Chapter 1

From State of Mind to State of War

Neural Communities

In this chapter I advance a number of theoretical propositions pertaining to national identity and war. Military conflict between nation-states is not an all-inclusive paradigm for every form of violence and pain with which my study will be concerned; rather, it is the most dramatic illustration of how modern material and discursive formations can create or exacerbate tensions between groups by blocking their capacity for empathy and restraint. Here I explore preliminarily issues that to varying degrees underlie each of the subsequent critical essays, issues pertaining to pain and denial, memory and forgetting, irony and the sublime. To the extent, however, that this chapter also address problems that point beyond the ensuing critical demonstrations to more recent historical contexts, the theoretical discussion will, I hope, stand on its own. To open the question, I offer a few hypotheses regarding the mutually constitutive relations between modern discourses of pain, commerce, and national consciousness. I then extend the analysis to include more general questions concerning the referentiality and the performativity of language, the nature of desire and aggression, the notion of means and ends in “just war” theory, and the relation of gender to “reason” and disavowal.

Let me begin, then, by framing for the reader a series of extracts. These are passages that have helped me to conceptualize lines of convergence between different disciplines and to which I have returned repeatedly, while writing, as to so many symptomatic anchoring points (points de capiton,
after Lacan). My purpose in presenting these passages here at the outset is to indicate briefly the main theoretical and sociohistorical contexts, or systems of meaning, in which my critical discourse will tend to intervene. My observations are therefore intended to be suggestive. They set forth the tropes of history and memory that traverse the study as a whole, and they anticipate my later discussions of the nation-state and the modern city as omnipotent imagos, abstract yet gendered ego-ideals that may be projected and identified with in similar ways by the members of a given community.

My first text concerns the language of advertising, marketing, and “consumer psychology.” That this is a powerfully gendered idiom is clear from the model of “typical” consumers that Rachel Bowlby infers from early twentieth-century sales manuals. At the masculine pole of the binary is the “classical” buyer, “the consumer as rational subject, calculating and efficient and aware of his aims and wants.”¹ The feminine counterpart to this economy-minded customer is the “romantic” buyer, capricious, hedonistic, easily manipulated. (It is assumed, nevertheless, that the “classical” buyer is equally susceptible to influence; “he needs only be persuaded that his desires are not whimsical but sensible.”² The gendered dualism can, as we might well expect, be extended through a seemingly endless list of familiar connotations, including “the passive and the active, the victim and the agent, the impressionable and the rational, . . . the infantile and the adult, the impulsive and the restrained.”³

What I wish to emphasize here (and I should mention that, in doing so, I redistribute and hierarchize certain components of Bowlby’s argument) is that, for the salesperson, fitting the consumer into one of the two basic gender categories is not simply a matter of recognizing a preexistent mode of consciousness; it is part of a process of constructing the buyer or, more precisely, the buyer-seller relationship. Bowlby gives to this fictionalizing activity the title “making up the mind.” “To most women,” says a marketing specialist as she initiates prospective department-store assistants, “making up their minds is a difficult and unpleasant task.”⁴ In order to make up the customer’s mind (or, to put it more tactfully, to “help” the customer make her mind up), the seller must make up his own mind as well, staging a performance in which he takes the lead role: “The seller makes up the mind of the buyer, casting her (it is generally her) in a role and giving her an ideal script to go with it. By the same token, the seller also puts himself (it is generally a he) in a role, plays a part and makes up a mind to the same extent as the buyer.”⁵

There are, according to Bowlby, two additional kinds (I would consider them subtypes) of making up, each being roughly analogous to one side of the masculine/feminine (saver/spender) paradigm: To make up is either to compensate for something that is (actually or potentially) missing—to