

Every Day

I Write the Book

Notes ~~A Report~~ on Style

Amitava Kumar |

Every Day I Write the Book

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Amitava Kumar

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For Ken Wissoker and Ken Chen

and the style man:

Heesok Chang

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Amazon.com lists 4,470 titles under the heading of
How to Write a Book.

—Richard Bausch, “How to Write in 700 Easy Lessons”

Topic sentence. However; but; as a result. Blah, blah,
blah. It follows from this. Concluding sentence.

—Charles Bernstein, *Content’s Dream*

To be inside and outside a position at the same time—
to occupy a territory while loitering skeptically on the
boundary—is often where the most intensely creative
ideas stem from. It is a resourceful place to be, if not
always a painless one.

—Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*

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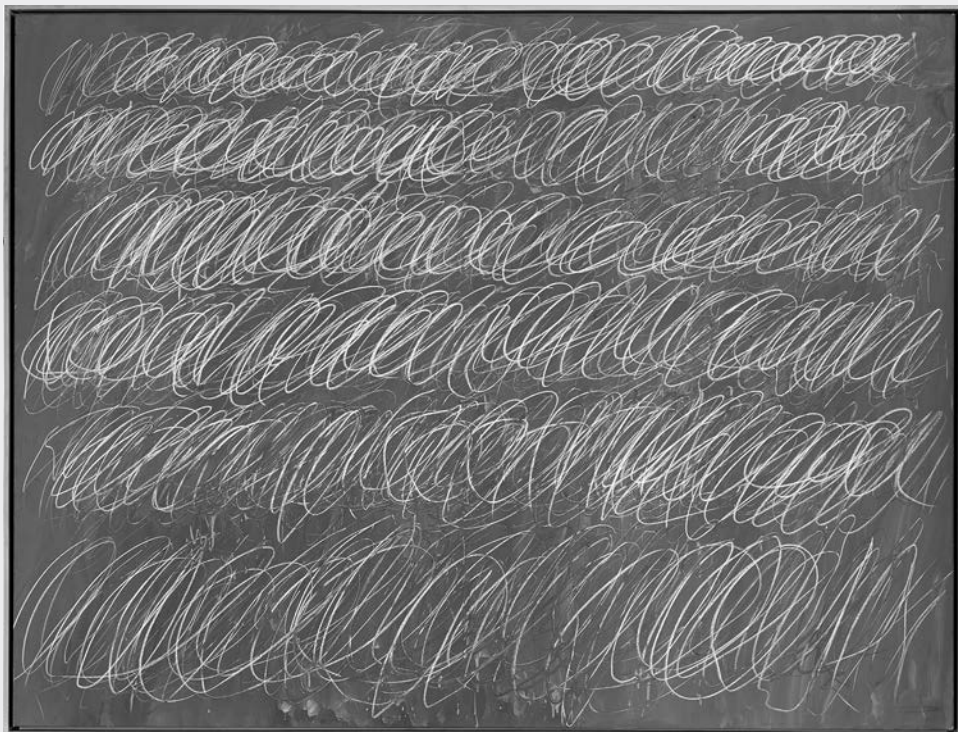


Figure FM.1. *Untitled, 1968*. Cy Twombly. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Image courtesy of Sotheby's.

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Introduction

The 90-Day Book

This is a book about writing.

I wanted to write about books that will remain new and attractive because of their style. The aim was to reduce the distance that divides criticism from creative writing. I began work on this book by finding examples of writers who blurred the boundaries between academic and nonacademic writing. Truth be told, I felt that a book like this would provide models and also encouragement, particularly to younger writers. It would work like a manifesto. Or a self-help book for academics wanting to break with convention. There is so much wonderful work being done all around us. This book is about the value, the ease, and also the excitement of crafting writing that hasn't been produced to please a committee.

On the one hand, we can follow models; on the other, we need instruction and help along the way. Both models and help came late to me, but I want to make that kind of information available to my readers. In the pages that follow I have also shared practical advice about various aspects of writing at different stages.

For instance:

Many years ago, a near-stranger in Mumbai gave me a book called *Advice to Writers*.¹ Walking on the Dadabhai Naoroji Road, this used book in hand, I came across a statement from E. L. Doctorow: "Writing a book is like driving a car at night. You only see as far as your headlights go, but you can make the whole trip that way." This was almost two decades ago, and I have always remembered those words when struggling with a new book. If I had to name one single quotation that I have gone back to in order to sustain me, it would

have to be the one by Doctorow. On a bookshelf in my study, I also have a statement from Sylvia Plath. I have now forgotten where I found it, but this is what it says on the index card: “The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.” Both the Doctorow statement and the one by Plath can be helpful when you are starting or in the middle of a project. What will happen when your work is finished and your book is published and gets reviewed? For any number of reasons, the following quotation won’t help you—it is not meant to, and, really, the writer is talking only about himself—but it will help to keep it in mind: it comes from an obituary for the writer Denis Johnson, after his death in May 2017. This is what Johnson had once told the journalist Lawrence Wright: “A bad review is like one of those worms in the Amazon that swims up your penis. If you read it, you can’t get it out, somehow.”²

Otessa Moshfegh is a young American writer whose novel *Eileen* was a finalist for the Man Booker Prize. Moshfegh told the *Guardian* that she didn’t “want to wait 30 years to be discovered . . . so I thought I’m going to do something bold.”³ She bought a book called *The 90-Day Novel* by Alan Watt. Moshfegh understood the limits, but she persisted. (“It’s ridiculous, claiming that anybody can write a great book, and quickly too. And I thought if I were to do this, what would happen, would my head explode?”) She carried on with the exercise for sixty days, and *Eileen* was born.

In the interview, Moshfegh had said that “the Booker people” would be “disgusted” with this story of her novel’s origins, but I embrace it wholeheartedly. I love the story of low origins, and, more than that, I love what it tells us about ambition as well as optimism. Because the point of course is to get the start you need and then put the imprint of your talent, your personality, your obsessions, on the work you are doing.