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**AN ANNIVERSARY ISSUE:  
THE SOUTHERN WRITER**

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*The*  
*Southern*  
*Review*

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THOMAS W. CUTRER

*Conference on Literature and  
Reading in the South and  
Southwest, 1935*

**N**INETEEN THIRTY-FIVE, said Malcolm Cowley, was "the Year of Congresses." Meeting in April in New York, the first American Writers' Congress resolved to "strike a blow at the growing fascist enemy, the rapidly developing white guard and fascist criticism, and the Roosevelt-fostered national-chauvinist art." Its leaders, all of whom were "enemies of reaction in the cultural field," included such communist stalwarts and fellow travelers as Granville Hicks, Waldo Frank, Malcolm Cowley, James T. Farrell, and Kenneth Burke. Complete party domination was assured by restricting invitations to "reliable writers," writers, that is, who had "clearly indicated their sympathy for the revolutionary cause."

In June, close to three thousand European, American, and Asian communist and socialist intellectuals convened at the Palais de la Mutualité in the Latin Quarter of Paris to discuss "the conditions of literary creation and relations between the writer and his public." As with its American counterpart, centrist and right-wing thinkers were neither invited nor welcomed. Presided over by André Malraux and graced by such distinguished men of letters as André Gide, E. M. Forster, Léon Blum, Aldous Huxley, Bertolt Brecht, Boris Pasternak, and Tristan Tzara, the First International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture was efficiently organized, well attended, and sympathetically reported. It heard speeches, created committees, adopted resolutions, and adjourned with the distinction of being the largest gathering of writers and artists since the Middle Ages to attempt the mobilization of art and letters around a single political ideal. Its insistence upon party loyalty, however, doomed it to literary futility. Good poets, it has been said, make



bad strike leaders. In retrospect, Malraux has called the congress an "impassioned confusion."

Also in the spring of 1935, bracketed between these two massive and closely scrutinized writers' congresses, was a third important but largely forgotten meeting of internationally prominent men and women of letters. In an isolated corner of the republic of letters, far from the cultural capitals of New York and Paris, a crossing of the careers of Huey P. Long, often characterized by the left as a proto-fascist American dictator, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren, two of the brightest stars on the American literary horizon, resulted in a writers' conference which would signal a significant burgeoning of literary effort on the campus of Louisiana State University.

In 1935 the university was celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary, while enjoying an unparalleled period of growth under the capricious but generally benevolent hand of Louisiana's "Kingfish," Senator Huey P. Long. The origin of LSU went back to the establishment of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy at Pineville, Louisiana, in 1860 with Colonel William Tecumseh Sherman as superintendent. This tiny school had closed, reopened, and closed again during the Civil War, reopened after the war, burned in 1869, and reopened at last in Baton Rouge. Named Louisiana State University in 1870, the institution was joined in 1877 to the Louisiana Agricultural and Mechanical College, a union that still exists. In 1925 the university began to move from its location on the grounds now occupied by the state capitol to its present location. The spacious new site afforded the opportunity for the institution to transcend its origin and move beyond a small school mentality.

Nowhere on the campus was the hand of change felt more decisively than in the department of English, which in the 1930s suddenly acquired a crop of talented young assistant professors with graduate degrees from Harvard, Berkeley, Oxford, and other prestigious universities. Foremost among this band were Cleanth Brooks, who arrived in 1932, and Robert Penn Warren, who came on the scene the following year. Both were natives of Kentucky, both had been undergraduates at Vanderbilt, where they had been more or less closely associated with the Fugitive, the short-lived but extremely influential poetry magazine, and both had been Rhodes Scholars at Oxford. Additionally, Warren had been one of the Twelve Southerners who defended traditional southern values in I'll Take My Stand, and Brooks, though not a charter member of the conservative movement, was certainly in strong sympathy with its principles and goals.

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