



## The Tennis Court Oath

*John Ashbery*

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## **The Tennis Court Oath** John Ashbery

A 35th anniversary edition of a classic work from a celebrated American poet who has received the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. John Ashbery's second book, *The Tennis Court Oath*, first published by Wesleyan in 1962, remains a touchstone of contemporary avant-garde poetry.

## **The Tennis Court Oath Details**

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Author : John Ashbery

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## From Reader Review The Tennis Court Oath for online ebook

### Kent says

Well, my understanding is that Ashbery wrote this book as an experiment in fragmentation, to see how far fragmentation could run outside sense or cohesive meaning. And, for me, I'm grateful he pulled away from this style. At least so that I could enjoy books like *Houseboat Days* and *Rivers and Mountains*.

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### Garrett Peace says

I understood none of this, and it was \*awesome.\*

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### mwpm says

What had you been thinking about  
the face studiously bloodied  
heaven blotted region  
I go on loving you like water but  
there is a terrible breath in the way all of this  
You were not elected president, yet won the race  
All the way through fog and drizzle  
When you read it was sincere the coasts  
stammered with unintentional villages the  
horse strains fatigue I guess . . . the calls . . .  
I worry

the water beetle head  
why of course reflecting all  
then you redid you were breathing  
I thought going down to mail this  
of the kettle you jabbered as easily in the yard  
you come through but  
are incomparable the lovely tent  
mystery you don't want surrounded the real  
you dance  
in the spring there was clouds

The mulatress approached in the hall - the  
lettering easily approached along the edge of the *Times*  
in a moment the bell would ring but there was time  
for the carnation laughed here are a couple of "other"

to one in yon house

The doctor and Philip had come over the road  
Turning in toward the corner of the wall his hat on  
reading it carelessly as if to tell you your fears were justified  
the blood shifted you know those walls  
wind off the earth had made him shrink  
undeniably an oboe now the young  
were there there was candy  
to decide the sharp edge of the garment  
like a particular cry not intervening called the dog "he's coming! he's coming" with an emotion felt it sink  
into peace

there was no turning back but the end was in sight  
he chose this moment to ask her in detail about her family and the others  
The person. pleased - "have more of these  
not stripes on the tunic - or the porch chairs  
will teach you about men - what it means"  
to be one in a million pink stripe  
and not could go away the three approached the doghouse  
the reef. Your daughter's  
dream of my son understand prejudice  
darkness in the hole  
the patient finished  
The could all go home now the hole was dark  
lilacs blowing across his face glad he brought you

- **The Tennis Court Oath**, pg. 11-12

\* \* \*

To true roses uplift on the bilious tide of evening  
And morning-glories dotting the crescent day  
The oval shape responding:  
My first is a haunting face  
In the hanging-down hair.  
My second is water:  
I am a sieve.

My only new thing:  
The penalty of light forever  
Over the heads of those who were there  
And back into the night, the cough of the finishing petal.

Once approved the magenta must continue  
But the bark island sees  
Into the light:  
It grieves for what it gives:  
Tears that streak the dusty firmament.

- **To Redouté**, pg. 21

\* \* \*

And if h thought that  
All was foreign -  
As, gas and petrol, en-  
gine full of speed, barking to hear the night  
The political contaminations

Of what he spoke,  
Spotted azaleas brought to meet him  
Sitting next day  
The judge, emotions,  
The crushed paper heaps.

- **A White Paper**, pg. 32

\* \* \*

The worst of it all -  
The white sunlight on the polished floor -  
Pressed into service,  
And then the window closed  
And the night ends and begins again.  
Her face goes green, her eyes are green;  
In the dark corner playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever." I try to describe for you,  
But you will not listen, you are like the swan.

No stars are there,  
No stripes,  
But a blind man's can poking, however clumsily, into the inmost corners of the house.  
Nothing can be harmed! Night and say and beginning again!  
So put away the book,  
The flowers you were keeping to give someone:  
Only the white, tremendous foam of the street has any importance,  
The new white flowers that are beginning to shoot up about now.

- **White Roses**, pg. 35

\* \* \*

Lugged to the gray arbor,  
I have climbed this snow-stone on my face,  
My stick, bu what, snapped the avalanche  
The air filled with slowly falling rocks

Breathed in deeply - arrived,  
The white room, a table covered  
With a towel, mug of ice - fear

Among the legs of a chair, the ashman,  
Purple and gray she starts upright in her chair.

- **The Unknown Travelers**, pg. 63

\* \* \*

The water began to fall quite quietly  
As pipes decorate laminations of  
City unit busses pass through.  
A laborer dragging luggage examined  
The wet place near a bug.  
It sifted slowly down the sides of buildings flat  
The permanent way to make a race.  
So simple was the ally. Trying the lips  
The spaced demons never breaking.  
They imagine something different from what it is.

Just a fat man with sunglasses  
Moving through shine - the uncle in the mirror -  
As it is beginning again these are the proportions -  
He lauds her with a smile.

Miles away in the country the performance included glue.  
The abandoned airfield will have to gave the imagination now  
To be august, gray, against oneself

These things that are the property of only the few.

- **The Shower**, pg. 90

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### **David Kim says**

When I read this many years ago when my mind was fresh and pliable, it was amazing. Now re-reading it it is barely comprehensible. He said writing like this is can come from exercising a muscle in your brain. But now I think reading it also requires exercising a muscle in your brain...getting older I feel simplicity can be just as complex.

Ashbery wants to make poems like paintings. The "Imagists" did it at like level 4. He does it at like level 10.

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### **James says**

Ashbery says that he is writing as Kandinsky paints. I disagree. Picasso through a child's kaleidoscope

perhaps. The froth of sea foam enshrined in the skin of a sanitarium.

If lack of form characterizes modern poetry—discipline dissolved—John Ashbery takes formlessness a step further in this book to embrace lack of meaning. With the dissolution of rhythm, he leaves us with a random jumble of dissonant words, as if presenting a local telephone directory and calling it art. Of course, the phone book would be closer to art; at least it has organization.

Perhaps he considers his work as Stravinsky did his 1913 ballet, *The Rite of Spring*, which was booed at its premiere, considered discordant to 19c ears. But Ashbery's work is almost a half century old now—and it should still be eliciting boos.

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### **Mitch says**

Great Ashbery book, with over-the-top poems like the Divine Sepulchre, an amazing sense of humor, and more drama than he evokes later on. Brilliant lines, almost every one of them would make a great jump-off point for another poem. Here Ashbery is bright-eyed, ready for anything, pure potential. No wonder everyone fell in love with him, he was a dazzling genius!

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### **Laurence Li says**

first quarter: wtf

second quarter: wtf but I see where its going

third quarter: haha lol

fourth quarter: its genius--but really, did you have to make it this arcane?????

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### **Ross says**

*One can never change the core of things, and light burns you the harder for it.*

Difficult, but often beautiful.

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### **Rupert says**

I have to admit that I haven't been able to completely meld with Senor Ashbery's oeuvre yet like I have with Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch and Ted Berrigan. I recognize his brilliance and razor chops, though, and get blown away by specific lines. I will keep studying his words until the gates creak open.

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### **Michael says**

More interested in playing with language than connecting with readers, Ashbery toys with the idea that poetry need be neither representational nor accessible: the painterly poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* cycle through the surreal, the obscure, and the urbane, with little concern for consistency or clarity. That Ashbery's verse is often at its best when his language is most comprehensible casts some doubt on the value of such a project.

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### **Ba Jin says**

These were hard to take. Makes Ulysses make more sense though, because of the French surrealist connection.

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### **Jessica says**

Think this is the most difficult work I've ever read.

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### **Ryan says**

Not a complete waste. "Faust" and "Idaho" adumbrate narratives; "The Unknown Travelers" might deploy a metaphor? "Europe" has ambition, and I almost enjoyed "Rain."

And yet, you would do just as well to cut up and re-assemble any favored lines scattered throughout the project, and in most cases would end up with a poem at least as coherent as any that those lines are removed from.

Maybe I lack the receptivity or preparation necessary to appreciate what's going on here, and I'm probably imagining things, but there are moments when even the poet seems to share my ambivalence about his endeavor:

"...the child's scream/Is perplexed, managing to end the sentence."

"...all was a bright black void"

"He had mistaken his book for garbage"

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### **landon says**

The first few poems are best heard behind a screen, maybe in a doctor's office, a cancer ward, when you're losing hope, but something in the way that people try to use words makes you feel hope. He teases the boundary between his ideas and yours, when he furnishes fragments of ideas and you have to assemble their source, which is yours. The book is also a nice world to be in: flowers, boyhood, houses, Stars and Stripes, and urban errands. "Rain" is exemplary of the best thing about the book, and about the poet: humility. After "Some Trees" he didn't expect to publish again, but he was soon asked for some poems, so he gathered together his recent experiments. This context makes sense when you read the Oath. It's not a monumental poet in top shape, but edgy attempts at new thinking. "Rain" is a reservoir of poetic and semi-poetic

observations that we let slip by us every day, and that John Ashbery collected in a barrel. He's just giving them some light, trying an arrangement of them, sequencing to make a felt but unspeakable narrative. I feel like it's an honest effort because I've felt this kind of thing. He's heroic because he doesn't mechanically beautify the special moments, he lets them speak for themselves.

What a master of mimicking arbitrariness but secretly making meaning. He pushes the bounds of phrase-making into the territory of lists. He pushes the bounds of your phrase-making memory by switching contexts so often, even between words. You can decide at what point you listen to it. Like consciousness, he gives us information to process, only this is better than consciousness, because the information is beautiful and has a god. So at best the book's an interrogation of your thinking, and at worst it's a still, pretty thing to look at.

In the context of his idiom, the ellipsis trick is breathtaking. As is the line of question marks in "Idaho"; its stuttering becomes a reassuring rhythm.

"Europe" distills one end of his project in this book. It often looks like a specialized transcription of what one hears while walking through a smart party. But it can't quite be that, because sometimes it makes consistent sense. It also can't be that because sometimes the phrases are poetically nonsensical, clearly tampered with. This poem's a good example of talent if his tenet is true that "the better a piece of art, the harder it is to talk about."

Read this to free up your language, to reflect on how words make and result from quirks of everyday experience, or to marvel at a tasteful vocabulary. There are only four poems I'll happily come back to ("How Much Longer...," "Our Youth," "Idaho," and "A Last World"), but the whole thing is a good experience.

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### **Timothy Green says**

This might be Ashbery at his best -- most of the poems leave enough low branches to get a toe-hold and start climbing, and even those that I couldn't access after several reads feel like they're worth exploring, with just a little boost. These aren't easy poems -- they're complicated and artful, but also full of passion. See my blog post for one example. Or look at one phrase mentioned there, "the thirteen million pillars of grass," which at once alludes to Whitman and Lot's Wife, and thus joy, regret, homosexuality, sodomy, and still more. Ashbery is the darling of academia for good reason: he's a poet to wrestle with forever. It seems you could write an entire dissertation on just a few lines, and I'm sure some people have.

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### **Ambrose Miles says**

Ashbery's idea is to write like some painters paint. I would add some jazz to the mix. With this in mind it makes his poetry easier to digest.

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## Steven says

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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## Robert Beveridge says

2 of 8 people found the following review helpful:

3.0 out of 5 stars When it's good, it's very very good. But when it's bad..., June 28, 2004

John Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath* (Wesleyan, 1962)

Reading Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* probably doesn't rank high on the list of many people's favorite things to do. But reading it while you've immersed yourself in a glut of Charles Simic is an especially bad idea. Simic is the quintessential surrealist writing in English today; Ashbery is sort of a weird, fuzzy cross between surrealism, dada, and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E whose work is, by turns, incomprehensibly unreadable and quite good.

I opened the book to a random page and start quoting from the top left...

"You often asked me after hours  
The glass pinnacle, its upkeep and collapse  
Knowing that if we were in a barn  
Straw panels would... Confound it  
Te arboretum is bursting with jasmine and lilac  
And all I can smell here is newsprint..."  
("The New Realism")

Anyone who wants to take a stab at explaining that, by all means, go ahead. I cannot help but compare this stuff (as I did in a recent Jackson Mac Low review) to the work of John M. Bennett, which is completely nonsensical but SOUNDS like it shouldn't be. Reading John M. Bennett is like understanding how to read and pronounce a completely foreign language without understanding a single word; even when you have no idea what's going on, if you read it out loud, you can still do so smoothly and put inflections in all the right places to make it sound great. With this, the reader is reduced to stumbling through, trying to grasp some semblance of meaning in order to make it scan. (And we wonder why people ask "what does it mean?" when confronted with poetry. lord save us.)

But when Ashbery is on, he is quite on, and his work takes on a spectre of imagism; not enough to make the book worth buying, mind you, but enough to make it worth borrowing from the library. The more lucid sections of "Europe," for example, where Ashbery dispenses with the easy, wannabe dadaism and gets down to his subject (Beryl Markham), give the reader an idea of why Ashbery, not too long before this, was selected by the Yale Series of Younger Poets. But, as with many poetry collections, you wade through some swine to get to the pearls. In this case, they're often in the same poems. \*\* 1/2

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## **S says**

For those that are facing Ashbery for perhaps the first time and coming away with not-a-lot, just go and read some Barthelme stories, and then come back and read Ashbery's "Faust" and "Idaho". The same zeitgeist-seeking ghost is reappearing in both mens' works.

~

Near the end: still ambivalent but better than before.

For maybe every five or ten lines that read pretty limp and 2weird4u ("lemons asleep pattern crying" ["Europe"]) are lines like

"My stick, but what, snapped the avalanche" ("The Unknown Travelers")

great lines that are poetic but more importantly feel real, reveal something of the nature of the sudden starting of an avalanche, however disjointed with the other lines.

~

The major poem in this collection is "Europe", and Ashbery makes his project clear here, thankfully. The poem wouldn't stand without the refueling paragraph. Does it reflect the nature of travel? I don't think so. So not very successful, although I've never travelled through Europe, so maybe they do things differently over there.

~

"Idaho" by far my favorite. The disintegration of the followable, although still eccentric narrative makes me reconsider how to read Ashbery's poetry, not as at-times seemingly random words strung together, but parts left over from a ravished, ravaged story. I suppose intuition plays a huge part in his work, but here it seemed to validate that view.

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## **Cole says**

Pretty good, you kinda need to know a lot of subtext to make sense of it though. Like this is book is dedicated to his Gay lover and the Algerian war for independence was in full swing.

Even with those though this book is not going to make sense for you, you will have to make sense for yourself in anyway you can.

Tip: Read the poems outloud and multiple times.

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