Preface

Rebellion is like witchcraft.

 —Cotton Mather, *A Discourse on Witchcraft*

I admire this in Gothic architecture—that you cannot master it all at once—
that it is not a naked outline, but as deep and rich as human nature itself, al-
ways revealing new ideas, and new larger ones. It is as if the builder had built
himself up in it, and his age, and as if the edifice had life.

 —Hawthorne, *English Notebooks*

This book is about the making of Nathaniel Hawthorne's politics, not pri-
marily his efforts to secure and maintain political appointments through his
friends in the Democratic Party, but rather his system of values and beliefs as
they affected his political perspectives, especially on abolitionism and slavery.
Hawthorne's political connections and appointments have caused observers
in his time and ours to assume that his politics were simply those of the con-
servative wing of the Democratic Party, which fell into disrepute in the North
during the 1850s, but this assumption lacks validity and has led to a number
of misconceptions about his political thought. While Hawthorne's finely
wrought tales and romances earned him high praise as an author, his associ-

ation with the unpopular presidency of Franklin Pierce (whom Thoreau called the "Devil")[1] and his subsequent lack of partisanship during the Civil War alienated him from his Concord neighbors, his Peabody relatives, and leading abolitionists, a number of whom damned him as inhumane and heartless. This moralistic approach to Hawthorne's politics persists into the present day, and he continues to be charged with the sins of blindness, cowardice, and escapism.[2] Because he shared the racism of his white middle-class society, this feature of his vision, rather than his political independence (or "perversity," as Emerson called it), has become the focus of recent judgments directed at him.[3]

The opprobrium cast on Hawthorne, past and present, illuminates not merely the difficulties faced by a public intellectual of imagination and thoughtfulness during times of political strife but also the need to develop a more comprehensive approach to the literary history of the American Renaissance, an approach less indebted to the discourse of New England righteousness and more attentive to perspectives and values beyond that region. Let me hasten to say I have no quarrel with judging an author with respect to one's own present set of moral and political values (how can one do otherwise?); however, to be fair, scholars need to recognize and allow for the cultural relativity of such values. Hawthorne's racism is a case in point—it was invisible to other white citizens in his time, though glaringly wrong in ours.

The challenge of understanding the nature and development of Hawthorne's political views is complicated by the highly charged partisan environment in which he lived and the strong centripetal force it exerted and continues to exert on every would-be independent observer, making detachment seem morally untenable. Moreover, the main issues that stirred passions and colored judgments in his times—slavery, women's rights, tyranny, revolution, violence, war—still maintain their power to affect us. Because of my own politics, I have no desire to defend Hawthorne's "brooding conservatism," as James Mellow calls it, or his repugnant racism, which Brenda Wineapple has acutely highlighted;[4] nevertheless, I believe that to do justice to the depth, complexity, and even progressiveness of Hawthorne's political views, it is necessary to place them in a larger context than antebellum New England reform and to examine them from Hawthorne's perspective, as part of his own historically and internationally informed—albeit still partial—imagined world. I recognize the main ethical question raised by such a task:

does not understanding imply acceptance? How one answers such a question depends on a system of personal and professional ethics that are specific to time, culture, and class. For me, the answer is no. The new understanding generated by this study, however, I admit, may render Hawthorne's politics more acceptable than they have previously appeared.

In this book, I argue that Hawthorne's mature political thought, which has been so vigorously condemned, centers on two major psychohistorical images—revolution and witchcraft—which were racialized for him and many Americans by their association with interracial wars and insurrections. Colonial warfare against Indians, the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1803, and the European revolutions of 1848–49 all generated structures of thought and feeling used to advance competing political agendas in the United States during the antebellum period. Hawthorne's intense study of American history, especially his understanding of revolution and witchcraft, contributed to his perspectives on current political issues and to his literary treatments of political violence, moral absolutism, and faulty perception, all of which he saw affecting the lives of individuals and the fate of the nation. His consistent antipathy toward ardent reformers, especially abolitionists, found expression in his works through narratives of self-delusion and faulty vision, where lies and myths of salvific action, rather than devils, take possession of his characters and lead them toward a hell they do not see ahead. Henry James once observed that Hawthorne is "perpetually looking for images which shall place themselves in picturesque correspondence with the spiritual facts with which he is concerned, and of course the search is of the very essence of poetry."[5] The main images Hawthorne drew upon from the history of revolution and witchcraft he used to illustrate the central tenet of his belief system: specifically, that "No human effort, on a grand scale, has ever yet resulted according to the purpose of its projectors" (23:431). In Hawthorne's world, the efforts of impassioned individuals, groups, and nations to right wrongs and destroy evil, however well intentioned, cause unanticipated pain and suffering, which their own self-righteousness prevents them from foreseeing and acknowledging.

Devils and Rebels has three main objectives: to trace the formation of Hawthorne's political views, especially as they relate to the slavery controversy; to show their complexity and coherence within his historically informed imaginative world; and to illuminate the ways they affected his art.

The introduction offers a brief survey of the hostility directed at Hawthorne's politics over the years—evoked for the most part by his *The Life of Franklin Pierce* (1852), his *Atlantic Monthly* essay "Chiefly about War-Matters" (1862), and his dedication of *Our Old Home* (1863) to Pierce—and suggests the kinds of insights a historicist approach to his politics can yield. Each chapter that follows integrates contexts and texts, examining the constitutive features of Hawthorne's political views and showing the ways these views found creative expression and led to his eventual marginalization among his New England contemporaries. The overall organization of the book is thus chronological. Within chapters, however, I often trace an issue over the course of Hawthorne's career.

While this study of course attends to Hawthorne's four major romances, it often focuses on less familiar works that offer striking and little-known evidence of his political values and beliefs. "Legends of the Province House," *The Whole History of Grandfather's Chair, Journal of an African Cruiser, The Life of Franklin Pierce,* and "Septimius Felton" are among the works accorded unusual attention here. Despite the voluminous commentary devoted to Hawthorne and his writings over the years, his politics remain relatively unexamined and unknown, though they have been consistently condemned. This study posits that a Christian pacifism, not unlike that of the Quakers, serves as the foundation of his politics, which, though characterized as thoughtless and benighted, actually possess a depth and subtlety comparable to those of his literary works themselves.

The first chapter of this study, titled "Revolution and Warfare," examines Hawthorne's early career and its unique political features, especially the combination of conservative and democratic sympathies that Hawthorne acquired, along with a deep aversion to social and political disruption. After summarizing the revolutionary context of the early decades of the nineteenth century, I highlight the pacifism animating Hawthorne's early tales and *The Whole History of Grandfather's Chair* (1841). To establish the links between revolution, witchcraft, and the dark racial Other that fascinated Hawthorne, I also point out ways in which the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1803 generated widespread anxiety about the antislavery movement in the United States during the antebellum period.

The second chapter, "Witchcraft and Abolitionism," turns from revolu-

tion to Hawthorne's study of the Salem witchcraft delusion and to the deep impression that subject made on him, especially its revelation of the dire effects of fanaticism and false witnessing. After discussing his use of witchcraft in several of his early tales, most notably "Young Goodman Brown," I argue that Hawthorne observed a number of links between the witch-hunters of the 1690s and the radical abolitionists of the 1850s. Witch-hunting and abolitionism formed a particularly strong bond in his mind due to perceived similarities between them, including Puritan religiosity intent on ridding the devil from the land, the sensationalistic demonization of others, obsession with forbidden sexual relations, and a failure of vision caused by fanaticism.

Chapter 3, "Racism, Slave Narratives, and the Body as Evidence," places Hawthorne's racism in the context of Northern antebellum society, comparing his views with those of his supposedly more progressive contemporaries, especially the transcendentalists. It then speculates on the reasons for his dismissal of antislavery literature as a whole, despite the undeniable horrors of slavery. The problems of specter evidence, gothic sensationalism, and abstract *isms* in general, I argue, encouraged him to distrust the truths purveyed by abolitionists and fugitive slaves. His eyewitness reading of bodies tortured and marked informed his own efforts at reform, which took a far more skeptical and judicious approach than that of any partisan witnesses in seventeenth-century Salem or nineteenth-century Boston.

After his marriage and move to Concord in 1842, Hawthorne turned his attention to contemporary, as opposed to historical, political issues. Chapter 4, "Accord in Concord," takes a close look at the congruence of Hawthorne's political views with those of his transcendentalist friends and acquaintances in the early 1840s, especially Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott. I argue that there is remarkable agreement among all of these authors with regard to the issues of self-culture, reform, reformers, and the role of the scholar-artist. Emerson's well-known 1844 "Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies" even shares the trust in divine providence found in Hawthorne's *The Life of Franklin Pierce.* Concerning the benificence of the British antislavery movement, however, it displays an esteem that Hawthorne's editing of *Journal of an African Cruiser* (1845) calls into question.

Chapter 5, "Lies, Specters, and the 'Black Man,'" summarizes

Hawthorne's appointment to and firing from the surveyorship of the Salem customhouse and speculates on some of the effects these events had on his political thought. In light of this speculation, the chapter offers a reading of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) as a cautionary ghost story, featuring the specters of Hester, Arthur, and the "Black Man." Coming from the "ghostly" hands of Surveyor Pue and the "headless" Surveyor Hawthorne, the novel warns against those persons gullible enough to believe that the devil, rather than their own guilt-ridden fantasies, haunts the borders of civilized life. Similarly, I suggest that *The House of the Seven Gables* can best be read as a tale of revenge directed at the obtuse and gullible as well as the politically corrupt.

Chapter 6, "Transformative Violence at Home and Abroad," focuses on Hawthorne's response to the outbreak of violence in the United States during the 1850s. The chapter begins with a consideration of the pacifism of *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), using as a backdrop the European revolutions of 1848–49, especially Margaret Fuller's radicalism in Italy and Louis Kossuth's visit to the United States to obtain money and arms for the Hungarian revolutionaries. Comparing the behavior and values of the character Hollingsworth and the candidate Pierce as Hawthorne constructs them, I attempt to show why Hawthorne rejects the former and praises the latter, using as criteria the principles of moderation, humanity, and broad-mindedness. During the climactic year 1854, Hawthorne, in England, responded to the violence generated by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the rendition of Anthony Burns, and the speeches of his friends and Concord neighbors, and consequently in his last published romance, *The Marble Faun* (1860), he critiques the transformative effects of violence, using what he knew of the activities of the transcendentalists, especially Fuller and Thoreau, models for Miriam and Donatello.

The concluding chapter of this study, "The Stationary 'Fall' of a Public Intellectual," sets out what I call Hawthorne's "politics of quiet imagination"—that is, the alternative vision of society and government that he offered his New England contemporaries in lieu of the absolutist, partisan, irrational, black-and-white vision they preferred. It opens with an account of how John Brown's specter haunted Hawthorne in Concord after he returned to the United States in 1860. His manuscript "Septimius Felton," with which he struggled, and his essay "Chiefly about War-Matters" reveal the pressure

put on his pacifism by current events and the aggressiveness of his fellow New Englanders. Despite his marginalization and temporary militancy, however, Hawthorne remained constant to his political principles, resisting the hostile currents of thought around him, though well aware of the accusations of treason and immorality leveled at him by friends, family, and one part of himself.