

Non(sense)-Places

Non-Places in Edward Lear's Limericks¹

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Abstract: Space as the locus of a game (“field”) has been a common metaphor in analysing Victorian nonsense literature: Elizabeth Sewell’s 1952 monograph incorporated it already in its title, The Field of Nonsense, while Susan Stewart’s study, Nonsense (1978), identifies discursive operations of nonsense-making “within a closed field.” However, little has been said about space as a motif (or topos) in the primary texts of nonsense. Although Gillian Beer in her 2016 book Alice in Space treats certain spatial aspects of Lewis Carroll’s Alice books, the spaces of Edward Lear’s limericks are yet to be explored. The paper attempts such an exploration by invoking anthropologist Marc Augé’s term “non-place” (non-lieu) from his 1992 study (first published in English in 1995 with the title Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity). Augé describes a central part of what he calls supermodernity within the context of anthropology, a field apparently far away from my primary concern. Yet it is not difficult to recognise similarities between lonely spots of modern cityscape such as train stations, shopping malls, airplane cabins, or driver’s seats—and the places in Lear’s poems like the snippets of countryside in the limericks or the Great Gromboolian Plain. Augé’s analyses of excess of space (as well as time), especially space perceived in travel, and of places unconcerned with (social) relations, history, or identity, where solitude reigns, ring familiar when reading Lear’s limericks and nonsense songs. By incorporating the main qualities of the non-place, this paper offers an interpretive framework for Lear’s nonsense poetry that can be potentially extended to Victorian nonsense literature in general.

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“And children swarmed to him like settlers. He became a land.”
(W. H. Auden, “Edward Lear”)

The last line of W. H. Auden’s poem about Lear captures the poet as a site for children, his primary intended readers. His identification with a place may appear paradoxical since it was Lear himself, like many of his nonsense creatures, who was always in pursuit of sites—both as a landscape painter and a traveller and travelogue writer. He preferred wide, open landscapes—but what kind of land can it be that he became? And what is the kind of place that his nonsense created? Does nonsense have a landscape?

Space as the locus of a game (“field”) has been a common metaphor in analysing Victorian nonsense literature. In *Field of Nonsense*, one of the first accounts of nonsense literature in English, Elizabeth Sewell sets out to discover the structure of what she regards as Victorian nonsense literature, or simply, “Nonsense.” She finds that this structure is best described with the analogy of game or play. Games indeed appear as a central motif in both Carroll’s and Lear’s most well-known works. Croquet and cards in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and chess in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* recur as structured activities organising the texts to some extent, and Carroll’s frequent language games, like the playful rhymes with place names in Lear’s limericks, all underpin such an interpretation. The latter fall closest to that abstract kind of game that underlies the structure of Nonsense, according to Sewell. She defines it as a game played primarily in the mind, which consists in the manipulation of abstract entities like numbers and words. For Sewell, the conceptual space for this manipulation—language—is the true “field of the Nonsense game” (55). The “field” of this game, however, will not bear many attributes recognisable in physical spaces. After all, “[i]n Nonsense all the world is paper and all the seas are ink” (Sewell 17).

Susan Stewart in her eminent study of nonsense is chiefly concerned with the “‘how’ questions” (vii) of making sense and nonsense as two opposing but complementary strategies of interpreting experience and grasping human existence and social life. She considers nonsense “as an activity by which the world is disorganised and reorganised” (vii) and analyses its different procedures or operations of “transforming common sense into nonsense” (viii). Space features in this context as a conceptual metaphor for these operations to “take place” in. For example, borrowing

Hugh Kenner's term "closed field" regarding how fictions work, Stewart discusses "arrangement and rearrangement within a closed field" (171) as a nonsense operation. Although she observes that nonsense play "involves the construction of another space/time, another domain having its own procedures of interpretation" (63), her essay is not concerned with the physical spaces of nonsense.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle's oft-quoted *Philosophy of Nonsense* does not treat space even as a conceptual metaphor. He is interested mainly in the linguistic intuitions of nonsense literature—the implicit observations about language that would be articulated in the theories of Austin, Searle, and Grice, anticipating "the main aspects of the current philosophical debate, or the discoveries of generative grammar" (2). He finds nonsense to work according to the dialectic of subversion and support or excess and lack. Nonsense, Lecercle claims, is both conservative, "deeply respectful of authority in all its forms: rules of grammar, maxims of conversation and of politeness," and revolutionary at the same time, "joyously" subverting "rules and maxims" (2–3).

Although occasional remarks on characteristic space(s) of nonsense do surface in the critical literature—for example, that escape into imaginative worlds is "a real and significant feature of play" in Lear's poetry (Williams and Bevis 6)—little has been said about space as a motif (or *topos*) in the primary texts of nonsense. Gillian Beer in her 2016 book *Alice in Space* treats certain spatial aspects of Lewis Carroll's Alice books, but the spaces of Edward Lear's poetry are yet to be explored. This paper embarks on such an exploration by analysing Lear's limericks. What is the kind of place that characterises the Learean limerick? A reformulation of this question may help us find an answer. If, according to Lecercle, nonsense literature entails intuitions of twentieth-century language philosophy, then are there any intuitions of space theory that Edward Lear's limericks, as a particular facet of nonsense literature, entail? If so, what can these intuitions tell us about Lear's limericks?

The paper will answer these questions by invoking anthropologist Marc Augé's term "non-place" (*non-lieu*) introduced in his 1992 study, first published in English in 1995 with the title *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. I will argue that Augé's theory of typical contemporary spaces can inform, in retrospect, the interpretation of Lear's limericks the same way as modern theories of language inform our understanding of nonsense literature in general. For this purpose, I will first briefly review Augé's concept and its context to spell out its most important features, and then proceed to analyse some of the limericks to show

how considering the “non-place” can aid our understanding of the spatial aspects of the Learean limerick.

“Non-place” (*non-lieu*), a coinage by French anthropologist Marc Augé, is a space where sense of identity is diminished, providing the self with the illusion of a void: like a passenger staring absent-mindedly at the billboards of a metro station, the individual confronts emptiness of space, time, and reference. Such spaces are “designed and intended for the frictionless passage of a nameless and faceless multitude” (Buchanan, “non-place” 346). Augé defines the non-place in opposition to an “anthropological place,” where identity matters and is symbolised by means of handling space—like in the case of a church, a monument in a town square, or any other hallmark of communal identity and belonging. There, the organisation of space mirrors cultural relations, identities, and histories (Augé 42), whereas non-places are characterised by the absence of such relations. “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Augé 63). As one of his critics observes, non-places, in more concrete terms, “appear to have a material form or geometry that corresponds to the architectures of communication or transport networks” (Merriman 54). Indeed, notes Augé, “[t]he traveller’s space may ... be the archetype of *non-place*” (Augé 70).

A pun in the original complements these definitions. The book’s English translator, John Howe, makes the following remark in a footnote to the text: “The expression *non-lieu* ... is more commonly used in French in the technical juridical sense of ‘no case to answer’ or ‘no grounds for prosecution’: a recognition that the accused is innocent” (Augé 82). This *double entendre* further refines non-places as spaces where the individual (typically a traveller) passes through in permissible anonymity.

The context of Augé’s coinage is the cultural epoch he terms supermodernity (*surmodernité*), whose essence the non-place captures. This is our contemporary age—as experienced in the Western world—after postmodernism (although when the postmodern ended and the supermodern began remains unclear). He defines this epoch within the triangle of three figures of excess, “the essential quality of the supermodern” (Augé 24): excess of space, excess of time, and excess of meaning. These figures complement the concept of the non-place by providing further context to it.

Excess of space encapsulates the experience of burgeoning metropolitan cityscapes, a sense of going even beyond ourselves as humanity explores outer space. In the supermodern, however, we experience not only vast spaces literally or virtually

explored within a short span of time (the “shrinking of the planet”), but also “a universe that is relatively homogenous in its diversity” (26). The author thus captures in spatial terms a globalised, post-industrial cultural state at the centre of our epoch. Excess of time refers to the temporal dimension of the same experience: the shrinking of time, the perception of “history snapping at our heels” (25). A world-wide pandemic and the outbreak of full-fledged warfare on European soil well after the book’s publication illustrate this all too vividly.

The third dimension of the supermodern Augé explores is excess of meaning. The contemporary Western world presents scholars intending to describe it with two problems: first, that of the Western ethnologist as “a privileged informant” (32), an individual who, being the subject of ethnological research, is at the same time a member of the society that is the object of study. Second, individuality has always been of special importance in Western society itself—Augé offers the examples of individual freedoms in politics and “an advertising apparatus” (32) targeting the individual. Therefore, the “individual production of meaning” (30), beyond the partly self-reflective nature of its method, is recognised as one of the most important features of our times. Thus, the “individual reference” or the “individualisation of references” (32) problematises generalisation, or the inductive method central to anthropology.

Peter Merriman offers some insightful criticism regarding Augé’s points. As he argues, “the theoretical arguments in *Non-Places* read as general theoretical statements,” whereas the “generic traveller” making these statements “is the privileged and successful professor, Augé himself,” who “fails to discuss his privileged position as a relatively affluent, white, Western, male anthropologist-traveller” (55). That said, *Non-Places* still seems to articulate a real experience, whatever limitations it may have. Even if not available to all in the same form, solitary travel as a routine, by comparatively advanced technological means that provide leisure to explore the space bubble of the traveller, does entail perceptions to which it is possible for a great multitude to relate. In addition, as Augé himself notes in the book, “it is quite possible that ethnology will be straying from the true path if it replaces its field of study with the study of those who have done fieldwork” (30). Distancing himself from postmodern anthropology, Augé observes its “reductivist method (field to text, text to author)” as being “in fact just a particular expression” (30) of supermodernity’s individualisation of references.

Another point in Augé’s account that has received criticism is the question of originality. In its effort to conceptualise the contemporary, *Non-Places* may seem to be “overstating the novelty of ... experiences of mobility, speed and acceleration” (Merriman 11). The book may display a “lack of historical insight” (Merriman 11) into modernity when associating non-places, their production, and the attitudes toward them, chiefly with late capitalism or “supermodernity,” whereas very similar, if not identical, accounts of the sensation of fast-paced travelling are traceable to at least the nineteenth century with the increasingly wide-spread use of the railway, for example (concerning mobility), or the post office (in communication). In fact, Augé does reflect on this aspect of relative cultural change and novelty when drawing a parallel (albeit in a different context) between the supermodern of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century and cultural phenomena of the nineteenth, noting “[c]hanges of scale, changes of parameter: as in the nineteenth century, we are poised to undertake the study of new civilisations and new cultures” (Augé 29). While this paper does not intend to delimit the applicability of non-places to late or early capitalism, for its own purposes, it is useful to take up this aspect of Augé’s account. The protagonists of Edward Lear’s poetry will be argued to inhabit spaces that, if not the same, do resemble Augé’s non-places.

One of the most well-known group of poems Edward Lear produced is the limericks. Each of these condensed pieces of rigorous form presents a persona with curious habits who is typically described as belonging to a particular place: an old (rarely young) person (sometimes man or lady) of a place (most often denoted with a proper name). Ina Rae Hark offers an exhaustive description of the structural features of Lear’s limericks in her study *Edward Lear* (24–52). She designates “The Old Person of Deal” as “[t]he archetypal Learean limerick” (25) in this regard:

There was an Old Person of Deal,
 Who in walking used only his heel;
 When they said, “Tell us why? —he made no reply;
 That mysterious Old Person of Deal. (Lear 331, Figure 1)²

2 When quoting Lear’s limericks, the paper retains the spelling and capitalisation used in *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*, edited by Viven Noakes. Page numbers refer to this edition. For a discussion of establishing consistency in this regard, see Noakes, “A Note on the Texts” (1–11). The electronic texts, however (with Noakes’s consistent spelling), and the images of Lear’s illustrations, are taken from the ebook editions of *A Book of Nonsense* and *More Nonsense* in Project Gutenberg.

The most obvious point of concern with space in the limerick is the place name in the first line (recurring in the last) that serves as a means of identification for the Old Person. He is implicitly claimed to belong there in some sense, at least coming from that place. However, although “[b]eing identified with a place name implies belonging, fitting in with a habitat or social group,” as Brown observes, “the protagonists of the limericks are presented as peculiar species that each consist of only one member” (168). No matter what place the old person is identified with, he must be one of a kind.

Deal is a port town in Kent, England. Does this matter, though? Does it have any bearing on the person’s qualities in any way or on whatever happens in the poem? We could also ask if having Dover, some nine miles to the south, instead, would change anything in the poem. It seems that the only qualities of Deal that play any role in the limerick are the number of its syllables and the last two sounds in it that provide a rhyme with “heel.” The place name turns out to serve only a verbal function. This stands in contrast to its semantic role as a point of identification; in fact, it does not identify the person in any way, who thus proceeds to his business in the relative anonymity of the passenger in Augé’s non-place. If that is so, then anything rhyming with “heel” would do—as a place, Deal has no significance because it could be any place; it is an empty reference. It has no real concern for identity or relations (nor indeed for history), so, despite all its rich maritime history, in Augé’s sense it is a non-place in Lear’s limerick.

Lear himself took great pleasure in walking tours, and it is with reason that Noakes gave her biography the subtitle *The Life of a Wanderer*: “Lear always enjoyed walking—it was the most certain way of keeping off attacks of epilepsy—and he found the world a happier place when he was outside and on the move” (78). This limerick’s protagonist is reminiscent of his author in this regard, too (aside from an apparent inclination for entertainment). This is another aspect relevant for Augé’s concept of the non-place. The action in which this limerick’s protagonist is involved both actually and habitually is a way of travelling, and the traveller’s space is “the archetype of non-place.” This may account for the emptiness of the picture’s background, but also, coming back to words, for the relative emptiness of reference to the town of Deal. This place name, as that of over a hundred others, seems only to feature in the verses as one item in an itinerary of places. When explaining the concept of the non-place, Augé quotes the French Jesuit scholar Michel de Certeau’s observations in *L’Invention du Quotidien* (1980), about proper names

rendering places as mere itinerary items—converting places proper (Augé’s “anthropological places”) into non-places.³ Place names, in Certeau’s words, “create non-place in the places; they turn them into passages” (qtd. in Augé 69). Augé carries the idea further and expounds:

We could say, conversely, that the act of passing gives a particular status to place names, that the fault lines resulting from the law of the other [Certeau’s term for place names diverting attention from one another in an itinerary], and causing a loss of focus, is the horizon of every journey (accumulation of places, negation of place), and that the movement that “shifts lines” and traverses places is, by definition, creative of itineraries: that is, words and non-places. (69)

This is exactly what happens to Deal and all other proper place names in the rest of the limericks. They become sheer words in a list, through mere mention without any real significance (there is only the rhyme that justifies them), and also owing to a particular sense of travelling, traversing them in glimpses, at a pace hurried by the terse and short verse form that is coupled with the sheer number of the limericks (about a hundred on average per each volume). Hence, the ideal reader of the limericks can be easily seen as one of the “solitary ‘travellers’ of the last [i.e. the nineteenth] century—not professional travellers or scientists, but travellers on impulse or for unexpected reasons—[among whom] we are most likely to find prophetic evocations of spaces in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense” (Augé 70). It seems that the prototype for the limericks features the archetype of the non-place.

The words, writes Viven Noakes, are “inseparable” from the pictures accompanying the verses in Lear’s poetry (57), which is thus both a verbal and a visual form of art. (Lear was also—by his self-definition, primarily—an illustrator and landscape painter.) The picture itself contains another spatial reference. The Old Person, to the right, is holding a walking stick in each hand and is indeed on his heels—walking, as indicated in the second verse. This, as well as his outfit (especially his cap), indicate an exterior scene. In juxtaposition, the other person, to the left, is sitting on a chair, without a head covering, which suggests rather an interior. With no other

3 He also cites the writer François-René de Chateaubriand’s *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* from 1811 later to the same end.

indication of where we are (except perhaps the shadows, which indicate that the light is coming from behind the man on the chair), the scene of chance meeting between the two men may be said to take place in a non-place in a more general sense, too.

The Deal poem seems indeed prototypical in the kind of spatial reference it has in the first line, which identifies both its Old Person and itself as a piece of verse. If it is prototypical, then what is true of it should apply to most of the other limericks as well. Let us see if this is so, and what we can say about the rest.

Together with Deal, 215 limericks were published in Lear's lifetime in one of three different volumes: *A Book of Nonsense* (first published in 1846 with a second, unchanged edition of 1855, both containing 73 limericks), the third, enlarged edition of *A Book of Nonsense* (1861) having 42 additional limericks, and *More Nonsense* (1872) with 100. Noakes mentions the limericks by the ending of the first lines (e.g. "Deal"), which already shows the prominence of this structural part within each piece. Like most of the old persons, most of the limericks they dwell in are identified and recalled by a place. As Ina Rae Hark points out, "[t]he generic designations given the men, ladies, and persons, often linked to their places of origin, constitute their sole appellations; no limerick protagonist bears a proper name (26).

Unique locations appear to be the norm among the limericks with such references. Lear himself must have considered reference to such specific real places specially to his purposes. Only 55 limericks have no reference to any location, and only about 60% of these (32) were published before Lear's death. As Hark observes,

Lear obviously grew fonder of the geographical associations, since the number of characters whose homes are not specified declines to eighteen in the second series. The use of these real place names contributes to the overall nonsensicalness of the limericks by creating a tension between the actual and the impossible. Many events in the poems could not occur outside the boundaries of fantasy, but instead of situating the action in a make-believe world (as he will do in some of the longer poems), Lear sets them in known, if sometimes exotic, places. (27)

However, we should still bear in mind the fact about Deal; namely, that despite its being a real place, the actual reference, however unique, does not seem to matter at all. Vienna does not have anything more to do with tinctures of Senna than Nice

with geese (Lear 360) or Greenwich with garments bordered with spinach (Lear 370). Even such historic spots as Troy (Lear 88, 93), Sparta (Lear 94), or Thermopylae (Lear 330) confuse an educated audience with their apparent refusal to activate a cultural context any more than the mere mention of the name. Anything we may know about the Homeric epics will contribute as much to our appreciation of the Old Person of Troy, taking warm brandy and soy (“with a spoon, by the light of the moon, / In sight of the city of Troy”) as to that of the skill of the Young Lady who triumphed over some large flies that annoyed her. While children, the original audience of Lear’s nonsense, may not be (have been) bothered with it, the interplay of expectations aroused and defeated in more cultivated minds undoubtably adds an extra layer of amusement to these pieces. Part of how this amusement is created is by means of the juxtaposition of a seemingly rich field of reference activated by the place name and the discovery of the complete lack in its place, which again results in the negation of reference, the negative of the place—non-place.

The non-place, as Augé explains, captures the essence of supermodernity, as defined within the network of figures of excess—of space, time, and meaning. If the non-place captures something of the spatial aspect of Lear’s limericks, then so will these figures of excess, in their turn, be refracted in the *topoi* of the poetry. The sheer quantity of (empty) references to the kind of places found so typical in the limericks (214 locations in 269 limericks in total) is one example of excess of space, experienced primarily through their fictional visitation one by one.

Travelling is the archetype of the non-place, and it is one of the most common themes of the limericks as well. As the place names start piling up in his/her mind, the reader is unnoticeably slipping into the traveller’s position as described by Augé. From Coblenz (Lear 71) to Crowle (Lear 369) via Cashmere (Lear 353) would appear to be just the kind of list that Augé’s exemplary traveller Pierre Dupont confronts when leafing through a travel brochure in his plane cabin. Lear’s protagonists travel by curious ways and means, and the Old Person of Deal’s may not be the most surprising. Walking is preferred, too, by the Old Man of Coblenz:

The length of whose legs was immense;
 He went with one prance from Turkey to France,
 That surprising Old Man of Coblenz. (Lear 71, Figure 2)

Born for the walk, this old man is aided by a walking stick similarly “immense” as the length of his legs, but he seems also to need a pair of glasses, perhaps to enjoy the sights better from a surprisingly high perspective as if from a bird’s eye view. That perspective and the pace of his walking (over 2,200 km / 1,400 m of air distance “with one prance”)⁴ are reminiscent of the travellers of supermodernity as described by Augé: “while we use the word ‘space’ to describe the frequentation of *places* that specifically defines the journey, we should still remember that there are spaces in which the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle” (70). This is how “the position of spectator” becomes “the essence of the spectacle” and the places defining a journey become non-places. The Old Man of Coblenz, looking straight ahead in the picture, focusing on the walk rather than the Oriental cityscape diminishing at his right foot, can indeed be considered both a spectator and a spectacle at the same time. His perception of the view through his glasses from high above must be similar to that of Augé’s spectator-traveller.

Similar experiences of traveling recur in other pieces as well, like in “There was an Old Man on a hill”:

Who seldom, if ever, stood still;
 He ran up and down in his Grandmother’s gown,
 Which adorned that Old Man on a hill. (Lear 158, Figure 3)

If not in physical dimensions, this old man shares in Coblenz’s pace and vitality, but also in a penchant for spectacle with the said gown—worn with a hat. Running up and down also implies little care for destinations—being on the move is more important than whatever it is made toward. Such an inclination is even more striking in the decision of the Young Lady of Sweden:

Who went by the slow train to Weedon;
 When they cried, “Weedon Station!” she made no observation,
 But thought she should go back to Sweden. (Lear 89, Figure 4)

It would be in vain to guess at a reason for the lady’s disappointment, but she is certainly taking her time “by the *slow* train” (emphasis added) between an undefined

4 This is the approximate air distance between Paris and Constantinople (today’s Istanbul).

part of the Scandinavian country and a village in Buckinghamshire (or is it Weedon Bec of West Northamptonshire?). Here again, as anywhere else, the rhyming of the first line's place name with the second line's ending establishes a connection that is otherwise left unmotivated, which creates the nonsense so typical of the Learean limerick. Again, the effect is like that produced by the seemingly haphazard list of the magazine Augé's Pierre Dupont is leafing through in the Prologue:

Waiting for take-off, while newspapers were being distributed,
he glanced through the company's in-flight magazine and ran his
finger along the imagined route of the journey: Heraklion, Larnaca,
Beirut, Dhahran, Dubai, Bombay, Bangkok... more than nine
thousand kilometres in the blink of an eye, and a few names that had
cropped up in the news over the years. (Augé 2–3)

Change the city names in Dupont's reading for some in Lear's limericks, and little will be altered in our impression. "Denuded of content, of local colour and richness, ... place names are inchoate words, mere word-sounds"—Brown's contention (181) could well be about the passage just quoted. It happens to treat Lear's limericks, though, and the way Sweden and Weedon are brought together reflects a similar logic as in the list of cities in Augé. If not rhyming (but notice the charm of the occasional alliteration in Dhahran and Dubai and Bombay and Bangkok), the somewhat arbitrarily selected points of a long journey mirror the pairing of Sweden and Weedon. "The limericks furnish few opportunities for sightseeing, little or no sense of place" (Brown 181), and the young lady indeed decides to go back to Sweden with "no observation." Her attitude relativises even the direction of the route: it does not matter whether it is Sweden to Weedon, or Weedon to Sweden—the point seems to be that we are on the move, like in Deal, Coblenz, or in the "Old Man on a hill" piece.

Untypically named but similarly iconic is the Old Man at a Junction:

Whose feelings were wrung with compunction
When they said, "The Train's gone!" he exclaimed, "How forlorn!"
But remained on the rails of the Junction. (Lear 328, Figure 5)

His fate could have been the Young Lady of Sweden's, too, had she decided to make some observation of Weedon and missed her train back. More importantly, this old

man has an unknown destination or departure, and is aptly labelled after the typical non-place where he is: “of a Junction,” that is, a station for more than one train. “How forlorn,” he exclaims, expressive also of the solitude Augé speaks of regarding the individual’s state at non-places, “prophetic evocations” (Augé 70) of which he finds in solitary travellers’ accounts of the nineteenth century. This junction is like the “spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality” (Augé 70), and the Old Man remains on its rails, a non-place within a non-place. This is the ultimate spot of such a space, not even a point, designed rather as a pair of lines serving the continuous movement of the train (as opposed to the buffer); a set of “installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods” (Augé 28). With the Old Man’s nonsensically irrational staying there in limbo, in between two trains diminishing in the distance, the verses and the picture (Fig. 5) both paradoxically capture another aspect of the same state of mind that is expressed elsewhere by Lear through constant movement drifting without an aim. It could also vividly illustrate Augé’s idea of the non-place, if not for the man’s posture and face, expressing his exaggerated feelings “wring with compunction,” an image overdramatised for the limerick’s comic effect.

The quality of the spaces that appear in the limericks adds even more depth to the same figure of excess. Besides a poet, Lear was also a traveller and a professional landscape painter, seeking wide horizons in his travels to reproduce on his canvases. None of the limericks features a place smaller than a village, but these wider horizons are most evident among the less typical limericks that identify their protagonists with locations other than settlements. Aside from whole islands like Crete (Lear 165) and Corsica (Lear 373), limerick people are sometimes associated with rivers ranging from the Dee (Lear 86, 109) to the Rhine (Lear 461) and the Nile (Lear 102). Larger regions like th’ Abruzzi (Lear 79) and Bohemia (Lear 102) also feature in some pieces, but the widest horizons are arguably supplied by the four cardinal directions: the North (Lear 101), the East (Lear 99), the South (Lear 90), and the West (Lear 87, 98). Some anthropological quality typically associated with these locations (especially from a European perspective) does feature in the pictures; for example, the Old Man of Jamaica (Lear 98) is black (as his newly wedded wife finds out to her distress), and the Old Man of the East is clad in Middle Eastern fashion, but what the limerick people do or what happens to them (marrying a Quaker, being killed by the misconduct of their children) is once again unrelated to the location they are identified with.

Such wide horizons seem to be telling of the perspective, both literally and metaphorically, that the limericks represent. This is especially evident in the pictures. One example is that illustrating *The Old Man of Philæ*:

Whose conduct was scroobious and wily;
 He rushed up a Palm when the weather was calm,
 And observed all the ruins of Philæ. (Lear 167, Figure 6)

Philæ refers both to an island in the Nile and to a complex of several ancient temples built upon it, of which Lear painted the Temple of Isis more than once.⁵ *The Temple of Isis, Philæ* (oil on canvas, with the size 13 ½ × 21 ½ in) records it as seen from the north and offers a very similar view as that in the picture for the verses, only without the palm tree and the Old Person. Lear described the place to his sister Ann as “more like a real *fairy island* than anything else I can compare it to” (qtd. in Noakes 124), an impression reflected in the colours he used.

Unlike *Deal*, this limerick has more references to the place mentioned in the first line: both the last line and the picture accompanying the text make a connection with Philæ, and the Old Person’s habit may be seen as reflecting Lear’s own enthusiasm. The judgment over his conduct (“scroobious and wily”), though, still seems nonsensically disconnected and disconnecting from the scene, creating the overall effect common to the rest of the limericks. What sets this piece apart from most of the others is the depiction of scenery in the background at a distance, in open air. Lear and his company camped in the temple, enjoying “a dinner party each evening, with music on the Temple terrace” (Noakes 124) during his first visit to the place in 1854, which means he had close access to his subject, but he chose a more distant view for the painting as well as the verses and the illustration, capturing as much space as possible.

The *Young Lady of Portugal* sets herself up in a similarly elevated position “to examine the sea”—with a telescope, as depicted in the drawing (Fig. 7):

5 Lear did see the temples on their native Philæ Island in 1854 and later, in 1867, but the temple complex was moved to nearby Agilkia Island as part of a UNESCO project in the twentieth century to save them from destruction. Philæ Island was flooded due to the construction of the Aswan Dam and is currently underwater in Lake Nasser.

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There was a Young Lady of Portugal,
Whose ideas were excessively nautical;
She climbed up a tree to examine the sea,
But declared she would never leave Portugal. (Lear 163, Figure 7)

Save for two fish in a somewhat artificial close-up (perhaps signalling water), even more distance is observed in the background than in Philae, a fact emphasised by the lady's need for a device to aid her visual examination. The vastness of space is thus even more pronounced here.

Similar sights of the sea are observed in the background to the Young Lady of Firle (Fig. 9) and the feast of the Old Person of Putney:

Whose food was roast spiders and chutney,
Which he took with his tea, within sight of the sea,
That romantic Old Person of Putney. (Lear 345, Figure 8)

While the Old Person's mild romanticism finds sufficient expression in the sight of the sea, the focus being on his nonsensical food, a surprising dynamism characterises the Young Lady of Firle:

Whose hair was addicted to curl;
It curled up a tree, and all over the sea,
That expansive Young Lady of Firle. (Lear 373, Figure 9)

Now the lady's locks take centre stage, and their curling, first up the tree in the foreground and then "all over the sea," threatens to acquire unforeseeable dimensions. *Pars pro toto*, this "expansive" character is jovially merging into the distance and promises to unite with space.

The ultimate proportions of space are suggested in the view of the Old Man of the Hague:

Whose ideas were excessively vague;
He built a balloon to examine the moon,
That deluded Old Man of the Hague. (Lear 72, Figure 10)

About 400,000 km from the Earth on average, the object of this limerick person's examination (aided again by a telescope) is the farthest away, with empty space completely surrounding him in his self-built vehicle. Augé's observation of the changes of scale regarding our own sense of space in supermodernity may well inform the perception of today's readers in appreciating this piece:

We could start by saying—again somewhat paradoxically—that the excess of space is correlative with the shrinking of the planet: with the distancing from ourselves embodied in the feats of our astronauts and the endless circling of our satellites. In a sense, our first steps in outer space reduce our own space to an infinitesimal point, of which satellite photographs appropriately give us the exact measure. (105–106)

This is not to say that the Old Man's examination of space depicted in this limerick should be taken as a precursor to the cultural impact of space exploration in the 1960s,⁶ nor that the concept of supermodernity could be applied directly to the cultural context of Lear's piece. However, the "*excessively vague*" (emphasis added) ideas of "That deluded Old Man" and their illustration do exhibit, albeit in a playful manner, a sense of excess of space similar to that explored by Augé some 150 years later.

Excess of time is the next figure of excess characteristic of supermodernity and captured in non-places according to Augé. Two aspects of this figure are noticeably present in Lear's limericks: fast pace and history, "desocialised and artificialised" (Augé 59), "transformed into an element of spectacle" (Augé 83). *A Book of Nonsense* contained 73 limericks in its first two editions, and 117 in the third, and *More Nonsense* had 100, with most of them referencing a location. Given the short and strict, homogenising form, reading each takes merely a few seconds, inviting the audience to an exciting journey through a multiplicity of places. Covering such a large number within such short time implies high speed, as suggested also by the spectacular means of travelling already explored (e.g. in Coblenz, on a Hill, or in Sweden).

6 It may be worth noting, however, that the first astronomical photograph, the earliest surviving daguerreotype of the Moon, was taken in 1840 (by a John W. Draper), only a few years before the first edition of *A Book of Nonsense* appeared in 1846.

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Time passing on a grander scale, or history, is made into a spectacle in a few of the limericks that happen to feature locations recognised as historic—mostly from ancient times. There are two characters of Troy (an Old Person and a Young Lady), but the mythical city serves merely as background to the depiction of the strange habits of both.

There was an Old Person of Troy,
Whose drink was warm brandy and soy,
Which he took with a spoon, by the light of the moon,
In sight of the city of Troy. (Lear 88, Figure 11)

The kind of drink the Old Person has and the way he takes it occupies the foreground both visually and verbally, while the mention of the city of Troy, with all the associations it may invoke, remains almost parenthetical, its function being mostly to provide a rhyme with “soy,” an unexpected accessory to brandy. A lesser function, it seems, is the play with the potential allusiveness of the name recognised from history by Lear’s adult audience. History and myth have no place other than mere spectacle.

It has already been explored how Philae, referencing a complex of ancient temples in the upper Nile, refracts ancient Egyptian times by means of capturing the ruins of the Temple of Isis (the illustration might even be seen as capturing the painting Lear made of the island). There the limerick person’s observation of the sight from a palm tree represents the kind of distancing in space that can be interpreted as a metaphor of history being distanced and framed as background, turned into a spectacle. This tendency is taken one step further in the illustration for a Young Person whose history

Was always considered a mystery;
She sate in a ditch, although no one knew which,
And composed a small treatise on history. (Lear 374, Figure 12)

This atypical limerick mysteriously conceals the pseudo-identity usually created by a location of origin for most protagonists. This lack is only reinforced by the fact that even her actual whereabouts are unknown. (The ditch she has chosen in the picture, however, must command quite an impressive view

of the setting—or rising?²—sun behind the sea or a pond.) Her work directly concerns history, but it amounts to only “a small treatise,” and what we can see even of her book is only its upper half. Thus, history in the abstract, together with the relevance of identity in general, merges into the unknown lady’s personal history in the last line, receding completely from view with a possibly setting sun.

The third figure of excess Augé uses to characterise supermodernity and non-places is excess of meaning or “the individualisation of references.” This figure can also be identified in the limericks as a recurring motif. It is present in Lear’s short nonsense pieces in three ways: through the multiplicity of singular locations, the proliferation of meanings in nonsense words, and the theme of mystery or enigma.

First, as mentioned before, very few of the place names in the opening lines are repeated. This creates an atmosphere of excess—not only of space, but of individual places or particular references, too. Secondly, one of the most characteristic feats of nonsense poetry, nonsense words or neologisms, also display the figure of excess. Thanks to Edward Lear, the English language has been enriched with such lexical items as “abruptious” (“An Old Man of Thames Ditton,” 376) “borascible” (“An Old Person of Bangor” 173), “ombliferous” (“A Young Person of Crete” 165), and the often recurring “scroobious” (“An Old Person of Philae” 167; “An Old Man of Cashmere” 353; and “An Old Person of Grange” 359). Although these nonce words do not represent such a strong tendency toward nonsense discourse as in Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky,” they do add a recognisable flavour to Lear’s poetry and nonsense literature in general.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle in his classic study offers a detailed linguistic analysis of literary nonsense. On the level of phonetics, he identifies the kind of linguistic invention most prevalent in nonsense as that conforming to the rules of one’s language (in Lear’s case, English) and labels it with the French word *charabia* as opposed to *lanternois*, “the proliferation of obsessional phonemes” (Lecercle 31) that express personal fixations to be interpreted by psychoanalysis. *Charabia* operates with “‘regularly’ invented words” (Lecercle 31), licit coinages exploiting “the possibilities offered by the phonotactics of English” (Lecercle 33). The neologisms quoted above from Lear’s limericks are examples of this kind of nonsense.⁷ *Charabia*, we learn, prevails in “the published nonsense of the limericks, where the excessive appeal to constraints

7 Interestingly, Lecercle notes that *lanternois* can be traced rather in Lear’s personal letters—one example he offers is “abbiblebongibo” (qtd. in Lecercle 32), coming from a letter to Evelyn Baring, one of Lear’s friends.

at all levels precludes the use of imaginary language” (Lecerclé 35). On the morphological level, too, nonsense is found to prefer regular word formation techniques—nonsense words can be suffixed or suggest a well-formed variant of a (non-existent) stem, like “outgrabe” in “Jabberwocky,” which is instinctively taken to be the past tense of “outgribe” (whatever that may mean). Nonsense, Lecerclé explains, “does not invent in a vacuum, but by imitating and exploiting rules” (40).

Indeed, the coinages in Lear’s limericks never break the rules of English, and their endings “-ible” (in “borascible”) and “-ous” (in “abruptious,” “ombliferous,” and “scroobious”) identify them as adjectives. The fact that they are not follows from their meaning—the lack, or, rather, the proliferation of their meaning. This is more evident when they are read in their proper contexts. “Borascible” is the word used to characterise the Old Man of Bangor,

Whose face was distorted with anger;
He tore off his boots, and subsisted on roots,
That borascible Person of Bangor. (Lear 173, Figure 13)

Apparently uncontrollable aggression, directed primarily toward footwear, and an appetite for uncooked vegetables suggest a lowness and rawness of character that is expressed in the well-formed but unprecedented “borascible.” It reminds the reader/listener of “irascible” with an initial /b/ sound added for alliteration with “Bangor.” Formal linguistic rules are duly respected, and it is formal properties, too, that seem to necessitate the coinage itself for linguistic euphony. However, “borascible” is not “irascible” in disguise: it is a different word, but one whose meaning, unlike that of “irascible,” is unclear. Unlike Carroll’s neologisms that operate by “simply hybridising a pair of existing words,” “Lear’s more capacious portmanteau words invoke morphemes that chime with broader experiences of language use, whether they be conventional, onomatopoeic, or arbitrary and accidental” (Brown 180).

Humpty Dumpty might boast to explain it like the “hard words” (Carroll 225) in “Jabberwocky,” but we perceive that poem to be more propitious without the explanations. There are four whole chapters between the poem’s first occurrence in Chapter 1 of *Through the Looking-Glass* and Alice’s meeting Humpty in Chapter 6, which effectively separates its first, untainted reading by Alice (and the reader) from the pedantic rereading. The former leaves her with a more

vibrant experience expressed in the exclamation, “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t exactly know what they are!” (Carroll 156). The plural in “ideas” signifies an important aspect of the uncertainty of reference in nonsense words, a creative lack (of definite or clearly definable meanings) that is just as characteristic of Lear’s verbal creations. This plurality is akin to the excess of meaning that the reader perceives in the multiplicity of locations.

According to Lecerclé, Victorian nonsense literature’s most prominent characteristic is the dualism of excess and lack—respecting certain rules of language to the extreme and ignoring some others at the same time. Augé’s three figures of excess defining supermodernity and non-places do not concern language use, but they share a parallel dualism. The non-place, besides the excesses of space, time, and meaning, also relies on the lack of all those features that make an anthropological place (identity, history, relations). Thus, the central paradox of excess and lack characterises both nonsense (à la Lecerclé) and Augé’s non-place. My analysis of the limericks has been intended to demonstrate how this theoretical connection can aid the understanding of nonsense poetry by exploring the kind of spaces that characterise an important facet of Lear’s poetry.

It should be clear that the non-places of supermodernity are not the same as the sites of Victorian nonsense. Augé’s account provides an ethnologist’s conceptualisation of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Western world, and many of the social and technological idiosyncrasies of our times (e.g. the Internet, means of personal mobility, comparatively advanced communications technologies) set them apart from the world that the Victorians inhabited. However, the social and technological circumstances of our post-industrial culture started to take shape precisely in the nineteenth-century industrial age that Lear and his contemporaries occupied. The railway, for example, that features in more than one limerick came to be available to an increasingly wider public—the first locomotive carrying passengers on a public line made its first journey in 1825 in England, about two decades before the first volume of Lear’s limericks appeared.

Lecerclé’s idea about the intuitions of Victorian nonsense literature has opened the possibility of going in the other direction as well. He argued that Carroll’s and Lear’s play with language anticipates certain critical approaches to our primary means of communication (which also explains why so many philosophers of language turn to these authors for examples to demonstrate their points). The present paper has proposed that nonsense’s peculiar handling of space can be seen as carrying

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premonitions of the critical treatment of the sites characterising the contemporary. The excesses of space, time, and meaning in the limericks intuitively foreshadow Augé's figures of excess and thus, his concept of non-places. That, in its turn, tells us more about the spaces of nonsense and lead Lear's modern readers to discover the curious land that, according to Auden, Lear became.

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FIGURES



Figure 1. An Old Person of Deal

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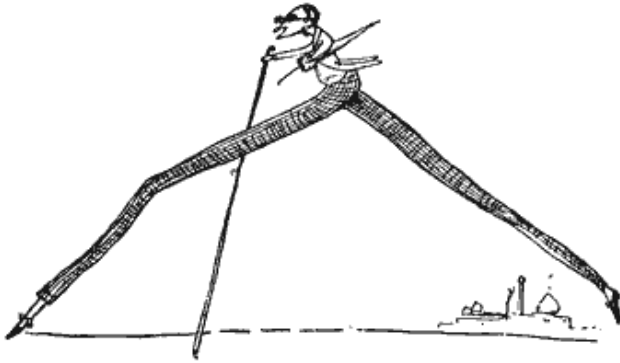


Figure 2. An Old Man of Coblenz

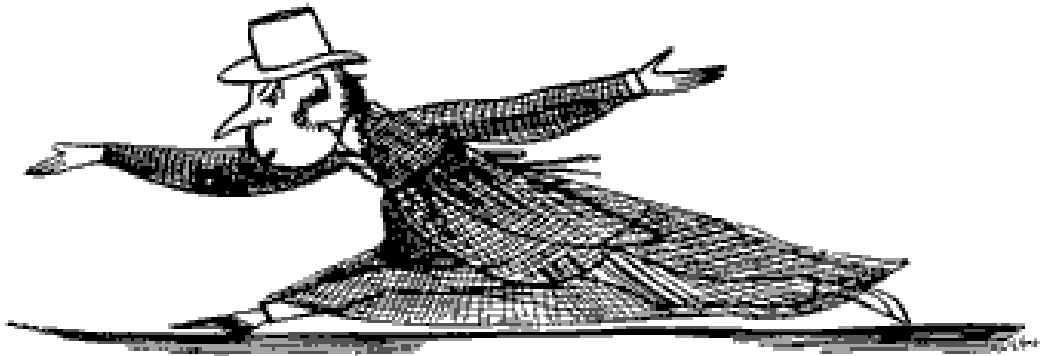


Figure 3. An Old Man on a hill

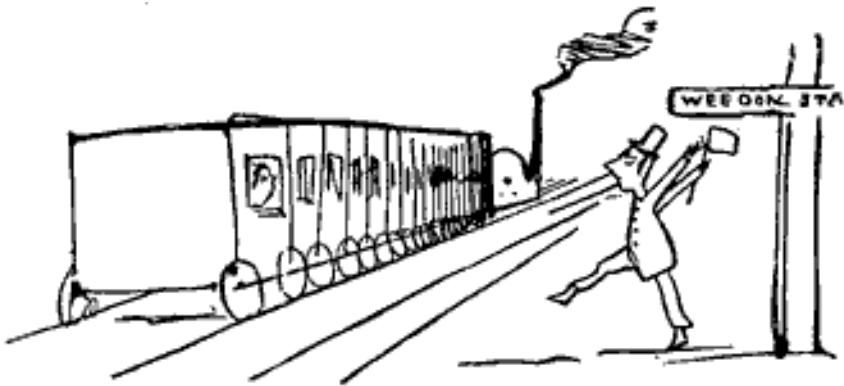


Figure 4. A Young Lady of Sweden



Figure 5. An Old Man at a Junction



Figure 6. An Old Person of Philæ



Figure 7. A Young Lady of Portugal

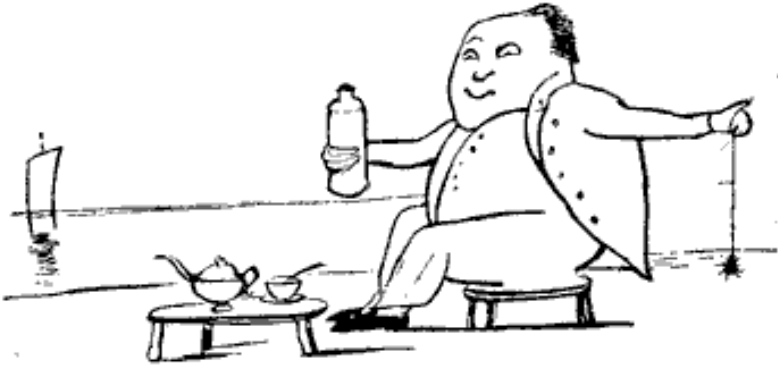


Figure 8. An Old Person of Putney



Figure 9. A Young Lady of Firle



Figure 10. An Old Man of the Hague



Figure 11. An Old Person of Troy

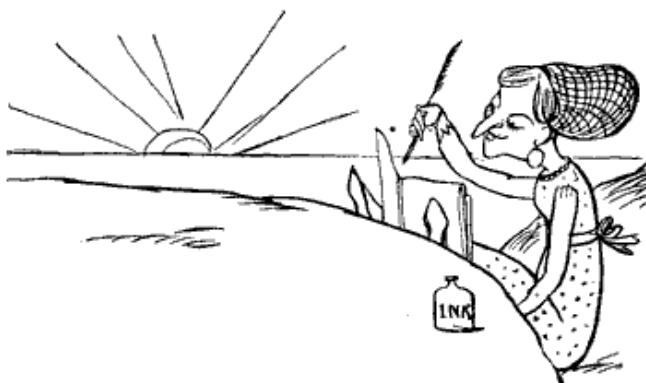


Figure 12. A Young Person whose history



Figure 13. An Old Person of Bangor

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