Part II
In the course of developing the grand design of his poetics, Northrop Frye has evolved a number of stimulating and important observations about the function of rhetoric in literary criticism. Richard Conville has discussed the contribution which Frye’s theory of discourse in general can make to speech criticism. I propose to examine Frye’s understanding of the relationship between rhetoric and literary theory from another perspective, concentrating on the particularities of his argument about rhetoric in Essay Four of Anatomy of Criticism. Professor Conville, in fact, suggests that one might usefully pursue the problem of the relation between Frye’s ideas about rhetoric and such central concepts in his system as “convention” and “genre” (425). The purpose of what follows will be to examine this aspect of Frye’s thought. First, we will look at the relation between the principles upon which Frye’s poetics is based and what can rightfully be called his theory of rhetoric. Second, we will examine the meaning and function of the chief categories in that section of the Anatomy that Frye has entitled “Rhetorical Criticism: Theory of Genres.”

I

Frye’s theory of literature is developed from his attempt to answer two questions: What is the total subject of study of which criticism forms a part? And, how do we arrive at poetic meaning? In answering the first question, Frye rejects the notion that criticism is a subdivision of literature. This rejection stems from the common-sense observation that apart from some aspect of criticism literature is not a subject at all, but rather an object of study which can be neither taught nor understood except as critics develop their own conceptual universes. Such a critical framework is what Frye sets out to build. His goal is stated forthrightly: to give his reasons for believing that “a synoptic view of the scope, theory, principles, and techniques of literary criticism” is possible, and, in doing so, to provide a tentative version of one such synoptic view (Anatomy, 5). His first assumption is the existence of a unified structure of knowledge about literature which criticism should progressively and systematically develop. A synoptic view of criticism is both possible and necessary. The literary scholar and the public critic, says Frye, are in need of a handbook, a contemporary Poetics, which would perform the same function as a basic theoretical manual in other disciplines. The book reviewer, the literary historian, the philosophical and formal critic all need a shareable body of theoretical knowledge which, by involving them in a larger context, could serve as a common point of reference and thereby work to reconcile the differences among their opposing “schools.” In short, literary studies need to be unified. A synoptic view is also required, Frye urges, because criticism itself needs an autonomy, an independence from externally derived frameworks. Autonomy is a concept frequently encountered in Frye’s work; he uses it to refer to the self-sufficiency of both criticism and literature. On the one hand, literary studies are independent from other studies, or at least they should be; and on the other hand, literature itself should be independent from “life.”

Frye’s argument for critical independence (“autonomy” in the first sense) derives from his observation that criticism, because of its claustrophobic complex, has tended to attach itself to, and thereby take its conceptual framework from, other disciplines or ideologies. “Critical principles,” he says, “cannot be taken over ready-made from theology, philosophy, politics, science, or any combination of these” (Anatomy, 8). Nor does the study of literature lie within some “Marxist, Thomist, liberal-humanist, neo-Classical, Freudian, Jungian, or existentialist” framework (ibid.). In other words, past critics, because their own discipline has not had an autonomous conceptual framework, have had to turn to some other
field of study to derive their concepts, methods, and vocabulary. To overcome this parasitism, Frye proposes “an examination of literature in terms of a conceptual framework derivable from an inductive survey of the literary field” (Anatomy, 9). And he suggests, furthermore, that such an examination can and should be “scientific.”

Frye uses the word “scientific” in two distinct senses. The first is simply a claim that critical inquiry should be systematic, inductive, and causal as opposed to random and intuitive; that it should be self-contained rather than dependent upon the principles of other disciplines; and that it should attempt a coherent and progressive consolidation in organizing its materials (Anatomy, 10). Since there is a kind of critical study based on rigorous, rational, and systematic analysis, that is, a kind of criticism distinguishable from what R.S. Crane calls, on the one hand, “cultivated causerie,” and, on the other, the application to literature of general systems of ideas (x), then Frye’s use of the term “scientific” can be said to describe such an approach.

The second sense of the word, however, arises from Frye’s claim that criticism, considered historically, still exists in a state of naive induction, whereas other disciplines, such as physics, history, biology, and astronomy, have moved beyond primitivism to the status of pure science. The transition from naive induction is accomplished when a discipline, rather than taking the data of immediate experience as its explanatory and structural principles, conceives of the data themselves as the phenomena to be explained. Physics, for example, “began by taking the immediate sensations of experience, classified as hot, cold, moist, and dry, as fundamental principles. Eventually physics turned inside out, and discovered that its real function was rather to explain what heat and moisture were” (Anatomy, 16). The study of history has passed through a similar revolution. In the chronicles of the naive historian there is no distinction between the recorded events and the structure of the chronicle; whereas the scientific historian, rather than merely cataloguing events chronologically, sees them as data to be explained and is thus forced to view them from the perspective of a larger interpretative framework. Frye argues by analogy that criticism, currently in a state of naive induction because its practitioners insist on treating every literary work as a datum, needs to pass from the primitive to the scientific state. And this can be accomplished only when criticism seeks to explain literary works in terms of a conceptual framework which is independent from the datum itself. Just as physics, for example, has discovered the theoretical framework of relativity, so criticism needs “to leap to a new ground from which it can discover what the organizing or containing forms of its conceptual framework are. Criticism seems to be badly in need of a co-ordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole” (Anatomy, 17).

Frye’s boldly stated purpose, as we have observed, is to develop such a synoptic hypothesis, and his first step in doing so is to assume that there is a total coherence among literary works.

We have to adopt the hypothesis, then, that just as there is an order of nature behind the natural sciences, so literature is not a piled aggregate of “works,” but an order of words. A belief in an order of nature, however, is an inference from the intelligibility of the natural sciences; and if the natural sciences ever completely demonstrated the order of nature they would presumably exhaust their subject. Similarly, criticism, if a science, must be totally intelligible, but literature, as the order of words which makes the science possible, is, so far as we know, an inexhaustible source of new critical discoveries, and would be even if new works of literature ceased to be written. (Anatomy, 18–19)

Having defined criticism as a “central expanding pattern of systematic comprehension” which needs to develop its own vocabulary and synoptic principles, Frye proceeds to search for the formal causes of literature. This search if motivated by the second question, referred to above: How does one discover poetic meaning? Frye begins by admitting the principle of polysemous meaning—a version of Dante’s four-fold system of interpretation. His problem then becomes one of reconciling the differences among
various interpretations. Pluralism, which seeks to huddle all valid critical methods under one theoretical umbrella, is automatically ruled out by the synoptic goal. How, then, are different interpretations to be reconciled? Frye’s answer is that the critic does not actually seek meaning after all:

... the meaning of a literary work forms a part of a larger whole ... meaning or dianoia (is) one of three elements, the other two being mythos or narrative and ethos or characterization. It is better to think, therefore, not simply of a sequence of meanings, but of a sequence of contexts or relationships in which the whole work of literary art can be placed, each context having its characteristic mythos and ethos as well as its dianoia or meaning (Anatomy, 67).

“Context” rather than meaning, then, becomes the crucial criterion. And in the great bulk of the Anatomy, where Frye busily defines and classifies literature in terms of these relationships, the concepts of history and structure, more than anything else, determine the content of Frye’s idea of a “sequence of contexts.”

Each of the four essays betrays an obvious historical orientation. In the first three, for example, where hero, symbol, and myth are the basic categories, Frye’s sweep through the entire Western tradition establishes a series of three parallel historical developments: heroes are seen as passing through five modes; symbolism, through five phases; and myths, through five modes and phases together. One of Frye’s main complaints against the New Critics is that, in their strong reaction against historicism, they abandoned too readily the tradition or the historical context. Another way Frye states this limitation is his claim that the New Criticism, while able to deal quite admirably with rhetorical texture, cannot adequately treat literary structure. The importance of contextual structure as the central principle in Frye’s conceptual universe cannot be overemphasized. It lies at the heart of his entire system: the structural elements of literature are the conventions, the genres, and the recurring archetypes of the literary tradition. And it is through these larger structures that the total body of literature is to be studied. Although Frye does sometimes speak of the individual structure of a work, the analysis of which moves centripetally into a work’s particularities, it is clear that his main interest lies in conventional structures, running all the way from undisplaced myth to the indirect mythologizing of naturalism. Frye usually speaks of conventional structures in terms of myth simply because he believes myth to be their ultimate source.

II

The concept of convention offers a convenient place for turning to Frye’s theory of rhetoric. “The problem of convention,” he says, “is the problem of how art can be communicable. ... as the archetype is the communicable symbol, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication. By the study of conventions and genres, it attempts to fit poems into the body of poetry as a whole” (Anatomy, 91–2). This statement is from the Second Essay. The Third and Fourth Essays are Frye’s description of the conventional and generic modes of communication. And rhetorical considerations play an important role in the First Essay. In the sense, then, that modes of communication have traditionally been located in the province of rhetoric, we can say that the entire Anatomy is concerned with rhetorical issues—with the anatomy of rhetorical conventions, one might say.

This, of course, is a highly general observation and one which Frye significantly refines in the Fourth Essay. Even as early as Essay I, however, he raises issues which can properly be described as rhetorical in a more explicit sense. Some focus can be given to the question of Frye’s theory of rhetoric if we assume for a moment a definition of rhetorical criticism similar to what Meyer Abrams calls the “pragmatic” theory of critical inquiry; and if we then see how this theory relates to Frye’s concerns in the First Essay. The pragmatic tradition, according to Abrams,

is ordered toward the audience ... it looks at the work of art chiefly as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done, and tends to judge its value according to its success in
achieving that aim . . . the central tendency of the pragmatic critic is to conceive a poem as something made in order to effect requisite responses in its readers; to consider the author from the point of view of the powers and training he must have in order to achieve this end; to ground the classification and anatomy of poems in large part on the special effects each kind and component is most competent to achieve; and to derive the norms of poetic art and cannons of critical appraisal from the needs and legitimate demands of the audience to whom the poetry is addressed. (Mirror, 15)

If we add to Abrams’ statement the further distinction that the “something” to be achieved—the intended “effect” or “response”—possesses either a final or an instrumental value, then we have a convenient tool for analyzing the two ways in which Frye’s discussion of “modes” embodies a rhetorical theory. Although rhetorical considerations are most obviously apparent in his treatment of “thematic modes,” they are also present, given our extension of Abrams’ definition, in what Frye says about “fictional” works.

“Mode” is a category defined in terms of what Frye calls the ethical elements (or ethos) of a literary work. Frye’s ethos, an extension of the Aristotelian category of character, refers both to a literary hero and his society and to a writer and his audience. The constant term, then, in Frye’s definition of both fictional and thematic modes is ethos, the point of reference being either hypothetical characters or human beings. “Fictional” works are those in which the human beings are internal characters, that is, characters apart from the author and his audience. And a “fictional mode” refers to the power of action that a character possesses. (In his “Glossary” Frye defines “mode” as “a conventional power of action assumed about the chief characters in fictional literature, or the corresponding attitude assumed by the poet toward his audience in thematic literature. Such modes tend to succeed one another in a historical sequence” [Anatomy, 333]). Using this distinction, Frye classifies fictional works according to the position of the hero on the spoudaios-phantos continuum, beginning with the hero as a god and ending with him as inferior to ourselves. He then develops an elaborate pattern through which the five fictional modes (myth, romance, high mimesis, low mimesis, and irony) are said to have cyclically moved. Lying behind Frye’s elaboration of the various fictional modes is always an awareness of the author-audience relationship. “In literary fictions,” he says, “the plot consists of somebody doing something . . . the something he does or fails to do is what he can do, or could have done, on the level of postulates made about him by the author and the consequent expectations of the audience” (Anatomy, 31). These postulates and expectations, which indicate a concern with both the process and product of artistic expression or communication, are rhetorical considerations; for they depend upon choices the author must make to manipulate his audience’s response. But they are internally rhetorical; that is, their essential reference is to the way by which an author causes his audience to respond, not to the external world, but to the self-contained world of the fictional hero. In other words, the values obtained from the response are primarily final rather than instrumental. Rhetoric in this sense, then, has reference to those means available to a writer for developing a self-justifying poetic end.

This is not the case, however, with works in the thematic mode. Although Frye insists that “every work of literature has both a fictional and a thematic aspect” (Anatomy, 53), there are works in which the internal characters more or less disappear, having been subordinated to the dianoia of the writer’s argument. Works in the thematic mode are, therefore, external fictions in which the dominant “ethical” relationship is between the writer and his society, rather than between the hero and his. “Poetry may be completely absorbed in its internal characters as it is in Shakespeare, or in Homer. . . . But as soon as the poet’s personality appears on the horizon, a relation with the reader is established which cuts across the story, and which may increase until there is no story at all apart from what the poet is conveying to his reader” (Anatomy, 49). Whereas the typical question asked about a fictional work is, “How is this story going to turn out?” the question becomes for thematic works, “What is the point of this story?” In the latter mode, therefore, mythos and ethos are subordinate to dianoia, as Frye’s glossary definition of “thematic”
indicates: “Relating to works of literature in which no characters are involved except the author and his audience, as in most lyrics and essays, or to works of literature in which internal characters are subordinated to an argument maintained by the author as in allegories and parables” (Anatomy, 334). We need not concern ourselves with the bulk of Frye’s discussion of thematic forms: it is yet another ingenious taxonomy which seeks appropriately to locate such forms in the quasi-historical sequence of modes. We should observe, however, the principles Frye uses to define the two kinds of thematic modes: the episodic and the encyclopaedic. Fundamentally, his criteria for distinguishing the two are (1) the role assumed by the poet, and (2) the end toward which the poet’s effort is directed. The end of episodic forms is the expression of a distinctive, personal vision; the poet “communicates as an individual”; his role is oracular and visionary; and he tends to produce discontinuous thematic forms, like lyrics, essays, satires, epigrams, elegues, and occasional pieces. The purpose of encyclopaedic forms, on the other hand, is broadly educational; the poet “communicates as a professional man with a social function”; he tends to produce extended forms, like thematic epics, didactic works, and compilations of myth and legend (Anatomy, 51–2). Thematic modes, as Frye defines them, would be an appropriate subject matter for a rhetorical criticism which views the end of literature instrumentally. In other words, Frye’s discussion of thematic works depends on concepts quite similar to the criteria of those pragmatic theories which view literature as a means to some external end.

These observations should not be misunderstood as confusing a form of literature with a theory of criticism. All I mean to suggest is (1) that the difference between “fictional” and “thematic” is quite similar to the difference between other pairs of opposites frequently encountered not only in the traditional vocabulary of criticism (mimetic vs. didactic, delight vs. instruction, final vs. instrumental value) but also in Frye’s own special terminology (centripetal vs. centrifugal meaning, ornamental vs. persuasive rhetoric); and (2) that such oppositions are useful in showing that Frye’s Anatomy from the very beginning is oriented toward problems which, given our extension of Abrams’ preliminary definition, can be called “rhetorical.”

The study of Frye’s theory of rhetoric, therefore, cannot be restricted merely to the observations and argument of the Fourth Essay. Conventions (myths, symbols, archetypes) as well as genres involve the general problem of “how art can be communicable.” From one perspective, Frye might well have placed the final two essays under the rubric of “Rhetoric,” just as he could have labeled Essay I “Ethical” rather than “Historical Criticism.” Why then is Frye’s theory of genres called “rhetorical criticism”? In answering this question we have the advantage of the framework Frye sketches at the beginning of Essay IV. The first several pages of this “Introduction” indicate not only the place of rhetoric in his system as a whole, but also his distinction between persuasive and ornamental rhetoric. Rather than recapitulating the profusion of triads which Frye sets forth in these pages, we need only to observe that just as he locates the world of art, beauty, feeling and taste between the world of social action and events and the world of individual thoughts and ideas, so he finds the concerns of rhetoric to lie midway between those of grammar and logic. He then draws the further distinction between ornamental and persuasive rhetoric, the two kinds being distinguished according to their ends (disinterestedness vs. purposefulness), the directions of their meaning (centripetal vs. centrifugal), their effects (stasis vs. action), and their defining processes (the articulation of emotion vs. the manipulation of emotion).

The basic organization of the Fourth Essay derives from what Frye, following Coleridge, calls “initiative,” or the “controlling and co-ordinating power” which “assimilates everything to itself, and finally reveals itself to be the containing form of the work” (Anatomy, 227). There are four different categories comprising the initiative: (1) the theme, (2) the unity of mood which determines imagery, (3) the meter or integrating rhythm, and (4) the genre. This complex of factors, Frye asserts, governs the process of poetic composition. He has treated the first two initiatives in his discussion of archetypal narratives and images in Essay III. The remaining two, rhythm and genre, are the fundamental categories of Essay IV.

Frye’s definition of ornamental rhetoric is quite inclusive and one that operates at the highest level of generality. More focus is given to his discussion, however, in his equation of the rhetorical aspect of
literature with (1) the Aristotelian elements of *melos*, *lexis*, and *opsis*, and (2) “the ‘literal’ level of narrative meaning” (*Anatomy*, 226). Central to his initial discussion of rhetoric is the concept of *lexis*, which he translates as “‘diction’ when we are thinking of it as a narrative sequence of sounds caught by the ear, and as ‘imagery’ when we are thinking of it as forming a simultaneous pattern of meaning apprehended in an act of mental ‘vision’” ([ibid.]). *Lexis*, in fact, is rhetoric, or rather ornamental, as distinct from persuasive, rhetoric. If we consider grammar as the art of ordering words and logic as the art of producing meaning, then literature, according to Frye, “may be described as the rhetorical organization of grammar and logic” (*Anatomy*, 227). Again, these are broad distinctions; but the relationship of verbal pattern to both music and spectacle does provide Frye with a perspective for differentiating among four kinds of literary rhythm (the third factor of initiative).

Rhetoric, as it relates to the fourth factor of a writer’s initiative—the genre—has a more specialized and traditional reference. “The basis of generic criticism,” Frye says, “is rhetorical, in the sense that the genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and his public” (*Anatomy*, 229). He calls this rhetorical element the *radical of presentation*, which means the fundamental or ideal way in which a literary work is presented. For example, the radical of presentation for fiction is the book or printed page; for drama, enactment by hypothetical characters. In the last section of the “Introduction” to Essay Four, Frye sketches the relationship among the author, the audience, and the radical of presentation for each of his four generic categories. These relationships may be summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RADICAL OF PRESENTATION</th>
<th>DRAMA</th>
<th>EPOS</th>
<th>FICTION</th>
<th>LYRIC</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enactment by hypothetical characters</td>
<td>Oral address</td>
<td>Book or printed page</td>
<td>Hypothetical form of I-Thou relationship</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR OR POET</th>
<th>DRAMA</th>
<th>EPOS</th>
<th>FICTION</th>
<th>LYRIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poet concealed from audience</td>
<td>Speaking poet</td>
<td>Poet as person disappears</td>
<td>Poet speaking to himself, God, muse, etc.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUDIENCE</th>
<th>DRAMA</th>
<th>EPOS</th>
<th>FICTION</th>
<th>LYRIC</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observers/ listeners (as group)</td>
<td>Listeners (as group)</td>
<td>Reader (as individual)</td>
<td>Poet has his back to audience, which overhears</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Frye also specifies for each genre both a predominant rhythm and a mimetic form, outlined in this chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MIMETIC FORM</th>
<th>DRAMA</th>
<th>EPOS</th>
<th>FICTION</th>
<th>LYRIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External mimesis (outward representation sound and imagery)</td>
<td>Mimesis of direct address</td>
<td>Mimesis of assertion</td>
<td>Internal mimesis (inward representation of sound and imagery)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREDOMINANT RHYTHM</th>
<th>DRAMA</th>
<th>EPOS</th>
<th>FICTION</th>
<th>LYRIC</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decorum</td>
<td>Recurrence</td>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>Association</td>
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</table>
Thus we can see that “radical of presentation,” “predominant rhythm”, and “mimetic form” are the three primary categories used by Frye to distinguish the four genres. Only one of these concepts, however, receives an extended discussion in the remainder of the Fourth Essay. It seems clear that Frye wants to establish a relationship, on the one hand, between rhythm and the organization of melos-lexis-opsis, and on the other hand, between the radical of presentation and the mimetic form of each genre. In the first case the relationship is quite clearly developed: in what is perhaps Frye’s most original contribution in the entire essay, he shows that the rhythm of each genre has its characteristic melos and opsis. The second relationship, however, is neither argued nor illustrated in any consistent way after its original presentation. In other words, the rhetorical considerations presented in the “Introduction” to Essay IV almost completely disappear in the discussion of generic forms, as a simple listing of the various criteria used to distinguish the specific forms of each genre will indicate. There are at least a dozen or so such criteria, for example, in the section on specific dramatic forms: mood, chief symbols, kind of appeal, type of hero, “vision,” etc.

I suggest that there are three primary conclusions to be drawn from Frye’s theory of rhetoric, as it is presented in the Fourth Essay. First, “rhetoric” is used in two distinct senses; they closely parallel Frye’s two rhetorical concerns in Essay I. Ornamental rhetoric, the lexis of poetry, is an internal, centripetal category, just as Frye’s concept of “fictional modes” in Essay I is; whereas rhetoric in the second sense, defined as the radical of presentation, is analogous to the rhetorical relationship between poet and audience which Frye uses to define “thematic modes.”

Second, the main function which the second rhetorical category serves is to define the four genres. That is, rhythm, form, and the radical of presentation provide generic differentiae. And the main function served by the first rhetorical category (the organization of melos, lexis, and opsis) is to provide principles for an altogether ingenious discussion of generic rhythm. It does not distort Frye’s intention, I think, to say that this first category has the additional function of helping to differentiate the various rhythms: the rhythm of epos, for example, is distinguished not only by the comparatively regular meter of recurrence but also by the peculiar rhetorical manifestations of melos and opsis, like onomatopoeia.

Third, rhetoric in the second sense is essentially a matter of style. Frye obviously cannot be called a stylistic critic. But his discussion of rhythm is the one place in the Anatomy where he does turn to what Angus Fletcher calls the microstructure of literature (“Utopian,” 39–42), the effects of the individual line and phrase-unit.

Standing back from the Fourth Essay, as Frye urges us to do in gazing at a work of literature, we can observe the rather remarkable tour de force he has pulled off. One would hardly expect, in turning to an essay on rhetorical criticism, to encounter the unlikely combination of so particular a topic as prosody with so general a one as genre. But to move from a discussion of poetic phrase-units to a treatment of the specific continuous forms of prose fiction is characteristic of Frye’s ingenuity. It is because he sees literature in its relation to other works of literature that he can move from the microscopic to the macroscopic levels without so much as casting a glance at the countless rhetorical concerns that lie somewhere in between. The point to be made, I think, is, first, that Frye is not writing a manual of style but a theory of criticism; thus, his aim is to show how the concerns of stylistic criticism can fit within his synoptic view. The more important point to he made is that Frye, by using the radical concept of rhythm in its smallest and largest senses, has forced us to see the integral relationship between two very different literary phenomena, both of which call for a social response. Frye’s theory of rhetoric, then, is one which unites style and genre.