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The Legend of the Legion: Nihilism and the Restoration of the Aristocracy in Ouida's *Under Two Flags*

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Abstract

Ouida's *Under Two Flags* (1867) is not a widely read Victorian novel today, but it offers important insight into the philosophical concerns of a novelist who was hugely popular in her time. In *Under Two Flags*, Ouida explores what she saw as the epistemological problem developing in the nineteenth century, a nihilistic view that promoted scepticism, aestheticism, and idleness, which is a perspective she believed was responsible for the demise of the aristocracy. Wishing to restore the power and position of the aristocracy, Ouida sends her protagonist Bertie Cecil, a dandy who embodies the aestheticism and ennui of the upper class, to the French Foreign Legion in order to make an important social and psychological point. Ouida draws upon the legend that the French Foreign Legion rehabilitated its wayward recruits to present a society in which something is demanded of Bertie and where he rises to that demand. Symbolically speaking, Bertie regains his inheritance and his title in the novel only after a radical transformation that restores him, and by implication the aristocracy, to a foundational moral and chivalrous code.

Keywords: Ouida, nihilism, aestheticism, aristocracy, French Foreign Legion, war

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Maria Louise Ramé's novels, written under the pen name Ouida, are largely unknown today outside of specialist circles, but they were extremely popular in the nineteenth century. In particular, Ouida's *Under Two Flags* (1867), a novel about the adventures of a profligate aristocrat Bertie Cecil who flees England to join the French Foreign Legion, was a best-seller and would go on to inspire the popular genre of French Foreign Legion novels, most famously P. C. Wren's *Beau Geste* (1924). Critical approaches to *Under Two Flags* have focused on it as a work of sensation fiction or on the role of the dandy,¹ but pay little attention to Ouida's depiction of the French Foreign Legion.² Ouida's interest in the Legion, however, goes beyond its sensational appeal. In *Under Two Flags*, Ouida uses the myth of the Legion to explore what she saw as the epistemological problem of nihilism developing in the nineteenth century, and not so much in Nietzsche's sense, as we shall shortly see, but in the sense that life had no purpose and meaning. For many like Ouida, the idea of nothingness had already become a serious philosophical dilemma in the mid nineteenth century because the influence of empirical philosophy and the advances of science had undermined the epistemological foundations on which life and thought had previously rested. Long before 1897, when Émile Durkheim argued that suicide was a response to the loss of structure, community, and moral order that came with the dissolution of traditional conceptual foundations in modern society, Ouida's Bertie Cecil is destroying himself precisely because he lacks a purpose in life.

Ouida welcomed the dissolution of many of these traditional frameworks, especially institutional religion which she saw as stifling individuality.³ At the same time, however, she worried these societal changes were leading to an entirely nihilistic perspective that only promoted scepticism, aestheticism, and idleness. As a result of these fears, Ouida looked to the aristocracy for leadership and stability. The question for her was how to elicit these qualities when the prevailing philosophy of the time engendered apathy and inertia. To explore this quandary in *Under Two Flags*, Ouida sends Bertie, or Beauty, a character who embodies the aestheticism and ennui of the upper class, to the French Foreign Legion in order to make an important social and psychological point. Drawing upon the legend that the Legion rehabilitated its wayward recruits, Ouida presents the Legion as a society in which something is demanded of Bertie and where he rises to that demand. Only once Bertie has redeemed his latent noble qualities can he, and by implication the aristocracy, be restored to his rightful place in society.

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It might seem odd that Ouida chooses the French Foreign Legion, a military group, as the catalyst for Bertie's transformation. Ouida did not think that war was a morally defensible strategy to cultivate character. In fact, she was vehemently opposed to war, as can be seen from her 1892 essay 'Conscription'. In her response to Lord Wolseley's assertion that 'enforced and universal military service' would confer great mental and physical benefits on young men, Ouida, an avowed individualist, argues that forced servitude is cruel and detrimental to individual development and necessarily leads to revolt and disobedience (36). Ouida saw war as the manifestation of society's obsession with money, something Bertie also reflects upon when he muses, 'There I killed time – here I kill men. Which is the better pursuit, I wonder. The world would rather economise the first commodity than the last, I believe. Perhaps it don't make an overgood use of either' (248). Bertie knows that leisure and war are both commodities valued by a consumer society. Indeed, Ouida complains about this very same issue in her essay 'Joseph Chamberlain' (1899), arguing that '[w]ealth is now the dominant factor of English social life; and a commerce, wholly unscrupulous, is the sole scope of the tawdry and noisy empire of which Joseph Chamberlain is the standard-bearer' (268). For Ouida, colonialism and imperialism, first instigated by Disraeli and then continued by Chamberlain, reflect the temper of the modern age – an age that pursues brutality and destruction for the sake of accumulating more wealth and power.

Clearly Ouida was critical of war, so it begs the question of why she uses the French Foreign Legion as the vehicle for Bertie's redemption. I suggest that Ouida chooses the Legion because, unlike the conscripted national armies that she condemns in her essays, it was open to recruits from all over the world, and thus it had the reputation as a haven for people fleeing crimes or persecution in their home country. The Legion was an alternative to prison, and, in this sense, it was seen to rescue or rehabilitate its recruits. We see this image of the Legion when Bertie's devoted servant, Rake, who follows him into service, makes a distinction between his experience as a recruit in the English army and the time he has spent in the French Foreign Legion. Rake notes that while the English army assumes that its recruits are all 'blackguards' who will never change their degraded ways, in the Legion, 'contrariwise, you come in the ranks and get a welcome, and feel that it just rests with yourself whether you won't be a fine fellow or not' (253). He exclaims that 'it makes a wonderful difference to a fellow – a wonderful difference – whether the service he's come into look at him as a scamp that never will be nothing but a scamp, or as a rascal that's maybe got in him, all rascal though he is, the pluck to turn into a hero' (253). This French Foreign

Legion, then, becomes a vehicle for Ouida to explore the challenges and expectations that inspire personal and societal transformation.

Of course, as Erwin Rosen's *In the Foreign Legion* (1910) and Frederic Martyn's *Life in the Legion: from a Soldier's Point of View* (1911) attest, the reality of the Legion was quite different from the legend. We also cannot ignore the fact that the Legion was involved in a colonial war in Algeria. Ouida certainly does not overlook this issue; in the novel, she makes it clear that she thought France's colonial pursuits in Algeria were futile and that the Algerians had the right to their land. Even Bertie, who fights for France, morally supports the Algerian resistance.⁴ The historical reality is that recruits were subject to brutal treatment and conditions, as were indigenous people, at the hands of the Legion, but although Ouida strongly denounces imperialism and colonialism in her essays, a viewpoint that is clearly expressed in *Under Two Flags*, a critique of the Legion's role in a colonial war is not the focal point of her novel. Instead, the Legion serves a symbolic function in that it combats the destructive force of nihilism.

Ouida worried about the fact that young people were being brought up in a time where nothing was being asked of them. In *Under Two Flags*, the narrator remarks that '[b]oys grow up amid profuse prodigality', raised 'like young Dauphins, and tossed into costly whirl to float as best they can – on nothing' (47). The word 'nothing' is significant here. According to Ouida, young people are floating on 'nothing' because, in an age of nihilism, there are no longer any objective grounds of truth, especially moral ones, that give a basis for thought and action or a basis for any kind of *telos* for the future. This results in a class of young people who might do something, have it in them to do something, but do not know what to do, so they waste their time in idle or disreputable activities. Felicia Bonaparte notes that although we associate nihilism with a movement that started in Russia and gained popularity in England late in the nineteenth century through Nietzsche, the idea of nothingness was actually explored by Victorian novelists a great deal earlier in the century. Two of the most popular tropes for nihilism in the Victorian novel, Bonaparte shows, are gambling and bankruptcy, which serve a double purpose in the narrative because they supply an interesting plot-point while also suggesting a wider philosophical context, with gambling representing materialism and bankruptcy the loss of meaning and hope (39–40).

Ouida turns to gambling many times in her essays to argue that it is a manifestation of nihilism in modern society. In 'The Ugliness of Modern Life' (1896), she laments that the loss of beauty, resulting from industrialisation and urbanisation as well as the lack of purpose in society, has led to 'the callousness and apathy and egotism so general in

national life' (225). For Ouida, gambling is an external embodiment of these psychological problems: 'Being shorn of freedom, interest, and beauty, modern life', she argues 'finds vent for the feverishness which is cooped up in it in commercial gambling – gambling of all kinds from the Stock Exchange to the tontine, from the foreign loan to the suburban handicap – and existence is but one gigantic lottery' (224).

In *Under Two Flags*, Ouida uses the image of gambling and bankruptcy to signify the recklessness and apathy of a generation that seeks constant stimulation but can never find satisfaction. We see this in both Bertie and his brother, Berkeley, who 'was trained to his brother's nonchalant, impenetrable school, and used to his brother's set; a cool, listless, reckless, thoroughbred, and impassive set, whose first canon was that you must lose your last thousand in the world without giving a sign that you winced, and must win half a million without showing that you were gratified' (6). That this malady is the temper of the age for Ouida is apparent when we are told that people were more thrilled when Bertie lost the race than '[w]hen a young Prussian had shot himself the night before for roulette losses' (123).

While nihilism in Victorian characters can manifest in depression and hopelessness, as we see in Dickens' Sydney Carton, Bertie's nihilism leads to 'infinite ennui' (42), a 'resigned weariness' in his features (42), and 'weary and depressed into gentler languor' (11). Bertie, we learn, does not really care about anything: 'Neither Bertie's indolence nor his insouciance was assumed; utter carelessness was his nature, utter impassability was his habit, and he was truly for the moment loath to leave his bed, his coffee, and his novel' (70). Bertie is entirely listless and apathetic: he only really enjoys the titillation of reading French novels and the pleasures of furs, silks, and perfumes. Ouida makes it clear that nihilism leads not only to ennui in Bertie but also to a shallow aestheticism. Also known by the nickname 'Beauty', it is clear that Bertie is an aesthete who values sensory pleasures over intellectual or moral concerns.

Ouida's relationship to the aesthetic movement was complex and often contradictory. Talia Shaffer has shown that Ouida was an important figure who shaped the later aesthetic movement made famous by Oscar Wilde and his friends. Indeed, Ouida certainly appreciated beauty and luxury, and it is worth noting that her extravagant lifestyle is strikingly similar to the behaviour she criticises in Bertie. However, Ouida distinguishes herself from the Art for Art's Sake motto that would come to define the later aesthetic movement by emphasising that the refined enjoyment of beauty and pleasure leads to intellectual and ethical development. In 'The Sins of Society' (1892), Ouida maintains

that: 'Beauty is always inspiration. There is nothing in a soft seat, a fragrant atmosphere, a well-regulated temperature, a delicate dinner, to banish high thought; on the contrary, the more refined and lovely the place the happier and more productive ought to be the mind' (5). It is her view, however, that the modern individual, in the constant quest for stimulation and material gain, does not truly appreciate beauty or luxury.

Ouida gives an example of this in her depiction of Bertie Cecil, whom she uses to paint a picture of a type of aestheticism that is shallow and entirely unintellectual:

Cecil had no time or space for thought; he never thought; would not have thought seriously for a kingdom. A novel, idly skimmed over in bed, was the extent of his literature; he never bored himself by reading the papers, he heard the news earlier than they told it; and as he lived, he was too constantly supplied from the world about him with amusement and variety to have to do anything beyond letting himself be amused; quietly fanned, as it were, with the lulling punka of social pleasure, without even the trouble of pulling a string. (86)

Ouida observes that Bertie is not without noble instincts but concedes that it is difficult to think or act differently 'when every touch and shape of life is pleasant to us – when everything about us is symbolical and redolent of wealth and ease – when the art of enjoyment is the only one we are called on to study, and the science of pleasure all we are asked to explore' (53).

That Ouida views the 'science of pleasure' as a problem of philosophy is clear from the fact that she alludes to Bertie's 'light philosophies' (132) and 'languid creeds' (132). This philosophy, Ouida repeatedly tells the reader, is the materialism of Epicurus – an empirical worldview that argues, in a world without the gods, that pleasure is the greatest good. Indeed, Bertie's 'epicurean formulary was the same as old Herrick's' (114). He was 'a great believer – if the words are not too sonorous and too earnest to be applied to his very inconsequent views upon any and everything – in the philosophy of happy accident' (114). Bertie lives a hedonistic lifestyle of the senses: 'Far as it was in him to have a conviction at all, – he had a conviction that the doctrine of "[e]at, drink, and enjoy, for to-morrow we die" was a universal panacea' (114). Ouida shows that Bertie's nihilism also leads to scepticism. He does not believe in love, preferring casual dalliances, and scoffs at the thought of sacrificing his life for a woman. Indeed, when Bertie asks his married lover, Lady Guenevere, whether she would care if something happened to him, he asks, "How is a man to end?" and, 'while his thoughts still

ran off in a speculative scepticism', he muses, "Is there a heart to break?" (104).

As Schaffer and Susan Zieger have shown, Bertie is the quintessential dandy. While critics have focused on the important implications of the dandy for discussions of gender, they have not considered how Bertie's effeminacy is, for Ouida, the manifestation of his philosophical perspective. Indeed, Jean Baudrillard defined dandyism as an 'aesthetic form of nihilism' (160), an idea that is also explored by Albert Camus in *The Rebel* (1951). Central to Camus' vision of the dandy is his reflection upon humankind's division from God: 'Up to now man derived his coherence from his Creator. But from the moment that he consecrates his rupture with Him, he finds himself delivered over to the fleeting moment, to the passing days, and to wasted sensibility' (51). Camus argues that dandyism is a response to the epistemological crises of the modern world: 'The dandy creates his own unity by aesthetic means', but he notes that 'it is an aesthetic of singularity and negation' (51). Camus contends that the dandy only 'plays at life because he is unable to live it' (52). In her essay 'The Sins of Society', Ouida speaks of a similar crisis, '[an] incessant and *maladif* restlessness' that 'has become the chief characteristic of all cultured society nowadays' (15). For Ouida: 'The horror of being alone amounts in our time to a disease. To be left without anybody else to amuse it fills the modern mind with terror' (9). This agitation, she notes, means that, in the present, 'it is accounted a calamity beyond human endurance to be six months at a time in one place; to remain a year would be considered cause for suicide' (15). Thus, 'it is the wit as well as the fool in this day who flies from his own company; it is the artist as well as the dandy who seeks the boulevard and the crowd' (9).

Finding no traditional structure and meaning, the dandy is restless in his pursuit of new experiences and sensations. He or she chases 'a stimulant and a drug', what Ouida sees as 'the curious mixture of excitement and *ennui*, of animation and fatigue, produced by society' without which 'the man and woman of the world cannot exist' (10). We see this modern restlessness and capriciousness in Bertie, whose life is made up of 'an incessantly changing kaleidoscope of London seasons, Paris winters, ducal houses in the hunting months, dinners at the Pall Mall Clubs, dinner at the Star and Garter, dinners irreproachable everywhere' (18).

Ouida makes it clear that Bertie's nihilism is a threat to the very fabric of society. In 'The sins of Society', she exclaims, 'I do not think that the rich enjoy beauty one whit more than the poor in this day. They are in too great a hurry to do so' (5). Ouida decries the fact that '[w]hat is

decreasing, fading, disappearing more and more every year is something more precious than any mere enjoyment or embellishment. It is what we call high breeding; it is what we mean when we say that *bon sang ne peut mentir* [good blood cannot lie]' (30). These are 'the unpurchasable, unteachable, indescribable qualities and instincts' that Ouida sees in the aristocracy (30). She worries that these qualities are being overtaken by a shallow commercialism that has led to the excessive consumption of meat, the destruction of the environment, and the pursuit of war.

As Andrew King has shown, paradoxically, it was Ouida's concerns about modern issues that led to her more reactionary views. He explains that Ouida's 'observation of the transition of Tuscany from a feudal rural economy to an industrial capitalist one seems to have convinced her that the feudal rural guided by a responsible, dutiful aristocracy, for all its shortcomings, was preferable' (573). Although Ouida's idea of a paternalistic aristocracy is highly idealised and her notion of good breeding is hardly palatable for the modern reader, her critique of the aristocracy and hope for its reformation offers an interesting insight into her perception of a defining cultural moment. Indeed, Ouida blames the dissolution of the aristocracy on the nihilism of the modern mind: 'It is only now in the latest years of the nineteenth century that these superb places are left all over Europe to dust, decay, and slow but sure desolation, whilst the owners spend their time in play or speculation, call for bocks and brandies in the club-rooms of the world, and buy shares in mushroom building companies' (11). Ouida presents a similar deterioration of the aristocracy in *Under Two Flags*. The reckless gambling and ostentatious lifestyle of Bertie and of his brother have depleted the Royallieu estate which is now threatened with foreclosure. The narrator laments the fact that '[i]ts present luxury was purchased at the cost of the future, and the parasite of extravagance was constantly sapping, unseen, the gallant old Norman-planted oak of the family tree. But then, who thought of that? Nobody' (46).

It is Ouida's contention that the innate noble qualities of the aristocracy have been dulled by the materialism and aestheticism of the modern age. Still, despite Bertie's dandyism, we are told that '[f]ar down, very far down, so far that nobody had seen it, nor himself ever expected it, there was a lurking instinct in "Beauty"' (102). This instinct 'was only vague, for he was naturally very indolent very gentle, very addicted to taking all things passively, and very strongly of persuasion that to rouse yourself to anything was a niaiserie of the strongest possible folly; but it was there' (102). We are witness to Bertie's innate noble qualities when he is faced with imminent financial and social ruin. When he is unable to pay a loan that is fraudulently taken out in his name by his

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brother, Berkeley, Bertie could contest the loan by providing an alibi but refuses to do so since it would compromise Lady Guenevere's reputation, whom he was with at the time the bill was signed. To protect both his lover and his brother, Bertie flees to Algeria where he joins the Chasseurs d'Afrique, a division that Ouida bases on the French Foreign Legion, and it is here that Bertie's nascent instincts and innate noble qualities are cultivated.

Bertie's training in the Chasseurs d'Afrique is a complete departure from his previous existence. He comes 'from the extremes of luxury, indolence, indulgence, pleasure, and extravagance' to 'the extremes of hardship, poverty, discipline, suffering, and toil', from apathy and listlessness to 'incessant obedience, vigilance, activity, and self-denial' (266). While '[h]e had never before been called on to exert either thought or action', in the Legion 'the necessity for both called many latent qualities in him into play' (268-9). The narrator acknowledges that service in such a regime might look like the waste of a life to many but asks whether 'any life would have done for him what this had done', and moreover whether 'it might be questioned if, judging a career not by its social position, but by its effect on character, any would have been so well for him' (269). Without his experience in the Legion, Bertie's previous life would have 'encouraged his profound negligence of everything; and his natural listlessness would have glided from refinement to effeminacy, and from lazy grace to blasé inertia' (269-70). In contrast to Bertie's previous life of luxury and decadence, 'the inexorable demands of rigid rules compelled his incessant obedience, vigilance, activity, and self-denial. He had known nothing from his childhood up except an atmosphere of amusement, refinement, brilliance, and idleness' (266). Thus, it is clear that Ouida imagines in the Legion a tough programme that elicits the personal and civic virtues in its recruits so that they may once again play a productive and exemplary role in society. This legend allows Ouida to show how Bertie's experiences help to cultivate the qualities she feels are necessary for a restored aristocracy.

What Bertie learns in the Legion is the chivalrous code of a gentleman. It is Bertie's selfless sense of chivalry and honour that, for Ouida, aligns him with the nomadic Arab tribes of Algeria. Ouida's characterisation of nomadic peoples is entirely orientalist in its romanticism, but as with her depiction of the Legion, the tribes serve more of a symbolic function in the novel in that they represent for Ouida a rejection of materialism and the brotherhood of 'loftier instincts' (246). Ouida's belief in the beneficial influence of a paternalistic aristocracy on the rest of society is shown through Bertie's transformative

effect on the other recruits in the Chasseurs d'Afrique. Although 'the last part Bertie dreamed of playing was that of a teacher to any mortal thing' (286), in Algeria 'it might reasonably be questioned if a second Augustine or Francis Xavier would ever have done half the good among the devil-may-care Roumis that was wrought by the dauntless, listless, reckless soldier who followed instinctively the one religion which has no cant in its brave, simple creed, and binds man to man in links that are true as steel – the religion of a gallant gentleman's loyalty and honour' (286). This religion of 'honour' and reverence is, for Ouida, the antidote to the nihilism that plagues the modern mind.

Ouida believes that the chivalrous creed of a gentleman is its own religion. In her essay 'The Failure of Christianity', (originally published under the title 'Has Christianity Failed?' in 1891), Ouida criticises Christianity for its repressive formulas and, most importantly, for spreading socialism, which, for Ouida, undermines the possibility of individual genius. In her essay 'Vulgarity' (1886), she warns that: 'If socialism should have its way with the world (which is probable), it will not only be vulgar, it will be sordid; all loveliness will perish; and, with all ambition forbidden, heroism and greatness will be things unknown, and genius a crime against the divinity of the Eternal Mediocre' (341). In *Under Two Flags*, Ouida wants to show that the true spirit of religion lives not in the formulas of Christianity, but rather in the noble creed of the gentleman, in the latent chivalrous instincts she sees in the aristocracy.

In her idealised view of the aristocracy, Ouida imagines its reformed code as a religion which can hold society together and provide a moral foundation for the modern age. Indeed, Bertie inspires worship in men that have been dismissed by society and transforms them into nobler citizens. We see this in Bertie's servant, Rake, whose love for him 'was very much such a wild, chivalric, romantic fidelity as the Cavaliers or the Gentleman of the North bore to their Stuart idols [...] it had beauty in its blindness – the beauty that lies in every pure unselfishness' (393). The Legion becomes a symbol for a future society in which the aristocracy models the chivalrous creed of a gentleman. Under Bertie's influence, we are told that in the Legion: 'Coarseness perceptibly abated, and violence became much rarer in that portion of his corp with which he had immediately to do; the men gradually acquired from him a better, higher tone; they learned to do duties inglorious and distasteful as well as they did those which led them to the danger and excitation that they loved' (385). Indeed, Bertie found 'loyalty, courage, generosity, and self-abnegation far surpassing those which he had ever met with in the polished civilisation of his early experience' (385). In one of many of the unsubtle depictions of the benefits of a paternalistic aristocracy on

the lower classes in the novel, we are told that ‘the most savage and obscene brute in the ranks with him [Bertie] caught something gentler and better from the “aristocrat”’ (285). Bertie’s ‘refined habits, his serene temper, his kindly forbearance, his high instinctive honour, made themselves felt imperceptibly, but surely’ (285).

Bertie’s moral transformation also leads him to fall in love with the beautiful Venetia Corona, the sister of his best friend, Lord Seraph. In his listless and apathetic life, Bertie had rebuffed the idea of dying for a woman, but he ends up risking his life for love. One of Bertie’s greatest challenges in the novel is his constant persecution at the hands of Colonel Chateauroy, but he resists any confrontation, modelling self-discipline and loyalty to his comrades. Bertie transgresses the military code only in order to defend the honour of Venetia Corona. After Chateauroy insults Venetia Corona’s virtue, Bertie strikes his commandant and is sentenced to death for insubordination. Again, Ouida sees this as the principled behaviour of an aristocrat: ‘He was no longer the soldier bound in obedience to submit to the indignities that his chief chose to heap on him; he was a gentleman who defended a woman’s honour, a man who avenged a slur on the life that he loved’ (563). Bertie only survives because of the actions of Cigarette, the vivandière of the Legion, who loves Bertie and ultimately sacrifices her life for him.

Cigarette is similar in many ways to Bertie before he joined the Legion; she is characterised as a ‘bacchante’ (220), an ‘epicurean’ (222), and a ‘bohemian’ (222). Cigarette is as cynical as Voltaire (346), has had many affairs but does not feel deeply (288), and lives for the fleeting moment, which is represented by the many scenes in the novel in which she dances with abandon. As a young woman who has grown up with the army, Cigarette is described as lacking traditional feminine attributes, just as Bertie lacks traditional masculine characteristics.

Yet unlike Bertie, in growing up as a child of the army, Cigarette has already developed some of the noble virtues that Bertie lacked before joining the Legion. She evinces a loyalty and devotion to the flag of France, which is ‘a religion of her own’ (365). Indeed ‘Cigarette would have perished for her country not less than Jeanne d’Arc’, and it is this ‘holiness of an impersonal love’ and ‘glow of an imperishable patriotism’ (434) that leads Cigarette into battle to save the last surviving soldiers, as well as to throw herself in front of the bullet that would have killed Bertie, the man she loves. Yet, despite the fact that Cigarette challenges conventional gender stereotypes in the novel, it is only in loving Bertie that Ouida gives Cigarette a purpose, and it is only through this love that she fulfils her highest ideals of fighting for France. Again, as with Bertie, who himself was an effeminate dandy who must recover his ‘manly’

characteristics in the Legion, Cigarette goes from the subversiveness of being 'unsexed' (200) to embodying a traditional view of sacrificial femininity: in dying for Bertie 'she became a woman and a martyr' (585). Crucially, it is through Cigarette's death that Bertie's identity as an English aristocrat is revealed, and he is married to the aristocratic Venetia Corona. Cigarette, who is described as a democrat, as 'a child of the people' (419), who has 'all the contempt for the laws of rank of your thorough inborn democrat, all the gay, insouciant indifference to station of the really free and untrammelled nature' (515), is sacrificed by Ouida for the restoration of the aristocracy.

Ouida depicts the trials and difficulties experienced by Bertie in the Legion as an antidote to the nihilism endemic in modern society. Unfortunately, Ouida's concerns about modernity – her concern that nihilism was leading to a dangerous apathy toward life and the environment, and that commercialism was leading to war and destruction in the name of money and power – did not spark in her new ideas for change. Viewing socialism as a dangerous threat to individualism, Ouida's answer to these problems was to envision a reformed aristocracy and a hierarchical structure that would provide a restored foundation for modern life. But, first, Ouida imagined the kind of programme that might cure Bertie, and the many young people like him in the aristocracy, from succumbing to the disease of modernity – the recklessness and apathy she believed was the manifestation of an underlying epistemological crisis.

It seems to me, then, that when Ouida turns to the legend of the French Foreign Legion, she is not talking about war per se but rather anticipates what William James, the founder of American psychology, would explore in his influential 1910 essay 'The Moral Equivalent of War', a work that is based on a lecture he presented at Stanford University in 1906. In this essay, James explores the very same problems identified earlier by Ouida in *Under Two Flags*. Observing a malaise in modern life, James proposes that war is the antidote to indifference because it elicits altruism, self-sacrifice, and civic feeling. Yet James, like Ouida, was a self-professed pacifist who hoped for the eventual abolishment of war; thus, he argued that the expectations and ideals required in war ought to be brought into civil peaceful life so as to cultivate the same virtues. This leads him to set out his vision for a 'moral equivalent of war', a training programme that would elicit the same noble instincts evoked in times of conflict, which is the very idea that inspired John F. Kennedy to establish the Peace Corps.

James envisions a programme that instead of conscripting young men into the military would enlist them in a war against nature, a battle

to cultivate wild nature for humanity's benefit. He proposes that for a period of time, men in this programme would work in physically difficult jobs such as building, mining, and farming, pursuits that would serve to improve both society and the individual. It was James's hope that such a programme would solve some of the problems of modernity, especially the increasing divisions of wealth in a consumer society. He observes that 'the luxurious classes now are blind, to man's relations to the globe he lives on, and to the permanently sour and hard foundations of his higher life' (290-1). James contends, therefore, that it is imperative for the wealthy to cultivate civic virtues so that they can rejoin society 'with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas' (291). Only then, he remarks, would 'they have paid their blood-tax, done their own part in the immemorial human warfare against nature; they would tread the earth more proudly, the women would value them more highly, they would be better fathers and teachers of the following generation' (291).

Anticipating James's idea, Ouida uses the legend of the Legion to imagine such a programme for Bertie who must be purged of his nihilistic tendencies before he can re-enter society. When Bertie's identity is discovered by his old friend, Lord Seraph, and his name is finally cleared, Bertie expresses no bitterness over his time in the Legion: 'The sacrifice was ended, the martyrdom was over; henceforth this doom of exile and of wretchedness would be but as a hideous dream; henceforth his name would be stainless among men, and the desire of his heart would be given him' (615). Upon being reunited with his brother, Bertie feels only 'an infinite compassion' (605) for his brother's debased condition. He reassures Berkeley by saying, 'It has been well for me that I have suffered these things. For yourself – if you do indeed repent, and feel that you owe me any debt, atone for it, and pay it, by letting your own life be strong in truth and fair in honour' (605). Symbolically speaking, Bertie only regains his inheritance and his title in the novel after a radical transformation that restores him to a foundational moral and chivalrous code.

Ouida ends the novel with a lyrical description of Bertie on his ancestral land; he has been reunited with his devoted horse, Forest King, and is married to Venetia Corona. After his trials in the Legion, Bertie has been given a new perspective on life; he is no longer the indulgent aesthete who languishes at parties or in his boudoir. We are left with an image of Bertie outside, appreciating the beauty of nature: 'With his arm over the horse's neck, the exile, who had returned to his birthright, stood silent a while, gazing out over the land on which his eyes never wearied of resting; the glad, cool, green, dew-freshened earth that was so sweet and full of peace, after the scorched and blood-stained plains,

whose sun was as flame, and whose breath was as pestilence' (607). He is no longer sceptical about love, telling his wife, 'It was worth banishment to return [...] It was worth the trials that I bore to learn the love that I have known——' (607).

It is worth noting that Ouida does not place Bertie back in society to test his new chivalrous values in real life. Indeed, the final image of Bertie appears indulgent and solitary considering that Ouida spends the novel criticising aestheticism devoid of ethical and intellectual engagement. Yet, in the closing lines of the novel, we see both Bertie and Venetia Corona gaze toward France in memory of Cigarette, toward 'a grave made where the beat of drum, and the sound of moving squadrons, and the ring of the trumpet-call, and the noise of the assembling battalions could be heard by night and day; a grave where the troops, as they passed it by, saluted and lowered their arms in tender reverence, in faithful, unasked homage' (608). In looking to France, to Cigarette's grave, Ouida emphasises that it is only through noble sacrifice and service, love and devotion, a 'moral equivalent of war', as James calls it, that we can begin to emerge from the psychological problems caused by the ugliness and vulgarity of the modern age.

Notes

1. See Natalie Schroeder and Ronald A. Schroeder's discussion of *Under Two Flags* in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* and Anne-Marie Beller and Tara MacDonald's chapter on Ouida in *Rediscovering Victorian Women Sensation Writers: Beyond Braddon*.
2. In 'Toward an "Entente Cordiale": The Cultivation of Cosmopolitan Sympathies in Ouida's *Under Two Flags*', Kristi Embry explores Bertie's reformation, but while I focus on the philosophical and psychological significance of the French Foreign Legion for Ouida, Embry discusses Anglo-French relations and Victorian concepts of cosmopolitanism.
3. For an overview of Ouida's critical views, see Andrew King's 'The Sympathetic Individualist: Ouida's Late Work and Politics'.
4. When Bertie first encounters recruits from the Chasseurs d'Afrique, he tells them that he sides with the Algerian tribes because: 'In the first place, they are on the losing side; in the second they are the lords of the soil; in the third, they live as free as air; and in the fourth, they have undoubtedly the right of the quarrel' (189). In another instance, the narrator exclaims: 'The Arabs had cruel years to avenge – years of a loathed tyranny, years of starvation and oppression, years of constant flight southward, with no choice but submission or death' (406).

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