

The Skill

You'd think it was an easy thing to do,
To 'discourse of the glory of the stars,'
For people wait to watch, and listen too;
They want to know just what it is they are,
How big, how bright, how unimagined-far.
Hyperbole's ruled out, for every truth,
Unaided, clears exaggeration's bar.
Here time begins; a million years—a youth;
Till all of Earth's great things seem tiny and uncouth.

Well, try it. Quote the numbers that you know.
Their eyes glaze over, try what tricks you will.
You seek precision, careful as you go.
They hear just 'big,' and 'big,' and 'bigger still.'
This takes an altogether different skill:
The metaphor that nonetheless is true,
The explanation clarified until
It gives the grasp that numbers give to you.
It's harder than it looks, though not too hard to do.
--Alan Whiting