To the Editor:

I admire the clarity and earnestness with which Patricia Meyer Spacks justifies the profession in her Presidential Address, "Reality—Our Subject and Discipline." If the study and teaching of literature has a social value, the one she outlines would be it. Spacks admits that the public outcry against our profession is partially justified, but she seems to feel that the problem can be addressed through more effective communication. In this assumption she is profoundly mistaken. The source of the enormous public frustration, I believe, has less to do with the perceived valuelessness of literary study than with the shocking egotism and irresponsibility of scholars who seek personal aggrandizement despite their humanistic values. The irony for me lies in the wide gulf between the reality of my recent graduate school and job market experience and Spacks's glowing account. I was attracted to the field seven years ago by the same kind of starry-eyed idealism. Since then my illusions have systematically been dismantled. Undergraduates may still benefit from the study of literature in the ways Spacks describes (although I am skeptical, since most undergraduates are shamefully neglected); the professional institution of literary studies, however, is rife with egotism, ruthlessness, callousness, and a singularly narrow view of what constitutes success. There are few other institutions in the modern age that so blindly follow a medieval power structure based on personal reputation, rigid hierarchy, and irrevocable lifetime privilege.

Can we, as Spacks does, honestly take a holier-than-thou attitude toward other fields, such as politics? Politicians make a conveniently flattering point of comparison, but these days are professors of literature any more popular? If sound bites and oversimplification dominate the political arena, can we make any greater claims for our own rigidly defined isms and personal ambitions? If I learned anything in graduate school, it is that the realm of the ideal is an illusion, which means that the field of literary studies is nothing more than a set of conventions like any other. The substance of those conventions may differ; some may be more reactionary and some more liberating than others, but they are still only conventions. Complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity can lead just as easily to indecision, paralysis, and passivity as to "develop[ing] the skills of a thoughtful and mature human being" (355). Nevertheless, despite my disillusionment, the value of humanistic inquiry remains very real to me. Simply evoking that value, however, cannot be an excuse for failing to turn humanistic analytical rigor back on itself, to acknowledge that "the skills of . . . thoughtful and mature human being[s]" are the very qualities lacking in the practice of the profession today. In this sense it is as thoughtless and immature to dismiss other social institutions out of hand as it is to defend ourselves at their expense. For example, politicians set state budgets for education, and their concerns and the concerns of their constituents over the elitism and irresponsibility of the profession must be taken seriously. It is important for us to more accurately understand our role in the larger cultural apparatus so that we can act more effectively, as well as respect the roles others play in regulating, and giving meaning to, what we do.

Here, then, is the reality I have personally experienced—and observed—as a result of my involvement in this profession: chronic low self-esteem; contempt from those whose views I do not share; constant, anxiety-ridden self-doubt; fear; exhaustion; the breakdown of all meaningful personal relations; broken marriages; heartache; poverty; insomnia; paranoia; desperation; and loneliness. These are real human consequences that we cannot belittle. Nor can we ascribe them to individual failure. It is the worst kind of abnegation of responsibility to blame the victim and fail to recognize the systematicity of abuse. These human consequences are antithetical to Spacks's statement that literary study should "equip [students] to acknowledge and respond to the rich and baffling aspects of their direct experience" (356). In this light, asserting the value of literary studies constitutes a denial of grim realities.

I was in the middle of rereading George Eliot's *Middlemarch* when I first read Spacks's address. The section I had reached seemed singularly appropriate to my feelings:

> It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self—never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dimsighted.
> ([Lombard: Riverside, 1968] 206–07)

In this respect Eliot has indeed "provoked [me] to think about the peculiarities of [my] own culture, about the nature of the self, and about the ways that people relate to one another" (Spacks 354). There are too many Casaubons in our profession whose "experience [is] of a pitiable kind which shrinks from pity, and fears most of all that it should be known" (Eliot 206). That experience of power without responsibility and of privilege without merit must be made known, first, indeed, to be pitied but then to be rectified.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900174863 Published online by Cambridge University Press