

## Relevance Theory for Fiction

**Abstract:** Relevance Theory has been dismissed as inapplicable to literary genres first for its failure to come up with interesting and plausible new interpretations and second for its demonstrations' depending on contexts that are personal and immediate compared to the timeless public stages of the literary utterance. The first complaint is easily addressed: RT is not a hermeneutic tool; the laboriousness and banality of putative interpretations are not evidence in themselves of RT's incapacity to explain the inferential conditions of literary genres. The second complaint is addressed first by revisiting the typical demonstration of Relevance principles and finding that interlocutors' implicature-generating indirectness is a communicative efficiency insofar as it enriches shared consciousness. The ostensive-inferential model is then taken towards the literary field by first demonstrating its working in a (simple) expression in visual art.

Beyond these ground-level demonstrations, the chapter recognises problems with RT's relying on Grice's 'intended meaning' – for intention comes up against the 'intentional fallacy' in literary appreciation. Suggesting that a more pragmatic sense of intention could ease some fallacy fears, the chapter brings to the table Taylor's<sup>1</sup> reminder of Grice's distinction between natural and non-natural meaning, and, further, proposes that the inferential structure of literary genres produces a depth of field so fertile that it may be a clue to if not strict evidence of Sperber and Wilson's<sup>2</sup> 'dedicated module'. The chapter concludes by proposing intertextuality and, in addition, indirectness itself as projects for exploratory applications of RT to literary utterance, and then offers three very brief case studies, from Austen,<sup>3</sup> Zola,<sup>4</sup> and Dreiser.<sup>5</sup>

Keywords: *relevance; intention; intentional fallacy; dedicated module; ostensive-inferential*

## 1. Introduction

As the editors of this volume note, it is not clear that all pragmatic theories are equally appropriate to all inquiries into language and communication. One pragmatic model, Relevance Theory (RT), has recently been dismissed as inapplicable to legal language<sup>6</sup> on the very grounds for this volume on aesthetic genres: that is, context. Relevance Theory, it is contended, cannot account for language use in what is said to be the relatively impoverished context of legal genres. Often focussing on conversations between well-acquainted speakers, Relevance Theory can seem customised for situations where there is a lot of overlapping consciousness amongst participants – a 'rich' context to draw on in making inferences. Enduring through time and across many readings, the legal text is said to be 'autonomous', or context-independent, and the same could be said for literary genres: enduring through time and across readings by unforeseeable readers and readings; unfettered but also unsupported by context.

<sup>1</sup> Paul A. Taylor, "Meaning, Expression, and the Interpretation of Literature", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72.4 (2014), 379-391.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson, "Pragmatics, Modularity and Mind-Reading", *Mind & Language*, 17.1-2 (February-April 2002), 3-23.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Émile Zola, *Germinal*, trans. by Peter Collier (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1900).

<sup>6</sup> Brian Slocum, "Pragmatics and Legal Texts: How Best to Account for Gaps Between Literal Meaning and Communicative Meaning", in Janet Giltrow and Dieter Stein, eds., *The Pragmatic Turn in Law* (Boston and Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2017), 137-140.

This chapter begins (§1) by reporting some objections to Relevance Theory's being applied to literature and then, in reply, (§2) scripts a version of Relevance Theory for approach to aesthetic genres through (§3) the ostensive-inferential model. I suggest the fitness of the model for an exemplary literary genre like haiku (§4), and the use of RT, including the 'dedicated module' (§5), in some standing problems in literary interpretation (§6). Throughout, however, we are aware of the hostility of traditional literary values to Relevance Theory's application to literature: we confront the 'intentional fallacy' (§7) for its expression of those values. Throughout, we are also aware that RT is, for literary study, a methodological misfit. The final section (§8) suggests some early, tentative steps towards methodological fitness, and offers – in a most humbly speculative, tentative spirit – a few examples of Relevance analysis of literary fiction.

## 2. Objections to Relevance Theory's Application to Literary Fields

In her pragmatic stylistics of literary fiction, Black<sup>7</sup> dismisses Relevance Theory, rejecting in particular Pilkington's<sup>8</sup> claims for RT's applicability to literature. At best RT in literary study only mimics what 'any successful reader' does anyway,<sup>9</sup> and at worst follows the 'institutionalised' trend towards "major searches for weak effects".<sup>10</sup> It is true that Pilkington<sup>11</sup> at that time supported RT's role in literary studies in terms like these, familiar from Sperber and Wilson's inaugural proposals,<sup>12</sup> but not limited to these) for Relevance Theory. Pilkington, for example, describes "the richest poetic thoughts" arising from the activating of a "wide network of contextual assumptions".<sup>13</sup>

While Black provides a good example of literary studies' resistance to Relevance Theory, her rejection does not decide the case. For one thing, Black seems to take 'weak' in 'weak effects' in the folk sense of negligible or ineffective rather than in its technical sense as a measure of grounds for inference. In Black's folk sense of 'weak', RT leads literary study to ludicrous lengths for results so frail they may not even survive the return trip. Moreover, like other Relevance-Theory sceptics, Black mistakes the literary job of RT to be to produce interpretations, as if RT had been introduced as a way of finding meanings that would otherwise be out of reach. The actual role of Relevance Theory is as a potential method of inquiry into the production and reception of literary genres, and into the range of language behaviours or customs which count as 'interpretation'.

Black is not alone in mistaking RT for a hermeneutical tool. Soon after the second edition of *Relevance Theory* was published, Green<sup>14</sup> acknowledged RT's application to fields outside literature – "linguistics, literary studies, psychology and philosophy"<sup>15</sup> – but also saw comparatively 'minute' effect in literary studies. The effects are only small because "Relevance Theory cannot tell us what a text means".<sup>16</sup> It is of no help in text analysis and "cannot lead to stimulating readings of literary texts",<sup>17</sup> and when it is used for interpretation it can be an especially poor tool, inducing readings of "the most naive and intentionalist kind".<sup>18</sup> Like other linguistic theories which Green reviews, Relevance Theory

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Black, *Pragmatic Stylistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Pilkington, *Poetic Effects: A Relevance Theory Perspective* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Black, *Pragmatic Stylistics*, 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Pilkington, *Poetic Effects*.

<sup>12</sup> Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Second Edition (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, [1986] 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Pilkington, *Poetic Effects*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Green, "Butterflies, Wheels, and the Search for Literary Relevance", *Language and Literature* 6.2 (1997), 133-138.

<sup>15</sup> *Cit. in* Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 225.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

is not up to the job of literary interpretation, and is especially tainted by the Intended Meaning of Grice's Speaker. (We return to *intention* below, in its being driven out by the New Criticism in particular, and by 'close reading' generally.) Green is not unconvincing in disparaging statements of literary meaning produced by RT in its first long decade. But the main point here is not that the statements are amateurish and unsophisticated in comparison with literary-critical reasoning but that these RT critics are mistaken in taking Relevance Theory as an engine of interpretation, or in evaluating it as such.

Both of these problems with the application of Relevance Theory to literary genres can be addressed. Folk senses of 'weak' could be replaced by more technical ones, and Relevance Theorists could refrain from making statements of literary meaning as finales to their analyses. Not only are statements of literary meaning – 'readings' – expressions of a highly cultivated professional domain and rarely produced successfully by outsiders, but RT itself suggests that it is time to rethink interpretation, paraphrase, and other vehicles for re-routing indirect meaning. We come back to the problems of 'readings' below.

### 3. Relevance Theory – A Script

A third problem is Relevance Theory's depending on invented examples. Green's<sup>19</sup> dismissing of Relevance Theory and its literary applications, following the second edition of *Relevance*,<sup>20</sup> begins with a Peter-and-Mary joke<sup>21</sup> caricaturing Sperber and Wilson's means of demonstrating Relevance as a core principle of communication. Typically, Peter and Mary – or, let's say, Ann and Bob, for our purposes – are talking together. Ann and Bob, like Peter and Mary, share a home, a circle of friends, an engagement calendar, and to a certain degree a frame of mind. Their exchanges are not exactly small talk, which orients strangers to one another, but still in what Bakhtin in 'Speech Genres'<sup>22</sup> called 'primary' genres: they are informal in the sense of being structured below the level of 'secondary' speech genres, which gear speech to a regularised situation, such as an interview or a sermon or a marketplace transaction. Tethered to an informal or casual, continuing, familiar but not rote context, Ann and Bob's interaction is often exemplified by either Ann or Bob responding to the other indirectly – as in Mary answering Peter about her changing a lightbulb by reporting a headache – and leaving the Hearer to infer the Speaker's intention: that is, the Relevance of the headache in the lightbulb context.

Like Mary, our Bob also answers questions indirectly. By following the indirection, we can lay out Relevance Theory towards its possible use in study of aesthetic genres.

Ann: Where's Carl?

Bob: Wednesday is two-for-one.

What does Bob's answer have to do with Carl's whereabouts? Bob and Ann do both know the day is Wednesday, so at least Ann can infer Bob's intending to mean that it is today that is 'two-for-one'. But this is not what Ann asked.

Bob's reply could be deemed perverse. It does not even seem to be about Carl. In Grice's original terms, it could be deemed uncooperative, and flouting of conversational maxims. Yet Bob offers it in good faith, as an answer, and Ann accepts it as such. The good faith is a Presumption of Relevance: the

<sup>19</sup> Green, "Butterflies".

<sup>20</sup> Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*.

<sup>21</sup> Q. How many relevance theorists does it take to change a lightbulb?

A. Three including Peter and Mary, who at some unspecified point says: Peter: Are you going to change that lightbulb?

Mary: I have a headache (Green, "Butterflies", 133).

<sup>22</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee, Slavic Series no. 8 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

act of Bob's utterance presumes that what is said will matter to Ann – will, that is, more or less readily improve her knowledge of the world as framed by the question.

RT sceptics may see in this exchange simply Ann's having to figure out Bob's intention – seemingly encrypted, made teasingly obscure, like the poem in English class. Carried over to poems and novels, the inferential structure of the Ann-and-Bob scene could then make literature look like a one-way, unitary experience: figuring out what the writer secretly means, according to, as Green says, a 'naive intentionalism'.

Acting for Relevance Theory, Ann and Bob actually tell a different story. Their exchange is neither uni-directional nor unitary. First, the meaning intended by Bob *depends on*, is involved with, *what Ann knows*, and what Ann knows Bob knows. If only Bob knew that 'two-for-one' is a special offer at The Yellow Dog neighbourhood craft-beer pub – the answer would be perverse to the point of nonsensical. Even with Bob knowing that Ann knows about The Yellow Dog's marketing, he must also know that Ann knows of his brother Carl's taste for beer, or, at least, that she knows of his, Bob's, estimate of this taste.<sup>23</sup>

Second, while the inference to be drawn – the 'strong implicature' – is that <Carl is at The Yellow Dog> – *that is not what Bob said*. His intended meaning depends on Ann's activated knowledge of the world: his reply has 'switched on' Ann's assumptions about Carl, about The Yellow Dog, about beer: in other words, the indirect response has brought much more to the table than the direct response would have done. In some ways, the indirect response could be more efficient than 'he's at The Yellow Dog'. It says more.

And, third, the 'more' is indeterminate: it cannot be paraphrased; it is not unitary. Stretched or shared unevenly across two mentalities, the assumptions switched on by Bob's reply could support a range of inferences, some of which may cantilever beyond the Speaker's Intention, or the Hearer's grasping of that Intention.

Further, some objections to RT's application to literature – Black, above, could be an example – find implausibly laborious and cognitively costly the long 'searches' said to go on while contextual assumptions are sought and tested for their readiness to work with what has been said, for some Relevance, some cognitive benefit worth the trouble. I have taken out of this account <search> and introduced <switch on> to be better able to characterise the rapid-fire responses to the presumption of relevance in utterance itself – and to be ready for the 'dedicated module' at which Sperber and Wilson arrive in 2002 (see below).<sup>24</sup> Bob's answer 'switches on' certain assumptions for Ann, brings attention to them, makes them 'manifest', to use the term from RT.

Ann and Bob's exchange illustrates the inferential nature of communication.<sup>25</sup> From Bob's stating that Wednesday is two-for-one, Ann infers that Carl is at The Yellow Dog, the inference deriving from assumptions shared across two consciousnesses – assumptions about Carl, about beer sales, even about the time of day. The exchange plays out in what people call a 'rich context', one stored with knowledge shared in proximity and in its mutual reach (what Ann knows Bob knows that she knows). That kind of context is not presumed by the public genres – legal, literary, journalistic, for example. And unlike Bob,

<sup>23</sup> As anyone who is troubling to follow this will already be saying to themselves, there are many other steps which could be inserted – assumptions about marketing alcohol, about alcohol, etc., as well as the mutuality which should be inserted at each step – Bob knows Ann knows Bob knows.... I recognise them, but leave them out for conceptual as well as practical reasons.

<sup>24</sup> Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson, "Pragmatics, Modularity and Mind-Reading".

<sup>25</sup> In its indirectness – veering sharply away from the surface topic <Carl's whereabouts> – Bob's reply is a pronounced case of inference. But RT, e.g., Robyn Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) and related pragmatics, e.g., François Récanati, *Literal Meaning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2004) establish that all communication is inferential, not only cases with a glaring gap between utterances or between context and utterance. For example, had Bob answered Ann with 'He's at the Yellow Dog', Ann would still have to infer Bob's intention to mean <buying and drinking beer inside The Yellow Dog> – not standing outside or working behind the bar or living in the upstairs flat, and so on.

Speakers in these genres will not have a Hearer's question to prompt them, as Bob has Ann's, and unlike Ann, Hearers will not have framed the scope of attention with their own turn as Speaker. But even in obviously interactive genres – job interviews, medical examination by a specialist, classroom or courtroom questioning – the 'rich' proximity of Ann's and Bob's frames of mind will be missing. There will not be the same kind of warrant for indirect answers – "I have a headache"; "Wednesday is two-for-one" – the same kind of resource for implicature.

Building on the common ground of Peter and Mary, or Ann and Bob, Relevance Theory can seem to be an explanation suited for households, workplaces or playing fields, and particularly ill-suited to the literary field.<sup>26</sup> Relevance Theory has seemed to be too coarsely familiar to suit literary situations. Literary readers do not have questions like Peter's or Ann's for Mary and Bob, and are unknown to writers in literary genres, just as literary authors are strangers to their readers. But what if the literary writer enjoys renown – contemporary celebrity or historical reputation? Why can't readers infer the Speaker's Intended Meaning, as Ann infers Bob's?

*Intention* is a hazardous material in the literary field, regarded as toxic to reasoning about the aesthetic. Green is not alone in disdaining 'naïve intentionalism' but, rather, joins a long tradition of contempt for finding 'the meaning' of a poem – 'what the poet is saying' – or the moral of the story. But does RT's *intended meaning* really rank beside the stating of the moral of the story? Let's check the measure of Speaker intention.

With his indirect response, Bob mobilises assumptions in Ann's consciousness and in the mental space between himself and Ann. Carl's thirst for beer, or for company; Carl's improvidence, or stinginess, for example. As these materials switch on, so may some understandings about what is usually said about Carl, or left unsaid. Since *Bob said* "Wednesday is two-for-one", he must in some way *intend* to activate these assumptions: this is his intention. Meanwhile, Relevance Theory distinguishes between the implicature <Carl is at the Yellow Dog>, said to be a 'strong implicature', and other implicatures which might be derived from materials drawn on to connect Carl's whereabouts with 'Wednesday is two-for-one'. These are said to be 'weak', and have been, from the earliest presentations of RT, called 'poetic effects'. Although the distinctions between strong and weak depend a lot on degrees of 'responsibility' – the Speaker is more responsible for 'strong', the Hearer has to take some responsibility for 'weak' – these materials have been *selected by Bob*: they are *intended*. Inferring Bob's 'intention' is, in the RT version, a speculative venture, an "experiment in estimating the consciousness of another",<sup>27</sup> as is Bob's intending itself.

There must be an efficiency to the otherwise costly indirectness. Bob's roundabout efforts in arranging for the strong implicature and Ann's in inferring his intention – tracking his indirection – are repaid when the context for thinking (together) about Carl's whereabouts is enriched by the assumptions switched on by the indirect reply. It is not only that (weak) inferences array themselves across a range in their uncertainty. It's that what Bob intends Ann to infer *could not be said any other way*.<sup>28</sup> There is no paraphrase for Bob's intention, no proposition to translate his meaning, even though his utterance may make Ann ponder, and respond like-minded in turn – "Carl can't resist a free beer" – on her own 'responsibility', as Relevance Theorists say. Or she might report to another person the gist of what Bob said – "He said Carl was, as expected, at the pub. You know how stingy Carl is!" – but this is an up-take of Bob's intention, re-intended for another audience.

<sup>26</sup> Metaphor may once have presented a potentially prestigious literary connection for Relevance Theory. However, by 2008 Sperber and Wilson were 'deflating' the distinctions of figurative language, and reducing the value of metaphor for RT demonstrations.

<sup>27</sup> Janet Giltrow, "Form Alone: The Supreme Court of Canada Reading Historical Treaties", in Natasha Artemeva and Aviva Freedman, eds., *Genre Studies around the Globe* (North American and International: Trafford Publications, 2015), 207-224.

<sup>28</sup> Laughingstocks as Peter and Mary may be, Mary's indirect reply to Peter on the matter of the light bulb, *may speak volumes* – as "No, I am not going to change that light bulb" would not.

Moreover, Bob's intention is framed by his entertaining of what Ann can have in mind. Bob's utterance *depends on another mind for its meaning*, for it to have meaning. And the other mind is not matched with his as if along a telepathic wire or by means of a code. It is off-set. Can the same be said of the aesthetic utterance? Does it depend on another mind in the same way? We will keep this question open while we look at the model of communication on which Relevance Theory is based.

#### 4. The Ostensive-inferential Model

Scripted in Relevance-Theoretic terms, Ann and Bob establish the inferential dimension of communication. As Relevance Theorists often remind us, the uttered sentence is only evidence of a meaning intended by the speaker, not the intended meaning itself. From this condition unfolds the completion of RT's ostensive-inferential model of communication. The uttering of the sentence – the use of the sounds and structures of language – is an ostensive action: Bob intentionally 'shows' to Ann these sounds, which are grounds for her inferring meaning.

We might get more to grasp in the 'showing' part of what Bob is doing if we imagine that, following Ann's "Where is Carl?", Bob says nothing. Rather than speak, he picks up a flyer which has arrived through the mail slot – a flyer picturing The Yellow Dog and announcing weekday special prices. Because Bob is recipient rather than producer of this message, Ann can't take for granted *Bob's intention* that she infer a meaning from his picking up the flyer<sup>29</sup> – as she could from hearing him speak. Refusing a found object rather than composing a fresh utterance,<sup>30</sup> Bob has to give Ann grounds for presuming his intention to communicate rather than simply to read the flyer for his own information. He has to catch her eye, perhaps, or wave the flyer in front of her. As either Speaker or waver, Bob is showing Ann something relevant to her question.

The ostensiveness of what Bob is doing when he says "Wednesday is two-for-one" might be still more easily grasped when we find, in another part of town, Dave, a graphic artist. Dave has issued an edition of etchings of a beer-and-bar image and the wording <two-for-one-Wednesdays>; he has framed one of his prints and put it in the window of his studio. This ostensive action – framing and displaying (rather than pushing through the letter slot) – would prompt passersby and visitors to the studio to recognise an intention to mean, and a Presumption of Relevance. With that recognition, in the minds of some of these visitors or a few of the passersby, certain assumptions will be switched on – about imagery, font, technique, colour, line, and other materials of design, as well as Dave's reputation and artist's statements. And to the minds of some people come assumptions about traditions of selling and drinking beer, or of the contemporary flyer genre. The intention to mean – including its presumption of relevance – is unmistakable – but the Speaker's meaning itself in so many words can hardly be captured, let alone measured on the strong-to-weak scale, even as 'poetic effects'. It may take special training to infer intentions from this kind of ostensive action, and follow up with statements: "Dave, a local artist, has published a print edition suggesting that today's mediation of commercial imagery appropriates manipulative traditions of conviviality....". Less specialised training however ensures that passersby generally 're-key', in Goffman's<sup>31</sup> term, the action of advertising a half-price beverage, and they don't infer Dave's intention to provide a beer, or two.

Relevance Theory detractors see RT, with its ostensive-inferential model, as not fit to leave the house, not ready for public appearances let alone aesthetic performance. It is true that producers of the

<sup>29</sup> Just seeing the flyer, without Bob's intervention, might answer Ann's question, reminding her of bargains and beer in the context of Carl's whereabouts. But the inference would *not be the same* as the one drawn from Bob's reply. That one is derived from conditions of mutual consciousness, including the condition of Bob's intention.

<sup>30</sup> One could feasibly argue that <Wednesday is two-for-one> reports the speech of the flyer designer, or of a flyer, or another drinker, or possibly Carl himself – that the words are not 'original' to Bob.

<sup>31</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974).



flyer do not know the flyer's recipients the way Bob knows Ann; nor do their recipients know them as Ann knows Bob. But Relevance Theory still contends capably with the flyer genre. Coming through the mail slot, the flyer can be immediately discarded as irrelevant by someone who does not drink beer *or* by someone who may one day, in years to come, consider choosing a day of the week for going for a drink with a friend – but it is not worth the effort to keep the flyer in anticipation of that future possibility. The flyer is not relevant, and goes in the bin, for the effort/effects quotient is not favourable. Or the flyer may arrive in the letterbox of someone planning to change the venue of their Wednesday-night drink with friends. In this case, the recipient may derive the strong implicature that they should go to the place advertised. Or the flyer may arrive in Carl's letterbox – and offer no effects for effort, for Carl already knows the sales pitch and has derived inferences. Relevance Theory accounts for the flyer genre, and the 'response rate' in direct-mail advertising.

Relevance Theory also accounts for the display of Dave's etching – an aesthetic rather than marketplace genre, composed with unidentified but not entirely unknown viewers in mind and distributed publicly. For some of those whose visual field is entered by Dave's etching, the image and wording promise only the most remote, even unimaginably unreachable cognitive effects, not worth any investment of processing efforts. Others (many fewer) pause to gaze, entertain thoughts, put a lot of effort into inferring intentions of meaning and further implications. Another category of viewer might put much less effort into looking at the etching, their glance may linger but entertain only a few thoughts (colour, font, texture) and derive fewer inferences as to the artist's intentions and fewer or no materials for further inference about genre or the echo of sales pitch, and so on.

Can literature be usefully thought of as ostensive-inferential, something shown, with an intention to mean? Or is it misleading to demonstrate ostension through visual art – the framed print on display? Is literature like this – reticent and indirect but intending? Or is the coinciding of the visual show with the verbal ostension just an artefact of theory?

## 5. Literature and the Ostensive-inferential Model: The Case of Haiku

Even as literary values can be offended by expressions of Relevance Theory, there are also some potential sympathies, at just this intersection of the visual showing and the verbal ostension. The haiku is one genre at this intersection.

Haiku was of great interest to the literary modernism which also fiercely attacked the 'fallacy' of 'intentionalism' – attacked the notion that it was the writer's intended meaning that should be inferred from the literary utterance. Haiku<sup>32</sup> is said to be "the use of a visual language that regularly juxtaposes concrete yet incongruous images; and a meaning that arises through this play of images in a way that is suggestive rather than deliberate or explicit"<sup>33</sup>. How far do the terms for haiku line up with the RT terms demonstrated by Bob's utterance? Both the haiku and the exemplifying exchange between Bob and Ann are brief. Is Bob's utterance 'incongruous'? We could say that it is incongruous in its indirectness seeming not to hear Carl as the topic and talking about weekday specials. We could say that in each case the 'incongruity'/indirectness is a prompt to inference, to find the relevance, the connection. Like the haiku, Bob is 'suggestive', rather than 'explicit; rather than one meaning or the sole meaning, Ann gets a strong implicature escorted by weak ones, for which she takes 'responsibility'. While both incongruity and indirectness could be substantially or briefly challenging to the Hearer, neither should be dumbfounding (and if they are, RT could explain the nature of the difficulty). If, following Relevance Theory, we say that Bob shows an intention to communicate simply by the act of speaking itself, we

<sup>32</sup> My account here of haiku owes everything to Hoyt Long and Richard Jean So, "Literary Pattern Recognition: Modernism between Close Reading and Machine Learning", *Critical Inquiry* (2016), 235-267.

<sup>33</sup> Earl Miner, cit. in Long and So, "Literary Pattern Recognition", 239.

must be able to say something like this for the haiku: it uses language, it is ‘framed’, so to speak, for viewing. However, rather than address, as Bob’s utterance does, one Hearer, it is exhibited for public showing. What happens to the Presumption of Relevance in this difference? Such a question is feasible because the idea from Relevance Theory on ostensive-inferential communication and the idea from the New Criticism and Modernist poetics do line up. And the parallels in themselves are worth contemplating for they show up despite the forces pushing these tracks apart. For Relevance Theory in its Gricean traditions and in its innovations privileges Speakers and their meanings, whereas the New Critics did the opposite: the quotation above, on haiku’s meaning ‘arising’, is only one example of the New Critics’ erasing of writers’ subjectivities from the conceptualisation of interpretation.

## 6. Aesthetic Genres and the Dedicated Module

The critical conception of haiku, at least, shows potential alignments with the ostensive-inferential model. But the literary perspective on Relevance Theory generally sees only RT’s demonstration in the invented couples, and laborious parsing of the unsaid premises of their interaction, and clumsy paraphrase to the truth-conditional standards once in effect for reasoning in pragmatics. These are not pleasing to the literary ear.

Relevance Theory meanwhile points to a way around Peter and Mary, and the awkward audit of their familiarity. Fifteen years after RT’s book-length début,<sup>34</sup> declared for a further specialisation of the mind’s modularity: the human brain has evolved a dedicated capacity to support communication – a cognitive infrastructure, that is, to support Ann and Bob in their inferences and estimates. In linguistic-pragmatic terms, the dedicated module could be regarded as down the road from earlier way points: Background Knowledge, Common Ground, Mutual Knowledge, Given and New, and Presupposition broadly. The way for the dedicated module is also cleared by Theory of Mind,<sup>35</sup> and ‘mind-reading’.

Can literary-leaning pragmaticists – or literary specialists themselves – follow the path past ‘poetic effects’ to the dedicated module? Few would have disciplinary expertise to work with the module, and pragmaticists may be better outfitted for ground-level inquiries into language use than work in neural regions. And in the event that the evolutionary generalisations about the module were taken up, they could seem – to literary specialists – to echo once traditional but now problematic avowals of the universality of literature as expression of the human condition.

Acknowledging these concerns, I suggest nevertheless that *the very fact of the claim* for modularity – how the claim itself comes about, the circumstances it entertains – is worth recognising for pragmatic approaches to literary genres. Sperber and Wilson propose this modularity on grounds which are sympathetic to aesthetic values.

First they establish that people could not take the ordinary path to inferential conclusions to get to implicatures. The path would be too long, the process too laborious. Similarly, RT-sceptics have objected to fully worked-out Peter-and-Mary premises and deductions as implausible. So, can the ‘mind-reading’ module take over from the general inferential capacity? The mind-reading module supports observing, for example, persons taking their places in a bus queue: we nearly instantly infer their

<sup>34</sup> Sperber and Wilson, “Pragmatics, Modularity and Mind-Reading”.

<sup>35</sup> For non-specialists, Theory of Mind was most famously demonstrated by K. H. Onishi and R. Baillargeon, “Do 15-month-old Infants Understand False Beliefs?”, *Science*, 308 (2005), 255-258; Heinz Wimmer and Josef Perner, “Beliefs about Beliefs: Representation and Constraining Function of Wrong Beliefs in Young Children”, *Cognition*, 13.1 (1983), 103-128 – for the ‘verbal’ demonstration of ToM; see also Luca Surian, Stefania Caldi and Dan Sperber, “Attribution of Beliefs by 13-month-old Infants”, *Psychological Science*, 18.7 (2007), 580-586, when very young children, pre-verbal, under experimental conditions saw a puppet observing the location of a prize – a desirable object; then witnessed the puppet leaving the room and, in its absence, the researcher moving the prize, putting it in a drawer. When, next, the puppet returned to the scene and went right to the drawer, the child subjects exhibited signs of consternation: *that’s not right!*



motives, goals, preferences; the action makes sense. But the persons are not trying to tell us, or anyone else, anything. Crucially, Sperber and Wilson argue that joining a bus queue is not the same order of action as speaking to someone. The communicative act involves the speaker's anticipating the Hearer's frame of mind: it involves, that is, the Presumption of Relevance. The mind-reading model is not geared to go through the estimates of mutual consciousness.

Few pragmaticists, let alone literary specialists, will be prepared to follow Relevance Theory to Sperber and Wilson's answer to this problem: a 'dedicated module', one evolutionarily designed to handle the requirements and output of the ostensive-inferential model. Pragmaticists, literary-leaning or not, have no methodology for testing or applying the proposal for the dedicated module. Yet their methodologies do establish, over and over, the inferential nature of communication and, at the same time, do not support the unrealistically laborious outlay in premises and deductions. Even as a black box to pragmaticists, the dedicated module marks the location of a cognitive architecture which can house minds' estimates of one another, as well as estimates of those estimates. With such accommodation, whatever their neural design, there are not only facilities for Ann and Bob's domestic inferences but also for those involved in public genres, including aesthetic ones.

The dedicated module offers a prominent neural home to intention and interpretation, but neither pragmaticists nor literary specialists have the keys to these new premises. They could however turn to the module's blueprint – its functional design – to get beyond not only the invented couples but also some stubborn notions about what Relevance Theory calls 'underdeterminacy'. One is that inference is just a follow-up to decoding, the consolation prize when explications fails. Even a pragmaticist such as Black<sup>36</sup> takes a fall-back position on inference and the underdeterminacy of the sentence. Inference, she says, can be necessary because it would take too many words to say exactly what we mean: without the assumptions supporting implicature, communication would be "long-winded and clumsy".<sup>37</sup>

Neither a word-saving measure nor, in aesthetic genres, the stylish means of only 'suggesting' and not saying, or even of inserting hidden meanings, underdeterminacy gets a fresh brief from the module dedicated to managing the resources of mutual knowledge for interpretation. Switching on assumptions and assigning them – in varying degrees and along varying trajectories of experience and affiliation – to interlocutors, the proposed dedicated module creates a depth of field for meaning, both everyday and aesthetic.<sup>38</sup>

## 7. Problems of Interpretation

Before trying to reconcile Speaker's Intention with the anti-intentionalism of close reading, and then suggesting avenues for Relevance-Theoretic inquiry into literary fiction, I will point to an area where aesthetics has already picked up pragmatics. Taylor<sup>39</sup> has taken Grice to problems of interpretation in literature, and, looking back with him to Grice's 'Meaning',<sup>40</sup> we can see the principle of ostension already at work.

Grice distinguishes between 'natural' meanings and non-natural meanings. Natural meaning is what one might infer from independent observation. For example, from a very long queue at the bus stop, one might infer that the bus is not on time. This is a 'natural' meaning: no one is *showing* the queue in order

<sup>36</sup> Black, *Pragmatic Stylistics*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>38</sup> Discussing the pragmatics of genres of fiction, Janet Giltrow, "Pragmatics of Genres of Fiction", in Miriam A. Locher and Andreas H. Jucker, eds., *Pragmatics of Fiction* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2017), 55-92, suggests that overhearing may be a 'fundamental condition' of fiction. In calling on the dedicated module, this condition would construct depth of field, especially through the complexities of Reported Speech.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, "Meaning, Expression, and the Interpretation of Literature".

<sup>40</sup> Herbert Paul Grice, "Meaning" [1948, 1957], in Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1989).

that an inference be drawn. Non-natural meaning, on the other hand, is inferred from, in the broadest sense, people's showing of things to other people, for inference, utterance being the central category of such showing. So, for an 'utterer' A to have meant something, is equivalent to "A intended the utterance of *x* to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention";<sup>41</sup> "for *x* to have meant NN anything, not merely must it have been 'uttered' with the intention of inducing a certain belief but also the utterer must have intended an 'audience' to recognize the intention behind the utterance".<sup>42</sup> Grice's reasoning around intention stayed close to problems of disambiguation of sense: "where there is doubt about which of two or more things an utterer wishes to convey" we turn to "context" and "and ask which of the alternatives would be relevant to other things he is saying or doing".<sup>43</sup> His example is basic: choice between a bicycle *pump* and other *pump* as a fire rages. But the terms of Grice's distinction lead straight to RT's ostensive-inferential model: *intention* and *recognition* of the intention.

Bob tells Ann that all the umbrellas have gone missing from the hall stand and that he himself had just recently replenished the household's supply of umbrellas. Simply by addressing Ann with this pair of statements, Bob activates the Presumption of Relevance, and, under the same presumption, Ann will estimate Bob's intention, including the connection between the two statements. From the pair of statements, uttered by Bob, Ann derives the implicature: <Bob has done everything he can to ensure a good supply of umbrellas while others have in their negligence defeated his efforts> attributing to it a high degree of strength, knowing Bob. This is an *internal* and *non-natural* meaning: Bob intended this meaning to be derived from his utterance. Ann however may infer further *what Bob did not intend*, for example, <Bob is accusatory and self-righteous>. This is a natural ('external') meaning derived from the occasion of the utterance and not from a communicative intention.

When RT's ostensive-inferential model is sharpened with Grice's distinguishing between two types of inferred meaning, there is an opportunity for contributing to discussion of problems of literary interpretation.

Taylor applies Grice's terms to a standing problem in literary interpretation, exemplified by Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, and racism discernible in that novel (following Carroll).<sup>44</sup> Against claims that the novel cannot be interpreted as racist because Verne did not intend racism – intended, instead, a sympathetic representation of African Americans – Taylor suggests that the novel's racism is a natural meaning: it is 'direct' (rather than 'interactional') expression of "implicit feelings and attitude under the influence of which Verne composed the work".<sup>45</sup> Just as Bob does not show Ann – remind her of – his work with the household's umbrellas so that, recognising his intention, she will infer that he is a self-righteous scold, Verne did not compose the novel to enable inference about his own racist outlook. This example may show that, while the natural/non-natural meaning distinction is useful to literary studies, it may also be too cut-and-dried as to intention. Relevance Theory's scale of strong-to-weak implicature may help with this, to allow further gradations of meaning in *The Mysterious Island*: after all, if Verne arranged this ostensive-inferential situation, can his intentions be exculpated from every implication?

<sup>41</sup> Grice, "Meaning", 220.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>44</sup> Noël Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation", in Gary Iseminger, ed., *Intention and Interpretation* (Temple University Press, 1991), 97-131; Noël Carroll, "Anglo-American Aesthetics and Contemporary Criticism: Intention and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51 (1993), 245-252.

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, "Meaning, Expression, and the Interpretation of Literature", 389.

Relevance Theory could also refine treatment of ‘intertextuality’, an often noticed feature of literature. Taylor<sup>46</sup> works with the example of some lines from a poem resembling or partly repeating lines from Shakespeare. The reader could surmise that the resemblance is ‘accidental’ – or perhaps that it draws unwittingly from the public fund of often repeated but seldom attributed literary quotations, and surmise further that no allusion is to be recognised or inference to be drawn from the fact of repetition. Relevance Theory could take the case further, past just the fact of allusion. Estimating the consciousness of the Speaker, the Hearer might estimate the likelihood that the Speaker knows the words as Shakespeare’s; the likelihood that the Speaker can accurately estimate the Hearer’s knowledge of Shakespeare, and so on. If the wording is to be recognised as Shakespearean and that is the extent of the recognition, what is to be inferred? Is it only the ‘allusion’, as Taylor says – shared but limited knowledge of Shakespeare – that is relevant? Or does the Speaker’s estimate specify more narrowly – and accurately if the Hearer recognises the wording as from *The Merchant of Venice*? Assumptions about *The Merchant of Venice* thus switch on for contextual effect. On the Speaker’s part, estimates may have to be made as to *how well* the Hearer knows Shakespeare and *The Merchant of Venice*, to infer the intention; the Hearer meanwhile estimating how well the Speaker knows the extent of the Hearer’s knowledge of Shakespeare, and *The Merchant of Venice*. In the absence of such grounds, is it natural meaning that Hearers resort to, drawing inferences on their own responsibility? Or could there be a special case of ‘weak implicature’ where Speaker and Hearer share responsibility for some meanings? For example, say the Hearer has more specifics in mind from *The Merchant of Venice* than the Speaker actively contemplated: it is still the Speaker who arranged for the apt allusion; the Hearer brings to it an unforeseen but ‘now-that-you-mention-it’ assumption. While the measure ‘weak implicature’ effectively separates strong-implicature <No I am not going to change the lightbulb> or <Carl is at the Yellow Dog> from fainter implications, it may not be a thorough-going term for aesthetic interpretation – or even for some kinds of everyday interpretation which the aesthetic project could bring to our attention.

While intertextuality itself is often pointed to as one of the features of aesthetic-literary genres, a Relevance-Theoretic analysis could show that its phenomenology is by no means simple or obvious, and must make big demands on the dedicated module, indeed may be hardly feasible without some functionary like that module. Moreover, the ostensive-inferential model exposes the hazards of common ground to Speakers and Hearers, ground far more *hap*-hazard when it is heavily cultivated with literary history. It is an august field compared to the domestic confidentiality of Ann and Bob, but in some ways just as thoroughly presumptuous.

## 8. Good intentions and Bad Ones

Across conceptualisations of intention, pragmatics and aesthetics confront each other, like antagonists across a borderland. For Gricean and Relevance-Theoretic pragmatics, intention is a warrant for meaning. Intention is also a pronounced term in the New Criticism – where it is emphatically repudiated through the ‘anti-intentionalism’ of the ‘close reading’ tradition of Anglo-American literary studies and literary education.

In “The Intentional Fallacy” Wimsatt and Beardsley<sup>47</sup> condemn the idea that a poem is like a will or contract insofar as the critic must, like the judge, determine the meaning intended. They also declare that the poem “is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>47</sup> William K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy”, *The Sewanee Review* 54.3 ([1932] 1946), 468-488.

about it or control it”.<sup>48</sup> They agree with other critics (I. A. Richards, Renée Wellek)<sup>49</sup> that the poet is not the authority about the poem, and that general human experience rather than particular life history provides the interpretive context: you don’t need to know anything about the poet in particular.<sup>50</sup> Wimsatt and Beardsley feel that poets themselves are not good at talking about poems, even about their own poems. “A feat of style by which a complex of meaning is handled all at once”,<sup>51</sup> poetry succeeds by being in every part ‘relevant’, all irrelevant parts having been excluded (“like lumps from pudding”),<sup>52</sup> so there is no need to infer the intention of the speaker, as you would need to with non-poetic, ‘practical’ utterances, which are more slapdash and imperfect. This is an explanation for inference substantially different from the one Relevance Theory offers through the ostensive-inferential model.

Accordingly, applications would be different. Here is an example. Wimsatt and Beardsley say they agree with fellow-critic Bateson, who has plausibly argued that Tennyson’s “‘The Sailor Boy’ would be better if half the stanzas were omitted, and the best versions of ballads like ‘Sir Patrick Spens’ owe their power to the very audacity with which the minstrel has taken for granted the story upon which he comments”.<sup>53</sup> From a New Critical perspective, going ahead with the story – ‘taking for granted’ – without a lot of explanation is a poetic technique with an aesthetic effect: ‘power’. From a Relevance-Theoretic point of view, it is the Presumption of Relevance in the balladeer’s estimating of the awareness of his audience. When an Over-Hearer comes across the utterance, rather than the Hearer about whom the balladeer had evidence for estimating consciousness, the virtuosity of the Over-Hearer’s dedicated module – specialist in mutual consciousness, in how minds entertain the frame of other minds – finds not only the story of the noble voyage and sad loss but also that further depth of field: the hearing of the story by the others estimated by the balladeer.

Along related lines, Wimsatt and Beardsley discard as useless the information that Coleridge had read the *Travels* of the late-18th-century naturalist William Bartram. They see this information as “[leading] away from the poem”, rather than to its meaning: “it would seem to pertain little to the poem to know that Coleridge had read Bartram”,<sup>54</sup> and that there are connections between passages in Bartram and passages in “Kubla Khan”. A Relevance-Theoretic view would take account of Coleridge’s estimate of his Hearer as one who has read Bartram. In fact the Romantic poets did read Bartram, enthusiastically, including Wordsworth, who published with Coleridge in *Lyrical Ballads*, the volume in which “Kubla Khan” appeared. With this account, Relevance Theory would go beyond the fact of intertextuality to the Presumption of Relevance and the activity of the dedicated module: assumptions about Bartram, what Coleridge could surmise readers could know about Bartram which could provide grounds for inference, and the sketching of intention – and what readers could surmise that Coleridge could surmise.

On modernism’s most notorious intertextualities, Wimsatt and Beardsley speak magisterially. They are contemptuous of reading for traces even where the poet lays down the tracks:

The question of ‘allusiveness,’ for example, as acutely posed by the poetry of Eliot, is certainly one where a false judgment is likely to involve the intentional fallacy. The frequency and depth of literary allusion in

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>49</sup> Ivor A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* [1924] (New York: Routledge, 2001); René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1949).

<sup>50</sup> Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy”, 471. Wimsatt and Beardsley seem to hear context as shutting down the conversation. They write: “for every [poetic] unity, there is an action of the mind which cuts off roots, melts away context – or indeed we should never have objects or ideas or anything to talk about” (Ibid., 480). Is it that the orphaned utterance, like the note in the bottle, will attract aid in the form of speculations about what might have been in mind?

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 479.

the poetry of Eliot and others has driven so many in pursuit of full meanings to *The Golden Bough* and the Elizabethan drama that it has become a kind of commonplace to suppose that we do not know what a poet means unless we have traced him in his reading – a supposition redolent with intentional implications.<sup>55</sup>

After showing the mistake that would be made by tracing a line in “Prufrock” to Donne,<sup>56</sup> they also dismiss Eliot himself answering the question *were you thinking about Donne?*: “Our point is that such an answer to such an inquiry would have nothing to do with the poem ‘Prufrock;’ it would not be a critical inquiry. Critical inquiries, unlike bets, are not settled in this way. Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle”.<sup>57</sup> That is, the question and the answer would not be in the terms of aesthetics.

A Relevance-Theoretic approach to allusion or intertextuality goes differently. William Bartram *is* relevant to the ostensive-inferential project that is the writing and reading of “Kubla Khan”, contributing to its cognitive effects. Which is not to say that *no* intention could be inferred by a reader who did not recognise the allusion but that the materials for inference would be different from those available to the reader who did recognise the allusion. (Can we say that allusion is always basis for inference, that is, always sponsored by the Presumption of Relevance? Or should we here make provision for the ‘accidental’ or even conventional repetition, and a different order of inference?)

“The Intentional Fallacy” is of course by no means the only outspoken avowal of New-Critical principles, or of close reading in its heyday or today. For follow-up to the mid-century declarations and dictates, I borrow from an early 21st-century “Introduction” to *Close Reading*<sup>58</sup> to gather more indication of opposition between aesthetic values and pragmatic analysis.

Dubois<sup>59</sup> telling of the New Criticism’s origins story emphasizes its rejection as ‘sociology’ or ‘history’ of critical practice which located the aesthetic text in its times, culture, and class, or located the poetic utterance in the context of the writer’s personal experience and temperament, material or affective disposition. We may feel that in our era we are long past the text-alone, context-free vision of the New Critics. But it could be argued that objections to RT’s application to literature inherit the convictions of the New Criticism. The shared atmosphere (the ‘rich context’) supporting Ann and Bob, Peter and Mary is the opposite of the nearly airless summit of aesthetic expression, measured by literary appreciation.

Have objections also inherited the New Critical celebration of the aesthetic text? Even as the New Criticism rejected the deferential philological traditions of literary study, it seems at the same time to glorify aesthetic expression itself: “the feat of style”<sup>60</sup> acclaimed by Wimsatt and Beardsley is one expression of this reverence. Even as the writer was occluded, the aesthetic expression was, as Dubois says, an object of “love”,<sup>61</sup> or awe. Thus the ‘close readings’ of the New Criticism can offer, even in their analyses, eulogistic terms: we saw an example above, when Wimsatt and Beardsley find ‘power’ in the taking-for-granted in ‘Sir Patrick Spens’. Relevance Theory offers no measures or means for praising the literary text, or loving it.

In practical or ordinary interaction, even in public genres like those of journalism or politics, a Hearer may come across an ambiguity or uncertainty. The Hearer may resolve the difficulty by surmising what the Speaker could have intended, given what the Hearer knows about the Speaker. In close reading, difficulty is not supposed to be resolved this way. What happens instead? Is the dedicated module unplugged? Moreover, difficulty is to be expected in aesthetic genres. From Dubois’ review of New-

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 482.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 487.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 488.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Dubois, “Introduction”, in Frank Lentricchia and Andrew Dubois, eds., *Close Reading: The Reader* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 3-5.

<sup>60</sup> Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy”, 469.

<sup>61</sup> Dubois, “Introduction”, 9.

Critical principles, we know that close reading has to make plain what is obscure, by its attention to “the concentrated language which is the medium of poetry”.<sup>62</sup> Blackmur declares that poets, in this case, Eliot, Pound, and Stevens, “load their words with the maximum content; naturally, the poems remain obscure until the reader takes out what the poet puts in”.<sup>63</sup> The aesthetic text has to be read, read again, and re-read. And meanwhile the critic is imagining the poet packing his poem, concentrating his language, putting things in to be taken out – another version of intention?

## 9. Relevance-Theoretic Approaches to Literary Fiction

Broad colonies of interpretive texts settle around literary texts, just as they do around sacred texts, and around legal texts. In each case, the interpretive genres are specialist. They are geared to the social formation, and contribute to it: the interpretive utterances are used for social purposes both declared and tacit. The professional interpreter is trained to these purposes – although in each case folk interpretations can also show up. A Relevance-Theoretic approach to literature should be clear and emphatic in its intention *not* to join the field of literary interpretation. An RT approach may however shed light on the processes of specialist literary interpretation.

In this role, Relevance Theory steps off the straight line of its descent from philosophy of language – and away from the role played by the invented example, and Peter and Mary. Demonstrating the principle, the example is invented to sustain refinement and revisions to the principle as well as the challenge of counter-examples. Grice’s examples demonstrated the CP and the Maxims, and also sustained the challenges which generated Relevance Theory, the demonstrations of which in turn sustained Relevance Theory through the further refinements of loosening and enrichment, and reasoning about explicit and literal meaning, and about the dedicated module, and beyond. The reasoning enabled by invented examples advances Relevance Theory, and can point to literary genres. But it is not directly transferrable to them. It is not a methodology for applied inquiry.

If Relevance Theory were to be applied to any area of discourse – not only to aesthetic genres but to the genres of, for example, journalism, the marketplace, health and medicine – it would have to find a way past invented demonstrations. Inventions could still dramatize and even configure the interest of Relevance Theory for the area of discourse, but the method of application would have to follow a line of inquiry tracking issues both local to the genres in question, and general to the phenomenon of Relevance itself.<sup>64</sup> I propose two such lines of inquiry for literary applications.

*8a. Allusion/intertextuality:* Long prized in literary genres is the literary allusion: an indirect reference to another literary text. Most commonly, the reference is made by repeating wordings from the other text, without explicit attribution. Although literary allusion is widely expected, it is far from well understood in its ostensive-inferential characteristics. The Speaker ‘shows’ wordings to the Hearer, estimating the Hearer to know – or at least to *know of* – the original utterance, and to know it well enough to bring to mind assumptions which can form the basis for inference to establish relevance: what does this allusiveness have to do with what is being talked about? Where is the benefit in paying attention to this repetition? With “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child” does the Speaker intend only an antique flavour for a lament about parental disappointment? How is the Presumption of Relevance fulfilled by that flavour? Or does the Speaker estimate the Hearer reaching deeper to bring to mind Lear’s own self-regarding manipulations and disbursements, the parent’s own involvement in the legacies of ingratitude? What is the ostensive-inferential structure of “Kubla Khan” *with* or *without* Bartram’s *Travels* in the context? When the allusion’s life-span expires – the period when the Romantic

<sup>62</sup> Blackmur, cit. in Dubois, “Introduction”, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Blackmur on Eliot, Pound, Stevens, cit. in *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel Dor, “On Newspaper Headlines as Relevance Optimizers”, *Journal of Pragmatics* 35 (2003), 695-721 is an excellent early example of Relevance-Theoretic inquiry applying itself to questions raised by the genres being studied.



poets took mutual interest in the publications of this far-venturing naturalist – can it be artificially revived by a scholarly insertion? When the podcast on hiking in the Rocky Mountains begins “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”, is it the Speaker’s intention that Hearers not only recognise the allusion to Dickens but also switch on Victorian perspectives on the French Revolution, on family melodrama across terror and suffering in the ‘two cities’ of Dickens’ title? Probably not and if not, is an inferential structure for allusion like this one characteristic of non-aesthetic rather than aesthetic genres? 8b. ‘Weak’ effects: Sperber and Wilson’s<sup>65</sup> early differentiation between ‘strong’ implicature and ‘weak’ implicature, with the spin-off ‘poetic effects’ accompanying the latter, has accomplished a lot, as Pilkington’s relatively early *Poetic Effects*<sup>66</sup> shows. It may soon be time to go back to these terms, to improve their capacity to account for range of intention and interpretation that is wider or more delicately differentiated than strong/weak, non-poetic/poetic. Literary genres are a good place to start work on such improvements.

‘Poetic’, of course, should not be taken narrowly: poetic effects are not just about poems. Yet it can be acknowledged that even if the phenomenon bridges non-aesthetic and aesthetic genres, it also has a special place in the aesthetic genres. In her declaration for the cognitive/communicative continuity between literary and other types of utterance, Wilson says that attempts to spell out the weak implicature destroy the poetic effect.<sup>67</sup> We could say, similarly, that to translate Bob’s “Wednesday is two-for-one” into <at the Yellow Dog> forsakes the assumptions switched on by the indirect version: assumptions about Carl’s sociability or loneliness, about thrift or thirst, not to mention more remote assumptions about happy-hour marketing. Not only was <at the Yellow Dog> not uttered, it was *not what Bob said*. In the literary field, indirectness – as crudely illustrated by Bob’s reply to Ann’s question and also claimed more elegantly as we saw for the ‘suggestiveness’ of haiku – is so highly valued that directness is excluded. Literary expression which is didactic is despised, or seen as not ‘literary’ at all, whether the moral of the story is delivered through a narrator’s statements, or through ‘flat’ characters getting what they deserve.

Accordingly, a Relevance-Theoretic approach to literature will have to take to the project not only its socio-cognitively sophisticated, dedicated-module-assisted explanation for meaning but also some new way of representing the analysis and explanation, so as to not ‘spell out’. The vestiges of truth-conditional propositions and deductions ‘destroy’ rather than capture the poetic effect. Computational methods might be explored for other means of representation.

To know more about ‘weak’ implicature in its variety – that is to apply Relevance Theory – we might look at actual patterns of inference, demonstrated in published professional interpretations and possibly also in folk interpretations found in abundance online. With more data on actual literary utterance it might be possible to stabilise and refine the idea of the Speaker taking main responsibility for strong implicature, the Hearer for weak. Would we say that it is ‘irresponsible’ to spell out weak implicature? How is responsibility re-assigned at the frontier of intention, at the distinction between natural and non-natural meaning? What is the nature of the Hearer’s responsibility when it is in fact the Speaker who has arranged for the weak implicature, arranged by an ostensive act for the inference?

All of these questions could be attempted in the language-philosophical tradition. But without application – and methods for ‘applied Relevance Theory’ – to problems and instances beyond the philosophical, we will still not know about the pragmatics of aesthetic genres; we will have no data, and we will resort again to familiar assumptions about the literary genres – that they make readers feel and think, and also entertain them.

<sup>65</sup> Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*.

<sup>66</sup> Pilkington, *Poetic Effects*.

<sup>67</sup> Deidre Wilson, “Relevance and the Interpretation of Literary Works”, *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 23 (2011), 74.

8c. *Comparative Relevance Theory*: In the meantime, to begin to acclimatise Relevance Theory to the atmospheres of fiction, and adapt its analyses to demonstrations more congenial than the early deductive-tending ones, projects could set out on a loosely comparative basis. Most speculatively, and with only the sketchiest of method – if any at all – I will conclude with brief comparative sightings of ostensive-inferential structures in three novels: Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900), Zola’s *Germinal* (1885).

Readers enter into *Sense and Sensibility* through an explanation of a property in Sussex: its ownership and the succession of title. The ‘legal inheritor’ of the property, Mr Henry Dashwood, is described as having

by a former marriage ... one son: by his present lady, three daughters. The son, a steady respectable young man, was amply provided for by the fortune of his mother, which had been large, and half of which devolved on him on his coming of age. By his own marriage, likewise, which happened soon afterwards, he added to his wealth. To him therefore the succession to the Norland estate was not so really important as to his sisters; for their fortune, independent of what might arise to them from their father’s inheriting that property, could be small.<sup>68</sup>

When the owner of Norland dies, his passing is accounted in property terms: “secured”, “no power of providing”, “charge on the estate”, and the deceased owner’s “mark of affection for the three girls, ... a thousand pounds a-piece”.<sup>69</sup> Marriage and offspring are Presumed Relevant to cash, financial interest, and land-holding, for inference to be drawn. The sudden death of husband and father, Henry Dashwood himself, is shown to readers in similar terms: “ten thousand pounds, including the late legacies, was all that remained for his widow and daughters”, with further accounts of “four thousand a-year”, “three thousand”.<sup>70</sup>

In any story, the death of husband and father could be reported with a strong Presumption of Relevance, likely but not necessarily borne out by <*bereavement, grief, mourning, tears, desolation, melancholy or depression, regret...*> But Austen shows readers a storyteller whose estimate of Hearers’ consciousness leads to presumptions instead of the relevance of lump sums, *legacies, life interests*. Inferences about the father’s death, about the land itself are estimated – by this storyteller for the estimated audience – to be drawn from assumptions about sums, successions, and entailments. Especially the Speaker estimates the Hearers as knowing what a speaker intends by ‘L10,000’ – what this sum means for the Dashwood women. 20th- and 21st-century readers of Austen have had to infer from characters’ actions or speech or narrators’ attitudes the meaning of ‘L10,000’, what inferences can be drawn.

Yet some Hearers may feel that there is a further Presumption of Relevance, or Intention to Mean – namely, the Relevance of the very presumption itself that ‘L10,000’ and ‘a thousand pounds-a-piece’ are themselves relevant to the topic of the loving father’s death. Ostensive-inferentially, Austen shows readers – whose consciousness she estimates – a storyteller in turn estimating the consciousness of Hearers and presuming – for those Hearers – the Relevance of the lump sums. Some readers then and now may infer meanings, find implications on the plane where the father’s death means ‘L10,000’ and material disappointments. Other readers may find a depth of field, and aesthetic effect, in the stratification of consciousnesses: Austen’s showing the telling of the father’s death in terms of lump sums, and making this show available for inference.

This could be one structure, or phenomenology, of inference in literary fiction and possibly characteristic of Austen.

<sup>68</sup> Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser also writes about the prospects of youth, including income, but from the lowest ranks of the labour market in late 19th-century America. Dreiser may be well known – rather than universally admired – for the panoramic authority of his storytellers and their insights into people’s motives and frailties playing out in the historical moment of the socio-economic order. Here the storyteller tells us what we need to know about the affective measure of Carrie’s leaving home: “A gush of tears at her mother’s farewell kiss, a touch in her throat when the cars clacked by the flourmill where her father worked by the day, a pathetic sigh as the familiar green environs of the village passed in review, and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broke”.<sup>71</sup> Unlike the lump sums in *Sense and Sensibility*, *tears, kiss, throat, pathetic sigh* may seem more immediately satisfying to the Presumption of Relevance: an eighteen-year-old is leaving her Wisconsin home to join her sister and brother-in-law in Chicago. Like bereavement, feelings stirred by leaving home are always relevant. Even in their absence, they might be telling about a mind or heart. What can readers infer about Carrie from her feelings on leaving home – or, more accurately, about Dreiser’s intention in having his storyteller show this departure, with its particular affective profile? At first it might seem too obvious to mention (just as the relevance of most utterances will seem too obvious to mention) the relevance of nostalgia, a family poignancy. But, reading a little further, and we find Carrie’s feelings for home soon stirred another time. On the train, she has met the travelling salesman Drouet, a “masher”, as the storyteller says. The narrator having generalised about women’s “philosophy of clothes”, their disregard of men dressed on just the wrong side of “an indescribably faint line in the matter of ... apparel”<sup>72</sup> but also their self-consciousness when they see men dressed well beyond the line:

[Carrie] became conscious of an inequality. Her own plain blue dress, with its black cotton tape trimmings, now seemed to her shabby. She felt the worn state of her shoes.

‘Let’s see,’ [Drouet] went on, ‘I know quite a number of people in *your town*. Morgenroth the clothier and Gibson the dry goods man.’

‘Oh, do you?’ she interrupted, aroused by *memories of longings* their *show windows* had cost her.<sup>73</sup>

In fiction, clothes are always potentially relevant; characters’ outfits are often a basis for inference. But there is more here – a ‘*philosophy of clothes*’, something to do with Carrie’s mentality. And in fact in Dreiser’s fiction, not only *Sister Carrie*, but *An American Tragedy* (1925), the storyteller often points to clothes – their purchase, the desire for finery or the shame of shabbiness, the cost of fashion for both men and women. So readers might trust the Presumption of Relevance here to profitably entertain assumptions from which to draw inferences about Carrie’s nostalgia for merchandise. If readers continue to construct inferences about Carrie and her separation from home, they will have more here – *town, memory, longing* – but these come with strings attached: the ‘philosophy of clothes’ and ‘show windows’. The project of inferring from the storyteller’s showing of these mentions and memories is further complicated when Carrie arrives at her sister’s flat and we are shown her brother-in-law: Hanson “was a silent man, American born, of a Swede father, and now employed as a cleaner of refrigerator cars at the stock-yards. To him the presence or absence of his wife’s sister was a matter of *indifference*”.<sup>74</sup> Just as many read Austen for love matches and annuities adding up, many have no doubt read *Sister Carrie* on ‘the picture plane’, so to speak – *will she get this job? how much has she saved for that pair of shoes?* But others will experience the depth of field rendered by these much more unsettling – and generative – Presumptions of Relevance, and the project of inferring this girl’s place and prospects in turn-of-the-century America.

<sup>71</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 1.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, italics added.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, italics added.

Readers of *Sister Carrie* who read with literary history in mind might think of Zola, and *Au Bonheur des dames* (1883), about the retailing revolution, the passions excited by fashion merchandising, and imbricated with the overturning of craft economies. But for a last application of the ostensive-inferential model to literature I will go instead to Zola's *Germinal*.<sup>75</sup>

The story begins with the hunger and exhaustion of the coal-mining families, the crowding of generations into cramped quarters, the cold relieved only by the body-heat from the overcrowding. It needs no didacticism or spelling out, for implicated conclusions arrive robust and commanding – inferences of the injustice of this misery. *Germinal* was in fact read and embraced as an act of protest on behalf of the industrial working classes. Robust as these meanings and clear as Zola's intentions may have been, however, *Germinal* was itself indirect. Rather than explain in so many words the injustice of the economic order, it told a long and complicated story about families, jealousies, lovers, countryside, drink and violence, food and shelter. And the inferential structure of its indirectness is itself an engine of complexity.

On the morning LaMaheude's family wakes to hunger and toil, the Grégoire household also wakes. Whereas there is almost nothing to eat in La Maheude's hovel, chez Grégoire there is abundance; there is warmth and comfort. These conditions in themselves are relevant in the contrastive context of the coalminers' suffering, especially as M. Grégoire is a shareholder in the coalmine. It's not hard to draw inference, as the mass of readers of *Germinal* did in its hour and in the century following. But the structure of inference is more complex than just a 'strong implicature' of unfairness and time for change. For one thing, this isn't only an iteration of the divide between the haves and the have-nots. The story goes into details of the business history of capital accumulation: the rush for mineral wealth in the region in the 18th century; investors' struggle with landowners and government; industrial accidents; the entrepreneurial determination that secured the capital which eventually went to the happy Grégoires. M. Grégoire says to his cousin and neighbour, Deneulin, "You know I refuse to speculate. I live in perfect peace, and I would be crazy to plague myself with business worries"<sup>76</sup> to which Deneulin concedes: "You may be right: the money which other people earn for you is the money which pays you best".<sup>77</sup>

Even while the misery of the family of La Maheude may still be in mind, and readers may be tempted to the inference of the corruption of the abundance in the Grégoire household, they hear also of "religious faith",<sup>78</sup> of perfect and mutual *affection* between husband and wife, of laughter – "the whole household *happily amused* at the realization that [daughter] Miss Cécile had slept for twelve hours at a stretch".<sup>79</sup> Having heard also about the worn-out bodies of the coal miners, diseased, disabled and even deformed from a life of labour and deprivation, they also hear that Monsieur Grégoire "despite his sixty years, ... had a *pink complexion, with kind, honest, open features*"<sup>80</sup> and of his cousin Deneulin that "[a]lthough he was over fifty, his close-cropped hair and thick moustache were *jet black*".<sup>81</sup> And Cécile herself before her breakfast is "as fast asleep as an *angel in heaven*", "with *milk-white skin*, chestnut hair, and ... round cheeks"<sup>82</sup> and, after feeding on fresh-baked brioche, "*full of food*".<sup>83</sup> M. and Mme Grégoir feel "profound *gratitude* for a valuable investment which had kept the family in *comfort and idleness* for a century", "cradling them in their big, *soft beds* and fattening them at their *sumptuous table*", for the "40 000 franc income as well as their savings ... all effortlessly consumed in the interests of Cécile..."<sup>84</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Zola, *Germinal*.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 79.

With, in its time, a mass readership rallying to the story's implicated conclusions, *Germinal* nevertheless configures in its depth of field further inferential structures where not only money and a rich meal but also *gratitude*, *faith*, *pink cheeks*, and *affection* are presumed relevant to business history.

Finally, while literary specialists would probably dismiss Relevance-Theoretic analyses as not concerned with aesthetics, they would certainly dismiss Picketty's<sup>85</sup> reading of Austen in his *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*. Picketty turns to Austen (and other novelists, Balzac in particular) for data on the long-term rate of return on capital (it is 5%). He gets these data from the inferable Common Ground shared by Austen and her readers, and generations of readers through the 19th century, a long period without inflation. Austen's readers understood the distribution of wealth and the 'permanence' of the social distinctions which flowed from the deep inequality of that distribution;<sup>86</sup> they knew the rate of return on capital,<sup>87</sup> and the income necessary for a 'comfortable' life, and for a "truly comfortable" life.<sup>88</sup> For these readers, L10,000 or L3000 switched on many assumptions, as grounds for inference. In the extending of these assumptions across the mentalities and situations Austen shows readers, there is a lot of work for the dedicated module.

And, as literary specialists dismiss the brief, tentative RT analyses presented here or Picketty's distinguished readings, the fuller response to the dismissal must await a fuller account of genre – not only literary genres but also the literary-critical ones. This account should take as a main point of reference Levinson's<sup>89</sup> brilliant but under-appreciated conceptualisation of Activity Types on the basis of their inferential horizon.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2014).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 105, 240.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>89</sup> Stephen C. Levinson, "Activity Types and Language", *Linguistics* 17 (1979), 365-399.