230 West l05 Street

New York l0025

January 17, 1987

Ms. Gail Godwin

R.D. 1, Box 248

Woodstock, N.Y. 12498

Dear Ms. Godwin,

Thanks for agreeing to be on the panel at the NBCC meeting on Thursday, January 29. It will take place from 3:15 to 5:30 in Room 310 of the Loeb Student Center (at 566 Laguardia Place, on Washington Square South). The subject, as you know, is book reviewing, and all the panelists have both published books and put in time as reviewers, besides being interested observers of the whole publishing and reviewing scene. Each speaker will talk informally for 5-7 minutes, followed by discussion within the panel and give-and-take with the audience, which usually takes up the better part of these annual workshops.

Off the top of my head, here are a few questions you might (or might not) want to consider:

--When your own books were reviewed, how much help were these notices to you as a writer? After being on the receiving end, was your own approach as a reviewer deeply affected? Is there something especially difficult for reviewers who are themselves authors, besides the problem of knowing personally some of the writers they might be asked to review?

--Have reviews declined in quality in recent years? Have they become merely part of the promotional apparatus of book publishing? Alternately, is there a new seriousness is some reviewing organs? How have the large changes in the publishing scene altered the place of reviews and reviewers?

--Is there an ideal objective for a review, such as a)improving public taste and standards, b)enlarging the market for good books, c)conveying a great deal of information about what's in the books, or d)showing the author where he or she went wrong (or went wonderfully right)? One supposes that any good review will involve some combination of these elements, though each reviewer will no doubt have his own emphasis and proportions.

--Is book reviewing perhaps a dying technique, as more newspapers go under, as those that survive give more space to their Style sections and magazines increasingly prefer Peopleish profiles and behind-the-scenes stories about book deals and personalities? Is there any real constituency for periodical criticism apart from a need for consumer guidance?

This is my own exercise in free association, so don't hesitate to ignore these questions and go with your own experience. But these are some of the things other panelists may be dealing with, and they will no doubt come up again during the discussion period. The other panelists, by the way, are Max Apple, Robert Towers, and (on political books) James Chace of the TBR. I'm sure session will be a good one, and I can promise you the audience will be animated. I know you said you wouldn't be able to stay on later, but if you find you can, please be our guest at the reception and awards ceremony that will follow immediately, at 5:30, at the NYU Law School. (If you have any questions or simply would like to discuss the panel further, give me a call at 212-865-7328.) If I don't hear from you before then, I'll look forward to seeing you on the 29th.

With all good wishes,

Morris Dickstein

CITATION TO JOHN W. DOWER FOR WAR WITHOUT MERCY: RACE AND POWER IN THE PACIFIC WAR (Pantheon, 1986), National Book Criticis Circle, awards ceremony, January 29, l987

Wartime propaganda has a dim, tenuous connection to reality, and this may be why, after a war is over, nations tend to bury it under many layers of forgetfulness. In War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War, published by Pantheon, John W. Dower has set himself the task of being an archaeologist of the national consciousness, not just of the United States but of Japan as well. With its profusion of detail his book is not only riveting to read but shows a remarkable mastery of neglected sources in both nations: things like cartoons, manuals of indoctrination for soldiers, and anthropological treatises. He quotes from the newspaper editorials and the exhortations of admirals and generals. He digs down to uncover an intricate web of racial stereotypes on both sides, which, he suggests, helped fuel the war's horrifying savagery, especially during its final year, when the outcome was almost ways a foregone conclusion.

Dower gives full play to objective military and political factors, even to some real behavior that helped feed race hatred. He shows how two nations who thought each other sub-human could themselves behave in monstrously inhuman ways. He does not make racism itself the cause of anything. Yet his book is an eye-opening study in the dehumanizing attitudes that accompany total war, especially a war fought with advanced modern weaponry that distances the enemy yet increases destructiveness. In a balanced and evenhanded way, he shows how two racisms can complement each other, yet he never lose his capacity to choose sides and make comparative judgments.

Dower's is one of many recent books that have helped us to understand the signal importance of race in American history. But it is also exceptionally timely, because to many people today we are on the verge of fighting the pacific war again, this time in economic terms--except that at the end of this war, they say, it is we who'll be occupied. (See the cover story in this week's Newsweek: "Your Next Boss May Be Japanese. Hundreds of Thousands of Ameri­cans Are Already Working for Japan Inc.") In this overheated situation, the onset of hysteria has been marked by a revival of some of the racial stereotypes that Mr. Dower describes so well in his chilling and insightful book. I take great pleasure in presenting the 1986 NBCC Award in General Nonfiction to John W. Dower for War Without Mercy.

Introduction to Panel on Book-Reviewing, NBCC workshop, (1/29/87)

There's always been a school of thought, led by writers themselves, which holds book-reviewing in very low esteem. Virginia Woolf, who had written many hundreds of reviews, finally, in long 1939 pamphlet called Reviewing, pronounced the whole enterprise futile and worthless. (The pamphlet itself, by the way, got a bad review in the TLS, where she had published most of her own pieces.) On the other hand there's a school which has been quiet of late, which reared its head in John Gross's book The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters, that reminds us that much of the best of modern criticism arose not from Platonic or Aristotelian theories of art, and certainly not from university scholarship, but from a series of heated encounters between authors and their reviewers in the great 19th-century journals like the Edinburgh and the Quarterly, that the book reviewer has played a significant mediating role between the modern writer and his audience, and that journalistic criticism, though often written against tight deadlines, to fit inadequate space, deprived of the long perspective that time affords, has again and again proved itself more passionate, more immediate, more viscerally engaged with the problems of writers--as opposed to the pet notions of critics--than its academic cousin based in university departments.

But there's one more detail that academic critics would just as soon forget: the best critics have usually been writers themselves--not just the great poet-critics from Dryden to Eliot but recent NBCC honorees in criticism like Robert Hass and Joseph Brodsky, who will receive the award later today. The present panel is based on a similar if more modest tradition to which Virginia Woolf herself belonged--that of the author as book-reviewer . . . or reviewer as author--it works both ways. Three of our panel participants are fiction writers who are also veteran members of the NBCC. The fourth has written and reviewed many books on politics and international affairs besides being a working editor of long standing. The questions I posed to them, merely as potential subjects for discussion, went as follows:

--When your own books were reviewed, how much help were these notices to you as a writer? After being on the receiving end, was your own approach as a reviewer deeply affected? Is there something especially difficult for reviewers who are themselves authors, besides the problem of knowing personally some of the writers they might be asked to review?

--Have reviews declined in quality in recent years? Have they become merely part of the promotional apparatus of book publishing? Alternately, is there a new seriousness is some reviewing organs? How have the large changes in the publishing scene altered the place of reviews and reviewers? What is your ideal objective in a review? What function should it serve?

--Is book reviewing perhaps a dying technique, as more newspapers go under, as those that survive give more space to their Style sections and as magazines increasingly prefer Peopleish profiles and behind-the-scenes stories about book deals and personalities? Where do we go from here?

I'd like now to introduce our panelists, whom I've urged to feel free to ignore these questions and to speak from their own experience and observations. Our first speaker will be Robert Towers, a man who has led several interesting lives--in India on the eve of independence in the l940's, as a long-time teacher of literature and writing at Queens College and currently as the head of the Writing Program in the School of the Arts at Columbia University, as a fiction writer who wrote two early novels, The Necklace of Kali, based on his Indian experience, and The Monkey Watcher, as well as a recent novel, The Summoning, and finally in the last 10 or 12 years, as one of our most cogent and fair-minded fiction reviewers, in journals like the NY Review of Books and the Times Book Review.

Our second speaker is Max Apple, who first came to the notice of many of us when his charming and witty story "The Oranging of America" appeared in the American Review. It subsequently became the title piece in his first collection of stories, and was followed by a novel, Zip, another collection of stories and essays, Free Agents, and a novel which is about to be published by Harper & Row, The Propheteers, whose characters include Howard Johnson, Walt Disney, and Marjorie Post Merriwether, the cereal heiress. He teaches creative writing at the Rice University in Houston, but is presently in New York on a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Our third speaker is one of America's best known and most respected novelists, Gail Godwin. Her work is celebrated for its sharp and civilized intelligence. Her published fiction includes such books as The Perfectionists, Glass People, The Odd Woman, Dream Children, Violet Clay, and A Mother and Two Daughters.

Our final speaker, James Chace, is also a Guggenheim fellow this year, working on a book to be called America Goes to War: The Quest for Invulnerability from 1812 to Star Wars, to be published next January by Summit. His earlier books include Endless War (on Central America), Solvency (on economics and foreign policy), and A World Elsewhere (on Kissinger's foreign policy). He is also, he tells me, the author of a novel he published in his wayward youth. He worked from 1970 to 1983 as the managing editor of Foreign Affairs magazine, and has since then been an editor of the NY Times Book Review.