

A Different Kind of Wildness: Environmental Humor and Cultural Resilience

Author(s): Aaron Sachs

Source: *The Thoreau Society Bulletin*, No. 304 (Winter 2019), pp. 1-6

Published by: The Thoreau Society, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45185982>

Accessed: 06-08-2021 04:01 UTC

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# THOREAU SOCIETY BULLETIN

ISSN 0040-6406

Number 304

Winter 2019

## A Different Kind of Wildness: Environmental Humor and Cultural Resilience

by Aaron Sachs

### Dana S. Brigham Memorial Keynote Address at the 2018 Thoreau Society Annual Gathering

I wish to speak a word for *humor* . . . for a light-hearted politics and comedic scholarship, as contrasted with grim advocacy and writing that is merely *serious*. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of conventional research and mainstream environmentalism: the professor and the critic and the journalist and the independent scholar and the hipster activist and every one of you will take care of that. . . .<sup>1</sup>

But seriously: isn't it strange that there's essentially no such thing as environmental humor? It's almost as much of an oxymoron in our culture as "bipartisan cooperation." Why is it so rare? Some might be tempted to say that environmental seriousness is a recent phenomenon, tied to the seriousness of climate change. But, being a historian, I'm of course tempted to argue that it goes back much further than that. We environmentalists, it seems to me, have been rather dour and sanctimonious whether we were trying to save spotted owls in the early nineteen-nineties or the view of Yosemite Falls from Inspiration Point in the early eighteen-nineties.

Speaking of Yosemite, consider John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club and First Propagandist for the National Parks. An admirable activist, but he was the opposite of funny.

Aldo Leopold, inspiring author of *A Sand County Almanac* and First Prophet of Ecological Restoration? Dead earnest.

Rachel Carson? Perhaps the single most important environmental writer ever? Try to find a single humorous line in *Silent Spring*.

Among environmental icons, it's only our guy, Thoreau himself, who had anything resembling a sense of humor. And even he is remembered mostly as a scold. As Laura Dassow Walls notes in her excellent new biography, "That he was . . . a lively and charismatic presence who filled the room, laughed and danced, sang and teased and wept, should not have to be said. But astonishingly, it does, for some deformation of sensibility has brought Thoreau down to us in ice, chilled into a misanthrope, prickly with spines, isolated as a hermit and a nag."<sup>2</sup>

Many Thoreauvians of course know Thoreau as the goofball that he was—know that reviewers of his writings and lectures spoke of his "delicate satire against the follies of the times" and noted that he was often able to "keep the audience in almost constant mirth," that he even succeeded repeatedly in "bringing down the house by his quaint remarks."<sup>3</sup> I'll come back to a couple of examples of Thoreau's humor. But isn't it striking that the comedic aspect of his work has been so little appreciated or understood among general readers? Even environmentalists who adore Thoreau tend to do so because they see him as earnest, principled, abstemious, thrifty, *serious*.

And that's fine. I'm not arguing against seriousness. But if we truly want to develop an ecological and cultural vision for a tolerable future, as the theme of this year's Annual

Gathering urged us to do—heck, if we just want to survive the daily news cycle in the Trump era—we're also going to need a well-developed sense of humor.

(By the way, I love the fact that the visionary goal of the Annual Gathering was a *tolerable* future. Not a bright, glorious future—this is not the Whitman Society, after all—but just a future that we might be able to cope with, given the inevitable horrors



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we'll be confronting, in part because of factors specific to our time, and in part because the human condition has always been, shall we say, difficult. The source quotation from Thoreau—"What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?"<sup>4</sup>—actually suggests just the kind of smilingly realistic attitude I think we need to cultivate right now.)

I came to this conclusion about humor a few years ago, before the Trump era, for reasons that were both personal and political.

I had always appreciated comedic perspectives, but they were never at the heart of my work. Most of my engagement with Thoreau, and most of my efforts in the realm of environmental research and writing, have focused on unpacking what I hope are useful, relevant cultural traditions.

In my first book, *The Humboldt Current*, I wrote about the history of scientific exploration and the development of a cosmopolitan ecology among a long line of thinkers who were influenced by Alexander von Humboldt. I argued that these particular explorers learned to open themselves to new experiences and ideas on the wild frontiers to which they traveled. They were to some extent agents of empire, but they also trained themselves to see connections everywhere and even to mount a critique of the way in which empire exacerbated both social and environmental exploitation. For each of the ten chapters in that book, I chose two epigraphs, and one of the two was always from Thoreau, because my main characters shared his deep kinship with nature. "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?"<sup>5</sup> That's from chapter 3, and it helped me suggest that there is a long tradition of open-minded groundedness and empathy and humility on which we might draw in our twenty-first century environmental struggles. It was all, of course, very serious.

Then, in my second book, *Arcadian America*, I gave Thoreau the epigraph to the entire tome: "When the leaves fall, the whole earth is a cemetery, pleasant to walk in."<sup>6</sup> Here, I was trying to trace overlapping ideas about nature and death and limitation and integration, and I was trying to raise the hopeful possibility of developing a more reposeful culture. I got very lucky in one of the reviews of that book, written by the wonderful Thoreau scholar Lance Newman and published in the *New England Quarterly*: Newman said that parts of the book "testify directly to the Arcadian tradition's value as a remedy for contemporary American ecosocial disorders."<sup>7</sup> Yes, that was one of my central intentions, and I drew on the Arcadian tradition myself as I tried to make sense of various challenges, and I felt especially hopeful about how Arcadian Americans from the nineteenth century might offer us a way out of our cultural denialism, since they were so constructively engaged with mortality and limits.

But as I was writing *Arcadian America*, my father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and it was deeply painful to see this meticulous intellectual lose his basic identity. And as he declined, the toll on my mother was horrifying, despite the steps my sister and I took to try to ease her burden. And then, shortly after the book was published, my father died. And almost immediately after that it was my mother's turn to develop dementia, and her case quickly became worse than my father's had been.

Perhaps it was in part projection, but during this time, when I turned my attention to environmental politics, I started thinking that for a lot of people the problem was not denialism, but rather the challenge of moving forward beyond your immobilizing despair, once you'd confronted the reality of environmental decline, and climate change, in particular. And that made me even more depressed.

And for only the second time in my life, I went through a period when none of my usual coping strategies seemed to work anymore—when the Arcadian tradition itself seemed suddenly useless—when even my longstanding, reliable relationship with Thoreau could not provide any solace. For my whole adult life, I have soothed my spirit by reading long books and by taking long walks in the woods—both activities that remind me of the wider world and greater purposes, of intellectual and environmental diversity, of the possibilities of creation. But none of that helped anymore. I even became afraid of taking walks, because I so often got overwhelmed by memories of the times my mother's dementia took over, when she became abusive and violent, when the brain damage had progressed so far that I could no longer recognize the gentle, thoughtful, quiet person I had always known.

In the end, the one thing that got me through those years, besides my family and friends, was *comedy*. And,

simultaneously, it was comedy that suddenly gave me a new kind of purchase on climate change.

We talk a lot these days about ecological resilience, about how we need to bolster Nature's defenses, as it were. And I'm sure that's important. But what about *cultural* resilience? In dark times, we need dark comedy. Comedy is a means of bolstering *our* defenses.

Sometimes I would just lie back on my zero-gravity chair—because I also have a chronic back problem—watching stand-up specials and laughing and crying at the same time, and I wound up realizing that only after the relief and release of laughing did I feel strong enough to get anything done. And so in February of 2016, a few months after my mother died, I gave my first talk on environmental humor, to a room full of college students—and, much to my surprise, they got really excited. A few of them came up to me afterwards and asked if I would speak on the same topic to other groups on campus. And several of them wished me well



on the book project I had mentioned in the talk—but the thing was, it was a *fake* book project, really just an elaborate joke rather than something actually on my writing agenda. (I had explained that it was based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, except my book was called *Decline Comedy*, and it had three long chapters, just like Dante, and the first two were called Inferno and Purgatory, but instead of Paradise, my third chapter was going to be called Inferno II: Even Hotter.)

I felt a bit silly about the whole thing. But they could not wait for me to finish that book. And so gradually I started writing it.

And now I've come to believe that environmentalists urgently *need* to deploy humor in the fight against climate change, and I think we can do it in two really significant ways. And I also think that Thoreau can help us.

First, we need to turn up the heat on ourselves. A good dose of devilish, self-directed humor could actually make us much less annoying to other people, which would make our messages that much more likely to have an impact. What's better than comedy at helping to deliver bad news? Honestly, I think it's the only thing that might work at this stage, given that we've already developed a reputation for being absolutely insufferable anti-human moralizers—as suggested, perhaps, by a fake advertising video currently circulating on the internet for a new Prius model that automatically kills its owner in order to reduce his or her carbon footprint to zero. “If you care about the planet *at all*,” says one citizen who has pre-ordered the vehicle, “it's the best car you can get. If your car doesn't kill you, it's like, what's even the point?”<sup>8</sup>

Second, I think we could make use of both gallows humor and satire, which are historically linked in the comedic traditions of oppressed peoples, to help us first gain a little distance from our horrifying reality and then start pointing our fingers at the people most responsible for that reality. If Black folks could joke about slavery on plantations and Jews could joke about the Holocaust in concentration camps, then surely we can joke about climate change while perusing the latest UN reports. Here, we could take a cue from an Australian branch of 350.org, which created a fake video advertisement for a fake coal company that was rolling out a new policy called “F— You!”: “F— You' means we can be passionate about our values, but not act on them,” says the bespectacled, white, male president of the company. A sharply dressed Aryan woman, identified as the firm's CFO, elaborates: “F— You' takes what would be our present-day financial burden away from us and transforms it into a chronic economic, social, cultural, and political crisis for future generations. . . . It ensures solid returns to our shareholders, by killing their grandchildren.”<sup>9</sup>

Now, I realize that some people will feel uncomfortable with these approaches, and I understand your feeling. Some historians and theoreticians of dark comedy think of the genre as inherently fatalistic, or even nihilistic. Sometimes laughing at difficult situations just leaves you feeling even more depressed or immobilized.

But when it comes to climate change, we clearly haven't gotten very far by invoking fear and tragedy. Direct scolding often spurs scorn or shame, which are not particularly mobilizing; and tragedy is inherently depressive, even when it comes with some kind of catharsis. It's also strongly associated with Fate, with inevitability, with the need to accept reality. The comic mode is more unsettling; it also accepts reality, but then it turns to the audience and says, “Seriously? Can you believe this crap?” That can create a somewhat lighter, more determined kind of solidarity.

So why *not* try comedy? Comedy revels in surprises, in new perspectives, in making the world topsy-turvy, carnivalesque. Perhaps we *could* think of comedy as a parallel to Thoreau's wildness, as a tonic, a stimulant, a morale boost, an invitation to return to our senses.

I think I can demonstrate fairly quickly what the result is when you go the tragic route. Consider this list of recent book titles:

- Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*
- Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse*
- The Collapse of Western Civilization*
- Last Hours of Humanity: Warming the World to Extinction*
- Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth About Climate Change*
- Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity*
- High Tide on Main Street: Rising Sea Level and the Coming Coastal Crisis*
- Climate: Code Red*

Good, important books. But all of them utterly serious. And mostly depressing.

Humor, on the other hand, is fluid and flexible. It can be a shield, or a weapon. It can allow you to say the unsayable. It can help you avoid self-righteousness. It can offer distance and perspective. Or a moment of playfulness. Or a shred of hope. Humor can help you laugh to keep from crying. It can help you see that maybe you have a tendency to cry too much, given your level of privilege. . . . It can sometimes drive you to action. Even when it's delivering bad news, it often improves your mood.

For thousands of years, people have been using humor to cope with difficult realities. Lots of dark comedy captures the paradox that such realities—like oppression, for instance—are both facts that we have to live with and also egregious crimes against nature that must be overturned. Doesn't that sound at least a little bit like climate change?

Jews have created an entire culture based on laughing at dire situations. Granted, it feels a lot less innocent to invoke this historical oppression, now that the Jewish State has itself become oppressive. But there is still a usable past here to consider. I grew up watching the 1971 film version of *Fiddler on the Roof* over





and over again—you know, that joyous musical in which Jewish weddings get interrupted by pogroms and ultimately the entire Jewish community gets expelled from their village. And the Jews respond to the edict of expulsion by singing the song “Anatevka,” whose basic message is: we never liked living in this piece-of-crap village anyway. The song is slow and sweet, a eulogy and an elegy both, and yet it also, miraculously, manages to be defiant, by undercutting its tragic theme with comedic asides.

What do you do when you’re suddenly forced to pull up stakes? When you have to improvise? The tragic mode is not particularly good at generating improvisation. But comedy is. Those Jews were going to move on and survive.

There’s even comedy in the Hebrew Bible. When the Jews successfully escaped Egypt, only to be halted by the Red Sea, they felt sure that they would die right there: Pharaoh’s army was bearing down on them. Their response was to shake their fists at the heavens and ask God, “What was the point of helping us flee? Were there not enough gravesites in Egypt?” (That’s not the King James version—I’m paraphrasing—but honestly, check chapter 14 of the Book of Exodus, verses 11 and 12: the sarcasm is palpable.) Remarkably, the Lord could take a joke, and proceeded to part the waters. Dark comedy, far from fatalistic, can in fact be incredibly effectual: it might even give you control over sea levels. That might come in handy.

In the end (or just before the end), gallows humor is a basic human coping strategy. It makes purgatory more bearable for however long we’re in it. But its improvisational mood—that sense that you’re creating the tiniest bit of wiggle room in a hopelessly cramped space—can also help you take aim at the people who are cramping your style—whether you’re talking about God, or the president, or fossil fuel executives, or the whole military industrial complex.

Consider the song “We Will All Go Together,” from the height of the Cold War, by the brilliant Jewish performer Tom Lehrer. It’s a comedic acknowledgment of the mess the world was in, but it also managed to be a protest song, thanks to its critique of the ridiculous logic of Mutually Assured Destruction:<sup>10</sup>

When you attend a funeral  
It is sad to think that sooner o’ I-  
...ater those you love will do the same for you.  
And you may have thought it tragic,  
Not to mention other adjec-

...tives, to think of all the weeping they will do.  
(But don’t you worry.)

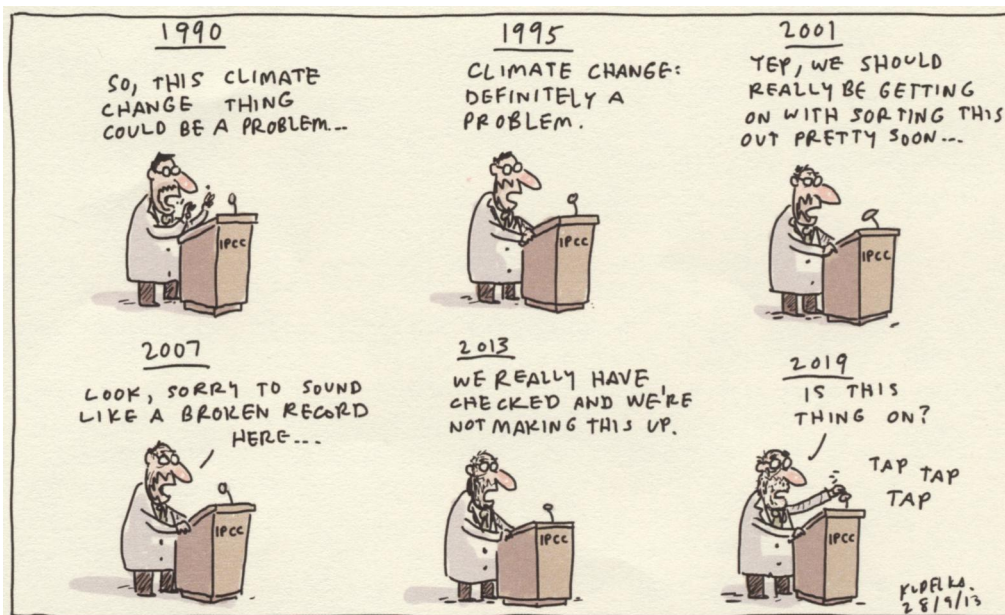
No more ashes, no more sackcloth  
And an armband made of black cloth  
Will someday nevermore adorn a sleeve—  
For if the bomb that drops on you  
Gets your friends and neighbors too,  
There’ll be nobody left behind to grieve!

And we will all go together when we go—  
What a comforting fact that is to know.  
Universal bereavement—an inspiring achievement!  
Yes, we all will go together when we go!

Many people in the twenty-first century are worried about both old and new forms of apocalypse, and more and more of them are realizing that it helps to laugh at our precarity. Maybe you need to shake yourself out of your immobilization, or maybe you feel like shaking your fist at the universe, or maybe your goal is to take down the people who have been profiting from climate change. Comedy can help. Dark environmental humor is still rare, but like sea levels, it’s on the rise.

An acquaintance of mine from the early-1990s environmental scene in Washington, Chip Giller, who grew up right next to Concord, in Lexington, started a green website called Grist, which offers itself as “a beacon in the smog,” delivering “doom and gloom with a sense of humor.” A few years ago, there was a full-length documentary called *Everything’s Cool: A Toxic Comedy about Global Warming*.

And the 2009 film *No Impact Man* succeeds precisely because it’s honest about the comedy that ensues when an environmentalist goes to extremes in his efforts to delay the end of the world: if you take away your wife’s coffee and television, for instance, she might start drawing on the walls of your apartment with



brightly colored magic markers. The whole film is an almost perfect example of self-directed environmental humor.

More recently, some environmentalists, academics, and artists launched an annual Eco-Comedy Film Competition. And just a few months ago, a playwright contacted me to say that he was working on a new show whose title is “Global Warming: A Comedy.” This kind of approach has even received some recent backing from social scientists studying the effectiveness of different communication strategies. When it comes to climate change, many people—millennials, in particular—are more likely

to be activated by humor than by invocations of looming threats. Is that really so surprising?

Consider the recent video entitled “Old People Don’t Care about Climate Change,” posted on the website Funny or Die. It features close-ups of elderly actors and celebrities who stare into the camera, looking grumpy and dismissive, and say, approximately, “Why should I spend my time worrying about climate change? I’ll be dead by then.” And just when you start wondering whether these selfish jerks care about anyone else besides themselves—don’t they at least want their grandchildren to have a future?—Ed Asner acknowledges that he does in fact think about posterity—just not in the way you might expect: “My grandkids are spoiled, anyway,” he says. “They could use a little hardship.” Then Cloris Leachman gets even more sarcastic: “Ooooh, the big bad ocean’s gonna rise up and swallow half of Florida!” At which point Bill Cobbs jumps in: “Good. That takes care of our country’s Florida problem.” When the graphic at the end tells you that YOU need to care about climate change, because senior citizens aren’t going to, you’re in a good enough mood to listen.<sup>11</sup>

So: get out there and start collecting climate change jokes. Print some environmental cartoons in your local newsletter. The next time you give a lecture, make fun of how much of an earnest, righteous, humorless activist you used to be. Visit a third-grade class and do a Tom Lehrer sing-along (my nine-year-old son *loves* dark comedy, as long as it rhymes). Buy one of those new blue hats or t-shirts that say “Make the Planet Cool Again.” Talk to your local anarchist group about organizing a stealth operation to install solar panels at a coal-fired power plant.

Thoreau would surely approve. You know that he would. I started off by invoking his lecture on “Walking, or the Wild,” because I could easily imagine Thoreau speaking those famous opening lines in a stand-up comedy special on HBO. One of the basic tenets of modern stand-up is that you grab your audience members by being playfully mean to them. I teach Thoreau every year, and some of the students always ask how his fellow citizens could have tolerated such a pompous, dismissive, mean-spirited, holier-than-thou New Englander (students from Massachusetts sometimes call him a Masshole). And it’s a great teaching moment for a history course, because I’m able to point out that in fact his fellow citizens not only tolerated this thorn in their side, they repeatedly asked him back to their lecture halls precisely because he knew how to affront them in an endearingly funny way. It’s just harder for us to see the humor now, because so much time has passed, and we’ve suffered that “deformation of sensibility” that Laura Walls so incisively pointed out. We environmentalists have

adopted the sanctimonious side of Thoreau’s persona, and we have almost entirely neglected the comedic side.

Imagine a twenty-first century college student working for MassPirg knocking on Thoreau’s door, to ask if he’ll support the struggle against climate change. Some lines from *Walden* immediately leap to mind. “If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life.” “Probably I should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling to do the good which society demands of me, to save the universe from annihilation.”<sup>12</sup> If you were knocking on Thoreau’s door, wouldn’t you want to come with a couple of your own jokes in your back pocket?

But honestly, when I try to play out this scenario in my mind, I realize that there’s no way to predict what Thoreau would say. His sensibility was too wild. He was as much of a loose cannon as Lenny Bruce or Richard Pryor—which is to say, a very deliberate loose cannon. Maybe he would engage with the college student in a long, deep debate about the social-justice dimensions of climate change. Maybe he would send her off with an injunction to explore her own higher latitudes. Or maybe he would recognize the college student as someone who has actually found a true calling: “I would not stand between any man and his genius; and to him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, Persevere.”<sup>13</sup> Then again, if the season were right, maybe Thoreau would simply invite the college student to drop

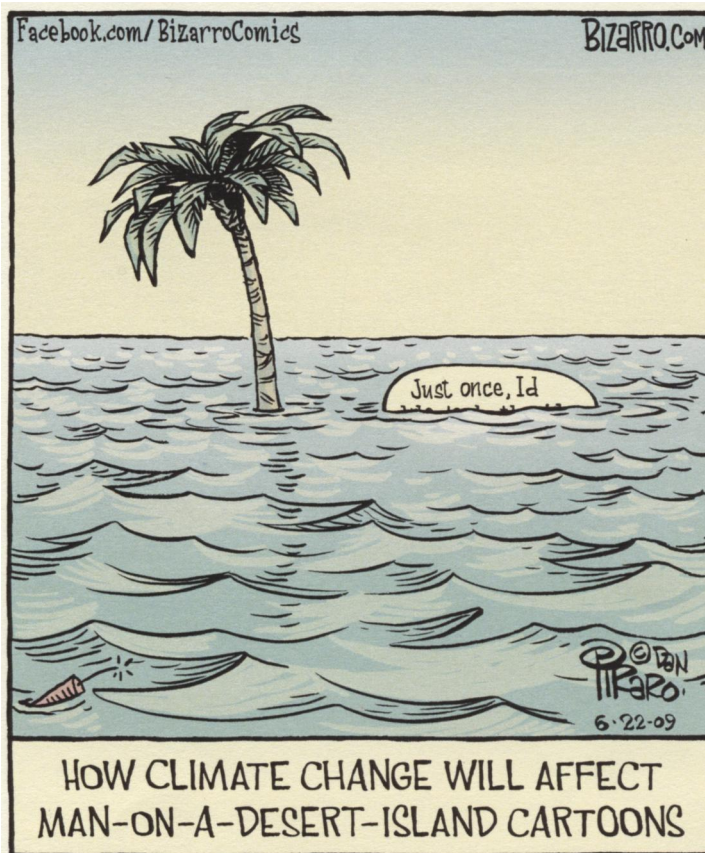
everything and join him on a huckleberrying party.

I don’t know. But my best guess is that his words would be delivered with a smile, and that they would contain, as Thoreau put it, “perpetual suggestions and provocations.”<sup>14</sup> What more could we ask of any writer, or scholar, or activist, or comedian?

**Aaron Sachs** is Professor of History and American Studies at Cornell University. He is the author of *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (Viking, 2006) and *Arcadian America: The Death and Life of an Environmental Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2013).

#### Notes

1. As will be obvious to readers of the *Bulletin*, I’m invoking the opening lines of Thoreau’s lecture “Walking, or the Wild.” See Henry D. Thoreau, *Excursions*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 185.





2. Laura Dassow Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), xix.

3. All three of these quotations are from contemporary reviews quoted in M. Allen Cunningham, *Funny-Ass Thoreau* (Portland, Ore.: Atelier26, 2016), 19. Walls's biography is also quite sensitive to Thoreau's sense of humor. And for a deep study of the linguistic, philological, and etymological side of Thoreau's wit, see Michael West, *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Puns and the Search for the Language of Nature* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000).

4. Henry D. Thoreau, letter to Harrison Blake, May 20, 1860, in F. B. Sanborn, ed., *Writings of Henry David Thoreau, Volume 6, Familiar Letters* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 360.

5. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 138.

6. Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," *Excursions*, 242.

7. Lance Newman, review of *Arcadian America*, *The New England Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (June 2013), 346.

8. The Onion, "New Prius Helps Environment by Killing its Owner," <https://www.theonion.com/new-prius-helps-environment-by-killing-its-owner-1819595261>.

9. Climate Crocks, "Australian Coal Producers Roll Out New Climate Policy," <https://climatecrocks.com/2014/03/07/australian-coal-producers-roll-out-new-climate-policy/>.

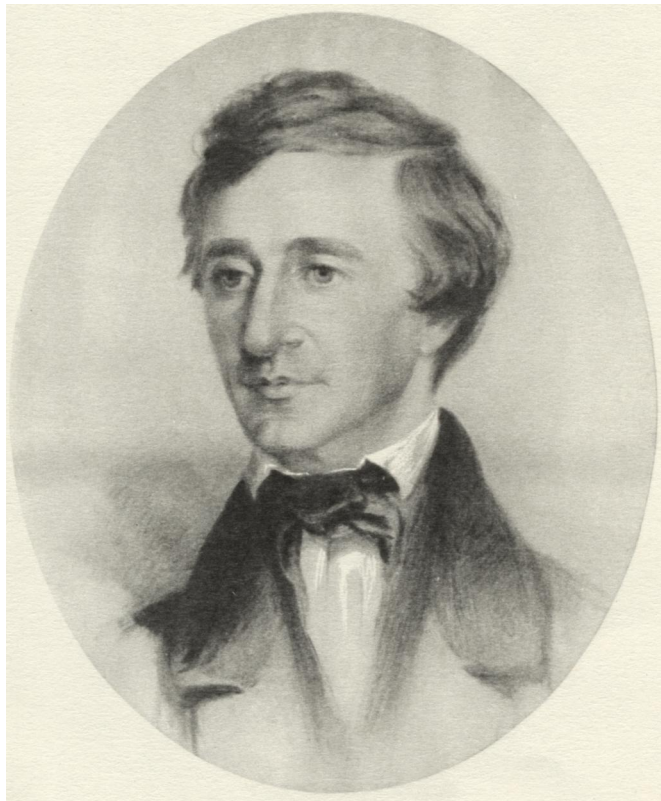
10. "We Will All Go Together When We Go," from Tom Lehrer, *An Evening Wasted with Tom Lehrer*, Lehrer Records, 1959. Tom Lehrer's permission to reprint the lyrics is gratefully acknowledged.

11. Defend Our Future, "Old People Don't Care About Climate Change," *Funny or Die*, <https://www.funnyordie.com/2016/4/21/17725754/old-people-don-t-care-about-climate-change>.

12. Thoreau, *Walden*, 73-74.

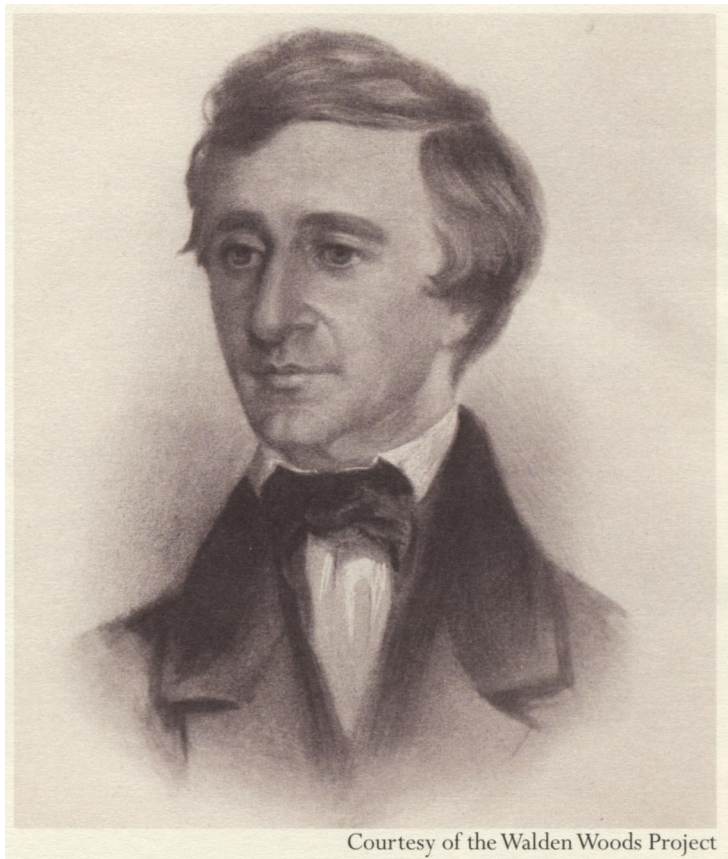
13. *Ibid.*, 73.

14. *Ibid.*, 100.



Courtesy of the Concord Free Public Library

Image A: CFPL's photo of the Rowse portrait.



Courtesy of the Walden Woods Project

Image B: Hérbert Gleason's photo of the Rowse portrait.

## Sizing Up the Rowse Portrait of Thoreau

by James Dawson

The crayon portrait of Thoreau done in 1854 by Samuel Rowse is one of the very few portraits we have of Thoreau done from life and it has been widely reproduced. The original is now in the Concord Free Public Library (CFPL), but it has deteriorated so badly over the decades that Thomas Blanding and Walter Harding wrote in their *Thoreau Iconography* in 1980 that there was virtually nothing left of it.<sup>1</sup>

I learned from Marcia Moss, the former reference librarian, that the CFPL had sent the crayon portrait out to one of the top restorers in the country. This specialist had attempted to stabilize it, but little could be done to bring out the image because it was in such poor condition. Leslie Perrin Wilson of the CFPL's special collections department said that this was done in the 1960s. She also said that CFPL had made a negative of it in the 1950s or 1960s, a print of which hangs on their walls (see image A).

Of other versions of the image that commonly circulate today, the best is undoubtedly the photograph taken by Herbert W. Gleason sometime before 1906 (see image B). This version appeared in Houghton Mifflin's 1906 edition of *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*.

The Rowse portrait was Sophia Thoreau's favorite image of her brother and so she had *carte de visite* copies of it made by Boston photographer J. E. Tilton for distribution to family and friends soon after his death. Tilton also sold them in his gallery