BOOK REVIEW

Cesty k literatuře: Podněty pro literární vzdělávání [Paths to Literature: Inspirations for Literary Education]

Tomáš Jajtner: Nakladatelství Jihočeské university v Českých Budějovicích, 2025, 229 pp.

> Teachers must be convinced that they stand in a position of great dignity, entrusted with a noble calling, surpassed by none in importance beneath the sun.
>
> John Amos Comenius

The quotation by Comenius with which Tomáš Jajtner concludes his essay collection *Cesty k literatuře: Podněty pro literární vzdělávání* [*Paths to Literature: Inspirations for Literary Education*] might raise an ironic or even bitter smile on the lips of many for whom the teaching profession has long since lost its aura of nobility or dignity. Likewise, the author's attempt to defend the importance of the literary text in the age of digitalization may also appear somewhat ironic given a contemporary context in which the dominance of images over the written word is seemingly fostering an entirely new means of perception. This mood seems even more pressing with the rise of AI and its suggestion that humans are no longer the only entity capable of producing artistic representations of the world.

Nonetheless, Jajtner's essays can offer solace for those who share his view that the function of the literary text is now more important than ever before, while also reminding readers that the aim of an education in the humanities is to nurture an "autonomous being who is not educated solely for the economic and political system of the state, but in the spirit of the humanistic ideal of education, i.e. as a free personality who thinks independently, and precisely for that reason will have a motive to pursue lifelong learning" (Jajtner 2025: 33, translated from the Czech original).

Within this specific conception of education, literature is seen not only as a means of cultural communication but also as an irreplaceable source for philosophical, aesthetic and ethical understandings of the world. Whether we perceive literature primarily as a repository of traditions and timeless values that develops a reader's cognitive grasp of reality through the lens of aesthetics, or as a form of sharing subjective experiences that deepen the reader's capacity for empathetic interaction within the human community and with the world itself, the literary text remains indispensable in shaping the positive development of subsequent generations of pupils and students. From this perspective, the role of the enlightened, inspired and passionate teacher of literature stands as a vital component of the contemporary educational system and its emphasis on linking the development of critical thinking with aesthetic and ethical education.

Through thirteen chapters, Tomáš Jajtner's book offers encouragement and inspiration to those who aspire to such a role by exploring the literary text and its pedagogical applications from a variety of perspectives. In the sections devoted to lyric poetry, prose and drama, Jajtner explores how specific features and challenges of each of these literary genres combine to offer a holistic reflection of life, but he also places an emphasis on the different aspects of teaching literature, including ethical-philosophical, psychological, aesthetic and linguistic considerations. The essays also proffer various proposals, recommendations and suggestions on how to integrate different perspectives on literary texts in the classroom and how to combine

them with a clear articulation of the role of the artistic narrative in the development of the human personality: “If the goal of education is the aforementioned autonomous being, who does not need to rely solely on authorities but is capable of independently structuring the world, then the ability to understand the meaning of stories and to gain meaningful insight into the workings of language is absolutely essential and indispensable” (Jajtner 2025: 82, translated from the Czech original).

Jajtner should also be commended for his willingness to confront the issue of the “literary canon” in our “post-canonical” age. Although he fully reflects upon and accepts contemporary concerns over traditional approaches to teaching literature through the presentation of an established set of canonical works, he does not exclude the concept of the canon from literary discourse, seeing it instead as a term that draws attention to enduring human values and existential questions. It is precisely the historicizing view of literature, shaped through a focus on selected works of the literary tradition, that clarifies the timelessness of certain values and questions and enables readers to perceive their everyday existence within the broader context of human experience. Jajtner also addresses other challenges involved in teaching literature in the postmodern age, noting, for example, the usefulness of film adaptations of literary works while maintaining that the literary text cannot be fully replaced because of its unique role in shaping the reader’s imagination.

The chapter devoted to teaching literature in the age of the internet and new media is a welcome part of the collection, since these fields perhaps represent the greatest challenge for teachers today, and not only in the subject of literature. Jajtner recommends an approach of “pedagogical realism,” which rejects the demonization of the digital world in favour of the integration of innovative literary forms, such as text-message poetry, into the literary curriculum. At the same time, he stresses that modern literary education must encompass internet communication and its various forms in order to bridge the gap between the media environment in which students are now immersed and their experience within the more traditional environment of the classroom. Jajtner also offers a range of teaching recommendations which will be useful for new teachers setting out on their careers. Over the course of the collection, he stresses the importance of the experiential model of teaching literature, as well as how insights derived from literary interpretation — understood as the “uncovering of the artistic code of communication” — can be transformed in the classroom into a didactic interpretation of the literary text aimed at the “development of the student’s creative communicative abilities” (Jajtner 2025: 203, translated from the Czech original).

Overall, Tomáš Jajtner’s collection of essays is an engaging and enriching work that showcases his considerable erudition and knowledge of the topic while presenting readers with complex interdisciplinary perspectives on the role of the literary text in humanities education. Jajtner argues convincingly for the importance of literary education in shaping the development of autonomous individuals capable of effective coexistence both within the human community and with the world itself.

On the other hand, the breadth and scope of the recommendations offered to literature teachers throughout the book suggest that the collection should be thought of primarily as a kind of reservoir of ideal approaches to the teaching of literature, with teachers being encouraged to draw upon and select those that they can implement in their everyday practice; any attempt to utilize all of the suggestions, inspirations and recommendations presented in the book would amount to a Herculean task. In contrast, however, a greater reflection on the practical realities of working with students in the classroom — for instance, through various practical exercises and specific examples demonstrating how to implement the theoretical

recommendations from the individual chapters — would certainly be appreciated, especially by novice teachers. Practical examples of this nature would arguably be more useful than the series of reflective questions which Jajtner appends to each chapter. It is also somewhat regrettable that the text has been published in Czech, thereby limiting its reach to Czech and Slovak audiences. The collection would undoubtedly be of value to an international readership given the fact that the crisis of humanities and literary education is a global issue. Within this wider discourse, Jajtner's book offers a welcome balance between a respect for the traditional function of literature within the context of humanistic education and the more modern approaches to its teaching that reflect the state of society in the twenty-first century.

We can only hope that Jajtner's work will contribute to the understanding that, in order for teachers to regain a highly dignified position in society, they must fully identify with Comenius's idea that their vocation is truly a noble calling — regardless of the era or conditions under which it is carried out.

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