

WOLFGANG LOTTES

## The Lure of Romish Art: Reflections of Religious Controversy in Nineteenth-Century English Art Criticism

In September 1844 the Reverend Michael Hobart Seymour, who claimed to be a lineal descendant of Sir Henry Seymour, brother of Jane Seymour, wife of Henry VIII, travelled to Rome, and four years later he published his reminiscences of this journey in his book *A Pilgrimage to Rome: Containing some Account of the High Ceremonies: The Monastic Institutions: The Religious Services: The Sacred Relics: The Miraculous Pictures: And the General State of Religion in that City* (London, 1848). The volume was immediately successful and until 1851 went through four editions—but it must have come as a shock to those pious souls who expected from the Reverend's detailed report a factual and spiritual guide to the venerable shrines of the Roman Church. Seymour, whom the *Dictionary of National Biography* styles a "controversialist," was far from being reverential; as an "untiring opponent of the dogmas and practices of the church of Rome" (17: 1265–66) he had become increasingly unpopular in his native Ireland and about 1834 had migrated to England. His unwearying activities against the Roman Church included pamphlets, books, and numerous lectures, one of which, on "Nunneries," issued in 1852, involved him in a controversy with Cardinal Wiseman, who published a reply.

In his *Pilgrimage to Rome* Seymour subjected to harsh criticism the institutions and religious practices of the Catholic Church and made it quite clear that one of her most formidable weapons was the use of the arts for her purposes:

It is this that has led so many to love the services of our cathedrals; attending them less to hear the

minister than to hear the musician, and less to worship God than to admire the music. . . . The result is, that the transition to the Roman service, in which all is ceremony, and in which all may be music, soon becomes an easy and natural transition, with the lovers of sacred harmony. A taste for painting has naturally produced a similar effect. In all the greatest triumphs of the pencil, it has been consecrated to the church of Rome. Her saints, her monks, her nuns, her martyrs, her popes, are ever foremost on the canvas. The greatest masters, Beato Angelico, Perugino, Raphael, &c. lived before the light of the Reformation was fully developed, and as all the subjects they painted were those of a mediaeval religion, so, as often as they are seen, they suggest the ideas of that mediaeval religion; and those alone who have experienced it, can form an adequate conception of the power of such associations on the minds of those who have a real feeling for painting. (10)

Staunch Protestant that he was, the Reverend Hobart Seymour could not but admit that the works of early Italian art which he saw on his journey deeply and almost dangerously impressed him:

I allude to the works of Giotto, Pinturicchio, Beato Angelico, Pietro Perugino, Francia, and the early works of Raphael—those who have been called the "religious school." I never looked at one of the pictures of these men that it did not instantaneously affect me, alluring me into a sort of dream of reverie, while my imagination was called into very lively activity. It is not that their drawing is good, for on the other hand it is often stiff, awkward and unnatural. Nor is it that their imagination, as exhibited in grouping their figures or embodying the story to be represented, was correct or natural, for often it is most absurd and grotesque, but still there is palpably the embodiment of an idea—an idea pure, holy, exquisite, and too much so to