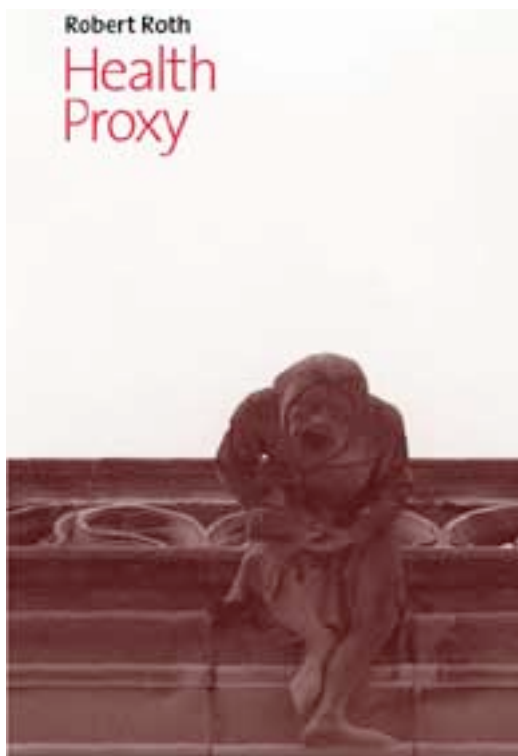


## Review

Howard Pflanzer

Robert Roth. *Health Proxy* (Stamford, CT: Yuganta Press, 2007).



Robert Roth's *Health Proxy* is a meditation and a provocation. These seemingly antithetical states of being propel this work and involve the reader in a personal journey that begins in the sixties and ends tomorrow. This open-endedness is suggested by the last words of the book: "But only for now." Before we reach those final words, we are carried along by Roth's engagement with the large and small issues of a life, experienced deeply and profoundly reflected on. Roth, when not writing, worked for thirty years as a newspaper deliveryman for several small distributors, with occasional stints in the

educational field. He is fiercely independent and made a decision many years ago to earn a modest living at the margins of the corporate capitalist marketplace. Not wanting to become enmeshed and imprisoned in a hierarchical organization, or a quasi-corporate institution, such as a school, university or a non-governmental organization, was a major choice in his life.

This is a book that makes us aware of death and our own mortality, but it is shot through with stories that make us laugh aloud. His serio-comic recounting, "Trickle-Down Economics," of his job delivering newspapers at the famous university "LKU" (NYU) is both telling and hilarious in its unfolding.

It is an elegantly written book that grabs us slowly as we move along with the flow of disparate stories that Roth relates. Seemingly ordinary events are taken by Roth and viewed from an unusual angle, making us rethink our perceptions of everyday

occurrences. Days later, after reading a section of the book, I've found myself recalling a story that Roth tells about people's desires that has embedded itself in my psyche: "Some people want sex, some people want power, I wanted that story for *And Then* (the magazine he co-edits)." The stories in his book prompt me to look at "accepted" aspects of my life in a different way. Rather than describing his personal and sexual life in high flown and lurid prose, Roth speaks directly to our concerns and insecurities in our greatest moments of achievement and pleasure.

The book is divided into three sections: "Health Proxy," "Manna," and "Wild Berries Singing." The first and last sections are long, while Manna is a short, poignant interlude about the death of Roth's father. The stories in *Health Proxy* are diverse, but they cohere in a vivid way to provide us with an emotional portrait of Roth's life. The leit-motif of the entire work is the various appearances of the "health proxy." Roth describes how he became the health proxy, the person who could make life and death decisions about his friend Pete Wilson, the gay rights activist, who was dying of AIDS, and the intricate ramifications of this emotionally charged role he had to play. Then in a shift, later in the book, Roth imagines someone else being his health proxy, and what this person would have to contend with knowing Roth's own fears, insecurities and confusions about making critical life decisions. "Still I fear everyone's secret judgment of me." The book is filled with similar "what if" situations, which Roth views from shifting personal perspectives.

Glorious experiences of sex and intimacy that Roth describes always become "petit morts," way stations on the road to death. We are engulfed by the feelings of voluptuous pleasure, and then dashed on the deadly rocks of the world. Roth broaches the controversial subject of intergenerational sex widely condemned by mainstream society. He explores its positives and negatives in a bold and illuminating discourse and points out how the subject is hidden away in locked closets, not open to revelation or discussion.

Alternations of pleasure and pain in Roth's book establish a peculiar dialectic that keeps the reader wanting more of *Health Proxy*. In its subtle way, reading *Health Proxy* almost becomes an addiction. In the piece, "Journal Interruptus," Roth describes the pleasure of keeping a journal and writing in cafes and then suddenly we are caught up

short in his abrupt fear and his move towards self-censorship: “It was written in a café after I had been writing about some sensitive personal and political matters and felt a shadow looking over my shoulder.”

In another part of the “Health Proxy” section, Roth graphically describes an identity crisis: “One night, many, many years ago, my head started spinning. I did not know who I was or what I was. A man? A woman? What was a man? What was a woman? None of this made any sense. Totally unhinged I bolted down six flights of stairs, frantically looking for someone, anyone to hug me.” He witnessed vivid frozen tableaux of male-female relationships in various bars he poked his head into. Finally he found someone to hug him and he calmed down. The reader is left with the thought of the dark alternative: what if he never found anyone?

“Dislocation is the feeling I want to look at,” Roth tells us bluntly. Issues of power, privilege, hierarchy and racism haunt Roth. In the ferment of past social movements, Roth found explanations for people’s behavior. Now he feels he has no compass to guide him through the thickets of current mystifications. “I don’t get what needs to be gotten.”

“The punitive ethic is what hardens the heart and further dehumanizes a dehumanized society. The hardness and harshness and brutality of the society are reinforced and the violence continues,” Roth tells us. He goes on: “I would say, Open up the prisons. People would get upset and I would take a small secret pleasure in their lack of imagination.” His insights, at times, make us uneasy. Roth gets us to scrutinize our own prisons of the body and the mind. His provocations are refreshing in an era when too many experts and pundits pretend to tell us exactly what we need to do to improve our lives and our world. More examples of creative anarchy like Roth’s would help to revitalize our stagnant society and moribund culture. Emma Goldman would have certainly approved of Roth’s ethos fueled by his artistic creativity. Roth sorrowfully notes that most instances of resistance today become institutionalized, and ultimately reproduce and bolster the culture they are trying to change.

Graphic descriptions of deaths of friends and family punctuate the book. Shortly before his death from AIDS, Pete Wilson tells Roth that “taking me to the hospital was like taking a Jew to a concentration camp.” His Aunt Claire, burned over sixty percent of

her body after being scalded by ultra hot water in the bathtub, shouted that “she would despise anyone who wanted to keep her alive. She did not want to live in such pain.” As the health proxy for his aunt, Roth says: “I didn’t fully remember that I was Claire’s health proxy. It was easy to go along with the momentum to let her die.” About his friend Diane, Roth tells us: “Diane used every bit of her energy, her imagination, her vast ability to do research to fight her illness. She was in the grip of total panic. Total fear. The total mobilizing of energy. In truth it was a rapid race towards death.”

“We die, hurled into an eternity, disappear, into the vastness of an empty universe, fall into a dark hole, and the world immediately seals itself up and we’re gone forever and in some way it is as if we were never here.” After his father’s death, when he went to the synagogue to say Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, Roth ruefully concludes: “I was startled how easily the world went on without him. Really I was startled that the world went on without him at all.”

Roth tells us how he avoids the terrors of the night. “I feel when I make up basketball teams, baseball teams, no dread will swim over me, no harm can come to me. It is like a structure, a foundation that keeps me from falling into an abyss. And God help me if that structure collapses. At times I have a glimpse into the abyss. . . . The teams I make up usually don’t cause strain or anxiety, just enough intrigue to keep me interested until I fade into sleep.”

The most moving part of Roth’s book is the short section called “Manna.” When his father came out of a coma in the hospital Roth recounts that his father scrawled “kosher” and “roll and coffee” on a sheet of paper. “The only thing he was allowed to eat was ice. Here’s your roll and coffee, I said. His tongue thirstily drank in the ice. You know this is manna from heaven, I said to him. And whenever I or my brother fed him ice we could imagine it to be the most delicious of foods.”

In the “Wild Berries Singing” section of the book Roth tells us: “My first interview in forty years.” It was for a tutoring job at Touro College in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. Roth is not prepared to enter into the process as required. He has no photo ID or formal resume with a list of references when he is interviewed by a “forlorn-looking Orthodox Jewish woman, who is a dean at the school.” He has copies of the magazine he edits, *And Then*, to show her pieces he had written, but after seeing a photo of Ronald Reagan

hung on her wall he steers her to less controversial material in the magazine. Roth asks bluntly: “How do you present yourself to someone who is deciding whether or not you will eat or where you will live? How do you present yourself with any degree of honesty or friendliness in a situation like that? I don’t feel friendly at all.”

Commenting on being judged, Roth says: “. . . I don’t want people judging my work. Obviously, I don’t like it when my work is rejected by a publication, for example. But in truth, I dislike it only slightly less when it is accepted. Although probably at this point it doesn’t much matter. But I know I’m not as inured to disappointment as I might think. It registers if not as a searing pain then as a kind of vague disaffected backdrop hostility.” Roth’s ultimate honesty is incredibly refreshing.

In his brilliant piece, “The Museum,” Roth presents four museum goers, including himself, on two different occasions. The first time, when he attends an exhibit with his linguist friend Miriam, he sees the iconic figure Allen Ginsberg. The second time he accompanies his mother and father to the museum where his mother is a volunteer docent. Roth interweaves the complexity of responses to art with the way the various participants respond to an exhibit. “Ginsberg, taking it all in . . . Miriam (using headphones), didn’t want to take in the work in ignorance. . . . My mother guided me through the exhibit. It helped me to respond to the work. . . . My father was exhausted and he was bored.” Roth incisively presents the museum as a deeply stratified cultural zone, where each of the participants — Ginsberg, Miriam, Roth and Roth’s parents — has a particular social place and individual reaction to this institution where some artists are privileged for inclusion and others are not. Different people, different responses, a kaleidoscopic portrait of the varieties of this experience for all the participants, vividly presented by Roth as cultural and social commentary.

Roth takes us from the museum to the street in “Wild Berries Singing.” On a humid summer evening on St. Mark’s Place in New York, Roth recounts a moment when he experiences the feeling of sexual harassment that women undergo all the time. “The attention, the comments, the hostility, the abuse by men in the street came raining down on her. . . . Monster faces lurched towards her, howling insults. I had never seen anything quite like it before. It is an experience that women are often subjected to, out of the sight and hearing of most men, even men standing nearby.” In Roth’s world, he can

take that leap and put himself in the place of another person. It is a rare gift.

Roth has a unique take on the educational process. In the sixties he worked in an alternative school. He relates this story: “Monville Waters was seven years old. I remember one time he was totally immersed in what was marketed as an “educational” game. . . . The teacher came over and asked him what he was learning from it. There was a pause and Monville said: “Every fucking time I’m having fun, you try and teach me something. . . . The teacher to her everlasting credit said, Monville you’re right. He nodded his acknowledgement and without another word went back to his game.” A quotidian interaction between a student and a teacher becomes a landmark of understanding for Roth.

A highlight of the book’s third section, “Wild Berries Singing,” is an entertaining account of the genesis of a brief video opera, *Smart and Tart Juicing*, and the libretto Roth created with Carletta Joy Walker for an online competition for [somedancersandmusician.com](http://somedancersandmusician.com). I had written a piece, *Baa, Baa, Baa*, for the competition, which would involve a recording by a children’s chorus. I realized the piece was too pointedly political for the contest. When Roth asked about the competition, I encouraged him to enter. His delightful entry with Carletta Joy Walker was one of the contest winners, and as Roth relates, my piece, *Baa, Baa, Baa*, as a poetic text had an ongoing life in various venues at political performance events. As a chorus of sheep, Roth had no equal in presentation.

Roth’s *Health Proxy* is a unique book, which has no readily comparable equivalent. Anyone who has experienced the oscillating trajectory of life in the last few decades will enjoy viewing their own life through the prism of Roth’s recreation of his. To order this book click on <http://www.yuganta.com>. I urge you to read it, and revel in the important resonances it will trigger for you about the events in your own life and the thoughts that fill your mind.