

Gleanings

James W. Halporn (Indiana) notes the striking association of literature and moral idiom in the following passage:

Nowadays, of course, we are all of us trained to believe that the moral life is in ceaseless flux and that the values, as we call them, of one epoch are not those of another. We even find it easy to believe that the changes do not always come about gradually but are sometimes quite sudden. This ready recognition of change in the moral life is implicit in our modern way of thinking about literature. Yet sometimes it is just our experience of literature that leads us to resist the idea of moral mutation, to question whether the observed shifts in moral assumption deserve the credence we are impelled to give them. Generally our awareness of the differences between the moral assumptions of one culture and those of another is so developed and active that we find it hard to believe there is any such thing as essential human nature; but we all know moments when these differences, as literature attests to them, seem to make no difference, seem scarcely to exist. We read the *Iliad* or the plays of Sophocles or Shakespeare and they come so close to our hearts and minds that they put to rout, or into abeyance, our instructed consciousness of the moral life as it is conditioned by a particular culture—they persuade us that human nature never varies, that the moral life is unitary and its terms perennial, and that only a busy intruding pedantry could ever have suggested otherwise.

And yet again, on still another view of the case, this judgement reverses itself and we find ourselves noting with eager attention all the details of assumption, thought, and behaviour that distinguish the morality of one age from that of another, and it seems to us that a quick and informed awareness of the differences among moral idioms is of the very essence of a proper response to literature.

Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1972. 1–2.