

**‘À propos, ou hors de propos, il n’importe’:¹
relevance theory and Montaigne (*Essais* I.40)**

‘Lucidity’ is, like ‘relevance’, a ‘fuzzy term’.² But, however these two qualities are defined, their combination is widely thought to be a hallmark of good discursive prose, of good conversation, and more particularly—for those fortunate enough to have experienced them—of the written and spoken words of Alison Finch. In such contexts, the two qualities are interdependent: we can only write or speak lucidly about a topic or an aim if we have a sense of what is relevant to it; and we can only have a sense of what is relevant to it if we have a sense of what the topic or aim is. I call this the ordinary-language sense of ‘relevant’.

That bald description of the combination of lucidity and relevance begs many questions, not least that of who decides what is relevant. Even allowing for that question, the description does not do justice to the full experience of reading or conversing with Alison, which is one of endlessly rich possibilities being opened up rather than closed down. Nor does it fully embrace what we might expect from literature and other arts, where the very notions of a ‘topic’ or an ‘aim’ and of ‘relevance’ to them might be precisely what a poem or film is trying to get away *from*. So is the notion of ‘relevance’ largely irrelevant to literature and the arts? The question has currency because one powerful approach to human communication that has grown out of the turn to cognitive sciences in recent decades assumes that communication aims above all to achieve . . . relevance. If that assumption is correct, where does that leave literature and the arts?

Relevance theory, founded by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, was launched by their *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (1986). Further developed by them and others, it has had considerable impact within linguistics, psychology, and philosophy, and has started making inroads into literary studies.³ One of its attractions for literary studies is that it takes a holistic view of communication, potentially encompassing the whole circuit from the ‘genesis’ to the ‘reception’ of a work. It holds that throughout the communication circuit the aim is for a stimulus (whether a literary work or words uttered in a conversation) to achieve relevance—ultimately not to a topic or to a precise aim (though those kinds of relevance may be included) but to readers or listeners. A stimulus will achieve relevance, to a varying degree, if it has or seems to have positive cognitive effects on them, and if the cognitive effort they must expend to derive those effects is not too great to be worthwhile.

But what is a positive cognitive effect? The foundational texts of relevance theory understand it primarily in conceptual terms, as for example the imparting of new information and thoughts, the confirmation or change or questioning of an existing belief or assumption or prejudice, and so on. A recent nuancing of the theory in some quarters argues that positive cognitive effects are also perceptual and embodied, since lower- as

¹ ‘It does not matter whether this is relevant or irrelevant’. All translations are my own, though I have occasionally consulted Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1993).

² Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd edition with new Postface (Malden MA, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell, 1995), p. 119.

³ See Ian MacKenzie, *Paradigms of Reading: Relevance Theory and Deconstruction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Adrian Pilkington, *Poetic Effects: A Relevance Theory Perspective* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000).

well as higher-order functions are activated when we respond to a communicative stimulus.⁴

Relevance in this theory is ultimately not to something but to a person (or persons), understood as a subject not object. Something is potentially relevant to a person if it can be or appear to be worthwhile to them, notably because it enhances their well-being. (One does not have to agree on a specific definition of well-being to subscribe to this.) This meaning of ‘relevance’ is technical in one respect, but broad in another, since it is not limited to communication. Food is relevant to our individual survival, whether or not the context is communicative. Sex is relevant to our survival as a species and to many other dimensions of our collective and individual well-being. So the kind of *communicated* relevance described by relevance theory is a sub-species of that broader category of relevance.

I argue that the relevance-theoretical notion of relevance is better placed (than the ordinary-language sense of the term with which I begun) to describe the effects sought not only by everyday interlocutors but also by the discourses that we loosely call ‘literature’. This is not to discard entirely the ordinary-language sense of the term, but to see it as one kind of communicative relevance—more characteristic of the business report, the academic monograph, or the focused conversation than of the novel or poem. Whether or not a text is relevant (for example to a topic or to an objective) in the ordinary-language sense, it seeks relevance (to its audience) in the broader but more technical sense.

Reading texts in the light of relevance theory involves partial, but not wholesale, redescription of any terminology for communication that they may themselves have used. So, like other theories, this one can at best serve as a heuristic tool of analysis that is partly alien to the language used by its object. Yet the redescription is usually only partial, since all kinds of discourses, including even ‘literary’ ones, have rich and ancient vocabularies for trying to demarcate what is ‘relevant’ (in the ordinary-language sense) from what is not. One example is the ancient Greek and Roman discourse about rhetoric. Like the widespread practice of rhetoric that it fostered, this discourse permeated European high culture right up to the nineteenth century, and continues to do so to a lesser extent. The key ancient manuals of rhetoric invested great effort in explaining to orators (and by extension to writers who also followed their advice for centuries) how to narrow down their topic to the fundamental nub of their speech—the cause, issue, question, and ‘basis’ (*status*), on which it turned, to use the terminology of Quintilian.⁵ This showed the speaker what was relevant to the cause and what was not, helping him or her achieve the lucidity that Quintilian so prized (*Institutio oratoria* 4.2.36–9).

The main people whom Quintilian was originally advising were lawyers in the courts, concerned to define the topic and aim—and thus what was relevant to those two—in ways that furthered their client’s cause. But whether or not the context was as instrumental as that, defining a topic and demarcating what was relevant to it (in the ordinary-language sense) were fundamental to the long history of rhetoric. One outgrowth of that history was the early modern commonplace book, a collection of fragmented excerpts from ancient texts that were ordered under thematic headings (‘friendship’, ‘death by drowning’, and so on). Whether collected by individuals in manuscript for personal use

⁴ This emphasis will be reflected in Terence Cave and Deirdre Wilson (ed.), *The Long-Legged Fly: Relevance in Literature* (in preparation). That volume, like the present essay, has grown out of the Balzan Project ‘Literature as an Object of Knowledge’ (2010–13).

⁵ Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 3.5.4–18, 3.6, 3.10–11, 4.1.23–34.

or else printed as reference books, commonplace books exerted a huge influence on habits of thinking and writing.⁶

I explore relevance through one major early modern work that was indebted to and influenced by commonplace books, Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* (first published from 1580 to 1595, the author having died in 1592). The reason for choosing Montaigne is that, over the period of continuously revising and augmenting his *Essais*, he progressed from a discourse grounded in relevance in the ordinary-language sense to one aiming explicitly at something that we can describe as relevance in the relevance-theoretical sense. That is not to deny that the earlier versions of the *Essais* were also aiming to achieve relevance in that more technical sense. Rather, it is to argue that Montaigne became more explicit about that aim at the same time as becoming more cavalier about relevance in the ordinary-language sense. That cavalier tone is communicated by my title quotation, not published till 1588, in the chapter 'Des boiteux' [On the Lame].⁷ But I have chosen as my main example a brief, less well-known chapter from Book 1, 'Consideration sur Ciceron' (I.40). Structure is the main angle through which I examine the changes undergone by relevance in it.

Here is the whole chapter as it first appeared in 1580:

Consideration sur Ciceron.

Encor'vn traict a la comparaison de ces cou[p]les:⁸ Il se tire des escrits de Cicero & de ce Pline nullement retirant a mon aduis aux humeurs de son oncle, infinis tesmoignages de nature outre mesure ambitieuse[:] entre autres qu'ilz sollicitent au sceu de tout le monde les historiens de leur temps de ne les oblir en leurs registres: & la fortune comme par despit a faict durer iusques a nous la vanité de ces requestes, & pieça faict perdre ces histoires. Mais cecy surpasse toute bassesse de cœur en personnes de tel rang, d'auoir voulu tirer quelque principale gloire du caquet & de la parlerie, iusques a y employer les lettres priuées écriptes a leurs amis: en maniere, que aucunes ayant failly leur saison pour estre enuoyées, ils les font ce neantmoins publier avec cete digne excuse, qu'ils n'ont pas voulu perdre leur trauail & veillées. Sied il pas bien a deux consuls Romains, souuerains magistra[t]s de la chose publique emperiere du monde, d'employer leur loisir a ordonner & fagoter gentiment vne belle missiue, pour en tirer la reputation de bien entendre le langage de leur nourrisse? Que feroit pis vn simple maistre d'école qui en gagnat sa vie? Si les gestes de Xenophon & de Cæsar n'eussent de bien loing surpass[é] leur eloquence, ie ne croy pas qu'ils les eussent jamais escrits. Ils ont cherché a recommander non leur dire, mais leur faire, & si la perfection du bien parler pouuoit apporter quelque gloire sortable a vn grand personnage, certainement Scipion & Lælius n'eussent pas resigné l'honneur de leurs comedies & toutes les mignardises & delices du langage Latin a vn serf Afriquain: car que cet ouurage soit leur, sa beauté & son excellence le maintient assez, & Terence l'aduoüe luy mesme.^{B1} C'est vne espece de mocquerie & d'iniure de vouloir faire valoir vn homme par des qualitez mes-auenantes a son rang, quoy qu'elles soient autrement loüables, & par les qualitez aussi qui ne doiuent pas estre les

⁶ See Francis Goyet, *Le Sublime du 'lieu commun': l'invention rhétorique dans l'Antiquité et à la Renaissance* (Paris: Champion, 1996); Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁷ M. de Montaigne, *Essais*, 3 vols, ed. André Tournon (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1998), iii, p. 379.

⁸ The two couples are (1) Seneca and Epicurus; (2) Cicero and Pliny the Younger.

siennes principales. Comme qui loüeroit vn roi d'estre bon peintre, ou bon architecte, ou encore bon arquebousier, ou bon coureur de bague: ces louanges ne font honneur, si elles ne sont présentées en foule, & a la suite de celles qui luy sont plus propres: a sçauoir de la iustice, & de la science de conduire son peuple en paix et en guerre. De cete façon faict honneur a Cyrus l'agriculture, & a Charlemaigne l'eloquence, & connoissance des bonnes lettres.^{C1/B2} Plutarque dict d'auantaige que de paroistre si excellent en ses parties moins necessaires, c'est produire contre soy le tesmoignage d'auoir mal dispencé son loisir, & l'estude qui deuoit estre employé à choses plus necessaires & vtils. De façon que Philippus roy de Macedoine ayant ouy ce grand Alexandre son filz chanter en vn festin a l'envy des meilleurs musiciens, n'as tu pas honte, luy dict il, de chanter si bien? Et a ce mesme Philippus vn musicien avecques qui il debatoit de son art, ia Dieu ne plaise Sire, luy dit il, qu'il t'advienne iamais tant de mal que tu entende[s] ces choses la mieux que moi.^{B3} Et Antisthenes prit pour argument de peu de valeur en Ismenias dequoi on le vantoit d'estre excellent ioueur de flutes:^{C2} & disent les sages que pour le regard du sçauoir il n'est que la philosophie, & pour le regard des effets que la vertu, qui generalmente soit propre a tous degrez & a tous ordres. Il y a quelque chose de pareil en ces autres deux philosophes: car ilz promettent aussi eternité aux lettres qu'ilz escriuent a leurs amis, mais c'est d'autre façon, & s'accommodant pour vne bonne fin a la vanité d'autrui. Car ilz leur mandent que si le soing de se faire connoistre aux siecles aduenir & de la renommée les arreste encore au maniemment des affaires, et leur fait craindre la solitude & la retraicte, ou ilz les veulent appeller, qu'ilz ne s'en donnent plus de peine. Car ilz ont assez de credit avec la posterité pour leur respondre, que ne fut que par les lettres qu'ilz leur escriuent ils rendront leur nom aussi connu & fameux que pourroient faire leurs actions publiques. Et outre cete difference encore ne sont ce pas lettres vuides & descharnées, qui ne se soutiennent que par vn delicat chois de motz entassez & rangez a vne juste cadence, ains farcies & pleines de beaux discours de sapience, par lesquelles on se rend non plus eloquent, mais plus sage, & qui nous aprenent non a bien dire mais a bien faire. Fy de l'eloquence qui nous laisse enuie de soy, non des choses. Si ce n'est qu'on die que celle de Cicero estant en si extreme perfection se donne corps elle mesme. I'adiouteray encore vn conte que nous lisons de luy a ce propos, pour nous faire toucher au doigt son naturel. Il auoit a orer en public, & estoit vn peu pressé du temps pour se preparer a son ayse. Eros l'un de ses serfs le vint aduertir que l'audience estoit remise au l'endemain: il en fut si ayse qu'il luy donna liberté pour cete bonne nouuelle.^{9 B4/C3/B5/C4/B6/C5/B7/C6/B8}

[*A Reflection on Cicero.*]

Here is another feature to add to the comparison between these couples. A huge number of indications of the authors' over-ambitious characters can be deduced from the writings of Cicero and of Pliny the Younger (who in my view did not take after his uncle's temperament in the least). One of these indications is that these two openly urge their historian contemporaries not to forget them in their chronicles. As if out of spite, Fortune has moreover made the vanity of these requests survive down to our day while making the histories themselves go

⁹ M. de Montaigne, *Essais* (Bordeaux: Simon Millanges, 1580), pp. 382–8. The symbols (B1 etc.) are explained below.

missing. But it quite exceeds any baseness of heart usually found in people of such rank to wish to derive some substantial glory from chat and chinwag, and to use for that purpose even private letters written to friends. So, when some of these letters have passed their send-by date, they still get them published, with the worthy excuse that they have not wanted their late-night labours to go to waste. How becoming for two Roman consuls, sovereign magistrates of the commonwealth that had empire over the world, to use their leisure to arrange and throw together a fine missive, so charmingly, so as to win the reputation of mastering the language of their nanny? Would a simple schoolteacher earning his living do any worse? If the deeds of Xenophon and Caesar had not far surpassed their eloquence, they would never have written them down, I believe. They sought to commend not their speaking but their doing, and if the perfection of eloquence could earn some glory appropriate to a great public figure, then Scipio and Laelius would certainly not have handed over to an African slave the honour that stemmed from their comedies and from all the charming delights of their Latinity—for the beauty and excellence of this corpus is sufficient evidence that it is their own work, as even Terence acknowledges.^{B1} It is a kind of sneer and insult to want to praise a man for qualities that, even if otherwise praiseworthy, are inappropriate to his rank, and that should not be his main ones. An example would be someone praising a king for being a good painter, architect, arquebuser, or jouster. This praise only confers honour if it is presented *en masse* and follows on from praise more fitting for a king—for being just and for knowing how to lead a people in peace and war. Thus, agriculture honours Cyrus, while eloquence and learning honour Charlemagne.^{C1/B2} Plutarch says moreover that having an appearance of excellence in less necessary respects does not do a person favours, since it suggests that the person has made bad use of leisure and study time that should be devoted to more necessary and useful pursuits. So Philip, King of Macedonia, having heard his son, the great Alexander, rival the best musicians when singing at a feast, said to him ‘Aren’t you ashamed to sing so well?’ And a musician who was debating his art with the same Philip said to him: ‘God forbid, my lord, that you ever have the misfortune of understanding these matters more than me’.^{B3} Besides, Antisthenes took as evidence of lack of valour in Ismenias the fact that he was celebrated as an excellent flautist.^{C2} The wise say indeed that the only qualities generally befitting all social ranks and groups are philosophy (as regards knowledge) and virtue (as regards action). There is something similar going on with those two other philosophers [Seneca and Epicurus], for they too promise eternal life to the letters that they write to their friends; but they do so rather differently, since they humour people’s vanity for the sake of a good ulterior goal. They do this by letting their correspondents know that if the concern to be famous and renowned in future centuries is making them remain in public life and fear the solitude and retirement to which the two philosophers wish to call them, then they should no longer bother. The two philosophers have sufficient credit with posterity to guarantee that, simply through the letters they are writing, they will make their correspondents’ names as well-known and famous as the correspondents’ public actions ever could. In addition to that difference between the two pairs of philosophers, the letters of Seneca and Epicurus are not empty and fleshless; they are not merely sustained by a delicate choice of words collected together and harmoniously arranged; rather, they are crammed full of fine reasoning

about wisdom; they make us not more eloquent, but wiser, and they teach us not to speak well but to do well. I do not care a jot for eloquence that makes us desire *it* rather than things—though Cicero’s eloquence is said to be so absolutely perfect that it turns itself *into* a substantial entity. Let me add an anecdote that we can read about him on this point and that helps us put our finger on his character. He was supposed to give a public speech and was rather pressed for preparation time. Eros, one of his slaves, came to inform him that the engagement had been postponed till the next day. Cicero was so delighted that he gave Eros his freedom for bringing this good news.^{B4/C3/B5/C4/B6/C5/B7/C6/B8]}

Without undermining relevance (in the ordinary-language sense), the chapter plays with it in characteristically Montaignian fashion. The play is around the question: what is this chapter about?

The *prima facie* answer is: it is about the vanity of Cicero and Pliny the Younger, which consisted in believing that the letters they wrote to friends would grant their authors immortal renown, in contrast with Seneca and Epicurus, who also claimed their letters would be immortal, not however out of vanity, but in order to get their addressees to detach themselves from public life, persuading them that even being the addressees of these letters would provide a surer path to immortality. Everything in the chapter—with the exception of the title and the last three sentences—is relevant to the vanity of one pair of philosophers (in relation to letter-writing) in contrast with the attitude of the other pair.

But another, more surprising answer to the question of what the chapter is about is provided by the last three sentences: they recount how Cicero freed a slave purely because of a modest piece of welcome news (that Cicero’s imminent speaking engagement had been postponed) which the slave happened to convey. This anecdote would have appeared straightforwardly as an irrelevant closing supplement to the chapter’s proper theme had it not also been presented as relevant (*‘a ce propos’*) and had it not been what the chapter’s title apparently refers to. Like many chapter-titles in the *Essais*, this one actually seems largely irrelevant to most of the chapter.

Can this uncertainty as to what the chapter is about be resolved by integrating these two topics? Does the closing anecdote illustrate the preceding argument about Cicero’s vanity? Or does it go against it, nuancing it? Confusingly, either could be argued. The anecdote could be read as an indication either of Cicero’s flightiness (consonant with his vanity) or of his generosity (nuancing his vanity). Montaigne states that the anecdote reveals Cicero’s character, but refrains from saying how. So there is less an open-ended indeterminacy than an ambiguity at the heart of the anecdote’s implied relevance to the rest of the chapter. Readers are left to decide between the two rough ways in which it might be relevant (as either confirming or nuancing the charge of vanity).

So Montaigne plays with relevance (in the ordinary-language sense) by making it unclear which of the chapter’s two topics is the main one, by devoting only three sentences to the ‘official’ one, and by making the nature of the relevance of one to the other ambiguous. But none of that play undermines relevance (in the ordinary-language sense) *per se*, so the chapter remains lucid in the sense that it is easy to follow the argument, even where it generates ambiguity.

However, relevance of that kind *was* increasingly threatened by the major additions and minor modifications that Montaigne made to the *Essais* over the twelve years between the first edition and his death. ‘Consideration sur Ciceron’ more than

doubled in length from the original version. The position of the additions is indicated in the quotation above. ‘B1’, ‘B2’ and so on are those that appeared in the 1588 addition. ‘C1’ and so on are those that appeared in manuscript in the working copy (the Exemplaire de Bordeaux) that Montaigne left at his death.¹⁰ Some of these additions fitted into the discursive structure of the original, amplifying the topic of the vanity of the pair of philosophers. But many of the additions altered that discursive structure. They did so in ways that undermined relevance (in the ordinary-language sense) as a structuring device, while at the same time drawing increasingly explicit attention to the text’s attempts to achieve relevance in the sense described by relevance theory.

Let me consider first the 1588 additions (‘B’), and in particular the one that starts where the 1580 chapter stopped. It is a single, lengthy addition (although designated above as B4–8 because subsequently broken up by ‘C’ additions). It is presented as continuing a topic that has already been discussed: ‘Sur ce sujet de lettres, je veux dire ce mot, que c’est un ouvrage auquel mes amis tiennent que je puis quelque chose.’ [While on the topic of letter-writing, I would like to add this, that it is an activity my friends say I’m good at.]¹¹ But in fact the addition is far from a straightforward prolongation of an existing topic. Rather, it derives a semi-new topic (‘anything to do with letters and me’) from an existing one (‘philosophers’ letters as vain tokens of immortality’). This kind of transition—more associative and incidental than logical—is typical of Montaigne, as it is of everyday conversation. Certainly, there is a shadow of a logical link, since some of the ensuing reflections do evoke vanity (for example that of Montaigne himself in the sentence just quoted, or that of epistolary prettification and rank-pulling), but not in a way that relates them logically to what had been in 1580 a coherent argument about vanity and letters. In other words, Montaigne is here straining relevance in the ordinary-language sense. The strain is all the more acute because of the mismatch between the kinds of relevance (in the relevance-theoretical sense) that the 1580 version and this 1588 addition seem to be aiming for. The cognitive effect sought by the original version seemed to be largely of a kind familiar in the period: communication of moral truths about famous third parties, under the aegis of abstract categories, especially ‘vanité’. By contrast, the cognitive effect sought by additions such as B4–8 is one familiar to Montaigne readers: learning about Montaigne’s habits, likes, and dislikes (here in relation to the reading, writing, formatting, carrying, and sending of letters). The mismatch arises because the latter can no longer fit neatly into those abstract categories such as ‘vanité’, even if they do have an oblique and intermittent relation to them.

This mismatch challenges relevance not only in the sense of coherence but also in the relevance-theoretical sense. What positive cognitive effect could readers derive from learning about Montaigne’s habits, likes, and dislikes? How was all of that relevant to them? My aim is less to answer that question, which has long concerned Montaigne scholarship, than to reformulate it in terms of relevance theory. The author makes the reader experience the question *as* a question because, on the one hand, the autobiographical information seems trivial in comparison with general moral truths and yet, on the other, the *Essais* communicate what relevance theory

¹⁰ Slightly different versions of those additions appeared in the first printed edition to incorporate them, the posthumous one of 1595. I quote them from a critical edition (by A. Tournon) that uses the Exemplaire de Bordeaux, though my analysis would have been basically the same had I used one of the critical editions based on the 1595 edition. By labelling the additions ‘B’ and ‘C’, I follow a longstanding critical tradition.

¹¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Tournon, i, p. 407–8.

would call a presumption of their own optimal relevance. If the reader accepts this presumption and so thinks the effort might be worth it, s/he tries to infer an intentionality: *why* is Montaigne telling me all this? S/he might do this by drawing on other contextual assumptions that s/he has already derived from the *Essais*—that ‘je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre’ [I myself am the matter of my book],¹² that this work is attempting something virtually unprecedented,¹³ that Montaigne’s self-scrutiny might provoke the equivalent in readers,¹⁴ and that the point of reading is to develop the faculty of judgement. Such general statements do not provide specific answers for each sentence to the question ‘Why is he telling me this?’, but do provide, as Terence Cave noted long ago, instructions for how to read.¹⁵ They indicate what to read *for*, not a key to crack a code (as in the semiotic model rejected by relevance theory) but rather a direction in which to make inferences. Indeed, the intentions that relevance theory posits as being fundamental to communication are often of this kind: pointers in a certain direction, with much of the itinerary left unspecified and perhaps to be partly specified by listener or reader. Relevance theory puts in systematic terms what literary critics such as Peter Brooks have long intuited when arguing that writers use certain literary forms to incite readers to read *for* something, such as the plot.¹⁶ In Montaigne’s case the reading is to a great extent for *him*, a kind of ‘topic’ that engulfs all others—because anything he writes about anything is relevant to it—and so ultimately explodes ‘relevance’ in its ordinary-language sense. But the reading is also—far more explicitly than for Montaigne’s contemporaries—*by* a person, that is, by whichever singular person is reading the *Essais*, and so is relevant to them in the broad ways mentioned above and in countless more specific ones that cannot all be predicted.

It is in the final, 1588–92 ‘C’ additions that Montaigne becomes even more explicit—more meta-cognitive—about this reader-oriented relevance. Here is C2. Montaigne adds it in order to continue the theme of the undesirability of being praised for something that does not belong to one’s main role in life. As such, it apparently respects the relevance (in the ordinary-language sense) that had underpinned the original structure of I.40. But it also moves beyond it by explicitly highlighting the work’s ultimate relevance, which is to writer and reader:

Je sais bien, quand j’ois quelqu’un qui s’arrête au langage des Essais, que j’aimerais mieux qu’il s’en tût. Ce n’est pas tant élever les mots comme c’est déprimer le sens—d’autant plus piquamment que plus obliquement. Si suis-je trompé [si] guère d’autres donnent plus à prendre en la matière. Et comment que ce soit, mal ou bien, si nul écrivain [l’a] semée ni guère plus matérielle, ni au moins plus drue en son papier. Pour en ranger davantage je n’en entasse que les têtes. Que j’y attache leur suite, je multiplierai plusieurs fois ce volume. Et combien y ai-je épandu d’histoires qui ne disent mot, lesquelles qui voudra éplucher un peu ingénieusement en produira infinis essais. Ni elles, ni mes

¹² *Essais*, ed. Tournon, i, p. 45.

¹³ ‘Nous n’avons nouvelles que de deux ou trois anciens qui aient battu ce chemin’ [We have news only of two or three ancients who have beaten that track], *Essais*, ed. Tournon, ii, p. 78.

¹⁴ ‘Si le monde se plaint de quoi je parle trop de moi[,] je me plains de quoi il ne pense seulement pas à soi’ [If the world complains that I speak too much about myself, I complain that it does not even think about itself], *Essais*, ed. Tournon, ii, p. 44.

¹⁵ T. Cave, ‘Problems of Reading in the *Essais*’, in *Montaigne: Essays in Memory of Richard Sayce*, ed. I. D. McFarlane and Ian Maclean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 133–66 at 153–62.

¹⁶ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

allégations ne servent pas toujours simplement d'exemple, d'autorité ou d'ornement. Je ne les regarde pas seulement par l'usage que j'en tire. Elles portent souvent hors de mon propos la semence d'une matière plus riche et plus hardie[,] et sonnent à gauche un ton plus délicat, et pour moi qui n'en veux exprimer d'avantage, et pour ceux qui rencontreront mon air.¹⁷

[I know very well that, when I hear someone dwell on the language of the *Essais*, I wish he would be quiet about it. He does not so much extol the words as depreciate the meaning, all the more sharply because obliquely. And yet, unless I am mistaken, compared with me barely anyone else provides more for people to take away in terms of matter, and no other writer has scattered that seed-like matter more materially and thickly over his paper. To maximize how much of it I can lay out, I compile only its headings. If I attached what flows from those them, then this volume would be several times longer. And how many stories and histories have I scattered here with no comment, whereas anyone who wishes to investigate them with a modicum of intelligence will produce innumerable *essais* from them. Neither they nor my quotations always serve just as examples, authorities, or ornaments. I do not view them only through the perspective of the particular use that I make of them. They often carry, above and beyond my present argument, the seeds of richer and bolder matter, sounding a subtler note, from left field, both for me—who does not wish to press more out of them—and for those who will sing from my sheet.]

The passage provides more examples of the kind of inference-directing general statement I mentioned earlier. Montaigne claims that his comments in the *Essais* on the 'matter' or 'material' that he proffers—anecdote, example, and citation of ancient and other opinion—sometimes exploit that 'matter' in a way that is predictably relevant to his current argument, exemplifying, authorizing, or adorning it. But he also claims that he has many other uncommunicated thoughts about that matter, which exceed such relevance to the topic at hand ('hors de mon propos'). And sometimes, he adds, I simply present the 'matter' with no comment at all. It is probably no coincidence that he mentions this last practice in the margin of the Exempleire de Bordeaux, having presumably just re-read 'Consideration sur Cicéron', which does indeed include a prominent anecdote for which a gloss is withheld, having been tantalisingly promised (the anecdote about Cicero freeing a slave). This passage makes explicit that such underspecification—'weak' communication in the terminology of relevance theory¹⁸—is an invitation to readers to 'take from' this matter or material ('à prendre'), to make their own inferences or 'Essais' from it that diverge from Montaigne's written ones, and that thereby develop readers' own judgement. While some of those inferences might coincide with ones that Montaigne himself makes in his mind without writing them down, others might not: 'rencontreront mon air' implies less 'will draw the same inferences as me' as 'will understand that I'm encouraging them to draw further inferences of their own'. At moments like this, Montaigne is describing 'weak' communication in terms roughly equivalent to those of relevance theory: 'there may be no cut-off point between assumptions strongly backed by the speaker, and assumptions derived from the

¹⁷ *Essais*, ed. Tournon, i, p. 406.

¹⁸ I generally avoid the 'weak/strong' terminology of relevance theory since, although certainly not evaluative, it perhaps risks being misunderstood as implying that 'weak' communication is not powerful.

utterance but on the hearer's sole responsibility. The fiction that there is a clear-cut distinction between wholly determinate, specifically intended inferences and indeterminate, wholly unintended inferences cannot be maintained.' Whereas 'Strong implicatures are those premises and conclusions [. . .] which the hearer is strongly encouraged but not actually forced to supply', on the other hand 'The weaker the encouragement, and the wider the range of possibilities among which the hearer can choose, the weaker the implicatures. Eventually [. . .] a point is reached at which the hearer receives no encouragement at all to supply any particular premise or conclusion, and he takes the entire responsibility for supplying them himself.'¹⁹

The language through which this 'C' addition outlines a model of communication broadly equivalent to relevance theory is, on one level, that of commonplaces. Montaigne is developing in an unusually explicit way the dynamism that commonplaces had in the rhetorical tradition, where they were counters stocked provisionally under thematic headings in commonplace books but then outgrowing such headings when deployed flexibly in thinking, speaking, and writing.²⁰ Montaigne here rewrites that contemporary model, describing the fragments of 'matter'—the examples, anecdotes, and allusions—as the headings themselves rather than as what comes under them ('je n'en entasse que les têtes'). Any such fragment may, through inferences produced by Montaigne and his readers, generate meaning that is far in excess of the fragment's initial, headline relevance. On another level, that 'irrelevant' excess is therefore shown to be relevant to Montaigne and his readers in the more fundamental sense outlined by relevance theory. *Everything* in the *Essais*, not just the 'matter' derived from ancient and other books, is presented as 'matter' from which inferences can be derived in ways that make it relevant to Montaigne and his readers. The opposition between matter and interpretation of matter breaks down, since the whole of the *Essais* is comprised of 'matter', not just those parts that draw overtly on other people's books: 'je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre'.

If relevance theory helps describe Montaigne, on the other hand he is a challenge for relevance theory, because he puts his finger in unusually explicit terms on the situation of the public writer, so different from that of everyday speakers that relevance theory has mainly analysed. Here is the famous start of another late addition to L40 (C3). Montaigne claims he wishes he had been able to write letters instead of *essais*:

Et eusse pris plus volontiers cette forme à publier mes verbes si j'eusse eu à qui parler. Il me fallait, comme je l'ai eu autrefois, un certain commerce qui m'attirât, qui me soutînt et soulevât. Car de négociier au vent comme d'autres, je ne saurais que de songes, ni forger des vains noms à entretenir en chose sérieuse: ennemi juré de toute falsification. J'eusse été plus attentif et plus sûr ayant une adresse forte et amie, que je ne suis, regardant les divers visages d'un peuple.²¹

And I would have preferred to adopt that genre for publishing my giddy thoughts if I had had someone to address. I would have needed what I did in

¹⁹ Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, p. 199.

²⁰ See Terence Cave, 'Thinking with Commonplaces: The Example of Rabelais', in *(Re)inventing the Past: Essays on French Early Modern Culture, Literature and Thought in Honour of Ann Moss*, ed. Gary Ferguson and Catherine Hampton (Durham: Durham Modern Languages Series, 2003), pp. 34–50.

²¹ *Essais*, ed. Tournon, i, p. 408.

fact have once: a particular relationship that attracted and sustained me, that swept me up. For I could only debate in a void (as do so many others) about illusory matters; nor, as a sworn enemy of all pretence, could I name fabricated figures in order to discuss serious matters with them. With a strong and friendly addressee I would have been more attentive and more sure of myself than I am now as I contemplate the different faces of a people.

The passage is famous for its mournful allusion to Montaigne's dead friend Étienne de La Boétie. Exchanging letters with La Boétie is here presented as essentially the same as one-to-one conversation. The last sentence here suggests that such letter-writing is quasi-oral because one imagines the addressee's face as one writes,²² in contrast to the crowd of blank or indeterminate faces for which Montaigne writes. Being a public writer means being tentative because one does not know how the work will go down ('plus sûr') and being unsure whether one has attended to the needs of individual readers ('plus attentif'). It is worth noting that uncertainty and tentativeness are two of the qualities of the *Essais* that have drawn readers to them over the centuries, exploiting the unusually capacious space left for their own active reading. But Montaigne did not know that would happen. This passage communicates rather the anxiety of not knowing who will read the complex message in the bottle that is a literary work, and it claims that that the public writer's peculiar situation of addressing a heterogeneous, large, yet largely unknown crowd profoundly shapes the work. Unlike genetic criticism or reception history, which focus on what from a holistic point of view are just the first and last stages of the literary communication circuit, relevance theory can embrace all stages. It asserts the principle that communicative relevance is highly differentiated and audience-dependent. But the task of exploring in detail how that principle works in the sphere of literature still lies ahead.

²² On the centrality of the face (in various senses) to communication, see Kathy Eden, 'Facebook *avant la lettre*: Communicating Renaissance-Style in Montaigne's *Essais*', in *Montaigne in Transit: Essays in Honour of Ian Maclean*, ed. Neil Kenny, Richard Scholar, and Wes Williams (London: Legenda, forthcoming).