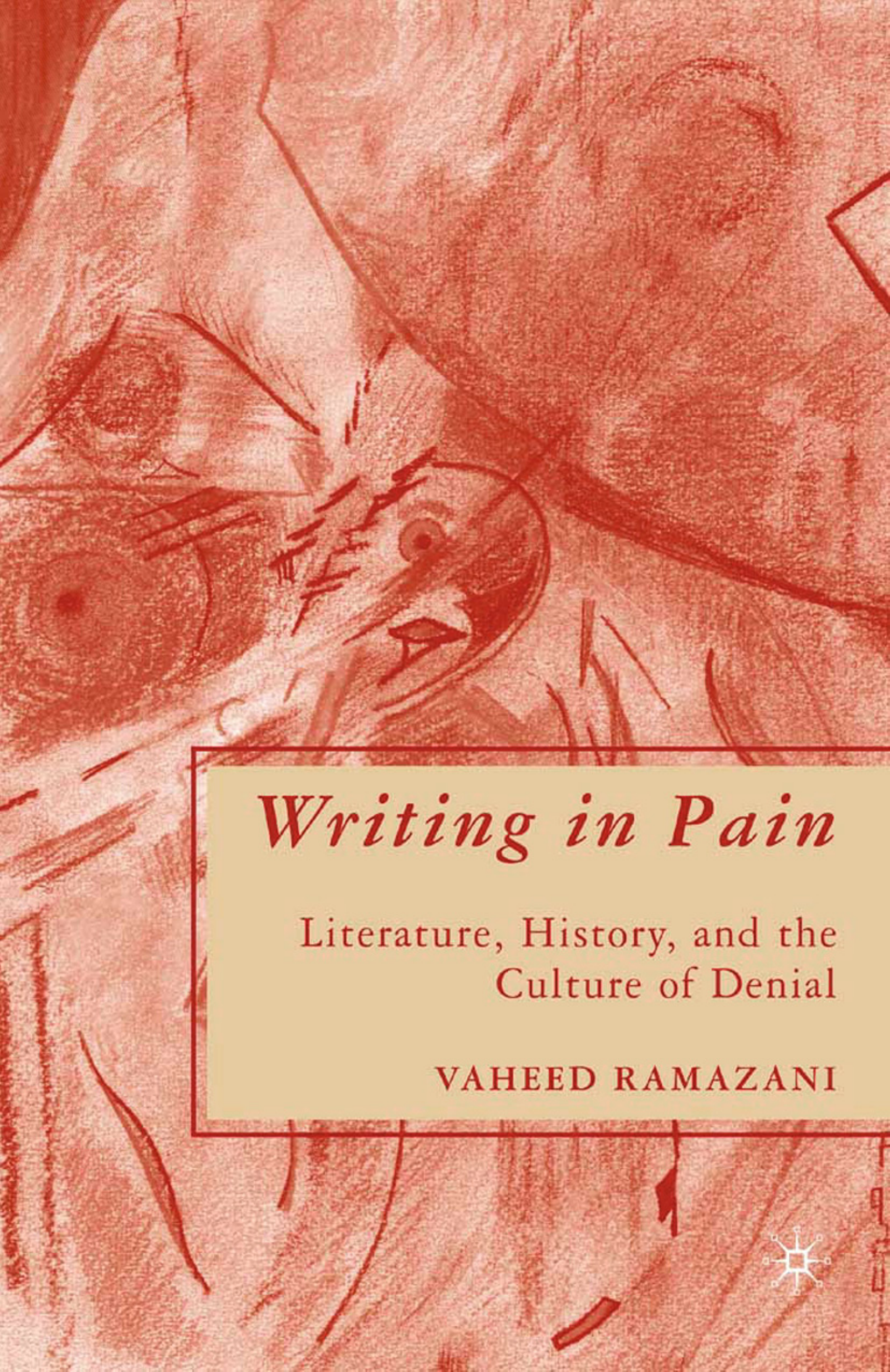

Writing in Pain

Literature, History, and the Culture of Denial

VAHEED RAMAZANI

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Vaheed Ramazani

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For Jean Auverny, Antoinette Bouveau,
and Jacqueline Saquet

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Introduction

To read the nineteenth-century texts that comprise the critical core of this book is to experience that moment of shock in which the historian, in the words of Walter Benjamin, "grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one." This sudden encounter of past and present does not imply, it seems to me, the simple equation of "documentary" evidence from separate historical periods but rather the awareness of a certain similarity between the rhetorical, ideological, and interpretive structures in which such facts and events are embedded and by means of which they take on historically comparable meanings. The "constellation" to which Benjamin refers entails, however, not only repetition but also difference: "thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions."[1] Readers of Zola, Flaubert, and Baudelaire might establish, for example, imaginative analogies between the authoritarian politics of Napoleon III and those of our American "empire" today, yet not overlook the cultural traditions and sociohistorical circumstances that clearly separate "then" from "now." Indeed, the very resonance of the encounter between these two historical moments requires that we keep in mind the significant differences between our "postmodern" society of electronic information, transnational corporations, and global markets on the one hand and the rising industrial capitalism of early modern France on the other.

Nevertheless, as Fredric Jameson reminds us, the contemporary transformations that we group under the term "globalization," despite and indeed because of their unmooring of traditional social structures and values, have provoked a backlash, a worldwide resurgence of tribalism, nationalism, religious dogma, and racism. The "untotalizable totality" of globalization, he says, "intensifies binary relations between its parts—mostly nations, but also regions and groups." These relations are "first and foremost ones of tension or antagonism, when not outright exclusion: in them each term struggles to define itself against the binary other."[2] Much of this book leaves implicit the ways in which contemporary political and geopolitical antagonisms may be said to reiterate facets of the exclusionist discourses of the late nineteenth century. In this introduction, then, I shall allow myself to point to just a few implications that my study might hold for the multiple and yet polarizing narratives of our era.[3] I want to suggest that the two historical moments have in common what I call a “culture of denial,” a kind of traumatic anxiety that both responds to and perpetuates specifically modern forms of violence.[4] These are defensive ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that, as I show at length in the chapters to come, may be linked, historically, to a variety of factors, including the primacy of exchange value in the laws of production and consumption; the rationalization of science, technology, and bureaucracy; and the newly consolidated relations of force attending the rise of urban centers and of modern nation-states.

As if the ontological gap between the experience of being in pain and that of hearing about pain were not already worrisomely obdurate,[5] the notion of trauma has become a privileged cliché of American, if not Western, culture in the new millenium. We can no longer be certain (if ever we were) that the trope of trauma carries real affective force, much less the conduciveness to moral awareness that, under the best of circumstances, we would hope that such expressiveness readily entails. Paradoxical though it seems, this state of uncertainty may be attributed in part to the journalistic (including photographic and televisual) spectacularization of the tragedies now commonly referred to as “9/11.” Just when critics in the late 1990s were pointing to our contemporary “wound culture’s” pathological fixation on violence and pain,[6] and just when, in academic circles, the popular and increasingly institutionalized field of “trauma studies” had attained, according to some, a state of saturation,[7] the attacks of September 11, 2001 made available to us a new “chosen trauma,”[8] a graphic scenario of victimization whose sentimental and voyeuristic overexposure by the media fed the public’s outrage and need for revenge. This is not to say that the events of 9/11 should not have provoked the horror of Americans and of peoples around the world; it is to say, instead, that life in the post-9/11 era poses special challenges to the concept of empathy, challenges arising as much from the overuse and misuse[9] of the concept as from the arrogant dismissal of it as irrational or unrealistic. If it is realistic, rational, and humane to care about the over 3,000 civilian lives lost during the events of 9/11, then it is, I think, equally realistic, rational, and humane to care about the ensuing war crimes committed by American forces or their proxies in Afghanistan and Iraq[10] or, conversely, about the psychological trauma suffered by American soldiers suddenly confronted by, precisely, the *reality* of the deeds they were called on to execute in the name of democracy and the “war on terror.”[11] The problem, as these examples suggest, is that what counts as rational or realistic depends on a culture’s dominant assumptions and systems of belief; and a deeply embedded attitude common to most cultures seems to be that it is perfectly “natural” for empathy to travel only with great difficulty across national borders.

The politicization of empathy is not surprising when we consider that its object, pain, is itself a phenomenon situated at the crossroad between biology and culture.[12] A nearly universal feature of human physiology, pain is also an interpretation—not just a sensation but an emotional response arising from the same nervous subsystem as other culturally freighted perceptions and meanings. To be in pain is to receive and process "sensory-discriminative" information pertaining to the "location, intensity, duration, and nature" of noxious stimuli, but it is also to know or imagine oneself to be in pain—which in turn entails remembering having been in pain before, and anticipating (or hoping to be) free of pain again.[13] In other words, pain engages the entire self, including, beyond one's most basic sense of corporeal identity, the feelings and cognitions that comprise "extended" or "autobiographical" consciousness.[14] Accordingly, both the way in which pain is felt and the manner in which it is expressed are influenced by factors such as personal history, social convention, and religious belief, as well as by the specific circumstances in which harm, if not always hurt, may occur. (Consider, for example, the soldier maimed in combat who experiences his injury not as pain but as relief, since for him the wound signifies his retreat from the battlefield and his successful, if narrow, cheating of death.)[15]

In keeping with the prevailing usage, I group under the term "pain" a number of different affects that share the quality of aversiveness but that are to varying degrees neurologically and experientially separable.[16] Fear, for example, arises from brain circuitry that is largely distinct from that which produces what we call "physical pain," although there is considerable overlap between the two feelings within cognitive, autonomic, and somatic-motor systems. Neuroanatomically, fear has more in common with anxiety than with physical pain, with the notable exception of separation distress, a type of anxiety that seems to have emerged, during the brain's evolution, from the same neurochemical mechanisms that mediate the perception of "pain" in the more narrow sense. Operative in panic attacks, loneliness, and the onset of depression, the pain of separation figures prominently in my discussion, in chapter 1, of the birth trauma as the ontogenetic prototype for subsequent feelings of loss and frustration. We should keep in mind, too, when assessing the relative illocutionary and modal aggressivity of rhetorical structures, or when reflecting on the link between human aggressivity and war, that aggression is not always the result of fear or anger. There is aggression of a fundamentally "predatory" or instrumental nature as well, and, whatever the underlying evolutionary and genetic sources of aggression may be, the psychosocial and cognitive conditions under which it may be learned or motivated lie well beyond the explanatory reach of current neurobiological models. Finally, our awareness that different emotions may emerge from different subcortical zones of the brain should not obscure the fact that, even within the subjective experience of a single individual, the "same" emotion may vary qualitatively, while "different" emotions may co-occur or blend at interdependent levels of biological and cognitive response.

As my inclusion of a range of affects under the rubric of "pain" suggests, I believe that the categorization of pain as either physical or psychological, while having some theoretical and practical uses, cannot be maintained in any rigorous way. All pain is physical and all pain is mental. Indeed, in the chapters that follow, I repeatedly put into question the traditional mind/body dualism. But here at the outset I wish to make clear that if I problematize the mind/body distinction (and numerous others as well), it is precisely in an effort to make *other* distinctions—nondualistic distinctions that are, I hope, more nuanced, more accurate, and to that extent more pragmatic than the conventional ones. As Dominick LaCapra has said, the deconstruction of binary oppositions does not "automatically entail the blurring of all distinctions" but rather "the recognition that the problem of distinctions becomes more—not less—pressing in light of the unavailability or dubiousness of binary oppositions."[17]

Empathy may be just as innate a human capacity as the feeling of pain,[18] but the complex and subjective nature of both pain and empathy contravenes any temptation to make universalizing claims about the likelihood that readers of the texts that I approach in this study do in fact recognize rhetorical structures such as irony, allegory, and the sublime (which are themselves highly aleatory interpretive constructs) as symptomatic of pain and of different ways of responding to it; nor is it certain that readers will be inclined to receive (or "witness") those particular affects in the way that I think they do (or ought to). Nevertheless, I trust that my analyses will elucidate certain perhaps unarticulated thoughts, feelings, and sensations experienced by readers of the primary texts under consideration; indeed, should my argument "merely" aid and abet the reading it presupposes, it will have accomplished the greater part of its critical task.

That task, as I noted earlier, is not limited to the historical period and national tradition "represented" by the poems and novels to which I attend. The France of the nineteenth century had a great deal to teach the rest of Western culture about jingoism, colonialism, modern warfare, and political and economic forms of revolution. For better or for worse,[19] those lessons have remained with us into the twenty-first century; so in my readings of nineteenth-century texts as in the theoretical essays, I have attempted both to account for and to countervail habits of thought that seem to me to underpin much of the violence of our time.

It is because this violence is not only periodic and dramatic but also everyday and structural—endemic to the social habitus (as Bourdieu would say) or to the prereflective understanding (in Heideggerian terms)—that

I have chosen to focus on literary texts that are not obviously "about" trauma as a limit experience. These are texts in which grand historical traumas such as war, revolution, and the sudden displacement of whole populations become accessible to the readerly imagination through their implication in everyday pains and losses—forms of hurt, stress, anxiety, or bereavement that might afflict any "ordinary" person in the course of his or her "ordinary" life, and whose continuity with the larger historical traumas has to be inferred. So while Zola's great war novel *La Débâcle* is evoked preliminarily in chapter 2, it is precisely the point of the chapter to study war discourse not primarily in that work but in *Au Bonheur des Dames*—Zola's novel about shopping and the clash between large and small retailers in fin de siècle Paris. Similarily in Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale*, the themes of political violence and historical writing are mainly contextual and allegorical—but, I argue, not subordinate—in relation to the sentimental intrigue. Finally, I have chosen to treat key aspects of the massive architectural and demographic upheaval known as the "Haussmannization of Paris" not as it may be overtly portrayed in a work such as, say, Zola's *La Curée*, but as it appears obliquely in Baudelaire's *Spleen de Paris*.

This critical parti pris is based on the premise that major historical upheavals can be at once symbiotically related to and structurally homologous with "everyday" violences and traumas. Readers of the texts I examine need not have suffered severe shock or trauma in order to experience, upon reading those texts, the vicarious pain of "empathic unsettlement" or "secondary trauma."[20] And their ability to empathize with unspeakable suffering is possible, I think, only because the boundary between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" pain is much more fluid than is generally suspected. Studies suggest, for example, that not only catastrophic trauma but also repeated minor trauma—including the normal (that is, normalized) stresses of the quotidian—can induce susceptibility to depression. Over time, the brain's chemistry becomes so altered, the nervous system so weakened, that depressive episodes may be touched off by seemingly insignificant psychological events.[21] I am not saying that I expect either my book or the texts I discuss to make readers depressed or vulnerable to depression (although that is, I admit, a real possibility, and I cannot say for sure that it would be a bad thing). What I am arguing is that, if empathy is to have any salutary ethical effect beyond the twinge of "concern" that one might feel when confronted with a disturbing image or report, the troubling perception has to penetrate our defenses, reactivating prior memory traces and laying down new ones: it has to re-mind us—literally reconfigure the brain's anatomy—by intercommunicating with and modifying a heterogeneous "store" of reminiscences that are partly individual and partly collective.

Thus, if the calamitous historical trauma can speak to us in the present, it is by way of a hook, an upsetting event such as you or I might experience yet that resonates uncannily with something beyond it, something unthinkable yet somehow familiar. There is, after all, no one, even among the privileged races and classes, who has not at some time encountered a culturally naturalized yet latently traumatizing event or series of events, a personal crisis arising from divorce, the death of a loved one, accident, injury, and so on. It is banal to point out (and therein lies the problem) that we are all to varying degrees touched by crime, racism, sexual discrimination, child or spousal abuse, AIDS, ecological destruction, or miscarriages of justice. What is, however, difficult to *feel*, and not simply to acknowledge in the abstract, is the vulnerability of the relatively privileged to the suffering of the socially marginal or the culturally alien. Indeed, one hard lesson of 9/11, it seems to me, is precisely the complex interdependence between "us" and "them" and, correlatively, between the "invisible," routinized violence of a dominant (in this case, globally hegemonic) culture and the spectacular violence that that same culture can generate (much, says Derrida, like an organism turning against itself during a crisis of autoimmunity).[22] The nineteenth-century texts that I consider in this book are haunted by a similar sense of unavoidable implication, of involvement in and responsibility for a cultural and historical pain that exceeds "everyday" understanding and that (therefore) becomes intuitable to it only by way of the writing, or rewriting, of "everyday" pain.

My foregoing evocation of "intuition" and "understanding"—terms often encountered in discourses on the sublime—does not imply that I believe that pain (whether as experience or as spectacle) should be sublimated into political, artistic, or personal narratives of heroic redemption. I have serious reservations about popular representations of pain as either pathetic or glamorous (recall here the plethora of contemporary films in which a secret trauma is the key to understanding the exceptional character of the hero or heroine), and I am equally skeptical of aesthetic philosophies in which it is the mission of art or literature to construe pain as an occasion for sentimental didacticism or spiritual redemption. It is for these reasons that my own discourse in the following chapters tends to be critical of both "high" and "low" (or "popular") versions of the sublime. This is not to suggest that we essentialize the sublime, whose modal, psychological, and structural features will, after all, take on different meanings in different social, historical, and rhetorical contexts; it is important to recognize, however, that there is something at least potentially problematic about the sublime's traffic with distanced or derealized notions of pain—pain that is not *so* threatening, not *so* painful, that it cannot be taken as a metaphor for freedom and power[23] (just whose pain and whose power may be at stake is a central concern of my book).

Of course, irony, the other major trope with which my work is concerned,[24] has also been theorized, historically, as a mode of distancing from the very feelings of pain whose causes and symptoms it so incisively grasps on an intellectual level.[25] And despite its Aristotelian credentials as the opposite of braggartism, irony has been conceived in terms no less egotistical, elitist, and aggressive than the sublime.[26] Indeed, irony's evaluative, judgmental, or "cutting" edge—its traditional association with satire, mockery, and even contempt—seems better suited to causing pain (in the real or hypothetical "victim" of the irony) than expressing it. But in texts and contexts where ironist and victim (or the affliction of pain and the expression of its aversiveness) are inseparable, it is precisely irony's negating force that enables its expression of the negative effects (the aftermath)[27] of (its) violence.

Irony in this sense (what Friedrich Schlegel called "the irony of irony") is a perpetually self-interrogating structure that implies that any expression of force, any will to mastery (including its own), is vulnerable to ironic negation (to domination) in its turn. When viewed under the aspect of open-ended temporality, the to-and-fro of irony places pain and (the pleasure of) power in a state of equal and irresolvable tension; that is, irony stages ambivalence as the failure to comply with—or to emulate—the authoritarian norms of self-presence, fixed meanings, dogmatism, and so on. And if it is true that there is no "outside" of power, no complete escape from ideological fetishism, then irony, precisely because it works both within and against the taken-for-granted discourses of the social, becomes a valuable tool for exposing the pain that power distorts and disavows. Theorists have, to be sure, been justifiably suspicious of irony's predilection for continual self-subversion: self-criticism, they say, might "really" be the ultimate bid for invulnerability to criticism; it might signal an unwillingness to take a stand for or against a particular issue; or it might simply be the fetishist's way of having his cake and eating it too. But my point is that there are ever only degrees of the fetishism of power and that, in the literary and cultural narratives that I explore here, irony's "egalitarian" oscillation between pain and power, or between the recognition of pain and the denial of pain, serves as a foil to the sublime's attempt to subsume, once and for all, pain to power, recognition to denial. Indeed, within the historically conditioned meaning-making structures of these texts, the iterativity of irony may suggestively (though not exclusively) be read as a vivid mimesis of the repetition compulsion.

In view of the psychological and ethical potential that I attribute to irony, it is pertinent to recall that, immediately after the events of 9/11, American journalists and political commentators ominously proclaimed that irony was dead. Indeed it was, albeit not altogether in the sense that the pundits imagined. For our nation's rush to translate its pain into the sublime joy of revenge was motivated by ways of seeing and feeling that are inimical irony as I understand it here. If I am right that the power of irony is the power of self-qualification, then the temporal element of the trope, its recurrent activity of questioning and self-questioning, might have opened our eyes to a historical explanation for the crimes of 9/11—not a justification but a detailed (and ongoing) contextualization of the many and complex roots of the event. A comprehensive investigation of the cultural, political, and economic catalysts of 9/11 might have made it possible to envision a number of effective legal, financial, and diplomatic alternatives to outright war.[28] At the very least, irony's dialectic of negation and affirmation, empathy and distance, might have made us think twice (or more, in concert with the trope's multiple overcoding) about the purpose, scope, and modalities of such a war (what exactly does it mean to wage a war against terror? against evil? for freedom and justice?). As the perception of coincidence, paradox, or logical contradiction, irony might have helped us remember that it was our own government that had created al Qaeda, and that those whom we now call the "enemies of freedom" we referred to only yesterday as brave "freedom fighters." With its eye for incompatibility, inconsistency, and duplicity, irony might have led us to wonder how we could legitimately claim to support democracy abroad while undermining civil liberties at home and in our "offshore" detention camps, or while arming, training, and bankrolling ruthless dictators (including, until recently, Saddam Hussein) in Africa, Central America, Asia, and the Middle East. Is there not a "cruel" irony in the pretence to liberate a people by bombing their homes or levying lethal economic sanctions against them? And is there not a particularly "chilling" irony in the twin eschatalogical vocabularies of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden?

In case my hypothetical agenda for "the" ironic worldview is beginning to sound hopelessly utopian (or else merely provocative), let me insist that I do not believe that irony necessarily commits us to any one political position. Furthermore, I do not offer irony as a magical panacea that would make us "get over" the trauma of 9/11. The ironic mood is one neither of complacent forgetfulness nor of definitive healing; it entails neither angry retribution nor impotent submission to the repetition compulsion. To make a perhaps less controversial claim for the politics of irony, then, I would hazard that the trope's ethos of doubt might have assisted us in better managing the painful aftereffects of the shock of 9/11—by not, for instance, rushing into a second war that is by now overwhelmingly perceived, both at home and abroad, as having been at best mistaken and at worst illegitimate. It is not just a matter of acknowledging error after the fact and with the benefit of hindsight, but of anticipating error and (to pun on America's alibi for invading Iraq) "preempting" it in the future.[29] Of course, irony is precisely the awareness that the avoidance of error is impossible. But in an ironic heuristic, error (or history) is an occasion for learning.

In chapter 1, 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. With its focus on the co-implication of consumer and national consciousness as well as on the linkage of war and birth in the cultural imaginary, this chapter directly anticipates my reading, in chapter 2, of war and commerce in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. And as a preliminary exploration of concepts that are vital to each of the subsequent critical essays—concepts such as pain and denial, memory and forgetting, irony and the sublime—the opening chapter also furnishes the theoretical scaffolding for my study as a whole.

I begin the chapter with a brief consideration of modern marketing psychology and its surprising crossings with discourses of national identity. In the language of early sales manuals, customers tend to be categorized by gender, the feminine type of buyer being the one most in need of "help" in making up her mind as to what, or whether, to purchase. The typical sales manual's portrayal of the decision to make a purchase as a kind of sublime overcoming (facilitated by the salesperson) of "feminine" uncertainty points forward to my discussion of the construction (the "making up") of national identity, which I see as a similar kind of commodification of putatively "feminine" sentience—a similar denial, at bottom, of historical, biological, and evolutionary contingency. This denial, as we shall see, is pushed to an extreme in discourses of war, where bellicosity is constructed as the sublime transcendence of "feminine" fear, weakness, and unreason by "masculine" rationality, decisiveness, and strength.

The commercial use of startlement as a technique for channeling the customer's conscious intentionality toward the act of making a purchase serves as the basis for my discussion, early in chapter 1, of the body image and its relation to pain. The central role of memory in mediating both pain and the body image then leads me to an examination of the work performed by the dialectic of remembering and forgetting in the collective construction of a national body image. Here, the contingent and repetitive nature of memory, its biological status as a continually reenacted neurocognitive performance, is read "back" into Ernest Renan's famous metaphor for the nation as a "daily plebiscite." More specifically, the mobile borders of the brain's topographical units, or "maps," and the manner in which these units continually signal to one another, are seen as evidence of the dynamic interplay of sameness and difference, heterogeneity and integration, in the ongoing contextualizing processes by means of which nations, like individuals (but also like subjects-in-process) seek to define themselves. That the discipline of geography, with its "science" of mapmaking, should become an important ideological tool of nation-building in the nineteenth century suggests, by analogy, that even relatively elementary neural maps and cognitive networks, once they are historicized, can no longer be seen as entirely innocent.

The greater part of this theoretical prologue examines the institution and practice of war as a core feature of state fetishism. I seek to clarify, in the wake of feminist critiques, how the patriarchal appropriation of the metaphor of birth helps to naturalize belligerent national ideologies. Why, I ask, is war so frequently portrayed as the male's way of giving birth? In the Western tradition, as we know, the "natural," birthing body of "woman" emblematizes the antithesis of metaphysical reason. (Recall, for example, the "feminine" subject-position of the impulsive shopper described above.) But what are the biological and psychosocial pressures that have produced the mythical mother as not only the unconscious foil but also the symbolic guarantor of military and political violence? What is it about her imaginary body that a masculine sublime of "rational" violence disavows on the one hand, yet on the other hand appropriates, incorporates, and projects—in abstract and purportedly self-evident truths?

As the manner in which I frame these questions suggests, I believe that there exists a fundamental structural affinity between fetishism, sublimity, and conventional forms of war discourse. After setting forth the basic metaphorical continuities and discontinuities between conceptions of birthing, warring, and "reason" or "common sense," I argue that structures of expression and repression inherent in these metaphors can facilitate a sublime "turn," a collective act of "translation" by means of which nations at war symbolically substantiate their moral and political claims. I go on to elaborate some of the psychoanalytic, neurocognitive, and biological bases for this political response to pain, explaining in this context why I think that the rhetorical violence of the sublime is more likely than that of irony to crystalize in the identity-securing violence of nation-states.

In chapter 2, my argument regarding the mutually constitutive nature of different discursive spheres is supported by a close reading of Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Through a detailed analysis of the novel, I demonstrate the inextricability of the apparently benign vocabularies of business