

TIMOTHY STEELE

BOUNDLESS WEALTH FROM A FINITE
STORE: METER AND GRAMMAR

in memory of Charles Gullans

Reflecting in 1947 on his experiences as a teacher of poetry, W. H. Auden remarked:

It's amazing how little students know about prosody. When you teach a college class, you find they read [verse] either as straight prose, or as deadly monotonous beat as in Gorboduc.

Auden's observation raises a crucial point. Poetry consists neither exclusively of grammatical prose-sense nor exclusively of meter, but is rather a fusion of the two. On the one hand, poets make themselves intelligible by the same means that prose writers do—by agreeably and coherently arranging words and phrases into clauses and sentences. On the other hand, poets compose according to a regular beat and recurring rhythmical pattern, a procedure not characteristic of prose-writing.

Unfortunately, this point is little appreciated. What Auden says of college students seems equally true of most other readers of poetry. Some focus on its grammatical sense at the expense of its metrical element; others concentrate on meter at the expense of meaning. Since Auden's day, the size of the former group has probably grown, whereas the latter has probably shrunk; but the division itself is much the same. In any case, neither approach serves poetry well. To neglect meter is to lose access to the music and modulation that fine metrical composition offers. By the same token, narrowly emphasizing meter can result in misunderstandings about it. Such emphasis can lead to the notion that actual metrical practice concerns merely