

Dušan Šarotar

Nicomachus Reports

Translated by Rawley Grau

To Izabela, for reading on the road.

The villa is surrounded by a glassed-in terrace, where the writers eat breakfast; the view from there looks onto the lake, mantled in quivering light and quiet, little waves. In the distance no mountains visible, only lazily undulating forests of broadleaf trees; nevertheless, every morning as I gazed into the distance (and into the silence), I felt I was living on some magic mountain from which I would never again descend. If I do not leave this place, I thought, I will one day still be sitting here by the lake (in a wheelchair?), on the terrace in front of the villa, draped in a plaid blanket, my legs lifeless; I imagined myself walking across the Wannsee as if on feathers.

– Daša Drndić

Thoughts on the writings of travellers and seafarers need to be supplemented by an examination of the form they take: the diary. People who invest so much energy in travel cannot manage to note every place they have been, every thing they have seen. Travel means more to them than travelogue.

– Predrag Matvejević

We receive this album of sites from reverie with a prodigality that we would not find in many voyages.

– Gaston Bachelard

I

Nicomachus, a man of firm character, stands in the city square. He observes an ugly, extremely unpleasant incident taking place. Nicomachus is in doubt: should he intervene or simply watch from the sidelines? Later, much later, he will write about this in a book, he thinks, and will judge the situation according to his conscience.

Nicomachus was right; now, as I read him, time has shown that the incident had far-reaching consequences – the catastrophe is felt even today. The square, surrounded by a fence, is empty, Nicomachus is long dead, and nothing is left but a never finalized judgement written in a tentative hand, as a dilemma that remains, as Nicomachus himself put it entirely in keeping with the facts.

II

Nicomachus travels frequently in the land of his native tongue. He eavesdrops on the the local dialects, immerses himself in all that he hears, so long as he is able to make out the meaning; even more, he enjoys telling stories and is teaching himself the art of persuasion. Nicomachus explains: Everything has its own *logos*, language is echoed in language, and only silence is without translation.

III

Necessity, or an important invitation from the rector of a famous university, or maybe the enticing promise of fame, of immortality in a foreign language – we do not know the reason, but Nicomachus is now, for the first time in his life, travelling by express train to the lands of the north. Whether this is flight or fear of oblivion will never be known. Nicomachus does not report. Again, he merely observes with surprise the things taking place on a remote platform, away from the cathedral-like main station, and, through his glasses, looks over at the large black sign rocking gently above the waiting area, which lists cold and hot drinks on offer. Nicomachus is thirsty; he has been travelling many hours, the whole time absorbed in thought, but he does not understand the language that is offering him water. On a piece of paper the traveller writes: Nothing will quench the thirst of a heart that seeks the hidden meaning of the unknown.

IV

The weather accompanies him changeably. Nicomachus summarizes the situation over supper, sitting alone at a small table set for two, slicing into the cold fish, opening it, and picking out the sharp bones with his fingers, fearful of injuring his tongue. Now, in front of a stranger chatting with a lady beneath the dusty chandelier, he underscores the thought that the cold, the rain, and the deficiency of light are negatively affecting his mood. But nobody hears his words, words laced with dead sea, the scent of rosemary, and salt. I am becoming more and more like the air around me; the atmosphere is irritating the marrow in my bones.

He returns along a narrow and unfamiliar footpath. He is walking beside a shore, just as he used to do, only he knows he is living in an illusion: the shimmer of autumnal water is not the sea, the wind blows from an unfamiliar direction, for these are not his coordinates; in a foreign land, he now notices the white sails midway to the horizon and stops for a moment by the pier – rowers, still catching their breath, are resting in an octuple boat as the coxswain, through his horn, reads to them loudly from a breviary. The tired, motionless bodies sit broken in the narrow wooden torso, the long oars resting on the dark surface like a centipede. Emboldened by a lofty word, the creature rises above the lake and stands to attention on wooden legs. A victory anthem plays for them as they stagger away on crutches. Nicomachus, shaken, withdraws; looking for shelter under a nearby bridge, he sits down in a tent next to some homeless people. The sun is shining through the leaves onto his papers as he writes: In this regatta we will all perish in the end.

Walking – movement – heals the mind, Nicomachus says eventually, but a man in a black, lightweight outfit, intercepting him at a trot, responds sharply that only a brisk stride truly heals, it drives away the tumorous pest. Anyone familiar with the land by the cold sea, where the sun shines so stintingly it delights even the unknown street poet, who is absorbed in the word that takes him to that invisible core hidden between black bile and grey matter – he knows that there, deep inside him, shines an unchangeable sun, which you might glimpse for a mere second but whose light, whose gentle, golden gleam, will mark you for ages. So you wander the desolate landscape like a blind man, illuminated from within. Neither night nor flood can stop you. Nicomachus is free as a star, as the dust which the cornea of the Hubble is searching for.

The distances, he thinks, as he nearly collapses on a garden bench, the expanses between you and me are vast when I walk across frozen lakes, soggy plains, and wild highlands; infinities accumulate only in loneliness, time is the arc of the open sky, with the view made multiple, I dissolve in a cloud. But there is something that binds which you love more than infinities – tell us, Nicomachus.

VII

Insistently, the awareness forces its way into him: there will be war, Nicomachus hears people saying everywhere. For a long moment he stands in front of the wrought-iron gate, wondering if he should ring the bell and enter or wait to be called from the doorstep some distance away; or maybe it's better to slip off, to run down the one-way street (in the wrong direction of course) before the uniformed woman watching him from a car grabs him by the collar.

He has travelled far, too far, in search of a question that would match the answer. The answer is known to all, he hears it echoing in every language: May good tidings, stillness, and quiet inhabit him. Nicomachus, who has lived and walked through the fire of many wars, will not step away. Again he remembers the incident in the paved square. Was it crime? Injustice? Glory? Now he is standing in the well-tended, spacious garden that spreads in symmetry from the drive to the arches above the entrance, where guests in gleaming uniforms were once ecstatically greeted. The invitation, terse and formal, typed on a typewriter, had gone out cordially to a select company of lawyers, soldiers, authorized bureaucrats, logistics experts, pharmacists, and factory owners, especially manufacturers of varnishes, paints, and poisons; the experienced typist and discreet stenographer, who had been carefully chosen for her appearance and ancestry, is quiet, hardly noticed, as she flawlessly, without pounding, presses the keys of the well-polished machine behind a heavy curtain. The letter keys. Only the letter keys, the alphabet, precise words, concepts, rational sentences, laws, articles, and by-laws. The guests arrive individually, at carefully appointed intervals, one after the other, just as sentences and paragraphs follow each other in a book; a silent procession unfurls of stately black overcoats and dress uniforms, no one really noticing the evergreen trees in the peaceful park, which conceal the January sky; hidden to them forever is the mystery of the reflection on the surface of the lake, how it hovers in the morning mist, thinner and lighter than a tear in the eye. For none of them really knows, from that meagre invitation, how to interpret the intent of this early morning working breakfast, as was typed in the heading to the letter. It was winter, but a temporary lull was then prevailing, a pause after the outbreak of war; the worst is yet to come, someone thinks as he stands in the doorway and, not without difficulty, extends his arm and raises it high.

The scent of soldiery, of death, will not be washed away; an invisible stain still lingers somewhere in the dewy grass, like a fingerprint on the underside of a desk, like the creak of floorboards or the flowery scent of an ornamental wreath; afterwards, he surveys the lawn, the shrubbery, and the ancient pines, even as, from the wide terrace with its view of the morning lake, he watches with his inner eye the yachts and racing boats and rowers as they glide across the water in silent peace, since for them death is still far away.