



Democracy and Poetry (Harvard Paperbacks)

By Robert Penn Warren

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In these two essays, one of America's most honored writers fastens on the interrelation of American democracy and poetry and the concept of selfhood vital to each. "I really don't want to make a noise like a pundit," Mr. Warren declares, "What I do want to do is to return us—and myself most of all—to a scrutiny of our own experience of our own world." Indeed, *Democracy and Poetry* offers one of the most pertinent and strongly personal meditations on our condition to have appeared in recent letters.

Our native "poetry," that is, literature and art, in general, is a social document, is "diagnostic," and has often been a corrosive criticism of our democracy, Mr. Warren argues. Persuasively, and movingly, he shows that all of "art" and all that goes into the making of democracy require a free and responsible self. Yet the American experience has been one of the decay of the notion of self. Our astounding success jeopardized what we promised to create—the free man. For a century and a half the conception of the self has been dwindling, separating itself from traditional values, moral identity, and a secure relation with community. Lonely heroes in a bankrupt civilization, then protest, despair, aimlessness, and violence, have marked our literature.

The anguish of Robert Penn Warren's own poetic vision of art and democracy is soothed only by his belief that poetry—the making of art can nourish and at least do something toward the rescue of democracy; he shows how art can become a healer, can be "therapeutic." In the face of disintegrative forces set loose in a business and technetronic society, it is poetry that affirms the notion of the self. It is a model of the organized self, an emblem of the struggle for the achieving self, and of the self in a community. More and more as our modern technetronic society races toward the abolition of the self, and diverges from a culture created to enhance the notion of selfhood, poetry becomes indispensable.

Compelling, resonant, memorable, *Democracy and Poetry* is a major testament not only to the vitality of poetry, but also to a faith in democracy.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Robert Penn Warren, poet, novelist, historian, biographer, is one of this nation's most eminent literary figures. He was born in Kentucky and is a graduate of Vanderbilt. He then earned a master's degree at the University of California, studied at Yale, and was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. From his earliest days as a writer, when he was a member of "The Fugitives"—that brilliant group of young Southerners who sparked a renaissance in their regional literature—to his latest accomplishment, a book of poems, *Or Else*, which elicited the New York Times comment that he was "one of the fathers of American poetry," Mr. Warren has concerned himself with the many forms of literature and art as they relate to American culture and society. Over his long and distinguished career Mr. Warren was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and held the Chair of Poetry of the Library of Congress. Of his numerous publications, *All the King's Men* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (1946); *Promises* won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and the National Book Award (1957). Mr. Warren was awarded the Bollingen Prize in Poetry for *Selected Poems: New and Old, 1923–1966* (1967); in 1970 he received the National Medal for Literature.

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