**The Spiritual Exercises**  
*From Ignatian Imagination to Secular Literature*

Frédéric Conrod

Ignatius of Loyola started as a courtier, cofounded the Society of Jesus, became its superior general, and was later canonized. But his essentially religious life was also marked by a transition from being a reader to being a writer who in turn influenced authors of fiction. Life circumstances forced Ignatius to spend a long time reading Christian narratives. His existential transformation and choice to embrace religious life happened after a long convalescence in his native castle of Loyola in northern Spain, when he found himself in bed for months, left without his dear novels of chivalry and lives of saints to read. According to John O’Malley, “While recuperating at the castle of Loyola, he found none of the tales of chivalry that he loved to read. In some desperation he turned to the only literature at hand—the lives of the saints in *The Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Voragine and *The life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony.”

While he was no longer to project himself as a courtier in the exercise of reading novels of chivalry, he transferred his tastes on another genre that clearly invites readers to the imitation of exemplary Christian lives. This long immobilization sealed Ignatius’s relationship with the genre of the *hagiography* and inspired him to become an exemplary character and, later on once he was able to walk again and begin his spiritual journey, an author of his own narrative. Consequently, his most famous text, the *Spiritual Exercises*, is to be perceived not only as product of a conversion to religious life, but also as a literary text that encapsulates sixteenth-century spirituality.

During the Renaissance, literature became independent from the religious function it had often had throughout the Middle Ages in order to integrate the world of the secular arts in which it found new expressions, in all of its subgenres. Theatre and prose, in particular, became spaces where imagination was used to educate and entertain simultaneously. The novel, first perceived as a “bastard genre” disobeying the Aristotelian rules of literary composition, developed between this time period and the Enlightenment to eventually

---

become a product of individual consumption, giving literature a new function of commodity in the precapitalist societies of Western Europe.²

Nonetheless, the transition of printed texts into secular fiction cannot be separated from the religious conflicts that marked the second half of the sixteenth century, between the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The historical context in which we find beyond their lifetime the narrative opposition of Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation, and Ignatius of Loyola, defender of a weakened Roman Catholic Church,³ is mostly responsible for the distancing of literary expressions from their original affiliation with medieval Christianity.

The Spiritual Exercises, Product of the Renaissance

By the end of the sixteenth century, the newly established Society of Jesus,⁴ had taken over the administration of some of the most renowned colleges of southwestern Europe and had launched an unheard number of new institutions and missions throughout the rest of the world. Ignatius of Loyola, the aging founder of the Jesuit order, insisted until his last breath on the necessity to integrate his meditation system, the Spiritual Exercises, within the learning approach of every discipline of human knowledge, including grammar and the construction of rhetorical figures.⁵ In this spirit, the Jesuit educative system was designed to be comprehensive and inclusive of all disciplines, always encouraging interdisciplinary studies.

Although the Spiritual Exercises had immediate and direct influence on devotional poetry, its more intriguing repercussions on secular literature and, particularly, its participation in the merging of philosophy with literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the consequent rise of the novel, will be the main focus of this chapter. From the Renaissance to the 1760s,⁶ the Jesuit fathers educated some of the most significant figures of Western European literature, such as Miguel de Cervantes, René Descartes, Voltaire, the

---

² The novel was never a category of literature defined by the classification of Aristotle in his Ars Poetica.
³ Between the Protestant Reformation starting in 1517 with Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses and the Sack of Rome in 1527, the church of Rome stood in a rather weak state.
⁴ Pope Paul III approved the Society of Jesus in 1540.
⁵ Loyola lays out his guidelines in the Constitutions and the Spiritual Diary.
⁶ Spain, Portugal, Rome, and France all expulse the Society from the institutions it controls and the Jesuits are temporarily dissolved.