

[E S S A Y]

PARABOLIC BY DESIGN

ROSS GIBSON BUILDS A LITERARY BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO SYDNEY PUBLICATIONS THAT APPEARED AT THE TIME OF THE BUILDING OF THE HARBOUR BRIDGE AND PONDERES THE FATE OF SYDNEY IN THE LIGHT OF THEIR VISIONS

HOW to understand Sydney as it came into its modernity? Let's imagine ourselves there in the early 1920s. The European war must have been a vivid memory still, remaining palpable in the way it had scythed into the southern world and sliced a generation of men from so many thousands of Australian families. And the spectre of the 1919 influenza pandemic would have lingered too—so distressing to recall how, in the wake of the bewildered soldiers' homecoming, the virus had killed legions of the waiting young and old.

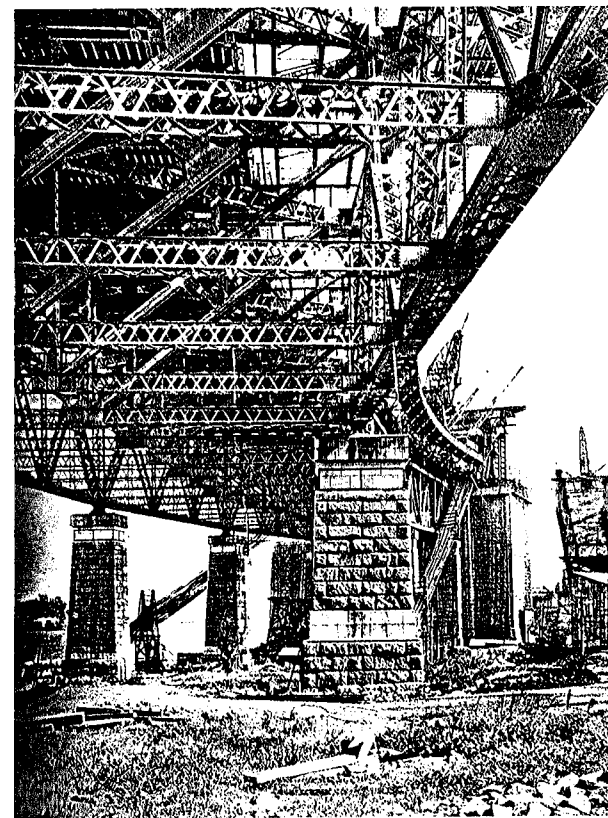
In 1923 in Sydney, against this backdrop of universal morbidity, Jack Lindsay founded a journal called *Vision*. It was to survive only four issues but it made some noise while it lasted, and it resonated for many years after its demise. *Vision* was a cantankerous enterprise co-edited with Kenneth Slessor and Frank Johnson, and if Slessor's memoirs are anything to go by, the three of them squabbled and sulked in full view of each other, to the extent that in years to come Slessor would put it about that *Vision* was not really his fault.¹ Lindsay was living in Bondi that year, and Slessor would rattle out there on the tram ostensibly to discuss manifestos,

but mainly to talk with Janet Lindsay, whom he thought was at least as good a poet as her husband. When it came to the serious business of production, most of the printer's meetings and layout sessions seem to have occurred in Kings Cross, that cosmopolitan village of shifty glamour.

Meanwhile in that same year, almost certainly unknown to the *Vision* crew, an Anglican rector and photography enthusiast named Frank Cash had commenced an energetic paean to the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Stage-managed from his vocational base at Christ Church Lavender Bay, Cash's project led him daily up and down the enormous emerging arch and led in 1930 to the publication of a 500-page book entitled *Parables of the Sydney Harbour Bridge: Setting Forth the Preparation for, and Progressive Growth of, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, to April 1930*.

Cash's book was begun as the surveys and house demolitions commenced on the North Shore, and it was self-published when the arch was still incomplete, two years before the grand opening in 1932. Taking shape along with the bridge itself, *Parables* was a continuous rapture. 'The object of this book is to give delight,' Cash declared as he seized every opportunity to probe into the design and animation of a structure that he came to believe was a solid message from on high.

Enthralled as he saw the mighty curved frame take shape and hold its form, Cash regarded the bridge as proof that a contract had been forged with cosmic forces:



BRIDGE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

FROM FRANK CASH, *PARABLES OF THE SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE*

The Bridge is truly *sacramental*. It displays ... day by day, a further and progressive visible expression of a faculty, which can be seen and known, in no other fashion. And in proportion as the steel tracery webs out fascinating figures amidst the fleecy cloud \ddot{s} (so lofty it would seem), so there will be displayed *outwardly* for our delight, more and more of, *the invisible originative faculty of man*. (p. xi)

Trained in engineering and metallurgy before taking up his religious vocation, Cash believed he knew something of the ideal principles that held the physical world together. And since he had full access to the design blueprints, the engineering workshops and the foundries that were bringing the bridge into material reality, he felt authorised to reveal its inherent soul. Both the engineer and the prelate in him were plainly ecstatic about the bridge, about the ingenuity and the energy that were made manifest as its arc extended across the heretofore disabling gulf of the harbour. He felt no need for reticence:

This is the greatest and most important work of its kind ever undertaken by man, and it displays outwardly, with most shining light, a faculty which men often call *reason*, and others call, the *image of god*. (p. xi)

Deploying the repetitive rhetorical techniques of great Anglican sermonising, he stacked up his litany of wonders:

What design therefore, have the engineers unfolded out of the kind of steel selected? They have designed the best Bridge that accumulated engineering genius can devise. No person in the whole world can question the lasting quality and strength of it ... It is designed to withstand the tremendous strain of rushing trains suddenly braked to a stand-still, to support the live load of endless motors, and hurrying pedestrians, and to weather without vibration the force of a raging gale. (p. 166)

Cash's rapture was that of a Chosen One to whom was being revealed the conception of this marvel, this bridge between the secular and the transcendental: 'It is a mystery, that out of the mind of man, this giant structure is being fabricated, and so built to resist the ravages of time' (p. 405). Ever the exegete, he offered the *Parables* as a talisman, hopeful that the book could do the same work as the bridge: each great project might provide a material means to know some of the immaterial designs or *visions* that organise the world.

Though based within the same few square miles of waterfront, *Vision* and *Parables* were operating in markedly different economies and cultural milieux. At first glance, there is no obvious or easy connection between them. Yet they held a fundamental precept in common: each was unabashedly *vitalist* in its zeal to

overwhelm enervation and inaction. *Parables* asserted that 'the Sydney Harbour Bridge is an undertaking of such importance and magnitude, that interest in it is not merely local or Australian, or even limited to the British Empire', but it also 'commands the scientific interest of the entire world'. *Vision* sought to coax readers out of the 'depths of devitalisation touched in the War'. Its manifesto, published in the first issue, proclaimed: 'We would vindicate the youthfulness of Australia, not by being modern but by being alive.' Youth was defined, there as 'any condition of mind which is vital, which ascends' and as the best defence against the 'physical tiredness, jaded nerves and a complex superficiality [that] are the stigmata of Modernism'.²

Vitalism was antithetical to ailments such as agonism, shock and lamentation, and it was thus at odds with everything that postwar, European-defined modernism seemed to represent at that time. T.S. Eliot's serene, cerebral response to the Great War, *The Waste Land*, had been published a year before the first number of *Vision*. It is unclear whether Lindsay had read Eliot's masterwork when the magazine was launched, but Slessor recalls having already encountered and 'heartily disliked' pieces such as 'Sweeney Erect' (1920).³ Only later would vitalism be brought inside the modernist frame and become the energetic core of a contentious international movement. The vitalism in *Vision* can be understood as some kind of precursor to an alternative trajectory of modernism—the dionysian, energetic one represented by Picasso, John Dos Passos and later Jackson Pollock—even though Lindsay and his cronies were setting themselves apart from the movement as they understood it at the time. This is not to argue that *Vision* was influential on global modernism; but it can be seen as an early symptom of the ardour that eventually defined dionysian modernism.

The antipodean vitalism represented by both *Vision* and *Parables* derives from a metaphysics of design dating at least as far back as the utopian *visions* first sketched during the inaugural years of the colony of New South Wales. Consider, for example, Erasmus Darwin's 1789 ode, 'Visit of Hope to Sydney Cove, near Botany Bay'. As Darwin's allegorical figure of Hope surveys the shores of the new dominion, she is thrilled by a vision:

There shall broad streets their stately walls extend ...
There the proud arch, colossus-like, bestride
Yon glittering streams, and bound the chasing tide ...⁴

In Hope's prospect, a vaulting connection across the harbour is thus prefigured and a foundational design set in place. All that's needed are the right clearances and the

ROSS GIBSON

right developers sufficiently energised to build according to such templates.

Parables and *Vision* were linked by a shared faith in the possibility of some kind of social alchemy that could be realised by the bringing of new treasures into the world. Each tried to deliver the treasure in different ways: in the case of *Parables*, by proselytising divine schemes of industrial engineering; in the case of *Vision*, by breaking from allegedly moribund European habits. Anticipating some new synthesis of civic vitality, each hoped to harness a sum of energy in their community. Each saw opportunities to transcend the tawdry insufficiencies of contemporary politics in the wake of the Great War.

For his part, Lindsay insisted:

We use vision with none of its spiritualistic connotation, with no reference to the visionary. Vision is the power of mental sight that defines the concrete image, and has nothing to do with 'visions'... For what the imagination creates by its power of defining imagery really exists, and the ability to see beyond the actual thing to its imaginative analogy in a higher condition of sense is Vision.

His vision was Platonist, certainly, but it was also humanist, to the extent that it urged citizens to rely on their own faculties to bring visionary form into everyday experience:

no thought or feeling can come into being without its expression; and till the creative image of emotion is liberated, emotion must be amorphous. In Form lies the mystery of all Life. What forces strive and awake in your experience of emotion, have been given to Life in the past by those who gave Form to Life. It is for you to find how much consciousness you can absorb and ultimately impress with a fresh structure of self.⁵

Cash's understanding of the urge to design and build was charged with what Lindsay would have ridiculed as 'spiritualistic connotation', but it was a world-creating drive that matched Lindsay's:

The *Image of God* comprises the faculty of the intellect, possessed by man, the power within himself of creating and originating ideas, out of which art has grown, science has grown, in fact our whole modern world has grown.

*The growth of our present world,
the extraordinary advance in science,
are the natural blossoms of
man being made in the image of God*

Herein is a truth, surprising when put into plain language,

*the Harbour Bridge displays outwardly,
the meaning of the image of God.*

It displays a faculty possessed by man alone, and giving him the superiority over all animal life, and all the works of God. (p. 402)

Cash's parables set out to show how all the fashioned matter that was going into the bridge could be understood as 'an outward expression of an inward faculty ... a visible sign of the invisible originative power of man to develop and carry designs through' (p. xi). The *hewn granite*, for instance, was an incorruptible gift of nature to society; the *mixed concrete* could be poured into foundational bedrocks to prove humanity's readiness to shape and cleave itself stoutly to the God-given world; and the *steel* showed how people could harness divine nous by making a substance forged in a crucible that was almost as primordial as Creation itself (p. 355). For Cash, every feature of the bridge offered a chance to peer into the great, godly design. He sensed a mystery that would always elude full human comprehension but would demand exegesis. His book proposed that the bridge should be understood as a superhuman gift to the world. By carrying the vision through from abstract proposition to material completion, the builders of the bridge were delivering a great 'benefit-making structure ... an uninterrupted highway that is possible of linking up the two halves of this splendid City'. Conveying an immense 'number of vehicles, trains and pedestrians across the span of unrivalled scenery', the bridge was a 'blessing upon the people' (p. 459).

Although so divergent in many respects, *Vision* and *Parables* were closely aligned in the way they both envisaged a city destined for alchemical transformation. Indeed, if we jump forward to the 1950s and ponder how automobiles took hold in Sydney so quickly and how the roadways hold it captive still, we can see that this commitment to the energetic transformation of the urban domain—a commitment inaugurated in 1788—can be traced through the more general civic urges and imperatives of modernity that resounded through the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and were temporarily arrested only by the externally enforced lulls of the Depression and the Second World War.

Not that these urges have brought all the benefits that were so simply expected. In a city endowed with an extraordinarily lush and accommodating natural environment, there's long been a sense that the best way to win the greatest riches in the place is by matching its natural sublimity with undertakings that might be politely described as 'industrially sublime'—monumental public projects such as

the current water desalination plant. True, the gorgeous environment, in all its elemental and hedonistic plenitude, is the city's blessing. But this sublimity might also be seen as Sydney's doom because of the complacent sense that the environment is so resplendent and so beneficent that it will absorb any built imposition. Imagine the response of Erasmus Darwin's symbolical Hope if she were to return, appropriately more hard-bitten now. She might mutter something like this before giving up on the whole sorry business:

At the end of any day you can amble down to the shoreline. Get the bridge framed in view as you like it. While the sun burnishes the sandstone and glimmers off the leopard-skin water, you hear a massed orchestra of alarms and machinery. Sniff the narcotic sea-breezes. What's that alkaline scum? You get to wondering, might this be the city's final design and destiny? Is it nothing more than some do-it-yourself contraption, at last? Is it really just a fiscal device that gets tooled up, greased and torqued now, shunted into profitable gear by any bold brigand in charge of an erector set? Has all that 1920s vision and vitalism come to this? All your imperialist braggadocio of 1788? Well, yes, maybe it *has* come to this. Aren't the reservoirs drying up as you gaze down on them? There's smoke eddying off the westerly tollways. Traffic is crawling and stuttering into the mouth of a tunnel. Can't you hear some ponderous gears catching and grinding? It's as if some part of the whole jerry-built machine has started to buckle and burn ...

NOTES

I wish to thank Colin Chestnut (one of the great unsung historians of everyday life in Sydney) for unearthing my copy of *Parables* and for his snippets of extra information about Frank Cash. Thanks also to Brenda Glover for her ingenious work in uncovering some of the tracks that Cash has left behind. More remain to be uncovered.

1. Kenneth Slessor, 'Spectacles for the Fifties' (1952), in Dennis Haskell (ed.), *Kenneth Slessor: Poetry, Essays, War Despatches, War Diaries, Journalism, Autobiographical Material and Letters* (St Lucia, Qld, 1991), p. 163.
2. 'Foreword', *Vision*, no. 1 (1923), p. 2.
3. 'Spectacles for the Fifties', p. 166.
4. Reprinted in Roger Lonsdale (ed.), *The New Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse* (Oxford, 1984), p. 505.
5. *Vision*, no. 1, p. 3; no. 4 (1924), p. 4.

[Z I N E]

Green Grass: Notes on Sydney Park

Refuse has been placed in disused brickpits around the St. Peters area since April 1952. Detailed records of pit depths and tipped materials do not exist, but it is known that on the whole, tipping has been controlled, with individual layers of refuse being interspersed with soil cover, and that 1976 no putrescible material has been tipped...Settlements will be large, non-uniform and generally unpredicable.

Sydney Park Plan of Management, July 1982, p. 25

It's summer. We let the street taper out like a home movie, the subdued, flickering terraces. A police van, someone howling *I'm sorry, don't die. I'm sorry*. Three police with black latex gloves stand around watching what might happen. We grimace and turn away. The hollow warehouses of Erskineville are made of playing cards, dry scrunched-up weeds, sun-bleached litter caught against railyard fences. The men are exhibits behind the glass of corner pubs. The park hovers across the road, as surprising as an ocean liner.

With the wash of traffic behind us there is the sound of a man practising trumpet beneath the brick kilns. He walks back and forth so as not to stand still. Two joggers, their arms plaited with muscles, take turns completing chin-ups from a tree branch. Deep inscriptions in the bark, a countenance of all our lost days.

Below, someone is lying on a hill looking at the sky; above, a stroller chips across another hill like the fine minute hand of a watch. Grandness is what swells, minuteness slashes it with detail. Every shadow throws ropes over the crewcut grass, sculpted from landfill. Dogs hurtle towards tennis balls arcing above the oval. Ghostly flashes, the velvet hum of raves.