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Dear Colleague:

When I see a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer in The New Yorker, I usually skip it. Now, having read an interview with Singer (Conversations with IBS, Singer and Richard Burgin, 1985) I think I know why. Singer is committed to roots and the particular. He disdains rootless beings and stories tinged by some larger viewpoint. He himself, though he has lived in America for fifty years, still writes in Yiddish. His stories are still often located in the Warsaw of his youth. He despises assimilationists. Arthur Koestler, because he has tried hard to assimilate, (in Singer's words) "fails both as a man of dignity and as a writer." Burgin asks Singer, "If you had fallen in love with a non-Jewish woman, could you possibly have married her?" Singer's answer: "I don't know." So much for romance! But as a matter of fact Singer did marry a woman who came from an assimilated house.

By contrast, consider another distinguished writer--the only female member of the French Academy--Marguerite Yourcenar. She comes from a bourgeois background. Her father was a bourgeois-vagabond, if such a combination can be conceived. He said to his beloved daughter: "Where is one better off than in the bosom of one's family? Anywhere." And, "A man is only at home when he is away." Yourcenar herself is footloose. She claims to have her suitcase (figuratively) packed and is willing to live anywhere. But what about her work? Doesn't it have to be rooted in personal experience? Well, her most famous work, Hadrian's Memoir, cannot be further from her personal experience--and, let me add this charming detail, this book was completed on the Santa Fe train as it rushed clickety-clack into the New Mexico desert.

I have a couple more observations to add. Singer's technique is minute description of external behavior. He disdains authors who tell you what the character thinks. Yourcenar, by contrast, gives you almost nothing but what goes on in a character's (e.g. Hadrian's) head. Being rooted means being concerned with externalities; being rootless means being concerned with one's own thought. Another revealing contrast is this. Singer's stories deal exclusively with heterosexual love, with its promise of progeny and a human biological future whatever the original intention. Yourcenar, by contrast, shows an unusual interest in the homoerotic, starting with Hadrian's affair with young Antinous. And, of course, homoerotic love is not grounded in the biological realities: it has neither ancestor nor progeny--it is curiously abstract.

Best wishes,

*A. Z.*