IT was a nice remark of the distinguished French General Moreau during his residence in this country, that the next thing in the world to a shock of cavalry is the English word, WHAT! There exists in it an irresistible abruptness, that frequently puts to flight at once the whole array of thoughts of the foreigner whose nerves are assailed by it. ‘I can stand,’ said he, ‘any thing better than your word, WHAT! It is impossible to reason against it; I seem to have nothing to do, when I hear it, but to submit!’

It certainly is one of those short words of power, one of those words of pistol-shot energy, that characterize our grand tongue and give it originality and force. It is a word to conjure with; and has many a time raised Truth out of the depths of the heart of the double-dealer: it is a word of defence—and not unfrequently has it overturned or repulsed in one utterance the half-formed scheme of some wheedling knave endeavoring to make a confederate, or nefariously to win the heart of a pretty girl. May you and I, dear Editor, never hear from lips we love, in the overwhelming accents of astonishment and of disappointed hope, the English word, WHAT!

The word at the head of my Essay, and which by the way I mean to make the subject of it, is another of these short English words of great strength and pith. This carries however no disfavour with it; no discourtesy; nor does it raise up one association that is otherwise than bland and attractive to the mind: and yet how forcible it is, alike in sound and in effect! Let us listen to it---PUNCH!---To the ear of my Imagination it is altogether irresistible! How impossible to parry it! What a possession it takes of the faculties, and how entirely it seems to get the better of one! Then how intrinsically, how essentially English it is.

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1 Jean Victor Marie Moreau (14 February 1763 – 2 September 1813). An illusrious and successful French general who under Napoleon Bonaparte; he was later banished under pressure from Napoleon and emigrated to the United States.

2 If Moreau did hold such opinions, they are not readily available.
in the all the strength and vigour of the tongue! --PUNCH! Turn the word into the French, and behold how pitiable the effect --ponche! Now it is a curious fact in the Natural History of Liquids, that a similar and not less remarkable result occurs in the noble beverage which this short word is intended to designate! Try over the whole continent of Europe and wheresoever else the English language is not the vernacular, try I say to get PUNCH, and it invariably comes out ponche or something still more despicable! I have essayed it repeatedly and have always found the result the same; and yet I am neither a young, nor an inexperienced, nor, if you will allow me the word, an inextensive traveller!

On the other hand, the moment you recross the channel and ‘set foot upon the sacred soil of Britain’; or come home quietly to our own unassuming United States and lay your hand upon the right ingredients, out of the sound of any foreign language, the mixture succeeds as a matter of course, and at once becomes virtually and essentially, PUNCH--PUNCH proper; PUNCH itself; in short, PUNCH!

Tout Éloge d’un grand home est refermé dans son nom!

The native merits and distinctive propriety of the word being thus established; before I enter into any consideration of the drink itself, I cannot refrain from chiming in with the general feeling of the day on this side of the Atlantic so far as to observe, how incontestably this proves the mutual interest and common origin of ‘the two great nations’; and should the dark day ever arrive, when letters shall be obliterated; printing forgotten; and language lost; it is still consolatory to reflect, that a mutual and inborn affinity between the two last representatives of ‘the MOTHER and DAUGHTER’ might be satisfactorily shown and most agreeably demonstrated by means of two lemons; four tumblers of Croton or filtered spring water; one of double refined loaf sugar well cracked, and one of old Rum!

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3 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the “essentially English” word punch is actually a loanword from Sanskrit. It is a derivative of the form paṇca in that language, meaning literally “five nectars”, so named for the five ingredients that made up the medicament originally: Milk, butter, curd, honey, and molasses (Oxford English Dictionary, “punch”).

4 Quoted from a speech given by John Philpot Curran in his defense of emancipated slave James Somersett during the proceedings of the case Somerset v. Stewart before the English Court of the King’s Bench in 1772. Having set foot on British soil, Somersett was declared free of his master, as chattel slavery was found by Lord Mansfield to be unsupported under common law in England and Wales. These lines would later be quoted extensively by American abolitionists, including Harriet Beecher Stowe in chapter 37 of her 1852 novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

5 “All praise of a great man is closed in his name!”

6 Russia and the United States, quoted from Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1831 text Democracy in America.

7 Refers to the Croton River in New York. The waters of the Croton were brought into New York City via the Croton Aqueduct, a waterway completed in the early 1840’s to meet the growing city’s water needs. This is also supposedly the origin of the so-called ‘Croton Cocktail’, a measure of clean drinking water shaken with ice.

8 Sugar used to be packaged and sold compressed in blocks that required “cracking” or pounding before use.

9 Aged rum, from the Spanish ron viejo or ron añejo.
Gentle Reader! Hast thou carefully dwelt over this list of ingredients? Are earth, air, fire, and water, more dissimilar in their elementary properties than are Lemon, Sugar, Water, and Rum? And has it ever before occurred to thee, to what supernal brightness of original and fortuitous Genius thou must have been indebted for this astonishing combination? Art thou alive to the grandeur of the original conception? Alas! the name of the architect of the Temple of Ephesus might as well at this epoch be sought for as that of the author of this stupendous compound, but the irrefragable word which is universally attempted to be attached to it indicates beyond the shadow of a doubt the land that claims the honour of his birth!

I am writing to thee from the attic of the house in which I have my abode—Canst thou tell me the name of the first artificer who planned the building of a second story? Who first contemplated or imagined STAIRS? Or changed the tent and the cabin into the fabrick of diversified flights? The scheme of this was taken from the invention of the Beaver—But where throughout the animal creation was the instinctive indicator of the man who first conceived the thought of PUNCH?

Newton by the fall of an apple is said to have determined the Theory of Gravitation; how vast and limitless in it's (sic.) application has been the discovery! Yet is the whole but the elucidations of one principle or element of knowledge--while four different and antagonistic elements associate and are made to combine homogeneously in the glorious beverage of PUNCH!

DAVY, in his wonderful invention of the Safety Lamp, went with it completed in his hand from the laboratory to the mine, and found his reasoning true! Throughout the terraqueous globe his achievement is cited as the conquest of abstract Science over Physics. But vain is all abstract reasoning here; all distant experiment; all knowledge of the gases; all study of the powers of repulsion;--here four palpable and repulsive reasons are placed in presence of the chemist and philosopher, and the irresistible argument of all is--PUNCH.

These are hints for reflection to thee, Gentle Reader, in the quiet and solitary concocting and brewing of thy Pitcher, during the two hours that thou shalt diligently pour it from one glass receptacle into the other. When all is finished, and thy star hath proved benignant to thee; and thy beverage shall have become like the harmony that steals away thy heart; gushing from four musical instruments where the sound of neither predominates;--then drink to the memory of the great original Genius who planned and inspired thy joy; and forget not to favour, with a passing thought, the verdant Spirit who would gladly be Thy Companion; and who here subscribes himself, Thy Friend,

JOHN WATERS

10 The classical elements as described by Aristotle in his On Generation and Corruption.
11 One of the seven wonders of the ancient world, more commonly known as the Temple of Artemis.
12 Indisputable.
13 A Davy lamp is a safety lamp designed for use in flammable atmospheres, such as those in mines.
14 An exaggeration for effect. Many old rum drink recipes call for the pouring of the beverage between two containers to froth it.
EDITOR’S NOTE

In an 1847 letter addressed to a “Mrs. F”, Charles Dickens included with his correspondence a recipe for punch. Dickens’ fondness for the drink is reflected in his thorough description of the punch-making procedure, which called for a strong basin, two lemons, brandy, rum, and sugar. Dickens’ recipe—not altogether unlike the abridged one we find in “Grave Thoughts on Punch”—has reentered modern American drinking culture thanks to David Wondrich, cocktail expert and author of the book *Punch: the Delights (and Dangers) of the Flowing Bowl*. In his work, Wondrich revives the rich history of the beverage from colonial America to modern Manhattan, and his 21st century ruminations on the ingredients and ritual of punch drinking forms a nice symmetry with the sentiments expressed by John Waters for the *Knickerbocker*. Waters, it is necessary to mention, is a penname; his real name, gathered from an obituary announcement in a later edition of the *Knickerbocker*, was Henry Cary (Clark, “The Late Henry Cary”).

It would seem, then, that Cary is not alone in his preoccupation with the beverage, even if his words are less than sincere. The antebellum print world was the golden age of literary chicanery, and highly stylized tongue-in-cheek essays such as this one appeared often. Cary was by no means a major contributor to the print world, but he was a regular one; as a successful merchant and President of the Phoenix Bank in New York City, he could submit his writings to the *Knickerbocker* and other publications freely without concern for payment (Barrett, 118-123).

An examination of his other *Knickerbocker* contributions sheds some light on the comedic intent of “Grave Thoughts on Punch.” Most are minor pieces, usually fanciful essays or religious poetry, but their author is not completely without the antebellum flair for wordy mischief: Cary was involved across a number of *Knickerbocker* editions in what is referred to by the *Knickerbocker* editors as “The Chowder Controversy”, in which a “Grave Thoughts”-esque essay on chowder prompted an indignant letter from a Nantucket resident, one “Hzediah Starbuck”, whose reprimand of Cary-as-Waters’ trivial treatment of the subject was reprinted in the August 1840 edition of the *Knickerbocker*.15 A comparison of styles between the letters and the general absurdity of their contents lends strong support to the conclusion that Cary was the author of all; such light-heartedness is at the core of pieces like “Grave Thoughts on Punch”, and indeed of a particular breed of just-for-fun antebellum periodical contributor.

It is worthwhile perhaps to remember that “Grave Thoughts on Punch” was printed in the midst of growing temperance movements in the United States without treating the subject of alcohol even remotely seriously. Furthermore, it was written by a man who wasn’t writing or editing for a living, and who wasn’t paid at all for the contribution of this work. There are some interesting pieces for the clever reader to seize, like hints of language-based nationalism, and a plethora of detailed historical references, but “Grave Thoughts on

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15 Interestingly, in a letter that predates the publishing of *Moby Dick* by eleven years, we find profuse mention of Quakers, chowder, the use of the second person “thee”, “thou” “thy” and “thine”, the surname Starbuck, “Coffin” as a place name, and whaling voyages all lumped together (Starbuck, “Letter to John Waters”).
“Punch” is mostly folly and fluff, but worthwhile in that it is solidly characteristic of folly and fluff as they appeared in nineteenth century American periodical writing.

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University of Arizona Antebellum Magazine Edition Project
April 2015
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