Ján Hollý

SLOVAK EPICS

Svatopluk, the Cyrillo-Methodiad, Sláv

Translated by Charles S. Kraszewski

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

THE SLOVAK EPICS

(Svatopluk, the Cyrillo-Methodiad, Sláv)

This book was published with a financial support from SLOLIA, Centre for Information on Literature in Bratislava

THE SLOVAK EPICS

(Svatopluk, the Cyrillo-Methodiad, Sláv)

by Ján Hollý

Translated from the Slovak and introduced by
Charles S. Kraszewski

This book was published with a financial support from SLOLIA,
Centre for Information on Literature in Bratislava

Cover image "Apotheosis of the Slavs" by Alphonse Mucha (1926)

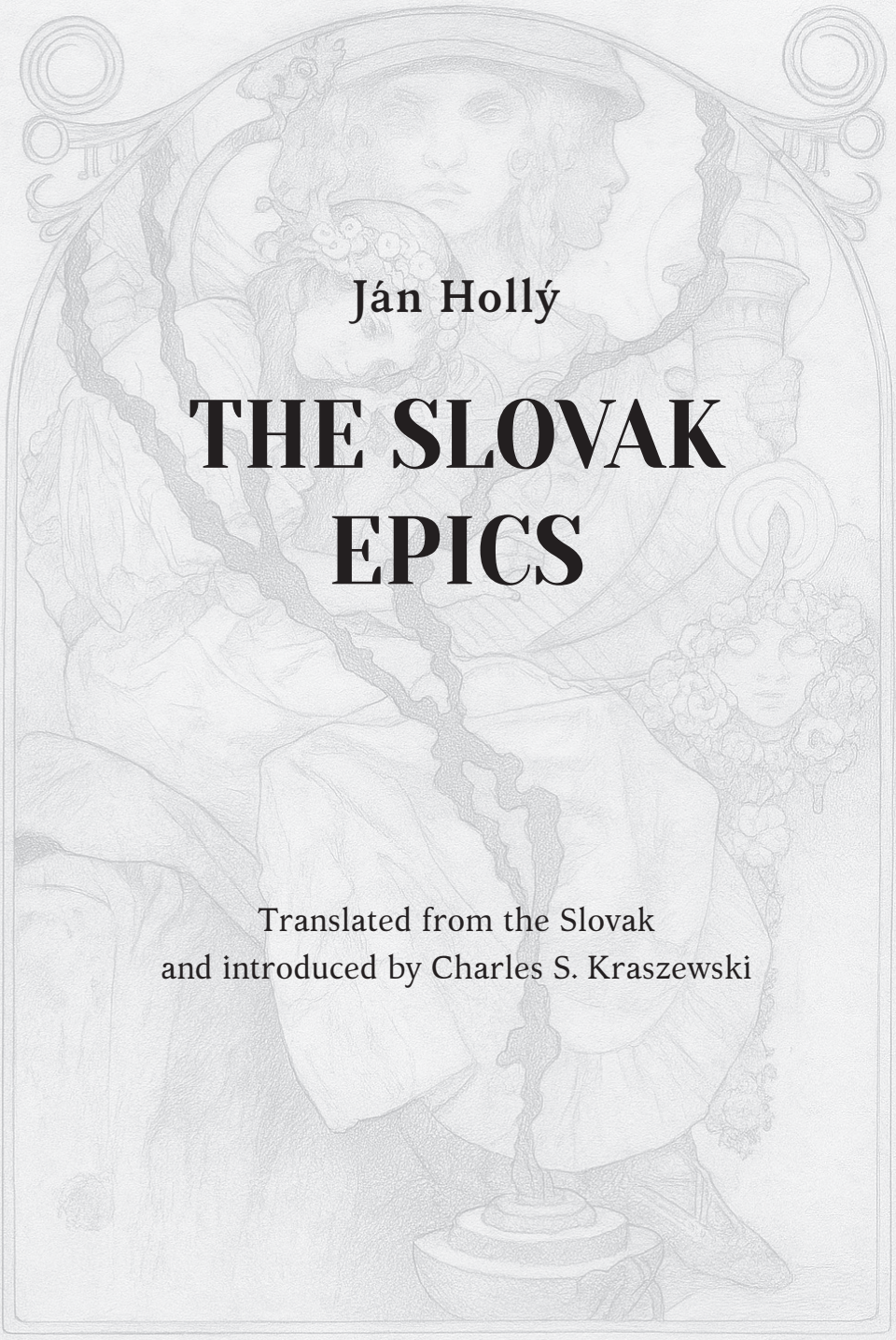
Publishers Maxim Hodak & Max Mendor

www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-80484-195-2
ISBN: 978-1-80484-196-9

Published in English by Glagoslav Publications in August 2025

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.



Ján Hollý

THE SLOVAK EPICS

Translated from the Slovak
and introduced by Charles S. Kraszewski

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

Contents

New Beginnings: the Epics of Ján Hollý and the Creation of Modern Slovak Literature

Charles S. Kraszewski

The modern period of Slovak literature begins with the poet Ján Hollý (1785–1854). Štefan Krčmerý calls him 'the first great poet of the Slovak language',[1] by which he means of *Bernolákovčina* — the state of the language as newly codified by Anton Bernolák (1762–1813) on the basis of the western dialects of Slovak. This fact deserves some emphasis. For whereas the roots of the Slovak language reach much farther back in history than the nineteenth century,[2] it was necessary, at the time, for political reasons to distinguish Slovak from its near-twin Czech. And thus, while Hollý is considered a classical author in spirit, creating in neoclassical tropes at a time when, as Stanislav Šmatlák points out, Polish and Russian literature, in the persons of Adam Mickiewicz and Aleksandr Pushkin, had already passed on through Romanticism toward Realism, and in Bohemia Karel Hynek Mácha had astounded the Czech readership with something totally new in his Byronic epyllion *Máj*[3] — the fact that Hollý is a moving force behind the national revival movement in Slovakia sets him firmly in the ideological camp we associate with Romanticism. Indeed, this was the period when the 'Czechoslovak' poet Jan Kollár was creating his magnum opus

[1] Quoted by Milan Pišút, 'Klasicizmus (roky dvadsiate a tridsiate)', *Dejiny slovenskej literatúry*, ed. M. Pišút (Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Osveta, 1962), pp. 187–215; p. 206.

[2] There is some justice in beginning an overview of Slovak writing as early as the ninth century — as do the editors of the two-volume anthology *Z klenotnice staršieho slovenského písomníctva* (Bratislava: Tatran, 1984) — with works in Old Church Slavonic composed by and about Saints Cyril and Methodius, the apostles of the Western Slavs, who began their mission in areas that were to become Slovakia.

[3] Stanislav Šmatlák, 'Ján Hollý — Klasik slovenskej poézie', in *Pamätnica z osláv dvojstého výročia narodenia Jána Hollého*, ed. Juraj Chovan (Martin: Matica slovenská, 1985), 123–133, p. 123.

Slávy dcera [The Daughter of Sláva], and the Magyar poets Károly Kisfaludy and Mihály Vörösmarty were engaged with legends from ancient Hungarian days; it was at this time that Hollý himself was initiating a current in literature that would continue throughout the Romantic period proper, from J.M. Hurban and Ľudovít Štúr through Samo Chalupka.[4]

THE HEROIC POEMS AND SLOVAKIA'S BATTLE FOR AUTONOMY

To fully understand the grandeur of Ján Hollý's epics, or 'heroic poems' [*víťazské básne*] we have to consider the fact that at the time they were written (1833–1839) the Slovak language was just being established as a modern literary idiom, distinct from its near twin-sister, Czech. As a matter of fact, Czech itself was also undergoing a revival. Despite the antiquity of both languages, and the Slavic group in general, in the lands of the Dual Monarchy centuries of linguistic centralisation — the imposition of German as an official language in the Czech lands, and of Magyar ('Hungarian') in Hungary — had a deleterious effect on the autochthonous languages of the regions. People who wished to advance, either in the civil service, law, the army, or any of the professions requiring an education beyond the most basic level had to study, and later work, in these two dominant languages. This resulted in the deracination of the intellectual crème de la crème in Bohemia and Slovakia, as Czech and Slovak were shunted aside from the main highways of intellectual and artistic discourse, confined to the cottage, the farm, and the servants' quarters.

[4] Pišút, pp. 206–207. The fact that Hollý wrote in Bernolák's idiom is seen by certain scholars as something that was already anachronistic during the poet's lifetime, for modern literary Slovak was to develop according to the usage established by the younger poet and scholar Ľudovít Štúr, based on the central dialects of Slovakia. 'When he wrote his work Bernolák's movement was in decay', stresses J. Hanák, and Paul Selver concurs: 'It was unfortunate for him that he selected Bernolák's artificial and clumsy dialect as his medium of expression'. However, it is a bit much to suggest, like Selver, that Bernolák's literary dialect 'was intelligible to a restricted circle of readers', or, like Hanák, that for this reason 'his poems remained in the main alien to the people'. Given Hollý's popularity, during his lifetime and later, throughout Slovakia, such statements are patently wrong. What is more, Štúr and his followers looked to Hollý as a revered oracle, and made at least two pilgrimages to his rectory. For Hanák and Selver, see: J. Hanák, 'Slovaks and Czechs in the Early 19th Century', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Apr., 1932, Vol. 10, No. 30 (Apr., 1932), pp. 588-601, p. 592; Paul Selver, 'The Literature of the Slovaks', T*he Slavonic and East European Review*, Apr., 1934, Vol. 12, No. 36 (Apr., 1934), pp. 691-703, p. 692. A very good source for Hollý's influence on Štúr and the young protestants of Bratislava is Lenka Rišková, 'Z korešpondencie Jána Hollého. Niečo o vzťahu Jána Hollého k protestantským autorom', *Slovenská literatúra*, 62, 2015, nr. 6: 495–511.

With the uprise of Romantic interest in 'folk' culture, spurred by the philosophical writings of J.G. Herder, among others, and fuelled by the general rebellion against multinational empires throughout Europe on behalf of the political emancipation of their smaller constituent nations, language began to be strongly associated with ethnicity, ethnicity with nationality, and nationality with statal and governmental aspirations based on the 'folk'. In both the Czech lands and Slovakia, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century constituted a period of 'national revival' [Slovak: *národné obrodenie*, Czech: *národní obrození*]. Literati and scholars such as Josef Jungmann (1773–1847) in Bohemia, and Anton Bernolák (1762–1813) in Slovakia were at work raising national consciousness through literature, and — especially in the case of the latter — by codifying the spoken language of the people into a rationally determined linguistic entity worthy of comparison with any other tongue in the world, in short: not a peasant jargon, but a national language, a national language based upon the language of the ethnic majority.

This was an especially important task in Slovakia. The mountainous regions of the Hungarian kingdom, bordering the Polish lands north of the Tatras, were subjected to such a fierce Magyarisation that even the ethnic Slovak nobility 'Magyarised' to get ahead. The Kossuth family is a good example of that. One of the national heroes of Hungary is Kossuth Lajos (1802–1894) who came of Magyarised Slovak stock — a background he rejected. Meanwhile, his uncle Juraj Košút (1776–1849) was a Slovak patriot who opposed Magyarisation and corresponded with Ľudovít Štúr (1815–1856), poet and linguist, one of the great architects of the modern Slovak nation. In Hungary, where the language of education and government had remained Latin up until the nineteenth century (so as to accommodate the various linguistic groups present in the kingdom: Slovaks, Croats, Romanians, Germans, and Magyars), the revolutionary Romantic movement, which sought independence for Hungary from Vienna, replaced Latin with Magyar, and sought to define Slovak as a mere dialect of Czech. Politically speaking, if this were to be acknowledged, that would define Slovak as a 'foreign' linguistic import to the country, and thereby a tongue deserving of no official standing in the land. All the more so, then, did the Slovaks — including the Lutherans, who traditionally cleaved more to the Czech language than did the Catholic Slovaks — work feverishly to establish a universally accepted and codified version of the language of the people in order to cement it as a language native to the region. Indeed, it is difficult to see how this could ever have been doubted, since Magyar arrived in the lands of modern day Slovakia and Pannonia only in the ninth century with the influx of the Magyar tribes. Magyar itself is chock-full of borrowings from the Slovak. Significantly, most of these are agricultural terms, and vocabulary relating to

permanent dwellings — terminology introduced to the consciousness of the nomadic tribes from the east only after their settlement along the banks of the Tisa and Danube and their peaceful commerce with their Slovak neighbours.

So much for politics. As far as literature is concerned, the ennoblement of 'new' or rather 'newly renovated' languages happens in two ways. On the one hand, products of the folk culture are disseminated through the world by translation into more universal languages. This happened with Slovak when Goethe found the folk poems brought him by Ján Kollár (1793–1852) worthy of being translated into and disseminated in German. More significant, however, is literary movement heading the other way: the translation of the great works of world literature into the 'young' languages, with the intent of proving the latter capable of bearing the weight of the content and beauties of the original in the native vocables. In Czech this occurs with Jungmann's translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost* [*Ztracený ráj,* 1811 — more of this later], and in Slovak, with Hollý's Slovak version of Virgil's *Aeneid* [*Vergiliova Eneida*, 1828]. Just fifteen years after the death of Bernolák, one of the great classics of the Western tradition was brought over into *bernolákovčina.* The remarkable suppleness of the newly-codified and far from clumsy Slovak language is astoundingly confirmed thereby. Comparatively speaking, it is as if the *Aeneid* had been translated into Anglo-Saxon by Alfred the Great, not having to wait more than half a millennium for Gavin Douglas to come along. And then, what is arguably more impressive, Hollý further enriched his literary tradition by not one, but three original epics on the Virgilian pattern: *Svatopluk* (or *Svätopluk*, 1833), the *Cyrillo-Methodiada* (1835), and *Sláv* (1839).

Indeed, Lucia Jechová begins her article on 'Mythology and Mystics in J. Hollý's Epos Svatopluk' with the bold assertion: 'The skilful epic *Svatopluk* was a work unique in its day and age. In it, Ján Hollý showed the world that Slovak literature is something independent and vital'.[5] It is true that Hollý's epics are intended as even more emphatic proof of the expressive capabilities of Slovak — and a point of reference for Slovaks, threatened with pressure from official Magyarisation. They were to underscore the antiquity, bravery, heroism, and significance of the nation's protoplasts.

The chronology of the epics proceeds backwards, from the mediaeval period into the far distant past of the Slovaks in particular, and Slavs in general — what in his lectures on Slavic literature Adam Mickiewicz calls 'the mythical period of Slavdom'.[6] For the first epic, centring on the eponymous hero who led a

[5] Lucia Jechová, 'Mytológia a mystika v epose J.Hollého – Svatopluk' *XLinguae.eu A Trimestrial European Scientific Language Review* 4/2011:40–44, p. 40.

[6] Adam Mickiewicz, *Literatura słowiańska. Kurs pierwszy* [Slavic Literature. Course I (1840–1841)] (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1997), p. 26. This edition: Volume VIII of Mick-

successful struggle of the Slavs in the Great Moravian Empire against German hegemony, is set in the closing decade of the ninth century. The action of the *Cyrillo-Methodiad*, which takes as its theme — so unusual for epic poetry — the Christianisation of the Slavs inhabiting the Moravian state, develops a few decades earlier, as it begins in 862 with the request sent by Svatopluk and Rastislav to the Emperor Michael III in Constantinople, for the Apostles of the Slavs Cyril (Konštantín, Constantine) and Methodius to travel to the Slovaks on a mission of evangelisation. Finally, *Sláv* ventures even farther back in time. Its six cantos are a detailed development of Svatopluk's recounting of the migration of the Slavic people from their original homeland in the Indian subcontinent to Central Europe, which he gives at a banquet in the presence of the Bavarian king Karolman. According to the chronology presented in Canto VI of *Svatopluk*, this took place at least five hundred years before Svatopluk's imprisonment among the Bavarians, and so — somewhere around 300 AD at the latest.

SVATOPLUK

The first of Hollý's epics is also his most classical in construction. Like most of the European epics following Virgil, it is divided into twelve books. It centres on a heroic war of great significance for the nation, and unfolds on a dual plane of action: that of men, and that of supernature — in this case, the Christian Heaven and the triune God.

The story developed by Hollý is fairly straightforward and simple to relate. The eponymous hero of the work, Svatopluk, has been imprisoned by the Germans to whom he had originally fled for protection from his vengeful uncle Rastislav. Shut in a dark dungeon, the innocent Slovak ruler is not abandoned by God, Who commands the Bavarian king Karolman to release him, lest he suffer the same fate. Karolman, moved by the visitation of God's angel in dream, summons a diet of the German elders in order to discuss the matter with them — although he has already determined upon heeding God's command. After some debate, the vote goes Karolman's way. Svatopluk is released, outfitted with arms, and provided with an army to move against Slavimír, who had reluctantly ascended the throne at Svatopluk's disappearance. Svatopluk's release is conditioned upon his agreement to remain in a feudal relationship to Karolman once he regains his sceptre, to support him in war, and to pay an annual tribute. Svatopluk agrees to the terms, although it is debatable whether

iewicz's *Dzieła* [Works]. Mickiewicz delivered his course of lectures at the Collège de France, during his Parisian exile.

or not he intended to keep the troth he pledged to Karolman (who betroths his daughter to him to make the alliance all the more stronger). For although he does return to his homeland at the head of a foreign force and even leads a clever cavalry charge against his own Slovak people that sweeps them from the field, at a lull in the fighting he heads to the Slovak fortress of Devín on his own to plead his case before the Slovak diet. Initially rebuffed as a traitor, following his arguments of alliance under duress, some of the Slovak elders make a counter offer: What if Svatopluk should abandon the Germans and reascend his throne? Would that not be a better solution, to fight at the head of his own people and, in repulsing the Germans, win a kingdom independent of feudal obligations, rather than to hold to Karolman's terms and 'enslave' the Slovaks to the Bavarians? Having been accused of treason for abandoning them, and Rastislav, to the Germans, and now tempted to break his word to Karolman, Svatopluk is, understandably, at a moral crossroads. However, national sentiment wins out in this man who had, just hours before, brought fire and sword against his own people. He accepts the offer and Slavimír, rather relieved, transfers authority to him. The offer he sends to Britwald, the commander of the German forces, to retreat homeward in peace, is, of course, spurned and the war continues, this time with Svatopluk leading his own people. In masterful lines that testify to Hollý's solid classical grounding in Virgil and Homer, the Slovak war of independence (in which the neighbouring Slavs, the Czechs and the Poles, also take part) batters on to the final victory, and the Great Moravian Empire is established on a firm, independent footing.

SVATOPLUK AND THE EPIC TRADITION

The classical epic genre in the West (and not only), is characterised by the following traits:

Exalted theme. For a small nation such as Slovakia, submerged for centuries in a multinational empire dominated by a foreign élite, and threatened by progressive cultural annihilation, there can be no greater or more exalted theme than the establishment of a national identity and cultural integrity. We have already mentioned the significance of Hollý's epics for the development of Slovak as a literary medium, which, it would not entirely be an exaggeration to suggest, is on a level with Dante's significance for Italian. But the content of *Svatopluk* is also important, as through it Hollý emphasises not only the heroism of the Slovaks, but the antiquity of their state as the foundational basis of the tenth-century Great Moravian Empire, the first and only inde-

pendent Slavic state in the early middle ages, until the consolidation of the Polish kingdom to the north.

Formal poetic language. All epics are 'high style'. The great formal triumph of Ján Hollý, as far as poetics is concerned, was his establishment of the Slovak line, which basically consists of fifteen syllables, and the powerful poetic narrative he builds around its supple core, sustained over the twelve books of *Svatopluk* (as well as the twelve others that constitute the *Cyrillo-Methodiad* and *Sláv*). His translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* provided, of course, a solid foundation for his verse-line. For a poet whose career falls between the Enlightenment and Romanticism proper, it is noteworthy that he eschewed couplets for a stately blank verse much more in line with his Italo-Grecian models.

Generous narrative length. Modelling himself on Virgil — as so many did before and after him — Hollý contains his account within twelve books. Taking five hundred lines as the average length of *Svatopluk's* cantos, this gives us more or less six thousand lines of verse. That is a little over half the length of *Paradise Lost*, which exceeds ten thousand, and closer to, but still less than the *Lusiads* of Camões, which come in at 8,816. Still, it is more than enough space for Hollý to produce an engaging and well developed account of the German-Slovak war, with many of the trappings found in the *Aeneid* (as we will describe below).

Extended metaphors. Again like Virgil, whose metaphors tend to be among the lengthiest in the ancient epics, Hollý delights in vivid comparisons. Most of them are taken from nature, and more than a few refer to the specific nature of his Slovak homeland. The introduction of Slovak toponymy both validates the 'reality' in which his fictions play out, and draws the Slovak reader close to the stories, referring as it does to places he knows, and lives among.

Beginning 'in medias res'. Svatopluk begins with the hero in gaol. As he makes his plaint to God, and during Karolman's address to the diet he calls in order to discuss his plan of liberating Svatopluk, the backstory is filled in, per usual epic narrative style, by recollection.

Invocation to the muse. It is to a particularly Slavonic muse that Hollý appeals, calling upon 'Umka', who resides on Bílá Hora, and has watched the sometimes dramatic history of the Slovaks unfold from that height. But whether or not we are to suspend our disbelief and take the Slavic muse as a figure separate from the poet himself is debatable. The word *Umka* seems to be a coinage of Hollý's own.[7] Based on the Slavic root *um*, meaning 'reason' or 'mind', it

[7] In *Slávy dcera*, Kollár also refers to *umky* in a way that suggests a Slavic version of the Graces. It is possible, and even probable, that he borrowed the word from Hollý.

is conceivable that Hollý is personifying his own inspired poetic abilities of narration, which 'dwell' in contemplation upon the historical heights of his nation.[8] For it is also true that, like Milton, at least once Hollý invokes the Holy Spirit, asking Him to enlighten 'Umka'.

War, duel, quest. Just as the *Aeneid* is divided into two halves, the 'Odyssean' half recounting the travels of the Trojans (Books I–VI) followed by the 'Iliadic' half dealing with the war between the Trojans and Latins (Books VII–XII), so is *Svatopluk* divided into two portions, though unevenly. Cantos I–VII of Hollý's work recount the preparations for war, from Svatopluk's deliverance from prison, through a tournament arranged to decide who will command the German hosts in Karolman's name, a banquet at which Svatopluk gives a lengthy account of the Slavic nation's generation in India and wanderings to Central Europe, and a catalogue of the troops who set out on Svatopluk's behalf. Cantos VIII–XII describe the fierce war per se, including Svatopluk's switching of sides and the eventual victory of the Slovaks. The war will conclude with Svatopluk's dispatching of Britwald in a duel, although Hollý will not 'humanise' his hero by tarnishing his scutcheon with raving and cruelty, as Virgil so curiously does in the case of Aeneas, who takes vengeance upon the defeated Turnus kneeling before him.

Dual plane of Action. In the earlier cantos of the work, Hollý introduces the vengeful demon Černobog, and the rest of the legions of Hell, who bitterly hate Svatopluk for his role in establishing the Christian religion in Slovakia/Moravia and depriving them of the latreia they had enjoyed from the pagan Slavs. This idea of the reality of the pagan gods as demons, fallen angels who deceived the pre-Christian peoples into worshipping them as deities, is derived from Milton, who thus explains the Greek oracles in a manner somewhat curious for a Protestant. For he does not deny the 'existence' of the pagan gods, he just unmasks them, showing forth their true, infernal nature. The emergence of Černobog from Hell is lifted nearly *in toto* from Milton, as is Černobog's address to his fellow toppled deities, which is similar to the pandemonium scenes from *Paradise Lost.* Thus, though not to the same extent as the more classically conceived battles waged by the pagan deities in *Sláv*, Hollý preserves the epic conviction of the vital interest of supernature in the doings of men here on Earth. Dream sequences, in which inspiration is brought to sleeping mortals (from God Himself, in the case of Karolman in Canto I) are also a part of this dual plane of action. However, insofar as the Lord God Himself takes an interest in the men here on Earth,

[8] According to Karol Rosenbaum, Umka 'frequents the summits of his native region, and thus is something of a good genius of the Slovaks'. See Karol Rosenbaum, 'Poznámky' to Ján Hollý, *Výber z básní* (Turčiansky Sv. Martin: Matica slovenská, 1947), p. 184.

sending forth His angel to make His will known unto them, in this we see more of a characteristic of the mediaeval chanson de geste, such as *The Song of Roland* and *The Song of My Cid*, than the pagan epics. This makes sense given that *Svatopluk* is a Christian epic, set in the mediaeval period.

Epic hero. Svatopluk is indeed an epic hero. He embarks upon a traditionally-conceived monomyth as described by the late great Joseph Campbell, departing from the Slovaks out of fear of treachery at Rastislav's hands, 'crossing the threshold of adventure' during his Bavarian imprisonment, and then returning to his people in the manner of Odysseus returning to the Ithacans, bringing to the Slovaks the 'elixir' of a restoration of independence and order following the successful war against the Bavarians.

The underworld journey. Of all the characteristics of the epic, perhaps the only one lacking from *Svatopluk* is the hero's descent into the underworld. That is, unless we consider the opening scenes of the work, in which we meet the Slovak king fettered in his dark dungeon. Yet that would be a stretch, as the underworld journey is supposed to be one of discovery. In Book VI of the *Aeneid*, the greatest of all of those west of Yudhishthtira's journey through Hell in the *Mahabharata*, Aeneas comes to know the future history of the city his descendants are to found, and what the special mission of Rome will be. Likewise, Gilgamesh would never have completely understood that the fate of all men is death had he not crossed the mythical waters to visit Utnapishtim, the Sumerian Noah. Hollý's Svatopluk does not undergo so nearly dramatic an enlightenment in his dungeon. Aware of the injustice of his sentence, he appeals to God for aid. The closest he comes to an acquisition of new wisdom is his realisation of the fata morgana of royal rule, which often leads, as it does in his case, to sorrow. Yet the nature of this intimation as life-changing wisdom is undercut as the story continues, for Svatopluk is to triumph as a king, after recovering his sceptre from his placeholder Slavimír at the diet, and then affirming it in war. But in this lack of an underworld journey Hollý doesn't completely depart from his epic patterns. In Milton's poem, for example, Adam, like Svatopluk, is depicted as a human being around whom supernatural powers group, and in whom they take an interest, and (apart from the revelation of the war in Heaven imparted by Raphael) he undergoes no journey of discovery either.

In short, then, it can be clearly seen that Hollý is a fine classical apprentice in his construction of the great Slovak epic. Significantly he is also mature enough of a poet not to work slavishly, but to select from the epic vineyard those clusters that best suit his purpose, in vinting new Slovak wine to be poured into the old wineskins of the Virgilian epic.

Speaking of Hollý's translation of the *Aeneid*, Jaroslav Vlček writes: 'once again one marvels at the faithful rendering of the sense of the original, the polished diction and the richness of poetic expression of the Slovak translator, who was labouring without predecessors or previous patterns on which to model his work'.[9] There may not have been any Slovak or Czech[10] models to draw on for his *Aeneid*, but the Latin work was certainly a model for his original Slovak epics. Indeed, as a translator, recreating the original in a new poetic setting, Hollý knew the Latin original better than many a passive receptor or critic of the work. In order to see to what extent Hollý places *Svatopluk* in the Virgilian epic tradition, let us consider the following chart that breaks down the contents of the *Aeneid*, listing alongside the Slovak narrative equivalents:

Book	*Aeneid*	*Svatopluk*	Canto
I	Aeneas at Sea, Venus' plea	Svatopluk Imprisoned, St Cyril's plea	I, XI
II	Narrative of fall of Troy	The Indian Pedigree of the Slavs	VI
III	Odyssean search of Hesperides	(Migration of the Slavs)	VI
IV	Dido and Aeneas	(Ojda and Miloslav, Palislav)	XI
V	Funeral Games of Anchises	The Tournament of Heroes	II
VI	Journey to Underworld	Černobog's Escape; Pandemonium	III
VII	The War Stirred by Juno and her fury	Černobog and his demons stir the Slovaks	IV
VIII	Aeneas and Evander; Shield of Aeneas	Svatopluk and Karolman, Shield of Svatopluk	VII
IX	Little Troy; Nisus and Euryalus	Siege of Devín, Zemižížen and Slavboj	VIII, XI
X	Battle on the Shore; Aeneas' Rage	Battle on the Shore; Svatopluk's Escape	VIII, IX

[9] Jaroslav Vlček, *Dejiny literatúry slovenskej* [The History of Slovak Literature] (Turčianský sv. Martin: Nákladom vlastným, 1890), p. 46.

[10] The first translation into Czech verse was done later, by Karel Alois Vinařický, like Hollý a Catholic priest, in 1851.

XI	Latin Senate; Amazons	Slavimír's Diet, Dobroslava, Prekrasa	V, IV, XII
XII	Aeneas and Turnus	Svatopluk and Britwald	XII

To speak of these briefly, Svatopluk's imprisonment, with which his epic opens, is similar to the pickle in which Aeneas and his men find themselves, storm-tossed by an angry Neptune, at Juno's urging. But whereas the Trojan hero's divine mother hastens before Jove at this first sign of danger facing her son, a similar scene is not to be found in *Svatopluk* until ten cantos later. When the battle for Slovak independence is well underway, St Cyril (formerly known as Konštantín, apostle to the Slavs), 'pleads the cause of those he had converted' before the Almighty. Just as Venus knew that it was not merely the elements that were battering the Trojans, but the inimical gods, so Cyril is concerned here, not with the earthly plane of battling men, but with the demonic legions of Černobog, who threaten, as he sees it, to plunge the Christian Slovaks back into the glooms of paganism. The Lord responds in soothing tones that both assure Cyril of the Slovak triumph, and also foretell a bright future for the Slovaks similar to Jove's promise of Roman empire without end:

> This I grant heroic Svatopluk: taking the field,
> He shall fell the German war-chief himself in battle,
> And cast the foreign yoke from off his people's shoulders.
> The borders of his kingdom shall extend far and wide;
> The kindred Slavic nations shall support his sceptre,
> Though like all earthly things subject to vicissitude,
> They shall endure the varied shocks of change, and sad falls.
>
> XI:146–152

There may be a flirtation with Pan-Slavism in these lines, which would not be strange for a Slovak poet of the national revival period. But given that the centre of this empire is Slovakia (something which even the most patriotically minded Slovak Pan-Slavists would never dream of suggesting), it is obvious that Hollý is here having God enunciate a more humble glory: the foundation of the Great Moravian empire, which indeed for a while did stretch 'far and wide', from the Lusatian Serbs in East-Central Germany to well within modern day Romania, and from Little Poland and Silesia in the northwest, past the Tatras, through Pannonia to swathes of modern day Serbia and Croatia.

In Book II of the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas recounts the fall of Troy, he is narrating current events, rather than history — after all, he was involved in the conflagration; it was the destruction of his city, despite his best efforts,

that led to his roundabout journey to Carthage. The same is true of his story of the 'Odyssean' adventures undergone along the way. Canto VI of *Svatopluk* contains a much more ancient story. Karolman, who has Slavs within his own realm, is interested in learning from the Slovak king where his people come from. Svatopluk embarks upon a long tale of the Slavs' journey from their original homeland — India — to Central Europe, centuries before, chased there by flood and famine. They have their own harrowing passages on the way to their own 'Hesperides', including a fierce war against the cannibalistic 'Doghead' tribe — more than enough of an equivalent for the bestial Cyclops or the fanciful half-human Harpies.

This idea of the Slavs' kinship with the Hindus and other tribes of the Indian subcontinent was popular amongst other Slavic Romantics, such as Adam Mickiewicz and Ján Kollár. As fanciful as it may sound, there is some linguistic kinship to build upon; the Slavic tongues, like ancient Sanskrit and modern Hindi, belong to the *satem* branch of the Indo-European family of languages (English, like German, is of the western, *centum* group), and the ancient cognates between them are often surprising. Slovak *piecť* [to bake] is a cognate of the Sanskrit *paçati*, and the same ancient word is at the root of the Slovak verb *budiť sa* — 'to awaken' — and the noun 'Buddha' — 'the awakened one'. I do not know to what degree Hollý, the meticulously trained Latinist, was aware of Indo-European comparative linguistics, but in the catalogue of troops in *Sláv* III, Mount Matra is said to have been named in honour of the Indian homeland. Is it merely a homophonic guess, or did Hollý know that *mātarah* means 'divine mother' in Sanskrit?

To whatever extent any of the theories of Slavic migration from India might be true, the desire of Hollý to pin the Slavs onto the Ancient Indian past is reasonable enough. How better to underscore the antiquity of the Slavic nation than by claiming it to be an offshoot of the ancient culture that gave us the *Vedas*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* — especially given the paucity of mention of the Slavs in the writings of the Western historians of ancient Greece and Rome?

The Indian descent of the Slavs possesses an additional interesting aspect. That the Slavs themselves are immigrants to the territories they now occupy is a strong corrective to any racist understanding of nationhood. They do not despise the Chudes, or the Avars, or the Germans, because they are racially different; they battle against them because they are rapacious, murderous, and unjust. This is further emphasised by the generous offer extended to Dízabo in *Sláv*, and at the end of the epic even to Bondor, for them to settle amidst the Slavs, giving over rapaciousness, and working the land with them. It's all about peaceful usage and coexistence — that's what the Slavs are after, who,

as Svatopluk says, only occupy the lands abandoned by others, so as to bring what's fallow into fecund use.

And thus, in Canto VI, the Slavs continue on their trek to their own 'Hesperides', of which, like the Trojans, they know to have been fated to them. This destiny is first mentioned by the god (Brahma) himself, through his prophet, before they leave famine-stricken India, and is confirmed at their stop in Armenia by the king, who recalls an old prophecy of a 'kindred folk' who were to pass through Armenia for Europe.

The Armenian episode is an interesting one for several reasons associated with the *Aeneid*. First of all, it recalls the 'seeds of empire' strategy employed by Virgil in his epic, in which (as here) some of the old and infirm are left behind at their various stops along the Mediterranean, thus underscoring the Roman Empire as a widespread area held together not only by law or governmental authority, but linked by bonds of blood. In the case of Hollý's epic, this emphasis placed on the kinship of the Armenians and the Slavs, true enough as far as Indo-European linguistics are concerned, is part of his syncretising Pan-Slavic tendencies (as delicate as they are in comparison with other Slovak writers, such as Štúr and Kollár). While not Slavs themselves, the Armenians are Christians, and the conquest of Armenia by the Russian Tsar draws them into the Orthodox Russian Empire and out of the clutches of the Muslim Ottomans. It is safe to say that if a Pole like Mickiewicz were writing *Svatopluk*, he might rather have appealed to the kinship of the Armenians (of whom, traditionally, there had always been a large community in Poland), above all as a people enslaved like his own to that same Russian Tsar.

Also, as some of the Slavs start to get used to Armenia and slowly — just like the lotus-eaters — begin to forget the destiny and responsibility fated to them in Europe, word must be sent down from on high to get them started on their road again — just as Jove sends down Mercury to the 'uxorius' Aeneas in Carthage.

The fact that the Armenian king 'would have liked it' had the Slavs remained 'to form one kingdom' with him in the Caucasus is, of course, an echo of Dido's welcome given to the Trojans even before Aeneas is revealed to her eyes. The same is true of the generous outfitting of the Slavs as he finally sends them on their way. We should not, however, expect Hollý to cover every episode in the *Aeneid* — Virgil himself does not do so with his Latin reinterpretation of Homer's epics — only a much worse poet would have slavishly imitated his original inspiration. However, a lamenting woman can be found in Canto XI. The one woman who stands out in this epic, as does Dido in the *Aeneid*, is Ojda, bewailing the loss of her last remaining son in the battles against the invading Germans. Her vituperation of Miloslav's squire Palislav for emerging from battle unscathed, while his master's body lies in the dust, is Hollý's equivalent

to Dido's 'Hyrcanian tiger' rant, and, like Dido, Ojda will die too, embracing her son's body — with God dispatching a merciful angel to snip her golden thread.

The funeral games in celebration of the life of Aeneas' father Anchises, which take place in Book V of Virgil's epic, provide a respite of sorts between the harrowing destruction of Troy and the war for survival of the Trojan people, which is about to commence upon their landing in Italy. It is full of good humour, the sort of thing where 'prizes for participation' are given out (witness the footrace in which Nisus and Euryalus take part) — although tragedy is never far away. The 'lusus Troiae' are broken off abruptly when some old women, under the malign influence of Juno, fire some of the ships so as to impede further wandering. Hollý's equivalent, the 'tournament of heroes' that takes place in Canto II, serves a more serious purpose: the determination of who is to lead the armies in Karolman's stead during the invasion of Slovakia.

Just as during Aeneas' absence on his meandering mission to the Arcadians, when the camp of the Trojans becomes the scene of a second, miniature, siege of Troy, the Slovaks, routed by Svatopluk's unexpected cavalry charge, are bottled up in Devín. The curious fact here is that while Aeneas is merely absent from his men, Svatopluk is actually fighting against his own country. It would be a bit of an understatement to say that Svatopluk's actions here are morally ambiguous. This seminal hero of Slovak independence — a traitor? It is as if the Americans were to begin celebrating Benedict Arnold Day, or the British give Lord Haw Haw an OBE in recognition of his services to the Crown.

Svatopluk's history begins in the shadows of betrayal. He accepts the armour given him by Karolman, and the army that will escort him to his homeland, and the hand of the king's daughter, who weeps at his departure into the unsure environment of war. Whether or not Svatopluk knew all the time what he was about to do, Hollý, at the very least, heavily foreshadows the treason:

> 'This armour, which I have had forged for you, expressly,
> Take now unto your mighty limbs, and visit the troops.
> Go now, engage in the cruel fray with steadfastness,
> And batter the resistant to their knees, to the dust,
> To occupy your throne usurped, and wield the golden
> Sceptre of your nation. Never break your plighted troth'.
> Thus said he, knowing not that he armed his own ruin.
>
> (VII:8–14)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ján Hollý (1785–1849) is one of the greatest writers of the Slovak *národné obrodenie* [national revival] of the nineteenth century. As a poet and translator, he is the most renowned author of the early period of *Bernolákovčina* — that codification of the modern literary language of the Slovaks, based on the western dialects of the nation worked up by Anton Bernolák. Although the language would shortly gravitate toward the central dialects, as established by those grouped around Ľudovít Štúr, Hollý continued to be revered by all Slovaks, a process which began during his lifetime. Hollý's first great work was a complete translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* (1828), which he composed following his first venture into translating the classics (*Various Heroic, Elegiac, and Lyrical Poems*, 1824), which groups together his Slovak versions of Ovid, Theocritus, Homer, Horace, and other Greek and Latin poets. The great Slovak epics — arguably his most important contribution to Slovak literature — are *Svatopluk* (1833), *The Cyrillo-Methodiad* (1835), and *Sláv* (1839). Both of the first are based on episodes from the early mediaeval period of his nation, while the last is a foray into the mythical regions of ancient Slavdom. His later lyric poetry includes idylls and hymns (Hollý was a Catholic priest). While much of his work was composed along neoclassical lines, his importance for the ideological development of Slovakia as an ethnically-based nationality, and his forays into the then-popular currents of Pan-Slavism, place him eminently amongst the great European Romantics.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Charles S. Kraszewski (born 1962) is a poet and translator, creative in both English and Polish. He is the author of three volumes of original verse in English (*Diet of Nails; Beast; Chanameed*), and two in Polish (*Hallo, Sztokholm*; *Skowycik*). He has also authored two satirical novels *Accomplices, You Ask?* and *At the Tone* (both San Francisco: Montag, 2021, 2024). He translates from Polish, Czech and Slovak. He is a member of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad (London) and the Association of Polish Writers (SPP, Kraków). In 2022, he was awarded the Gloria Artis medal (III Class) by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Poland, and in 2023 the ZAiKS award for Translation into a Foreign Tongue, presented by the Polish Society of Authors (ZAiKS).

Glagoslav Publications Catalogue

- *The Time of Women* by Elena Chizhova
- *Andrei Tarkovsky: A Life on the Cross* by Lyudmila Boyadzhieva
- *Sin* by Zakhar Prilepin
- *Hardly Ever Otherwise* by Maria Matios
- *Khatyn* by Ales Adamovich
- *The Lost Button* by Irene Rozdobudko
- *Christened with Crosses* by Eduard Kochergin
- *The Vital Needs of the Dead* by Igor Sakhnovsky
- *The Sarabande of Sara's Band* by Larysa Denysenko
- *A Poet and Bin Laden* by Hamid Ismailov
- *Zo Gaat Dat in Rusland* (Dutch Edition) by Maria Konjoekova
- *Kobzar* by Taras Shevchenko
- *The Stone Bridge* by Alexander Terekhov
- *Moryak* by Lee Mandel
- *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* by Uladzimir Karatkevich
- *The Hawks of Peace* by Dmitry Rogozin
- *Harlequin's Costume* by Leonid Yuzefovich
- *Depeche Mode* by Serhii Zhadan
- *Groot Slem en Andere Verhalen* (Dutch Edition) by Leonid Andrejev
- *METRO 2033* (Dutch Edition) by Dmitry Glukhovsky
- *METRO 2034* (Dutch Edition) by Dmitry Glukhovsky
- *A Russian Story* by Eugenia Kononenko
- *Herstories, An Anthology of New Ukrainian Women Prose Writers*
- *The Battle of the Sexes Russian Style* by Nadezhda Ptushkina
- *A Book Without Photographs* by Sergey Shargunov
- *Down Among The Fishes* by Natalka Babina
- *disUNITY* by Anatoly Kudryavitsky
- *Sankya* by Zakhar Prilepin
- *Wolf Messing* by Tatiana Lungin
- *Good Stalin* by Victor Erofeyev
- *Solar Plexus* by Rustam Ibragimbekov
- *Don't Call me a Victim!* by Dina Yafasova
- *Poetin* (Dutch Edition) by Chris Hutchins and Alexander Korobko

- *A History of Belarus* by Lubov Bazan
- *Children's Fashion of the Russian Empire* by Alexander Vasiliev
- *Empire of Corruption: The Russian National Pastime* by Vladimir Soloviev
- *Heroes of the 90s: People and Money. The Modern History of Russian Capitalism* by Alexander Solovev, Vladislav Dorofeev and Valeria Bashkirova
- *Fifty Highlights from the Russian Literature* (Dutch Edition) by Maarten Tengbergen
- *Bajesvolk* (Dutch Edition) by Michail Chodorkovsky
- *Dagboek van Keizerin Alexandra* (Dutch Edition)
- *Myths about Russia* by Vladimir Medinskiy
- *Boris Yeltsin: The Decade that Shook the World* by Boris Minaev
- *A Man Of Change: A study of the political life of Boris Yeltsin*
- *Sberbank: The Rebirth of Russia's Financial Giant* by Evgeny Karasyuk
- *To Get Ukraine* by Oleksandr Shyshko
- *Asystole* by Oleg Pavlov
- *Gnedich* by Maria Rybakova
- *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Essential Poetry*
- *Multiple Personalities* by Tatyana Shcherbina
- *The Investigator* by Margarita Khemlin
- *The Exile* by Zinaida Tulub
- *Leo Tolstoy: Flight from Paradise* by Pavel Basinsky
- *Moscow in the 1930* by Natalia Gromova
- *Laurus* (Dutch edition) by Evgenij Vodolazkin
- *Prisoner* by Anna Nemzer
- *The Crime of Chernobyl: The Nuclear Goulag* by Wladimir Tchertkoff
- *Alpine Ballad* by Vasil Bykau
- *The Complete Correspondence of Hryhory Skovoroda*
- *The Tale of Aypi* by Ak Welsapar
- *Selected Poems* by Lydia Grigorieva
- *The Fantastic Worlds of Yuri Vynnychuk*
- *The Garden of Divine Songs and Collected Poetry of Hryhory Skovoroda*
- *Adventures in the Slavic Kitchen: A Book of Essays with Recipes* by Igor Klekh
- *Seven Signs of the Lion* by Michael M. Naydan

- *Forefathers' Eve* by Adam Mickiewicz
- *One-Two* by Igor Eliseev
- *Girls, be Good* by Bojan Babić
- *Time of the Octopus* by Anatoly Kucherena
- *The Grand Harmony* by Bohdan Ihor Antonych
- *The Selected Lyric Poetry Of Maksym Rylsky*
- *The Shining Light* by Galymkair Mutanov
- *The Frontier: 28 Contemporary Ukrainian Poets - An Anthology*
- *Acropolis: The Wawel Plays* by Stanisław Wyspiański
- *Contours of the City* by Attyla Mohylny
- *Conversations Before Silence: The Selected Poetry of Oles Ilchenko*
- *The Secret History of my Sojourn in Russia* by Jaroslav Hašek
- *Mirror Sand: An Anthology of Russian Short Poems*
- *Maybe We're Leaving* by Jan Balaban
- *Death of the Snake Catcher* by Ak Welsapar
- *A Brown Man in Russia* by Vijay Menon
- *Hard Times* by Ostap Vyshnia
- *The Flying Dutchman* by Anatoly Kudryavitsky
- *Nikolai Gumilev's Africa* by Nikolai Gumilev
- *Combustions* by Srđan Srdić
- *The Sonnets* by Adam Mickiewicz
- *Dramatic Works* by Zygmunt Krasiński
- *Four Plays* by Juliusz Słowacki
- *Little Zinnobers* by Elena Chizhova
- *We Are Building Capitalism! Moscow in Transition 1992-1997* by Robert Stephenson
- *The Nuremberg Trials* by Alexander Zvyagintsev
- *The Hemingway Game* by Evgeni Grishkovets
- *A Flame Out at Sea* by Dmitry Novikov
- *Jesus' Cat* by Grig
- *Want a Baby and Other Plays* by Sergei Tretyakov
- *Mikhail Bulgakov: The Life and Times* by Marietta Chudakova
- *Leonardo's Handwriting* by Dina Rubina
- *A Burglar of the Better Sort* by Tytus Czyżewski
- *The Mouseiad and other Mock Epics* by Ignacy Krasicki

- *Ravens before Noah* by Susanna Harutyunyan
- *An English Queen and Stalingrad* by Natalia Kulishenko
- *Point Zero* by Narek Malian
- *Absolute Zero* by Artem Chekh
- *Olanda* by Rafał Wojasiński
- *Robinsons* by Aram Pachyan
- *The Monastery* by Zakhar Prilepin
- *The Selected Poetry of Bohdan Rubchak: Songs of Love, Songs of Death, Songs of the Moon*
- *Mebet* by Alexander Grigorenko
- *The Orchestra* by Vladimir Gonik
- *Everyday Stories* by Mima Mihajlović
- *Slavdom* by Ľudovít Štúr
- *The Code of Civilization* by Vyacheslav Nikonov
- *Where Was the Angel Going?* by Jan Balaban
- *De Zwarte Kip* (Dutch Edition) by Antoni Pogorelski
- *Głosy / Voices* by Jan Polkowski
- *Sergei Tretyakov: A Revolutionary Writer in Stalin's Russia* by Robert Leach
- *Opstand* (Dutch Edition) by Władysław Reymont
- *Dramatic Works* by Cyprian Kamil Norwid
- *Children's First Book of Chess* by Natalie Shevando and Matthew McMillion
- *Precursor* by Vasyl Shevchuk
- *The Vow: A Requiem for the Fifties* by Jiří Kratochvil
- *De Bibliothecaris* (Dutch edition) by Mikhail Jelizarov
- *Subterranean Fire* by Natalka Bilotserkivets
- *Vladimir Vysotsky: Selected Works*
- *Behind the Silk Curtain* by Gulistan Khamzayeva
- *The Village Teacher and Other Stories* by Theodore Odrach
- *Duel* by Borys Antonenko-Davydovych
- *War Poems* by Alexander Korotko
- *Ballads and Romances* by Adam Mickiewicz
- *The Revolt of the Animals* by Wladyslaw Reymont
- *Poems about my Psychiatrist* by Andrzej Kotański
- *Someone Else's Life* by Elena Dolgopyat
- *Selected Works: Poetry, Drama, Prose* by Jan Kochanowski

- *The Riven Heart of Moscow (Sivtsev Vrazhek)* by Mikhail Osorgin
- *Bera and Cucumber* by Alexander Korotko
- *The Big Fellow* by Anastasiia Marsiz
- *Boryslav in Flames* by Ivan Franko
- *The Witch of Konotop* by Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko
- *De afdeling* (Dutch edition) by Aleksej Salnikov
- *The Food Block* by Alexey Ivanov
- *Ilget* by Alexander Grigorenko
- *Tefil* by Rafał Wojasiński
- *A Dream of Annapurna* by Igor Zavilinsky
- *Down and Out in Drohobych* by Ivan Franko
- *The World of Koliada*
- *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* by Nikolai Gogol
- *Georgian Folk Tales* by Marjory Scott Wardrop
- *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* by Karel Čapek
- *The Hermit* by Ilia Chavchavadze
- *Spark in the Dark* by Astrid Lovell
- *The Slovak Epics* by Ján Hollý
- *Masquerade* by Mikhail Lermontov
- *Letter Z* by Oleksandr Sambrus
- *The Vampire* by Władysław Reymont
- *Fu(*n*)k Bomb* by Karel Veselý
- *Liza's Waterfall: The Hidden Story of a Russian Feminist* by Pavel Basinsky
- *Biography of Sergei Prokofiev* by Igor Vishnevetsky
- *A City Drawn from Memory* by Elena Chizhova
- *Guide to M. Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita* by Ksenia Atarova and Georgy Lesskis

And more forthcoming . . .

Glagoslav Publications
www.glagoslav.com

The mid-nineteenth century was a time of political and cultural ferment in the Slavic lands of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The Czechs in the west, and the Slovaks in the east of the dual monarchy were striving to preserve their ethnic identities against centralising tendencies of Germanisation and Magyarisation. Literature played an important role in this 'national revival'. This was especially true of Slovakia, where the attention of poets and philologists was not merely on fostering the native language, as amongst the Czechs, but on the question of which language to foster. Should they coalesce linguistically with the kindred Czechs, or develop regional dialects into a national, Slovak language?

Ján Hollý (1785–1849), one of the greatest Slovak poets of the Romantic age, laid a sturdy foundation for the construction of modern Slovak nationhood with his three epic poems: *Svatopluk* (1833), the *Cyrillo-Methodiad* (1835), and *Sláv* (1839). These works both prove the suppleness and power of Slovak as a linguistic medium capable of great poetic expression and remind the Slovaks, and the world at large, of the glory that was the mediaeval Great Moravian Empire (*Svatopluk*), the roots of the Slovaks and Moravians in European culture (the *Cyrillo-Methodiad*), and the signal role of the Slavs in creating a vibrant, humanistic culture in early Central Europe (*Sláv*). Hollý emphasises the Slovaks as a nation in their own right, while extending a fraternal hand toward the other Slavic nations, upon whom he lavishes equal praise.

With *The Slovak Epics*, Glagoslav presents the reader with the entirety of Ján Hollý's three epic poems translated and introduced by Charles S. Kraszewski. All who are interested in Slovak literature, the poetry of the Romantic Era in general, and Slavic reciprocity and unity, will find *The Slovak Epics* worth reading.

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS
ISBN 978-1-80484-195-2
WWW.GLAGOSLAV.COM