kept her distance, as is evident from her
critiques. Moreover, her lack of money often barred her from the upper echelons of
fashion, which tend to place emphasis on expensive items and a quick turn-over for
new trends. As an alternative Gerstl would find solace and inspiration in flea-markets:
the first she visited in 1972, according to the poem, and from then on these places of
trade became indispensable to her low-cost engagement with clothing. The markets in
various parts of Vienna solidified as further destinations of the flâneuse, similar to the
cafés she frequented, and Gerstl became a well-known figure in this community of
second-hand buyers and sellers. One friend describes how she first came to know
Gerstl:

I’d already known about her, she seemed like an interesting woman. She
seemed unreachable too. She was easily recognizable, with her mop of red
hair that would pop up every now and then from behind some pile of old
clothing. In the second district there was a vintage clothing and antique shop
in particular that still had a kind of cattle scale, and with it you could weigh all
your textiles by the cubic meter. Buying vintage clothing wasn’t all that
popular yet. . . and eventually it dawned on me that this red mop was Elfriede
Gerstl. (Schwahn-Reichmann 235; my translation)

It is impossible to say when Gerstl changed from clothing-enthusiast to
clothing-collector. In her essay on the homes of collectors, she writes that she
considers herself a “pseudo-collector,” meaning one of “those who care most about
finding and buying” (51). She says she might argue that this hobby (obsession?)
began in childhood, as a psychological response to some void left by early
experience, though she remains doubtful that “anybody just decides one day to start
collecting.” Indeed, many factors go into a person’s attachment to specific kinds of
objects. In his book *Collecting: An Unruly Passion*, Werner Muensterberger argues
that “Repeated acquisitions serve as a vehicle to cope with inner uncertainty, a way of
dealing with the dread of renewed problems of need and longing” (Muensterberger
11). Such a sentence could have come straight out of Gerstl’s own essay: she, too,
also focuses on psychological aspects of collecting and the intersections between
collecting and living spaces. Clothing is often difficult to manage; one feels the need
to keep it clean and organized, easy to locate and presumably wear. And yet Gerstl’s
relationship to collecting is unique in a few ways, just as her relationship to clothing
and fashion is unique. Because Gerstl often had no permanent home where she could
store a collection, her process of “finding and buying” included the process of losing
and gaining—hence “lost clothes.” It is easy to imagine collectors as hoarders who
cannot let go of any item in their collections, regardless of its sentimental value; but
due to her circumstances Gerstl had a more malleable relationship with her
“treasures.” Even when she acquired a long-term apartment in Vienna in the ’70s, she
did not put an end to this habit of losing, giving away: “Often I’ve been on the way
home from thrifting, with my finds in a plastic bag, and have given away journals or
scarves to friends I’ve happened to run into; with only certain hats, dresses, and
pieces of jewelry would I find it hard to part” (51).
In the end Gerstl believed that a collection should not be hidden away for a single person to cherish: a collection should be a living organism that grows bigger and smaller and interacts with the rest of the world. Thus in the '90s Gerstl started to hold her Modeschauen (fashion shows) in Vienna, where models would show off the various pieces that Gerstl had acquired over the course of time. Many friends remember these shows fondly, which worked as a transportation in time through the influential styles of the twentieth century: Elfriede Jelinek, the Nobel-prize winner and fellow clothing enthusiast, has written a number of pieces on these cult-like events. Since Gerstl’s death, Raja Schwahn-Reichmann, a Vienna-based artist who inherited the collection, continues to organize Modeschauen in the hope that Gerstl’s legacy won’t die out. Schwahn-Reichmann notes in an interview that at fourteen her daughter took a liking to wearing Gerstl’s dresses (Schwahn-Reichmann 240). Clothing is passed down through generations, and in this way we arrive anew at Gerstl’s early work, quoted above: “so that something will go on something goes on for now so that something stays / so that something remains for now.”

Six Decades and Six Senses
At over 5,000 words, “My Thoughts on Konrad Bayer’s the sixth sense” is the longest essay in this collection, a surprising length for an author who rarely wrote texts longer than a few hundred words. Gerstl adapted the essay from a lecture she gave at a local artists’ association in Vienna in 1994. The essay is almost conversational in tone, as

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the author discusses some of the characteristics of Konrad Bayer’s novel: she cites passages that she likes, speaks about Bayer’s background and influence, and at one point humorously describes how she wants to use this essay to engage with the text again from a greater distance, after absorbing it into my being more or less osmotically and emotionally in the ’60s when it first came out. I think I was addicted to it as to a drug or some fascinating person. . . . The best and most intimate experience with a text occurs when you incorporate it into yourself (which of course has a cannibalistic ring to it), and mobilize enough energy to come up with something related but still original, new. (55)

While Gerstl comes off as a relaxed critic, thoroughly familiar with the text, the essay is also analytic and cerebral, full of intriguing insights into a lesser-known avant-garde novel of the twentieth century. She notes that the sixth sense occupies a special place in literary history for some German-language authors, including Peter Handke, Gert Jonke, and Gerstl herself. But, as with so many experimental writers, Bayer “is still misunderstood to this day and, I think, all too rarely read” (72). Indeed, most bookstores I have visited in Germany and Austria don’t carry any of Bayer’s books—including those in Vienna, where Bayer lived and set most of his writing. In 2008 a small U.K. press published an English translation of the sixth sense by Malcolm Green, but today the edition is hard to come by: a third-party seller on Amazon currently charges over $70 for a copy of the 150-page translation.

Who was Bayer, and what is the sixth sense? How does Gerstl situate herself vis-à-vis Bayer’s work and legacy?

The first edition of the sixth sense came out in 1966, two years after Bayer had taken his own life with poison gas in his apartment in Vienna. Gerhard Rühm,
Bayer’s friend and collaborator, assembled the many fragments he found at Bayer’s home and organized them to create the novel we read today. As Gerstl notes in her essay: “Anyone aimlessly flipping through the sixth sense will at first notice variously long, internally compact, seemingly disconnected segments or blocks of text that might be confusing or off-putting if your reading habits have led you to expect linear or otherwise fixed narratives” (62) The novel’s “story,” to put it simply, follows a young man named Goldenberg through a variety of unreal, comical, and terrifying experiences in Vienna, the world, and the underworld, though the story itself takes a secondary role to the author’s style and method: Bayer appropriates the montage technique first pioneered by modernist authors to mix seemingly disconnected literary elements, including science, surrealism, German Romanticism, hermeticism, mysticism, and modern philosophy, into his own alchemical form of the novel.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s writings on language and perception arguably assume the most important role in this eclectic mix, and Malcolm Green notes in the introduction to his translation that, in line with Wittgenstein,

*the sixth sense* reveals [Bayer] as a sceptic who has seen through the illusion language creates of representing ‘reality’, and indeed our own perceptions, on an authentic, one-to-one basis, and who suffers from being trapped within a language that is incapable of truly objective statements, but is equally unable to truly express subjectivity. And dandy that he was, the montage enabled him to highlight the artifice that glues together the arbitrary jumble of syntax, rhymes, similes, metaphors, synecdoches and half-forgotten associations that go to form language itself—often to hilarious effect. (Green 9)

The many passages that Gerstl quotes in her essay attest not only to Bayer’s humor and wit, but also to his literary interests and philosophical rigor, all of which he paints
with a deep mistrust for language and its ability to communicate feelings, ideas, truths. Like many other Austrian others before him, Bayer wanted to play with language, deconstruct it from the inside; he was writing at a time when writers in Germany and Austria were searching for new ways to write fiction, after their native tongue had been abused and defaced by the language of Nazi propaganda. On the one hand we find writers like Günter Grass and Ingeborg Bachmann arising from this situation, both seeking to use language to confront history and deal with the past. Bayer had a similar project, but I would argue that his was much more destructive in nature: he seemed to believe that you could not rebuild the language before tearing it down completely. In this sense, Bayer may have similarities with Gertrude Stein, who aimed to dismantle traditional modes of expression in English as Bayer did in German. It is difficult to say whether Bayer succeeds or not with this undertaking in the sixth sense; perhaps the impossibility of such a project led ultimately to his demise at the age of thirty-two. The novel at any rate shows an tirelessly experimental writer at work, delighting in the artifice of language, perception, and reality.

How can we situate Gerstl in relation to Bayer? On first glance, the two could not be more dissimilar: Gerstl, writing brief, seemingly inconsequential poetry and prose sketches for most of her life, seems quite far away from Bayer, whose masculine writing seems to want to encompass everything possible in the world, in order to either change it or destroy it. But in reading Gerstl’s essay, we can see how the two may have overlapped. Gerstl first read the sixth sense shortly after its publication, while living in Berlin; she was reading Wittgenstein at the time, like
Bayer, and also attended events at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, though the two spoke to one another only on a few isolated occasions. As mentioned above, Gerstl was deeply moved by Bayer’s book. Her own novel, Spielräume (Playrooms), sometimes reads like a reworking of the sixth sense, filled with questions of perception and the relationship of perception to the language we use in daily life. Though Gerstl distances herself in many ways from Bayer—by the end of the essay, she admits that she can’t even explain why Bayer had such an influence on her—she also suggests where they may intersect. Both seem to have a strong disregard for literary tradition: in her essay, Gerstl constantly reminds the reader that she has no use for an “established set of literary instruments” while analyzing Bayer’s book (62); she pokes fun at professors of literature who tend to pick away at authors’ archives; and, in place of a conclusion that would wrap up the many disparate thoughts she articulates in the piece, she writes that “the literature professors will surely sort this all out for me” (73). Repelled by the literary establishment in Berlin in the ’60s, both authors wrote for a small circle of experimental writers, far from the contemporary literary scene at the time. The montage technique is a hallmark of this estrangement, and the sixth sense, Spielräume, and even “lost clothes” in this collection present themselves as montages, combinations of disparate elements. If Bayer wanted to explore topics such as German Romanticism and Wittgensteinian philosophy, Gerstl wanted to explore fashion and cultural history, housing and autobiography. Thus, while the two writers rarely overlap in content or scope, they utilize the same

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6 An organization, still in existence, that hosts literary events and sponsors workshops on writing and translation in Berlin.
techniques, and share literary principles common to many authors writing on the fringe, away from the establishment.

Perhaps the most clear overlap between Gerstl and Bayer—both evident and hidden—is the number six. Bayer was interested in mysticism, shamanism, and various kinds of “sixth senses” across cultures, and developed his own version of “the sixth sense” in his book, based on his ideas of perception and time. Gerstl, writing at the end of six decades of her life, chose the number six to ground her longest poem: it appears not only as the central motif (“six decades present themselves in clothing”), but also as the word count for every line, with one notable exception. Forced to reduce every line to six words, Gerstl has given us an amazing example of poetic compression, as she employs particular constructions of the German language to express complex information in as few words as possible; many lines are fragments, containing floating participles and nouns instead of subjects or finite verbs in order to comply with this Oulipo-like restriction. One critic, Dagmar Winkler, has even argued that the entire collection can be interpreted through the number six, with different “planes” aligning with Gerstl’s essays and areas of expertise (Winkler 115).

In numerology the number six has a number of different connotations: Christianity sees it as the number of creation (“God in six days created the world”), and other traditions believe that it is the symmetry of opposites and the law of analogy, or as Hermes Trismegistus, an early pioneer of hermeticism, puts it: “As above, so below” (Ebeling 32). I tread lightly in applying these far-reaching ideas to Gerstl, who always saw herself as far removed from established ideologies or belief systems; be that as it
may, in choosing the number six, she has incorporated herself into a long tradition that extends far beyond her and Bayer.

I mentioned earlier that impermanence is arguably the central motif of Gerstl’s writing in this collection. Impermanence cannot be separated from time: as a function of time, it can come into being only through the passing of days, years, and decades. In choosing to write about her life and passions, Gerstl has dived into many temporal intricacies: What does it mean to grow older, to live through six decades, to see the world change? How does the relationship between authors and influences change over time? How do material things “live” over time? What does it mean to let things go and “move on”? One of the final pieces of the collection, “my Prater – your Prater,” shows Gerstl reminiscing about the Prater amusement park in Vienna. At first we find passages describing a young and naïve Gerstl as she tries out roller coasters for the first time as a young child before World War II. She whimsically describes riding on swans and in tin cars and frighteningly losing herself in a house of mirrors. Then a change in time occurs: she describes a visit to the Prater with her daughter many decades later. There is distance between the two figures, in time and in experience: Gerstl seems to fear the “terrifyingly beautiful world of the prater,” while her daughter wholeheartedly revels in the amusement park and its many attractions (77). The final ride concludes: “the lilliput train. . . goes jingling through a mini-forest, into a near-stillness – after all the bustle, hustle, trampling and shouting, a droplet of silence” (77). Time seems to freeze here, at least for a second, and it is an
unorthodox moment for an author who was always on the move. Of course the ride will keep moving: its movement only temporarily suggests silence, and Gerstl will return to the outer world that so frightened her as a child. Similarly, Gerstl’s life had to end as she grew older and older—2019 marks the ten-year anniversary of her death—but her legacy can still live on in many ways: through her writing, through her clothing collection, through memory and recollection. I hope that these translations can further that cause.
Gerstl’s poem “lost clothes” presents a number of difficulties for the translator, some stemming from specific qualities of the German language, some stemming from the idiosyncratic ways the author has chosen to use that language. An author’s style is sometimes so intimately connected to a specific grammar, vocabulary, and syntax that a translation must tackle both linguistic and stylistic problems at the same time, and this is the case with all the texts in lost clothes. Gerstl’s German comes off as modest, humble, and succinct. She uses words carefully, but despite this care she seemingly never attaches much weight to the process of writing. Elfriede Jelinek has termed her “Der leichteste Mensch” (“the lightest person”) and “Die Flüchtige” (“the fleeting one”), and rightly so: throughout the volume, her style captures the attention through its lightness, its buoyancy, especially in the more sombre passages on homelessness, poverty, and childhood trauma (Jelinek 2009, 62; Jelinek 2012, 11). The second section of “lost clothes,” detailing Gerstl’s descent into the underground as a child, for example, seems to skid across the subject matter without ever holding onto the severity of the situation:

1942: mother packed the small go-bag
leaving behind black 1930s cloth coats
we won’t need that much anymore
she said strangely mysteriously i thought (34)

In “lost clothes”—the one poem in the volume—the lines read almost as fragments of prose, highly irregular in meter and form. Some lines fall into a rhyme scheme, but never consistently enough to turn the text into a more traditional poem.
Though she employs fewer words and expressions from the Viennese dialect in this poem than in those of her more poetry-heavy collections, such as *neue wiener mischung* ("new viennese blend"), her word choice is still highly specific; she often employs strange and rare adjectives, and utilizes German’s inventiveness in combining words to create new terms, such as *kleiderberg, konditoreibesuch*, or *clochardkluft* (literally translated as clothing-mountain, pastry-shop-visit, hobo-outfit, respectively). Gerstl always appears effortlessly clever in her use of language. And even if there is little room for lyric poetry in "lost clothes," we still find an impressive array of sounds within the poem, creating a delicate and complex sonic atmosphere outside the traditional rules of verse.

The poem has been the most challenging text in this collection to translate. As much as translation necessitates a comprehensive knowledge of the original language—in this case, German—I’ve been frequently reminded over the course of this project that such knowledge is useless without an equally comprehensive knowledge of English in all its peculiarities. As I worked to transfer the poem from one linguistic and cultural context to another, Gerstl was consistently testing my ability to use my own mother tongue in flexible and inventive ways. I’d be able to translate a certain phrase more or less literally at times, but on the whole my translation often required me to find new modes of expression. With each line, I first had to ask myself: does this line make sense in English, and is it pleasing in its imagery, sound, syntax, etc.? and if it was, I then had to ask myself: does it ultimately capture the feel of the original? In this way, the translation became both a practical
and creative process: practical, in that there had to be a solution to each word, phrase or idea, and creative, in that the final product had to be aesthetically pleasing in some way.

Arguably these two principles for translation—practicality and creativity—force the translator onto a kind of tightrope walk, between overly literal language on one side and overly free language on the other; at first these two sides appear to be irreconcilable, constantly threatening the translator from both sides, so much so that, if you indeed choose to straddle the two, the final product is less a unified text than a kind of heated and disjointed argument. In my own struggle between creativity and practicality, I have found the closest thing to a solution in Mark Polizzotti’s book *Sympathy for the Traitor*, where he speaks of translation as representation:

> once we see the translation as a creative work in its own right, one that conveys the essence, spirit, and, to the extent possible, form of someone else’s text while communicating a literary pleasure of its own, then it becomes less an impossible pursuit and more (to borrow Ralph Manheim’s formulation) a performance to be appraised on its own merits. . . . A good translation offers not a reproduction of the work but an interpretation, a re-presentation, just as the performance of a play or a sonata is a representation of the script or score, one among many possible representations. (Polizzotti 52–3)

I believe Polizzotti’s argument suits this kind of poem well, which forces the translator to constantly make creative decisions for lack of equivalency and cultural overlap; I also believe that his description is aesthetically fitting for a poem with its origins in an exhibition at a museum, a kind of performance. Just as Gerstl can have
many different versions of her work, so I propose my translation as another version among many others, a type of “re-presentation.”

It is easy to speak theoretically about translation, but it is always in the nitty-gritty that the choices get made, in the interplay between individual words, phrases, lines, and stanzas. I have used this theory of performance to guide me in all of my choices, choices that I cannot possibly fully analyze in this essay—not only because of how numerous they are, but also because of the purely intuitive aspect of writing (or re-writing) poetry. Be that as it may, I will try to explain some of the larger choices that define the translation as a whole.

Polizzotti claims that a translator can “convey the essence and spirit” of the original text, but the form only “to the extent possible.” This aside signals how difficult it can be to replicate form in literary translation: why recreate, say, the sonnet form of a poem when translating it into a language that has no literary tradition of that form? Clearly the shape and rhythmic pattern of the poem will not have the same effect when translated into a different cultural and linguistic context. Translators of poetry have often recognized this activity of translating forms as futile, and thus have attempted to find new or equivalent forms in their target language. The Japanese “linked form,” for example, which tied together a series of short poems through an elaborate intertwining of associative imagery, is often viewed as impossible to replicate in English: the structure that the poem assumes seems too culturally specific to translate.\(^7\)

\(^7\) For more on seemingly untranslatable forms, see “Forms and Genres” in Burton Raffel’s *The Art of Translating Poetry*, 63–79.
The translator doesn’t seem to run up against these problems of form in “lost clothes,” at least at first glance, since the poem appears to be in free verse, a tradition that easily traverses the landscapes of both English- and German-language poetry. And yet, as mentioned in the commentary, Gerstl has chosen a particular restriction for her verse: each line contains six words, no more or no less, with one notable exception. This is a form without a specific literary history in German, though it is fitting for a language that can compress multiple words into one, and for a poet bent on poetic economy. Some lines within the form are quite short: “in wien enge armut und enge” has six words and 27 characters. Others are quite long: “Synthetik-Gabardine spottbillig – durchgeknöpfter Rock – kurzärmeliges Oberteil” has six words and 78 characters. Over the course of the project, I have swayed between following and breaking this restriction in my final translation. At times it felt that it was essential to compress the German into a six-word line in English, and at times I felt as though I was losing precious poetic information in the process, forced to cut words that felt essential to the piece overall. In the end, however, I decided to mirror Gerstl’s word-count. Emily Wilson’s recent translation of The Odyssey into English served as a large inspiration in this endeavor: in her introduction to Homer’s epic, Wilson notes that “My version is the same length as the original, with exactly the same number of lines. I chose to write within this difficult constraint because any translation without such limitations will tend to be longer than the original, and I wanted a narrative pace that could match its stride to Homer's nimble gallop” (Wilson 82). I can only imagine how much Wilson struggled with this process, how much she
rearranged or cut out elements of the poem to adhere to the original form. I think that her decision has plenty of merit, and, if Wilson wanted “a narrative pace that could match its stride to Homer’s nimble gallop,” I wanted a translation that could match its stride to Gerstl’s brevity and laconic precision—and so the six-word limitation soon became indispensable.

On a separate note: Some of the stanzas in “lost clothes” are written in entirely lower case, while some include capitalized words. The lower-case style is characteristic of some twentieth-century German poetry, particularly Konkrete Poesie; the effect is more striking in German, since all nouns are usually capitalized, regardless of whether they are proper or not. The stanzas with capitalization, at least in the poem, represent a more distant voice than the intimate one that addresses the reader in the stanzas that are in lower case: the stanzas symbolize a broader, more general voice of culture, speaking in catch-phrases, slogans, and headlines, mostly from the fashion industry of twentieth-century Austria. The play between these two styles simulates a dialogue: one more personal, one more impersonal. The difference between the two is much more evident in the look of the printed page of the German text, for reasons stated above. To mark the difference more clearly in the English, I have decided to italicize the stanza portions that are in upper case: I believe that this sets them apart from their lower-case counterparts, along with emphasizing the idea that Gerstl is quoting from a culture that uses language in a very particular way and with particular aims.
The reader will see that many of Gerstl’s prose pieces in the volume *lost clothes* expand or comment on the themes explored in the opening poem. By virtue of these pieces being in prose and not verse, I have found them easier to translate, at least on the surface, though in them Gerstl uses language just as lightly and economically as she does in the poem. The writer presents information very elliptically, in an offhand way, and the reader (translator) sometimes has difficulty filling in the gaps between sentences, as she jumps from one idea to the next. Pieces like “Snobbery” and “Surviving Tradition” come off as *feuilleton*-style writings that offer quick takes on the culture of her day; the longest piece, “My Thoughts on Konrad Bayer’s *the sixth sense,*” was first given as a lecture to intellectuals and artists, and thus has more in common with long-form literary criticism (though it diverges as well from this kind of criticism in many ways). The translations have tried to take into account how Gerstl moves between different genres of prose writing and consequently between what we consider low and high culture. I would argue that Gerstl prized movement in all its forms, and that she was eternally restless in her writing. I have always kept this in mind when translating her texts, and I have also realized that, in a way, translation overall corresponds to this aesthetic. These pieces are never finished, never static: something can always be edited and moved around.

To return to Polizzotti’s idea of *performance:* It is common knowledge that all productions of plays happen at a specific moment in time, and this moment in time always relates to another, when the play was first written; so a contemporary Shakespeare performance is different from one at the turn of the twentieth century or
one in Shakespeare’s own time. The same principle can be applied to translation: this is the first English-language translation of “lost clothes,” undertaken twenty-six years after the first appearance of the poem—the prose pieces have also never been translated into English before. Twenty-six years creates not too large a gap when one considers translations of ancient or medieval poetry; but much has happened between 1993 and 2019, and this divide between the two time periods can be both profitable and detrimental to a translation. On the one hand, in 2019, vintage clothing has become more popular than ever before, and so it may be easier for today’s reader to understand Gerstl’s obsession with vintage hats and shoes, with flea markets and collecting; on the other hand, today’s reader will probably have some difficulty visualizing every type of garment or understanding every advertising slogan that Gerstl mentions in the text. And just as time plays a role in translation, so too does place: an English-language reader will have difficulty associating anything with “zwieback’s,” a famous department store in pre-war Vienna (34), or “s-bahnquelle,” a restaurant in West Berlin from the ’50s and ’60s (43). But these references should not detract from the experience of a translated text, which always aims for familiarity on the one hand and estrangement on the other. So translation must give access to texts in other languages and other cultures—not only to show where we may overlap, but also where we may stray from one another.
lost clothes

by Elfriede Gerstl
lost clothes: a poem

I

six decades present themselves in clothing
six that has a nice sound
no lady left home without hat
bacall in her jacket with shoulderpads
monroe in corselette – her pleated skirt
the bathing suit as woolen one-piece
the platform sole in style: 1940
six that has a nice sound
heavy shoes for work during wartime
women clearing rubble in headscarves turbans
were long skirts the new look
by 1952 had stilettos come back –
first nylon stockings – girdle with stays –
was it mine – an underwire brassiere
a tulle dress in punch-cake pink
petticoat black cinch belt poodle skirt –
where did i leave them behind
six – does it not sound nice
some nip-and-tuck for a little dress
fashion-magazine tips – old recycled – made new
1961: making do with second-hand suit

Fake corsages return – silk is low-cost
Charleston dresses in lovely new versions
Fitted bodice – tied belt – four suggestions
Age-old complaint – I’ve nothing to wear
Simply accessorize your three basic pieces
1959: Snap it up it’s Dralon⁸
No worries washing your Dralon dresses
No ironing needed – pleats are rain-resistant
Write us when fashion problems
weigh you down – age occupation included

⁸ In 1954 Bayer AG launched a new fiber made of polyacrylic on the market and called it “Dralon.”
This high-tech material was soon to become a bestseller and has now been holding its own on the
world market for more than half a century.
Polished look – no success without chic

Elsbach9 has the clothing for go-getting

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9 Elsbach was a German company in the textile industry, started in 1873 by the brothers Josef und Hermann Elsbach. In 1914 they were the largest manufacturer for underwear and other clothing. Because of the Elsbachs’ Jewish heritage, they were forced to hand over the company to the Nazis in 1938. The company lived on until 1998 under different management.
1936: mother packed the first go-bag
leaving father – to grandma’s by taxi
in closets polkadot dresses stayed put
white on blue – blue on white
she did not like them anymore

1942: mother packed the small go-bag
leaving behind black 1930s cloth coats
we won’t need that much anymore
she said strangely mysteriously i thought
never again buying clothes at zwieback’s
no more coats hats sweet salesgirl
at first our seamstress visited us
in one of our earlier hideouts
stitching one dress out of two
light-blue pink for me i’d grown
but nothing eye-catching no ocelot jacket
nothing to iron nothing with ribbons
cardigans – wool dress – instead of heating
layers in bed in the cold
heavy shoes for work during wartime
summer – wooden clogs – brown leather straps
women clearing rubble skirt headscarf turban
1948: long dresses the new look
stilettos are back – the wedge sole

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10 Ludwig Zwieback & Bruder was an influential department store in Vienna, founded in 1877. With the rise of the Nazis in Austria, the store was forced to close due to the Zwieback family’s Jewish heritage.

11 Presumably a reference to Christian Dior’s “New Look,” a new style in fashion pioneered in the late 1940s which emphasized feminine features with full skirts and tight waists.
III

vienna: no place of my own
1958: hitchhiking to venice – lost jacket
vienna: tight quarters poverty cramped quarters
flashy american clothing – gifts altered slightly
the 60s in berlin makeshift lodgings
repeated relocating – suitcase with clothing stolen
kleiststrasse\textsuperscript{12} renovated – new owners – commune evicted
the art-nouveau cabinet in basement – buried
dismantled discarded crepe blouses inside it
goethestrasse\textsuperscript{13} – scammed – apartment with multiple leases
coming home from a pastry-shop run –
three men with identical lease agreements
cursing – ribbed sweaters vanished with bell-bottoms
ossi\textsuperscript{14} takes suitcase for safe-keeping – containing:
my wedding dress\textsuperscript{15} made of satin
color: cherry red – plus shoes books

\textsuperscript{12} A street in the neighborhood of Schöneberg in Berlin, formerly West Berlin. Gerstl lived at Kleiststraße 35 in the 1960s.
\textsuperscript{13} Also located in the neighborhood of Schöneberg. Gerstl lived on this street as well for a short period of time, but her exact address is unknown.
\textsuperscript{14} Oswald Wiener, an Austrian author and friend who lived with Gerstl during her time in West Berlin. (See Gerstl’s essay on Konrad Bayer below, in which she cites a few passages from Wiener’s work).
\textsuperscript{15} Gerstl was married to Gerald Bisinger in 1960. They divorced in 1968; she never remarried, though she considered the writer Herbert J. Wimmer a life partner for most of her later years.
1956: fitted waist head-to-head with princess line
1960: brigitte magazine\textsuperscript{16} offers life-saving suggestions
iconic figures: sabrina or jackie k
Adorable handbags – all women love Skai\textsuperscript{17}
A waist-length jacket – Little collarless suit
What teenagers are wearing: American hip-huggers
Real Chinese raw silk – so chic
Old spring suit made snugger and shorter
The corduroy skirt now also shortened –
White gloves plus plain batiste blouse
The women can sigh with relief –
So grateful for these transformative tips

\textsuperscript{16} Brigitte is a popular German-language women’s magazine, first published in 1886.
\textsuperscript{17} Skai was the creation of Konrad Hornschuch AG in Germany as an alternative to real leather. The material is used for everything from clothing to furniture.
early 70s: back to vienna – rembrandtstrasse\footnote{18}
black-and-white op-art trapeze dresses mini skirts
again cramped living seeking provisional housing
1974: first trips to flea markets –
acquire my first natural linen jacket

spending every spare shilling – delightful addiction
when moving i sacrifice a cloth-mountain
including – sob – a coat with checks
was forced to wear others’ hand-me-downs
for so long – finally joyous hunting
pillbox hats – polkadot dresses – elegant clutches
writer’s group in graz – the literature-producers\footnote{19}
have i sold out after all
or found my own private market-niche
festooning my room with second-hand clothing
is my theory unsustainable – feeding obsessions

\footnote{18} Gerstl lived at Rembrandtstraße 24 in the Leopoldstadt district of Vienna with her mother, daughter, and husband (see the piece “Individual Living” below). Gerstl had partly grown up in this apartment before being forced out by the National Socialists; it was given back to the family eventually after the war.

\footnote{19} In 1972 Gerstl became part of the Grazer Autorenversammlung, founded as an alternative to the Austrian PEN club. Their members would be called \textit{Literaturproduzenten}.}
Dress to impress: real artificial silk
As mentioned no success without chic
Attention: The spring arrives in wool
One coat for spring summer fall
No one leaves home without hat
The fragrance of cleanliness and freshness
Order your cute Perlon\textsuperscript{20} dresses today –
The Walzertraum the Rumba and Samba\textsuperscript{21}
The Playtex girdle molds and holds
No supports – no stays – no seams
You too can look centimeters slimmer
Helanca stockings\textsuperscript{22} – legs changing with seasons

feet here show your feet here
your shoe this path lined with shoes
shoe-parade presenting the passage of time
the blue-and-white pumps in dancing-school days
black berlin clogs left behind somewhere
not every loss must be mourned
sometimes life goes on moving on

\textsuperscript{20} The trade name in Germany for the nylon developed by IG Farben in the 1980s.
\textsuperscript{21} A play on mail-order catalogues from the 1970s, with elaborately named dresses.
\textsuperscript{22} A 1950s-era brand for stretch fabric, popular in both Europe and the U.S. and used for bathing suits, tights, and other garments.
1984: rented my first wardrobe storeroom
the apartment unclogged – rediscover old books
the collection grows methodically and chaotically
a continuous cycle of purging – space-filling
as a text grows it grows
writing and collecting stem from lack
a lack defiantly confronted with abundance
the 80s – shopping from six decades
doesn’t six sound nice
to mix or compose an attire-compilation
blurring borders – crossing outdated with current
tuxedo with jeans – playing with meanings
while top designers proffer canonical styles
feelings of doubt grow ever stronger

salztor-bridge\textsuperscript{23}: wind whisks my straw hat
into the danube canal – tidal kidnapping –
the red replaced with black hats
evicted from storeroom – a loss-heavy move
next storeroom: damp cellar – mice – mold
i move – and salvage my favorites
furniture collector then offers them refuge
but pungent moth-repellent: dreading infestation – help
leave a few mold-covered handbags behind
migrating again with mini-pack and backpack
pricey new refuge a pricey park-view
while others still hang there undisturbed –
some hiding place damp and cold

\textsuperscript{23} A bridge in central Vienna, connecting Leopoldstadt (District II) with the city center (District I).
typical of the 80s: puffy shoulderpads
career women broad shoulders in flats
the power of top designers now fractured
innovations rise from below – the streets
everything is possible – freedom over restriction

Everything joyously combined – a style nonetheless
Grunge girls: punks of the 90s
Underwear in full view – bra-straps undershirt
Two undershirts layered – plus crocheted hat

the 70s return: narrow shoulders
short dresses – long coats – bell-bottoms – help!
two elfriedes24 promise – never again bell-bottoms
perhaps nostalgic ruffled blouse – nothing more

Chanel: dandy style adapted for women
Men’s wear for women haircuts neckties cuffs
What the dandy took from women
Should “of course” be properly returned
Alt-fashion eliminates gender and class distinctions
unisex: pants – same t-shirts – long hair
Satirizing lady-like clothing – plastic plus fur
Rats: the punks’ new lap dogs

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24 Elfriede Gerstl and her long-time friend Elfriede Jelinek.
discover clothing in mother’s coat closet
clothing once thought lost – yellow clogs
bell-bottoms op-art blouse – green princess-style dress
from hanni’s cut-up suit in berlin
jacket found – skirt in snatched suitcase
kleiststrasse commune visions of stucco ceilings
memories parading before the mind’s eye
headspace stores everything unimportant/too important
perhaps rip it out some other time
the day-to-day routine as internal dust-beating
constantly moving – noisy lodgings – needing peace-quiet
when no dough – need to be needless
everything luxury – space quiet keeping silent
bizarreness of fringe groups – destitution normalized
woman poor odd-looking – getting bossed around
on-the-go living – changing in park restrooms
read-write-chat-cafés – makeshift living – local eccentric?
always find some value in deprivation
comfort from lovely cloth-scraps – caressable silk
three-toned art-deco prints orange brown beige
50s: green palms on yellow cotton
delightful curtain-haul with meter-high giraffes
dreadful 60s – earth tones – kennedy-suits cloche hats
beatles: neat mop tops skinny suits

25 Hanni Rühm, a friend from Gerstl’s time in Berlin and the wife of the writer Gerhard Rühm.
working alienated from yourself marx said
as cashless austrian alienated from yourself
a home – wherever cash is found
exile means – poor in strange lands
strange lands with money – buddies aplenty
bosnian maid hits lucky-six-jackpot – instantly integrated
hostility persists but – at best – disguised
perhaps there’s solidarity among poor berliners
the daily backbiting – solidarity the outlier
mid 60s as foreigner in berlin
tough tough subletting from “normal” berliners
room-hunting in little black dress – unobtrusive – “respectable”
teased hair in beehive – pumps teetering-tottering
when sublet noisy – writing at s-bahnquelle

when s-bahnquelle noisy – diener restaurant savignyplatz
hitchhike to vienna in houndstooth-suit pumps
question: are you really austrian? passport:
mistrustful up-and-down – look even MORE foreign
only money looks right all the time
the big shot hated but beloved
can look foreign whenever he wishes

26 A bar and bistro popular among artists in the 1960s and ’70s in the neighborhood of Schöneberg in Berlin.
27 Also a popular artists’ restaurant in West Berlin.
1972: vienna-bound no contract no cash
room-sharing with mother – searching for lodging
now dressed wrong for garish vienna
arrive with vinyl silver suit from berlin
no available jobs – proving friends right

1974: flared checkered skirt – covering boots
Boots tight – side-zipped – thick platform sole
Blouses – long pointed collar or bow
New career-suit – affordable – but expensive-looking
Dirt-cheap synthetic gabardine – a short-sleeved top
The skirt buttoned down the front
Corduroy: skirt – vest – boots a must-have

Body-hugging felt coats – berets everywhere
1978: small apartment\textsuperscript{28} – beyond my means
right away decorated with my favorites
clothes over bookcase – these ACCUMULATIONS everywhere
the well-known storerooms only years later
(in order why order – memory ACCUMULATING
simply showing what comes to mind)
speaking in public – speaking to myself
must artists always be on call
must they apply the businessman’s dream –
the worker forever working – to themselves?
no breaks? allow themselves only self-exploitation
or become a jolly self-boss?
even satisfying work needs a break
clothing-passion was once work-break – became work
everything marketable’s marketed infected by work

\textsuperscript{28} The apartment at Kleeblattgasse 9/21, where Gerstl lived until her death.
long ago fashion meant leisure – celebration
the married man’s wealth – no designers
would ever design work clothes – this
convention now also passé – barbara vinken
confusion between day and night between
work and play – intellectual lady businesswoman
silk parka – sweater made of cashmere –
outfits for the day AND evening
sports leisure in casual work clothes
designers confuse consumers with misleading allusions
aggressively punk – ruffled hobo-look – bag lady
sometimes find something even in muck
the poorest of poor provide inspiration
consolation? irony? what they have – individuality –
can still be exploited up above

Classics are like a good friend
For us they will always be there
For the uncertain – avant-garde needs young blood

six decades present themselves in clothing
six that has a nice sound

Individual Living

My interest in apartments and how people use them stems primarily from my childhood: growing up, I never learned what it meant to “live” anywhere in the strict sense of the word. For me the various apartments we lived in during the Nazi era were no more than hideouts, refuges, prisons. And for many years after that, I came to know only the shelters and communes that others had forced upon me.

In the sixties I lived in a one-room apartment with a kitchen and bathroom, crammed in with my mother, husband, and child. I had no say in this form of living, and it was surely one of the reasons my marriage failed. We had no money to buy or
even rent a proper home, and we weren’t assigned any public housing that would’ve been big enough for the four of us. Because of this, a well-meaning civil servant at the city counsel advised me to have a second child, or at least give up writing and become a painter. Only then would I be entitled to an office or an additional room.

Sharing housing with acquaintances still counts in the minds of an unenlightened public as something almost sleazy or seditious. On the other hand, the homes where families live like strangers to one another continue to be tolerated and even subsidized, spawning mental disorders and illnesses among the tenants. By reopening the emotional wounds of a more vulnerable population, these places produce alcoholics, addicts, binge-eaters, and depressives, all of whom in turn require a legion of social workers, psychologists, and therapeutic resources.

Too few affordable studio apartments and too much societal pressure on communes and shared housing: as long as this situation interferes with a citizen’s autonomous choice of a way of life and living, the “crazed” nature of the city will hardly change.

P.S. I wrote the above in 1982; in 1994 it looks out onto today’s landscape with strange, sharp eyes colored by a revolution grown old. People who lived in or visited the communes and shared apartments of the 70s (i.e., those young at the time) must now explain to their adolescent kids that commune doesn’t simply mean a community (as an administrative unit) but rather the shared flats influenced by the 1960s student movement and its ideals, which aimed to eliminate bourgeois living conditions. But
how to describe the revolutionary fervor of that era, the utopias, the drive to escape from the comfortable nuclear family, the same family that the kids of the 90s so easily affirm as they continue to live with their parents?? These kids hardly wish for the “death of the traditional family” anymore, now that their vacation trips with groups of friends, their disco outings, their eclectic fashions no longer encounter any push-back from their parents, but rather are tolerated—and funded. Do kids these days even want to leave the nest?

First off, they want more money, want to drive faster and farther, want to buy better entertainment technology and differentiate themselves from members of other youth cliques, all of whom chiefly aim to differentiate themselves through their respective “styles” and “looks”—or so it seems to me.
The Home of the Collector

Like art or any other productive activity, collecting owes its existence (among other things) to some sense of deprivation. Something you lacked earlier in life produces a desire that persists, and even those who can later obtain something they once craved still don’t necessarily satisfy that initial hunger.

I doubt that anybody just decides one day to start collecting, though I’m talking here about libido-directed collecting, not about accumulating (art) objects for display or as an investment and a capital gain.

Housing is at once a simple and a complicated affair, and can be dictated by everything from basic needs (a place to eat, sleep, shelter from the heat and cold) to the elaborate satisfaction of aesthetic tastes. Along with economic imperatives, the psyche plays a large role in determining whether a person chooses to live in quarters ascetically bare or lavishly appointed.

If you were conditioned as a child to one pattern or the other—e.g., if you grew up crowded by shabby things—then, as an adult who has achieved a certain level of prosperity, you may choose to live hemmed in by more beautiful and valuable things. And the reverse situation—an adult cast into poverty—is easy to imagine as well: the person once surrounded by many beautiful things might choose to be surrounded by many cheap objects later on in life.

What seems more unusual to me would be going from bare to lavish, and vice versa: that someone who is used to a sparsely furnished living space would suddenly fill it to the brim.
One thing is certain: the rich, self-assured collector will display his treasures with pride and pleasure, keeping some of them in storage, and his home won’t be inconvenienced by his (socially respectable) hobby of collecting. On the other hand, the poor collector, collecting measly objects (beer coasters, glasses, magazines, etc.) tends rather to be ashamed of his passion; indeed, in his milieu any deviation from the norm soon brings on mockery; and the more crowded his place becomes and the more his eccentricity gets out of hand, the less often he will let visitors come into his apartment.

I’ve had a chance to see collectors’ apartments that were so cluttered their inhabitants had only the narrowest spaces to move around in. A painter—who has since become a monk and willed all his treasures to the monastery—had his Thonet chairs stacked one on top of the other, and a few of the rooms in his bourgeois apartment were no longer accessible, being jam-packed with porcelain, paintings, and elegant furniture left to gather dust and mold. A book collector, an odd, old musician, had similarly withdrawn into a single room, and even so could barely move among the piles of magazines and books; he ate at his ex-wife’s apartment or at a local bistro.

I know one collector of Art Nouveau and Art Deco who stacks all of her treasures vertically, and eats with her partner in a tiny corner of the kitchen, so as not to knock over an Emile Gallé vase with her elbow when cutting her schnitzel. She spends most of her time with other second-hand dealers or at flea markets and in pubs.
Why do people who get their kicks from shopping and collecting incur such inconvenience by cluttering up their apartments? Most of the objects they acquire are kept out of inertia, I think, not because the items, once acquired, continue to bring intense pleasure.

Those who suffer from depression—found frequently among collectors—console and energize themselves with a new purchase, only to leave the item, once purchased, lying around like an unfinished letter or the like.

The systematic and obsessive collector who imagines some kind of perfection in his collections—the full-year set of a journal, the complete coffee service, the sixth and final collector’s mug, the second volume, etc.—quenches his desire when he finally acquires the last missing piece, which promises a complete, systematic order.

Myself I count among the pseudo-collectors—among those who care most about finding and buying.

Often I’ve been on the way home from thrifting, with my finds in a plastic bag, and have given away journals or scarves to friends I’ve happened to run into; with only certain hats, dresses, and pieces of jewelry would I find it hard to part. But because I go shopping far more than I give things away, a chaotic collection has started to accumulate in my apartment, as if it were growing on its own. Collections grow like corns on your feet, mitigating or padding some pain or pressure-point; the embarrassment with which a collector lets a supposedly normal non-collector see his apartment is at once genuine and insincere. On the one hand it’s embarrassing to reveal to a so-called healthy person an addiction that’s generally glossed over in
society (as opposed to alcoholism or gambling), and on the other hand it’s insincere to complain about the lack of room to move around in—not because the collector actually misses the room all that much, but because he has acceded to the general notion that you’re supposed to complain about such things.

The collector thinks he should say something to placate the guest, no doubt horrified at such a cluttered apartment, where piles of books and paper cover every inch of the dining/reading/work table; he reassures him that he’s vowed to get everything cleaned up and downsized soon enough. But after calming the guest, the collector claims, so as not to seem completely meschugge, that he can still find everything he would need in this apparent chaos, and that—here comes the biggest shock—he still feels comfortable and at home amid all this junk.

On a similar note, I find it hard to throw away any piece of paper, so long as I haven’t filled both sides with scribbles. As a child I did my drawings on whatever scrap paper, receipts, letters or envelopes I could find around the house—during the war paper wasn’t exactly abundant—and, although now I’m happy to type up a text and throw away the handwritten original, all the partial drafts, the letter-responses that I’ve started but not finished, the unanswered letters, the newspaper clippings, etc., are still lying there in skidding and slipping piles, some of which also contain books and magazines that have been buried, all of which forces me to dislodge and root through the piles whenever I’m conducting a major search operation in my apartment.
Of course the searching costs time and energy and is irritating, but of course my infrequent guests have bigger problems when they encounter this chaos, like the chaos they’re probably contending with themselves, still uncertain as to how much turbulence they should allow into their own lives.
My Thoughts on Konrad Bayer’s *the sixth sense*

Motto 1:
“even as a child goldenberg had . . . a morbid yearning for perfection”
Konrad Bayer, *the sixth sense*

Motto 2:
“Answering texts with texts”
Siegfried J. Schmidt

The mottos give an idea of what I’ll primarily be discussing: fantasies of omnipotence and impotence in *the sixth sense*, and additionally the possibility of an author’s talking to a text like a person. I’m interested in how the highly developed sensibility of the main character, Goldenberg, vacillates over the course of the book, how he sees through and ironizes all of his own emotional challenges and at the same time succumbs to a kind of narcissism that insists on all or nothing.

*the sixth sense*, which among many other things seems to me like a tribute to this quintessentially modern attitude, could be considered a ’90s cult book for a group sometimes called the “Young Intelligentsia”—a convenient label, but only accurate if this group were still willing to read anything not directly furthering their careers. The second obstacle for the book’s reaching cult status, however, is that it’s a text characterized by the utmost compression rather than the usual postmodern randomness and rambling. And so the book is enjoyable only for those who respond positively to this type of structural rigor.

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30 All translations from *the sixth sense* are Malcolm Green’s. Page numbers for passages from the book that are cited in this essay come from his edition published by Atlas Press (2008). For the passages that I have translated myself, I’ve kept the original page number that Gerstl cites in the German-language text.
With the second motto I’m pleased to have found a competent constructivist thinker who admits that, in interpreting, you can’t truly capture the aura or intensity of a text like *the sixth sense*, but can arguably do justice to the text with other texts, or by means of affinity or empathy. I’ll be jumping back and forth between these two approaches, so to speak, at first describing the book in general terms, reading from it, and reading from books that can and must be called “reactions,” especially homing in on passages that pertain to Bayer’s book.

Those who claim an inability to truly interpret texts strike a pose, as if they were abandoning all their preconceived notions: only the thing itself, they say, only as it speaks for itself, and nothing, nothing articulated separately from it. Hermeneutics’ aversion to its own status is as good as any other distancing from your particular identity that society urges you to undertake: you don’t want to be what you are, and you know best why. Or: you want to be what you are, but at the same time strive to be your opposite, the Other of your self, in order to nibble on everything simultaneously, without making yourself vulnerable to attack. (Franz Schuh, *Konrad Bayer Symposium*, 61)\(^{31}\)

I feel touched to the quick by this excerpt in so far as I myself am trying to avoid the difficulties of interpretation, by describing, talking to, and psychologizing the text, i.e., by treating the text as a person, and imagining that I’ve established an intimate dialogue with it.

Be that as it may, I’ll have statements concerning the text here that clearly amount to my judgments, as I see no other way out besides staying silent altogether. I’ll psychologize the text and the characters’ remarks because I can’t come close to it in any other way, or at least never as close as I once was. I’ve been wanting to engage with the text again from a greater distance, after absorbing it into my being more or

\(^{31}\) My translation.
less osmotically and emotionally in the ’60s when it first came out. I think I was addicted to it as to a drug or some fascinating person; anybody can try to trace down or figure out these feelings, how I felt so captivated, transformed by this book, but I myself simply can’t make any more headway along those lines. The best and most intimate experience with a text occurs when you incorporate it into yourself (which of course has a cannibalistic ring to it), and mobilize enough energy to come up with something related but still original, new.

I’m also assuming that most of you are familiar with the repressive political climate of the ’50s and ’60s, which made this kind of ostentatious assertiveness in public and rebellious verbal outpouring so necessary for blowing off steam.

As best as I can, I’ll consider:

1) Influences and inspirations

2) Specific themes, e.g., concerning friends, autobiographical elements

3) General themes, philosophical considerations, perspective as a sixth sense

4) Literary methods

5) Influence on other authors

6) 7), etc., it’s clear enough to me how much I’m taking on here, so I’ll just say: —that such a compact, dense, and hermetical text contains its own criticism, that the main character Goldenberg, for instance, understands himself best, that he is playing the dangerous game of a tight-rope walker yet nonetheless remains ensnared in his emotions, a prisoner of the limits imposed by his own narcissistic-hysterical feelings.
—that the book demands a right to happiness in life that is both gigantic and very adolescent: something—e.g., recognition, that special someone—should either come knocking immediately or never be allowed to show up at all, this or nothing: life as a game of chance.

Re 1: Influences and Inspirations

I’ll start with a quotation from Gerhard Rühm’s foreword to Bayer’s Collected Works: “now bayer had a particularly high regard for max stirner and walter serner (“letzte lockerung”)—but also for zen texts, in poetry quirinus kuhlmann, the
pataphysicists, hans arp. he was interested in cultic (and secret) rituals, magic, the alchemists, studied shamanism” (16).

When he appeared on the scene—which back then was small, easy to take in, and noticeable against the backdrop of a generally dreary environment—Bayer had already made friends with H.C. Artmann, whose poems he cherished (on the occasion of one of the few conversations I ever had with Bayer, in a bistro in Berlin, he extolled the radical intervention of Artmann’s poem “I am a polar star”). Artmann, to whom he probably felt some affinity in the late 1950s as a dandy and womanizer, became a mentor to Bayer, influenced by and playfully experimenting with surrealism, presenting himself as a man of the world who would bring back hard-to-find texts or old grammar and language-instruction books from his travels abroad or from excursions to thrift stores and antique shops in outlying districts of Vienna; in these tomes Artmann found inspiration for his montage pieces and collaborative work.

Bayer’s second important friend, mentor, and father figure—who couldn’t have been more different from HC Artmann—would be Oswald Wiener, who supplied Bayer with the philosophical repertoire for his work: from him Bayer received book recommendations, comments on Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, and encouragement to look into the individualistic anarchy outlined by Max Stirner, with solipsism as the final result. I’ll return to all of this in a moment.

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32 My translation.
Re 2: Specific themes in *the sixth sense*

Rühm writes in the foreword: “his fundamental themes are paradox, compulsion, resistance, reification and ossification, death, and ultimately interchangeability: one is like the other (“the birds”)”—and I’ll add to this: erotic and suicidal phantasies, additionally a group of friends that traverses a city with its squares, restaurants, and parties, a group that you could identify if you were so inclined (Artmann, Wiener, Frieberger, Hundertwasser, Lampersberg and others, Bayer is more or less identical to Goldenberg), but that isn’t really the point, the people, I believe, provide opportunities for him to showcase something, namely the repertory of artistic methods in the modern age, filtered through the unmistakable sensibility of the author.

Re 3: Philosophy and the challenges of communication

I’ll quote a few passages here in order to explore the philosophical problems Bayer broaches in *the sixth sense*:

“you know,” said paolo farkas, “we don’t have a scrap of free will.” a little bit, perhaps, goldenberg brooded on his way home. we do have a bit of free will, goldenberg answered 3 days later, he had given it a lot of thought. 2 weeks later farkas retorted: “you call that free will simply because i could raise my right hand now. that’s a load of crap, and who can say whether i can, and so what?” (99)

Later:

time? goldenberg said in astonishment, and several days later, after thinking the matter over, he said, it is just a cutting-up of the whole, by means of the senses, he added when they came to speak of it again. (112)
“what does i mean, what’s it supposed to be, is it my toes & i or my consciousness and what then is my subconscious? perhaps the library of arcane literature, the petrified mysticism of this i, my i, hey what does that mean?”

“you know, we’re working with shoddy images and perhaps we shouldn’t come up with any at all, should ward them all off and then there’d be a right to-do up here,” goldenberg points to his brainpan, “and the result or a number of results spew out of the computer without my having cobbled any such associative pyramids of images together. perhaps one shouldn’t disturb them, you know, the mechanisms i mean, not keep butting in with stupid little images, get me? making neat little images, coming up with nice little ideas, not being able to wait.” (148)

Bayer’s philosophical position toward solipsism, which solidified over the course of many conversations with and suggestions from Oswald Wiener, appears to me in an unforgettable way on a half-filled typewriter page in the early (1958) text “since i know”:

since i know that everything is my invention, i avoid speaking with my friends. it would be foolish. however, i do take care not to tell them that i have invented them, because they are terribly conceited and believe they have invented me. it would hurt their vanity. i’m astonished by the vanity and the arrogance of my inventions. yesterday, somebody maintaining to have lent me some money wanted to cash a sizeable sum. i tried to explain the matter carefully, but he understood nothing, and i invented that he was about to attack me because i proceed with strict logic in my inventions. i slammed the door in his face and invented an afternoon with sun. it was very beautiful, but boring. that’s why i let it become 11 pm, read a book and got to bed. i have invented today’s day and am very pleased with it. also with the invention of music i’m very happy. (61)

And what is this “sixth sense”? I suspect a sensual awareness similar to the kind enhanced by the consumption of certain drugs, and a realization of perspective, of

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perspectival seeing, that makes certain passages in the book so—I can’t think of any other way to put it—cinematic.

“there!” and the two of them leapt from their brightly painted metal and wire-chairs over the hedge out of the café garden in hot pursuit of her: “a girl like a flat iron like a pebble like a buttered roll like bacon and eggs like a white border like a red dress like a cell like a ship like a shin like a chin like elle like gazelle like giselle like dispel like remark like a red tern like the way she’s turned red how cute!” the two of them collapsed exhausted to the ground. columns of hot steam suspended above their open mouths and the snow around their bodies melted. helped up by the strong arms of their friends, who had come hurrying up from the garden heated by the infra-red rays, they swayed through the twilight alongside a number of gently glowing lampposts and stared into the distance, where the young thing had long since disappeared.

“perspective,” said goldenberg.
“that old shit,” said oppenheimer.
which brings us back to the crux of the matter. (105–6)

Bayer frequently laments the impossibility of an ideal form of communication, since the German language that grandpa passed down to us has devolved into a scrap yard, or something along those lines, and yet all the same he constructs from this language a fascinating verbal amusement park of surprises. His desires were limitless, Rühm argues in the foreword, and I have a hunch too that every so often these phantasies of power and strength (in narcissistic-hysterical form) were from time to time cut short and replaced by the fear of a impending frigidity and a numbing sense of loneliness.

As for the agony surrounding the inadequacy of communication, I’ll say this: on beaten paths, along worn-out rails, communication can be accomplished quite marvelously, though the more complicated and exquisitely partitioned language becomes, the more the group of interlocutors will shrink, and in that most private
space of emotions a kind of incommunicable autism reigns, which no individual necessarily needs to share with others. What cannot be said out loud is perhaps the sole possession that cannot be coaxed from me, no microphone can capture it like a butterfly net and dish it out to some silly radio show, no literature professor can rehash the material for his colleagues to show what the abdicated author has left behind for the archives.

Bayer was young, determined, full of boundless ambition, he wanted everything, even the impossible, without delay. And so again we encounter this form of modern narcissism that’s already being offered and presented to middle-school children through video games (which nobody principally needs to be against) as a future orientation for the world. The enemy is defeated in an instant, the city reduced in ashes, and fantasy is no longer necessary for that finale-flight across the sky—indeed, it’s pointless now to dream up a surrealist aeronaut when he’s already been dealt with on the screen, like a nemesis or a professional task that should be handled as quickly as possible, like a checkbox on the to-do list.

Re 4: Literary methods

Anyone aimlessly flipping through the *sixth sense* will at first notice variously long, internally compact, seemingly disconnected segments or blocks of text that might be confusing or off-putting if your reading habits have led you to expect linear or otherwise fixed narratives. In the more fortunate case where the reader comes to the text with a more open mind, the text can engross and even enthuse, so long as the
intended connections between the blocks of texts—and the different levels of the novel—manifest themselves in the reader’s mind.

Common to most authors writing non-realistic texts is that they don’t care to weave their narrative threads and personal constructs into reality on a one-to-one basis, and that themes or situations instead offer opportunities for them to test out methods and prototypes, to dismantle them or develop them.

As early as the ’60s I placed my confidence in these techniques of working with language as material (permutations, work with found linguistic “objects,” montages or other types of layering), but ever since the grand political and philosophical theories have admitted defeat, I’ve been amazed at the cheerful persistence with which authors—both young and old—continue to aspire to the tried-and-true format of the realistic novel. Concentrating on smaller units, as Oswald Wiener does in *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman* (“the improvement of central europe, novel”) (with poetic passages, mini-essays, journal entries, quasi-realistic descriptions, etc.) seems to me a far more realistic approach to today’s world with its insistence on process, this world of increasing complexity and global interconnectedness and at the same time its continuing desire for small bites of information.

Bayer’s novel deviates from this format by using Goldenberg’s self-reflexive consciousness and his permanent inner dialogue to propel the individual sections and writing techniques with Goldenberg’s self-reflexive consciousness and his permanent inner dialogue.
Next I’ll comment on different types of text in *the sixth sense*, but I won’t be dissecting them with an established set of literary instruments; instead I’ll just try to describe what jumps out at me, and will say completely subjectively what comes to mind and how.

hand in hand nina and goldenberg walked through the forest in the blush of sunset. nina snuggles up to franz and says: franz is the patron saint of animals. then the birds, the snakes, the tortoises, the cats, the dogs, the peacocks, the fish, the elephants and the butterflies come out of the clouds, the thicket, from greece, the basket, the hut, the gardens, the rivers, africa and the roses. “but i am not a christian,” goldenberg lied. then the animals flew, crept, crawled, slinked, ran, walked, swam, tramped and fluttered sadly back home. (63)

This is what I associate with the passage: two lovers are strolling through the forest, when in response to Nina’s remark the animals of the forest start to appear as if “on cue” or on a stage, the catalogue of animal names unwinds like clockwork, then the catalogue of their places of origin, until on Goldenberg’s cue—“not a christian”—they vanish from the stage of consciousness, moving along a catalogue of verbs, as if being reeled in on a fishing line.

The action proceeds along a seemingly naive path of language, with each category of words occupying its own stretch: nothing means more than it says. That’s the first surprise; and then the proximity of fish, elephants, and butterflies to each other forms a poetically surreal wonderland, a kind of Garden of Eden, made entirely out of language, expressing a nominalistic view of the world.

Another passage, another type of text, produces a different kind of surprise: suddenly oppenheimer is standing before me and looks like braunschweiger, who looks like dobyhal and he looks like nina, who looks like weintraub, who
looks like lipschitz, who looks like mirjam, and she looks like the man there at the barrier who wants to see my entry ticket.
“hey, you,” he says. damn it. (94)

It should already be clear that the characters in *the sixth sense* don’t conform to any index of psychological profiles, their actions don’t fit into corresponding character structures, and in the passage I’ve just read they demonstrate their complete interchangeability: it’s a masked ball a where the individual’s identity is constantly changing, produced by superficial appearances; somehow everyone looks one way, meaning the same, but you still need a ticket to get into this society of sameness, it’s like a key; the person who says “damn it” presumably has none.

It’s hard to imagine a more succinct portrait of a social event that requires a ticket. It’s an impressive device, fashioned from just a few lines of buoyant language, both enjoyable and enlightening, and the less you operate with the usual criteria that we’ve been used to applying to literature, the better you can understand these texts: “After all, nothing is concealed, nothing is hidden,” Wittgenstein says in his *Philosophical Investigations* about the perceptual process.34

The montage combines disparate elements and pays no attention to the most common assumptions about literature and readers’ expectations that arise from them. Bayer similarly doesn’t tip his hat to self-indulgent forms of scholarly discussions, which often just mean reformulating something into a different cultural code without offering new insights: his seemingly scholarly approach disavows and ironizes the attitude associated with it.

34 From Section 435 of Wittgenstein’s work; Gerstl herself doesn’t give a citation.
meanwhile the planet earth had described a considerable part of its path through the heavens, trees had grown from its spherical surface, several 100,000 organisms had perished, half of those still alive had slipped into the unconsciousness which the well-developed species of so-called earthlings terms sleep, highly-sophisticated fictions, the so-called angels, watched over their places of rest and whispered sequences of pictures in black and white or colour, with sound or without, their dreams. (128)

Is this person sitting on the outside, far away from, even beyond all fictions, looking down onto everything, even the most insignificant phenomena—at times Goldenberg can even be God—or is it the scientific eye of an extraterrestrial observer, watching the film, the film series that makes up life on Earth? These various themes call for various approaches, and anyone who engages with these themes impartially will surely see them in a new light. I read the sixth sense as a journal without dates: on certain days the author succeeds in portraying an everyday occurrence—such as a subway ride or a visit to friends—with a method that dismantles an established pattern in order to transform it.

Most fascinating, however, is the magic trick that we can never figure out, the moment when the writer breaks out and reconfigures everything usually taken for granted and then puts pen to paper. This moment is perhaps possible only when you lead the kind of experimentally radical life that Bayer did, when you decide in youthful and narcissistic boundlessness to subdue the earth, to take a biblical commandment literally.

  first i want to be happy
  second savor life
  third the world belongs to me
  surely that should suffice
but i
disturbingly
own the universe as well
and time
and space
but nobody believes it in any case. (Konrad Bayer, The Complete Works, 47)35

Re 5: Influence on other authors

Bayer was and is an author from whom other authors have learned, and that shouldn’t
be seen as a reproach to any of those involved. “A writer who does not teach other
writers teaches nobody,” says Walter Benjamin.36

Admittedly I’m extrapolating this from my own experience as a writer, but
what else should I do except extrapolate—compare?—no, extrapolate. Besides the
usual criteria I could name, there exists in me a kind of inner respect-sensor,
comparable to depth perception, that helps me recognize affinities between authors
(along with the region, the environment a text comes from). I’m familiar with Bayer’s
use of found material, his irony and humor, the milieu of his recognizable
personalities, all of whom I knew, and his desire for autonomy, though perhaps minus
the radicalism of an ego constantly experimenting with itself. Completely foreign to
me, however, are these masculine fantasies of power and omnipotence, the
unrestrained commitment of life for art, the self-directed ruthlessness of the dandy,
who has chosen to aestheticize all aspects of his life as both pose and guiding
principle.

35 My translation.
36 From his essay “The Author as Producer”; Gerstl again doesn’t give a citation.
I can’t help turning to myself now and the influence Konrad Bayer had on my novel Spielräume (“Playrooms”).

After being rejected by Berlin’s literary establishment in the early ’60s and forced to listen to criticism of my writing that refused take my own intentions into account, I came to feel an even greater sense of belonging to Vienna’s circles of experimental writers.

In the winter of 1963-4 the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin had invited me to participate in a kind of four-month writing workshop, which turned out to be no more than an offshoot of the Gruppe 47 with all its unpleasant dictatorial features. It pleased me to see Bayer surprisingly turn up as a short-term guest in this milieu of conservative writers and critics, and far from Vienna with its fixated hierarchies and communicative antics I finally had an opportunity to speak with him. Lonely, living on Kleiststraße, I began work on my montage-novel Spielräume. Without going too deeply into Bayer’s and Wiener’s influence on me in this period of terrible isolation, I’ll juxtapose a few passages here for sake of comparison.

First, from the sixth sense: “the mass of time, thought goldenberg” (151).

And later:

time is a solid body in which we move, goldenberg had known when he was still alive.
or is it an allegory of ourselves that we gradually become aware of? dobyhal pondered.
away with images, dobyhal called out loud. a couple of apparitions that bore the form of his friends interrupted their simple steps. they’re all useless, dobyhal closed before closing his eyes. (158)
Now in Spielräume:

Version 3
at midday Grit, having slept, stepped out onto the street, but here all the passersby had turned into fossils overnight, firmly and silently stuck in quartz time
thought Grit
i’m stuck here up to my neck, cemented into eternity
(although there was no cement here, everything beautifully transparent, glass-like) and because she was having trouble breathing in the hard mass she quickly closed and opened her eyes, and everything started flowing again as always, and she effortlessly swam with her electrified body of cells through all the wave crests and valleys, the bundles of rays and swarms of ions, onto the other side of the street, and electromagnetic vibrations had awakened from their dreamy sleep and were now sending what Grit in the interest of simplicity would call beeping, humming, whistling, screeching, grating and rattling into her ear and perception-center (as if she hadn’t needed to first prepare her multi-course auditory meal), and then a shiny yellow clump of molecules swam up to her and she provided it with a name (comprised of sound? meaning?) and named it the 19 bus and pushed her way into one of its openings (“like second nature,” as they say, “as usual”). (48)

Somewhat farther along there’s a passage that refers indirectly to K. Bayer and O. Wiener:

at midday Grit, having slept, stepped out onto the street
what’s left to do, Grit asked herself
seduce well-meaning people by way of skillful argumentation into the style of thinking that you’ve been counting on recently, thought Grit, after reading ideas similar to hers in authors she admired, after eating french fries, applying her night cream, sleeping, and stepping out onto the street, and what style of thinking have I been counting on, she thought further (damn it, that brings us back to the crux of the matter). (77)

37 My translation. All of the block quotes that follow from Gerstl, Wimmer, and Wiener are also my own translations.
According to the rules of behavior that our group established in seemingly self-deprecating fashion in the multi-author novel *starker tobak* (“strong stuff”), I’m committing a severe transgression here. Back then in the ’60s any assertion of an affinity to other authors, even one motivated by appreciation, would’ve been dismissed as presumptuous and punished with ridicule. These rules no longer apply, and I maintain friendly connections with all four of the remaining authors from the Vienna Group. Back then, however, for a member of the group, surrounded by both naive and knowledgeable admirers and followers, it was wiser to keep your mouth shut, listen, and watch their self-promotional activities like a performance: these people ostracized by the culture industry were not only grandiose, but also performers of grandiosity itself.

Now I’m going to mention a few other authors in whose textual landscapes I see references to *the sixth sense*. In my opinion Herbert J. Wimmer’s novel *innere stadt: roman* (“inner city: a novel”) belongs in this context; it’s a text inspired by Bayer’s montage-technique that doesn’t merely take place in Vienna but is at home there. The book similarly consists of text blocks of various length that take up recurring themes such as perspective-centered strolls through cities and consciousnesses, visits to restaurants, and eating and drinking rituals in order to try out and invent new literary techniques.

> blaunsteiner is anna is loretto is otto, the detective says to the man he is chasing.  
> you don’t understand a thing, do you even have a ticket, i’m the ticket inspector.
no, the detective says and jumps off the 49 bus. he runs across heldenplatz and disappears into the national library. (111)

Here’s a passage that reminds me of Bayer:

walk down the wollzeile and enter the historical gösser restaurant, the empty hose sucks blaunsteiner in, he will drink a beer, after he has drunk a beer, foam drips onto his notepad as loretta walks by, loretta in the form of anna, equipped with anna’s consciousness, and blaunsteiner notices he has otto’s body, otto’s hand grabs the beer, otto’s hand is dripping, then a blaunsteiner-thought pops up into their shared head, pops up in the otto-hemisphere and otto’s hand writes it down on the notepad, perhaps he’ll find salvation in a text, perhaps make the jump into another consciousness, as anna walks by loretta gazes out of her eyes, slowly the restaurant fills with guests, clusters of consciousness absorb hot dishes and cold drinks into their bodies and carry the secretions over terrazzo steps and into the subterranean rivers, which quickly sweep the output to the city’s sewage treatment plant, blaunsteiner looks at the wooden floor soaked with oil to keep down dust and hands his empty beer glass to the avatar of a certain consciousness of a waiter, which he will receive refilled so he can empty it, so he can leave the gösser restaurant, out into the world of mixed appearances, across to the pantheon, where the rotonda bar awaits him, in the bar a certain siegfried is drinking a grappa that tastes like aluminum, as koeppen once described it, as a certain ernest remembers, nonetheless blaunsteiner passes by a lueger who could easily be downing a number of moscows, all this material gawks bombastically, otto just manages to catch a tram, blaunsteiner rolls down into the underground as usual. (61)

It seems to me that Peter Handke and Gert Jonke also operate in Bayer’s magnetic field; it would fascinating sometime to read Wiener’s *verbesserung von mitteleuropa* alongside *the sixth sense*—that would be another subject for a dissertation—or to read Wiener for pure enjoyment, an old-fashioned, even passé undertaking. While recently flipping through *verbesserung* after many years I noticed that in addition to all the

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38 The Wollzeile street and the Gösser restaurant are both locations in central Vienna.
39 A short, oblique passage on the Viennese author Reinhard Priessnitz has been omitted for the sake of clarity.
language skepticism, critique of positivism, fundamental epistemological questions and cybernetic quibbles with Max Stirner’s individualistic anarchy and Ockham’s razor, Vienna and Café Zwerina and the same group of friends still appear and disappear in the book’s pages, chatting and expressing qualms about language and the Austrian state.

A favorite quotation of mine that always turns up in publications reads:

“philosophy is the intellectual discipline par excellence: good for nothing” (XXXIX).

And on page LXX an atypical passage, a conversation among friends:

recently i had a chat with schiller, yes, well, it was very nice. he told me i would stick my head in the oven. take sleeping pills because otherwise you can’t stand the smell of the gas, you know, then turn it on low. of course without fire. mmm. he says he tried it once, he was still quite young then of course. so i say look, it’s your call, write it down, i say, you know. look, writing is different from speaking because you think it over, you make it better, get rid of the things that bother you, the style i mean, and the ideas; i don’t have as much time as karl kraus—that’s symptomatic ceased to interest me long ago, writing without a response is a forbidden type of stupidity, i myself would always rather speak. editing is never the right choice, instead cut. the style you’ll improve and make pretty, you asshole. writing is what’s nonsense—when you look at it and name it, that’s idiotic. (LXX)

To conclude: this writer who to this day occupies the imagination of a literary scene now grown older is still misunderstood to this day, and, I think, all too rarely read. As already mentioned, you can’t truly penetrate these texts, but you can submit to them and their appeal as you would to an embrace; you can be affected or carried away by their radicalism, or imagine gradually absorbing them osmotically through various organs, or you can incorporate them into your bloodstream so long as you have the
right receptors; does my body own the particular enzymes and fermented agents that allow me to get a kick out of these texts?

I attribute a seductive quality to these texts in the expectation that someone or other will believe me, since there’s no way for me really to prove it.

As the author of my own past texts, I speak about myself no differently than I would about an author I used to know more or less in some bygone time. I do remember the external conditions under which my writing came into being—Berlin, Kleiststraße, being broke, isolated—and I remember being in limbo between tense and distracted, but how it happens that you allow a model of language to enter you like a drug and take hold so that you can develop it further—that I can’t explain.

Nor can I explain how this egomaniacal delusion of grandeur known as solipsism, in the form of this boyish, Mickey-Mouse-like “oh! all of you are just my inventions,” could make such a strong impression on me, and how I—perhaps disappointed by experimental psychology and impressed by Wiener’s critique of positivism or whatever—could start playing with these ideas in my own way. The literature professors will surely sort this all out for me, just as my doctor knows more about my bones, muscles, and veins than I do (not to mention the pathologist), but the fact of the matter is that I know more about how my pain really feels, and the doctor has no choice but to believe me.

The very last sentence of the sixth sense reads: “shut this book! said dobyhal” (160).

And I hope I can persuade you to open the sixth sense and read it.
Snobbery

Do rules still exist in a world where anything goes? I’m thinking on the one hand of the general rule that urges you to follow the prevailing trends in fashion, and on the other hand of the specific styles dictated by the occasion, the age group, the time of day. In addition to the aforesaid rules it seems to me that there are still very clear ones for group-specific clothing, rules that each group member has come to internalize. I’m not aware of any treatises written on the dress-code dos and don’ts of a counter-cultural street festival, but the regulars still all know to show up in their Sunday best: the young women with hemp shoulder bags, in long Indian dresses or harem pants, and the guys—blooming for the first time, so to say—with henna-dyed hair (rat tails), hand-woven ponchos, wooden sandals. Visitors unconvinced by this kind of lifestyle will come up with a stylistic comprise for the occasion, maybe jeans and a t-shirt, and you can be sure no figure in a pinstripe suit will lose his way into the crowd.

Here as everywhere it boils down to consensus and compliance; the chubby guest will make it clear that he belongs at the Vienna opera ball just as much the gentleman in his tux.

The lower a group’s income and education level, the more strictly its members will comply with outdated rules and scoff at or ostracize any who try to deviate from them. Young people are the only ones who haven’t settled on a curated look yet and still have the leeway to play around with their outfits: they have the greatest room for freedom, but so few of them seem to enjoy taking advantage of it.
The crumpled silk blouse and wrinkled linen jacket shows that sloppiness can be tolerated, even de rigeur, but only with upscale fabrics, upscale people. On a similar note: think of how none but those in the upper echelons of society have the privilege of messing around with age and youth. Some beautiful and admired society women accentuate their perfectly styled appearance with gray hair, which not only raises a fist against the pressure to look young, but also shows off (to their advantage) the youthfulness these women still possess. The youngest of us all have already learned what’s appropriate and what’s not: recently six-year-old Anita said to me: “I used to like blue jeans, but now I only like black ones.” The dictates of the fashion world trickle en masse through all sorts of information channels, reaching even those whose counter-culture parents make a point of keeping them away from TV and conspicuous consumption, reaching even those who haven’t yet learned to read.
My Prater – Your Prater
(mixed feelings, or: a phobic’s paradise)

the lilliput train is a swan set on tracks, the swans here spit out frogs, it doesn’t take much for them to fly through the air in circles, out there you’ll find much stranger things.

purchase fear x 2 and hop onto the ghost train. get lost in the hall of mirrors (and its spitting images) – suddenly can’t find my way out.

and always people flying whether sitting or lying. with the shrieks in my ears of those who are flying i feel my sunday tick away.

please nothing but a spin in a little tin car, okay, and then nothing but lots of crowd-watching.

going back later with my daughter as a schoolgirl, around 6 or 7 – with her as mickey mouse, and me forced to be the clutzy donald duck, hearing her explain the terrifyingly beautiful world of the prater.

and what did she want, do you think: one ride on the swan boat in the man-made brook, and another in the little bumper cars, constantly colliding, and then relax on the lilliput train, which goes jingling through a mini-forest, into a near-stillness – after all the bustle, hustle, trampling and shouting, a droplet of silence.

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The Prater (officially: Wurstelprater) is a famous amusement park located in the second district of Vienna, with origins in the 18th century.
Surviving Tradition

Despite all the attempts at renovation and revitalization, the classic Viennese coffeehouse simply refuses to croak. In fact it’s booming; what else would you expect? All the historical treatises, feverishly listing everything that the coffeehouse has endured and accomplished since the monarchy, miss the mark on the present situation, which is completely different economically: the current popularity of theater, movies, and entertainments in general is due not to the machinations of mysterious string-pullers, but rather to the bulging wallets of middle-class kids and their parents’ substantial incomes. I’d add that the coffeehouse is the only media-free location (apart from the occasional dreadful piano player) where people can discuss the day’s usual and unusual occurrences undisturbed. The so-called good coffeehouse doesn’t exhibit the group-specific insularity of a trendy meet-up or club, but rather features a wide array of people, mostly dominated by lower-middle-class folk. Here you find retired school teachers, civil servants, the whole Habsburg army of service-providers, and especially waiters and waitresses from other coffeehouses. You hear age-old stories of illnesses and cures and indignities, various reports on weather and sick leaves and vacations at the shore; the countless art students discuss fashion and complain about their monarchical professors. The visitors either don’t care about the decor or grudgingly put up with it. Usually the coffeehouse restorations look forward or back in time, a real horror show, with cafés in authentic 50s style “modernized” by forcing them to pass for older establishments with a vaguely art-nouveau ambience. Every now and then a renovation succeeds, but for the most
part the renovators count on the visitors’ lack of interest in aesthetics and on the fact that the more refined visitors have had less and less of a choice since so many coffeehouses died out in the sixties and seventies. You don’t go to the coffeehouse for pleasure. Five percent of the time you seek out a café because you have something practical to discuss, ninety-five percent of the time you visit a café to avoid having to visit a friend, or to read, to complain, not to be alone, etc.

Not the least important aspect of the recent coffeehouse boom is that young people have not only become good consumers, but have also integrated a coffeehouse visit into their daily routine, along with study-sessions at the university, Micky D’s, pizzerias, and discos. In this way the coffeehouse has survived the dead weight of its own tradition.
Editorial Note

Although I’ve included all of the pieces that Gerstl collected in the German edition of *lost clothes*, I’ve rearranged them for the sake of comprehension. For those curious, the original order was:

1) lost clothes: a poem
2) My Thoughts on Konrad Bayer’s *the sixth sense*
3) Individual Living
4) The Home of the Collector
5) My Prater – Your Prater
6) Surviving Tradition
7) Snobbery

The German-language edition also includes an afterword by Franz Schuh, entitled *Irgendwo im Nirgendwo oder Über das Dasein* (Somewhere in Nowhere, or: On Being). I’ve decided not to translate the afterward because of my introduction.
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