# Making poetry babies in an online world Laurence Scherz

If there were a meeting akin to alcoholics anonymous for the overconsumption of memes, I would be the first to lift my butt off the chair and say: 'Hi, my name is Laurence and I'm a meme-oholic.' Not only do I attempt to translate these intrinsically virtual copies of copies and edits of edits into an offline conversation on a regular basis—with lots of flailing of my limbs when it's a particularly good one and I’m in complete disbelief that the other person has not, in fact, seen it yet. I even get praise from strangers for my extensive collection and will not hesitate to try and 'cure' someone's bad mood with 'the funniest they've ever seen'.

My dreams involve meme battles in an offline arena where dancing is allowed, and only the best meme-naisseur survives. Suffice to say, I love memes. But I also adore books, and the bizarre, enticing world they have to offer, a clean-cut escape from reality. This is the account of how the two met, in my living room, and even shook hands.

## Magic Box that Makes Merry

Imagine if you will: an avid reader, writer, and owner of an impressive library, sits on their couch. Having succumbed to the allure of Netflix they passively consume images and sounds. The unread books stare at them from across the room, wondering ‘why not them? Why not now?’. Perhaps to conquer their guilt, or out of sheer boredom—because albeit relaxing, the land of TV shows can be quite boring, especially while re-watching—the watcher starts to note down remarkable or funny one-liners that pass by.

This viewer is, of course, me. The lists on my phone grew longer, and longer, and *longer*. I named the scribbles 'Netflix Poetry' and eventually stopped numbering the entries—that's how vast the collection had become. At some point, I started doing the same with memes. The collection of memes on my Insta account started pouring into my notes: fragmented, incorrect sentences, jokes devoid of their punchlines, words whose origin I couldn't pinpoint even if my life depended on it.

The semiotics of these memes were all out of whack. Like shipwrecked passengers, they sat alone on an island with no context, no visuals to guide them. My phone had become a harbor for lost, incomplete memes without context, not yet appointed a new destination. The only companion they had were the Netflix one-liners, brutally taken from their home country in a similar manner.

The nature of these digital-native words and scrap sentences had already altered slightly, but they weren't *something new* quite yet. It was only after the invitation came to apply a process involving chance on recycled texts, resulting in a Dada-istic poem as per artist Tristan Tzara's manual of 1920, that these pieces found their forever home. Dada poems were meant to reflect ‘a world where words should not be believed',[[1]](#footnote-1) and seeing as 'though[t] is produced in the mouth',[[2]](#footnote-2) all meaning is valid within these non-sensical poems.

## A Big, Postmodern world

Of course, members of Dada didn't have anything like the internet. It seemed strange to exchange their analogue paper and scissors for the quick flip of the ctrl paste buttons, but strangely—and wonderfully— it worked. What came out felt more at one with the internet's scatterbrain than a classical (let's say, linear and analogue) poem, raising the question of how to approach this kind of electronic poetry. Researcher Giovanna Di Rosario argues that 'there is a need of a new definition of textuality in addition to the previous definitions proposed by different disciplines or theories such as philology, logic, semiotics, structuralism and post-structuralism'.[[3]](#footnote-3) She goes on to say that none of these previous approaches 'have expressed the perspective of the text as a material machine, a device capable of manipulating itself as well as the reader'.[[4]](#footnote-4)

My sweet, no-longer-forlorn digital babies, manipulating both themselves and the reader: I couldn't be more proud. A cut and paste birth it was, a random combination yet not random at all. Marcus Boon describes cut and paste in the world of computers as 'a dominant metaphor; more broadly, fragmentation, pastiche, and juxtaposition are characteristic of postmodernity.'[[5]](#footnote-5) And of course, it's true, online we are all big, big girls in a big, big postmodern world. Something else happened right before my screen-gazing eyes: the pieces not only aligned with one another, but became a new, shiny thing, one that I didn't seem to have full control over. Boon, again, tells us how 'montage implies that a whole has been broken, even if it is then reassembled into a new whole. Something is broken in a montage, and in most successful montages you can still see the break, which is often what makes them funny'.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Because, joyfully, loudly, happily, yes—these electronically made poetry children were hilarious as fuck. But why? And what had travelled through them from the memes, and what had stayed behind?

## Doing Me a Syntax

One day, a friend of mine proclaimed that, to him, 'everyone is a doggo now'. My cat: a fluffy doggo. Our mutual friend: an amazing doggo. The tree across from my apartment still standing there after all the others had been cut: a lonely doggo. Funnily enough, this offline use of digital native language was to me, in all its absurdity, the most natural to boot, exactly *because* it owned up to its fragmentation, its out of place-ness. Boon: 'A fragment is an unstable unit—but we, too, are “unstable units”; and our longing for wholeness, our need to populate our equally unstable environment with wholes, expresses our discomfort with that moving, shifting chaos'.[[7]](#footnote-7) And that explains quite possibly my infatuation with the doggos not only roaming the internet, but the whole offline world, surrounding me with their goofy eyes and human faces.

What had I brought together then, into a brave new world of literature? In *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*, linguist Gretchen McCulloch points out that 'memes are a kind of internet folklore, drawing parallels to dirty limericks, ghost stories and pranks'.[[8]](#footnote-8) On top of that, McCulloch sees them as (wonderfully) weird and containing a playful language that invites participation. While making my poetry kin I observed how the language of the memes, strangely similar to that of poems—slightly elusive, with points of reference known mostly to initiates—felt right at home in the melodic cadence of verses I squeezed them into.

What else is a well-written, or performed, poem other than an invitation into a world, one where the reader finishes the writer's thoughts, by bringing their own little bag of references along with them, by formulating new images with the tools—the words—provided for them? With this, the words by academic Scott H. Church ring very true: 'Remix *requires* the participation of the user to alter the original cultural artifact.'[[9]](#footnote-9) All language is remixed, perhaps, and thus all poets are DJs.

## I Worked Out in My Mind

## The joke or 'clue' of a meme is very often—yet not always—a punchline that is accomplished with visual aid. Depriving the reader of this visual information when dragging the meme language into fiction, into these assembled poems, sometimes proved effective. An additional weirdness entered the scene, or, the joke was still understood and shone brightly in its new-found appearance. But sometimes the transposition missed the mark completely.

Cutting up these jokes laid them bare in a way that was quite surprising, almost reminiscent of the American author William Burroughs' cut-up method from the 1960s. Burrough’s method aimed to 'expose the texts’ true, deeper meanings',[[10]](#footnote-10) an action 'seen as undermining authority, as breaking down the control system'.[[11]](#footnote-11)

But I certainly do not wish to compare myself to Burroughs. I merely want to tell you about the process of weed picking after the chance process had been done. Which darlings to keep, and which ones to throw away in the river? These choices felt almost arbitrary. For I do not know what my reader knows, how meme-savvy they are, which remixed jokes they will effortlessly grasp and which ones they won't. In this, I only have my own framework to hold onto. But to choose is also to exclude, for as McCulloch says, 'laughing at a meme is staking a claim to being an insider'.[[12]](#footnote-12) As a writer, I am walking blindly, hoping my reader owns somewhat the same cultural references as I do, or if not, can estimate this perspective—something that is more likely, of course, seeing the publication my poetry children find themselves in.

Another beautiful thought regarding the humor of memes comes, again, from Boon: 'Puns are funny because they reveal, at the level of the unit of semantic meaning “itself,” the possibility of radical disjunctures and breaks. They show that a word is an unstable montage of meanings'.[[13]](#footnote-13) A broken world filled with endless words and meanings, light seeping into the cracks while jokes appear on its surface: sounds about right. At least *that* part of the memes travelled through and entered the gates of poetry.

## Lean Mean Meme Machine

## The term *meme* originates from the ancient Greek word *mīmēma*, meaning 'something that is imitated'.[[14]](#footnote-14) There’s a meme in my catalogue for this too: 'We get it, poets, things are *like* other things.'

## Life imitates life, poetry imitates life imitating life, metaphors and parables are flying around in an intense Droste effect that makes your head spin. Almost always signifying something outside themselves, memes are akin to a poet looking out of their window and describing the world through comparisons, referenced symbolism and insider jokes (sometimes only referring to the poem they are in). Is this poet, writing their new-found hybrids with all the pastiche, montage and remix they posses, not just a Marcel Duchamp, casually plucking ready-mades from the web and putting them on a literary pedestal?

## Avant-garde works such as Duchamp's and, naturally, the Dada artists’, had 'constantly been built around a critique of notions of originality, identity, and property'.[[15]](#footnote-15) This might explain my simmering intuition that intentional vagueness was needed around which lines of my poems were quotes from the internet, and which were by my own hand. Surely, a hundred years later you would think notions of authorship and originality had evolved enough to make me care less—but alas. Perhaps the contemporary poet who's using recycled digital texts is not a Dada artist after all. Maybe, as I've joked unwisely, a DJ? Or something else altogether?

In a *New Yorker* article titled ‘The Writer as Meme Machine’, poet and critic Kenneth Goldsmith sees poetry slipping out the backdoor, running towards the internet and finding its place there.[[16]](#footnote-16) A virtual space where an even more experimental form of (post)modernism is possible, a new era for recycling, appropriating, retooling, decoding, and much more—once again: our big, postmodern world. Casting aside for a minute the death of the author and the disputed nature of postmodern literature, one thing about this article stands out: how Goldsmith sees the writer of nowadays 'as a meme machine, writing works with the intention for them to ripple rapidly across networks only to evaporate just as quickly as they appeared'.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Lonely stones, my poetry babies are; filled with internet slang, they're tossed into the river of poetry, hoping to cause enough ripples. What these ripples look like or entail, I have no idea. But there is, as Boon says, 'power in naming, because naming brings together the heterogeneous energies of various fragments and unifies them in a particular name/form'.[[18]](#footnote-18)

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1. Tzara, 1959, quoted in Giovanna Di Rosario, “Electronic Poetry: Understanding Poetry in the Digital Environment,” (PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä, 2011), 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rosario, “Electronic Poetry,” 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rosario, “Electronic Poetry,” 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rosario, “Electronic Poetry,” 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Boon, *In Praise of Copying,* 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Boon, *In Praise of Copying,* 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (London: Harvill Secker, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Scott H. Church, “All Living Things are DJs: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and RemixCulture” (PhD diss.,: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2013), 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Janneke Adema, “Cut-Up,” in *Keywords in Remix Studies,* eds. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher and xtine burrough (London: Routledge, 2017), 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Adema, “Cut-Up,” 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. McCulloch, *Because Internet.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Boon, *In Praise of Copying*, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Elena Shalevska, 'Internet Memes and their Socio-Linguistic Features,” *European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies* 2, no. 4 (January, 2018): 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Boon, *In Praise of Copying,* 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kenneth Goldsmith, “The Writer as Meme Machine,” *The New* Yorker, October 2013, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-writer-as-meme-machine. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Goldsmith, “The Writer as Meme Machine.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Boon, *In Praise of Copying,* 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)