being impersonal? Its absence has already led this essay into at least one clumsy 'he or she', and drives other writers (see Christie, below) into other expedients. Yet the gap usually goes unnoticed, or is accepted as natural. In the last section of *The Years of the City* (1984), however, Frederik Pohl rounds off his picture of a developing American utopia with a world in which such a pronoun is regularly used: instead of 'he/him/his' or 'she/her/hers', one says consistently 'e/um/uz'. Just to rub the point in, among the characters' casual words of abuse are the neutral-sex neologisms 'prunt' and 'fugger'. If these words were blanked out of the text, they would not be guessed; indeed, in the case of 'e/um/uz', one imagines that strict control would have to be exerted over sub-editors to ensure they stayed in at all, and were not automatically replaced by their 'obvious' equivalents. So they are 'high-information' items in terms of unpredictability. But once introduced they also point a powerful if silent finger at the terms one has come to expect. They make us aware of the latent presuppositions, the unconsidered information about our own habits concealed within casual and normal speech. In this way Pohl's coinages perhaps exemplify the 'tri-valency', the multiple relations between real and fictional worlds, seen in science fiction by Samuel Delany (see Spark, p. 133 below). And in addition they do one other thing: they serve as a warning that science fiction has a rhetoric of its own, an 'economy of signs' (to

use Christie's phrase from p. 38 below), a hierarchy of figures of which the neologism is only the lowest term. The distinctive feature of this unconsidered rhetoric is its ability to exploit contrast, between the real world and the fictional, the novum and the datum, the real gap and the science-fictional filling of it. The tropes, images and modes of this rhetoric, however, have still not been codified; in a sense, critics have not yet learnt to read them.

There would be quite enough material for the beginning of a *Rhetorica nova* in the last section of Pohl's 1984 book.[10] It is called 'Gwenanda and the Supremes', which sounds like a pop group. But in this case 'Supremes' is an ellipsis for 'Supreme Court Justices': the first postulate of Pohl's fiction is that in this future world judges are chosen by lot (like modern jurymembers), trained, given computer guidance, and then allowed to settle matters not by the arcane and deliberately professionalized structures of modern Anglo-American law, but by common sense alone – common sense being, says Gwenanda, 'what the Second American Revolution was all about, right?' This means that from the start Gwenanda and her colleagues can behave, and talk, like an unruly pop group, in a Supreme Court setting of considerable gravity.

The contrast sets up a sequence of assaults on the modern reader's unconsidered assumptions about legal and stylistic decorum. Faced with a client who has murdered her husband ('uz marry' in their

English), the Chief Justice allows twenty minutes for a plea in mitigation, cuts the defendant off dead on time, and says (p. 262): 'Right . . . I'd call this a case for summary judgement if we ever saw one, and I'll start the ball rolling. Guilty. How say you, gang? 'How say you?' is formal legal English; 'gang' is intimate/colloquial. The contrast feels disrespectful, and even more so are the notions of a judge dispensing 'summary judgement', and attempting without concealment to lead his colleagues. Shocks of this nature keep on being delivered. Later on, a defendant is betrayed when his lawyer approaches the bench and says: 'Well, what e said, when we were talking about uz case, was e said it cost um plenty to fugger up the records at the freezatorium' (p. 325). 'I protest the unethical behaviour of this attorney!' cries the defendant. 'I want him disbarred.' But 'fuggering up the records' has led to a plague in the future, from the germs of the past carried by a frozen-then-thawed invalid; and the only reason the defendant is surprised by what the lawyer has done is that he too is from the past, is indeed a corrupt judge from the legal system of the present. One obvious point is that to him 'unethical' does not mean 'morally wrong', it means – and to our shame, this is a standard modern meaning – 'against the customs of a profession'. The speech of the future ('gang', 'fugger', 'what e said . . . was e said') is marked for us as careless, lax, or ugly. But in this story the speech of the

characters from our time, while careful, precise, and formal, is presented also as deeply dishonest, 'professionalized' in the worst sense, full of genuinely evil or 'unethical' presumptions. Who is in the right? Which is more important, offended decorum or neglected justice?

The rhetorical questions above are mirrored by one in the text, again spoken by an unsympathetic revivee from modern times: 'What kind of a world would it be if you let people do whatever they wanted?' And the answer obviously generated by the text is 'quite a nice one', remembering always the Thirty-first Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, 'Nobody has any right to dump on anybody else. This takes precedence over everthing else.' But change of register, semantic shift, and rhetorical questioning are only three of the devices continually used, and used with great variety by Pohl, to set up the repeated contrast between future and present, to rouse the reader's alarm over the unknown future (the 'e/uz' level), and then demand why such alarm should not be better felt about the present (the 'he/she' level). Neologisms used in 'Gwenanda', besides those already cited, include 'an' (a person, neither (m)an nor (wom)an), 'muddy' (a parent, a mummy/daddy), 'hemale' and 'shemale', and 'congressun': at least they all follow a clear logic. By contrast, words from the present used and greeted with incomprehension or derision by the future include 'feet' (as a unit of measure-

ment), 'attorney', 'testify', 'witness', 'bench', 'statement', 'prejudicial', 'competent authority': all are tagged by Pohl with the same legalistic narrow-mindedness as 'unethical', or the ethnocentrism of 'feet'.

Pohl also makes considerable play with the way in which speech is presented. Early on, the reader's sympathies are led at least two ways by a passage which shifts unexpectedly between authorial narration and what one might recognize as 'coloured' interior monologue.[11] Samelweiss, the Chief Justice, has just left in the middle of the defendant's speech to go to the toilet – wearing, it should be said, his 'walk-around headphones', a characteristic technological novum combined with sociological provocation. But:

> In fairness to Samelweiss, it was true that nothing was being said that any sensible person would want to hear. The brute of a defendant had begged for twenty minutes to make a statement, and Samelweiss, the old fool, had let her have it. Probably just wanted time to go to the can. So the statement had gone on for six or seven minutes already. Bor-*ing*. All she did was complain about the myriad ways in which society had so warped and brutalized her that whatever she did wasn't really her *fault*. Now she was only up to the tyrannical first-grade teacher who had hung the label of thief on her –
>
> A loud beep interrupted her – one of the Tin Twins. 'Hold on there a minute, sweet-meats. You did swipe the teacher's wallet, didn't you?'
>
> The defendant paused, annoyed at the interruption. 'What? Well, sure. But I was only a child, your Honor.'
>
> 'And then you did, the way it says here in the charge, you did stab your marry to death, right?'
>
> 'Only because society made me an outlaw, Your Honor.'
>
> 'Right,' said the Twin, losing interest (p. 260).

Any experienced reader of fiction, not just science fiction, will realize straight away that 'sensible' here is tendentious. The language at the start is Gwenanda's: 'old fool', 'go to the can', 'brute of a defendant', all are part of her sceptical, aggressive, overstating personality, and they establish Gwenanda as a familiar 'unreliable narrator'. Her judgements accordingly should be unreliable, and we expect to be against her because of her bias. But not all that paragraph sounds like her interior monologue. 'Bor-*ing*' no doubt is, but what about 'society', 'warped and brutalized', 'tyrannical', 'hung the label on'? These do not sound like Gwenanda, but like the defendant filtered through Gwenanda. But if they are the defendant's words, she sounds unreliable too. As for the self-exculpatory whine of 'wasn't really her *fault*', it is hard to tell whether this is the defendant speaking (as in 'because society

made me an outlaw' in direct speech just below), or Gwenanda mocking (*'fault'* is like 'Bor-*ing*' just above). In practice, the reader is likely to take the defendant as a 'stooge', a dummy set up to voice attitudes respectable enough in our time, with Gwenanda as the new voice, the voice of the fiction challenging us. Yet with one unreliable narrator reporting another, it is hard to say which way sympathy would go. There is more than one irony in the paragraph. As the passage moves on to ordinary authorial narration plus unmediated direct speech, matters become clearer, but even so there is a sequence of shocks. 'Sweet-meats' and 'swipe' are highly unjudicial language, and there is again an indecorous anacoluthon in 'you did, the way it says here in the charge, you did . . .' Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that it is not only a judge speaking, but a robot. After dozens of post-Asimovian tales about self-sacrificing, human-worshipping robots, it is a shock especially for a science fiction reader to come upon '"Right," said the Twin, *losing interest.*' The remark itself is familiar to anyone who speaks English; 'Right' does not mean 'I agree', but 'I heard what you said'. Just the same, the casual nature of this continues the presentation of Pohl's future world as, in our terms, careless, harsh and biased. Yet this must coexist with the vision of our world and our language as, in the terms of the fiction, evasive, irresponsible, and dishonest.

Pohl's story in fact depends heavily on the presence of 'corpsicles';[12] twentieth-century people who have been frozen and then revived, to find themselves as centres of anachronism in the future, their familiar phrases and beliefs becoming, as it were, nova to the whole greater imagined novum. The device allows Pohl to exploit amazement both ways. Gwenanda's whole world is full of amazement to us. But when our world is put to her and her colleagues, they react with giggles, gasps, 'incredulous snickers', or even – when the 'adversary system' of Anglo-American justice is explained in brutal paraphrase – 'silence, broken by a beep'. The assertion is always that fictional and factual worlds have parity, that 'uz marry' is really no stranger than 'a thousand feet', 'swipe' or 'gang' no more indecorous than 'plaintiff' or 'testify'. At the end of the process even common words are tinged with uncertainty. Like other writers, Pohl uses adverbs to indicate tone of voice – 'indignantly', 'reasonably' – or mental attitude. Yet what is one to make of the last words of the first scene (p. 268), as Gwenanda sentences the marry-stabber to indefinite freezing: '"You can take um away, Sam. And get um a nice dinner," she added kindly, "because it'll have to last um a long time."'

In normal fiction, 'kindly' would be bitterly ironic; it would show Gwenanda as a latter-day Judge Jeffreys, exulting in her own power and her victim's helplessness. In this story it could, possibly,

be literally true. When Samelweiss looks round at his colleagues after their chorus of agreement to his 'Guilty', he does so 'affectionately'. There is no reason to disbelieve the adverb there. When he refuses to let the 'corpsicle' judge introduce modern rules to his court, he does so 'reasonably'. There *is* something to balk at there, for he is refusing to let someone make a case. Still, he has reason to do so. The adverb sounds ironic to the modern reader, but under the special rules of the story it cannot be so. 'Kindly' is only one further extension of the process. Gwenanda *is* being kind in that closing speech. It is only prejudice that makes us take it in the opposite sense.

Pohl has one final device of great power throughout the story, and that is the use of 'contextless' phrases, quotations from thinkers in our own past – Hobbes, Lincoln, Disraeli, Marcus Aurelius – which continually circle the Supreme Court dome in glow-light. Would the philosophers disagree with Gwenanda and her collegues? If they would, the remarks could be directed ironically against them, and once or twice – 'The skill of making, and maintaining commonwealths, consisteth in certain rules ... not as tennis-play, on practice only', Thomas Hobbes – this seems to be the case. More often the irony is against us. Just after the first demonstration of 'summary judgement' by Samelweiss the sign lights up with:

> 'Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?' – Abraham Lincoln. (p. 262)

Lincoln is normally taken as a sponsor of the present American state. But who could think that the professional legislature of today has anything to do with 'the ultimate justice of the people'? The quotation, then, can be taken as ratifying the arbitrary, amateurish, fair, and democratic Samelweiss, putting past and future in substantial alliance against the present: a process akin to some of the narrative 'disfigurements' of national myth discussed below (see pp. 107–28).

To repeat a point made earlier: though Pohl's fiction is overtly hostile to rhetoric, it still has a rhetoric of its own. The critical feature of that rhetoric, perhaps, is that while it exploits the resources of the high-informational science-fiction genre, it is also very alive – witness the use of quotations, anachronisms and voices-within-voices – to the rhetorical possibilities of *degraded* information. It is no doubt only an accident that the most recurrent science-fictional image found in this collection is that of the unreadable library and the inscrutable text (see Christie, Crossley, and Shippey on pp. 47, 88–9 and 125 below), but there is a kind of appropriateness about it just the same. It would

after all be wrong to think that degraded information becomes unusable, or that the existence of degradation implies (see Meyers below) lack of faith in human power to communicate. In a way, biased narrative and altered texts tell us not only what they intend to, but also what has shaped them or formed their bias. As H. G. Wells said, apropos of his famous quarrel with Henry James, 'the Novel' consists of a frame as well as a picture. It seems particularly appropriate that the effective Father of English science fiction should have been able to claim: 'I suppose for a time I was the outstanding instance among writers of fiction in English of the frame getting into the picture.'[13] Science-fiction authors and literary readers have been in a sense re-enacting the Wells/James quarrel ever since.

The thought takes us back to questions asked at the start of this essay. Is science fiction really about modern times and modern problems, intrinsically 'referential', or has it a kind of playful or fictional autonomy? The examples given here tend to support the former view, showing clearly that in 1953 Pohl and Kornbluth were writing (with admirable foresight) about consumerism and world resources, while in 1984 Pohl had turned to questioning American law and politics, with an underlying belief that new technology could restore antique forms of elementary democracy. Some essays below confirm that view, with their demonstrations of how science

fiction has coped as an exploratory mode in 'taboo' areas such as Vietnam or racialism or – one would have liked to add – gender[14] or mortality.[15] Yet it is worth noting the rather dissentient view of Alan Elms, whose study of 'Cordwainer Smith' below shows (a) that that author was not concerned with the major issue to which his 'underpeople' were connected by critics; but (b) that nevertheless his fiction did arise out of social and religious concerns of an unexpected kind; but (c) that its origins had almost nothing to do with the success of the fiction itself. Does that make *Norstrilia* (1975) or 'The Ballad of Lost C'mell' (1962) pure 'futuristic play'? The matter remains open. One can only suggest that the answer may lie not only in analyses of plot and theme, but in further painstaking probing of the special problems, in science fiction, of authorial rhetoric and readerly response: an exercise from which we have too often been distracted by the immediate, often alienating, always attention-grabbing influence of the novum.

NOTES

1 Eight different definitions are given in Ulrich Suerbaum, Ulrich Broich and Raimund Borgmeier, *Science Fiction* (Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 9–10.

2 The story is told of one of the most prominent authors of 'cyberpunk'. See further the parody 'Cy

Ber Punk's Tale', in Harry Harrison, *Bill the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Robot Slaves* (1989), for comment on science-fictional technical failings.

3 George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (London, 1939), cited here from the Penguin reprint of 1962.

4 See, for instance, the remark of the lower-class speaker in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, lines 219–21.

5 In my youth there was a brand of (cheap) razor-blades on sale called 'Seven O'Clock, Cock'. Seven was the time for the working class to get up, to walk or cycle to work for eight. The nine o'clock-starting middle class got up later, to catch their trains or buses.

6 Frederik Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants* (New York, 1953), cited here from a Gollancz reprint of 1972.

7 See Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, 1979), pp. 63–84. It should be said that Suvin uses the term *novum* in a more abstract and wide-ranging way than I do here.

8 Ibid., pp. 7–8.

9 Pohl's autobiography, *The Way the Future Was* (New York, 1978), records that he was a member of the Young Communist League in the 1930s.

10 Frederik Pohl, *The Years of the City* (New York, 1984), pp. 259–334.

11 I take the term 'coloured' from the discussion of medial stages between direct and indirect speech in Norman Page, *Speech in the English Novel* (London, 1973), pp. 24–50.

12 This is another clear case of word-borrowing within

science fiction. 'Corpsicles' is an invention of Larry Niven's, prominently used for instance in his *World Out of Time* (1976).

13 H. G. Wells, *An Experiment in Autobiography*, 2 vols. (London, 1934), p. 495.

14 For an extended discussion of this issue, see Sarah Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (London, 1988).

15 Not much has been written on this extremely delicate taboo area, but see my article, 'Semiotic Ghosts and Ghostlinesses in the Work of Bruce Sterling' in George Slusser (ed.), *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative* (Ann Arbor, forthcoming 1990). Sterling is one author who does not seem convinced that people have to be mortal.