

Sleight of Hand and *The Fourth State of Matter* by Joanne Beard

A Blackbird Studio/Flight School Discussion 2/1/24

- 1) **Primary Terms Defined:** “sleight of hand”, consecution, personal essay, scene, representative scene:

Sleight of hand is a reference to the hints given to the reader, throughout, about the true nature of the story being told, as well as the technique of effectively overloading other story elements by way of distraction. This is like a magician who begins his trick with distraction techniques thus: Sleight of hand.

Consecution: Succession, logical sequence

1. ... moving forward in a story while keeping in mind what has gone before through the use of repetition.
2. ... continually coaxing action, conflict, and interest out of prior sentences by bringing out what is implied or suggested in what has already been written.
3. ... examining your objects for the tension inherent in them, the polarity, the natural conflict, the innate conflict, what is already there, and in the unpacking of this tension, you will reveal...the whole of your story and how each unpacked object relates in [the] story to every other object. (Lish Notes, 47)
4. ... using repetition at the sentence level and at the larger structural level of a narrative.
5. ... crafting each sentence so it extrudes from the previous sentence; look behind when you are writing, not ahead. Your obligation is to know your objects and to steadily, inexorably darken and deepen them...Query the preceding sentence for what might most profitably be used in composing the next sentence...The sentence that follows is always in response to the sentence that came before. (Christine Schutt Believer, 71) Pouring your sentences
6. ... “curving back in your stories in every possible way: thematically, structurally, acoustically” (Lish Notes, 4). (He means repeat references to hints or clues deposited by earlier sentences through methods of consecution that aim at profitably extending the construction of the plot, the theme, the image or word patterning, or simply words mentioned previously)

One more: Stories have a linear component based on the forward movement of plot and time. But the stuff, the textured density of material draped over this bare bone of plot, often takes on a churning, recursive quality. Words, thematic topics or motifs, images and memories start up and then recycle through the story, coming back again and again, **with a variation**. (Douglas Glover Copula Spiders, 36).

Personal essay:

The Hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy.
~ Philip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*

From *Tell it Slant* by Brenda Miller & Susanna Paola, 1st Ed:

In the West, scholars often date the essay tradition back to the sixteenth-century French writer Michel de Montaigne. *Essays*, composed in Montaigne's retirement, lay much of the groundwork for what we now think of as the essay style: informal, frank (often bawdy), and associative. His book moves easily from a consideration for the classical author Virgil to pieces like "Of Thumbs." His title *Essays*, playing on the French verb meaning "to try", gives us the term we now use routinely in nonfiction writing. The essay writer "tries out" various approaches to the subject, offering tentative forays into an arena where "truth" can be open for debate.

Phillip Lopate, editor of the historically astute anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*, puts it this way: "The essayist attempts to surround a something—a subject, a mood, a problematic irritation—by coming at it from all angles, wheeling and diving like a hawk, each seemingly digressive spiral actually taking us closer to the heart of the matter."

Prior to Montaigne, as Lopate's anthology illustrates, plenty of writers worked in what we would now consider a personal essay mode. Just a few examples include Sei Shonagon, a tenth-century Japanese courtesan who created elaborately detailed lists that revealed much about herself and her place in the Japanese court; the Japanese monk Kenkos' meditative ruminations translated as *Essays in Idleness*; or Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, whose book *Meditations* embodies an aphoristic essay style, creating pithy "slogans" as advice to those who will succeed him.

Scene: Scene is a **moment** in time where **something** happens to move the story forward. A way to understand scene is to remember you live in one in every moment of your life and when time changes and/or location, you are then in a new scene. Your embodied, sensual life is composed of moments, not thoughts.

From *Story Engineering* by Larry Brooks: A scene must present a dramatic scenario with something at stake. Scenes thrust the story forward and have a beginning, middle and end.

From *Tell it Slant* by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola: *Scene is the building block of creative non-fiction...Scene is based on action unreeling before us, as it would in a film and it will draw on the same*

techniques as fiction—dialogue, description, point of view, specificity, concrete detail. Scene also encompasses the lyricism and imagery of great poetry. (NOTE: Concrete detail defined in The Elements of Style: specific, definite, and concrete. From Tell it Slant: Concrete detail appeals to the senses).

Representative Scene: description that describes a representative series of moments vs one specific moment in time as you would see in a scene.

- 2) **Discussion points:** Representative scene set-up (pg. 1-2), actual scene land (bottom pg. 2) (SRC), ten pages of set up about a dying dog, a failing marriage, an infestation of squirrels, author working at this particular university and her role/relationships in the physics dept, and for underlying story which is about shooting, bookending.

Addl Resources:

Philip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*
Brenda Miller, *Tell it Slant*

Read the essay: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/06/24/the-fourth-state-of-matter> or in Beard's collection: *The Boys of My Youth*.

Other teachings found online:

<https://newohioreview.org/2017/09/07/more-than-a-vanished-husband-jo-ann-beards-the-fourth-state-of-matter/>

<https://pagesofjulia.com/2018/01/24/the-fourth-state-of-matter-by-jo-ann-beard/>

<https://www.studocu.com/en-us/document/pasco-hernando-state-college/english-composition-i/the-fourth-state-of-matter/30945567>

<https://www.slideshare.net/juliagoldberg/fourth-state-of-matter>

[Jason Lucarelli PDF](#)

(<https://sites.evergreen.edu/eyeofthestory/wp-content/uploads/sites/137/2016/02/The-Consecution-of-Gordon-Lish-An-Essay-on-Form-and-Influence-%E2%80%94-Jason-Lucarelli-%C2%BB-Num%C3%A9ro-Cinq.pdf>)