Two Poems by Bill Parry (1934–2006)
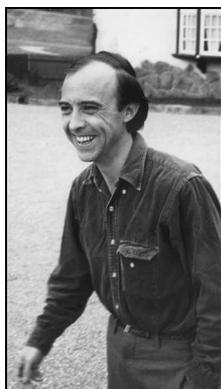
Bill Parry, emeritus professor at the University of Warwick in England, died at age 72 on August 20, 2006. He was a student of Yael Dowker who introduced ergodic theory to the United Kingdom, and Bill played a major role in establishing the subject in this country. His many former students occupy key positions in universities in the UK and elsewhere. He gave an invited address at the International Congress of Mathematicians in 1970 and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1984. Although he was the first in his family to attend university, he was a well- (though self-) educated man, with a deep interest in politics, literature, science, cinema, theatre, and other topics. He was a firm socialist all his life. Towards the end he became increasingly interested in poetry, and several of his poems have been published. Two previously unpublished poems, with mathematical themes, are published here with the permission of his estate.

The picture above was taken at Oberwolfach and dates from 1968. It is published with the permission of the Mathematisches Forschungsinstitut Oberwolfach.

—*David Epstein,*
University of Warwick

Argument

As he cleaned the board,
chalk-dust rose like parched mist.
A dry profession, he mused as morosely
they shuffled settling tier upon tier.

Now, almost half-way through the course,
(coughs, yawns and automatic writing)
the theorem is ready.

Moving to the crucial point,
the sly unconventional twist,
a quiver springs his voice and breast;

soon the gambit will appear
opposed to what's expected.
The ploy will snip one strand
the entire skein sloughing to the ground.

His head turns sympathetically
from board to class.
They copy copiously.
But two, perhaps three pause and frown,

wonder will this go through,
questioning this entanglement
— yet they nod encouragement.
Then the final crux; the ropes relax and fall.

His reward: two smile, maybe three,
and one is visibly moved.
Q.E.D., the theorem is proved.

This was his sole intent.
Leaving the symbols on the board
*he departs with a swagger of achievement.*

David Epstein is emeritus professor at the University of Warwick. His email address is David.Epstein@warwick.ac.uk.

Alexander's Horned Sphere

The sea was the first to propose it,
anticipating Alexander's thought.
The whited branch which clawed the ocean floor,
the echoing shell, the time-worn stone,
anemone and jell of sea-flower;
had he seen all this before?
Did he find his inspiration
along this sepulchered beach
or in some anatomy lesson?

Strands of bladderwrack,
distend to dentritic kelp. He saw
this could go on forever,
each increment a crab's claw.

So friend, hand in hand, we must keep close.
For should you stray,
perhaps along that promontory,
there's no going back.
Our lonely paths shall intersect
only by leap of synapse.
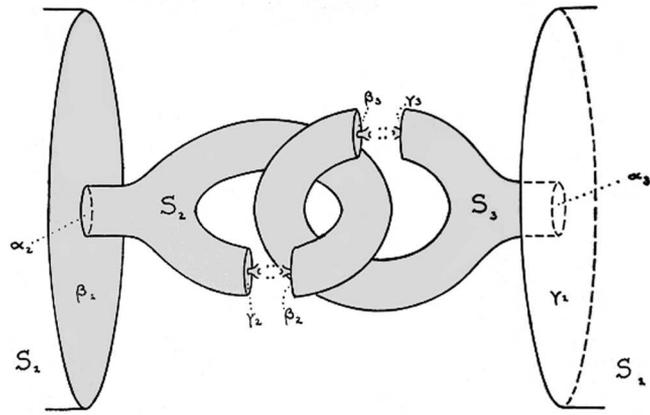
Alexander's horned sphere. This picture is taken from J. W. Alexander's original paper ("An Example of a Simply Connected Surface Bounding a Region which is not Simply Connected," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences***, 10 (1924), 8–10). Copyright J. W. Alexander.**