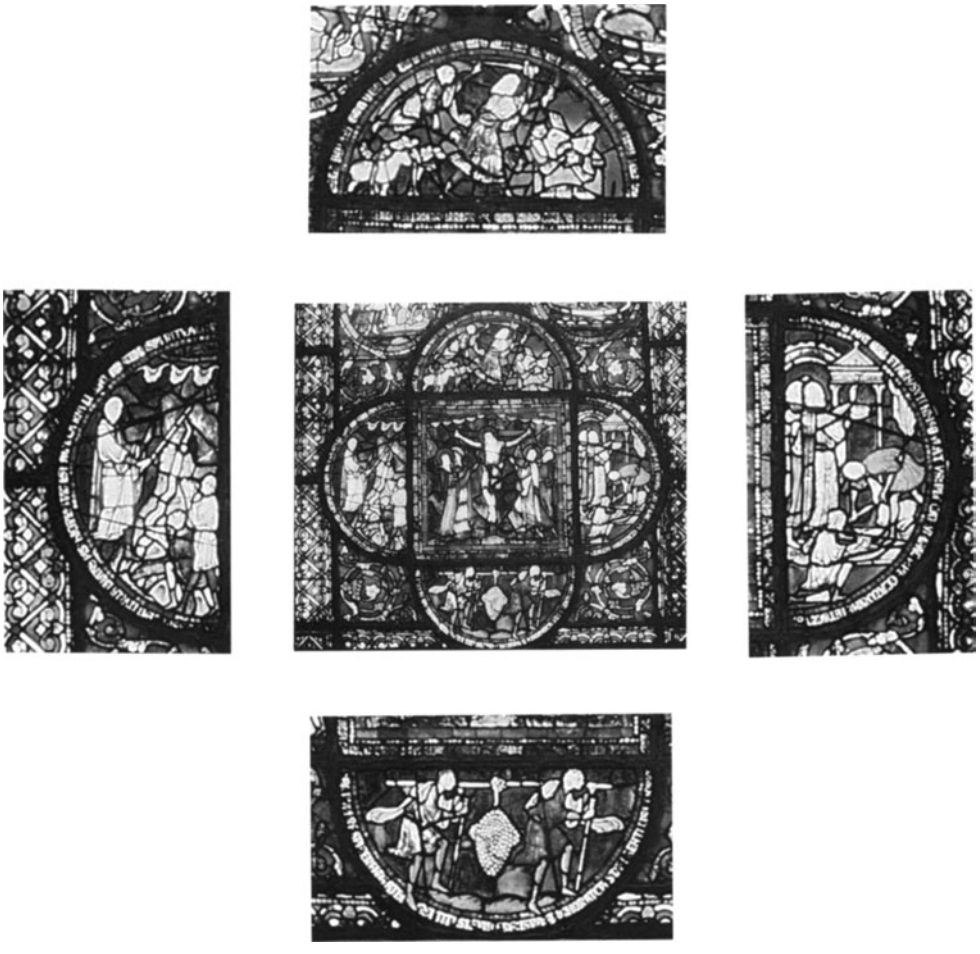
1 *Discourse, figure*

IN THE APSE of the Cathedral at Canterbury there is a window which can tell us a good deal about the controls operating on the image in the art of Christian Europe. Approaching the window from a distance, we recognise at once that its square central panel depicts the Crucifixion (illustration 1). Placed against the sides of the square are four lesser, semicircular panels which are not so easily identifiable, and as we go up closer to the window we may simply enjoy them for their dazzling colour and design. But our disinterested visual pleasure is soon interrupted, because as we move closer still, the lesser panels resolve from abstraction and light into precise narrative scenes. Going round the square in clockwise order, we find that they represent the Passover, with a priest sacrificing a lamb and marking a lintel with a sign that is almost a cross; then a strange group of two figures who carry between them a cluster of grapes hanging from a rod; then a patriarch performing a miracle: Moses striking the rock in the desert and causing a river to appear; and finally a scene of sacrifice: Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac.[1] Obviously there is a rationale behind these juxtapositions, and just as we are beginning to work out the resemblances and parallels, we discover that our work has already been done for us. Set into the border of each semicircle is a Latin inscription indicating how the image as a whole is to be understood.

The window displays a marked intolerance of any claim on behalf of the image to independent life. Each of its details corresponds to a rigorous programme of religious instruction. To prevent the occurrence of those alternating crises of adoration and iconoclasm which had troubled the Church in Byzantium,[2] the image in Western Christendom has been issued with a precise but limited mandate: 'illiterati quod per scripturam non possunt intueri, hoc per quaedam licturae lineamenta contemplatur'.[3] Images are permitted, but only on condition that they fulfil the office of communicating the Word to the unlettered. Their role is that of an accessible and palatable substitute.[4] And not only must the image submit before the Word, it must also take on, as a sign, the same kind of construction as the verbal sign. Speech derives its meanings from an articulated and systematic structure which is superimposed on a physical substratum.[5] Its signs resolve into two components:



1 East Window,
Christchurch Cathedral,
Canterbury

the acoustic or graphic material – the 'signifier'; and intelligible form – the 'signified'. With the linguistic sign, interest in the sensuous materiality of the signifier is normally minimal except in certain highly conventionalised art situations;[6] we tend to ignore the sensual 'thickness' of language unless our attention is specifically directed towards it. And the Canterbury window similarly plays down the independent life of its signifying material, which progressively yields, as we approach it, to a cultivated transparency before the transcendent Scripture inscribed within it. The status of the window is that of a relay or a place of transit through which the eye must pass to reach its goal, which is the Word.[7] Qualities that might detain the eye during that transit are to be carefully restrained.

Moreover, the image is less important *in praesentia* than it is as anticipated memory: the moment of its impact may be intense, but only so that the visual impression can go on resonating within the mind after it has ceased to contemplate the actual image. Present qualities – as in advertising – are subordinated to future ones, and the qualities likeliest to endure are those that cluster around the verbal components: these will fix, while purely visual aspects, unanchored by text, will quickly fade into oblivion: such aspects are therefore to be excluded. Subordination of present experience of the image to future recollection, the stripping away of qualities which do not derive their life from illustration of the Word – it is possible to speak of a certain servility of the medieval image, whatever its degree of beauty. It expects rapid consumption – the Cathedral has hundreds of such images to be absorbed – and instead of cramming into its brief contact with the eye of the spectator as much of itself as possible, the image here follows the opposite course, towards economy and self-effacement. The path of the glance to the final destination of the signified must be smoothed of all resistance. Temporally, reduction from two sides: by the past, in that the image must recall and reinforce the family of representations of the scene already encountered, like a memorandum; and by the future, since the present existence of the image, here and now, is subordinated to a proleptic place within future memory. In the face of this double assault, its existence is reduced to that of an increment or interval.

It is an interval through which texts pour. Scripture determines the master-text: the Gospels through the central panel, the Old Testament through the semicircular quatrefoils. Next, the legends in the margins of the lesser panels, which function by question and answer, like catechism. How does the Crucifixion resemble the sacrifice of the lamb at Passover? Because, the legend tells us, 'He who was as spotless as a lamb sacrificed himself for mankind.'[8] How is the Crucifixion like

the grapes we see being carried by those two figures? 'This one refuses to look at the cluster, the other thirsts to see it: Israel ignores Christ, the Gentile adores him.' How is Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac an analogue of the Cross? Because in both cases the innocent was restored by divine intervention. How is Christ on the Cross like Moses in the desert? 'Just as the rock was riven to yield water, so the side is pierced by the spear: water is for the carnal, blood for the spiritual.' This second level of textuality, determined by the rubrics, is for the most part redundant: the connections could be inferred without the inscriptions, and in the Abraham panel where the inscription is lost, we can manage perfectly well without it. But the rubrics are essential, not only because their answers curtail the number of aspects the image can easily present, but because the act of setting up questions with absolute answers ensures a finite boundary. An image by itself might merely be contemplated; the inscriptions work to turn the image into a riddle or conundrum whose great merit lies in the idea of exhaustibility.[9] Each question is dealt with completely, so that when the answer falls into place the image has no further purpose to serve. The supply of the answer acts as a signal to pass on to the next window. With pedagogic imagery such terminal signposting is essential – left to his own devices the spectator might prolong his contemplation beyond the requirements of instruction. The inscription guarantees closure: the image must not be allowed to extend into independent life.

There is a further dimension of meaning in the image, and it is called into being by a process which closely resembles cinematic montage. The juxtaposition of two images together generates a semantic charge – Eisenstein's 'third' sense[10] – which neither image taken alone could possess; and at this point the images, whether in celluloid or in glass, break free from the external control of script or scripture, and begin to generate meanings from within. Before, the window had been a substitute or relay; now it acts as an independent source of signification. This development is a crucial one, because it marks the first claim of the image to interest and authority in its own right. Neither the Bible nor the individual legends make the global statement the image releases from its own resources: that the new Law fulfils the old. To be sure, though the image does manage to set up as an independent text, it never breaks free of text itself. Given its constructional principle of juxtaposition, liberation from textual constraint is impossible: montage inevitably generates sense, and the generated sense curtails the life of each individual 'shot'. The claim to independence is still contained by Text, through what is almost a kind of repressive tolerance.

The window at Canterbury is a good example of the

supremacy of the *discursive* over the *figural*; terms for which I at once apologise to the reader, because they may suggest a more scientific approach than he or she will find in this book, and because these two ungainly words are going to be used rather often. Part of their awkwardness comes from unfamiliarity, though for this I do not apologise. The problem I will be looking at is one which has been sadly neglected – the interaction of the part of our mind which thinks in words, with our visual or ocular experience before painting. Everyone who has visited a museum or a gallery will know the curious sensation of moving on from one painting to the next and almost before taking in the new image at all, of finding the eyes suddenly plunging down to the tiny rectangle of lettering below or beside it. Many of the paintings discussed in this book were seen for the first time by people who held in their hands a special publication which took the place of our modern rectangles of lettering – the *livret* of each new Parisian Salon, and the information there was far more elaborate than our rudimentary names and dates, though the need met in each case is similar. Even in the twentieth century, when every formerly accepted convention of art has been questioned and refashioned, one convention which has survived almost intact is the use of an inscription as a handle on the image – even when the usual content of the inscription is demolished, as in Duchamp's 'The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even'. We have not yet found ourselves able to dispense altogether, in our dealings with the image, with some form of contact with language. And language enormously shapes and delimits our reception of images. One need think only of the different impact[11] of the same photograph in newspapers of differing ideology; or the difference between this—

This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself.

By the 'discursive' aspect of an image, I mean those features which show the influence over the image of language – in the case of the window at Canterbury, the Biblical texts which precede it and on which it depends, the inscriptions it contains within itself to tell us how to perceive the different panels, and also the new overall meaning generated by its internal juxtapositions. By the 'figural' aspect of an image, I mean those features which belong to the image as a visual experience independent of language – its 'being-as-image'. With the window this would embrace all those aspects we can still appreciate if we have forgotten the stories of the Grapes of Eschol and of the last plague of Egypt, or are not at all familiar with the techniques of 'types' and 'antitypes', but are nonetheless moved by the beauty of the window as light, colour, and design. The window, of course, will engage us far more if we do work to retrieve the reading skills which have declined or been lost in the centuries between its time and our own, because it shows so clearly the authority within the aesthetic thinking of its period, of the discursive over the figural.

Now, we might think this ascendancy or supremacy of the discursive is a function of a certain limited technology – the image at Canterbury is textually saturated because it does not yet know how to be otherwise. And support for this view might be found in the 'traditional' account of the development of European painting as a series of technical leaps towards an increasingly accurate reproduction of 'the real'. A crucial figure here is Masaccio, and as a specimen of his work I have chosen the official who receives the tribute money in his fresco

in the Brancacci Chapel (illustration 2). The French critic Francastel voices the traditional reaction:

> Placed at the edge of the space and of the fresco, his calves tense, his demeanour insolent, this magnificent *sabreur* bears no relation to the figures of gothic cathedrals: he is drawn from universal visual experience. He does not owe his imposing presence to the weight and volume of his robes: his tunic moulds itself on his body. Henceforth man will be defined not by the rules of narrative, but by an immediate physical apprehension. The goal of representation will be appearance, and no longer meaning.[12]

The opposition Francastel erects is Meaning versus Being, and it might seem that the terms 'discursive' and 'figural' repeat that opposition: that the Canterbury window, where discourse subjugated figure, has subordinated Life to Text, whereas the Masaccio, with its goal of 'appearance and no longer meaning', appeals to 'universal visual experience'.[13] Received opinion would support such an opposition: there remains a vague conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning, in the name of a certain mythical idea of Life. Vasari's history of the progress of Renaissance painting is built on this 'common-sense' view: the progress he sees is an evolutionary liberation of Life from the repression of the textual. Italian art, he believed, had thrown off the constrictions of dogma and pedagogy, and having escaped the control of discourse, at once came to an objective registering of the visual experience common to all men: optical truth.

But let us reconsider this 'common-sense' view. At its deepest level it assumes that painting can be calibrated by degrees of remoteness from, or approximation towards, an Essential Copy. The Masaccio is near, the Canterbury window far off. Yet such a view ignores the obvious fact that there is no Essential Copy, and that the rules governing the transposition

2 Masaccio, *Rendering of the Tribute Money*

of the real into the image are subject to historical change.[14] Obviously, we would not hesitate to describe the Masaccio as 'realistic' by comparison with the window; but such a decision does not concern, as Vasari believed, the *distance* of the copy from an original, but only those visual effects we currently agree to call realistic. Husserl has a good phrase for the kind of outlook Vasari represents: the 'natural attitude'.

> I find ever present and confronting me a single spatio-temporal reality of which I myself am a part, as do all other men found in it and who relate to it in the same way. This 'reality', as the word already indicates, I find *existing out there and I receive it just as it presents itself to me as something existing out there*. 'The' world as reality is always there: at the most it is here and there 'other' than I supposed it, and should it be necessary to exclude this or that under the title 'figment of the imagination', 'hallucination', etc., I exclude it from this world which in the attitude of the general thesis is always the world existing out there. It is the aim of the *sciences issuing from the natural attitude* to attain a knowledge of the world more comprehensive, more reliable, and in every respect more perfect than that offered by the simple information received by experience, and to resolve all the problems of scientific knowledge that offer themselves upon its ground.[15]

What Husserl says of the sciences issuing from the natural attitude equally applies to painting: within the natural attitude, which is that of Vasari, Francastel, and the birds of Zeuxis, the image is thought of as self-effacing in the representation or resurrection of things, instead of being understood as the milieu of the articulation of the reality known by a given visual community.[16] It is clear that the term 'realism' cannot draw its validity from any absolute conception of 'the real', because that conception cannot account for the historical and changing character of 'the real' within differing cultures and periods. Its validity needs relativising, and it is more accurate to say that 'realism' lies rather in the effect of recognition of a representation as corresponding to what a particular society proposes and assumes as 'Reality'. The real needs to be understood not as a transcendent and changeless given, but as a production brought about by human activity within specific cultural constraints; a production which involves a complex formation of representations and codes of behaviour, psychology, social manners, dress, physiognomics, gesture and posture – all those practical norms which govern the stance of men towards their particular historical environment. It is in relation to this socially determined body of codes, and not in relation to an immutable 'universal visual experience', that the realism of an image should be understood.

This second and more accurate description of realism, which begins to emerge once the natural attitude is called into question, touches on a phenomenon familiar to the sociology

of knowledge. For example, in their work *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann comment extensively on the drive inherent in all societies to 'naturalise' the reality they have constructed and to transform a world produced by a specific socio-historical activity into a World given from the beginning of time, a Creation, natural and unchanging. In their words, while 'social order is not part of the nature of things and ... cannot be derived from the "laws of nature", social order being only a product of human activity', nonetheless the social world is typically and habitually experienced by its inhabitants 'in the sense of a comprehensive and given reality confronting the individual in a manner analogous to the reality of the natural world'.[17] In connection with the image, realism may be defined as the expression of the idea of the *vraisemblable* which any society chooses as the vehicle through which to express its existence to itself in visual form.[18] Clearly, the historically determined nature of that *vraisemblable* must be concealed if the image is to be accepted as a reflection of a pre-existing real: its success lies in the degree to which that specific historical location remains hidden; which is to say that the success of the image in naturalising the visual beliefs of a community depends on the degree to which it remains unknown as an independent form.

The terms 'figural' and 'discursive' do not, therefore, resolve into the opposition which the natural attitude institutes, between 'accurate reduplication of the real' and 'alien superimposition of intelligibility'. The Masaccio is not more 'real' to us than the Canterbury window because of a closeness to the Essential Copy; it is no closer to and no further from that than any other image. How then are we to account for the conviction that lingers on, even if we have conceded that there are no Essential Copies or absolute realities, that nevertheless Masaccio still looks far more real than the window?

Part of an answer is suggested by an interesting observation by the literary critic Roland Barthes, writing on realist fiction: that its *realism depends on a supposed exteriority of the signified to the signifier*.[19] Reading a realist novel, we quickly lose the awareness that we still possess when reading, for example, poetry, of the work of signification as a process occurring *within* the text; signification seems to enter the text from an 'outside', an outer reality which the text passively mirrors. The realist text disguises or conceals its status as a place of *production* of meaning; and in the absence of any visible generation from within the work, meaning is felt as penetrating the work from an imaginary space outside it – the 'world', whose intrinsic meanings are simply being transcribed. The Canterbury window quite patently displays how it produces its meanings, and for this reason – not because of its remoteness

from the Essential Copy – we are disinclined to call it realistic. With the Masaccio, on the other hand – at least if we are thinking like Francastel – the various meanings of the image are not visibly articulated by any patent system at work on the signifying plane.

Once realism is no longer a question of the Essential Copy, we can begin to explore the means used by the realistic image to persuade us of its illusionism.[20] We have mentioned the exhaustion of the image by the text, in the case of the medieval image. According to the natural attitude, such an image fails to record universal visual experience; it is servile and depleted. By contrast the Masaccio displays a marked *excess* of the image over the text, and because it is seen to break away from the symbolic requirements of discourse, Francastel is prepared to describe it as lifelike. In the terms of my own description, the image is neither like nor unlike Life – but it is far more figural than the Canterbury window. It supplies us with more visual information than we need to grasp its narrative content, and more than we can recuperate as semantically relevant.

With the panel that dealt with the Passover, all that was necessary to establish the idea of 'Passover' was a man daubing a mark on the lintel of a doorway: only quite minimal information had to be supplied to trigger our immediate discursive response; and with Masaccio's scene of the tribute money, all one needs are the component ideas of 'apostle', 'money', 'receiver of money', and the activity which connects them, of 'donation'. The narrative can be parsed, like a sentence, into its minimally sufficient requirements: apostle – donation – recipient.[21] And the Masaccio meets this rudimentary textual demand on the image: the halo establishes 'apostolic', the outstretched hand meeting the open palm establishes 'gives money to' (we do not even have to see the money itself; 'money' is contained in the gesture). The economy or frugality of these signalling means is medievally concise. But Masaccio supplies much more information than this. For example, the donor at the right of the fresco is bearded, white-haired, and robed; the recipient is beardless, brown-haired, and clad in a tunic. In context, these oppositions generate the semantic idea of *sacred : profane*.[22] To be sure, the pairs *bearded : unbearded*, *robe: tunic* and *white-haired : brown-haired* do not of necessity generate *sacred : profane*. It is possible to imagine a scene in which these polarised attributes might feature without any accompanying sense of meaningfulness. It is only when combined with the more central opposition *apostle : official* that these secondary meanings emerge from semantic latency into semantic realisation. Some parts of the image are more discursively charged than other parts; there is a hierarchy of semantic relevance.

This idea of relevance is vital, because realism insists on the