

THE ENIGMA OF GISLA SAGA

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The turning point of the saga of Gisli Súrsson and the beginning the hero's downward spiral into outlawry, visionary obsession, and death takes place in a chapter in which Gisli's behavior can justly be called *enigmatic*.¹ He proclaims his own guilt for the murder of his brother-in-law, but the vehicle and setting of the confession do not suggest a surge of conscience or anything of the kind; instead we seem to be in the presence of some contest or agonistic game. The fatal admission is encrypted in an ornate skaldic stanza and called over to a group of women, including his sister, the widow of the slain man. Gisli's puzzling actions in issuing this self-incriminating challenge, if they are to be explained at all, cannot be fully understood in anything less than a full interpretation of the saga. But an appreciation of the form, content, and immediate context of his stanza could begin with skaldic obscurity itself.

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"Difficulty" in poetry generally is a topic perennially green,² and, for early Germanic at least, a usable conception of obscurity in poetry would derive it from a certain calculated effect on audiences, the creation of distinctions according to understanding, in fact the creation of two or more ranked audiences. An obscure style, then, would be programmatic cultivation of a literary language meant to divide audiences into two or more groups, the cognoscenti and the unwashed. Most who have struggled with skaldic poetry probably consider it "difficult" in a general sense; and it is laborious enough and spreads its difficulty evenly enough to speak of the style of the genre itself as "obscure" though it is unclear whether social ostentation (including audience-ranking) is pervasive enough to be considered its chief motive.³ Such a claim of uniformity would overlook period and local styles within this great mass of verse, hardly a single genre, which stretches from the half-mythical Bragi Boddason (c. 850) to the late Icelandic Middle Ages and includes all manner of marginal forms. The core of "skaldic poetry," however, is praise poetry composed in "court meter," and it is chiefly this *dróttkvætt* verse that John Lindow addresses in his inventive article "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry."⁴ Skaldic poetry is, of course, built on kennings, and Lindow explores the extent to which each kenning is a riddle in little.⁵ When he comes to discuss the purpose, function, or inherent ideology of such a style, Lindow suggests that the "play" element involved in kennings and riddles serves the exploration of semantic boundaries; but this line of thought, a more or less democratic line, seems to be contradicted by his further argument that such poetry functioned as a kind of test or sign of initiation into the *drótt* or court: "Early skaldic poetry might, therefore, be regarded as a device for isolating non-members, i.e. the lower classes and women, from the *drótt*. It functioned, in effect, as a kind of secret language in which the members of the *drótt* could maintain their collective traditions in a special way and also communicate without being wholly understood by others, indeed to the exclusion of others."⁶

In working up to this theory Lindow remarks: "It must have taken some practice and perhaps even a little training to understand skaldic poetry; it seems very likely that in the earliest period generally only the members of the *drótt* were in a position to get any such training and practice" (p. 322). He imagines a two-part system with first performance and re-performances: "This [i.e. re-performance] is the means of the maintenance of skaldic poetry in oral tradition for centuries until its recording on vellum. During re-performance the 'answer' is taught; this is how the difficult rules of the genre are transmitted. The impetus of re-performance, in addition, involves strong feelings of group solidarity . . ." (p. 322).

Can we test this hypothesis in roughly contemporary meta-literary commentary? The sagas present a great many references to the circumstances in which skaldic poetry was produced, but rarely mention how or how well it was understood, and few re-performances are extensively described. But it is hard to believe that Ethelred the Unready or even the Norse-Irish Sigtryggr silkiskegg could have had a close and instant understanding of Gunnlaugr's orally delivered eulogies,⁷ and a passage in the short story *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* indicates that that scalawag perpetrated bad poems on the skaldically ignorant Danes and then shared the joke with his Norwegian king.⁸ The fantastic picture in another short story, *Þorleifs þáttur jarlsskalds*, seems also to imply that the audience failed fully to comprehend what Þorleifr was chanting until his satire had had its devastating magical effect.⁹ A remark in the thirteenth-century anecdote known as *Sturlu þáttur* implies that one auditor is unlikely to have understood a skaldic performance--an auditor who was a woman and Danish.¹⁰ In another realistic anecdote a poet playfully wagers with his king about how much the king and courtiers will be able to remember:

[About 1114-30, King Sigurðr Magnússon, the Jerusalem-farer, challenged Einarr to improvise one of the ubiquitous eight-line occasional strophes in *drottkvætt* to describe the passage of a gallant lady commanding a ship now in their view, and to have it finished before the ship passed out of sight beyond a certain point.] Einarr answered, "That won't come free." The King asked, "What will it cost?" Einarr answered, "You must promise, for yourself and seven of your retainers in addition, that each of you will remember his line in the poem. And if that fails, then you give me as many kegs of honey as lines which you don't remember."

The King agreed to that. Then Einarr spoke a poem:

The valliant dame with prows divides
The hollow waves through Utsteinn's tides;
The Wind, that Driver-of-fine-rains,
The swollen sheets on boom it strains.
No steed-of-the-Sea upon this earth
Runs homeward hence in greater mirth--
The broad-planked bottom batters the flood--
Upon its poop a stately load.

Then the King said, "I believe that I remember:

'The valliant dame with prows divides'

--yes, by God:

'Upon its poop a stately load.'"

They didn't remember at all what had been in the middle.¹¹

Retaining the lines of a poem is not the same as understanding them as spoken, but a passage such as this from *Einars þáttur Skúlasonar* suggests that even among the *drótt* (admittedly of a late period in the history of the skaldic subgenre), skaldic competence would have been varied. A complete collection of such vignettes would probably throw some light on the audience responses to skaldic verse, but one of the richest of such passages forms the immediate context of Gísli's enigmatic verse.

This is the situation: the hero of the saga, Gísli Súrsson, has murdered his brother-in-law Þorgrímr in revenge for Þorgrímr's involvement in the murder of Gísli's blood-brother and brother-in-law Vésteinn. Þorgrímr's widow, Gísli's sister Þórdís, has married Þorkr, her murdered husband's brother, and the two farmsteads, with their intertwined extended families, are continuing a tradition of winter games --something like ice-hockey--on a frozen pond flanked by the burial mounds of Vésteinn and Þorgrímr. One day when the crowd of onlookers is large, and the rivalry between the two houses corresponding, Þorkr scores a minor victory, snapping a bat on Gísli's team. The passage continues in George Johnston's translation:

Gísli sits down and goes to work on the [broken] bat, facing Thorgrim's mound; there was snow on the ground, and the women were sitting up on the slope, his sister Thordis and many others. Gísli spoke a verse which he should have kept to himself:

Giant-bane Grim's grave mound,
Grows thin shoots, unfrozen;
God of war-blade gleaming
Gained by me, pain's ending.
Wearer of grim war mask
Wields at last his field plot;
Him, for land who hungered,
Halled earth made I swallow.'

Thordis got the verse by heart from the one hearing, and goes home, and by then she has worked out its meaning.¹²

The poem itself cryptically boasts of Þorgrímr's killing, but we are concerned first with the setting.

Gísli's admission is made less implausible by certain formal features of the narrative: this is the culminating scene in a series, and Gísli's hybris seems inevitable in the grip of the narrative logic. The exact mate to the scene we are concerned with took place in a similar pregnant pause in a hockey game after the death of Vésteinn but while no responsibility for the murder had been assigned and no revenge accomplished. The rivalry between Þorgrímr and Gísli had reached a peak; Þorgrímr had been knocked down: "Thorgrim stood up slowly; he turned to Vestein's grave mound and spoke:

'Spear in the wound sharply
Sang. I feel no anguish'" (Johnston, p.21).

Our juries would not convict Þorgrímr on this evidence which merely describes an event conventionally and impersonally and expresses an attitude toward it; he does not directly brag of murdering Vésteinn in these simple lines (a *kviðling*), but he is expressing pleasure in the death and obliquely making himself available for the responsibility. The parallel to Gísli's later confessional stanza is obvious, but the saga provides an immediate parallel when Gísli drives the hockey puck into his rival's back and parodies Þorgrímr's lines:

"Ball on the broad shoulder
Banged. I feel no anguish."

In all three contexts an outside stimulus provokes a verse admission in the midst of the fierce hockey competition, and Gísli's parody shows that he had instantly understood Þorgrímr's verse not only as an expression of feeling but as a boast about action: the sentiments (no anguish) and descriptions (spear and ball) are exactly parallel, but in the parody we see that the ball was driven by the unanguished speaker; this element, added within the framework of exact parallels, means, when re-applied to the original, that Gísli understands that the spear was similarly wielded by the speaker of the *kviðling*.

Two main points in the series are constituted by another pair of scenes where an as-yet secret killer hints at his role by his actions at his victim's funeral. Þorgrímr had tied Vésteinn's Hel-shoes, and Gísli had ballasted Þorgrímr's funeral boat with a comment ("I cannot make fast a boat, if the weather moves this one") that had the audience in the saga remarking on the parallel: "Some men said that this did not seem much unlike what Thorgrim had done with Vestein when he spoke about the Hel-shoes" (Johnston, p. 25). The sequence so far, then, is: (1) Þorgrímr's hint about Hel-shoes (ch. 14); (2) Þorgrímr's verse in view of his victim's mound (ch. 15), and (3) Gísli's immediate parody; (4) Gísli's imitation of the hint at the funeral (ch. 17); finally (5) Gísli's verse in view of his victim's mound (ch. 18). The parallelisms could be emphasized by symbolization: A, B, C, A', B'--but where is C'?

Gísli's comprehension of and reaction to "Spear in the wound sharply" was instantaneous and violent, eventually deadly (C). Later scenes do parallel this less obviously with Þórdís's reaction (C'). She was able to remember the stanza exactly even though she did not understand it. As she walked home she slowly worked out the significance of its content; the saga author seems to mean that it is remarkable even that she could *memorize* the poem upon a single hearing, let alone understand it--indirect evidence for re-performance though a direct instance follows. Johnston's translation says that she had unraveled its meaning by the time she got home--a long walk, by the way--but the "by then" is not in the text, which just says "she walks home and has unraveled the poem"; the unraveling could have taken longer, for Þórdís does not disclose her understanding of the verse until the following summer. (But see below.) The time factor, while significant for the larger question of the comprehension of skaldic verse and its obscure styles, is not as important within the saga as the series of parallels--parallels which continue when Þórdís completes the action C' by revealing Gísli's guilt to Þorkr.

This happens again in view of her slain husband's funeral mound:

The story tells now that Thorðis, daughter of whey-Thorbjorn, Bork's wife and Gisli's sister, went some distance on the way with her husband. Bork spoke: 'Now I want you to tell me why you were so moody last fall when we broke up the games, for you promised to tell me before I went away.' They have now come to Thorgrim's grave mound when they begin this talk. She puts her foot in front of her and says she will go no farther; then she tells him what Gisli said when he looked at Thorgrim's mound and she recites the verse to him.

'And I think,' she says, 'that you need search no farther over Thorgrim's death . . .' (Johnston, pp. 27-28).

The parallels to the narrative context of Gisli's "Ball on the broad shoulder / Banged. I feel no anguish" --in other words to C--are understated but quite compelling: near the pond, in sight of a mound, the bereaved hears and analyzes an incriminating verse and here begins revenge against the speaker; her reperformance is Þórðis's parody, exactly paralleling "Ball on the broad shoulder." Þorkr's words here ("you were so moody last fall when we broke up the games") would seem to limit the time required for Þórðis to unravel the verse, but we have no certain way of knowing how long the games went on and how precise a decoding is implied in her moodiness and promise.¹³

The series of parallels may be summarized as follows:

Þorgrímr	< Gisli	Gisli	< Þórðis/Þorkr
A	B	C	A' B' C'

In addition to the parallels between the like-lettered scenes, C and C' parody B and B'; A and B focus on the actions of Þorgrímr as A' and B' do on those of Gisli, and the main actor of C and C' is responsible for the death of the main actor of the parodied AB and A'B' (Gisli directly; Þórðis via Þorkr).

The narrative parallels fail, however, to explain everything about the text and context in which Gisli admits his guilt. Gisli was apparently down by the pond looking up at Þorgrímr's mound where the women were sitting. There must have been quite a distance between them; at least it is clear that Gisli was not overheard muttering a kind of soliloquy. In fact, he must have shouted or at least projected his voice. The poem was an act of communication, yet not overtly intended to be understood. Gisli must not have expected the audience of women to understand the verse; in historical fact there is evidence of more than a few women skalds,¹⁴ but in this scene the underlying assumptions about the intelligibility of skaldic poetry seem to support Lindow's thesis about male and courtly exclusivity. Further (but fragile) support may be derived from the passage in which Þórðis reveals Gisli's guilt to Þorkr: "segir hon nú ok, hvat Gisli hafð kveðit, þá er hann leit hauginn Þorgrínis, ok kveðr fyrir honum vísuna." (I would deviate slightly from Johnston here, translating: "she now told him what Gisli had composed when he looked up at Þorgrímr's mound, and she recited the verse before him.") The text does not say that Þórðis has to explain, gloss, or translate the stanza for Þorkr, though she does add a summary comment ("And I think . . ."); and in the context Þorkr's angry and resolute reaction makes it look as if the male understands at first hearing. In any case Gisli, if he did suppose that women would not understand, was dead wrong, for while none of the other women apparently did, his sister was the fatal exception.

The poem was public, even ostentatious, but was not intended as a simple communication; it was to be a riddle which by performance context excluded men from its audience and then divided its (female) audience into two groups, those who understood and those who did not. The risk Gísli ran was that the first of those categories would not remain empty.

It would be going too far to argue that the poem itself is a riddle by any formal definition, for its riddling elements are not unique in skaldic verse. It begins, however, like one of the most common types of riddle, with presentation of what the riddler *saw* (or sees):¹⁵

Teina sák í túni	I saw shoots in the yard of
tál-gríms vinar fölu	ruin-of-the-friend-of-the-trollwife-grímr.

Craig Williamson distinguishes riddles of a projective and a non-projective type; in the projective the riddler becomes the Other, speaks in the first-person, and may conclude "say what I am." The non-projective are either eyewitness riddles (I saw), hearsay riddles (I heard of a creature), or purely descriptive without reference to the riddler.¹⁶ From Old English one might quote: "Ic seah on bearwe beam hlifian, tanum torhtne" ("I saw a tree towering in the forest,/ Bright with branches," Williamson, p. 51) as an analog having (1) the *saw*-formula with (2) its object (*teina*; *beam tanum torhtne*) and (3) a location (*í túni* . . .; *on bearwe*). But the specific similarities here are accidental, and this is only one of many examples of the type. The *Heiðreks gátur* furnish many more instances closer to Gísli's tradition. There one long series of riddles begins with this *saw*-formula: "Hvat er þat undra, er ek úti sá/ fyr Dellings durum?" Other examples: "Fara ek sá foldar moldbúa . . ."; "Hest sá ek standa, hýði meri . . ."; "Sá ek á sumri sólbjörgum í . . ."; "Meyjar ek sá moldu líkar. . ."¹⁷

If Gísli's verse were a riddle plain and simple, instead of constructed *like* a riddle, the subject or thing to be guessed would be present metaphorically in *teinar* and would belong to Williamson's "phytomorphic group" in which the subject is compared to a plant. Converted into a riddle, the problem set by Gísli might read: "What are the shoots that grow up from Þorgrímr's unfrozen yard (i.e., funeral mound)?" The answer might have been his posthumus children, and as it happens Þorgrímr did have a posthumus child born to Þórdís in the winter of the games and fateful verse. (Was this new-born Snorri on his mother's lap as she sat with the women on the funeral mound?) The word *teinar* has troubled explicators here,¹⁸ but the parallel from *Guðrúnarkviða II* seems to me conclusive for the ordinary meaning, "twigs, shoots": "Hugða ec hér í túni teina fallna,/ þá er ek vildigac vaxna láta" (st. 40).¹⁹ In these lines Atli reports part of his dreams to Guðrún: "I dreamed I saw²⁰ branches fallen here in the yard, branches which I would have wished to let grow." The shoots, plants, or trees are, of course, Atli's own sons who will be killed by his wife. The shared formula *teinar í túni* has a traditional look and might have been associated with children.²¹ In *Guðrúnarkviða II* the figure is part of a series of dream metaphors that seem to be traditional and are certainly related to riddles;²² reformed as a riddle question this one would be: What branches are those which are fallen in Atli's yard, yet he would have wished to see them grow?

In Gísli's poem the full riddle form is not realized; the *teinar* seem to be there as literal shoots (or snowless strips or punningly both). Some riddles are based on such puns, but the realistic *teinar* here seem intended to mislead us.

For the real riddle to be solved here is the name of the man "'s geig of veittak" (whom I did great harm). His name is encoded in the second line as the owner of the much-thawed yard: *fála* = trollwife; her *yjnr* "friend" = a giant; his *tál* "detriment" = the enemy of giants, Thor. The second element of Þorgrímr's name is treated by editors as simply appended, functioning only as his name; but two other man-kennings in the stanza have Odin names as base, and Grímr is also one of his names. The challenge here is similar to that posed by Cynewulf's runic signatures in Old English and a bit like the "cryptomorphic" group of Old English riddles;²³ Gísl's puzzle has its closest relatives, however, among the "Rätselspiele" of skaldic name-kennings: "Hier wird der ganze Name oder ein Teil durch Kenningar ersetzt."²⁴ Meissner reported that the device was popular among skalds and listed some 37 instances, including Gísl's.²⁵ But while name-kennings--some with hostile or satirical intent--and the instances of punning kennings (*ofljóst*) and other puzzles mentioned by Meissner all have playfulness in common, the stakes of exposure, the "criminality" signaled by the game, relate Gísl's Þorgrímr-stanza more closely to the onomastic play with women's names studied so effectively by the forthright-female-man-in-blue (the man in blue is a policeman, traditionally a Robert; if he is female, Roberta; forthrightness makes her Frank).²⁶ Skaldic lovers who encrypted their lady's name in a poem were subject to banishment if discovered and prosecuted though there must have been an audience to appreciate and *not* prosecute.

Gísl's second helming repeats the gist of the first:

nú hefr gnýstærir geira
grímu Þrótt of sóttan,
þann lét lundr of lendan
landkostuð ábranda.

[Now the stirrer-of-battle (the man, I) has attacked Þrótt-of-the-masked-helmet (Þrótt = Odin; a god of the helmet = a warrior, a man); the tree-of-river-flame (fire of the waters = gold; gold's tree = a man, I) gave that farmer land.]

Given the context it would seem that the name of Þorgrímr is again suggested, less precisely, by *Þrótt grímu*, and the last lines seem to refer back ironically to the origin of the *tún*: Gísl made Þorgrímr a land gift he could not refuse, his grave.²⁷

In the illegal love-poems (*mansongr*), including those that contained the lady's name, the evidence is the offence itself: proof and crime are one and the same. Gísl's guilt, on the other hand, resides in earlier actions which he now risks revealing in verse just as the riddlers do who describe riddlingly their own earlier actions. In *Heiðreks gátur* the few riddles of this kind simply provide a framing persona that propounds an eyewitness riddle, for example: "From home I fared, from home I took my journey; I saw a way of ways: there was a way under and a way over and a way every which way" (a bridge).²⁸ Gísl reverses this order, beginning like an eyewitness riddler but continuing with a cryptic narrative of his actions of his own which the audience cannot know. Riddles "based on some experience that only the riddler has undergone or witnessed"²⁹ are as old as Samson's "Out of the eater came forth meat and out of the strong came forth sweetness," but in Nordic folklore this structural type is usually coupled with a narrative context in which the riddler's life is at stake;

this "neck-riddle," as the type is called, is employed as in Hervarar saga to save the riddler.³⁰ There seems to be a logical contradiction in riddle scholarship between the definition of "neck-riddle" by structure, content, or form as a question that is unanswerable because it depends on experience or knowledge peculiar to the asker and a definition by context according to role in a story about a life-or-death trial of wits. I sympathize with Christopher Tolkien's remark that there are many of Gestumblindi's riddles he would find "unanswerable questions" if the saga did not give the answer, and the history of our guesses about the answers to the Exeter Book riddles makes the same point;³¹ on the other hand the seemingly unanswerable riddles of the ballad "King John and the Bishop" (Child 45), based on the riddler's unique experience, are answered in the story.³² To my mind "neck-riddle" ought to be applied to a question in a certain narrative context, but this objection need not detain us further, for Gísli's verse resembles the neck-riddle by either definition. In form it is close to the eyewitness and cryptomorphic types and even more to the skaldic riddling mansongr, but like Samson's riddle and Odin's whisper in the ear of the dead Baldr, it encrypts a past action known only to the riddler. In context Gísli's poem is a failed neck-riddle in sense that it is guessed,³³ and the guesser proves to be Gísli's judge and indirectly his executioner.

Gísli was, however, not on trial *until* he recited his verse. Something else drove him to do that, and another riddling context may be relevant. Riddling exchanges between men and women are traditionally part of a wooing ritual, a test by which the right mate is selected.³⁴ The Irish Cúchullain and Emer and the English Captain Wedderburn (Child 46) present famous examples. These two end happily with the woman "next the wall," but the neck-riddle story-pattern and the wooing context are not mutually exclusive. As Child puts it: "Usually when the hand of a princess is to be won by the performance of tasks, whether requiring wit, courage, the overcoming of magic arts, or what not, the loss of your head is the penalty of failure" (I, 416); among the examples he heaps up is Carlo Gozzi's "La Turandot," "now best known through Schiller's translation" (I, 417)--the sheer charm of reading Child! The wooing knight in "Riddles Wisely Expounded" (Child 1) makes his choice among the eligible girls through riddling, and Gísli seems to challenge a group of women with his riddle. Is it the saga's underlying fantasy that the unriddler will be the destined match? (Meeting one's match can have a double sense.) But what of the incestuous wish in this reading, and is it likely that a brother-sister pairing would be imagined in a riddle contest? Tradition offers one analog in Child 47, "Proud Lady Margaret."³⁵ In text A, a stranger comes wooing the Turandot-like heroine; the threat of death hangs over him if he fails; she poses riddles which he answers, replying with better riddles; Margaret admits: "I think you maun be my match," she said, / 'My match and something mair'" (47 A 11). Pregnant words, for he is revealed as her brother, come from the grave to warn against pride; like other ballad lovers, she wants to be united in the tomb, but the brother turns her away with a sermon. In several texts the tomb is part of the scene--"in yon kirkyaird" (D 10). The tomb and many of the relationships are quite different in Gísla saga, but Gísli's obsession with Þórdís and her lovers and the densely psychological erotic intricacies implicit in the saga have impressed many modern readers--even those who did not cut their interpretative teeth on Faulkner's sister-obsessed Quentin Compson.³⁶

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Riddles and kennings belong to one type of esoteric knowledge, the skill or discovery procedure: outside *Alice in Wonderland*, such puzzles, however difficult, are in theory solvable if the hearer has intelligence and the basic cultural literacy.³⁷ The solvability of the skaldic enigma is one subject of the passage in *Gisla saga*, and this is the point at which a connection can, perhaps, be made between the obscure style of skaldic poetry and its apparent antithesis in saga prose. How could the same society support these two jarringly different literary forms not only side-by-side but implicated in each other? Saga prose is open, informal, realistic, and accessible to any audience while skaldic poetry is involuted, stylized, used for ostentation rather than communication, and apparently, to test audiences.

What saga prose and skaldic riddles have in common may lie at the level of bare epistemology. The sagas are famous for their severe limitation to the observable; psychology, for example, is presented through outward and visible signs--W. P. Ker called it face-of-the-clock psychology. A secret that could only be known between two persons is reported in the only form everyone else could know: they were observed to be talking alone. In *Njáls saga* an attacking band sends a scout to Gunnarr's house to find out if the hero is there; the scout is stabbed with a spear through a window and just staggers back to report in his last words: "I don't know whether Gunnarr is at home--that you will have to discover--but I know his spear is there." Reality is a kind of epistemological puzzle; the elements for solving it are there, but each person and the reader has to solve it for himself. *Gisla saga* is full of such small epistemological riddles, and the narrative turns on a murder which is never firmly credited to anyone and is still a source of disagreement.³⁸ Oddly enough the riddles of saga realism turn out ultimately to be less solvable than the skaldic enigma at the center of the plot; those spaces between the facts, part of the saga's interpretative challenge and its greatness, make every reader his own hermeneut.

Notes

¹In *Yestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: HÍÍ Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1943), ch. 18, pp. 56-60.

²For example, George Steiner, "On Difficulty," pp. 18-47 in *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford and Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1978). The present essay is a modified extract from a longer piece, "Obscure Styles (Old English and Old Norse) and the Enigma of *Gisla saga*," forthcoming in a collective volume on literary obscurity, edited by Jan Ziolkowski.

³On skaldic style in general see Roberta Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: The Dróttkvætt Stanza*, *Islandica* 42 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978).

⁴*Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975), 311-27. Roberta Frank, "Skaldic Poetry," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 183, summarizes some comments on the general topic of the intelligibility of skaldic verse ("a question that probably deserves the dull answers it has received"!) and its institutional settings, pp. 180-83. The traditional assumption that the name of *dróttkvætt* refers to its setting in the *drótt* seems much more convincing than Hans Kuhn's strenuous argument to the contrary in "Die Grenzen der germanischen Gefolgschaft," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 73, Germanistische Abteilung (1956), 1-83; rpt. *Kleine Schriften*, II (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), 420-483, here 437-438.

⁵This insight is old and widely shared; cf., for example, Craig Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 29-30; Brynjulf Alver and Anne Holtsmark, "Gáter," in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, 5 (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1960), coll. 648-53; and Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kennningar der Skalden: Ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik*, *Rheinische Beiträge und Hilfsbücher zur germanischen Philologie und Volkskunde*, 1 (Bonn and Leipzig: Schroeder, 1921).

