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### **Between Art and Stereotype:**

#### **I. J. Singer's The Brothers Ashkenazi and W. Reymont's The Promised Land**

Both Władysław Stanisław Reymont (1867-1925) and Israel Joshua Singer (1893-1944) occupy important places in Polish and Yiddish literatures respectively. Reymont received the Nobel Prize in 1924 and Israel Joshua Singer was seen by a significant number of Yiddish critics as deserving greater acclaim than his Nobel laureate brother, Isaac Bashevis. Reymont and I.J. Singer would not have much in common if not for their well-known novels about Łódź (Lodz), both set against the background of Polish, Jewish, German and Russian<sup>1</sup> participation in the development of the city's textile industry: Ziemia obiecana (The Promised Land, 1899) and Di brider Ashkenazi (The Brothers Ashkenazi, 1936)<sup>2</sup>.

Both novels were first published in installments: *Ziemia obiecana* in *Kurier Codzienny* in 1897/8 and *Di brider ashkenazi* in *Forverts* in 1934/5. Reymont's novel was adapted into film twice, in 1927 and 1975; it was never translated into English. Singer's novel appeared in two different English translations: in 1936 (by Maurice Samuel) and 1980 (by Joseph Singer). It was translated into Polish and published in installments in a Polish language Jewish periodical *Nasz Przegląd* in 1935. A part of it, concerning the dramatic scene between the Ashkenazi brothers and the Polish officer who shoots down one of them on the Polish Soviet border was censored both in the Polish translation and in the Yiddish version published in Warsaw.<sup>3</sup> After the war the novel was published in Poland in 1992 in the censored form since the publisher was probably unaware of the intervention and used the text published in *Nowy Przegląd*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Russians appear in Singer's but not in Reymont's novel. Polish writers at the time of partitions usually avoided presenting Russian characters in their works. This was partly due to the censorship and partly in order to create an impression of semi-independence, to give the readers the illusion at least that the occupiers were not really present in the country.

<sup>2</sup> This is the date of publication in book form in Warsaw. Later it was also published in Yiddish in New York in 1937 and 1951.

<sup>3</sup> See Chone Shmeruk, „Majufes”, in: *The Jews of Poland*, vol. 1, Kraków 1991, p. 470.

<sup>4</sup> The missing passage is included in Chone Shmeruk, *ibidem*. pp. 469-7.

Both novels had mixed reception among their own audiences; they were perceived as controversial by some critics and attacked from the left and the right for various historical, ideological and artistic reasons. In both cases critical comments were made in reference to the ways of presenting various national groups, especially Poles and Jews respectively. On the whole, however, Singer's novel had a more enthusiastic reception among Yiddish critics than Reymont's work among Polish ones.

From the point of view of the literary technique utilized, Reymont's novel, although written much earlier, seems more modern in certain respects than Singer's work. This can be attributed to the cinematographic technique employed by the writer which at that time was quite innovatory. Also the fact that there is no one main protagonist but three, a Pole, a Jew and a German, (although especially towards the end of the novel the focus is shifted to the Pole), and that the emphasis is placed on presenting Lodz as a developing industrial centre make it a precursor of modern urban novel. What makes the novel old-fashioned, however, is its artificial ending with didactic undertones as well as the language which at times is too ornamental.

Singer's novel is a mixture of a rather traditional family saga and *Bildungsroman*<sup>5</sup>, an epic novel based on the vicissitudes of twins who turn out to be completely different and whose lives are presented against a rich historical and social background. This initial opposition is extended on other aspects of the novel and as a consequence we constantly encounter contrasts in the portrayal of people, events etc. Contrary to Reymont's novel in which it is difficult to say exactly when the action takes place (the closest hint being a remark on Victor Hugo's death, that is 1885), Singer's book, like a traditional epic, takes place against important historical events such as the Russo-Japanese war, World War I, the Bolshevik revolution, the regaining of independence by Poland in 1918 etc. The characters themselves are entangled in history and some real historical figures appear, although usually unnamed or in disguise.

However, what makes the two novels equally dated for the contemporary reader, is – apart from the above mentioned characteristics--the stereotypical portrayal of characters. This is especially visible in the presentation of Jews by Reymont and Poles by Singer, but also in the presentation of Germans by both writers. This stereotypical depiction makes a number of figures types rather than fully developed individuals. On the other hand, this mode of presentation constitutes fascinating material to study mutual perception and encourages looking for the reasons and sources of such stereotypical depiction.

There is evidence that Singer knew Reymont's novel. While praising Reymont as a writer, especially as the author of *The Peasants* (*Chłopi*, 1899-1903 - Reymont's magnum opus [M.A.-G.]), he points

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<sup>5</sup> See Max F. Schulz, "The Family Chronicle as Paradigm of History: *The Brothers Ashkenazi* and *The Family Moskat*, in: Marcia Allentuck (ed.), *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Carbondale 1969, pp. 77-92.

out his stereotypical presentation of Jews, particularly in *The Promised Land*. As he puts it: "It seems as if Poles were still the kings, the Germans half-devils and Jews first class devils"<sup>6</sup>. While this criticism is certainly not ungrounded, Singer himself falls into a similar trap in his own work. Both writers, as it seems, made an effort to present foreign communities objectively; hence the multitude of characters representing different national groups. They are also both very critical of their own communities. But still when we look closely at Jewish characters in Reymont and Polish ones in Singer we can see that the emphasis is on the negative aspects and mutual mistrust prevails. Apart from personal prejudices and convictions, the time periods when the books were written might have influenced peculiar modes of perception. Reymont's novel was written when the assimilationist ideas of the positivists were abandoned, while Singer created his work at the time of growing antisemitism in Poland. Additionally, as Polish critics mentioned on different occasions, Reymont had friends and benefactors among activists and ideologues of *Narodowa Demokracja*.<sup>7</sup> One of the best proofs of the latter's concern for his writings is Roman Dmowski's article about the book<sup>8</sup>. Dmowski, assuming the position of a literary reviewer but at the same time deeply immersed in his own political theories, overinterpreted the novel adapting it to his own ideological needs. Dmowski would have willingly annexed Reymont as a spokesman of National Democracy; however, as a close reading of the book testifies, Reymont only partly and rather inconsistently followed the ideas propagated by that political party.

Nevertheless the question of race, so prominent in the nationalist doctrine, appears a number of times in the narrative as an issue that inhibits coexistence of Poles and Jews or assimilation of Jews into the Polish society.

The racial component is visible in the very descriptions of the characters' physical appearance. For instance, the first information we get about Moryc Welt, undoubtedly the most negative representative of the trio, is that of his "thin Semitic nose"(I, 5)<sup>9</sup>. Physically very handsome, he is unscrupulous and does not refrain from cheating his seemingly best friend, Polish nobleman turned industrialist, Karol Borowiecki<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, older Jewish industrialists are basically negative

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<sup>6</sup> I.J. Singer, "A fardinte premye," *Literarisze bleter*, 1924, no. 29. Quoted after Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, introduction to a new Polish translation of *Di brider Ashkenazi*, unpublished manuscript, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> See Kazimierz Wyka, *Władysław Stanisław Reymont*, in: *Obraz literatury polskiej. Literatura okresu Młodej Polski*, vol. 3, p. 57. Quoted after Józef Rurawski, *Władysław Reymont*, Warszawa 1977; see also Lech Budrecki, *Władysław Reymont*, Warszawa 1953, pp. 87-96.

<sup>8</sup> See Roman Dmowski, "Nowa powieść społeczna", *Przegląd Wszechpolski* 1899, no. 1, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Władysław Stanisław Reymont, *Ziemia obiecana. Powieść współczesna*, vols. 1-2, in *Pisma*, vols. VI-VII, ed. Adam Grzymała Siedlecki, Nakład Gebethnera i Wollfa, Warszawa 1921-25. All quotations according to this edition in my translation.

<sup>10</sup> In Andrzej Wajda's film of 1975 the character of Moryc is completely different. Physically rather unattractive, from the moral point of view he is the most positive member of the trio.

characters, especially Szaja Mendelsohn and Groszlick, and references are often made to their Semitic looks.

The racial question often comes up in conversations of particular characters. For instance in a dialogue between Karol and Moryc, the latter is surprised that the former shares some valuable information with him, to which Karol responds: "I am an Aryan and you are a Semite, this explains everything," (I, 99) and he calls Moryc's attitude, that is trying to make money at all costs, a Semitic philosophy, to which Welt responds that it is neither Aryan nor Semitic, but mercantile.

Karol's Jewish lover, Lucy, fits well into a stereotype of a beautiful seductive Jewess not rare in Polish and other European literatures. With olive skin, full lips, and low forehead, she is presented as extremely voluptuous, constantly licking her lips, and affecting Borowiecki like a drug, while her husband constitutes a "strikingly Semitic type" (I, 48). Lucy expresses her love to Borowiecki with "the whole love of the East, as if she sang the whole fiery Song of Songs" (I, 69), but at the same time she has no taste and is very narrow-minded. There seems to exist a deep racial and class barrier between them: for example, when she notices Borowiecki's coat of arms on his visiting card and asks what it is, she does not understand her lover's explanations: as if the subtleties of the Polish nobility code were a knowledge beyond her comprehension. Borowiecki even wonders if Lucy has a soul because he only perceives her as wildly passionate (I, 86). What is more, when she becomes pregnant and annoys Borowiecki with her affection, she resembles in his eyes a common Jewess from a shtetl as if her future maternity "transformed her completely and awakened all characteristics of her race" (II, 372).

Descriptions based on racial characteristics are not reserved exclusively for Jews. Representatives of other nationalities are also referred to as types, e.g. "a typically German face" (in reference to Will Müller). Not only individuals but also large groups are depicted in this manner, e.g. among the audience in the theater there are "mainly Semitic and Germanic types" (I, 49).

Racist comments are made by all nationalities in reference to each other or themselves, e.g. Bernard, a Jew (himself with a "strikingly Semitic face and black olive eyes"), discourages Wysocki, a Pole, from marrying Mela, a Jewess, claiming that racial differences between them are too deep to be overcome even by the most passionate love (I, 299).

It is worth pointing out that Murray, the only Englishman in the novel, is also presented in a stereotypical way, with a long bony face and pale blue eyes. He has long yellow teeth and resembles a bulldog. The narrator himself admits that he makes an impression of a caricature from *Punch*. Murray hates Moryc and seems to cherish anti-Semitic ideas in general since, as he puts it, he "hates his [Moryc's] race" (I, 12).

Nevertheless in no cases is the racial component as important as in the Polish-Jewish relations of which the figure of the above mentioned Mela is the best illustration. She would have a chance for being the most complex and memorable character in the novel if not for the final inconsistencies in her presentation. Almost completely assimilated to Polish culture, very intelligent and sensitive, presented as physically 'un-Jewish,' with grey-blue eyes and very regular features, she falls in love with an idealistic Polish doctor, but their marriage is prevented to a great extent by his anti-Semitic mother and his own indecisiveness. In the key scene we see her at a Polish party where she herself realizes that she does not fit into the 'superb' and 'refined' Polish world, as it is described by the narrator, that she would be treated there as an intruder for which her pride would not allow (II, 191). She <sup>is reminded</sup> remembers of some women who married Poles and then were humiliated by their families and even by their own children.

The whole love affair between Mela and Doctor Wysocki, together with the upcoming conflict, is presented in a very convincing way up to the point when we find out that shortly after breaking with her beloved, Mela marries Moryc Welt and immediately assumes the role of a vulgar nouveau riche; what is more, her new husband brags that this transformation is his accomplishment. This totally unconvincing conclusion (it would have been much more convincing if Reymont left her unmarried, since the alternative of being unhappily married to Moryc would be too melodramatic) seems to result from Reymont's being influenced by the nationalist views.

Undoubtedly, we have to distinguish between authorial comments and those made by characters who constantly use contemptuous expressions in reference to each other, sometimes kindheartedly or jocularly, more often offensively, pointing to each other's national characteristics. How can we find the author's position among them?

Some clue seems to be given in Karol Borowiecki's conversation with Wysocki's mother. Borowiecki appears to be disgusted by her antisemitism when she says that she cannot conceive of her son blending his blood with the foreign, hostile and repulsive race; Borowiecki who himself says that he does not have any caste or racial prejudices, is both repelled and amused by this conversation (II, 106). But then after leaving her, he feels sorry for the woman and agrees with her at certain points (II, 109). This ambivalence seems to reflect the writer's standpoint since Reymont, as I have already mentioned, is very inconsistent (to some extent this can be attributed to the fact that he wrote his novel in installments). As Lech Budrecki observes, the novel is so full of inconsistencies that it makes an impression as if it were not written by one author<sup>11</sup>; this also led to various contradictory interpretations to such an extent that even obviously negative Polish characters were perceived as positive and racial comments were neutralized or placed in a historical

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<sup>11</sup> Budrecki, p. 88.

perspective. For example Jerzy R. Krzyżanowski while admitting that sometimes Jews in Reymont are grotesque, observes that "in the representation of that group Reymont comes much closer to reality than, for instance Eliza Orzeszkowa in her Jewish novels, and achieves the most successful effects, quite often humoristic without being malicious"<sup>12</sup>.

To counterbalance negative portraits of most Jews, Reymont introduces positive or at least 'harmless' Jewish characters, among them Dawid Halpern, an outcast and eccentric who loves Lodz, although he himself does not possess anything, and Blumenfeld, a musician who was forced into working as a clerk. But Halpern still has a "a dry Semitic soul" (I, 403) and Blumenfeld is by no means typical with his light golden hair and romantic and idealistic personality.

Although Reymont takes his readers to Jewish homes and some descriptions make an impression of realistic and probable, several scenes show clearly how little the Polish novelist knew of certain Jewish beliefs and customs. This ignorance is best visible in the scene at Szaja Mendelsohn's palace where the praying Jews are described as dressed in "ritual covers in black and white stripes" (the word *tallit* or its Polish equivalent is not used) and they sing a "strangely passionate and strangely sorrowful psalmody"(I, 189). The scene is concluded with Szaja giving one of the praying men less money than the other, because according to him he did not sing enthusiastically enough and wanted to cheat both his master and God. In another scene when Szaja unbuttons his coat, one can see "a satin waistcoat from which two white strings hang" (I, 312; again the word *tsitces* or its Polish equivalent is not used).

While for Reymont the racial component plays a significant role, in Singer's novel most Polish characters seem to have their roots in two stereotypes deep-rooted in Yiddish folklore and literary tradition: the peasant and the *polets*. The peasant is stupid, illiterate and harmless--like Wojciech at the beginning of the novel--but when in a crowd he becomes antisemitic and harmful to Jews. The *polets* is violent, unpredictable, sometimes sympathetic towards Jews but more often cruel. Very few Polish characters appear in Singer's novel compared to the number of Jews in Reymont's and they are almost exclusively male. If in Reymont's world Jews have noses, in Singer's Poles must have moustaches, whether individuals or a group, and the longer the better. Polish gentry presented as a group on different occasions are easily distinguishable by their moustaches which they constantly twirl up. The Jews who want to look Polish also wear moustaches, for instance Flederbojm who dances the polonaise and proudly turns up his moustache.

Singer makes an effort at introducing Polish characters from various social, political and even religious groups (e.g. one of them, Colonel Konicki, is a convert to the Orthodox Church), but most

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<sup>12</sup> Jerzy R. Krzyżanowski, "The Promised Land: A Modern Novel," in: *Studies in Polish Civilization*, Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, New York 1971.

of them (perhaps excepting Marcin Kuczyński, first proletarian, then PPS activist, and finally an organizer of the Polish Legions) represent the same basic type of a sadistic, cruel, oftentimes pernicious and arrogant Pole who is to a greater or lesser extent anti-Semitic.

One of the most interesting cases in this respect is the wojewoda of Lodz who lives in Max Ashkenazi's palace for a while. His very name, Paćz-Paćzewski, sounds like a parody of a Polish aristocratic name and he is a representative of old Polish aristocracy. As can be expected, he wears a long moustache and additionally a tie decorated with a golden cross. He hates Lodz since he perceives it as a Jewish city, as does earlier the German, Baron von Heidel-Heidellau. However, he is not an enemy of Jews as long as they play their traditional roles:

*It was not that he was an enemy of the Jews; they had their place in the country, he believed; but that place was not at the head of a city's industries. He remembered out of his boyhood the frightened, ragged Jews of the village, shrinking bearded figures in long gaberdines, who would stoop before the local squire and kiss the hem of his garment. Those Jews were all right. As long as the prince remained a prince, the peasant a peasant, the Jew a Jew, Prince Panch Panchevski felt benevolently inclined. In fact, he could not imagine Poland without its Jews, and it made him feel good when, driving along a country road, he encountered one of those stooping, cringing, bearded peddlers who got out of the way and humbly removed his cap as the Polish aristocrat drove by. But what kind of world was this, he asked himself, where Jews, clean-shaven, in modern dress, speaking Polish, masqueraded as bankers and industrialists and intellectuals and had a say in the management of affairs?<sup>13</sup>*

This feature of the Polish *porets*, namely his inability to accept the emancipated, 'masqueraded' Jew (in this case allegedly a Bolshevik), is also implied by the scene at the border (pp. 599-603) when the Polish officer tries to humiliate both brothers by ordering them to dance *mayufes*. As long as the Jew is subservient to the *porets*, he can feel relatively safe.

As far as Polish characters are concerned, Singer never attempts to introduce his readers into their private lives; they are not shown in relation to other Poles, but almost exclusively in opposition to Jews.

<sup>13</sup> I.J. Singer, *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, trans. Maurice Samuel, New York 1938, pp. 615-16. All subsequent quotations according to this edition.

It is interesting that no Polish women except for some very marginal characters appear in the novel. In this respect Israel Joshua differs from his brother Bashevis who often introduces the stereotype of a simple, kind-hearted and devoted Polish or Slavic woman<sup>14</sup>.

Some authors have suggested that perhaps *Di brider Ashkenazi* can be treated as a polemic with *The Promised Land*<sup>15</sup>. Whether this is true or not, it goes without saying that any Polish reader's reaction to reading Singer's novel is that this is the 'Jewish version of *The Promised Land*' (one can easily imagine similar reaction among Yiddish readers if they happen to know Reymont's novel<sup>16</sup>). This would not be an isolated case in Polish Yiddish literary relations. For example, Bashevis Singer's *Der king fun di felder* can be treated as an Yiddish version of Józef Ignacy Kraszewski's *Stara baśń* (*Old Tale*, 1876)<sup>17</sup>. It is always dangerous to talk about possible influences, borrowings or travesties in literature since this can lead to over or misinterpretations; nevertheless it is definitely possible to read these two novels together and look for plausible parallels. We can imagine that what must have irritated Singer a lot in Reymont's novel was the presentation of Moryc Welt. Having this in mind, we can treat the Ashkenazi brothers as two sides of Moryc: Jakub resembling him with his handsome appearance, popularity among women and good connections with Polish circles, and Symcha in his shrewdness and unscrupulousness. Jakub at the same time is equipped with some features characteristic of the Polish gentry as if taken from Borowiecki and other noblemen (e.g. Trawiński). What is more, Dinele's marriage to Symcha is like a version of Mela's marriage to Moryc with the difference that Dinele remains unhappy and we are forced to believe that Mela is not. Characteristically, Dinele, like Mela, does not look 'Jewish'; at school they tell her that she does not have a Semitic appearance. She has brown hair and blue eyes, her appearance symbolizing her departure from her own community she is critical of.

German families, the Hunzes in Singer and the Millers in Reymont, are very much alike as well. Presenting German characters is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are undoubtedly similarities between them. Germans both in Reymont's and Singer's novels tend to be either simple, uneducated and hard working or evil and corrupt to the point of perversion. Generally the portrayal of Germans by Reymont is more favorable, e.g. there is the rather positive although bland figure of Max Baum (the German component of the trio) and definitely positive, almost utopian figure of his

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<sup>14</sup> See my article "Poles and Poland in I.B. Singer's Fiction," in: *Shtetl to Socialism. Studies from POLIN*, ed. A. Polonsky, London-Washington 1993, pp. 502-516.

<sup>15</sup> See Shmeruk and Prokop Janiec, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately it was never translated into Yiddish or Hebrew but many Yiddish speakers might have read it in the original.

<sup>17</sup> For more on this topic see my book *Polska Isaaca Bashevisa Singera - rozstanie i powrót*, Lublin 1994, p. 43. See also Chone Shmeruk, "Polish-Jewish Relations in the Historical Fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer," *The Polish Review*, no. 4, 1987, p. 411.



old father. In this case it is clear that in some respects the writer's focus is often not national but class oriented. Reymont was very critical of industrialization and in many ways contrasted the old world of values to the new one; old Baum, like Abraham Ashkenazi, stands for the past world and its values. One must remember also that Germans, contrary to Jews, were generally considered at that time as easily assimilated into Polish culture and that the novel was written at a time of no special Polish German tensions. In Singer's portrayal of Germans, in turn, one can easily detect a projection of the situation in Germany at the time novel was written.

Not to be forgotten while indicating national stereotypes in both novels is that to some extent this type of characterization was determined by factors other than merely personal prejudices, false convictions or misbeliefs, mainly the naturalistic vein in Reymont's case and sharp irony in Singer's. What is more, both writers shared a deterministic and pessimistic outlook on social processes.

While juxtaposing the two novels, the reader's point of view is very important as well. I am sure that if Roman Dmowski had read Singer's novel <sup>18</sup> he would have found enough evidence for a Jewish domination in the city and enough support for his racial theories. The same passages depending on whether they appear in Reymont or Singer can be read as anti-Semitic or simply ironic. In a Polish literary encyclopedia we read that Polish characters in Reymont's novel are bland and stereotypical while German and Jewish are colorful and vivid <sup>19</sup>. One can easily imagine a Yiddish reader who will criticize Singer for stereotypical or negative portrayal of Jews and a rather convincing presentation of Poles and Germans. The same scenes are open to contrary interpretations depending on what traditions we take into account. It is interesting how differently Jakub's death can be interpreted: as a death in defense of one's dignity and a triumph over his cowardly brother by some critics <sup>20</sup>, or as an unheroic act by others <sup>21</sup>.

The most striking similarity, however, can be seen in the ambivalent depiction of Lodz. The city is presented as both repulsive and fascinating by both writers and it often acquires human features by frequent employment of animization. It is not difficult to find similar passages in this respect, e.g. the very beginning of Reymont's novel:

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<sup>18</sup> There is no evidence he did, but theoretically it was possible since he died as late as 1939.

<sup>19</sup> See entry about *Ziemia obiecana* in *Literatura polska. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, Warszawa 1984, vol. 2, p. 683.

<sup>20</sup> Such an interpretation was given, for instance, by the Yiddish critic B. Rivkin in "Y.Y. Zingers letst verk," *Epokhe* (May 1944), pp. 314-22. Quoted after Anita Norich, *The Homeless Imagination in the Fiction of Israel Joshua Singer*, Bloomington 1991, p. 44. For a similar interpretation by a contemporary Polish critic see Prokop-Janiec, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> For instance Anita Norich does not agree with Rivkin's interpretation claiming that "it is impossible to attach heroic stature to Yakub in this scene." According to her "heroism implies a plane of action and meaning that is antithetical to the terms in which Singer casts *The Brothers Ashkenazi*." Norich, p. 44.

*Lodz was waking up... Enormous factories whose long black bodies and slender necks, the chimneys, loomed at night, in the mist and rain, were slowly waking up, exhaling furnace flames, breathing coils of smoke, they were starting to live and move in the darkness that still enveloped the earth. (I, 1)*

And a fragment from *Brothers Ashkenazi*:

*And then suddenly everything stopped. A large bite stuck in the throat of the hoggish city. The mad eating and guzzling was at an end. The cleaning process was about to begin. (294)*

Both descriptions sound like passages from some futuristic poems, which should not be surprising regarding the futurists' fascination with the modern city.

In fact the two novels carry a similar message: a departure from tradition, in one respect gentric and rural, in the other traditional Judaism, leads to disaster, but on the other hand stopping or preventing the changes is impossible. The message, however, as conveyed by the characters, is sometimes too obvious and presented in simplistic terms. What seems to remain unaffected, convincing and unsterotypical is the city itself and that is how the two novels can be read by the modern reader: as two complementary perceptions of the city which constituted a unique conglomerate of Polish, Jewish, German and Russian economic and cultural efforts.