

A T_EX Odyssey Poetry Reading at the Banquet

Sunday evening, Wendy McKay, remembering our T_EX poetry contest two years ago in Vancouver, asked me to create something for this year's gathering. I must say that this shows that her taste in verse is every bit as suspect as her taste in operating systems

I have written a sestina. Those of you who are a few months (or maybe years) past your last creative writing class may need to be reminded what that is. Right?

A sestina is a 39-line poem, usually but not necessarily in iambic pentameter, comprised of six six-line verses and a three-line envoi. The gimmick is that each verse uses the same six words (or syllables—I cheated) to end the six lines. These words are permuted in a predetermined order. The same six words must show up in the envoi, also in a predetermined order. Those of you —both of you?— who are interested can easily find much more information on the web.

You will appreciate that this form lends itself to verse whose artistic merit is comparable to that of a crossword puzzle: Call it Cruciverbalist verse. And you *should* appreciate that the great virtue of such limited forms as sonnets and sestinas is that they are guaranteed not to go on too long. Sonnets are shorter, of course: perhaps you'll decide I should have written one of those.

Or a limerick.

Finally, a word on scansion: I cheated there, too.

Fred Bartlett

1 We are odd folks upon an odyssey
Searching out the future use of text,
Well-braced with practice in all kinds of T_EX
To put our notions in a pleasing form.
Even if we use old L^AT_EX's poor design
We will still set our words in perfect type.

7 And if our document is of some other type –
Not words on pages, but something else to see
And yet still math: greek letters or a sine?
Will Hans Hagen put us in ConT_EXt?
Or Richter make us fill insurance forms?
Well – there's nothing we can't do with T_EX.

13 When we are old and gray and full of T_EX
And can write macros of nearly any type
To create such things as, say, pdf forms –
Or JavaScript or other T_EXpert fantasy –
How many ways can we then write a text
Or put the signified into a sign?

19 Hail Sir Tranh! His pdfT_EX's new design
Has Czeched out to be the very best T_EX-
Nical trick in years – but ask not for a text
From which to learn its use. He doesn't do that type
Of work. Martin will impose himself; you'll see
That nothing else will do to make a form.

Sestina
Frederick Bartlett
15 August 2001



25 Perhaps there is a need for some reform:
Some new ML developed to consign
Our T_EX to the bottom of the data sea.
No! It shall not be. Our faith in L^AT_EX
Three is strong – for all that it be of the type
That needs no evidence nor any sacred text.

31 Let hoi polloi use (ech!) Word for their text.
We know they are debased, their work deformed
(Need I make more comments of this type?)
A small thread in the world's web, we design
To rule the whole – or at least the best. And T_EX
Is alpha and Omega of our odyssey.

37 You who make text fit for the best design
And wish the world conformable to T_EX –
You are our type. Come join our odyssey!