In order to get a more tangible sense of what humanistic inquiry means in the environment of today’s academy, let us return to the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University to consider some of the presentations that were given at a day-long public symposium in the spring of 1986 on “The Humanities and the Public Interest.” The purpose of the event, in the words of a university press release, was “to re-examine the traditional association between the study of the humanities and the guardianship of humanistic values in the context of contemporary American society.”

Peter Brooks, who presided over this event as well, expanded on this in the press release: “The symposium will ask whether the case for the humanities can rest on traditional assumptions, or whether a new rationale is needed if the humanities are to claim a major place in contemporary modes of thought and analysis.”

The symposium opened with some introductory remarks by Professor Brooks, who noted that the original impetus for the symposium was his favorite reading material, former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett’s report on higher education in the humanities, To Reclaim a Legacy. As we have seen, this report defends precisely those “traditional assumptions” of the humanities that Professor Brooks hoped the Yale symposium would question. For himself, Professor Brooks declared his “profound disagreement” with the conclusions and general outlook of Secretary Bennett’s report, taking issue especially with what he described as its “intellectual fundamentalism.” Professor Brooks’s opening remarks were very brief, but they established the tenor for the day’s discussion; and since he identified Secretary Bennett’s report as the catalyst for the symposium, we may begin by returning to take a closer look at the report’s argument.

In this essay, Roger Kimball, Managing Editor at The New Criterion, focuses on a 1986 discussion of the Humanities at Yale, for what Kimball sees as politicized tensions within the academy about the canon.
To Reclaim a Legacy begins by reaffirming the traditional role of the humanities as the chief instrument of our cultural self-definition. Its presiding spirit is Matthew Arnold, whose faith in the ennobling effects of high culture, of “the best that has been thought and said,” is patent throughout the report. Elaborating on Arnold’s famous phrase, Secretary Bennett describes the humanities as “the best that has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about the human experience.” The humanities are important, he writes, because they tell us how men and women of our own and other civilizations have grappled with life’s enduring, fundamental questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? What is courage? What is noble? What is base? . . .

These questions are not simply diversions for intellectuals or playthings for the idle. As a result of the ways in which these questions have been answered, civilizations have emerged, nations have developed, wars have been fought, and people have lived contentedly or miserably.

The real source of the controversy surrounding Secretary Bennett’s report lies not so much in such general observations as in his prescriptions for “reclaiming” the legacy he finds threatened and, in the end, in his understanding of the substance and definition of that legacy. In the simplest terms he calls for a reshaping of undergraduate study “based on a clear vision of what constitutes an educated person.” In his view, the goal of the humanities should be a “common culture” rooted in the highest ideals and aspirations of the Western tradition.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, despite accusations to the contrary, Secretary Bennett does not advocate restoration of a previous state of affairs. He insists that the solution to the current crisis in the humanities “is not a return to an earlier time when the classical curriculum was the only curriculum and college was available to only a privileged few.” Given the charges of elitism and reaction that his proposals have brought forth, especially from the most elite of our universities, it seems well to emphasize the point. “American higher education today serves far more people . . . than it did a century ago,” Secretary Bennett writes.

Its increased accessibility to women, racial and ethnic minorities, recent immigrants, and students of limited means is a positive accomplishment of which our nation is justly proud. . . . But our eagerness to assert the virtues of pluralism should not allow us to sacrifice the principle that formerly lent substance and continuity to the curriculum, namely, that each college and university should recognize and accept its vital role as a conveyor of the accumulated wisdom of our civilization.

It is of course this final affirmation that has angered Secretary Bennett’s opponents. For one thing, who decides what counts as “the accumulated wisdom of our civilization”? In Arnold’s terms, why should the humanities be concerned primarily with the best that has been thought and said? Does that not exclude a large portion of human experience? And does not that mass of experience deserve “equal time” in our institutions of higher education? Here again, who is to say what counts as “best”? Perhaps the Arnoldian injunction has been interpreted too narrowly, too “ideologically,” too exclusively? Furthermore, why should the humanities focus so intently upon the past? Why