



The Frieze

PART I

*An introduction to Franceschetto Cybo, son of
Pope Innocent VIII and husband of Maddalena de Medici, with some
words on his importance to both families.*

I told myself what I wanted to achieve by introducing these characters in the opening four chapters was the creation of a kind of frieze, inspired by a quotation from Burkhardt, from his Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, on poetic development from the canzoni form.

“Under these circumstances the poems naturally formed no complete whole, and might just as well be half or twice as long as they now are. Their composition is not that of a great historical picture, but rather that of a frieze, or of some rich festoon entwined among groups of picturesque figures. And precisely as in the figures or tendrils of a frieze we do not look for minuteness of execution in the individual forms, or for distant perspectives and different planes, so we must expect little of the kind from these poems.”

Well, what follows are ‘picturesque figures,’ anyway.

When Franceschetto Cybo reached
The age when he could start to plan
His life, he timidly beseeched
His father for a man-to-man
Discussion of the terms of their

Relationship and finally aired
What since he was a child he'd feared:
He'd be disowned, no father's tears.
For, born an unacknowledged child
Of one who chose as Pope the name
Of Innocent, who made his fame
Before his office for his wild,
Debauched embodiment of all
Declaimed as cause for Rome to fall ...

Just made it more integral for
His claim to credibility
To place a wall without a door
Between the way he used to be
And what, in finest robes of white
He claimed, both wooden and contrite,
To have become upon the throne.
So bastard sons were on their own.
And yet this father realized
That Franceschetto's talents were
Beyond the gifts he could confer.
In ways the Pope was well advised
To keep within his arsenal
A force unschooled and prodigal.

For Innocent became the Pope
As victor in the war between
Two rival factions. Now his hope
Was that he'd quell the Florentine
Cabal of one Della Rovere
Who had, since thwarted, put on airs
Of one usurped by votes that cost,
In coins of gold, a fortune lost
For Innocent, and now, exiled
As Cardinal in Florence, seemed
Content to wait, and slowly schemed

Against a Vatican defiled,
 Impoverished and torn apart,
 With nothing sacred but its art.

With such a threat, the choice was now
 For Innocent to hold his throne.
 He had to realize just how
 He'd face his options on his own:
 To fill the coffers that were bare
 Or meet his fate in grave despair,
 One sure to face a brutal end,
 No allies left who could defend
 Him, given that his power relied
 Upon his gift for alchemy,
 Transmuting every enemy
 Into a wealthy man, on side
 For the designs of his empire –
 A war was all it would require.

In my notes from this time: "I want to evoke the sudden development of dramaturgy and perspective that occurs during this period. I'll create a marked transition where static perspectives become dynamic as they become embedded in a narrative, and the frieze comes to life." I was already writing commentary for posterity, it seems, preening for an invisible audience.

The first figure here is Franceschetto Cybo, the illegitimate son of Pope Innocent VIII. So much of what occurs in Ocular centers around the decisions and direction of Lorenzo de Medici, by all accounts the model for Machiavelli's Prince. Yet in my theme and plotting I wanted to present in Cybo's character a strong counterweight, a kind of photonegative of how power and authority was exercised. I wanted Cybo's story to be the corrective to all the kitsch about Lorenzo heralding a golden age. Cybo was just as much a creation of these times.

As his kind was all too common in mine. When I hear the old snobs still working at Vidler's complain about the vulgarians they must deal

with – inevitably with some racist remark about the Saudi, the Indian, the Chinese in London shopping in Knightsbridge and looking for the gaudiest trinkets and the loudest, logo-emblazoned clothing that can declare their new wealth to the world – the underlying argument about this “primitive” sort of client (as Connie Vidler’s daughter called them – oh Lucy, you never really knew your father) is that they typify the steady decline in culture and values here in Europe. Apparently it really all began with Maggie Thatcher.

I don’t even bother to argue with them anymore, tell them about the Barone Lanza di Strabias and the Marquesa Contis of King Umberto’s court during Mussolini’s years in power, the dark comedy of their embrace of the modern in all its sleek, chrome-plated emptiness. There were too many models for Cybo’s thuggishness among the trumped-up minor aristocrats racing their motorcycles out on the dirt tracks by the factories, with their amphetamine addictions, their love of American prize fighting and “negro” dancing. Cybo the prodigal was my contemporary.

For every campaign waged in lands
 Unknown to most brings great success.
 The poorest soldier understands
 The more he plunders there, the less
 His glory fades on his return.
 Nobility was his to earn
 And riches from each dark crusade
 Would etch the map in routes of trade
 Through cities of the Caliphate
 Where so much of the ancient world
 Was just a tapestry unfurled
 To please a prince and educate
 The brotherhood in pagan thought
 Concealed in texts covertly taught.

Such plans required complicity
 With houses that had much to gain
 From conquest and duplicity

For private wealth and power attained
Where Innocent had cause to hope
Medici would support a Pope.
Lorenzo had in his designs
A wish to join two family lines
By offering his daughter to
This bastard Franceschetto's arms,
With a belief a woman's charms
Could mend a broken soul anew.
It was a pact that needed just
The Church's blessing and its trust.

Yet any expedition planned
And sanctioned by the Holy See
Was simpler when the foreign land
Assured an easy victory.
That quickly changed when forces of
The Ottomans attacked above
The latitudes within the realm
Of Rome and seemed to overwhelm
Otranto's battlements without
Enormous losses to their fleet.
Within just days came a complete
Surrender of this old redoubt.
The wise in Rome knew such a threat
Might force a war all would regret.

A culture of defence prevailed
Where those who harboured grand designs
For empire's increase simply failed
To move those on the battle lines.
But once Otranto was reclaimed
The pagan roots of faith were blamed
For weakening the church's hold
Upon the flock. The clerics told
Of parables of Babylon

Rewritten like a book of hours
From ancient sources, occult powers
To paint a godless pantheon
Within the mind of every man –
Rome had to show it took a stand.

And still the curia would sell
Indulgences to those who had
Grave fears that they were bound for hell.
Expensive guilt sufficed to pad
The figure of the Church's wealth,
Accounts infused with spiritual health
Replenished by a Papal nod
And one lump sum to square with God.
The litany of compromise,
The principles debased, told in
Confessionals, to air each sin
Concealed in sharply fashioned lies,
Worn for the world like widow's weeds
To mourn the soul's claim to its deeds ...

Would prove a most effective means
For Innocent to proudly claim
His talents shone behind the scenes
To batten throne and shun the fame
Of those before him who would play
The humble saint, who turned away
From worldly gain to dedicate
His life to those less fortunate.
Best leave the theatre to those
Who felt the need to sway the crowd.
All he required was an avowed
Defender of his realm. He chose
Franceschetto to secure
Alliances new arms ensured.

All these years later, I read “Best leave the theatre to those / Who felt the need to sway the crowd” as a dig at my sister Olivia, who had just had her first successes with the RSC as Katherine in Henry V. I was jealous, catty, resentful of the freedom she was allowed because our mother and father just presumed she would be on stage for a few years before she married well. Had I known what the pursuit of her career would cost her over the years or what an act of theatre my more conventional line of work would become, perhaps I would have chosen different lines here.

He gave his boy the power to build
 A force that could police the states,
 A threadbare rationale distilled
 From this corrupt pontificate’s
 Belief that if an enemy
 Could be declared, its infamy
 Lay in its power to be concealed
 Within the feminine, revealed
 By practices occult, profane,
 A lustful nature, welcoming
 The way the fallen angel’s wing
 Would cloak at night the mortal stain
 From base desires that lay within
 Each woman’s love of carnal sin.

The worst of these had secret ways
 To purge the living consequence
 Of appetites the heart betrays
 Where virtue offers no defence.
 The power they had could undermine
 The church’s claim to grand design
 By exercising such control
 Of transmutations of the soul
 Made real, just like the sacrament,
 Through alchemy and arcane rite,

Strange liturgies they would recite,
Enrapt in dark experiment,
Such women were identified
As heresy personified.

So suddenly this reprobate
Who, since he was a bastard child
Had found no cause to demonstrate
He would in time outgrow his wild,
Impetuous impulses to
Map vice's darkened avenues,
Or cultivate himself beyond
The few pursuits that he was fond
Of – gambling, brawling, drinking, and
His masquerading as a prince,
Had gained the power to convince
The sycophants of Rome who'd stand
To win the most from his dark deeds.
Each empire sanctions what it needs.

If he could manage to portray
In married life the figure of
A man once lost who found his way
Again through his belief in love,
As credible as nuptials were
Within this world, who would deter
The daughter of Lorenzo – this
Sweet Maddalena's wedded bliss,
If bliss itself could be defined
As mutual relief from fear?
Each family's power was but a mere
Bright flash before a slow decline
From great prestige and influence
To jaded nights of decadence.

So much of this plot comes down to Antony Farrell – whom I have really not thought about for a decade or more. Antony, the ex-priest who came out of All Souls and just magically found himself with champions and supporters within the Curia who had secured his position.

We met through Harry, who had known Antony for some time. Harry was like the art world's courtier for those mandarins who professed their love of art in Mussolini's government, so it was inevitable that Farrell would find a way to charm himself into his circle, without anyone ever figuring out how he got there in the first place. Antony had a fine and supple mind and an innate understanding of power and politics. He had that dancer's physique and the soft, chestnut coloured hair with the Clark Gable forelock that would have made him almost dashing and elegant if he hadn't been so slyly self-effacing. Yet there was something else too, something half-starved in him. His eyes lit up at life then flickered out quickly, as if he could not regenerate the battery power in his soul.

I was stand-offish with him at first when we met at a private dinner of Harry's in Milan, just before one of his vernissages. Farrell was so brilliant, Harry said. He knew so much about Old Masters. Well, if he was so brilliant and charming, I had thought, surely he'll come to me and show an interest in what I do. And he never did. Yet the sly grins we shared at the dinner table and the roll of the eyes at what some old pedant would say was enough for me to believe Antony was at least an ally.

It was the work that really brought us together. There were moments throughout the two or three years we were engaged with "the Othello project" for MI6 that we could both share our doubts, our incredulousness at some of the demands we were working under.

In time Farrell trusted me enough to tell me how the Othello project came into being. There were two Irishmen among the Curial staff at the Vatican, working under the Cardinal Secretary of State: Dermot Quigley and Bernard Delegarde. I had only met them briefly in the winter of '41 and I'm sure that was how they preferred it, given their plans. Antony said he owed Delegarde everything for how he found him the archivist's position at the Vatican. "Barney," who looked like the spawn of an Irish

priest and a bulldog, had been there for Antony from the moment he left the priesthood. I considered it best not to ask why. Delegarde and Quigley – who was always badly shaven, his olive skin nicked from his cheeks to his neck – were a kind of Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern in the end, sent out on a fool's errand from those higher up within the Curia, whom they would never speak about. They needed a “boy on the ground” to liaise with MI6 and the painters involved, and to ensure there was at no time a risk about the absolute secrecy of the project. That secrecy was less about the risks involved in the public finding out than the Vatican itself. Barney knew that only a fallen priest like Antony could take on that role because, at the root of it, the Othello Project was a plan to undermine Pius and risk not only his position but his life, to save the greatest paintings in the Vatican's possession.

Pius, for all his celebrated skills as a diplomat was, as Antony described him, “a problem.” Quigley and Delegarde could barely speak of him without muttering profanities. The Curia had watched Pius entertain Hitler's errand boys, allowing Goebbels a private audience and a tour of the Vatican's portrait collection, and they knew the Pope was less of a diplomat than a useful idiot who was naïve about how far the Nazis would go in their demands for complicity. Those who took care of the artwork had no illusions about Goebbels's interest in the paintings. Hitler's “Heritage Department” had plans for amassing the greatest collection of artworks possible for relocation to Germania, and the Vatican would certainly not be spared. Whether Pius was oblivious or at heart complicit did not matter in the end; something had to be done.

I always figured it was Harry who made Quigley and Delegarde aware of me and the services I might offer. Yet years later, over a drink in London, Antony told me that MI6 actually reached out to Connie Vidler first and he was the one who pulled me in, knew who to bribe so I could get the right visa to stay in Rome. Sir Constant clearly intuited something about the Kluge ambition, how both my father and I had a talent for shape shifting.

And so it came to be then, from
Such little expectation that
This Franceschetto would become
A man of substance. So much sat
Upon his shoulders now to bear
Than simply fathering an heir
That would enfold the Holy See
Within the principality
The House of Medici could claim.
However, he (dimly) seemed aware
This cabal of della Rovere
Had interests also in this game,
Would plot his possible demise
With regular reports from spies.

No one among the court of Rome
Would he entrust with what was shared
Within the walls of any home.
Built from these fragile bonds, he aired
The thoughts and fears that haunted him
As soon as sunlit rooms would dim
Among his troupe of sycophants
And parasites that knew the dance
Of servitude within the tune
Whose cadence was camaraderie
Despite the chords of misery
That underscored his picayune
Accounts of minor battles won
(In this he was his father's son).

He truly was a man made for
His times, despite what some would say
That to be schooled in love, not war
And to be cultured in the way
That one could quote the ancients, trill
The sweetest melodies, yet fill

An adversary's heart with fear
 The instant when it became clear
 One's name and honour were at stake
 Was to be favoured in an age
 When in the square, or on the stage
 Each man seemed almost free to make
 If not a prince, a courtier of
 Himself – when fortunate in love.

Yet love had never been a part
 Of any schooling he had done.
 Whatever stirred within his heart,
 Just like his claim to be the son
 Of Innocent had been denied
 Legitimacy, so he tried
 To cultivate a common touch
 Allowing him to show not much
 Of interest in a life beyond
 What gratified the basest drives.
 Within this underworld he thrived,
 Found meaning in fraternal bonds
 Among the battle-hardened men
 Who, Roman born, Rome would defend.

By the time I had begun Ocular Proof I was really looking back into my own years in a kind of underworld. The moment of my initiation was when I met Harry Maes, an art dealer who became famous for the network of art forgers he kept commissioned during the war for work he sold to the Nazis.

This all eventually caught up with him and he was tried, imprisoned, and executed in Berlin for acts of treason against the Reich. This was a charge he also could have faced in Britain, given what he divulged of the plot Antony Farrell and I became involved in. Yet if Harry was guilty of anything, it was his deep understanding that every belief or ideology or faith had become, like the artwork he peddled, simply transactional

in value. In another time, Harry would have been an artist himself, but he had put his shape-shifting skills to use as a kind of nihilistic experiment to see how far he could go. These conceptual artists now that claim Duchamp as one of their forefathers, they should really look to men like Harry. He could have done as much or more to change the game of the art world had he lived.

There was some question as to whether Harry Maes was his real name at all. I had heard he'd taken the name Harry from Harry Kessler, the art collector and part-time diplomat for Germany who became the "Red Count." Maes was one of Kessler's boys, they said, and Kessler always considered it his mission to give these brief flings of his some culture. Maes was, as they say, an apt pupil.

He spent the years after the Great War in Antwerp, then in Amsterdam, an actor and director and then an impresario who mixed among a few interesting painters and composers and con men. All of them made it through the Second World War and wandered from city to city, staying off the street by doing whatever backwork they could carry off. I remember turning on the television late at night in a hotel in Zurich, this must have been '74 or '75, and there on the screen, in some horrible American movie, was one of them that Harry had introduced to me at an exhibition, with a speaking part as a Nazi. Harry would have survived the war as well, I'm sure, had he not been the one among his group who proved useful to the powerful.

By 1935, Studio Maes in Milan had exhibited some of the most successful of the painters and sculptors Il Duce's regime considered fit for purchase. You would be wrong to imagine this was all forgettable work. There was a Morandi, a Carra, a di Chirico show. Even Tamara de Lempicka sold well, with Harry as her dutiful and faithful champion.

Yet Harry was not one to trust his run of luck in Italy. One of his better customers had told him about a certain circle of collectors and self-styled connoisseurs in Germany, newly moneyed and eager to outdo each other, who were looking for work of the great Dutch and German masters of the Northern Renaissance. The Fuhrer himself, he was told, no matter how philistine his tastes were about contemporary work, had an eye for Rembrandts and Vermeers, and if one was ambitious and

well connected, it was a very wise move indeed to be considered a man of taste in the failed painter's eyes. Harry's bold, brilliant idea was to establish a secret network of painters from all over the continent that could supply these new "connoisseurs" with a flawless collection of fakes on demand.

In 1942, when I first met him in the St. Regis Hotel in Rome, he had just begun to deal with these wealthy Germans who wanted "real art, not the degenerate shit you get in Berlin." I immediately liked the look of him with his auburn hair pomaded just like Fred Astaire's, his tailored dinner jacket, the rose in his lapel. He knew I was in the market for a certain client and rhymed off what was on offer. He could get me a Vermeer from an old Dutch friend of his working out of Rocquebrun, a Hals from this fat old Marxist who had relocated to Hamburg. Even a Raphael, lost for generations, could be "rediscovered," he said, with a wink. That would be the work of a seventy-year-old set painter he just signed on, based in Ostia.

This was all very risky work for Vidler's to engage in. For those who knew what Harry was about and knew for whom I worked, for us to be seen in public together would be enough of a scandal – and there were quite a few clients of Connie's in Rome who were capable of leaping to those conclusions. I could never even tell my father, years later, that I had known Harry. He would have never forgiven me because I was not only jeopardizing my own career but his, and our family name as well.

But it was not my own recklessness that compelled me to meet Harry on his terms. I also could never tell my father – or anyone else for that matter, I was sworn to secrecy – that I was following orders from Connie himself. Just a month earlier he had come to the Rome offices, where he had called me in and shut the door for a talk. I had sensed that Vidler's was not doing well. These were still the worst years for the firm: first the Depression, then the war. I presumed he was about to fire me. My sales and acquisitions were pitiful enough; it would have been justified. Connie had other plans for me, though. He had sized me up and realized I was just ambitious enough, with a bent for duplicity and an overweening desire to win the approval of those with the status both my father and I aspired to, that I would not only comply with his directive to seek out

fakes for acquisition but I would do my very best to excel. He knew who to pay off to keep me working out of Rome. It was my job to make it worth the firm's while.

Was it any wonder that I would end up writing a work about a young Machiavelli?

It really didn't take much for me to justify my new sideline. As Connie put it to me later that night over a simple roast chicken ("Always order the simplest dish on the menu, that's how you can tell how good the chef is," he said) and a couple of bottles of Valpolicella back at his hotel, the practice of those "in our line" trading in both fakes and genuine work was as old as the Grand Tour. "From Byres and Jenkins right up to bloody Sotheby's, nobody's squeaky clean in this racket." Connie had a sense of history and he knew what he was talking about. I realized he played the role of the vulgarian businessman to his advantage. Now here he was, showing his real cards and offering me the promise of a flourishing career if I played mine carefully as well. I slowly got drunk with him that night and ended up promising him my undying loyalty, of course.

Over the years it was Maes's stable of painters who could supply convincing fakes that I, with the help of Antony Farrell, would come to depend upon. It was all this work that eventually led to a plan that pleased the Curia in the Vatican and advanced their interests.