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. Adresses by plenary speakers have been incorporated in relevant volumes.

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