

THE
YOUTH
HOSTEL

OR

*AN ODYSSEY
IN THE MARGINS
OF
SOFTWARE
AND
PAPER.*

Being a Talk by
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Given at FROSCON 11, Bonn–Rhein–Sieg University of Applied Science, August 2016.

SUBJECTS addressed in this TALK.

A musical PROLOGUE.

The long and intentionally confusing authorship of a brief POEM.

A tuffle with type design: L^AT_EX and the long S.

Nested forays into free software: FONTFORGE, PSUTILS and (LIB)PAPER.

Some MUSINGS on the CARDINAL VIRTUES, putting up with proprietary software, the pleasures of mature code, and the joys of dilettantism.

A B S T R A C T.

MANY years ago, I spent an unusual night in a Dutch youth hostel while on tour with a choir from my university. From this experience was born a mock-mock-epic poem: *The Youth Hostel*. For the next five years, in trains, planes and hotel rooms, I worked on my masterpiece, in pencil and an 18th-century style.

Little did I know that the project had barely begun, and it would take me countless hours and another two decades to complete.

In my talk I will describe how my fascination with Alexander Pope's mock-epic *The Dunciad* led me into murky corners of L^AT_EX and METAFONT, and, increasingly side-tracked, into overhauling the venerable **psutils** package and entirely rewriting the almost equally ancient **libpaper** (both, in fact, of a similar age to my poem), as well as working on **Fontforge** and contracting for Google.

I will show how in the course of this work I found patience, diligence and modesty to be virtuous, despite what Larry Wall says, how I coped with proprietary software where there were no free alternatives, and how I discovered the joys and benefits of mature software, all in a spirit of joyous dilettantism.

I hope my talk will be of particular interest to po-

ets,

ets, typophiles, book lovers, serious programmers, and frivolous programmers.

The following pages contain a sample of the poem.

THE YOUTH HOSTEL

or *One day in Thy courts.*

Oft have we heard the joys of Travel told,
 Of wond'rous fights, reward of trav'lers bold;
 Of horrors too, and situations dire,
 Which make us glad to stay at our hearth-fire;
 Yet none so grim as that of which I speak, 5
 And cry to thee, o Muse! t' inspire my meek
 And feeble pen with fire from Helius' height,
 Enlight'ning my dull wits with thine so bright.

Figure the scene: in alien land estrang'd
 A coach and forty, Men and Boys, arrang'd 10
 As did their likes and comfort best secure,

REMARKS.

THE YOUTH HOSTEL.] Perhaps the most striking incongruity of this work is its subject. One wonders what it was about staying in a rather noisome auberge during an unremarkable tour of a country which could hardly be describ'd as exotic that inspir'd such labours. It is true that the choir had a long history of tours to the Netherlands, but it was curiously irregular for them to be billeted in a youth hostel.

VV. 6-7. *Meek and feeble.*] Not merely an echo of the first *Elizabeth's* famous declaration, but a common misquotation of it.

V. 9. *In alien land estrang'd.*] A witty tautology.

IMITATIONS.

One day in Thy courts.] Ps. Ch. 84 V. 10; the verse reads *For one day in Thy courts is better than a thousand*, and has the opposite meaning to that imply'd here.

V. 10. *A coach and forty.*] A pun on *coach and four*.

While they through Netherlands purfu'd their Tour;
 And at each novel venue they'd alight
 Or in hotels or homes to spend the night
 (Which homes kind concert-goers did provide, 15
 And bed and breakfast to the Choir supply'd).
 But one dark evening, when Luna was veil'd
 By rain and shadow, as the 'bus travail'd,
 No jewell'd de Baak, no friendly house appear'd;
 A diff'rent creature in the distance rear'd: 20
 A fullen Edifice of concrete pour'd,
 Grey as the skies its ghastly towers gor'd;
 The mutter'd question: "What's this place?" did swell,
 And answer soon there came: "A Youth Hostel."

REMARKS.

V. 18. *'Bus.*] That the long-distance coach in which the choir travell'd was not strictly an omnibus is excus'd by the poet's clever use of various terms that relate to its velocity: like a wandering comet approaching perihelion, the coach (V. 10) flows as it approaches the baleful hostel, becoming first a 'bus, and then a carriage; and upon departure the 'bus becomes once more a coach as it gathers speed.

V. 19. *De Baak.*] An hotel, brilliantly lit-up in the hours of darkness, at which the choir lodg'd one night; on the morrow they sang to the management with a view to sponsofship. Curiously, the matter receiv'd no further mention, nor, despite Mr. *Robinson's* assertion did the choir ever stay there again.

V. 22. *Ghastly towers.*] An extension function'd by poetic planning permission.

IMITATIONS.

V. 12. *Netherlands.*] A pun on *nether lands* (*vide* note to V. 9).

V. 21. *Of concrete pour'd.*] Am. Ch. 5 V. 11; significantly, of the houses there built of *hewn stone* the prophet says *ye shall not dwell in them*.