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Midway through his short account of South Seas travel, *Paradise*, Larry McMurtry faces a crisis. It might be described as the reverse of the fantasy of being alone on an island with your favorite book. Instead, it has to do with the fear of being alone with no book at all. McMurtry has brought on board nine books. But none are favorites, and all are too short. Hardly out of port, he has already finished reading three. Even though the boat is fast approaching its destination, the Marquesas, McMurtry panics and retires to the ship’s library, where he discovers an unexciting autobiography by Katherine Graham and then a biography of a contract killer, in which is revealed the true story of the death of Jimmy Hoffa.

A narrative of reading continues to be embedded in McMurtry’s narrative, ranging from a ship companion who keeps trying to read Czeslaw Milosz’s *The Witness of Poetry*, only to be interrupted by his daughter as well as other passengers, through McMurtry’s preference at one point to read Melville’s *Typee* (from which he quotes) rather than to hike in the Marquesas, his purchase of two art books on Gauguin, or his discovery of Joan Didion’s *White Album* in the ship library (which gets him through a night). By the end, McMurtry is down to two books of his own, and confesses gratitude that one, Erik Erickson’s *Young Man Luther*, must be read slowly. He remains irritated that any book by Thor Heyerdahl has to be read at all. Eventually, McMurtry stands revealed as an author himself to many of his fellow passengers. One of them finds a French translation of his novel, *Terms of Endearment*, in the library. The man guards the book from envious others and is still reading when the ship docks.

What does all this mention of books and reading mean within the framework of a travel narrative, besides the fact that a bookish man cannot easily escape books? A number of things. For one, books are wondrously indiscriminate, not to say promiscuous. Anybody can read them—anytime. The books do not care. Or rather, their authors do not; McMurtry muses at one point on the curiosity of J.D. Salinger knowing that a real foxhunting English squire on board is reading *Catcher in the Rye*, while floating off Fatu Hiva, one of the Marquesas. What *would* Salinger say? McMurtry does not speculate further. My guess is, Salinger would say the same thing McMurtry himself does at the sudden spectacle of a reader of his own book: nothing. Authors know that
ultimately there is no predicting who will read a book, or why, and certainly where. For their part, readers are prepared to take books where they find them, especially in a pinch.

Nothing like travel to expose what a pinch entails: it is difficult for a book to dictate the conditions of its own reading. The assortment that McMurtry brought on board soon seems to have made him restless. Perhaps he began with a dream of reading on the trip comparable to the common fantasy of reading indulged in by thousands of people as they undertake their summer vacations: light stuff only—usually pages turners of some generic sort—just to ease lying in the sun and passing the time. Does such reading suffice? For a while, undoubtedly; if you ask no more of books than that they serve to decorate the circumstances of your life, you will seldom be disappointed—in a real sense, the books have been accorded little power to begin with. Apparently, however, McMurtry accorded them more. Indeed, he expected his circumstances to conform to his books. They did not. What he discovered, in effect, was what he already knew before the trip: there are too many books in the world. Not only is it impossible to read them all. It proves hapless merely to attempt to sustain a selection of one's own.

For readers, travel provokes such an attempt. One of the reasons I enjoyed Paradise is that it becomes the record of the author’s struggle to stop reading and enjoy traveling. To be fair, McMurtry probably would not agree with such a characterization. Most travel writers would not. Professionals, such as Paul Theroux, preeminently, deploy their reading so carefully that the reader never suspects how bookish the whole travel project really is, from the relevant prior travel writing authoritatively cited to the particulars of guidebook information randomly appropriated or the intelligence of venerable authors variously given. Not only do professionals undertake travel at all in order to produce a book about it. They read a considerable amount of books before, during, and after the trip. In some cases, it might even be possible to say that they go away in order to focus their reading, and even to stop reading. McMurtry, on the other hand, cannot stop, and, since he presumes to be writing a family memoir rather than a travel book, discloses no need to restrict his reading to the restrictions of the trip. If thereby the trip is fated to become bookish, so be it. There are, after all, many kinds of trips.

What interests me here is how all of them, nonetheless, are effectively imperiled by books. Why? Because the very nature of travel releases the implicit power of a book over its reader, which the normal circumstances of his or her life constrain. We cannot devote our lives wholly to reading. We have our duties, our obligations, our jobs. We live in a world where the act of reading a book is either comprehended as an eminently practical activity or else an affair of leisure. Even those of us who effectively read books for a living—authors and editors as well as professors—are governed by occasions of various kinds that prohibit reading. Only on a trip can we read for a sustained time
according to whim or fancy, exclusively. At least it is pleasant to think so. What *Paradise* dramatizes is that it is also agonizing to experience, because the right book never appears, gives way to the need for another even if it does, and opens out ultimately onto a world where the only consolation for a reader is not more travel but more books.

Why does anybody take a book along on a trip anyway? After all, few of us are as voracious readers (much less authors) as McMurtry, celebrated in part because he is well on the way to turning his home town, Archer City, Texas, into a gigantic bookstore. Most of us, though, have books in some way lodged in our lives. When we travel, it seems only natural to take a book or two along. Even the most faraway, exotic travel is seldom all travel, all the time. On any trip, we need to pause, reflect, relax. However, away from the circumstances that normally govern us, and now free to dictate new circumstances that liberate us, what do we find, if we are at all devoted to books? Reading can prove to be more seductive than traveling! Reading provides many of the same pleasures as traveling—chance encounters, rare trajectories—without any of the exertion. Moreover, a reading plan promises the logic of concentration and reason, free from the inevitable surprises or vicissitudes of a travel plan. Why go somewhere when you can read about it? No, why go anywhere except to read about it?

Ideally, reading complements traveling. But what an account such as *Paradise* reveals is that this is seldom actually the case. More often, in the experience of individual travelers—in this case his fellows passengers as well as McMurtry himself—books suddenly become vivid and visible at the heart of travel. We need them, it turns out, more than we are accustomed to imagine that we do. Reading is easily reborn while traveling not so much in order to clarify our experience as to become our experience. Of course, once felt this way, the reading experience takes on a life of its own, and much depends, as always, just on the choice of book. Once, for example, on a trip to Cyprus, I fretted so much at being unable to read William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (either Crete was too lovely or the book was too difficult) that it almost ruined the trip. Was its point to read the mammoth novel or to see Greece’s largest island? It did not seem to help to remember that I could read Gaddis anywhere, whereas I would probably never see Crete again.

I never have, and still have not read *The Recognitions*, either. It is easier to explain why I have failed to read the novel than failed to revisit the island: there are simply too many other novels. Virtually each one sits on its shelf with some reason to be taken down, some logic to be read. What to make of them all, in their impossible totality? Nothing. Life normally takes care of the question. In life, all the books that could be read simply do not appear as a totality. If they did, we might go mad. Instead, most obviously we just classify books, and thereby try to anticipate the possible occasions for which we might read them. To some, this strategy works better than it does
for others. For everybody, though, it finally fails. Much of the time? Most of the time? Hard to say. I would only have us consider the spectacle of McMurtry once again, panicked once finished barely a third of his own “totality.” My guess is, one distinct purpose for his travel was to make a tiny, intense selection of books to read, from among the hundreds or thousands he could have chosen, and then to try to be content with these and these only, period.

Alas, it was not to be. If the choice of one sovereign book for our prototypical desert island remains the preeminent way our culture recognizes the power of reading to substitute for living (now presumably no matter the use of cell phones and email), the reality of many different books somehow embedded in anyone instance of travel evokes the same power, only in a more fugitive fashion. Are there as many reasons to read a book than to take a trip? Again, hard to say. Far more certain is the power of books to disturb travel, by threatening it without another sort of dream entirely. This has to do with usual freedom from the constraints of home but home now imagined as a vast, intricate plan designed to keep books in their place—requisitely categorized, completely domesticated.

However, regardless of how many or how few of our books we take along, traveling is capable of disrupting our customary order and restoring the lost provocation of reading. It does not matter, I do not think, precisely what these provocations are. Significantly, McMurtry keeps his to himself, and simply takes the license of his reading for granted—precisely the opposite of the account his culture would oblige him to give away from the boat, when books once again have to compete with other books, the internet, and so many dismissive assumptions about why anybody reads anything that it is a wonder anybody does. To some readers, to be free of all this—just that—is reason enough to leave home, with a few books in tow. Indeed, to someone like McMurtry, the prospect of reading while traveling is equivalent to the promise of paradise.