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On Not Being Stuck: Changing Humanities in 20th- and 21st-Century Britain: The Lorna Sage Lecture, 2025

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My thanks, first to the University of East Anglia School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing.[1] It is an enormous privilege, and a pleasure, to give this Lorna Sage memorial lecture. The brief the School has given me is to address the changing situation of the humanities—with an eye to public advocacy, and so not primarily in the mode of philosophical wrangling. Perhaps there will be some wrangling at the workshops tomorrow. I am deeply grateful to the participants for agreeing to take part.

I have found a way in to the subjects I want to address via the presiding early influence on Lorna Sage's life, her grandfather, the Reverend Thomas James Meredith-Morris as she evokes him in her unforgettably evocative memoir, *Bad Blood*. He is a weirdly charismatic and elusive man. A few weeks into writing I found myself side-tracked by curiosity about his education, detouring into the archives. I drew a line after spending half an hour chasing down quite irrelevant newspaper reports of his appearance at Chester Crown Court in 1938. He had gone the wrong way round a roundabout, and—thrown by all the oncoming traffic—did it again under the eye of a policeman: a symbolically apt episode for a man who made a habit of going wrong and getting caught. This preliminary acknowledgement of the tug of the internet on today's reading can be a flag in the ground for questions about the cultural field today that I will come to in the last section of the lecture. Like *Bad Blood*, the lecture has a three-part structure. The guiding concern is with what ties the humanities in Britain to our 20th-century past and what may now be lost; what is living and what is dead; more interestingly, what refuses to die.

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The novels in Thomas James Meredith-Morris's study are of a piece with the man: stagily self-concealing. 'If a caller was on strictly Church business', Lorna Sage tells us, 'he'd be shown upstairs to Grandfather's study, lined with bookcases in which the books all had the authors' names and titles on their spines blacked out as a precaution against would-be borrowers who'd suddenly take a fancy to Dickens or Marie Corelli.'[2] The study adjoins the vicar's bedroom, 'dark, under the yew tree's shadow' and smelling like him, 'the old devil', 'bony and eloquent and smelly (tobacco, candle grease, sour claret)' (10, 7, 4). There is more than a hint of the Gothic about these sequestered spaces amid the 'dilapidations' of St Chad's vicarage in Hanmer, North Wales. Better for Meredith-Morris's reputation if his 'small, cheap, reddish diaries' for 1933 and 1934 had not emerged to cast light on what he got up to here (45–6), but the impulse to author his own life won out over discretion, and probably there would have *been* no lasting reputation without his and his granddaughter's literary investment in him. At the point where the shabby relics are handed over by her (reluctant) father, the adult Lorna is aware of a reported dalliance with the district nurse, the stuff of 'local folklore' (69). Confirming rumour in his own hand, the Rev. Meredith-Morris cuts a rivetingly naughty figure, out in the fields 'rutting away in the ripe season' (56). Carry On, Vicar. But libertarian comedy tips into unconscionable wickedness once he starts dandling his teenage daughter's schoolfriend on his lap, in the study, under those blacked-out spines of Dickens (not quite a stranger to this sort of thing) and Corelli (naughty lovers aplenty).

By the time Lorna Sage can remember her grandfather, he has been paying for his sins for more than a decade, blackmailed by his man-hating wife. He is no longer tutoring his daughter (Lorna's mother) in Latin (and who would want to construe Tacitus or Ovid with such a father?). Instead, he is making a study of himself. By sheer force of theatrical instinct, he opens up a gap between the role he is consigned to (marginalised parish priest) and his performance in it, repelling 'the squalor of insignificance' (77). Earthly disappointment is an asset in the pulpit: he is great on Job. But it is not the reading in Theology that gives him the equipment he needs to invest his life with meaning. The hinterland of English literature that he picked up along the way lends panache to his meshing of the language and liturgy of the church with the literary vernacular: Shakespeare, Herbert, the metaphysicals, Scott, Dickens, Wilde, also Jules Verne, presumably in translation. Not liking his situation, he has a taste for alternative futures.

Inducting the 3-year-old Lorna into the art of reading, and exhibiting his perverse profit on it, Grandpa supplies the essential requirements for her to do what he cannot: study her way out of provincial Hanmer (a more northern version of Raymond Williams's border country) to read English at university and make literary criticism her career. His is a thwarted upward mobility story, one in which a humanistic education in Theology might have opened the door to success had not gross misconduct derailed the progress narrative. What better preparation of his granddaughter for the profession of English, on the other hand, than his 'thoroughly promiscuous' taste for words, his relish for style and his aptitude for Latin (90). As Victor Sage has pointed out, *Bad Blood* hams up Victorian notions of inherited immorality and comedically dangles the zoological concept of 'imprinting' (a 1930s discovery), both encompassed by the motif of the 'black mark'.[3] Two generations younger than Thomas Meredith-Morris, Lorna's relationship to her mentor has the element of elective affinity—Goethe + goslings, if you like—that draws attention within age studies: grandparent bonding bypassing, or overleaping, the more heavily charted Freudian terrain of parent–child bonding.

Felled by a stroke, Grandpa quits the stage when his granddaughter is 9, too young to have 'lost faith', thereby securing a ghostly role at her shoulder for years to come (90). Did he subliminally influence her choice of Durham?, she wonders, when Oxford and Cambridge decline to consider a teenage mother, even if married. In retrospect she doubts that the 'MA Dunelm', inscribed on his brass plate in St Chad's chancel, was legitimate (242). But she finds more than enough proof of his lingering psychic presence when she is interviewed at Durham by another 'thin', 'tense', 'rasping[ly …] ironic' figure (274): Professor Nicholas Brooke reviewing her Shakespeare exam script, exposing all her ideas as second hand, good enough to get her into university but hardly, as yet, distinctive. How could she not have recognised him more quickly, she wonders when she turns up as a student: 'the brilliance, the theatricality, the edge of bitterness (he felt trapped in Durham), the cradled cigarette, the flapping black gown …' (276). It is Thomas Meredith-Morris again, redeemed in the role of literary professor and one of the 'founders' of English Studies at UEA.[4]

Mentors in classic upward mobility stories have often enjoyed a degree of licence, exceeding their narrative function of igniting the desire for social transformation and assisting the protagonist's first steps towards an ampler future than the society of birth offers. Think Vautrin, Miss Havisham, Magwitch, Mme de Rênal, Lord Henry Wotton … The 'socially visionary impulse', even or especially when 'frustrated and

imperfect', found 19th-century expression in such older men and women, Bruce Robbins has suggested. 'Liberated by their marginal or merely functional relation to the plot, […] it's as if [they] were free to represent the text's repressed or (sometimes) its best self'.[5] This focus on who, and what, drives the upward mobility story forward sheds light on many 19th- and 20th-century narratives, from both sides of the Atlantic, structured around conflict between the desire for individual exceptionalism and a more democratising urge to see the opportunity for a better life extended to all.

Something clearly of that ilk but strikingly formalised is at work in *Bad Blood*, made structurally emphatic at the point where the memoir leaves Grandpa dead and buried and starts a new section of the life: Part Two. Consider his last appearance in *Bad Blood*, laid out 'on the bed in his black skirts, not coffined yet, hands crossed on his hollow chest and his jaw tied up with a big white handkerchief knotted on the top of his head like Marley's ghost' (91). So imaged, after John Leech, he is preserved *in memoriam* in association with death and thwarted eroticism and the Gothic imagination, suspended precariously between comedy, tragedy and the grotesque. He is not *just* Dickensian. Something more contemporary is also going on here: a weirdly potent sense of inter-generational intimacy, laced with the potential for abuse, as the child Lorna is dragged into the bedroom by Uncle Billy to bear witness. It is a scene redolent of the dramatic crisis to L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, published in 1953, just a year after Meredith-Morris's death, with Billy egregiously 'zealous' in the role of Mrs Maudsley (91), Lorna a squirming Leo Colston.

To Sage's credit, *Bad Blood*'s dramatisation of changes in British post-war society contains nothing of Hartley's unhealthy glamourisation of class. Which is not to say that it does not feel the difference in 'prestige' between old and new cultural dispensations (98). The geography shifts in Part Two, disconcertingly for the child Lorna, from 18th-century vicarage to new-build council semi, where life is chiefly tolerable in the mode of escape: into books, into the countryside, into tentative, not always stable friendships. It shifts again in Part 3 with the purchase of an Edwardian villa, encouraging a sense of restored security: here 'the soul of the vicarage seem[s] reincarnated' (225-6). It is possible for a while to 'sleepwalk' (219) through the transition from child to adult—until the (so to speak) inconceivable fact of teenage pregnancy makes 'br[eaking] the rules' (278) a life-saving necessity.

I am short-changing the complexity and emotional depth of Parts 2 and 3 of *Bad Blood*. Two elements are essential to the larger historical and sociological story I want to bring into focus. The first is the greatly

enhanced role, after Grandpa's death, of 'minor characters' who act not as fully-fledged, erotically charged mentors but as helpers: the GP who treats Lorna's insomnia with a prescription permitting her to stay up all night reading; the chain-smoking divorcée mother of a friend, modelling a less fettered relation to marriage; the Liverpool dentist who makes fixing 'my miserable mouth […] an emblem of progress' (155); the music teacher who accosts the pregnant Lorna and her mother in town 'to tell us at the top of her voice that seventeen was the ideal age to have a healthy baby and get on with your life' (255); Miss Roberts (another chain smoker and a socialist[6]) who 'timetable[s] weekly Latin tutorials at her house' (255) and points Lorna to the Scholarship level exam and sets her reading the *New Statesman* (258). Let us not forget the Night Sister at the maternity hospital, 'married with children', who tells the exhausted new mother, struggling to revise for A-levels, that 'it [*is*] all possible' (264); finally, at the door of the university, Clifford Leech and Nicholas Brooke, deciding that she is scholarship material and 'it [is] worth changing Durham's conventual college rules on [her] account' (275). It is a lengthy but not a complete list of the many individuals who clear the heroine's path, allowing her and her young husband to counter the old myths of social permissibility with 'new, mutant' ones (243). The claim to 'freak'-ishness in the later pages of *Bad Blood* (269) is part of a tonal high-wire act: a shared joke for a family attuned to the Gothic; but there is plangency, too—an acknowledgement that the made-up road will not be smooth.

The second element of salience to this lecture is Sage's sociological interest in the large economic and institutional factors altering the social picture of late 1950s and early 1960s Britain. Some of the changes are explicit, but by no means all. Clement Atlee's Labour government invests heavily in new council house building, erecting 1.2 million new homes between 1945 and 1951. Aneurin (Nye) Bevan, Minister for Health and Housing, promotes a vision of new estates, where 'the working man, the doctor and the clergyman will live in close proximity to each other'.[7] Macmillan's Conservative government cuts the bank rates and makes possible the purchase of that big Edwardian villa on credit. And in 1959, the University Grants Committee takes the decision to found seven new universities, UEA among them: small (at first), highly selective, residential and built on green-field sites by contrast with the Victorian civic universities. Many adopt a liberal arts model[8]; UEA makes a more specialist offer, starting small with biological sciences and English studies.

Without the multiple helpers and the large social changes of which they are a part, the transition from the provincial borderland to

university, from poverty to professional security, and from a crumbling old order of things to what Sage terms the 'fantasy-freedom' of modernity (268), her upward mobility story would be close to impossible. Beating the odds, in 1960, she is exceptional and also a harbinger of a more generous Britain in creation. The world she enters, on graduating from Durham, is in the course of transformation by what Stefan Collini suggests we call 'the "welfare-state model of cultural diffusion"',[9] with state funding of the arts and higher education the twin poles of a widely shared vision for social improvement:

> The traditional form of some cultural good was to be extended to more and more people by means of state support. 'Culture' was seen as an antidote to or refuge from the grubby pressures of economic life, and universities were expected to be beacons of culture. This model had its paternalist side—the mandarins knew what was worth having more of, whether people clamoured for it or not—and also its hidden subsidies to the middle class, who were overwhelmingly the chief beneficiaries of the expansion before the 1990s. But it also had deep roots in British social attitudes. (33)

What makes *Bad Blood* so much more than a symbolic reduction of Sage's early life to a representative story of upward mobility facilitated by 1950s and 1960s investment in access to culture is the degree to which the budding literary critic and feminist, at the point of entry to the university, remains willingly haunted by a malcontent mentor of a pre-welfare state cast.[10] His stuckness and her escape are a joined historical and psychological story.

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It is 14 years now since Nicholas Dames, reviewing three contributions to the rapidly growing literature of humanities advocacy, ventured the thought that even the most trenchant public philosophy may do less for the cause than the novelistic memoir. Neither Martha Nussbaum's canny attempt in *Not for Profit* (2010) to square the humanities' cultivation of sympathy with a skills offer to the marketplace, nor Louis Menand's insistence, in *The Marketplace of Ideas* (2010), that disinterested pursuit of the liberal arts is consistent with worldly practicality, seemed to Dames to answer the question students and their teachers wanted addressing: 'Why bother?' Why bother to study the humanities, given the cultural and economic forces ranged against you, let alone commit your adult professional life to them? Given what was already clear, by then, about the public and private economic costs of higher

education, the weight of debt, the often indirect routes to employment, the 'neo-Victorian social struggles' of the academic precariat, it seemed to him that what we humanists and our sympathisers need are not 'just' rational arguments to persuade our political and economic masters of our value to society but accounts of our life and work that take cognizance of the intensity and, it may seem, the perversity of desire vested in studying arts and humanities. The exemplary account Dames had in his sights was Terry Castle's *The Professor* (2010): a risqué 'story of the charisma of intellectual mentors and intellectualism'. In Castle's lubriciously naughty rendition of her academic rise, the mentor function resides with a series of well-known female professors, many of them a Head of Department's nightmare, whose intellectual lure for the fledgling Terry ensured a 'neurotically invested' relation to the humanities thereafter. *The Professor* tells a story predicated on closer identification with the institution of the university than *Bad Blood* (it is American), but it belongs on the same shelf.

'Perhaps the humanities, in their current plight, need to be novelistic *again*', Dames concluded [my emphasis]: equipped with narratives—like *Bad Blood*—that inspire attachment and that allow us to 'inhabit the gap between sincerity and irony, between cultural gatekeeper and cultural rebel'.[11] His 'again' gestures towards a less inhibited past: a point in time before the scale of the economic and political threats to our fields knocked our cultural confidence and forced explicit advocacy for what we do. The high era of the campus novel floats into view; also, on a wider lens, the 'condition of culture novel' as Francis Mulhern has since described it, from Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) to Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012): fictions that grafted the story of individual cultural aspiration onto a synoptic analysis of the social whole. Whether the central protagonists' aspirations were frustrated or gratified in these genres matters less than the imaginative mobilisation of the desire for culture. In the hands of its great practitioners (Amis, Bradbury, Lodge), the British campus novel leaned towards comedy (being richly ambivalent about the effects of academia on the character, the language, the ethical disposition of anyone who devotes too much of themselves to it); the condition of culture novel more often tended towards disappointment or tragedy. But both genres possess features Mulhern considers essential to a novelistic appraisal of culture. The offer to the reader is a perspective on the culture at once idiosyncratically personal and reflective of trained critical intelligence. 'Rarified knowledge' (in the form of the novels' 'deployments of cultural capital') is offered up 'as if it were common currency', function[ing] to test and (perhaps) confirm the novels' 'readers as adequate evaluating subjects in their own right'.[12] In other words,

however, various their politics, the fictions that charted the imaginative route to university for much of the 20th century had one non-negotiable feature: with rare exceptions, they were beholden and committed to sustaining the cultural capital the university represented and the critical disposition it increasingly nurtured.

The historical arc implied here is not beyond dispute. If there was a prelapsarian moment for the humanities, its window was vanishingly small. Either an unacknowledged source or a ghostly precedent for Dames's 'Why Bother?' is a 1964 Pelican Original volume, edited by J. H. Plumb, entitled *Crisis in the Humanities*. The lead essay, by M. I. Finley, asks exactly that question as the author ponders the decline of Classics. Plumb frames the collection in terms of a post-war shattering of 'the confidence of humanists in their capacity to lead or to instruct'.[13] Finley, an intellectual refugee to England from McCarthyite America (grilled by the House Un-American Activities Committee, prosecuted by the US Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security) had more reason than most to want to reckon with the limits of the humanities' worldly power. A sense of crisis in the humanities is, on the evidence of this volume and many others before it, pretty much coeval with their coming to prominence as an institutional category.

No luxurious pre-crisis moment, then. On the contrary, a case could be made for the humanities' mid-20th-century institutional success having depended upon a certain dogged resilience in fending off near-constant challenge to their subjects' cultural prestige. Be that as it may, the broader story with respect to the 'welfare state model' of higher education is clear. In or around 1985 (the year of the Jarratt Report on University Efficiency), the nature of the UK's national commitment to university financing changed, and the political pressure on the humanities to justify their cost and clarify their public value intensified. Underfunded growth of the university system left universities struggling to deliver teaching on the basis of a funding allocation that lost 40% of its value between 1976 and 1994.[14] In 1994 John Major's second Conservative government placed a quota for the first time on student recruitments (minimum and maximum numbers per institution); a year later, the Main Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals accepted that a student contribution to the cost of teaching was inevitable; in 1998, a £1000 student fee was introduced under the New Labour government's Teaching and Higher Education Act; maintenance grants were replaced by loans, guaranteeing the lasting unpopularity of the post-1998 funding regime. From that point on, the story (well told by Roger Brown and Helen Carasso in 2013, and regularly updated since) has been one of repeated experimentation with financialisation and

marketisation in an effort to square the growing demand for higher education with its affordability to the nation.[15]

The principal sources of our more recent difficulties are well known, but they, too, bear a compact reiteration. Higher education today is not in any coherent sense a sector, though it is routinely called one. With c. 224 publicly funded higher education providers,[16] serving very diverse purposes, it is highly stratified and dominated economically by a few very large research intensives. Forty-three percent of institutions are operating in deficit.[17] Research is the basis for any university's international prestige and its ranking, but research loses money. Teaching has, for years, subsidised research, but the growing gap between the student fee[18] and the cost of tuition has set the budgets of most universities in a downward spiral. The removal of the student cap has done huge damage to regional universities, and not a little to civics as students have flooded to a few 'high-tariff' universities. A precipitous drop in international student recruitment since the start of 2024 made worse by global political instability, visa restrictions, the lingering effects of Brexit, and the costs of servicing ageing real estate or unfilled new buildings (or both), has deepened the problems. For students, the burden of debt is growing, the value of the maintenance loan is lagging well behind inflation, aggravating rather than alleviating entrenched social inequalities. Household income thresholds, which determine how much a student can borrow, have been frozen for more than 17 years. 'Full-time education' is often no-such thing, study contending with the need to work. The current government has a strategy for research—one to which the arts and humanities are all but irrelevant except as seedbeds for growth in the creative industries. It has as yet no strategy for universities. The logic appears, *de facto*, Spencerian. The weakest institutions will go to the wall.

If you are over 40, or thereabouts, you have lived through the dismantling of the welfare model. If you are younger, it is a story you have inherited, and that quite possibly leaves you with an unusable and *ressentiment*-inducing knowledge that earlier generations had it better and cannot stop talking about it. Those generations were few in the grand scheme of things, and their 'better' was not all good, but it is perhaps unsurprising that the lapsing-into-history of the 'welfare state moment' has become a topic for sentimental reflection in the literary upward mobility memoir as it has developed 'post Sage'. ('Sentimental', that is, in the older more generous sense linking feeling to socio-political and ethical reflection.) What links Lynne Barber's *An Education* (2009), John Carey's *The Unexpected Professor* (2015), Melvin Bragg's *Back in the Day* (2022) and *Another World* (2026), Don

Paterson's *Toy Fights* (2023), and Geoff Dyer's *Homework* (2025), different though they are in age cohort,[19] geography, childhood circumstances, post-university trajectory, and (not least) literary voice, is a vivid sense of 'what we have lost'.[20]

This is Geoff Dyer, recalling the moment at which a Cheltenham Grammar School teacher encouraged ambition in his university applications. Note the helper name to the fore:

> Bob Beale said I should try for Oxford. […] there was nothing self-determining—let alone self-made—about this. I don't have the figures but I'd guess that seventy per cent of pupils at my grammar school stayed on for A-levels, a high percentage of these went to university, and every year several went to Oxford or Cambridge. Once you were in [the system], at the age of eleven [i.e. if you passed the 11-plus], you were in, and on your way. So I was riding a tried and tested, reliably functioning educational escalator that had been constructed for me—and it was *free*.[21]

A hefty weight of moral and emotional ambivalence bears in on Dyer's prose here. Everything about its logic works against his characteristically ironic, looping, under-cutting style. In the main *Homework* offers a witty, fondly familial, astoundingly detailed retrieval of childhood, approaching the Proustian in its recall of the ephemera of youth: toys, games, collectibles, sweets, Wall's ice-cream and LPs. (Geoff, unlike Marcel, has the internet to aid memory.) But at its educational crux, a disabling consciousness takes hold of having been placed, by invisible hands, at the better end of an unequal distribution of life chances.

Whatever the exact percentages, the big picture is clear enough: the boys at Cheltenham Grammar were lucky, with educational stages mapped out ahead, taking them ever further from the kids who failed the 11-plus. There was an escalator, and it worked well if you did your bit, which is made to seem pretty much nothing: 'I did the [A-level] exams, they seemed to go well. […] I took the Oxford exam, then travelled by coach, […] for an interview [… which] seemed to go ok [… then] resumed the passive life of actively waiting for a letter to arrive' (242). Exams do not write themselves, but Dyer is palpably averse to claiming merit. Only when the results letter is late, caught up in the Christmas post, does his psychological investment in the process break through. The escalator is perhaps malfunctioning. 'Eventually I could bear it no longer. I called the college office and was told that I had got a place' (242). The old lineaments of the upward mobility story at last reveal

themselves, still in action, though deep buried: this is, after all, a story of desire, but desire with an awkward conscience.

Guilt, embarrassment, nostalgia: the 30-year-long and not, even now, absolutely vanished welfare-state moment carries a heady set of emotions in its wake. Higher education is, after all, a 'positional good', Peter Hennessy reminds us (quoting Fred Hirsch's definition of the term): 'scarce' in a 'socially imposed sense' and 'subject to […] crowding through more extensive use'.[22] Regret for a period in which 'the government cranked education escalator' worked wonderfully for the middle classes, and much less reliably for the less well off, risks obscuring the positional advantage enjoyed by many of those now lamenting its loss.[23] Not everyone was optimally situated, of course, and not everyone is as conflicted about what their life owes to the state as Dyer. Don Paterson gives the subject a more tough-love, Scottish, left-school-at-16-and-entered-the-university-by-the-back-door twist at the end of *Toy Fights*:

> I don't think the state should provide young self-declared artists a comfortable living; but I'd propose that it might afford them an uncomfortable one. You are free to place faith in yourself, but that doesn't oblige anyone to place any faith in you without some evidence. There's nothing wrong with young folk finding it tough going in their garret and basement years, and I have some sharply unfashionable things to say about grant culture, which disburses the same pot in a colossally unfair and inefficient way.[24]

Contemplating 'what we have lost' makes pundits of us all, or so I understand Paterson to be signalling in this performatively pugilistic, 'Here I Stand' bar-room stool declaration of opposition to 'grant culture'. The tone is nothing like Dyer's. But a similarly passional consciousness of generational advantage seems to be at work.

Even if we did not live the welfare state moment as Dyer and Paterson (a bit younger, with a less strong start in life) and many other memoirists did, anyone working now in the humanities has to contend with a pervasive awareness of its loss. UEA is among the several UK universities that, quite literally, inhabit its visionary architecture and one of many trying to find a way out of a collapsing financial model. At their best, memoirs of the welfare state era are vital reminders of a social vision for education that gave higher education in the humanities the double allure of an object of desire accessible with a bit of effort and talent. They testify to a twinning of personal ambition to social progress that was not only imaginatively compelling but, in the experience of many of our best recent and current writers, *true*. The unhappy

social conscience they speak to is understandable, but if you are young now and wanting to get ahead you might justifiably consider it, as Lorna Sage once said (of her relationship to chain smoking) too much the mode of 'baleful' contemplation.[25]

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Or, as she put it elsewhere (in a review of Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian*): 'Some of this personalised, confessional stuff works well, some not'.[26] The gear change—mine, not Sage's—may be clunky, but I trust new novelistic efforts are under way, updating our contemporary repertoire of stories about the familial, social and political factors that encourage investment in 'the idea of the university'. Whether it will be the novel *per se* that keeps alive the sense of the university as a site of personal and social transformation may be doubted: the cultural centrality of long-form fiction can no longer be taken for granted, but that has been true for some time and the competition for attention from other, easier forms of entertainment is among the factors needing frank recognition and better answers from humanities advocacy. The novelistic impulses of autobiography, and life-writing more generally, may be better placed to confront the challenge—up to a point.

Heeding the warning, I want to turn outward to consider the most consequential high-level shifts in culture and society bearing in on our disciplines. The changes do not require us to throw Dickens and Corelli, or anything else you might care to name, on the clearance pile. Conversing with ghosts is an essential part of the humanistic job description. But they require a better articulation than yet exists of the changed context in which the humanities now pursue their work. Left unaddressed, they will tend to make it harder to explain the intellectual purpose and social value of what we do.

Let me start with the question of the status of text. The humanities study culture as the medium in which a society understands itself. Until recently, the dominant form in which our disciplines have stored, scrutinised and advanced knowledge has been the written word. But the mediation of culture has shifted to a dramatic degree from text to multi-modal and predominantly visual short-form media. There are genre exceptions—epic fantasy and the magical school are, as Mark McGurl points out, thriving repositories of social rather than cultural capital[27]—but their flourishing has done little to assuage concern about the erosion of reading attention from our hard-working advocates for book reading (literacy organisations, libraries, educational associations and publishers). Blacked-out or not, that row of book spines making up the Meredith-Morris home library, and providing the first point of entry

for the child of the house to a world beyond the family, is no longer as ordinary a possession as it was.

A PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) of UK children undertaken in 2024 showed the '[n]umber of books at home' to be 'the second most powerful predictor of overall reading score' after the Year 1 test of a child's ability to read phonics.[28] The obstacles to engagement with books go beyond socio-economic access: the cultural capital bound up in long-form reading is widely thought to be lapsing, if not quite lapsed, in value, as the basic unit of every-day cultural consumption shifts from long-form to shorter and from print to digital. Emerging data on changing cognitive patterns and educational capacity easily intensify cultural panic, detectable in the headlined statistics from reading and literacy surveys and the reports coming through from all educational stages about diminishing concentration spans, cognitive offloading, and disengagement from education altogether.

AI intensifies and complicates what was already a very pronounced shift to short-form ephemeral under the influence of social media. Predictively filleting, excerpting and summarising complex material into quickly digestible, rapid turnover short form, AI turbo-boosts distraction. The ratio of the AI content window on a smartphone to the material available in the LLM is becoming ever more impressive. As saliently, the form given to that content is becoming more fluid, predictively reshaped to fit the viewer/reader's needs and circumstances. The principal enticement is AI's capacity to answer your questions and generate new text and images almost instantaneously in response to prompts, relieving the user/reader of labour and (perhaps) of boredom. But, unless you are operating with a defined, highly curated data set on a secure platform (so, behind a paywall), even the most basic internet search tends, increasingly, to reflect the flooding of the internet with AI slop: low- to mid-quality content that dilutes and impoverishes the quality of information pushed to the fore.

As I argue in greater detail elsewhere,[29] these profound shifts in the dominant forms and mediation of culture require two related responses from the humanities: the first is the contribution our disciplines will make, as repositories of cultural expertise, to the process of technology regulation, helping to frame the scope of intervention where it is needed to protect the purposes of education, safeguard psychological well-being and maintain the quality of a higher literate culture; the second is the evolving work we have to undertake to re-define and justify the content we teach and research against a background in which the content we want to pass on to new generations of students has to rise above a very broad 'stratum' of ephemeral digital activity.[30] A systems approach,

describing and critiquing the whole hybrid digital-print media context of communication, is an essential element for a basic humanities education today, but it will not in and of itself be enough to secure public understanding and confidence for our disciplines, which stand in need of increasingly assertive curation for students and a wider interested public. In other words, we need to redo and rethink the work many prior generations of writers and publishers have performed from the later 18th-century onwards to establish the cultural base on which the 'higher' study of literature, language, history, philosophy, classics, art, music, sits, and without which humanities departments have no meaningful claim to knowledge or expertise.

Two further changes in the socio-political, rather than technological, environment of the humanities are profoundly affecting perception of our knowledge base and our public value. Both are fundamental to social, economic and cultural experience right now, however unevenly their immediate effects are felt. First, the relationship between demographic and cultural change. The headline statistic should be free from cultural panic: 20.8% of children in England in 2023/2024 did not have English as a first language, up from 18% in 2015/2016.[31] Whatever British society looks like in 25 years' time, the basic demography tells us that it will be culturally far more plural. For much of the 20th century, the UK could operate as if it were, for educational purposes, a monoculture. The children of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants escaping the Russian pogroms in the 1880s and 1890s went to schools where they were taught the Battle of Hastings and given large helpings of Shakespeare. (There is a touch of that in *Bad Blood*, when Lorna befriends Jean, presumptively a Black American GI's child—her racial difference quite invisible to the school syllabus.) 'Set-book Shakespeare and Marlowe' (177) still held interest then and can continue to hold interest now. But it has been evident for decades that we need different chronologies and a broader representation of voices that speak to the evolution of the UK's composite and unevenly distributed demographic base.

Much of the work humanities departments have achieved since the 1970s has been supplying that need. The best reply we may be able to give to dispiriting charges of wokery is that rethinking educational canons is a slow, labour-intensive and sometimes conflictual business. On the one hand, complicating a nation's history to register its evolving demography is a vital way of giving people a foothold in a shared culture; on the other, something goes wrong when curricula become dogmatically identitarian. People will not in the long term buy into a history that gives them nothing to like about themselves or a positive

handle on difference. To invoke the social geographer Ash Amin, the debate would be better if it were less about identity, more about the complexity of belonging.[32]

Which brings me to the last and much the most worrying change in our cultural context. In 1990, as a graduate, I sat in on a term of undergraduate seminars at Cambridge dedicated to literature and war and led by Morag Shiach. The first question we were asked was how many of us felt that *we* were at war. One hand went up: a woman whose boyfriend had been called up to serve in the First Gulf War. In today's international student community, that number would be far higher, and the alignments of political and cultural affiliation much harder to handle in the classroom. Humanities expertise is indispensable to the country's ability to understand and work through what is happening in the world right now. Some of that expertise is directly relevant: modern Baltic, Middle Eastern and Asian studies, work on the historical roots of contemporary conflicts, on our human relationship with the natural environment (heavily negatively impacted by war), on language change, on migration, on the shifting character of war, and the imprint of violence and population displacement on the cultural and psychic imagination as we find it expressed in narratives, images, music, and every other form of creative expression.

The Research Councils of the UK are already asking for clearer statements of what the university contributes to national defence and security as they prepare for an uplift in national defence spending to 2.6% of GDP (with a stated aim of 3% 'by the next parliament'[33]). The claim cannot be that studying the humanities will prevent war (though a few writers, in the past, have tried to make that argument) or even that our efforts to give the culture forms in which to apprehend and express war and its effects will be apt. What the humanities can and do offer is deep and nuanced knowledge of our complex culture, its sources, how it represents itself to itself, and what and how it values and is led to value. It is worth recalling how much of the material our disciplines study has been born of the experience of conflict, from antiquity onwards. From the perspectives of the humanities, the conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, the wider Middle East, and tension with China are pressing evidence that wars start and are won or lost to a large extent in the medium of culture. In the long term, they are won or lost in how we educate younger generations in the languages, history, cultural and philosophical differences, and moral–political priorities that determine whether we can live together.

Lorna Sage's childhood was lived in the gradually lightening shadow of war. Her culture's investments in literature and literary studies were

not necessarily to be expected in a country destabilised by two long and brutal wars between nations with rich and longstanding historical connections. Hers is a story of a life transformed by reading and education, amidst a wider process of change happening unevenly but with increasing clarity of political and social purpose across the country: slow but steady improvement of provision in schools, the building of financial infrastructure and the growth of something that would soon be called a university sector. It is all too easy to see our own political moment as one of retrenchment, shrinkage and betrayal of the principles that underpinned that historical period. But something is going badly awry if we find ourselves replacing an intergenerational story of expanding opportunity (one generation's stuckness perversely mentoring, and pleasurably haunting, another's liberation) with one in which the 'social visionary impulse' falters, and we are left with only an unproductive sense that a benefit has been enjoyed and is now running out.

Much about the early life Lorna Sage recalls is, after all, anything but enviable, and any tendency we (or here I must say, 'I') may have to identify pleasurably with an impoverished and eccentric vicarage upbringing in North Wales may be evidence not only that a well-told upward mobility story gets under the skin but of odd points of contact between childhoods 12,000 miles and more than two decades apart. The same school syllabus, in no small order; the same Church of England presence pretty much—certainly the flapping clergy skirts, church calendar, and elaborate Anglican ceremonials; remarkably similar women of character, several of them chain smokers, determined to help a young girl get to university on the basis of poetry-by-heart, extra drilling in Latin, and personal loans of books not in the small home library. Never underestimate, in other words, how far and how late British institutional structures, and structures of feeling, extended their reach around the world. *Bad Blood* is not just a UK story.

The educational vision for the future that younger generations are confronted with now is thin on optimism about their, and this country's, future. Anyone advocating for the humanities should pause, then, over the evidence that public instincts about what graduates think of the value of their education, retrospectively, are massively out of kilter with the reality. 'People guess that 40% of graduates wouldn't go to university if they could choose again,' researchers at the Higher Education Policy Institute and the Policy Institute at King's College London found in August 2025: 'the reality is just 8%'.[34] The public are tending to be wrong about a lot of other things as well: earnings after graduation, the extent of the debt impact, (less surprisingly) the way the fee system works, and the scale of universities' contribution to the economy.[35] The

chief reason for projecting a more culturally attuned story about what we do, even and especially in the midst of so much that is badly awry with the world, is that we owe our students the reanimation of a sense of possibility that they themselves are still eager to preserve. Uncertain how to end a lecture, largely about the past we are still trailing with us, I am happy to trust chiefly to our students' willingness to break the mould provided without losing what is good in their inheritance—and to try to help them. Lorna Sage was there well ahead of me, finishing *Bad Blood* not with her own existential imperilment but with the next generation: 'they are the future'.

Notes

1 Special thanks to Matthew Taunton, Doris Pearce, and all the contributors to the workshop: Ruth Abbott (U Cambridge), Birgit Breidenbach (UEA), Stefan Collini (U Cambridge), Thomas Karshan (UEA), Heather Love (UPenn), Tina Lupton (U Copenhagen), David McAllister (Birkbeck), Anshuman Mondal (UEA), David Nowell Smith (UEA), Rachel Potter (UEA), Nancy Yousef (Rutgers).

2 *Bad Blood* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 10.

3 'Writing, Reading and Witnessing', *Hinterland* Issue 7 (2021), 60–73 (67–8).

4 Lorna Sage, Obituary for Nicholas Brooke, *The Independent* 10 November 1998, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-professor-nicholas-brooke-1183949.html.

5 *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 64–5.

6 On the socialism, see "Lorna Sage – Student", Lorna Sage and Bad Blood: An Exhibition, curator Sharon Tolaini-Sage, Lorna Sage Archives, British Archive for Contemporary Writing c/o UEA Archives, University of East Anglia Library, https://lornasagearchives.omeka.net/exhibits/show/student/student.

7 Not Bevan's precise words, but a subsequent widely-circulated paraphrase. In his own wording, the 'ideal community' was one in which "'all the various income groups of the population are mixed" … where the small cottages of the labourers were cheek by jowl with the butcher's shop, and where the doctor could reside benignly with his patients in the same street'. Speech reported in the *Architects' Journal*, 1948; quoted in Stephen Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo, *England Arise! The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995), 104. For a more detailed account of Bevan's policy of community integration through public housing, see John Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), ch. 11.

8 Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 30.

9 *What Are Universities For?*, 33.

10 Lorna Sage, Obituary for Nicholas Brooke, *The Independent* 10 November 1998, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-professor-nicholas-brooke-1183949.html.

11 'Why Bother?', *n* + 1, issue 11, *Dual Power* (Spring 2011), http://nplusonemag.com/why-bother.

12 *Figures of Catastrophe: The Condition of Culture Novel* (London: Verso, 2016), 11.

13 M. I. Finley, 'Crisis in the Classics', in J. H. Plumb (ed.), *Crisis in the Classics* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 11–23 (13); J. H. Plumb, 'Introduction', 7–10 (7).

14 See Roger Brown with Helen Carasso, *Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2013), 81. See pp. 8–10 for their 'Chronology of key developments in the marketisation of UK higher education 1979 to 2012'.

15 Brown with Carasso, *Everything for Sale?*

16 The latest figures available from the Higher Education Statistics Authority are based on data returned to HESA in 2024–5. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-02-2026/sb274-higher-education-staff-statistics. Cf. Statistica, reporting 296 providers in 2022/23. https://www.statista.com/statistics/915603/universities-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/. The number of Alternate Providers (partnered with existing providers for degree-awarding purposes, but not funded by the Office for Students or other public bodies) is less clear, estimated in 2013 as c. 340. Mark Jeynes, 'Alternate Providers as Partners of Traditional Universities', *Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)* blog, 30 October 2023, https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/10/30/alternative-providers-as-partners-of-traditional-universities/.

17 Office for Students, *Financial Sustainability of Higher Education Providers in England: November 2025 update*, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/uzshqf13/financial-sustainability-of-higher-education-providers-in-england-november-2025-update.pdf.

18 Revised August 2025, to a £9,535 upper limit.

19 Barber (b. 1944); Carey (b. 1934); Bragg (b. 1939); Paterson (b. 1962); Dyer (b. 1958). The first three in the list belong to the grammar school moment but just miss the full welfare state moment; the latter two had the fuller package of benefits.

20 James Hamilton-Paterson, *What We Have Lost: The Dismantling of Great Britain* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018).

21 *Homework: A Memoir* (London: Canongate, 2025), 239.

22 *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 78 (quoting Hirsh, *Social Limits to Growth*, 1977).

23 *Having It So Good*. 77.

24 *Toy Fights: A Boyhood* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2023), 362.

25 'Farewell Lady Nicotine', review of Richard Klein, *Cigarettes are Sublime*, in Sage, *Good as Her Word: Selected Journalism* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), 183–5 (184).

26 'Paean to Gaiety', in *Good as Her Word*, 190–94 (191).

27 'Social Capital: Epic Fantasy and the Magic School', *Genre* 56/1 (2023), 109–27.

28 Ariel Lindorff, Jamie Stiff and Heather Kayton, *PIRLS 2021: National Report for England Research Report* (April 2024), (Government Social Research), p. 7, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/661667a756df202ca4ac0538/PIRLS_2021_national_report_for_england.pdf.

29 See 'Short Form Cultural Fluidity and the Threat to the Humanities', *Modern Fiction Studies*, special issue on Foreseeable Humanities Futures, ed. Michael Bérubé and Robert Marzec (forthcoming, 2026).

30 See Tess McNulty, 'Content Era Ethics', *Journal of Cultural Analytics* 4 (2021), 290–325, on the problem of nomenclature for this class of content.

31 UK Government, 'Academic Year 2023/24: Schools, Pupils, and Their Characteristics', 6 June 2024, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2023-24. The survey canvased views from 'a nationally representative sample of 2,082 adults aged 18+ across the UK, with data weighted by age, gender, region, ethnicity and education status' (p. 2).

32 *After Nativism: Belonging in an Age of Intolerance* (Cambridge: Polity, 2025).

33 UK Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review: Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad* (2025), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home__strong_abroad.pdf.

34 *UK Higher Education: Public Perceptions vs. Reality* (August 2025), p. 38. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/higher-education-perceptions-vs-reality.pdf.

35 *UK Higher Education: Public Perceptions vs. Reality*, p. 4 (summary).

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