

ERIC FONER

## THE CANON AND AMERICAN HISTORY

Toni Morrison's essay is divided into two parts—a discussion of the current controversy over revising the “canon” of Western literature, and a fascinating elaboration of some of the meanings of her own writing. There is little to add, I think, to what she says of the “canon wars,” except to express the hope that it will be read and pondered by William Bennett, Lynne Cheney, Allan Bloom, and others who have been raising the cry that Western civilization—the course and the thing itself—stands today in imminent danger. The core of her argument, however, bears reiteration: the idea of the canon is itself an ideological construction, whose specific content has changed over time to accommodate changing pedagogical, ideological, and political needs. There is nothing new in the demand that the established premises of University education be rethought, or in the fears that this demand arouses. And nowhere do today's defenders of the status quo reveal themselves to be more political than when, as Morrison notes, they insist that critics of the canon are politically motivated, while they themselves are not.

Perhaps I can illustrate these points by drawing on my own experience at two rather different universities. In 1980–81, I taught at Cambridge University in England. I learned that the first effort to teach American history at Cambridge, seemingly a rather uncontroversial enterprise, had produced a prolonged and bitter fight. The proposal to introduce a course in the history of the United States, taught by a visiting lecturer from Harvard, was made some one hundred twenty years ago. The idea emanated from outside the hallowed groves of academe, for the initiator was Henry Yates Thompson, a kind of precursor of Rupert Murdoch who owned the *Pall Mall Gazette* and published such sensational volumes as *Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon*, an exposé of prostitution in London.

Thompson's proposal aroused a storm of protest, but more because