Two “disunionist” movements began in the early 1840s, one on each side of the Atlantic Ocean. In Ireland, the Repeal movement, led by Catholic statesman Daniel O’Connell, demanded an end to the political Union between Ireland and England. Irish nationalists had long blamed the Union for a variety of problems, ranging from the impoverishment of Ireland’s working classes to the subordination of Catholics within the United Kingdom. But a concerted movement for disunion did not peak until 1842 and 1843, when O’Connell’s Loyal National Repeal Association (LNRA) staged numerous “monster meetings” advocating “repeal of the Union.” Meanwhile, in those same years, abolitionists in the United States began advocating repeal of another union—the Union between northern freedom and southern slavery. William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the Boston Liberator, first demanded disunion in 1842. Soon he was joined by a vocal abolitionist minority—including Wendell Phillips, Maria Weston Chapman, Henry Clarke Wright, and Edmund Quincy—who agreed, as Wright told the Liberator, that “we ought to have laid before the slaveholders, long ago, this alternative. You must abolish slavery, or we shall dissolve the Union.”

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1. “The Only Alternative—Dissolution of the Union, or the Abolition of Slavery,” Liberator (Boston), Apr. 29, 1842.
Irish Repeal and Garrisonian disunionism may seem to share little in common. But Garrisonians believed they were analogous. Garrison referred to disunionism as the “great question of a repeal of the Union,” deliberately evoking O’Connell’s movement. In 1842 he proposed that the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) should make “the REPEAL OF THE UNION . . . [its] grand rallying point.” Beginning in May, his editorial masthead demanded “A REPEAL OF THE UNION BETWEEN NORTHERN LIBERTY AND SOUTHERN SLAVERY.” When the AASS made “No Union with Slaveholders” its official slogan in 1844, Garrison praised its decision to “hoist the banner of ‘Repeal.’” Even one critic called disunionism the “doctrine of ‘Repeal.’” But Garrisonian allusions went beyond euphemisms to extended comparisons. Garrison claimed to support “the repeal of the union between England and Ireland . . . on the same ground, and for the same reason” that he supported “the repeal of the union between the North and the South.” In 1843, Quincy wrote in the Liberator that Repeal was “precisely analogous” to abolitionists’ “line of policy.” For Garrisonians, disunionism and Repeal were not only contemporaneous but also comparable.2

Garrisonians drew analogies with Repeal partly because by 1842 they belonged to vibrant transatlantic networks with British abolitionists. In

1840, Garrisonian delegates had attended a “World’s Convention” on antislavery in London, where Americans like Phillips and Garrison met an Irish delegation that included O’Connell, whom Garrison already knew from an earlier 1833 meeting. The Convention strengthened existing ties between Garrisonians and English abolitionists like George Thompson and Elizabeth Pease, while also inaugurating new friendships with Irish abolitionists like Richard D. Webb, James Haughton, and Richard Allen, leaders of Dublin’s Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society who were also involved in other reform movements for temperance and peace. Several Garrisonian delegates traveled to Dublin and lodged with the Hibernians, who corresponded regularly and intimately with Garrisonians after 1840. Letters and newspapers sent by this circle of Irish abolitionists and reformers were often published in the American antislavery press, keeping Garrisonians abreast of British reforms and their potential usefulness to abolitionists.³

In Ireland Garrisonians made many fast friends, but at home they were besieged by critics both inside and outside the antislavery movement. Most American abolitionists believed that calls for disunion were counterproductive, a charge Garrisonians hoped to answer by comparing themselves with Repealers. Garrisonians also believed such analogies might attract Irish Americans to their ranks. In early 1842, while urging disunion for the first time, Garrisonians were publicizing the “Irish Address,” an antislavery petition from O’Connell to the growing number of Irish immigrants to the United States. Abolitionists promoted the Address by citing friendships with Irish reformers and by claiming, as fellow disunionists, to support Repeal. Garrison declared in a letter about the Address that he was “both an Irish Repealer and an American Repealer. I go for the repeal of the union between England and Ireland, and for the repeal of the Union between North and South.”

Garrisonian allusions to Repeal were thus products of the historical intersection of the birth of Irish Repeal, the birth of new transatlantic abolitionist networks, and the birth of Garrisonian disunionism. By narrating these developments together, this article makes three related arguments. First, it challenges the view that Garrisonian disunionists were more concerned with personal purity than with politics. Garrisonians, who rejected voting and third-party organization, are often faulted for mistaking “the avoidance of politics for progress even as political abolitionism eclipsed [their] own movement.” But that view mistakes disunionism for the “avoidance of politics.” Far from ignoring political action, Garrisonians’ disunionism stemmed from close attention to politics—particularly to political debates surrounding slavery that occurred throughout 1842. Garrisonians saw disunionism not as an apolitical strategy, but instead as a political alternative to voting that was partly inspired and made intelligible by extraparliamentary politics abroad. 

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A second argument emphasizes the value of placing antebellum reform within transnational contexts. Historians of antebellum reform are beginning to learn what scholars have already shown of later movements—that “Atlantic crossings” provided activists with foreign models that they appropriated and shaped to their own ends. Garrisonians’ interest in Irish Repeal exemplifies just such antebellum Atlantic exchanges, even as it reveals the limits of transatlantic reform alliances before the Civil War.6

My third argument concerns timing. Because disunionism is often described as a dogmatic idée fixe, historians sometimes imply that its emergence in 1842 was a foregone conclusion once Garrison rejected voting in 1836. Likewise, historians have used Garrison’s writings from the 1850s to illustrate his original reasons for disunionism. Yet viewing disunionism as a static idea does not illuminate why Garrison called for disunion in 1842, rather than earlier or later. And once the timing of Garrison’s decision is emphasized, early disunionism emerges less as a priggish quest for self-purification and more as a calculated response to events unfolding on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1840s.

In May 1842, a few months after Garrison urged the AASS to advocate “disunion,” the antiabolitionist New York Herald published an alarmist editorial. The Herald noted that “until the recent assemblage of the World’s Convention in London, and the pilgrimage of several British abolitionists to this country,” abolitionists had “never dared to come out openly, and propose a REPEAL OF THE UNION.” Anglophobia was typical for the Herald, but here the paper was partially correct. Garrisonian disunionism did emerge only after the World’s Convention, and Gar-

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risonians did compare disunion with Repeal. By referring to a “REPEAL OF THE UNION,” the Herald echoed abolitionists’ own terminology.⁷

“Repeal of the Union” had a double connotation for Garrisonians, particularly in their transatlantic correspondence. Irish abolitionists transposed disunionism, which they learned about in antislavery newspapers regularly received from Boston or Philadelphia, into familiar terms. Richard Allen enjoyed Garrison’s “heart-burning articles on the repeal of the American Union.” Richard Webb praised the Liberator in August 1842 for “the course thou art taking in advocating the Repeal of the Union.” Two months earlier, Webb told Phillips that “I am with Garrison for the Repeal of the Union,” adding that he “admired hugely his last two articles on the American Repale.” Rendering the spelling of “Repeal” in Irish dialect, as contemporary Britons often did, Webb told Phillips that “you must come to repale at last.” Although Webb was rare among Hibernian abolitionists in opposing Irish Repeal, he assured Phillips that “your repeal” is “another matter.” Phillips liked the idea that abolitionists had their own “repale.” In a letter to Elizabeth Pease, he called disunionism “our Repeal,” and two years later, when the AASS officially endorsed disunionism, Edmund Quincy wrote Webb “that we have a repeal question as well as you.”⁸

“American Repale” was partly a jocular pun, but it also bespoke a Garrisonian tendency to compare America’s “repeal question” with Ireland’s. That tendency was encouraged indirectly by Irish abolitionists, who kept Garrisonians informed about Repeal. James Haughton attended LNRA meetings and knew leading Repealers personally, so in 1843, when Phillips wrote Haughton to ask for information about Repeal, Haughton obliged. Webb, while often critical of O’Connell, updated Americans about Repeal activities. Even when Hibernians expressed conflicted feelings about the Repeal movement, their correspondence also shaped Garrisonian perceptions about the scale and significance of Repeal. “A mighty movement is in this land,” Allen told the Liberator. “O’Connell’s popularity, his power, his influence over the

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⁸ “Letter from Richard Allen,” Liberator, July 1, 1842; “This Slaveholding Union,” Liberator, Aug. 5, 1842; Webb to Phillips, [June?] 2, 1842, HL, HU, hMS, Am 1953 (1277/1); Phillips to Elizabeth Pease, June 29, 1842, BPL, Ms. A.1.2.12.2.62; Edmund Quincy to Webb, June 14, 1844, BPL, Mss.960, 1: 6.
people seems but beginning—the gatherings of the masses are, I believe, immense beyond precedent.”

In June 1842, another letter from Allen to New Hampshire abolitionist Nathaniel P. Rogers, who had accompanied Garrison to the World’s Convention and to Dublin, hints at how entangled Irish Repeal and “American Repale” could be in abolitionist letters. Allen reported his delight at reading, in a recent newspaper, “Garrison’s noble outbursts respecting the iniquity of your Union.” Prompted by Garrison’s writings, Allen reflected on Ireland’s own “partnership” with crime, exemplified by recent clashes between police and agitators. But after discussing Irish unrest, Allen returned abruptly to American disunionism. “But to return to the Union—I mean your Union—and Garrison,” he said, “Why the [National] Anti-Slavery Standard [a Garrisonian newspaper] made me a Repealer!” Allen’s identities as Irish reformer and Garrisonian overlapped and reinforced each other.

To understand how disunionism and Repeal became so entangled requires us to revisit the origins of disunionism, which can be dated precisely to early 1842. Although seldom emphasized, there were specific reasons why Garrison chose that moment to urge disunion. Throughout the year, slavery was becoming increasingly politicized and abolitionists became more convinced than ever that the federal government was subservient to a “Slave Power.” In 1842, the Supreme Court ruled in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* that slaveholders could capture fugitives without ob-

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9. Haughton to Phillips, Sept. 10, 1843, HL, HU, bMS, Am 1953 (710); “Letter from Richard Allen,” *Liberator*, July 7, 1843. For another example of an American abolitionist asking an Irish contact for information about Repeal, see Thomas Davis to Webb, June 12, 1843, BPL, Ms.A.1.2.13.33. For other letters commenting on Repeal activities and information, see letters from Allen to Phillips, dated Feb. 3, 1842, May 3, 1842, and June 11, 1842, all in HL, HU, bMS, Am 1953 (201); Haughton to Edward M. Davis, Aug. 16, 1843, HL, HU, bMS, Am 1054 (89). For some of Webb’s many dispatches on Repeal, which mixed harsh criticism with a wealth of reportage and recommendations for further reading on Ireland, see letters from Webb to Phillips, dated Dec. 14, 1842 and [Apr.?] 17, 1843, in HL, HU, bMS, Am 1953 (1277/1); Webb to Chapman, July 3, 1843, BPL, Ms.A.1.2.13.35; letters from Webb to Quincy, dated Aug. 16, 1843, Oct. 16, 1843, and Nov. 2 1843, all in BPL, Ms. 960, 2: 2–9; Webb to Chapman, Nov. 16, 1843, BPL, Ms.A.1.2.13.82.

10. Allen to Nathaniel P. Rogers, June 11, 1842, Haverford College Library, Special Manuscripts Collection 806, Box 1.
struction from states, a ruling whose implications were manifested that fall with the capture of fugitive slave George Latimer in Boston. President John Tyler, a southerner, appeared to palliate slaveholders by supporting Texas annexation. And in Congress, a “gag” on antislavery petitions stymied discussions of slavery.

To many abolitionists, these developments proved the need for a third party. Members of the Liberty Party, founded in 1840, believed that defeating the Slave Power required the election of abolitionists, or at least the use of abolitionist votes to pressure antislavery politicians like John Quincy Adams and Joshua Giddings. But Garrisonians rejected “third party” politics for numerous well-known reasons, including their principled opposition to voting and their increasingly radical view that the Constitution itself was a proslavery document.11

Yet Garrisonians were no less concerned than third-party abolitionists about the drift of national politics in the early 1840s. In his debates with Liberty Party apologists, Garrison repeatedly insisted that by withdrawing from electoral politics he did not give up the hope of influencing policymakers. Garrison endorsed political action “in its broadest sense,” defined as any effort to “influence” voters or elected officials to oppose slavery. But because he rejected the most direct form of political action—voting—he needed a strategic alternative to party formation. Garrisonians needed a strategy that enabled them to influence politicians, without condoning the Constitution or becoming politicians themselves.12

Advocating disunion struck Garrisonians as just such a strategy—a political alternative for abolitionists who rejected third-party organization. By advocating disunion, Garrison and his supporters could consistently refuse to vote and continue their growing assault on the proslavery Constitution. At the same time, they believed disunionist agitation was a sure means of gaining leverage in Congress—a belief seemingly borne


12. See Garrison to Gerrit Smith, Mar. 27, 1840, LWLG, 2:572; Garrison to the Editor of the *Emancipator*, May 31, 1839, LWLG, 2: 468–469; Garrison to Oliver Johnson, Aug. 5, 1839, LWLG, 2: 525; Garrison to Smith, May 8, 1840, LWLG, 2: 598–600.
out by their close attention to debates over the “gag rule” in the winter of 1842.

Although disunionism is often seen as the epitome of Garrisonian indifference to politics, it was first suggested to Garrison by events in Congress. On January 24, 1842, former president John Quincy Adams rose in the House of Representatives to read an antislavery petition from 46 citizens of Haverhill, Massachusetts. Challenging the “gag rule” was nothing new for Adams, who had fought against it since its inception in 1836. But this petition was unprecedented, because instead of focusing narrowly on slavery, it asked Congress to “adopt measures peaceably to dissolve the Union of these states.” Southern Congressmen were enraged. George Hopkins suggested “burn[ing] the petition in the presence of the House,” while fellow Virginian Henry A. Wise advocated the censure of anyone who “offered such a petition to this body.” House business stalled for two weeks until February 7, when Representatives tabled motions for Adams’s censure and refused the Haverhill petition.13

In intervening debates, however, southerners uniformly interpreted disunion as a prospect harmful to slavery. Wise foreshadowed the Herald by seeing in the petition an Anglo–American abolitionist conspiracy. But on January 27, Joseph Underwood of Kentucky explained most clearly why southerners opposed the petition. Once the “bonds of this Union” broke, he said, the Ohio River and Mason and Dixon line would beckon as foreign borders for fugitive slaves, and “slavery was done in Kentucky, Maryland, and a large portion of Virginia.” “The dissolution of the Union,” Underwood concluded, “was the dissolution of slavery.”14

That statement caught the immediate attention of Garrison, who printed excerpts from House debates throughout February and March. In February, at a meeting of the Essex County Anti-Slavery Society, Garrison submitted resolutions for the “dissolution of the Union,” echoing Underwood’s claim that this would dissolve slavery, and on March 11, he excerpted Underwood’s speech in the Liberator, highlighting its “precious confessions” that ending the Union would end slavery. Histo-

rian Ronald G. Walters has noted that although Garrison had always vilified the Union, the Essex resolutions were the first time he called for disunion. Underwood’s speech, by conceding that slavery depended on the Union, triggered a change in Garrison’s rhetoric. There were, of course, already precedents in American politics, stretching back as far as the Constitutional Convention and the Hartford Convention, for raising the prospect of disunion in debates about slavery. But Garrison traced his reasons for urging disunion back to the Haverhill petition, rather than to earlier antecedents. In May, he quoted Underwood as proof that disunion meant abolition, and even as late as 1860, Garrison was paraphrasing Underwood’s argument.15

Garrison’s transatlantic correspondence also emphasized his attention to the Haverhill debates. In 1842, many Garrisonians wrote to British correspondents about the struggle over the “gag rule” in Congress, and Garrison was no exception. “The anti-slavery excitement is daily increasing in this country,” he told Irish abolitionist Charles L. Corkran a month after the Haverhill petition. A crisis was “at hand, which, though it may possibly end in the dissolution of the American Union, will inevitably result in the downfall of our nefarious slave system.” To Webb, Garrison wrote of the “tremendous excitement in Congress, arising from the presentation of a petition for the peaceable dissolution of the American Union,” which was “driving the slaveholding representatives to the wall.”16

15. “Meeting of Essex County A.S. Society,” Liberator, Febr. 25, 1842; “Dissolution of the Union,” Liberator, Mar. 11, 1842; Walters, Antislavery Appeal, 130, 180, n.2; “Repeal of the Union,” Liberator, May 6, 1842; “Speeches at the Annual Meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society,” Liberator, June 1, 1860. See also Garrison to Executive Committee of the AASS, May 9, 1842, LWLG, 3: 71–72; “Repeal of the Union,” Liberator, May 13, 1842; Eleventh Annual Report, presented to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society by its Board of Managers, January 25, 1843 (Boston, MA, 1843), 4–10. On earlier uses of disunionist rhetoric in debates over slavery, see Matthew Mason, Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), which also summarizes antebellum abolitionists’ debts to earlier Federalist attacks on slavery, 228–32.

But if the Haverhill petition sparked Garrison’s new disunionism, it was unclear what disunionism meant. At the least, Garrison believed “disunionists” should withdraw personally from the Union by refusing to vote or seek office. But those views were at least five years old. By “disunion” Garrison now meant more than just not voting, since he adopted Underwood’s argument that disunion would create a haven for fugitive slaves. Advocating personal withdrawal from politics was typical of Garrison; advocating the Union’s dissolution was new.

Even that demand, though, was still not always explicit. Garrisonians sometimes argued that disunion, while a possible outcome of their agitation, was not inevitable. Instead, by demonstrating northern support for disunion, abolitionists could persuade southerners to abolish slavery without disunion. To do this, abolitionists would first convince “the consciences of the people” that slavery depended on the Union. Possessed by that “startling truth,” Garrisonians believed northerners would sign “thousands of petitions” modeled on the Haverhill letter. Such agitation, according to Wright, would “make a right and effectual issue with the South, and say—’Release us from all support of slavery, or we dissolve the Union.’” In short, disunionism would, as Richard Allen wrote from Ireland, “prove a powerful engine with which to agitate the public mind.”

An address issued by the AASS in 1844 delineated this strategy with rare clarity. The AASS called on northerners to “circulate a declaration of DISUNION FROM SLAVEHOLDERS, throughout the country. Hold mass meetings—assemble in conventions.” Their goal would not be an “anarchical movement.” Rather, disunionists had four aims: “first, to create discussion and agitation throughout the North”; “secondly, to convulse the South like an earthquake, and convince her that her only alternative is, to abolish slavery, or be abandoned by that power on which she now relies for safety”; “thirdly, to attack the slave power in its most vulnerable point”; and “fourthly, to exalt the moral sense” of northerners.

The actual dissolution of the Union was conspicuously absent from that list. If the South capitulated to popular pressure and abolished slav-
ery, there would be no need for repeal. In 1844, Philadelphia abolitionist Edward Davis told Wendell Phillips that while he supported disunionism, he did not believe the North and the South actually would form “separate governments.” Rather, thanks to disunionist agitation, “the people may yet come to acknowledge our principles . . . enough to influence the action of those who make & change our laws,” obviating the need for disunion. “Altho’ we cry out ‘dissolution’ because we are involved in the guilt of slave holding,” Davis wrote, “yet I believe our arguments for dissolution will erradicate [sic] the evil of slavery, & then, will not our government be a free one and our compact a just one?” Arguments for disunion would avert disunion.19

To be sure, as Davis noted, Garrison also stressed the North’s complicity in “the guilt of slave holding,” implying that disunion was obligatory regardless of expediency. In one editorial, Garrison urged his readers to “demand the repeal of the Union, or the abolition of slavery—not as a THREAT, but as A MORAL OBLIGATION . . . to clear . . . your souls from blood-guiltiness.” But Garrison’s denial that disunion was a threat was belied by his frequent allusions to Underwood’s fears, and also by the fact that he framed disunionism as a conditional demand for “the repeal of the Union” or “the abolition of slavery.” Because Garrisonians demanded either “Dissolution of the Union, or the Abolition of Slavery,” as Wright put it, their rhetoric usually made disunion one potential outcome of abolitionist agitation, rather than the inevitable one. Garrison’s first editorial on the subject promised to demand disunion “until it be accomplished, or slavery cease to pollute our soil,” implying that if slavery ceased, so would disunionism.20

Garrison made this implication explicit in an 1846 speech given in England, where he was touring for the third time in thirteen years. Garrison explained that disunionism created “consternation” in the South. Southerners “knew right well that the dissolution of the Union was the dissolution of slavery,” Garrison said, borrowing the same phrasing Underwood used in 1842. But “he did not think,” Garrison continued, in remarks later printed in the Liberator, “that it would be necessary to

19. Davis to Phillips, May 27, 1844, HL, HU, bMS Am 1953 (471/1).
dissolve the Union. The Southern States, when they found the abolitionists determined, and that they had no choice but emancipation or dissolution, would say the time had come for the abolition of slavery, and let their slaves go free.” Here Garrison clearly envisioned an ultimatum, and other Garrisonians did the same. The *Tocsin of Liberty*, an Albany paper still allied with Garrison in 1842, claimed not to advocate an “unconditional” repeal of the Union, but if slavery is to be perpetuated in this free republic . . . we should go for *repeal*. But our hope is yet, that slavery will be overcome without so great a sacrifice as such a repeal would be.” Extenuating “buts” were typical of early disunionism and coexisted with moral admonitions to “come out” of sin.21

But few abolitionists rallied to “repeal,” conditional or otherwise. Instead, disunionism deepened Garrison’s alienation from other abolitionists. In 1840, Lewis Tappan and James Birney had led an exodus from the AASS to protest Garrison’s radical views on subjects like “come-outerism”—shorthand for the Perfectionism of utopian John Humphrey Noyes—and “nonresistance”—a radical Christian pacifism that saw all human governments as sinful. Birneyites and Tappanites often blamed Noyes for introducing these ideas to Garrison, who converted to both in 1836 and who was moved by his nonresistance views to reject voting. In 1842, Tappanites and Liberty Party supporters saw disunionism as “come-outerism” by another name—further proof of Noyes’s influence and Garrison’s indifference to politics.

“Come-outerism” and “nonresistance” undoubtedly did prepare the way for “disunionism,” mainly by strengthening Garrison’s self-image as the movement’s radical gadfly. But it was not true, as critics suggested, that those doctrines were logically identical or were all traceable to Noyes. Not all disunionists were Perfectionists, with Wendell Phillips being the most prominent example. And if nonresistance and “come-outerism” entailed disunionism, Garrison might have advocated disunion in 1836, when he first encountered Noyes, instead of six years later, in 1842. But the chronological gap between Garrison’s conversions to nonresistance and disunionism hints at the ideological distance be-

21. “Breakfast to Garrison and Thompson,” *Liberator*, Nov. 27, 1846; “The Union,” *Tocsin of Liberty* (rep.), *Liberator*, May 20, 1842. See also “Disunion Pledge,” *Liberator*, June 27, 1845, which made the usual claim that disunion would “clear our skirts from innocent blood” but at the same time asserted that disunionism was the “most consistent, feasible means of abolishing slavery.”
tween them. As historian Lewis Perry has noted, “only in the minds of . . . critics of Garrisonism were disunionism and nonresistance thought of as synonymous.” Nonresistants attacked *all* human governments as sinful, whereas disunionists indicted one specific government and argued for a more perfect Union.22

Even some of Garrison’s friends regarded disunionism as inconsistent with nonresistance. In June 1842, Philadelphia abolitionist Elizabeth Neall explained to Pease, whom she met at the World’s Convention, that “the Dissolution Question is creating quite a stir among us. Garrison is accused of inconsistency . . . because it is a Political Question.” The chief critic within Garrison’s circle was Nathaniel P. Rogers, who aired his reservations about disunionism in letters to the British reformers he had also met in 1840. In letters to Webb, his closest overseas correspondent, Rogers argued that disunionism ultimately required political actions that nonresistants rejected. “Garrison is advocating the dissolution of our political Union,” but such an act was “a thing our politicians alone can do.” Rogers supported Garrison’s calls for *personal* withdrawal from politics as the “dictum of nonresistants.” But *political* disunion required an “act of suffrage at the polls. How W[illiam] Lloyd can advocate it, when he could not conscientiously take any part in it, I do not see.” Tellingly, Rogers added that political disunionism was as different from moral-suasion abolitionism as Irish Repeal was from the Irish temperance movement. In both cases, disunionism represented entanglement in politics. “Garrison holds politics a mortal sin,” complained Rogers, “yet he fills his paper with the doings of politicians.”23

By 1845, Rogers had abandoned Garrison, and even Noyes was advising followers to “come out” from disunionists. Garrison, meanwhile, maintained that disunionism allowed nonresistants to influence Congress

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without voting. But he was running a gauntlet of criticism from two sides. Political abolitionists dismissed disunionism as “come-outerism” writ large, while “come-outers” criticized it as too political.24

It was partly to reply to such criticisms that Garrisonians drew analogies between disunionism and Irish Repeal. Pointing to O’Connell as a model, Garrisonians hoped, might convert political abolitionists from skepticism about disunionism, while reassuring nonresisters who were skeptical about politics. O’Connell’s coattails looked promising, since he was admired by abolitionists on both sides of the schism. As one of the Parliamentary abolitionists who had helped pass the British West Indian Emancipation Act of 1833, O’Connell’s pedigree as an abolitionist was impeccable. At the World’s Convention in 1840, both Garrisonians and anti-Garrisonians like Birney had met O’Connell, and both camps praised him. In April 1839, John Greenleaf Whittier, soon to be a Birneyite, argued that “no individual of the present age has done more for human liberty.”25

Garrisonians hoped O’Connell’s reputation might repel attacks on disunionism. If political abolitionists approved of O’Connell’s Repeal, why were they opposed to Garrison’s? After all, just as Garrison insisted that Congress could be influenced without voting, O’Connell was using extraparliamentary means, like large “monster meetings,” to influence Parliament from without. O’Connell proved that effective political action did not require formal politics. The 1844 AASS address on disunionism answered skeptical readers who asked “what can be done, if you abandon the ballot-box,” with a rhetorical question: “What has Daniel O’Connell done for Irish repeal?”26

O’Connell, of course, was not morally opposed to voting. In the 1820s O’Connell led a popular movement for “Catholic emancipation”—the lifting of political disabilities that had prevented Catholics from taking seats in Parliament. In the 1830s, O’Connell himself served in the House of Commons. But Repeal attracted nonvoting Garrisonians in part be-

cause it signaled O’Connell’s growing disillusion with Parliament. Early in his career, O’Connell had tried to repeal the Union of 1800 by legislative fiat, but he was never able to muster enough votes. By 1840, faced with dwindling parliamentary support and weakening prospects for other Irish reforms, O’Connell therefore revived the “outdoors” tactics he had used to win “Catholic emancipation.” O’Connell’s support of extraparliamentary “monster meetings” for Irish Repeal thus represented a conscious turn away from parliamentary tactics. To Garrisonians, O’Connell’s long record as an outdoors agitator made him a model statesman, even if he ultimately became a politician. In an 1845 pamphlet arguing that abolitionists could not vote or take office under the Constitution, the AASS cited O’Connell’s example. Just as the champion of “Catholic emancipation” had refused to join Parliament so long as he would have been required to swear “an oath abjuring the Pope,” abolitionists refused to join Congress because it would require an oath of allegiance to slavery. 27

O’Connell also occasionally admitted that his Repeal movement was meant to frighten Parliament into reforming its government of Ireland, much as disunionists conceded that they aimed primarily to consternate the South and force Congress to act against slavery. O’Connell framed Repeal as an ultimatum to win concessions from Parliament on other issues. “If we get the justice we require,” he once admitted, “then our Repeal association is at an end.” Such rhetoric suggests to historian Kevin Nowlan that O’Connell saw Repeal “not as an absolute necessity but as the most likely means of achieving justice and good government” for Ireland. That view of O’Connell’s strategy found its way across the Atlantic to abolitionists at the time. In his 1839 article on O’Connell, Whittier predicted the Repealers would disenthral Ireland “not perhaps by a repeal of the Union, but by the accomplishment of such a thorough

reform in the government and policy of Great Britain, as shall render a repeal unnecessary.” In an 1844 letter, Pease echoed this interpretation of Repeal. “If Ireland had been put, in all respects, on the same footing as England,” she told one Garrisonian, then O’Connell might have relented: “I remember hearing [O’Connell] say in 1838 that it was not repeal but Justice he wanted, but found he could not obtain the one without agitating for the other.”

Garrison had similarly concluded that he could obtain justice for slaves and northerners by agitating for disunion. And Garrisonians invoked such similarities when defending disunion from their critics. They pointed out that the Repeal movement was agitating Parliament without the casting of a single vote and without the organization of a political party, proving the practicality of their tactics. “How exalted is the present position, how majestic the attitude of DANIEL O’CONNELL,” declared the Liberator in December 1843. Thanks to his “demonstration of ‘moral suasion’ . . . no government was ever in . . . so helpless a predicament” as Parliament. In an earlier editorial on O’Connell in August 1843, Chapman used Repeal to vindicate Garrison’s preference for meetings and publications over voting and party organization. She noted the tremendous “progress of the Repeal movement in Great Britain,” whose effects were not confined to “Ireland alone . . . Parliament itself is convulsed by it,” and she hoped political abolitionists would see the lesson: “O’Connell in parliament is merely an M. P. O’Connell out of parliament may be the saviour” of Britain.

But if invoking O’Connell deflected criticisms from political abolitionists, it invited criticism from opposing abolitionists. Absolute “come-outers,” who saw disunionism as politics by other means, also scorned flirtations with O’Connell. O’Connell, after all, was a politician. Rogers feared that O’Connell was “a lion in a net by reason of his politics,” and Richard Webb reinforced such fears. Unlike other Hibernian abolitionists, Webb harped ceaselessly on the theme that O’Connell was no better than American politicians. “If he be a sun in your eyes,” he told Chapman, “I am nearer to him than you are & can see the spots.” Such

suspicion was typical for Webb, who warned that O’Connell was a temporizer, a drinker, a superstitious Catholic, and a bad landlord to boot. Yet his warnings primarily expressed skepticism about rapprochement with politicians. Webb criticized Repeal because “politics and political efforts and politicians are full of unsoundness, and void of principle, and slaves of the Tyrant Expediency.”

Excepting Rogers, however, few Garrisonians heeded Webb. His criticisms of O’Connell rarely appeared in the Liberator, while paeans to O’Connell frequently did. Even Webb’s animus softened during 1843, when he began to suggest that despite his aversion to politics, he was “in theory & talk . . . more of a repealer and a radical than anything else.” While it was “faint praise,” Webb conceded that O’Connell was “as honest as . . . a politician could be.” He also told Quincy that O’Connell deserved respect as an abolitionist: “Thou knows that I am by no means an O’Connellite: nevertheless whatever he be, he is the man who above all . . . has done the most valiantly for the Slave.” Most Garrisonians agreed with that sentiment more than with Webb’s attacks on O’Connell. Pease’s view was more common: Whatever the failings of O’Connell, she wrote, “the right of the demand [for Repeal], I cannot see how any honest mind can deny.” Garrisonians echoed that support for Repeal throughout the 1840s.

Garrisonians supported Irish Repeal not only to defend disunionism, but also to serve another purpose. In 1842, Garrisonians were pursuing an


31. Webb to Chapman, July 3, 1843, BPL, Ms.A.1.2.14.16; Webb to Chapman, Nov. 16, 1843, BPL, Ms.A.1.2.13.82; Webb to Quincy, Nov. 2, 1843, BPL, Mss. 960, 2: 7–9; Pease to Weston, Jan. 27, 1844. See also Webb to Phillips, Dec. 14, 1842, HL, HU, bMS Am 1953 (1277/1); Webb to Chapman, Feb. 29, 1844, BPL, Ms.A.1.2.14.16.
unlikely alliance with Irish immigrants, and they hoped to be aided by their connections with Irish abolitionists. In the 1840s Garrisonians believed Irish immigrants, many of whom were Repealers, were changing American political alignments for the worse. Repeal societies were being founded in major cities from New York to New Orleans, and the Democratic Party, to abolitionists’ chagrin, courted Irish American Repealers by praising O’Connell. “The Irish population among us is nearly all ‘democratic,’” Garrison noted in March 1842, because “leading democratic journals” were all “in favor of Irish Repeal.” But Garrison feared Irish voters were being hoodwinked by these political overtures into supporting “the defender . . . of slavery.” Irish and Democratic “Demagogues” were forging “a ‘union,’ most unnatural and horrible!”

For help in repealing this “horrible” union, Garrisonians naturally turned to Irish friends. While at the World’s Convention in 1840, abolitionists asked O’Connell to sign an antislavery address to Irish Americans. After securing O’Connell’s support for this “Irish Address,” Garrison’s Hibernian allies worked throughout 1841 to gather Irish signatures. Thanks to networks established by Repealers and Irish temperance reformers, the Address amassed over 60,000 signatures, collected with the help of African American abolitionist Charles Lenox Remond. As Hibernians informed the Liberator about their progress, Garrisonians grew hopeful that the Address would “put down” the alliance between Democrats and Repealers.

But that hope was quickly dashed when the Address arrived in Boston in December 1841. Despite feverish promotion by Garrisonians, Irish Americans scorned the Address. They claimed to be Americans who took no orders from foreigners, implied that slavery was light compared with the oppression of Ireland, and called the Address a forgery. Garrisonians replied that their connections with Irish reformers proved that their support for O’Connell was genuine and mutual. In Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society (PASS) not only distributed the Irish Address at its offices, but also stocked Repeal newspapers, believing, as Philadelphia abolitionist James Miller McKim put it, that evidence of “sympathy & correspondence between us & the Dublin Repealers”

32. Garrison to Benson, Mar. 22, 1842.
33. Ibid.
would “increase the hold which we are of late beginning to have on the confidence of the Irish population of this city.”

Likewise, when Garrisonians in Boston held a massive meeting at Faneuil Hall in January 1842 to unveil the Address, speakers emphasized their support for Repeal. Resolutions were adopted wishing “Old Ireland success, in all her righteous efforts to redeem the Emerald Isle from every species of oppression, and especially in the grand movement . . . for the repeal of the fraudulent act of Union.” James Canning Fuller, an Irish native, claimed that support for Irish freedom required him to support abolitionism. Phillips described Ireland as “the land of agitation and agitators,” urging abolitionists to “learn a lesson from her.” Garrison denounced England’s treatment of Ireland under the Union as an example of the “true slaveholding style” and endorsed Ireland’s “effort to secure her emancipation.” “I AM A REPEALER!” he exclaimed.

Claiming to be Repealers thus enabled Garrisonians both to defend disunionism and to appeal to Irish Americans. A year after the first Faneuil Hall meeting, Garrison repeated at another meeting that Ireland was “the victim of an absolute despotism” and “truly deserving” of sympathy. Chapman’s editorial on O’Connell claimed that the Irish were second only to American slaves in suffering. Quincy’s editorial on Repeal claimed the “measures” of Repealers were “excellent” and “analogous” to abolitionism, insofar as their machinery of organization and agitation is concerned.” It was inconsistent for American supporters of Irish Repeal to denounce abolitionists as traitors, since they used “the same instrumentalities for the subversion of the domestic institutions of Great Britain, and the dissolution of her glorious Union with Ireland, which


they denounce as fanatical and unreasonable when used by their own countrymen, or by Englishmen, for the destruction of slavery.”

These were direct rejoinders to Irish Americans who questioned abolitionists’ motives for supporting Repeal. Abolitionists were frequently accused of maliciously embroiling O’Connell in slavery controversies, a view epitomized in a cartoon printed at the time (see Figure 1). But Garrisonians steadfastly denied that charge, which had the added benefit of refuting the widespread presumption that abolitionists were sycophants to England. In July 1843, the PASS responded to accusations from Philadelphia Repealers by insisting that “we have never done any thing whatsoever . . . to injure or obstruct the cause of Repeal.” The PASS desired the “success of the Irish people in their efforts to effect a peaceable repeal” of its “political Union.”

That support for Repeal remained consistent even when Garrisonian relations with O’Connell wavered. In 1843 Garrisonians were dismayed when O’Connell reportedly denied his acquaintance with Garrison and distanced himself from Garrison’s heretical religious views. Yet O’Connell’s vacillation did not prompt Garrisonians to renounce Repeal. Garrison instead insisted in an open letter to O’Connell that he had always been “a decided friend of Repeal.” That remained true when O’Connell later regained Garrisonians’ trust with several abolitionist speeches—speeches solicited, like the Irish Address, by Garrisonians and their Irish contacts. James Haughton was especially indefatigable in lobbying Dublin Repealers, chairing one meeting of the LNRA at which an antislavery address from Pennsylvania was read in O’Connell’s presence. In reply, O’Connell redeemed himself by reiterating his abhorrence of slavery. While Pease regretted O’Connell’s waffling, she affirmed that he was, “nevertheless, a great man,” and Repeal “one of the grandest movements that ever was enacted in the theatre of the world.”

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38. Garrison to O’Connell, Dec. 8, 1843, LWLG, 3: 231; Pease to Weston, Jan. 27, 1844. On tensions between O’Connell and the Garrisonians, which also concerned O’Connell’s willingness to accept Repeal contributions from southern-
By the end of 1843, Garrisonian relations with O'Connell were improving, but relations with Irish Americans were grim. When Repeal began to decline after O'Connell’s arrest and trial by England in 1844, Garrisonians were left where they began: with mutual admiration between themselves and O'Connell, but few Irish American supporters. Scholars have offered various explanations for their failure. Some scholars have argued that the desire of Irish Americans to prove themselves “white” doomed abolitionist efforts. Others cite the good political reasons Irish Americans had to support the pro-immigration, pro-labor agenda of the Democratic Party and to be wary of abolitionists, some of whom barely concealed their anti-Catholic prejudices. 39

Yet given the well-known reasons why an Irish–abolitionist alliance failed, it is easy to overlook the question of why Garrisonians attempted it all. Answering that requires realizing that the Irish Address campaign

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Figure 1: “American Sympathy and Irish Blackguardism.” In this contemporary print, cartoonist Edward W. Clay lampoons Daniel O’Connell’s attacks on American slavery and tars the abolitionists as anti-Irish meddlers. In the cartoon, O’Connell collects funds from American supporters, but he refuses to accept money from supporters of slavery, to the embarrassment of one of Repeal’s chief supporters, Robert Tyler (center), son of President John Tyler (left). Clay implies that O’Connell is being manipulated by American abolitionists by picturing a figure who looks like William Lloyd Garrison whispering in the Liberator’s ear. Garrison says, “Friend Daniel we will join you in all your views, your cause and ours is one—only we don’t want to meddle with Irish repeal for fear we may lose our English friends.” This dialogue shows that Garrisonians, who actually did support Irish Repeal, had to fight a popular perception that they were agents of England and opponents of Irish causes. Credit: HarpWeek, LLC.

coincided with the origins of disunionism. When abolitionists convened at Fanueil Hall to unveil the Address, it was only four days after the Haverhill petition had roiled Congress. The Irish Address was even mentioned during Congressional debates, when Virginia’s Henry Wise argued that the timing of the petition and the Irish Address suggested an international conspiracy. “Let no American citizen . . . fail to notice the coincidence of events,” Wise said. While “O’Connell was issuing his mandates to every Irishman in the United States . . . to join the
Abolition–English–American party,” a former president had submitted “a proposition to dissolve the Union.”

Without accepting Wise’s paranoia, it is worth noting “the coincidence of events.” First, both disunionism and the Irish Address emerged from very recent transatlantic networks between Garrisonians and Irish abolitionists. The same Irish abolitionists who applauded Garrison’s calls for a “Repeal of the Union” encouraged Garrisonians to believe (sometimes unintentionally) that Irish American Repealers would naturally support disunionism.

Garrisonian disunionism was also related to the Irish Address on a deeper level. Disunionists believed that by rallying northerners against the Union, they could agitate Congress, just as O’Connell’s “monster meetings” agitated Parliament. But given their use of that analogy, Garrisonians naturally saw the Irish American community as a good place to start amassing support. Rhetorically, after all, their Repeal seemed symmetrical with O’Connell’s, and their use of Faneuil Hall to unveil the Address was merely the first of what they hoped would be many “monster meetings,” ultimately creating an American Repeal movement similar in form and function to its Irish counterpart.

Chimerical as that plan seems now, it underlines that Garrisonians were not totally dismissing political action in 1842, even as they became disunionists. Like O’Connell, they favored extraparliamentary means of effecting political ends, a roundabout politics that made some nonresistants nervous. To critics like Rogers who thought Garrison’s disunionism contradicted his principles, the Irish Address also smacked of politicking. Lydia Maria Child noted that “exciting the ignorant Irish by the use of O’Connell’s name, strikes me as work that peculiarly belongs to the Third Party,” since its most likely outcome would be to “drive them to the polls.” As Child realized, Garrisonian attempts to separate Irish voters from Democrats showed that even as they withdrew from the polls, Garrisonians still hoped to affect what went on inside them. Historians may question whether Garrisonian disunionism was an intelligent strategy. But there can be little doubt that in the transatlantic political context of the 1840s, it was an intelligible one. Attempting to rally Irish Americans exemplified the kind of popular politics that Garrisonians believed

that they could conscientiously do and that O’Connell was already doing.\textsuperscript{42}

Ultimately, both disunionism and Repeal failed, but several lessons can be learned from their coincidence and interaction. Most broadly, Garrisonian interest in Repeal, like the founding of Irish American Repeal societies, reveals the cross-fertilization of European and American political discourse in the early nineteenth century. In the 1840s, ocean steamers, improved postal services, and rising immigration to America enabled the rapid transatlantic exchange of news and ideas via letters, travel, print, and personal networks. Informed by these exchanges, reformers on one side of the ocean often used politics on the other side to legitimate causes or delegitimize critics.

American radicals, for example, pointed to European movements to defend unpopular movements at home. In 1843, abolitionist Amasa Walker, while touring Dublin, said that “in looking over England, France and Ireland,” he had concluded that the “new and important movements which are now in progress” vindicated the efficacy of nonviolent agitation. While American reformers looked to Europe for vindication, European reformers like O’Connell worked American political developments into their rhetoric. In one Repeal speech in 1843, O’Connell attacked Prime Minister Robert Peel by comparing Peel’s rumored plan to suppress Repeal meetings with the “gag rule.” “I will tell Sir Robert Peel where he may find a suggestion for his bill,” O’Connell said. “In the American Congress . . . they have passed a law, that the house shall not receive any petitions from slaves, nor any petitions on behalf of slaves.” O’Connell suggested that act as a “model” for Peel’s “bill for coercion.”\textsuperscript{43}

Yet antebellum Atlantic crossings produced rhetorical analogies more easily than substantive alliances. Despite close ties with Dublin reformers like Webb and Haughton, Garrisonians never created an Irish–abolitionist


\textsuperscript{43} “Letter from Amasa Walker,” \textit{Liberator}, Sept. 8, 1843; \textit{Speech of O’Connell, In reference to a reported Declaration of the Ministry, that Coercive Measures would be used to suppress the Repeal Agitation} ([n.p.], 1843), Broadside, BPL, CAB 24.24.1, folder 9.
Transatlantic organization also proved problematic for Irish Repealers, as O’Connell discovered when Irish Americans rejected his antislavery counsels. In the end, transatlantic networks did not demonstrably aid either Garrison or O’Connell. Even at Repeal’s highest tide, control of Ireland’s movement for Home Rule was quickly passing into the hands of militant nationalists who viewed O’Connell’s dalliances with abolitionists to be a damaging distraction from the cause of Ireland. Meanwhile, far from vindicating abolitionists in the eyes of American critics, networks with British reformers raised suspicions of traitorous conspiracies.

Although transatlantic alliances remained organizationally weak during the antebellum period, it is still worth following the gaze of reformers across the Atlantic. Understanding their allusions to and exchanges with European reformers helps us better understand what groups like the Garrisonians aimed to do. The discursive world of Garrisonians was not bounded by national borders, so when searching for the sources of “disunionism,” it is a mistake to focus only on homegrown influences like come-outerism. Likewise, when characterizing “disunionism” it is a mistake to juxtapose it solely with the third-party politics practiced by abolitionists like Birney. If the Liberty Party really represented the only political action available to abolitionists in the 1840s, then by comparison the Garrisonians certainly were apolitical. But if “third-party” abolitionism is placed on a broader, transatlantic spectrum of political action that includes popular extraparliamentary movements like Repeal, the Garrisonians’ place on that spectrum can be viewed differently.

After 1845, Garrisonians referred to disunion less and less as “repeal,” and more and more as a moral duty. In part this was because the failure of Irish Repeal diminished O’Connell’s power as a rhetorical analogue. Garrisonians also wished to distance themselves from proslavery writers who increasingly argued that the oppression of Ireland under the Union was worse than the oppression of slaves. As the apparent strength of the Slave Power seemed to grow in the 1850s, Garrisonians also muted previously pragmatic aspects of their disunionism. In 1854, Garrison would treat a copy of the Constitution like George Hopkins had wanted to treat the Haverhill petition twelve years earlier: He burned it publicly.

It is hard to look away from Garrison’s pyrotechnics in 1854, but focusing only on later, more uncompromising expressions of disunionism creates a distorted view of its origins, and encourages an intellectual genealogy of disunionism that begins and ends with the puritanical creed of “come-outer” Perfectionism. This explanation of disunionism’s origins
not only passes over the years between Garrison’s conversions to Perfectionism and disunionism but also fails to account for the evolution of disunionists after the start of the Civil War, when many Garrisonian disunionists vilified secessionists and cheered the Republican Party. If we understand disunionism solely as a byproduct of Perfectionism, it is hard to understand that transformation as anything but equivocation. John L. Thomas, surveying this volte-face in his biography of Garrison, exclaims, skeptically, that “from Christian anarchy Garrisonism had been miraculously converted into a respectable theory of constitutional reform!"44

Without minimizing the distance that Garrisonians had traveled between 1842 and 1861, the conversion of disunionism into Unionism was not wholly miraculous. Congenital ties between Repealers and disunionists underline that disunionism began as a political strategy, not an unbending principle, thus helping to explain why Garrisonians discarded it once political conditions changed. In the 1842 debates over the Haverhill petition, southern politicians like Underwood averred that slavery depended on the Union. This confession directly inspired the Garrisonians’ confidence that they could use popular demands for a “repeal of the union,” much like O’Connell was using similar demands in Ireland, to force political change in Congress from outside its walls. Secession, however, proved that the South no longer saw the Union as essential for the preservation of slavery, making the strategy of antislavery disunionists suddenly moot.

When asked about his change of mind about the Union in the 1860s, Garrison sometimes said that when he called the Constitution a covenant with death and an agreement with hell, he had “no idea that [he] would live to see death and hell secede.” It is possible to view that reply as disingenuous, but it suggests a point worth considering: The key difference between Garrisonian strategy in 1842 and 1861 was not a difference in the way disunionists saw the Union, but in the way southerners did. Once the union had been repealed, calls for its repeal no longer had the rhetorical force they once possessed. For both O’Connell and Garrison, calling for Reform or Repeal seemed promising only as long as their opponents appeared to value their respective Unions enough to acquiesce in desired reforms.45

44. Thomas, The Liberator, 412.
45. Garrison quoted in Mayer, All on Fire, 531.