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**Imaginative Didacticism: Emotion, Individuality, and the
Function of *Trivalliteratur* around 1800
(Abstract)**

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This article explores the history of autonomy aesthetics together with approaches that recuperate ethical and emotional functions of literature to suggest that the dismissal of these functions in the late 18th century results from what we can call the problem of *Trivalliteratur*, namely, that it seems readers respond most emotionally to literature that is sentimental or sensational, rather than to what is generally considered great art. The dismissal of the sentimental, touching, and popular – and accompanying notions of moral instruction – that began at the end of the 18th century is so taken for granted that recent arguments by philosophers of literature in favor of exploring the ethical value of emotional responses to literature devote countless pages to refuting possible objections. Understanding autonomy aesthetics as a reaction to a particular problem emerging from a particular cultural context makes these objections seem less inevitable and allows us to question the absoluteness of the canonical/trivial divide. Furthermore, we can entertain the thought that even so-called trivial literature may indeed have a legitimate and important purpose and analyze popular literary texts to see what that function might be and how authors might cultivate and promote it.

After briefly reviewing sociological histories of the shift between reception aesthetics and autonomy aesthetics, this article discusses two studies by Berys Gaut and Jenefer Robinson. Gaut's work argues for the importance of ethics in the function of art (which instructs by way of, among other things, exciting the imagination); Robinson's study uses cognitive science to establish that emotional responses to artworks are neither unreal nor irrational but rather make up a crucial part of what literature has to offer readers. With Gaut and Robinson, we can conclude that reading literature is an emotional, imaginative process, which has as at least one of its functions the cultivation of processes of understanding and ethical development in its readers – what I choose to call ›imaginative didacticism‹. Neither one of them, however, deals with the history of autonomy aesthetics (beyond brief references to Kant) or with the problem of *Trivalliteratur*. The final section of this article takes up this problem again and offers a reading of a popular sentimental novel from 1794, August Lafontaine's *Klara du Plessis und Klairant* to explore the functions that so-called trivial literature might be fulfilling for its readers. This reading traces descriptions of emotional processes and their ethical charge along with narrative strategies for soliciting emotional reactions in both historical and implied readers.

In particular, Lafontaine's novel offers readers a way of exploring new paradigms of individuality and love relationships that arose in the late eighteenth century and that present significant challenges to existing systems of social order, which Lafontaine represents against the backdrop of the French Revolution. Readers wanted and indeed *needed* to examine individuality and love, and their relationship to a wider social world with shifting value systems repeatedly, in detail, and from every angle, and also in forms that were cognitively accessible and emotionally intense. The representations of these topics in the novel in turn shaped the lives of their readers and their expectations for love and marriage. Crucially, the novel does this not by making an explicit didactic point, but instead by narratively unfolding the complexities of the characters'

situation: it is neither a triumphant celebration of the powers of love to overcome social boundaries nor a condemnation of individual love and attachment but rather a nuanced depiction of the relation between the kind of love predicated by absorption in an individual and a society that sometimes validates this type of passion and sometimes condemns it. Despite the novel's straightforward plot, Lafontaine was successful in calling up emotional responses on the part of his readers and, through that emotion, in making an ethical demand on them: namely, that the old social system of rigidly enforced hierarchies is inconsistent with a conception of each person as an individual with legitimate desires, hopes, and plans for his or her life. It is thus a demand for tolerance and for acknowledgment of mutual humanity – a demand that takes different forms in different historical epochs but does not disappear and cannot be stably or permanently fulfilled, and one which art continues to represent and explore in its different historical manifestations. Even so-called trivial literature has a function, if we cease to view art as closed off from life.

The article thus concludes by suggesting that we can also see the relationship between trivial and canonical literature not as a dichotomy, but as a progression: Lafontaine's depictions of emotions are explicit and sometimes exaggerated, but they can train readers to be on the lookout for other, more complicated descriptions of emotional states. It therefore argues that literature itself can help to dismantle unproductive dichotomies between critical/cognitive and imaginative/emotional modes of reading and between canonical and supposedly trivial art. This, too, is a function of literature: we can gradually become more sensitive to subtleties of emotion and cognition, we can use previous encounters with easier literature to reflect on more difficult texts, and we can develop both as emotional creatures and as critical readers.

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