

# Imagination

For the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, imagination was the essential element in the making of what she, along with Kant, called ‘the world citizen’. Without imagination, it was impossible to develop that ‘enormously enlarged empathy through which I could know what actually goes on in the mind of all others’—an enlarged empathy that underpinned judging or critical thinking. ‘Critical thinking is possible only where the standpoint of all others are open to inspection,’ she wrote in her *Lectures on Kant’s Philosophy*.

Hence, critical thinking while still a solitary business has not cut itself off from ‘all others’...[By] force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves potentially in a space which is public, open to all sides; in other words, it adopts the position of Kant’s world citizen. To think with the enlarged mentality—that means you train your imagination to go visiting.<sup>1</sup>

Arendt saw the storyteller as the most potent stimulant of the imagination. By providing vivid pictures of the lives of others, the storyteller transported the reader into other worlds—in other words, the writer (or artist) ‘train[ed] your imagination to go visiting’.

The writers and artists whose lives are discussed in this section all explore ways in which the imagination can go visiting, whether from ‘home’, as in the case of Eleanor Dark, or from ‘away’, as in the cases of Jean Devanny, Christina Stead and the gay artist David McDiarmid. Because these are real lives, however, or representations of real lives, this process of imaginative visiting is not simple, as Mary Besemeres shows us in her discussion of three English-speaking autobiographical writers who struggle with the problems of making a life in a non-English-speaking country.

Nancy Paxton explores the effects of travel, migration and ideas of internationalism derived from the communist movement in the 1930s on New Zealand novelist Jean Devanny. She traces her development from a somewhat superficial ‘cosmopolitan’ writer for the international imperial romance market to a serious, gendered ‘transnational’ subject, who conveyed in her 1935 novel, *The Virtuous Courtesan*, the complexity of colonial, imperial and national identities and of sexual, racial and class relationships. *The Virtuous Courtesan* does not merely exoticise the world of 1930s Sydney; instead, it takes us into a former colonial city whose quiet world is shattered by the outside world. ‘Jews! Gentiles! Foreign words,’ Devanny writes. ‘Suddenly a gusty hate for the strange new forces pulsed and festered in the gigantic web of the world’s social fabric surged up in Faith and was expelled in a gush of tears.’<sup>2</sup>

Susan Carson looks at the responses of two Australian writers, Christina Stead and Eleanor Dark, to that same period of world upheaval. Stead, the endless traveller, whose only 'home' is her lover, Bill Blake, and Eleanor Dark, who lived all her adult life in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, have been characterised respectively as the transnational and the regional writer. Carson demonstrates, however, that both were responding in their work to the national and global pressures of a world approaching war. Stead, in her near-ethnography of international finance set in Paris, *House of All Nations*, and Dark, in her picture of settled and smug Sydney, *Waterway*, critique financial exploitation at the global and national levels and, like Jean Devanny, at the private level of gender relations. Imagination, in both cases, takes them from their local location into the larger world and then home again with a greater understanding of the complex relationship between 'home' and 'away'.

Mary Besemeres points to the fact that most travel writing is about looking rather than listening: Mary Louise Pratt's 'Imperial Eyes' or Paul Theroux's 'seeing-man'. Travelling, in the meaning Arendt gives it, is much more difficult and the power dynamics are more complex, she argues, when it comes to 'language travel'. Examining Gillian Bouras's *A Foreign Wife*, Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French* and John Mateer's *Semar's Cave*, Besemeres demonstrates the difficulties of communication, not just of words, but more importantly of feelings, that inhibit the traveller's ability to 'go visiting'.

The gay artist David McDiarmid, whose creative response to his chosen life in New York is examined by Sally Gray, had no such problems when he visited New York in 1977 and later moved there permanently. He shared not only a language with his fellow New Yorkers; he had already inhabited the city in his imagination, from the advertisements of his childhood to the accounts of gay life in American gay liberationist publications he read as a teenager. 'New York' allowed him to make a life and develop an art that was both 'mobile and located', neither 'Australian' nor 'American'.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Arendt, Hannah 1978, 'Appendix/judging: excerpts from lectures on Kant's political philosophy', *The Life of the Mind*, edited by Mary McCarthy, Harcourt, New York, pp. 255–72, esp. 257.

<sup>2</sup> Devanny, Jean 1935, *The Virtuous Courtesan*, Macaulay, New York, pp. 143–4.