

RUSSELL AS “SPANISH ASTRONOMER” (A RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW)

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Constance Malleson. *The Coming Back*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1933. Pp. 328. 7s. 6d.

Published in 1933 and never reprinted, *The Coming Back* is Constance Malleson's first novel. She had been publishing shorter fiction as well as articles since 1919.¹ Her lover, Bertrand Russell, had encouraged her writing career, assisting with the placement of her first short story in *The English Review*.² He thought a writing career preferable to acting. Using the stage name “Colette O’Niel”, she had a successful career on the stage.³

The novel is a fictional account of the love affair between Russell and Colette. They appear as Gregory del Orellano and Konradin Waring. It was not, however, recognized as a *roman à clef* when it was published, as their affair was not known by anyone except their closest friends and family members. John Slater recognized it for what it was.⁴ Three of the four Russell biographers mention the novel.⁵ Presumably all three relied on Slater's article. Ronald Clark quotes one sentence from the novel, a summation of Gregory's character by one of the other characters who shared the view of many. Gregory was seen as “a man exhausting other men by his intellect; exhausting women by his intensity; wearing out his friends, sucking them dry, passing from person to person, never giving any real happiness—or finding any” (*Coming Back*, p. 307; Clark, p. 583). Caroline Moorehead quotes several sentences about the

¹ TURCON, “A Bibliography of Constance Malleson” (2012).

² MALLESON, “The End” by “Christine Harte” (1919).

³ TURCON, *op. cit.*, appendix, acting roles, pp. 188–90.

⁴ JOHN G. SLATER, “Lady Constance Malleson, ‘Colette O’Niel’” (1975), pp. 10–11.

⁵ CLARK, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (1975); MOOREHEAD, *Bertrand Russell* (1992); MONK, *Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1 (1996).

importance of work to Konradin—work that Gregory deplored (*Coming Back*, p. 105; Moorehead, p. 264). Only Ray Monk undertakes a detailed description of the novel, even naming the last chapter of *The Spirit of Solitude*, “The Coming Back”. He identifies, as did Slater, several other characters with their real life counterparts: Ottoline Morrell is Magdalena de Santa Segunda; T. C. Maynard is T. S. Eliot; Jevons is Clifford Allen; Marcus Beazley is Maurice Elvey; Gertrude West is Dora Black. He quotes the sentence that Clark had used earlier (Monk 1: 607). Monk writes that “Russell claimed never to have read *The Coming Back* (or any of Colette’s other books). Perhaps he knew it would make painful reading” (1: 608). Monk provides no source for this judgment, and in fact it is untrue. Although *The Coming Back* is not specifically discussed in their correspondence, her other three books are.⁶

My reading of the novel is coloured by an attempt to identify what is true in the novel. My knowledge of the truth is based on editing their correspondence. The novel is a fascinating portrait of the Russell and Colette relationship, far more revealing to those in the know than her autobiographies, where libel concerns were always at the forefront. Her first autobiography, *After Ten Years*, had been published two years earlier, in 1931, to great acclaim. *The Coming Back*’s dust-jacket reads:

Here is the first novel from the author of that vivid and successful autobiography, *After Ten Years*. And as might be expected, it shows the same vitality, integrity, and the same passion for beauty as the earlier work. Constance Malleon presents a portrait of a young girl of our times, and of her stand for freedom, through all its stages from selfishness to a fine renunciation.

Before the novel begins Colette includes four things. She dedicates the book to “Joneen when he is grown up”. Colette was very fond of Russell’s son John, and this may well refer to him. Opposite the dedication is the disingenuous disclaimer: “No character in this book is a portrait of any living person.” On the next page is the foreword: “This is a love story, or a lunatic’s story, as you please.” This is followed on a third page with a line in German with an English translation from which the title is derived: “If only you realized that just this coming back is love.” The author was Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931), the

⁶ *After Ten Years* is discussed in three letters, documents 200796, 200799, 200803—Russell asks for two small changes; *Fear in the Heart* is discussed in two letters, 200805, 200806; *In the North* is also discussed in two, 200835 and 200845. In 200835 Russell writes: “How much there is in your life that I know nothing about. I was touched by the passages about me, in none of which I have any changes to suggest.” There is indirect evidence that Russell read *The Coming Back*. In a letter from Elizabeth Russell to Colette, she notes that: “I agree with Bertie that your last book is the best” (29 Sept. 1936, REC. ACQ. 102). It seems out of character for Russell to conclude that without having read both her previous books.

Austrian writer. The line is from his one-act play *The Green Cockatoo* (1899).

The novel begins by introducing us to its main character, Konradin Waring, named after Joseph Conrad whom Colette (and Russell) greatly admired.⁷ Konradin's mother was Irish, as was Colette's, although Konradin's father was English and she grew up in Dorchester. As a young woman she moved to London and is described as "fearless and free" (p. 51). She has an affair with a married architect, Rockwell Talbot (p. 54) who before too long leaves for India. It is Rockwell who introduces her to a line by Leopardi: "*e il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare*" ["and sweet it seems to shipwreck in this sea"]. In real life it was Russell who introduced Colette to this line. Although Rockwell cannot be directly linked to a real-life character, his main purpose is to show that Konradin is not a naive virgin when she meets the much older Orellano through T. C. Maynard, one of his pupils. "Maynard lived all alone in a studio in the slummy part of Fitzroy Street ..." (p. 59). In real life, Russell rented a studio on Fitzroy Street as a bolt-hole for himself and Colette. In the novel, Maynard is married; his wife is ill and often away. He teaches school and wants to be a poet. Thus in some ways Maynard resembles T. S. Eliot.

Gregory del Orellano differs from Russell in that he is Spanish, teaches astronomy rather than philosophy at Cambridge, and is not married. Similarly to Russell, his reputation was made by the three volumes he published (p. 72). Like Russell he has a reputation of "aristocratic priggishness" (p. 71). When Gregory and Konradin meet, he is in love with the Marquesa Magdalena de Santa Segunda, who resembles Ottoline Morrell in all ways except nationality.⁸ It was Magdalena who "had shaken him out of his stiff academic ways" (p. 73). Konradin is regarded as a mere "passing sex attraction". "It never entered their heads to suppose Gregory had discovered in Konradin a capacity for deep and serious feeling" (p. 83). They are happy together and go on country walks like their real-life counterparts. In the autumn they vacation together in Shropshire (pp. 94, 99–102)—this, of course, parallels Russell and Colette's own vacations in Shropshire.⁹ Just before the vacation, Marcus Beazley appears. Instead of being a film director as Elvey was, he is a novelist. Gregory is "frantically jealous" of him (p. 98). After their return from Shropshire, Beazley hires Konradin as a research assistant. She meets him in Henningholme on the east coast (p. 120). In real life, Colette was in a film, *Hindle Wakes*, directed by Maurice Elvey. It was shot partly on location in St. Annes-on-Sea near Blackpool on the west coast. Both Elvey and Beazley came from

⁷ Letter to K. Blackwell, 27 May 1974; REC. ACQ. 1233b.

⁸ Ottoline Morrell has been often fictionalized. See Appendix III in SEYMOUR, *Ottoline Morrell*.

⁹ TURCON, "Then and Now: Bertie and Colette's Escapes to the Peak District and the Welsh Borderlands" (2014).

the working-class and were self-made men. Konradin initially turns down Beazley's romantic advances. Gregory despises the "selfish" Beazley (p. 140) and demands that she give him up (p. 146–7). Konradin planned to stop seeing him; then he takes her to his Adelphi flat and she finds she cannot say no. She was in fact "incapable of saying no to any man" (p. 157). She writes to Gregory, telling him she loves them both (*ibid.*). "She must be free" (p. 158). Gregory refuses to see her and writes her cruel letters (p. 161), as Russell did to Colette. Gregory retreats to the village of Woodacombe, "between the moors and the sea" (p. 170). With Maynard she drives to Woodacombe (p. 172). Their reconciliation scene is described exactly as Colette describes her reconciliation scene with Russell at Lulworth Cove in June 1919.¹⁰

Gregory was standing in the open, smoking his pipe and looking out to sea. He turned suddenly and saw her standing on the footboard of the car, her bare arm holding back the open door. In a moment she was beside him, her hair brushing his cheek, her arms round him. Never, never to her dying day, would she forget that moment.

(P. 174)

Konradin falls out of love with Beazley and begins work at a publishing company in Tavistock Square.

Monk identified Jevons as Clifford Allen because Jevons and Gregory shared a flat in Bedford Square, where in real life Ottoline Morrell lived. (The flat Russell and Allen shared was in Overstrand Mansions, Battersea.) But Jevons is a very minor character in the novel. Both Konradin and Maynard visit Gregory at Woodacombe—it is at this point that it becomes clear that Maynard is an amalgam of Eliot and Allen. In real life, Russell, Colette, and Allen spent time together at Christmas in Lynton, Devon in 1918 and 1919. The line from Leopardi appears again (pp. 201–2). Konradin wonders: "What was it they had in common? What was it brought them so close to eternity? She did not know. She only knew she was miraculously happy. The thing that held them together, was for all time" (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, it is at this point that Gregory realizes he "desired children more than he desired anything on earth" (p. 208) while at the same time Marcus Beazley reappears in Konradin's life. "She had loved him" but "had not been able to change him" (p. 210). They shared work. "Marcus had answered a definite need in her nature" (p. 211). Gregory returns from Woodacombe and calls Konradin his "Heart's Comrade", "the name she most loved to hear" (p. 212). This was a term the couple used in real life.¹¹ But in the novel, the couple are at an impasse: "his

¹⁰ "What Colette Wrote After She Motored to B. at Lulworth (Written Some Good Time Afterwards)"; Constance Malleison papers, Russell Archives, McMaster.

¹¹ Colette first called Russell her "heart's comrade" in her letter of 17 November 1916 (Urch–Malleison typescript, 1: no. 32). On 9 December she explains: "I want you as

need for absolute intimacy was as great as her need for absolute independence” (p. 212).

There are plans to visit Woodacombe again. This time, Persian Harrington, a Cambridge friend of Gregory, was there (p. 217). Konradin falls instantly in love with Harrington, though her feelings are not reciprocated (p. 236). She withdraws physically from Gregory (p. 245) and leaves Woodacombe. Colette withdrew from Russell after one of his jealous rages upon his release from prison. It is at this point that Gregory meets Gertrude West (Dora Russell), the sister of one of his pupils, Owen West. Gertrude had been at Newnham College, Cambridge reading Economic History and the Middle Ages (p. 247–8); Dora Russell had been at Girton reading Medieval and Modern Languages. Gertrude makes Gregory lapsang souchong tea, Russell’s favourite. Gertrude wants to marry and have children. Dora, too, wanted to have children—she was just not keen on the marriage part. There is now a chain of unhappiness: Gertrude cares for Gregory, Gregory cares for Konradin, “Konradin care[s] for Harrington” (p. 257). This aligns with Colette’s short-lived affair with Lewis Casson, the theatre director. As Russell wrote: “Dora loves me, I love you, you love Casson, he loves his wife” (letter 200616, 26 Feb. 1920). Gertrude “was so jealous of Konradin (whom she had never met) that she could hardly bear to hear her name mentioned” (p. 261).

Gertrude and Gregory go to Paris (p. 269), as did Russell and Dora before they left for China. Konradin begins writing unposted letters to Harrington (p. 270).¹² Gregory flies back to Croydon from Paris, leaving Gertrude there. Waiting for his plane, Konradin remembers that in the early days Gregory compared “their love to a great bird seen after days on the lonely sea” (p. 274). In real life Colette recollects a letter that Russell wrote to her after they had spent time together in Derbyshire. Love had come to him “like some great bird out of the horizon after long days on the lonely sea”.¹³ Possibly this letter was never written in real life. Gregory tells Konradin that he is going to lecture

comrade as well as lover” (*ibid.*, I: no. 45). The first time Russell reciprocates the sentiment is in his letter of c.9 April 1917 (200121). In a letter of 1 January 1918, Russell is so upset with their relationship that he can no longer call her “heart’s comrade” (200248). After their relationship is patched up, he writes on 16 February 1918: “I do really feel you now again my Heart’s Comrade” (200278). The last time that Russell used “heart’s comrade” in a letter was 26 August 1921 (200748).

¹² Colette published “Letters Posted and Unposted” as a series in *The English Review* from September 1920 to March 1921. There are 56 letters in total. Colette appears as Moya Moore and writes from Edwardes Sq. The other characters are: the actress Moya is writing to “Dear, Dear One, Blessed One, Dear Heart” (in real life, Lewis Casson); the actor’s wife Anne (in real life Casson’s wife, the actress Sybil Thorn-dike); the wife’s lover, Moya’s husband Dennis; and Maurice Maynard who goes with Moya to Lynmouth.

¹³ Urch–Malleeson ts., no. 65; Russell’s original is not extant.

in America for six months and that Gertrude will accompany him (p. 277). In real life Russell went to China to lecture in 1920 and Dora accompanied him. Konradin goes to Woodacombe alone and pines over Gregory (pp. 292, 296); Colette went to Lynton alone. In the novel Maynard's wife dies and Konradin goes to Spain to meet him. She was thrilled to be in Gregory's Spain where Gregory "had planned to take her". In real life the couple had planned on going abroad after World War I ended, but did not go (p. 300). Maynard quotes Eliot's words on "birth, copulation, and death" (p. 308). Magdalena is in Spain and invites them for a visit where she talks about Gregory (p. 314). Konradin and Maynard have sex; Konradin leaves Maynard in Spain knowing he won't return to England (pp. 318–19). In real life, Colette and Clifford Allen became lovers;¹⁴ they travelled to Italy and visited Lady Ottoline there in 1921. Back alone in London Konradin has a nervous breakdown (p. 324). Gregory returns from America and tells Konradin that he is going to marry Gertrude. In real life, Russell returned from China and did the same thing with the addition that Dora was pregnant. The novel ends with Konradin's summation: "I've mucked up my life. It's my own fault. But I'm not going under. This isn't the end. It's the beginning."¹⁵

In addition to the main plot points summarized above, Colette included information about Gregory that was also true of Russell. They had both written pot-boilers, and Gregory read detective stories (pp. 52, 258). She also noted that Gregory "had honorary degrees from every University of importance" (p. 105). Russell did not—in fact he received only two honorary degrees and that was long after this novel was written. Perhaps the two of them discussed this seeming snub. There is also mention of Gregory writing a scientific article for an American publication during the Shropshire getaway, but no published writing by Russell from that time can be found.

Colette did not keep reviews of this book or the book itself, possibly because in later life she came to dislike the book or perhaps she was never keen on it in the first place. She wrote to Slater that "it was a very *feeble* first effort."¹⁶ In a letter to Kenneth Blackwell she noted that she wanted the book forgotten. "Sir Shane Leslie, Sir Winston Churchill's cousin ... reviewed it very well, but few others did" (21 Sept. 1971). What does remain in the Russell Archives is a typed page of extracts from five reviews, including Leslie's in *The New*

¹⁴ Michael Barratt Brown to Turcon, 22 Feb. 2013, email communication. Barratt Brown learned of the affair from his father.

¹⁵ SLATER (p. 11) notes a parallel between this "it's my fault" and "it was my fault" that she calls out to Russell when she was leaving Oxford in 1938, taking the blame for their separation being too long (from 1931 to 1938). In this case, the fictional words are spoken before the real-life words in *In the North*, p. 76.

¹⁶ 10 Nov. 1972; REC. ACQ. 1233b.

Statesman and Nation.¹⁷ All five extracts are positive, as is the review by F. Hadland Davis which appeared in the *Bristol Weekly*—a typed copy of the review is extant. As for the book, the only copy in the Russell Archives is one purchased by Blackwell. It is inscribed by Colette to “Elizabeth” Russell, the novelist, Frank Russell’s last wife and Bertrand’s good friend: “To darling Elizabeth with the author’s love from Colette January 1933.”

Possibly the criticisms of her publisher Jonathan Cape came back to haunt her. In a letter of 25 July 1932 she wrote about her characters: “No efforts of mine can dislodge them or make them more flexible or bring them more to life. It’s a case of ‘apprentice work’.” She did note that “when Mr. Garnett read the first five chapters (while you were in America) he did say ‘all the characters come alive instantly in their separate surroundings’.” She offers to withdraw the novel and hopes that the new one¹⁸ that she has started work on will be “more what you want.”

She also received critical letters from Dennis Bradley and St. John Ervine. Bradley (1878–1934) was a businessman, author and producer. One of the plays he produced was *Sakuntala*, an ancient Indian work. Colette appeared in it in November 1919. Ervine (1883–1971) was an Irish playwright and London journalist. Both men wrote to her after the publication of the novel. Bradley wrote on both 20 and 24 February 1933; the second letter was a follow-up to the first, which he felt may have been too harsh. Ervine raised an interesting point in his letter of 17 January 1933: “If my recollection is right, this novel is a version of the story you told in the play which I so brutally dismissed....” I have not been able to find this play in Colette’s papers. Both men saw real promise in her writing; they urged her to continue. Ervine begged her to write about “a girl in a house such as you described in the first part of *After Ten Years*”. She should return to her roots (17 Jan. 1933).

Colette also heard from two journalists. Violet Scott James, with the *Yorkshire Post* to whom Colette had sent an inscribed copy, generally praised the novel in her letter of 3 February 1933. Erna Mildé of the *Ekstra Bladet*, Copenhagen, was effusive, writing that she “enjoyed every word of it”—she was planning on reviewing it (25 Jan. 1933). Colette also heard from Professor W. J.

¹⁷ The Leslie extract possibly was not from *The New Statesman and Nation*; an advertisement in *The Times Literary Supplement* printed the extract as from the *Sunday Times*. Leslie wrote that “the whole book is wrought and re-wrought with an intense desire for truth and without a single offence to the Soul’s dignity.” The other four extracts are from *Everyman*, *Today and Tomorrow*, Kate O’Brien in *The Spectator*, and Douglas West in *The Evening Standard*. In a letter to W. J. Gruffyd, 15 March 1933, she noted that the review in *Everyman* on 18 February was “almost too appreciative. When I discovered it was written under a *nom de plume* by a novelist I greatly admire, I was considerably encouraged.”

¹⁸ Presumably *Fear in the Heart* (1936).

Gruffydd of University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire. They had never met, but he felt compelled to write her because he had read “the first significant novel” that he had “read for years; I cannot but think that it will have a great influence on young minds” (11 March 1933). And finally there is a letter from C. F. Collin, writing from Paris, and addressing her as “My dear Lady Constance”, from which it would appear that they had met. He told her he was “sorry you were feeling low when you wrote.” His comments were mainly critical, yet he found the characters she has created “won’t let me forget them” (19 Feb. 1933). Colette wrote only one more novel (*Fear in the Heart*), and faded from literary view.¹⁹

My own feelings about the novel match those of Ervine, who regretted the lack of dialogue early in the novel. I felt this even before reading his letter. The novel is a window into a fiercely independent young woman who lacked a formal education yet held her ground against rather formidable men. Konradin is an unforgettable character, but to me she was more an embodiment of an abstract concept rather than a real woman. She has no female friends and most of the men in the novel are her lovers. Colette herself had a real talent for friendship and had many female friends. It’s unfortunate that more of that aspect of her character was not included.

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¹⁹ JOHN WILSON FOSTER does discuss her in his chapter “Irish Women Novelists: 1922–1940” in his *Irish Novels* (2008).