



LOYOLA'S GREATER NARRATIVE

*The Architecture of the Spiritual Families
in Golden Age and Enlightenment Literature*

FREDRIC CONROD





Foreword

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In Loyola's Greater Narrative, Frédéric Conrod confronts us with the sort of historical narrative that is not afraid of risks and, at the same time, surprises us with new readings of canonical writers such as Cervantes, Gracián and Sade. The book identifies the Baroque as a transitional period between the Renaissance and the culture of the Enlightenment. At first glance, this may not seem to constitute a new and radical assessment of the historical periods involved. However, Conrod tackles this transition by focusing on the reactions that one single author (Ignatius of Loyola), and one single book (the Spiritual Exercises) had on the overall Roman Catholic culture, in particular the countries comprised by southwestern Europe (mainly Spain, France, and Italy). Loyola's Spiritual Exercises becomes the center of an intense response to the Protestant Reform based on an intensification of the institutional control over the economy of salvation. Loyola's book confronts us with a total structure designed to exert control over the relationship between director and exercitant by means of what Conrod calls orders of corruption (following closely De Certeau's phrase). Baroque artifacts appropriate corruption through an interplay of images designed to confront subjects with the intensity of decay, disintegration, mortality, death, and an overall absence of the divine. This strong

negativity is designed to open the possibility of salvation by means of a confrontation and eventual conquering of evil. The *Spiritual Exercises* becomes a locus of intense cultural energy that is appropriated and refracted by authors such as Cervantes, Gracián and Sade. Conrod postulates that these authors use images as a response to Loyola's scopic regime, producing in their works a crisis of the total structure imposed by the Jesuit order. Although such a reaction still depends on the Baroque's need to saturate culture with images, nevertheless it opens up new deviations of the original purposes of the visual by reconfiguring the relationship to religion and divinity. Images now do not tell a coherent story of the "greater narrative" of Catholicism, but instead propose new eschatological, highly secular alternatives that effectively transform French and Spanish culture. Conrod has produced what should be considered a solid interdisciplinary and comparative approach to a very complex cultural period. By concentrating on the deep influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* written by Loyola, and by working on the rich dialogues between the Jesuit order and major artists at the time, Conrod is able to propose new, compelling and sometimes controversial readings that will certainly attract the attention of scholars in the Humanities.