The impetus for a volume on ‘nominalism’ and ‘literature’ arose from a workshop on “‘Realist’ vs. ‘Nominalist’ Semiotics’ which the present writer conceived and organized for ISSEI’s 1994 biannual conference at Graz (see Acknowledgements). However, as it is now submitted to our readers, the present collection of essays is not a workshop proceedings. It does contain some contributions that were presented and discussed at the Graz workshop, all of them in expanded, revised form, but more than half of the essays were specifically commissioned and written for this volume—some by participants in the workshop, some by scholars who could be convinced that their expertise in the field would be an asset to our project.

If there was any consensus at the Graz workshop, it was the conviction that a fundamental re-orientation of our enquiry into nominalism and realism as literary and cultural phenomena was needed, from an historical point of view as well as in theoretical and methodological terms. The shared impression among participants was that we had reached a cross-roads, because it was felt that a research program which had started off in recent decades as the study of the relationships between late-medieval literature and scholastic philosophy was now on its way to move into new and different directions, asking questions of a more comprehensive nature. An important task of those participating in our mutual project, therefore, was seen in the attempt to open up and consolidate such new perspectives for an emergent research paradigm and to suggest theoretically adequate, methodologically convincing ways to address literary discourse in its relation to what might be termed the ‘nominalism/realism-complex’.

It is partly in response to that situation that a substantial introductory essay has been supplied, which aims to provide a thorough theoretical and methodological grounding for the new paradigm, as well as attempting an in-depth exploration of the present issue from a more general perspective. At the same time, this essay seeks to give a comprehensive introduction to a highly abstract problematic that is not easy to pinpoint in any definitive ways, but which is perhaps still less easy to grasp for the non-specialist. Indeed, a main consideration has been to offer an overarching framework and to suggest common points of reference for the essays to follow; for one of our aims right from the beginning has been to emphasize the common purpose of our joint efforts to arrive at a better understanding of ‘literary nominalism’ as a cultural and discursive phenomenon. Subsequent contributions have been arranged in roughly historical sequence, with some
overlapping in terms of chronology, which, however, was less unavoidable than intended. It should finally be mentioned that the editors have as far as possible sought to allow contributors the space they needed to develop their argument, which would account for considerable variations in the length of individual articles.

It is with pleasure that the editors pay their debt of gratitude to a number of individuals and institutions for the help and support they received at various stages of the present project. We would like to thank ISSEI for providing us with the opportunity to meet and 'spawn' our ideas. Our sincere thanks go to all of our contributors for their most helpful cooperation and gracious forbearance in coping with any queries that might have arisen during the editing. We would also like to thank our publisher, Mr Fred van der Zee of Editions Rodopi, and Dr Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz, general editor of the Critical Studies series, for their belief in our project, and for their unflappable good humour, patience and help, all of which have been invaluable assets during the final stages of preparing this collection. We would like to extend our thanks to the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Transport for the subsidy they have given towards the publication of this volume. We are further grateful to Mr Wolfgang Schlinger of 'sw design' (Graz) for doing the layout and for the professionalism he showed in the process. The present writer, moreover, would also like to thank his co-editors, Christoph Bode and Richard Utz, for their part in the work, but in particular for the special contributions they made for this project to come into being. Richard did a great job in convincing a number of contributors to participate, but he also commented most helpfully on some aspects of the introductory essay. Heartfelt thanks also to Christoph for sharing his expertise as a literary theorist, but especially for his encouragement at various points during the laborious gestation of that essay. Needless to say that any shortcomings in that contribution are still my own. My very personal thanks, finally, are due to Anita Keiper for her unflagging support, not least in compiling the Bibliography and Index, and in preparing the layout of this volume, but also for just being around. It is to her and our children, Bernadette and Maximilian, that I would like to dedicate my share in this book, which has cost them a lot.

Graz, October 1997

Hugo Keiper