

Sunday evening, Wendy McKay, remembering our T<sub>E</sub>X 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.

# Sestina

*Frederick Bartlett*

*15 August 2001*

We are odd folks upon an odyssey  
Searching out the future use of text,  
Well-braced with practice in all kinds of T<sub>E</sub>X  
To put our notions in a pleasing form.  
Even if we use old L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X's poor design  
We will still set our words in perfect type.

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<sub>E</sub>Xt?  
Or Richter make us fill insurance forms?  
Well – there's nothing we can't do with T<sub>E</sub>X.

When we are old and gray and full of T<sub>E</sub>X  
And can write macros of nearly any type  
To create such things as, say, pdf forms –  
Or JavaScript or other T<sub>E</sub>Xpert fantasy –  
How many ways can we then write a text  
Or put the signified into a sign?

Hail Sir Trinh! His pdfT<sub>E</sub>X's new design  
Has Czeched out to be the very best T<sub>E</sub>X-  
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.

Perhaps there is a need for some reform:  
Some new ML developed to consign  
Our T<sub>E</sub>X to the bottom of the data sea.  
No! It shall not be. Our faith in L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X  
Three is strong – for all that it be of the type  
That needs no evidence nor any sacred text.

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<sub>E</sub>X  
Is alpha and Omega of our odyssey.

You who make text fit for the best design  
And wish the world conformable to T<sub>E</sub>X –  
You are our type. Come join our odyssey!