whether they are based on grammatical or metaphorical ambiguity or represent one of the transitional types they identify, are solvable within the confines of the culture in which they have been constructed and in which they are posed. But the signified of a riddle is not its answer. Nor is it an object or a situation. Rather it is the code employed by the riddle itself. Riddles are, therefore, meta-linguistic: ways of using language to deal with language—ways of using language to gain mastery over language.

Unlike proverbs, the other minor genre with which they are often compared, riddles do not enhance sociability. They serve, to the contrary, to generate tension in an atmosphere of competition they themselves induce. The riddler seeks deliberately to confuse his audience; and though the conflict he provokes is resolved with the decoding of the answer when his rival gives up, his aim has never been to ameliorate or even relieve the tension he has caused. For in riddling, one is permitted—even required—to be rude. And it is, perhaps, in its power to disconcert, to discomfort, and to disarm, within limits prescribed and sanctioned by convention, an adversary of one's own selection, in an assault that is excused, that we find in large part the source of the riddle's perennial appeal.

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