found that Miss Tita (for such the name of this high tremo little are women to be count it as a triumph, but only for the editor (in the lous spinster proved somewhat incongruously to be) had a despondent view of It) thesis), not for the man, who had not the tradition of insatiable appetite for them. When I speak of my suit, I pretended to have the, conquest. When I went back on the morrow the little won I mean that before I left her she had promised that she that I had a distinct premonition conducted me straight through the long salas would refer the question to her aunt. I inquired who...up this Mrs. Preston there as before in perfect perspective and was aunt might be and she answered, "Why, Miss Bordereau head! You fancy you (now, which I thought a good omen) into the apart
with an air of surprise, as if I might have been expected a quarter of an hour that among the recipients of my formor visit had emerged
know. There were contradictions like this in Tita Bordereau be depended upon to occasion. It was a large shabby parlour, with a fine which, as I observed later, contributed to make her an object in you'll count it as a laced ceiling and a strange figure sitting alone at one and affecting person. It was the study of the two ladies the idea into my high live so that the world should not touch them, and yet the counted on) she a palpitation they caused, the successive feelings of the...was really never altogether accepted the idea that it never heartier pessimism pre
ried my consciousness that as the door of the room closed of them. In Tita at any rate a grateful susceptibility to humored hopes: I went the behind me I was really face to face with the Juliana of some contact had not died out, and contact of a limited order thesentiment that I of Aspern's most exquisite and most renowned lyrics. I grew
I did count it as a triumph, but only for the editor (in (the) look out, "Oh, I used to her afterwards, though never completely: but as she last analysis), not for the man, who had not the tradition have made such an personal conquest. When I went back on the morrow the little is dying for your stem of resurrection had taken place for my benefit. Her presence

Image as Text and Text as Image:

New and Old Forms in The Aspern Papers by Henry James

Creative Writing
Thesis

By: Candice Smith
A Critical Introduction

Image as Text and Text as Image:
New and Old Forms in The Aspern Papers by Henry James

By Candice Smith

Muriel Rukeyser describes art as "a source talking to a source," and indeed these pages roar with incessant chatter. The following prose, poems and collages are the intersections of various sources—writers, painters, critics and philosophers—whose work informs my own. This project is also, and more conspicuously, an interchange between mediums, between the critical and creative, between prose and poetry and between written and visual modes of expression. Furthermore, the product is a dialogue between my own experience, me being my own source with the help of my thesis advisor, poet Thomas Devaney (without his support, this project might never have seen fruition), and Henry James' 1888 novella, The Aspern Papers. Through our exchange, I inherit the thoughts, questions, discoveries and dilemmas of James and rework them to become my own.

The Aspern Papers is the story of a man obsessed with the relics of a dead poet, the personal letters of Jeffrey Aspern. No one has ever seen the letters, as they belong to a Ms. Juliana Bordereau, an estranged old woman, as well as Aspern's former lover, who has isolated herself from the world in her Venetian mansion. Ms. Bordereau's only companion is her middle-aged spinster niece, Miss Tita, an innocently helpless and ignorant woman, who feels trapped by her Aunt but is simultaneously too afraid to leave her side. The narrator positions himself in the Misses' home by acting in need of accommodations for the summer, with the
ulterior purpose of obtaining the letters from Ms. Bordereau. His romantically inspired but essentially selfish aims gradually become an unnatural, crazed passion to achieve his goal. Only towards the end does the narrator withdraw from all his “battles and stratagems” to discover his backdrop—Venetian life going on in all its charming nostalgia and graceful serenity, but by then, the letters have been destroyed.

This summary is but a rudimentary sketch of the story that is the subject of my project, one that does not even begin to acknowledge the generative complexity written into its pages. But before I discuss the intricate way in which The Aspern Papers relates to my work, I must address the theories and processes that give my project form. First and foremost, the work of Jasper Johns from a 2008 retrospective of his works in shades of gray as well as the corresponding publications written for its catalogue, were fundamental to the formation of my creative process. In an introductive essay to the exhibition catalogue, James Rondeau writes:

Structured modes of repetition—every so often verging on obsessive fixation—remain a key feature of Johns’ work... the gray pictures constitute an independent idiom of remarkable objective consistency that supplies an endless subjective variety of interpretations (Rondeau, Jasper Johns: Gray, 27-28).

Johns’ Gray is an enormous opus. And yet, each piece has the “objective consistency” of being gray. One would assume that such blatant uniformity would become monotonous and boring; however, each and every piece is a stimulating work of art in its own right. Each “constitute[s] an independent idiom” with “an endless subjective variety of interpretations,” each is excitingly unique, one thing
producing many variations of the same thing. It is in this notion of "objective consistency" effectively yielding "subjective variety" that I find the kernel for my critical and creative investigations.

Effectively, I have selected one passage, two paragraphs spanning two pages of my library copy of *The Aspern Papers*, as the jumping off point for each piece in this collection,¹ my "objective consistency." I work with the passage in numerous ways using "structured modes of repetition." To do so, I repeatedly photocopied this portion of the text so that each and every time I looked at, I had the opportunity of seeing it anew. In an interview in the film "Ecoute" John Cage says, "If I look at a coca-cola bottle and then look at another coca-cola bottle. I want to forget the first one, in order to see the second coca-cola bottle as being original." This is how I tried to approach each new photocopy of the passage. I, thus, read and re-read these two pages at different times throughout different days, making new notes on them every time I read. I began cutting them up and re-gluing them down, crossing words or phrases out, and putting new words or phrases in, effectively making something new and original out of it every time I worked. Of looking at a coca-cola bottle, Cage continues, "And it is original, because it's in a different position in space and time and light is shining on it differently, so that no two coca-cola bottles are the same." In a similar way, in repeatedly working with

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¹ I wish I could claim to have had the passage chosen at the onset, to fantasize that I’ve had a clear notion of my project all along; however, it was not until about mid-way through the semester that I discovered the passage as a necessary point of emphasis for my work. Needless to say, a great deal of exploratory writing and visual work has been left out of the pages that follow. This note is my acknowledgement of all the work that got me here, though those pieces no longer directly relate to this body of work; they were essential to the development of my ideas and play out in what I have included in the following.
the same passage, I was never really working with the same passage, never really saw it in exactly the same way but rather found new ways of analyzing and interpreting the same words, conceptualizing and re-conceptualizing what the text, and text in general, might mean.

Thus, the aforementioned passage is the connective tissue binding the various pieces of my project together. The poems, perhaps better described as meandering meditations, are new interpretations of the same passage, portions of the passage and the passage as a whole. Each collage, excluding a few bits of lace, white gesso and marks of graphite and charcoal, use photocopied material from the text. Even the dark tonal regions found in the collage pieces are products of my manipulation of the Xeroxed pages. The final collection is a critical self-reflexive body of work reflecting my personal experience and involvement with the text, and with seeing, reading, perceiving and interpreting text more generally.

For me, one of the most striking aspects of James’ work is the sheer quantity of words that might compose a single one of his written pages. Often one page cannot contain a complete paragraph but rather pours over onto the following page, and a single paragraph may only hold two or three complete sentences. An entire page of text, like an endless abyss of words, with no line breaks or indentations to serve as spatial rest for the eye, is a formidable opponent indeed. One doesn’t just dive right in and begin reading without noticing this about James’ work.

The pages and passage I’ve chosen as the focus of my project are no exception (3). With this scaled-down reproduction of the book, open to the two
pages that include my passage, one must pause and simply look rather than immediately begin to read. In fact, the words are possibly too small even to read, at least not without a magnifying glass (or telescope) and even then the text is blurred. At one point, in one of my reflections on the James passage, I became especially impressed by what appeared to me to be the sheer quantity of words on the page. I stared and stared, not reading, simply looking at them and thought:

Words play tricks on us, overreaching us with their visible ironies, their two-faced little forms. They work, but their forms dissolve into the dark, disarmed in density on the page so that none is seen as separate or unique (6)

My gaze effectively caused the dissolution of the words into a single heap of unidentifiable symbols, a massive block of indecipherable text, "[words] disarmed in density on the page." The double-nature of words, "two faced little forms," is striking. At once, "they work" as tools to achieve something, to signify whatever it is they mean, and simultaneously they stand as graphic images, visible visuals despite what they symbolize. In this way, I find words and the book's open page to stand as remarkable visual objects in their own right, as opposed to a utilitarian view of their visual nature as mere practical formality, necessary contrivance.

The work of poet and book artist Johanna Drucker speaks to the material nature of words, words as visual poetry, with their own pertinent visual language outside the realm of meaning. Charles Bernstein, in his "Introduction" to Drucker's book, Figuring the Word, a collection of essays, interviews and visual poems, writes:

Smith

Introduction
In her work, Drucker reverses a common assumption even among writers, typographers, and visual poets that the visual dimension of writing is ornamental, decorative, extrasemantic—a matter of design, not signs that matter. “The single, conservative constant in my work,” she says, “is that I always intend for the language to have meaning. My interest is in extending the communicative potential of writing, not in eliminating or negating it” (Bernstein, Introduction to Johanna Drucker’s Figuring the Word, xi).

Most of the time, readers pay little attention to the visual aspect of writing, and yet writing quite simply must be seen to be apprehended. My reading of Drucker’s work informs a number of my contemplative glosses on the James passage, pointing to the fact that all language is a visual performance when read on the page.

The collages in this collection especially point to the textural quality of text, text as having its own visual language, in that I literally use bits of text to collage a larger figure or image. An old Arabian proverb states, “The eye is blind to what the mind does not see.” Because we habitually read for meaning, effectively reading with the mind, and the mind alone, the reader remains inattentive to the visual physicality of words. Readers forget that they are looking at something, rather than for. However, the collaged text used to compose these drawings cannot actually be read in any coherent sense to find meaning, so that the reader (or hopefully the looker) may experience seeing words and text with their eyes, rather than with their mind.

To further complicate the reading of this series, I layer the very letters of form, one on top of the other, pushing the process of reading even further into visual disaggregation in order to see words and letters as component parts to a
whole visual idiom of language. I pair these collages with written compositions that explore the nature of the word *form*, both its visual form as a word as well as the various forms the word may signify through meaning. The word *form* is significant for me, in addition to the fact that it is simply used in the passage, because of its complicated nature as a word. It signifies a great many different things; the New Oxford American Dictionary supplies eleven definitions for noun-use of the word itself. Furthermore, I find it interesting that *form* itself has form, and its form appears out of the dissolution of the collaged text, to clearly stand as an interesting visual object.

By placing different modes of expression, the written and the visual, side-by-side, I intend to further illuminate the multifaceted ways in which one can not only interpret a single passage but also the ways one may interpret these overlapping yet incongruous ideas: the dual identity of words as material images as well as their function as elements of language and illustrators of meaning. I write:

> The numerous meanings of *form* proliferate, and yet, the ebb and flow of its four small faces is a ubiquitous dance. An experience felt, and needed only to be felt, in its own visual movement on the stage and across the page (10)

In conceptualizing words as an ever-present visual experience, like a shared dance performed for the eye, words are no longer forced into a stationary and lifeless existence, written only to give life to other objects; they are imbued with a new independent vitality, their "own visual movement on the stage."
The conceptualization of having “visual movement” generates pertinent questions as to the idea of subjective perception, of each person having an independent view of the world. Again, Druick speaking on Johns writes:

We see what we know; we don’t look carefully; learning to see the world is a skill that begins in infancy and continues throughout our lives; seeing is as much a matter of experience as of physiology and as such is based on assumptions; we see what we believe we are looking at” (Druick, *Jasper Johns: Gray*, 90).

Our mental pictures are our own, no two people are identical in sense perception; we each see the world, locked in to our own personal vision. And yet, here the conception of words as images, in all of their subjectivity, finds another overlap, another point of intersection with meaning: the multifaceted subjectivity of words. Much of the work done by Gertrude Stein explores subjectivity of words in their relationship to meaning. On Stein, Jonah Lehrer writes,

Whereas realist writers before Stein had tried to pretend that our words neatly map onto the world, Stein called attention to the fact that words are subjective and symbolic (Lehrer, *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, 151).

My *form* series, thus, points doubly to the fact that the reading of words is a subjective creation of the mind both in the interpretation of them as visual objects and as linguistic symbols.

If only words did make meaning, I would understand the page as a mirror reflecting the world, but here is this space in which meaning merely comes to press its pale face up against the glass, waiting to break the reflection of its own flat image (4)
In these lines, I conceptualize the page as a mirror, as the liminal space of writing, with meaning on one side and words on the other. In this scenario, Meaning finds itself on the wrong side of the mirror, unable to break through the glass, while the mirror reflects the "flat image[s]" of words, the only objects actually visible on the page.

Returning to Lehrer on Stein, he writes:

Although we pretend our words are transparent—like a layer of glass through which we see the world—they are actually opaque...Stein is trying to remind us that our nouns, adjectives, and verbs are not real. They are just arbitrary signifiers, random conglomerations of syllables and sound. A rose, after all, is not really a rose. Its letters don’t have thorns or perfumed petals (Lehrer, Proust was a Neuroscientist, 146).

It is truly amazing how much meaning readers invest in words, despite their reality as "arbitrary signifiers." Stein, in her work, addresses this notion by creating "incongruous vocabularies" that pull the reader out of their comfortable relationship with words, revealing their multiplicity.

My entire project can be conceived as something akin to a Steinian exploration of the material aspect of words. By reconstructing the meaning of a passage in multiple ways, I point to the subjectivity of that passage, its reliance on context, and the subjectivity of writing as a whole. I have the power to do anything to the passage. I can even construe a character, "the old lady," Ms. Bordereau, as an allegory for something else, anything else, for example, as I do here, for meaning itself:

An old lady sits shrouded in an inky, white cloth, suffocating on the very material that once made her feel alive. Material that
keeps her alive...The old lady is cryptic purpose, veiled by an opaque shade (12)

In this rendering of her, the old lady is hidden by the material that has written her, the letters that give her life and form. In this light, meaning is cryptic and hidden by the very signs and symbols that allow her to be apprehended. And yet, on the next written page, I reinterpret my reinterpretation again into the "old lady," the Ms. Bordereau, an artfully crafted character who becomes almost real in James' careful rendering of her through words. Effectively, through my "structured modes of repetition," my various subjective interpretations of the same passage, the same "objective consistency," I want to show that we have the ability to illuminate meaning by always making new comparisons and looking around and outside of our selves, as one might say, with an innocent eye.

Somewhere along in my process of creating the *form* series, reading and re-reading, working and re-working the same passage over and over, committing my own "structured modes of repetition," I saw my own experience of the text beginning to coincide with the story and passage itself. My work had become an almost "obsessive fixation," much like the narrator's frenzied psychological drama in search of Aspern's papers. Whenever working on a piece, reading the passage in a new light, I would get hung up on my discoveries, fixated on their underlying meanings and significances to the point that, for days at a time, the idea at hand was all I could see or think of when attempting to re-look at the passage.
Simultaneously, however, at different moments, when able to look past my tiny obsessions and to again see the passage anew, I felt like the ignorant Miss Tita, always seeing the world with an innocent eye, I think of Riffaterre’s notion of reading poetry as a “continual recommencing,” always under a new pretext as if with wide-eyed naïveté. Druick writes, “In an ongoing cycle, new certainties yield to fresh doubts, requiring us to change our notions about the world as well as our verbal and visual means of representing it” (Druick, *Jasper Johns: Gray Matters*, 90). And yet, perpetual change has a funny way of feeling like perpetual crisis, never at ease with some decisive discovery. Working with the text was my very own “psychological drama,” a feeling of discontent with what my project had become: vacillating layers of subjective irresolution.

One of the most significant questions students face today is how to confront literature; what to do with the pages of the past we so ardently study. Where do we fit in with these stories, so distant they feel like they are from another world? What bearing can they have on our lives, right here, right now? One answer to this question is that we might work with them in our own way, subsume these texts into ourselves, reinvent them into something pertinent to our lives. In reading and thinking about a work we effectively inherit the issues at hand, thus we should combine them with our own, recontextualizing them to produce something meaningful to and for our present. This is what I had been doing all along with *The Aspern Papers* and can be seen in the way James and I both effectively “draw” Ms. Bordereau with words (13).
Contemplating my involvement in and with the story itself, I find the musings in my final written piece to be the most critical moment in this body of work—my very own blaze of revelation:

The text is my Venice, Henry James my Jeffrey Aspern, and I both encounter and create my Venice through his text, withdraw from stratagem and simply embrace. It is here that Ruskin’s “dying city, magnificent in her dissipation and graceful in her follies,” stretches out before us (16).

With this, my “eccentric private errand,” that is my multiple, independent interpretations of the passage, becomes something much greater than each of its component parts. It becomes something like Venice to the narrator, “part of the general romance and the general glory” (James, The Aspern Papers, 241). In producing this body of work, I feel “a mystic companionship” with all those who have informed my work as well as those who read it. In this moment, I acknowledge there is a larger picture at hand, and by inheriting this text, I become part of its larger purpose. What I do is almost predetermined by that purpose, and I am like a character written into the greater story of art and literature, like Venice sparkling in the heat of the sun. Simultaneously, however, I am the author of my own experience. I “create my Venice through this text.” Venice only appears before me through my dialogue with the text and through my use of it as a new, visual medium. In the pages that follow, I extend an invitation to this experience, to a new textural involvement with James’ text, one in which “Ruskin’s ‘dying city, magnificent in her dissipation and graceful in her follies,’ stretches out before us.”
Bibliography


The Aspern Papers
Drifting through the dark corridors of the third tier of Magill Library, packed in one of the tall pillars of old, dusty literature, I find this book, call number PS2112F66 cop.2. Here is The Great Short Works of Henry James. It is a small, humble hard-cover book, five by seven by one and a half inches, its title written all-caps on the navy blue and textured binding, worn and torn at the rounding edges, partially revealing its hard interior, like failing bones weakened with age. The cover text, perhaps once white, now a bluish-gray is large and italicized, The Great Short Works of Henry James, as if, on its own in a purely visual way, signing its name in the canon of “Important” English literature.

Below the title, I encounter a sketch of the man for whom it is named. A caricature, perhaps, but a daunting, formidable face—the profile of pure knowing and blunt objectivity, dark eyes staring straight beneath a heavy, down-turned brow. He studies a mark I feel I may never see. Like weathered wisdom, he sits atop a light mauve rectangular frame above the six names of The Great Short Works of Henry James: Washington Square, Daisy Miller, The Aspern Papers, The Pupil, The Turn of the Screw, The Beast in the Jungle.

The guts of the book have yellowed with age, and on the fourth written page, I again read the words Great Short Works of Henry James. I fan out the four hundred and ninety pages, wafting the dank and musky smell, warm and earthy like my Grandmother’s old basement. On the inside of the back cover, a pocket contains a typewriter produced catalogue card, and in some lost reader’s red-inked hand, “BMC ’89” still stands—the year I was born.
HENRY JAMES

The image appears to be a page from a book written in English. The text is readable and appears to be a continuation of a narrative or a literary passage. The page number is 240, and the content seems to be from a work by Henry James, possibly an excerpt from his novel or a collection of essays. The text is not fully visible, but it contains a narrative element, likely describing a situation or a character's thoughts and actions. The language is coherent and formal, typical of Henry James's style, known for its depth and rich characterization.
What is the nature of these blank faces and flat-footed letters, symbols bent and dashed, slashed and spaced, placed, read verbal, lain mute, and born mature on a white linear floor? Acting, subject to text, and yet they rest, unable to play themselves in the party of sound, unable to revel in their own adventure of the page, all the while claiming a place in the spotlight of linguistic function. If only words did make meaning, I would understand the page as a mirror reflecting the world, but here is this space in which meaning merely comes to press its pale face up against the glass, waiting to break the reflection of its own flat image.
That spirit kept me perpetual company and sline, or the famous Lady Hamilton, when I went to and fro; I used for it seem- to me from the revived immortal face—it that she belonged to a generation as extinct. “Why, he door that led to Miss Bordereau’s lady, the genius shone—of the great poet who was my predecessor tremendously old—at least a hundred.” I had soon observing me might me me the name— fixed idealat had gone; he hovered long coming to consider dates I saw that it was reprieve upon it or attempt—been to I the time; it was as if his bright ghost had ret necessity that she should have exceeded by very m. But I was only praying, to tell me that he regarded the affair as his own common Span. None the less she was very far from treasure probably lurked made my mine and that we should see it fraternally, once and her relations with Jeffrey Aspern had occurred, that I should never been dest conclusion. It was as if he had said, “Poor denizerness womanhood.” “That is her excuse,” said a sacred relic was there; whom I her; she has some natural prejudices; only half sententiously and yet also somewhat as if joy at being under the papers). Strange as it may appear to you she was verashamed of making a speech so little in the rey were under her hand ered my 1820. Meanwhile are we not in Venice Venice. As I felt even a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with Jeffrey Aspern, who was simple hearsay to her, quite as he the sea and the rosy air and the marble of the palaces all the point of assuming—in my quiet extravagance—that poor interested shimmer and melt together.” My eccentric private errand Miss Tita also went back, went back, as I used to phrase it, the joys became a part of the general romance and the general glory she did indeed, the gentle spinster, but not quite so far as in her grace—I felt even a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with Jeffrey Aspern, who was simply a harsay to her, quite as he the bright face of all those who in the past had been in the service of art. They was to me. Only she had lived for years with Juliana, she had movable had worked for beauty, for a devotion; and what else was I seen and handled the papers and (even though she was infatuated doing)? She had given me part of her house and now she would not Miss Bordereau’s maid or, failing this, had taken her in service and this give me even a morsel of paper with her name on it. Let me alone; either event might have brought about some kind of thrill. It say that even at first this did not make me too miserable, for catastrophe and a catastrophe might have led—to some pathos, the whole episode was essentially delightful to me. I foresaw ley. It was my idea that she would have been sociable, and I fixed idealat I should have a summer after my own literary heart, and myself on various occasions saw her flit to and fro on dorn at answer too sense of holding my opportunity was much greater than tie errands, so that I was sure she was accessible. But I tried the sense of losing it. There could be no Venefer business tasted of no gossip from that fountain, and I afterwards between without patience, and since I adored the place I was much learned that Pasquale’s attentions were fixed upon an object pent’s letters in the spirit of it for having laid in a large provision, that made him heedless of other women. This was a young greater! was tempted to send her a reminder, after which I relie lady with a powdered face, a yellow cloth gown and much I took quenished the idea (against my judgment as to what was right) lass, who used often to come to see him. She practised, one’s godin the particular case), on the general ground of wishing to get her convenience, the art of a stringer of beads (these oman long com keep quiet. If Miss Bordereau suspected me of ulterior aims, she is in Venice, in profusion; she had her in our literature she would suspect me less if I should be busined to me by which it this had been successful only as regards the little pocket full of them and I used to find them on the floor of my apartment), and kept an eye on the maiden in the house. It time as Mrs. Prest called the thie; though in reality, as I afterwards learned, she was considerably the bigger of the two, strictly even ask her to sit down. This was not encouraging for me, two. She had heard Miss Bordereau was ill and had a suspicion that she was in want; and she had gone to the house tanced in Prest. She however replied with profundity, “Ah, but there’s offer assistance, so that if there were suffering (and America can suffering), she should at least not have it on her conscience. Prest, to ask one. If they are proud you will be on the right side.”
Words play tricks on us, overreaching us with their visible ironies, their two-faced little forms. They work, but their forms dissolve into the dark, disarmed in density of the page so that none is seen separate or unique. Words join to form the larger figure, an elusive ghost, our mystic companion; meaning.

Meaning for which we are always searching.
watch—as long as I thought decent—the door that led to Miss and this
Bordereau’s part of the house. A person observing me might
have supposed I was trying to cast a spell upon it or atten-
ding some odd experiment in hypnotism. But I was only
it would open or thinking what treasure probably
behind it. I hold it singular, as I look back, that I shan’t
have doubted for a moment that the sacred relics
never have failed to feel a certain joy at being
same roof with them. After all they were un
—they had not escaped me yet; and they made
famous, in a fashion, with the illustrious life
launched at the other end. I lost myself to
the point of assuming—in my quiet extr
Miss Tita also went back, went back, as
She did indeed, the gentle spinster,
Jeffrey Aspern was to me. Or not seen and he seemed
stupid) some use was what the)
I thought decent to
of the house. A person was trying to cast a spell
it would open or behind it. I hold it singular
have doubted for a minute
never have failed to be on the same roof with them.
— they had not escaped
famous, in a fashion. I touched at the other end
the point of assuming
Miss Tita also went back. She did indeed, the
Jeffrey Aspern, this was to me. Only within
seen and handled (more stupid) some exoterica
what the old woman’s
and this was the idea of
thrill. It literally had been out, as I

more than twenty years, I was the executor of
the will of a man who had been
the sweetest
of the house and
illuminates, with his son about.

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“For some days, I looked out for it and then, when I had given it up, I wasted a good deal of time in wondering what her reason had been for neglecting so indispensible and familiar a form.”

In context, the word form signifies a receipt, of which Miss Bordereau never supplies for the narrator's paid-for accommodations. But what is form, really? First, it is a word. We physically enter it like a rising wave; we encounter the curling arch of it sitting atop the crossed left leg of its leading letter, like the crest crashing down into its next new rune. Diving and rolling, the eye, the hand, the mark, spins in a single rotation, plummeting to the bottom. It rises again, lifting and falling as it, tumbling, breaks at the shore.
When something has form, only then do we begin to understand. Form is a character, synonymous with figure, a symbol for something understood or grasped. It could signify a physical shape or configuration—the roundness of an apple, the wrinkling segments of a worm. Form provides form. It could be the shapely muscles of a body builder or the technique he uses as he lifts the weight. It could mean a questionnaire or a legal document, molten bronze placed into a cast. The numerous meanings of form proliferate, and yet, the ebb and flow of its four small faces is a ubiquitous dance. An experience felt, and needed only to be felt, in its own visual movement on the stage and across the page.
"Only she lived for years with Juliana, she had seen and handled the papers and (even though she was stupid) some esoteric knowledge had rubbed off on her. That was what the old woman represented—esoteric knowledge; and this was the idea with which my editorial heart used to thrill."

An old lady sits shrouded in an inky, white cloth, suffocating on the very material that once made her feel alive. Material that keeps her alive. The material is a letter—or many—written in the hand of an artist, now gone. The old lady is as meaning, an elusive impression, difficult to grasp and yet still in reach. Her very nature represents that esoteric figure, that drowsy significance, meaning as a stubborn hag. Meaning's intentional omission signifies its own impertinent suggestion. The old lady is cryptic purpose, veiled by an opaque shade.
Yet, doesn't the old lady exist in her fictional actuality, wearing, quite literally, a green, opaque shade? That mystifying bandage that covers her eyes and obscures her face, makes her head almost invisible but for its slow turn as she watches her visitor, as if to show that even while she sits silent, she beholds the narrator clear as day. She is her. In denying her thereeness within the text, we miss her frightening accuracy, her hauntingly grim and artful construction by grammaticality.
“I had invoked him and he had come; he hovered before me half the time; it was as if his bright ghost had returned to earth to tell me that he regarded the affair as his own no less than mine and that we should see it fraternally, cheerfully to a conclusion. It was as if he said, “Poor dear, be easy with her; she has some natural prejudices... Meanwhile are we not in Venice together, and what better place is there for the meeting of dear friends? See how it glows with the advancing summer; how the sky and the sea and the rosy air and the marble of the palaces all shimmer and melt together.”

As my eyes pore over these passages, it is both the fictional whisper of Jeffrey Aspern speaking in the narrator’s ear as well as Henry James’ rustling in mine. The “mere echoes of echoes” of his voice lift as if from the watery trenches of the page—his page, my page, our page—and the words ring in fecund contradiction: “Meanwhile are we not in Venice together...”

Well, James, yes; it is true. While we are not in Venice together, I in my studio and you in the air, are we not in Venice together? In our page, I do, I see the sea and the air and marble palaces. I see your words. They beam dense and hard and true. In my lazy, hazy eyes, I see how they glow and shimmer and melt together like the sea on the horizon in the heat of the advancing summer.

The text is my Venice, Henry James my Jeffrey Aspern, and I both encounter and create my Venice through his text, withdraw from stratagem and simply embrace. It is here that Ruskin’s “dying city, magnificent in her dissipation and graceful in her follies,” stretches out before us.