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Democracy and Poetry (Harvard Paperbacks)

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 be- come 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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