The Art of Trolling

Semiotic Ingredients, Sociocultural Causes, and Pragmatic Effects

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Summary:

The article singles out and describes the main rhetorical ingredients of trolling through contrasting it with comparable discursive practices: provocation, joke, defensive anonymity, critical public discourse, controversy, and lie. The following elements are found to play a major role in the discursive construction of trolling: topic-insensitive provocation; time-boundless jest; sadistic hierarchy of sender and receiver; anonymity of both the troll and her or his audience; choral character of the 'actant observer' of trolling; construction of artificial contradictory semantics; disruption of argumentative logics; irrelevance of the relation between beliefs and expressions. Trolling profoundly disrupts the conversational ethics of the human civilization because it severs expression from content, signifier from signified, communication from intention.

1. Introduction.

The relatively new phenomenon of trolling has been often studied from the point of view of its reception, that is, from the perspective of its victims or 'Internet witnesses'.[1] A typical semiotic move consists in reversing the

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[1] An early study of the legal implications of trolling is Bond 1999; Revillard 2000 offers insights from the perspective of the sociology of interaction; Hardaker 2010 refers to "impoliteness studies" but seeks to propose an alternative definition of trolling; on the relation between trolling and violence, see Shachaf and Noriko 2010; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides 2011 analyses the morbid relation between death and trolling; Herring, Job-Sluder,

direction of analysis so as to wonder about the fabrication of trolling, i.e., the discursive elements and the contextual conditions that are necessary in order for trolling to take place and be socially recognized as such. The history of rhetoric, a discipline that can be considered as the ancestor of semiotics, as well as the history of philosophy, especially with authors like Schopenhauer, have brought about a series of works whose main label might be "the art of…", works that were intended, indeed, to transmit practical and, above all, stylistic knowledge about such or such domain of communicative practice, escaping the more cogent instructions of codified grammars. The current cultural semiotics might add to such series a further work, entitled "The Art of Trolling". What are the main tenets of this art? A practical way to expose them is to compare and contrast trolling with similar discursive genres and practices.

2. Trolling *versus* provocation.
An important ingredient in the morphogenesis of trolling is its responsive character. Trolls are usually never initiators of a new semantic trend of communication. Conversely, they normally respond, parasitically, to a fragment of discourse that has been created by someone else, someone who is considered as holding no trolling attitude and who can, therefore, be designated as victim of this discursive practice. Trolls do not initiate discourse but respond to it for the simple reason that they do not care about any particular semantic focus. They are not interested in what they write about; they are interested in the cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic reactions that they can obtain from an interlocutor or from a group of interlocutors when these are solicited to participate in a trolled conversation.

Scheckler, and Barab 2012 investigates the relation between trolling and female subjects; Krappitz 2012 is a dissertation about the culture of trolling; from a psychological perspective, see Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014; the recent practice of trolling in cyberwarfare is the object of Spruds and Rožukalne 2016; there is plenty of 'grey literature', both in Internet and in traditional media, about trolls, but still not enough scholarly contributions. The most comprehensive (and provocative) study on trolling to date is Phillips 2015. On the visual semiotics of trolling, see Turton-Turner 2013. A semiotic analysis of the relation between trolling and conspiracy theories is in Thibault 2016; a paper on "The Role of Trolling in Shaping Cultural Discourse and Identity: A Case Study of an Anonymous Internet Message Board" was delivered by Mark Lehman at the 18th Annual Michicagoan Graduate Student Conference in Linguistic Anthropology (May 6-7, 2016).

That, the fact that trolls are not actually concerned with that about which they communicate, is certainly an unpleasant aspect of their style of communication but is not an exclusive one. From this point of view, indeed, trolling is nothing but the latest manifestation of an older discursive genre: provocation. Every time that we communicatively provoke someone, we are not interested as much in what we provoke about, as in the reactions to provocation. As the Latin etymology of this word suggests, provocation is a communicative action whose purpose is to elicit a voice, meaning an emotional more than a cognitive or pragmatic voice. Provocation, indeed, does not intend to obtain extra knowledge or extra action from an interlocutor but, rather, extra emotion; that is, it is meant to raise the emotional tone by which the interlocutor engages in conversation. It usually aims at increasing the negative emotional tone of an interlocutor's answer, in terms of indignation, anger, or utter rage.

As experts of rhetoric know, however, provocation can be a useful pragmatic device and even produce positive effects in the communicative exchange. When I provoke my partner about an issue, for instance, it is not because I want to see her or him angry but because I esteem that her or his emotional engagement in regard to a certain topic is not sufficient. As it is known, emotions are not entirely separated from cognitions in conversation. A moderate emotional activation, for instance, can lead the communicative exchange to conclusions that would have not been attained, were the participants engaging in it in a purely robotic way. However, as it is also known, excess of emotions in conversation can lead to its paralysis, meaning that the need to express one's altered states of mind takes over the need to express one's ideas. Provocation too, then, is the object of an art; provoking someone can enhance the communicative game; beyond a certain extent, though, provocation can disrupt the game. Trolling is *provocation that is indifferent to its conversational topic* and that aims at paroxysmal emotional reactions. The pleasure of moderate provocation consists in seeing that the shape of conversation has been changed, and sometimes even improved, by the intentional increase of its emotional tone. The pleasure of trolling, instead, consists in realizing that *the emotional tone of conversation becomes the main focus of conversation itself.*

That is one of the first ingredients of the art of trolling: when trolling someone, I should not care about what I say but about potential emotional responses to what I say, no matter what. In simpler terms, the first communicative goal of a troll is to be able to push the interlocutor's most sensitive buttons. "Pushing someone's buttons" is an appropriate locution here. That which is at stake, indeed, is not to elicit some

emotional but nevertheless controlled reactions, in which a cognitive frame of argumentation filters the irrational response. That which is at stake, instead, is to trigger relatively unmediated emotional responses, in which the negative passions of the interlocutor simply explode without regard any longer for the cognitive and rational framework of argumentation. *The ultimate goal of a troll is to be insulted by its victim*.

3. Trolling *versus* joke.

As we have seen, trolling is not simply provoking, but it is not simply joking either. Jest, humor, and other declinations of irony play a fundamental role in human communication. Paramount persuasive effects can be obtained through humorously poking fun at an interlocutor. That is, moreover, a pleasurable activity per se. Teasing someone, and realizing that this someone feels teased and responds to it, is the source of an autonomous aesthetic pleasure, which is ultimately related to a desire of control. Whereas the pleasure of persuasion consists in realizing that we can control otherness through changing someone else's mind, the pleasure of irony consists in realizing that otherness can be controlled also through changing someone else's heart, for instance, by producing that mild and usually innocuous irritation that teasing among friends is about. In ironic conversation, I can pretend, in jest, that I hold opinions that I actually do not seriously hold, since, if that were the case, they would probably be unacceptable for my interlocutor. One of the useful communicative purposes of joking is, therefore, that of testing the limits of the conversational relation in which joking takes place. Through saying things that are unacceptable to my interlocutor and, at the same time, through signaling, through special conversational markers such as the tone of the voice, the facial expression, gestures, etc., that I do not actually believe in what I say, and that I'm saying it in jest, I can study the cognitive and, above all, the emotional reactions of my interlocutor outside of the framework of a 'serious' communicative exchange, as though jest was a gymnasium in which two contenders train and gauge their strength without actually engaging in violent fight with an unknown rival. The intrinsic aesthetic pleasure of teasing, indeed, consists not only in realizing that I can control the emotions of my interlocutor but also in making sure that communication, as long as teasing is respectful of its limits, will never change into verbal or, worse, physical violence.

Trolling shares some communicative ingredients of verbal jest. In trolling too, one does not believe in what one says or writes. However, whereas the successful ironic conversation requires that both the sender and the receiver realize that the former does not believe in what he or she

says to the latter, successful trolling implies that only the sender and her or his community of trolls realize that there is no belief attached to what is being said, whilst the receiver firmly believes in such relation between internal belief and external expression. *Trolling, then, is joke whose communicative nature of joke is never revealed to its addressee*, for the fundamental purpose of trolling is not to make fun *at* someone, but to make fun *of* someone.

In other words, the victim of trolling is debased to an inferior level of the pragmatics of conversation, in which he or she does not participate any longer to the testing of the limits of the communicative scene but turns into the sacrificial victim of a spectacle. In a joke, both the conversation partners come out of jest knowing more about each other and their personalities; in trolling, the sender enjoys precisely the fact that the receiver does not understand- and is actually trapped into- an 'infinite jest' whose nature of jest he or she ignores. Whereas in teasing, sender and receiver mutually experiment the power of being able to control the emotions of the other, in trolling this mutuality is disrupted, and the victim turns into a mere puppet into the hands of her or his trolls. As a consequence, trolling does not aim at testing the boundaries of a relation but rather at confirming the sender's narcissistic illusion of omnipotence, as well as the bonds that tie her or him to a community of trolls.

The fact that trolling is both provocation that is oblivious to its topic and jest that is opaque to its receiver entails two important further pragmatic ingredients of this communicative practice: anonymity and choral nature.

4. Trolling *versus* defensive anonymity.
As regards anonymity, trolling would be impossible if its victim knew her or his troll perfectly well. Elaborate jokes are viable among friends, and yet they must, at a certain stage, end up with revelation of what they are, that is, jokes. The longer is the joke, the higher is the risk that testing the limits of an amiable relation will, in the end, jeopardize the relation itself. Long and complicated jokes are possible, as a consequence, only among good friends and not at all among strangers. The reason is simple: an exceeding amount of communicative energy and action will be needed, after poking fun at a stranger for a long time, in order to 'close' the jest and return to the a non-ironic communicative framework. *Trolling, instead, knows no end*. Its aesthetic pleasure exactly derives from the fact that in no moment its victim realizes or expresses a realization that the conversational exchange in which he or she is immersed is actually a joke, a verbal game from which one can exit at any moment.

From this point of view, as we shall see even better later when dealing with the choral dimension of trolling, this practice is a sadistic one, meaning that it produces aesthetic pleasure by debasing the counterpart of conversation to the level of emotional puppet; it is, however, a sadistic practice in which no keyword is given to the victim so as to end the game. The victim, instead, must ignore the ironic frame in which he or she is made fun of and, as a consequence, must not be able to determine that the conversional counterpart is joking. In elaborate jokes among friends, sooner or later the moment of disclosure always arrives. Even before its arrival, however, the victim of the joke cannot completely believe that her or his friend is acting and speaking in a way that is in such a contrast with the customary one. To give an example: in the wonderful French comedy *Le Prénom* (Alexandre de La Patellière and Matthieu Delaporte 2012; in English: *What's in a Name?*), Vincent, a real estate agent, jokingly reveals to two of his closest friends, Claude and Pierre, that he, Vincent, is going to name his first son "Adolph". The friends are shocked at the revelation, and yet they cannot completely believe that what they are hearing is true. When the joke is protracted for too long, then, catastrophic consequences are triggered in the relation among the three men and in those around them, exactly because the conversational face that the main character has displayed to his friends is not compatible at all with the story of their mutual acquaintance. A joke that jeopardizes a relation, either because it overly challenges its boundaries or because it is extended for an exceeding amount of time, is a bad joke. Its conversational and social result is disruptive. On the contrary, *trolling in which the victim does not realize that he or she is being trolled is a perfect one*, since it can continue endlessly, at mounting levels of emotional tension, each being the source of the troll's equally increasing pleasure. For a troll, there is nothing better that witnessing how a perfect stranger, embodied by her or his social network avatar, enrages more and more over what is being said, falling into a spiral of increasingly violent arguments and, eventually, insults or even threats.

The question remains to determine whether increased possibilities of anonymity have begotten trolling, or whether trolling has begotten increased need for anonymity. As it was pointed out earlier, trolling requires a higher degree of anonymity than a usual ironic conversation would. The discursive modality of trolling, however, is not only the cause but also the effect of enhanced anonymity in digital communication and social networks. Such anonymity must not necessarily been actively sought for. There is, indeed, a more diffused and perhaps even more pernicious form of anonymity, which simply stems from the fact that, in

the digital semiosphere, interacting with a huge amount of complete strangers is more and more frequent, when it is not the rule. In digital communication and especially in social networks, people feel invisible and anonymous not only because they act under disguise but also because they feel part of a multitude in which their individual responsibility of speakers disappears. They are irresponsible in the sense that they do not have to respond anymore to anyone for what they write and say. From this point of view, digital communicative arenas have often brought about the same terrifying ethical effect that spatial distance usually implies: human beings tend not to care about other human beings that they perceive as spatially and, therefore, emotionally far from them; moreover, they also tend to develop sadistic or even violent attitudes when this distance is perceived as asymmetric. Looking at other human beings from the top of a skyscraper or on the screen of a military drone, one feels no particular negative empathy at the thought of annihilating them, as though they were small noxious insects.

In many circumstances, digital communication and social networks have resulted in the introduction of this unethical consequences of spatial distance in conversational environments in which, on the contrary, all gives participants the impression that they are closely connected, all familiar to each other, and all sharing the same proximity. The combination of ethical distance and virtual closeness is explosive: in such conditions, many human beings develop sadistically violent attitudes toward their digital conversation partners. Trolling is the epitome of it: I talk to you and engage in conversation with you, yet what I have in mind is not to exchange ideas, emotions, and plans of actions with you but to rejoice at my capacity for pushing your buttons and provoking your rage, ad libitum.

Anonymity is necessary in repressive societies; it allows members of persecuted minorities to express their thoughts and seek to overthrow the regime by acquiring increasing consensus and power. *In non-repressive societies, however, anonymity is not needed in order to shelter oppressed voices but in order to oppress unsheltered voices*. It is not a rhetorical instrument in the hands of the victims of power but rather a rhetorical instrument in their torturers' hands. It is like the hood on the head of the executioner. *Trolling is, in a way, verbal torture*, because what it aims at is not to elicit such or such piece of information from a tormented body/soul but to give pleasure through the spectacle of its useless pain.

5. Trolling *versus* public discourse.

That is the reason for which the choral dimension of trolling should not be overlooked. Like torture, trolling never is only a matter between a torturer and a tortured one. In the terms of Greimassian semiotics, one could say that both torture and trolling always imply an actant observer, that is, an instance that beholds the sadistic game and draws pleasure from it. To a certain extent, that is true of a joke as well: saying something in jest to a friend requires not only a sender of the humorous message and a receiver of it but also a third actant, whose role is to witness the joke and somehow also sanction its discursive appropriateness. That does not mean that a conversation actor must physically observe the scene of irony. In most cases, indeed, the one who jokes will simultaneously be the joke's witness, somehow rejoicing in anticipation at the effect of surprise and hilarity, as well as relief, that the closure of the joke will result in. Similarly, the scene of trolling also implies some observers, who nevertheless share, in most cases, the anonymity of the troll: the troll does not perform in front of him- or herself or in front of a group of friends; he or she, instead, performs for an audience that, being potentially infinite, and potentially coinciding with all those that can come across the troll's words in the web, ipso facto becomes an anonymous public, to which, again, no specific responsibility is attached. Trolling, thus, entails an anonymous torturer's endless and fruitless provocation for the sake of an anonymous audience, a digital crowd that somehow resembles those that, in the past, would elatedly attend the spectacle of public executions.

6. Trolling *versus* controversy.
Through comparison and contrast with similar discursive practices, some of the main semiotic ingredients of trolling have been singled out: topic-insensitive provocation; time-boundless jest; sadistic hierarchy of sender and receiver; anonymity of both the troll and her or his audience; choral character of the 'actant observer' of trolling; etc. Although all these pragmatic features are closely linked with a sociocultural context (acting as both their cause and their effect) and although they result in semantic effects, they are not, nevertheless, semantic per se. A separate analysis, therefore, must be developed as regards the semantics of trolling, that is, the specific fields of meaning that trolling usually bears on. Suggesting that trolling is insensitive to topic, indeed, does not mean that this discursive practice can unfold in relation to whatever semantic area. In order for trolling to take place, the field of meaning at the center of digital conversation must be a contentious one.

As I have sought to demonstrate elsewhere (Leone 2016), the level of contentiousness of areas of meaning in the semiosphere ultimately

depends on the specific structure of the semiosphere itself. No topic is intrinsically immune to contention and no topic is inherently a contentious one. Abstractly put, in order for trolling to happen, it is sufficient that the semantic area that trolling is about be susceptible to give rise to an axiology and, therefore, to a polarization. As soon as a topic whatsoever entails a potentiality for contrasting opinions, that topic becomes a possible semantic area for the activity of trolling. Comparison and contrast, however, are in order here too. Trolling is not simply controversy, as it was not simply provocation or jest. In Greimassian terms, given a certain field of meaning, trolling parasitically constructs its position, so that it results not only contrary, but also mirror-like contradictory to the opinion that is voiced by the interlocutor.

One of the socially disquieting aspects of trolling, indeed, is that the troll does not have a mind, but builds it in relation to that of the counterpart and victim of trolling; the troll, moreover, does not pursue the objective of expressing a radically different opinion, and convincing the interlocutor and/or the audience of it, but rather seeks to provoke, through a specific choice of arguments, the mounting rage of the conversation partner, for the delight of the sadistic audience of trolling. The troll would like to be utterly outrageous, and often he/she is; however, in order to be effective, the discourse of trolling must also abide by a specific aspectuality. The 'art of trolling', indeed, also implies that its perpetrator does not reveal its nature at the onset, through using some initial outrageous arguments or lines. Trolling in which the victim realizes that he or she is being trolled is not a good one, for it does not give rise to that protracted conversational sadism that is at the core of the aesthetics of trolling. The aspectuality of this discursive practice, therefore, consists in measuring out the outrageousness of arguments, so that initial contradictory semantic positions do not immediately disclose the real nature of the game but entrap the conversation partner in an emotional spiral, in which progressively more and more intolerable arguments are used without giving out, for that reason, the fictitiousness of their pragmatics.

7. Trolling *versus* lying.
Trolling, however, is not characterized only by a specific pragmatics and by a particular semantics; its syntactic logic too contributes to the overall semiotic effect of this discursive genre. So as to enrage the counterpart of a conversation, in fact, choosing and endorsing opposite arguments is necessary but is not sufficient. A close analysis of trolling, indeed, shows that, often, its victims are increasingly outraged not only because of the

arguments that the troll uses but also because of the syntax of the argumentation. In order to achieve its sadistic goal, trolling must be full of non sequitur, repetitions, petitions of principle, arguments *ad personam*, etc., skillfully displaying an array of logical fallacies that constitute a sort of counter-manual of rhetoric. The pragmatics, the semantics, and the syntax of trolling pinpoint the main features of this phenomenon as discursive practice and text-producing communication. Such internal characterization, nevertheless, is not exhaustive per se but must lead to a better understanding of the sociocultural context of trolling, in terms of both its effects and its causes.

7.1. Pain.

As regards the former, which are probably easier to observe and analyze, discrepant opinions have been held about the social consequences of trolling. On the one hand, one might think that, by outrageously testing the limits of conversational tolerance, trolling actually is beneficial, since it exposes the paradoxes, the taboos, and the hypocrisies of present-day digital conversation. From this point of view, trolling might be regarded as a new instance in the series of highly unconventional voices that, from Socrates's gadfly ethics until modern clown aesthetics, have contributed to shake society from its entrenched certainties, favoring, thus, the healthy renewal of its moral energy. A community that is able to react against trolling, indeed, becomes a stronger community, and one with an accrued capability for discriminating among tolerable and intolerable stances. Just to give an example: it is quite common, in trolling, to defile the memory of violently deceased young people, so as to cause extra pain among the relatives of the victim; that is clearly a sadistic behavior, and a morally unacceptable one in all societies; in all cultures, indeed, showing respect, or at least not showing disrespect, for the death of young and innocent people and the grief of their families is a pillar of shared empathy. By ignoring and tramping this taboo, trolls unintentionally point at the crisis of traditional patterns of empathy in the digital arena, as well as at the hypocrisy of global grief; at the same time, through deprecating trolling and reinstating this taboo, societies renew and reinforce their moral boundaries, redefining and reinvigorating, thus, the distinction between that which is morally permissible and that which is not.

7.2. Meta-pain.

The most disruptive effect of trolling, however, does not consist in the pain that it causes in such evident cases of conversational sadism: only a troll would send pictures of the mutilated corpse of the victim of an

accident to his/her family. Albeit tragically heinous, such acts, indeed, are not as disruptive as the meta-pain that trolling brings about when its nature of trolling is not as clearly discernible. In more general words, the worst social consequence of trolling is that of making it increasingly hard to single out trolling itself. The possibility of labeling a fragment of discourse as "trolling", indeed, cannot simply depend on the pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic features described above. These are all necessary to define trolling, and trolling systematically features them. Trolling, however, can be fully defined only in terms of intentionality. In other words, only can be defined as "trolling" that provocative, disruptive, and outrageous textual occurrence whose content does not correspond to any of the troll's actual beliefs. That does not mean that trolling is a lie, that is, that its expression is contrary or contradictory in relation to that which the troll actually believes. *That which ultimately defines trolling, indeed, is the unimportance of the relation between that which the troll says in a conversation and that which she or he believes.*

Trolling profoundly disrupts the conversational ethics of the human civilization because it severs expression from content, signifier from signified, communication from intention. That which matters are not the invisible thoughts or emotions that communication signifies but the visible outrage that it prompts. In metaphorical terms, trolling is socially dangerous not because it poisons the water of communication but because it makes it very hard, and increasingly so, to distinguish between drinkable water and undrinkable one, between criticism of mainstream trends and trolling of them. As in the case of conspiracy theories, in that of trolling too, the worst consequence of this sadistic practice of discourse is that of discrediting non-trolling social criticism, which, exactly because of the proliferation of trolling, ends up being difficult to distinguish from it and, therefore, discarded as mere instance of it. As it was pointed out earlier, irony has always been a powerful rhetorical device for the dismantlement of the moral status quo, yet the proliferation of anonymous trolling defuses this device and makes it unavailable in digital arenas, giving rise to the famous law of (Nathan) Poe:[2] in a world of trolls, satire becomes impossible, for it can always be mistaken, and often is, for a non-satirical statement, advocating precisely that which it would intend to ironize about.

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[2] "Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that *someone* won't mistake for the genuine article."

Imagine a world in which, whenever someone says something that we do not like, we cannot actually determine whether she or he is serious or not. Such world, whose realization might not be thus unrealistic and far in the future, would be one in which conversation ceases to be a discursive framework for the creation of a community of interpreters and, therefore, the peaceful resolution of conflicts. That is the reason for which, although it is hard to label such typically digital phenomenon as trolling with categories, such as "right-wing" or "Fascist", which belong to a different historical epoch, it is undeniable that, by systematically encouraging sadistic rejoicing at other people's distress, creation and ridiculing of outsiders, and, above all, a disruption of that conversational arena which would precisely grant participants a non-violent frame for the resolution of conflict, trolling intrinsically is a fascist behavior, in the sense that it thrives on the institution and maintenance of a community whose internal cohesion and aesthetics depends on the painful subjugation of a victim.

8. Conclusions.

The work of the semiotician should be distinguished from that of the sociologist. The former might help the latter by offering an articulate description of the discursive phenomenon of trolling, but then extra-textual information will be required, to the latter, in order to fully understand the effects and, especially, the causes of such disruptive and violent practice. In the present context, only some hypotheses can be ventured, which all stem from the consideration that the pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic features of trolling might actually be a response to a distressful social and existential condition that they seek to compensate for. What pushes a troll to act as such? First of all, trolling might be a particularly spectacular symptom of a more general attitude, which is that which sociologists have already singled out and labeled as the "no syndrome". Today, communities are hard to shape around positive values and projects of sharing and construction; communities more easily take shape around negative projects of opposition to that which is considered "the mainstream" or "the establishment". From this point of view, the appeal of trolling might be seen in its capacity for offering a sense of community, belonging, and entitlement to those who sadistically engage in dismantling the 'moral mainstream'. Given the fact that this 'moral mainstream' becomes more and more narrow in post-modern societies, trolls must resort to increasingly outrageous behaviors in order to define their opposition, to the point that the only way, for them, to generate an existential stance and a community consensus is to openly endorse cruelty. As populism is the revolt of the social outcast against that which he or she deems as the abuse

of the system of political representation, so trolling is the revolt of the moral outcast against the community of mainstream morality, to which the troll feels and rejoice in feeling morally superior or, simply, indifferent.

Why should someone, and presumably a young person, experience aesthetic pleasure in triggering the outrage of an interlocutor through adopting preposterous and yet obnoxious stances? The ultimate answer might sound like follows: trolls feel so utterly impotent in the traditional conversational arena, unable to convince anyone of anything and, worse, unable to be convinced by anyone about anything, that the only source of empowerment they can rely on is that of breaking the machine of conversation itself, exactly like a player who overthrows the chessboard because she or he is unable to escape checkmate or, with an even more appropriate metaphor, like the child who, not being able to understand how a toy works, breaks it into pieces.

Unfortunately, the toy that an increasing number of trolls are disquietingly seeking to destroy is not a minor one: it is public discourse.

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