General Preface

The choice of “Literature as Cultural Memory” as the overall theme for the xvth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), held in Leiden 16-22 August 1997, draws particular attention to the role literature plays as a repository of culture. In fact, this specific function of literature seems so obvious that it may well lead us to overlook the very complex questions raised. Questions such as: Which cultural phenomena precisely are being preserved in, or through, or by literature? Is literature sometimes, or often, or always a mode of praising tradition, continuity, even permanence? Is this a good thing? Is it on the contrary a reason for indicting literature (and/or the aesthetic in general)? Where is the dividing line between cultural memory and cultural heritage? Or: both literature and memory have a complicated relationship to the past, both select and edit what they register; both change and distort, in ways that are comparable as well as totally different, what they report on. If literature and memory, each in its own way, act like this, then what kind of “truth” is being preserved by their combination, by a memory that is also literature? Moreover, literature not only preserves culture, it also is itself part of culture, and even creates culture. The general congress theme allowed for the study of literature in relation to both recent and more remote sociocultural developments around the globe as well as in relation to gender and cultural studies.

The xvth ICLA Congress, attended by some 600 delegates from 52 countries around the globe, addressed the general congress theme, and the questions raised by it, in eight sections, each with parallel sessions, as well as a number of workshops and round tables. The present volumes contain the selected proceedings from these eight sections, as well as from two workshops held during the congress. Addresses by plenary speakers have been incorporated in relevant volumes.

Financial support for the Congress was provided by the Netherlands Graduate School for Literary Studies (OSL), the ICLA, the Faculty of Letters of Leiden University, Leiden University, the Research School CNWS, School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies at Leiden, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Gulbenkian
Foundation, Kooyker Booksellers in Leiden, the French Embassy to the Netherlands, the Association for Canadian Studies in the Netherlands, the Leids UniversiteitsFonds, and Brigham Young University. The Faculty of Letters of Leiden University funded the early stages of editing the proceedings. I thank them all.

I also here expressly want to thank Elly van Winden, who did the preparatory editing, and Rudi Horemans, who in his inimitable way expertly prepared all volumes of the Proceedings for the press.

During the very final stages of seeing these volumes through the press I had the good fortune to enjoy the hospitality of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, an Institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. I am grateful to the Rector of the Institute, and to its staff for the wonderful working environment they provided.

Theo D’haen
General Editor Proceedings ICLA ’97 Leiden
General Organizer XVth ICLA Congress Leiden 1997