The Wit of Saul Steinberg

By E.H. Gombrich

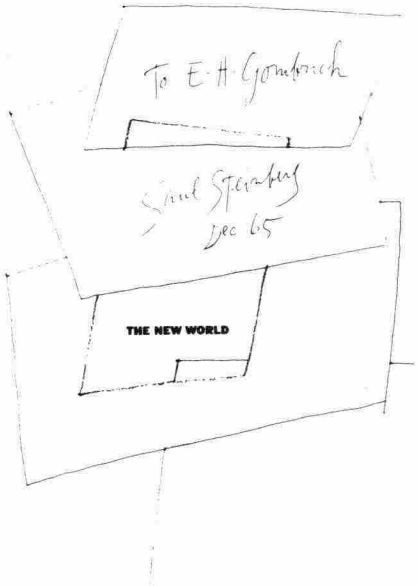

Fig. 1 Steinberg, *The New World,* dedication.

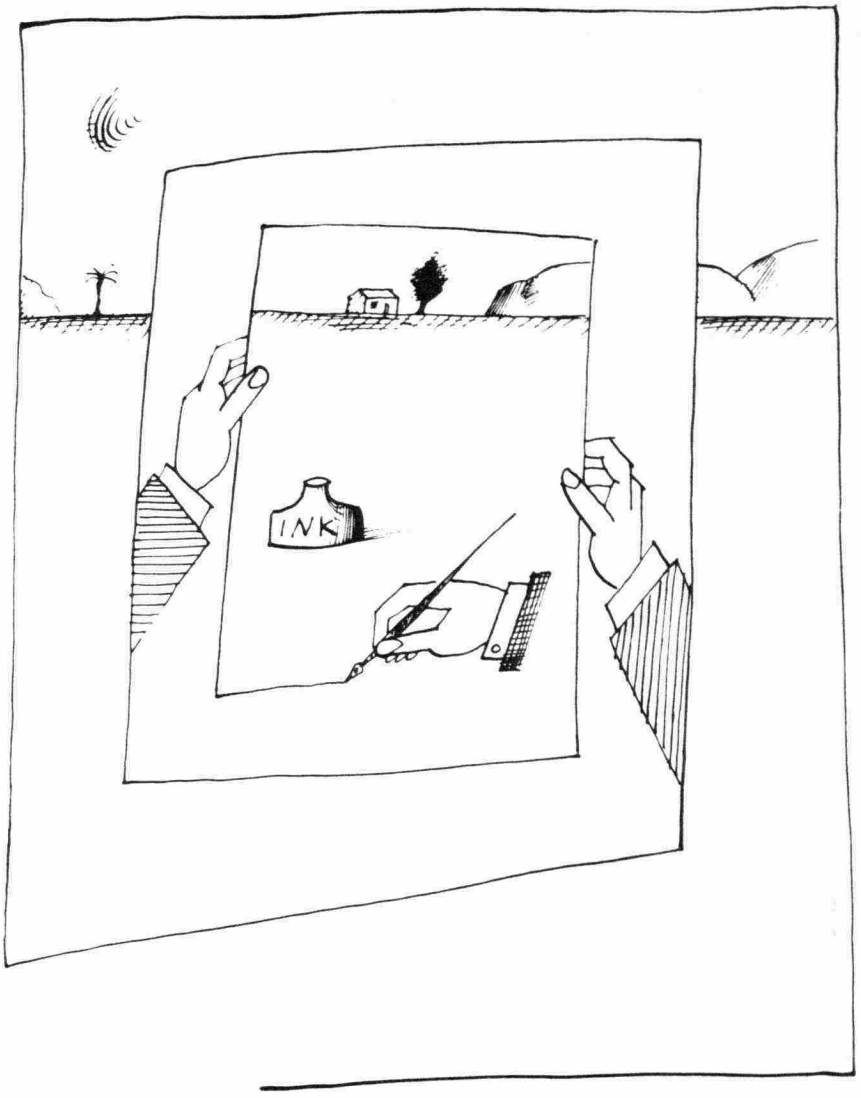

Fig. 2 Steinberg, *The New World.*

The dedication which Saul Steinberg wrote and drew for me when he sent me his volume *The New World* ***(Fig. 1)*** may not seem to fit into a series of articles devoted to the theme of caricature. Yet it is not only personal vanity which prompts me to take it as a starting point for this brief discussion of the artist's wit. Look at the drawing more carefully and you will see that it does not "work out." What appears at first sight as a sequence of stacked oblongs, superimposed or stuck into one another, turns out to be so cunningly devised that it would be impossible to construct such a configuration in real space. It so happens that I owe this generous gift to the words which I devoted to the artist in my book on *Art and Illusion:* "There is perhaps no artist alive who knows more about the philosophy of representation." The tribute, incorporated in an article by Harold Rosenberg, was quoted to my delight on the dust cover of Steinberg's next book; hence his present, which illustrates and confirms my words with that economy of means which is one of the hallmarks of Steinberg's art.

It has often been said that the real or dominant subject matter of twentieth-century art is art itself. If that is the case, Steinberg's contribution to the subject must never be underrated. Without going over the ground again which I covered in my book I may point out that the drawing which I chose here as my starting point offers a more illuminating comment on the essence of Cubism than many lengthy books about the Cubist conception of "space" and its alleged relation to Einstein's theory of relativity.

Rosenberg quoted Steinberg's remark: "What I draw is drawing, [and] drawing derives from drawing. My line wants to remind constantly that it is made of ink."[1] The reminder is made explicit on another page of *The New World* ***(Fig. 2)***, which shows the artist's pleasure in catching us in the traps of his visual contradictions. It would be otiose to point them out in detail.

Fig. 3 Steinberg, *The Passport,* 1954.

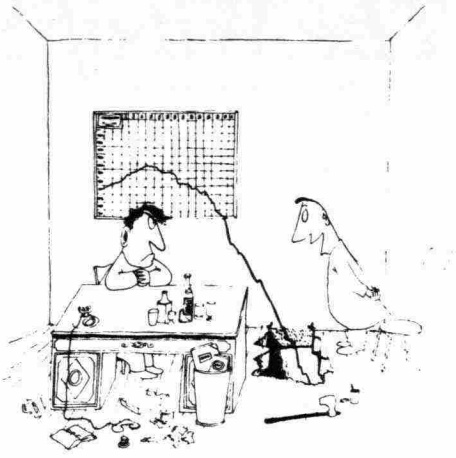

Fig. 4 Steinberg, *All in Line*.

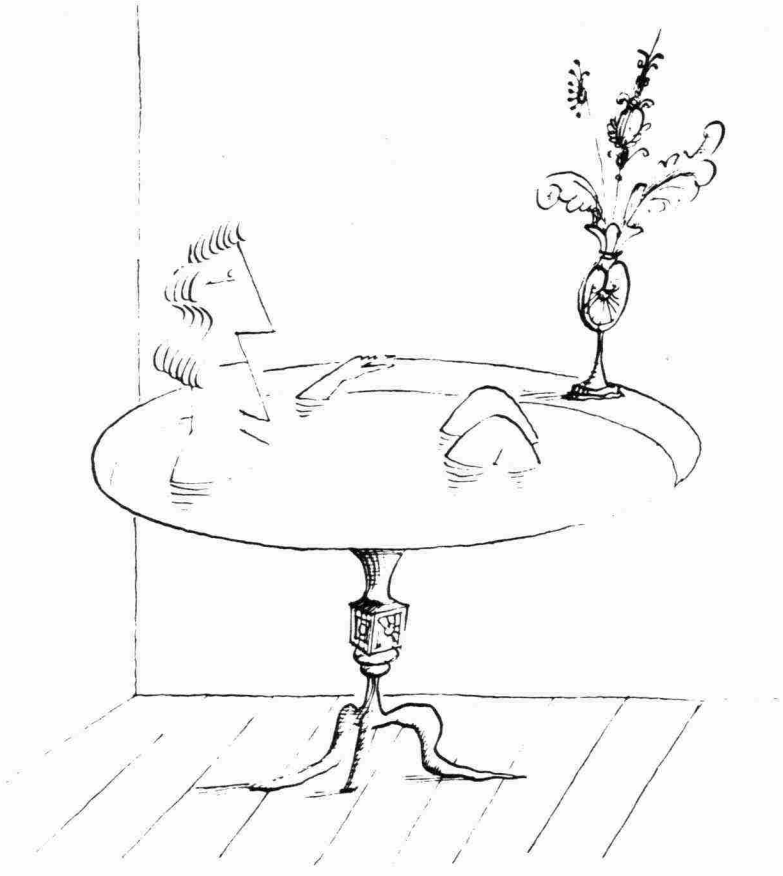

Fig. 5 Steinberg, *The Inspector*.

Indeed, one of the problems in writing about Steinberg's wit is precisely the fact that his drawings make their point so much better than words ever could. What may be said, however, about the artist's remark is that even though he reminds us constantly, he never fully convinces us. Try as we may, what we see is not just ink. The little man who cancels himself ***(Fig. 3)*** remains pathetic and intriguing. The drawing proves, if proof were needed, that our reaction to pictorial representation is quite independent of the degrees of realism. It is a function of our understanding and it takes an enormous effort to inhibit our understanding and only see ink.

There is indeed a parallel problem in our reaction to language. If we could easily hear the words "all Cretans are liars" as just a string of noises (as we would if we heard them in a foreign language), the paradox of self-reference which arises when a Cretan speaks them would not trouble us.

What must be one of the earliest of Steinberg's humorous drawings to be included in one of his volumes neatly illustrates the play between "ink" and meaning in a joke that still relies on a caption ***(Fig. 4)***. What starts as a graph turns into a real force smashing through the floor. There is as yet no real paradox here, no more than in the metaphors of language which we do not take literally, as when we say that prices "rocket" or "slump." In self-reference we cannot interpret without running up against a contradiction, and contradictions are one of the many humorous devices Steinberg uses to produce the shock of laughter, as when we look at the mysterious table which is also the rim of a bathtub ***(Fig. 5)***—another visual joke worth many lengthy disquisitions about the reading of images.

This process of reading is examined in many of the drawings in which the artist explores the very limits of graphic signs. He shows us how the simplest geometrical configurations will suddenly resemble a human head and exhibit a definite individuality and expression, as is the case with the odious pair who appear to arrive as the guests of a party ***(Fig. 6)***.

Needless to say, these explorations of what I have called "the philosophy of representation" have also taken him much further afield. In some of his wittiest drawings we see him commenting on a time-honored problem of criticism, that of the proper relation between form and content. The general heading under which this question used to be discussed since classical antiquity is that of the decorum, the fitting of the right word or style to the right subject matter, memorably summed up (as far as poetry is concerned) in Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism":

> 'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence,
> The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
> Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
> And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows:
> But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,

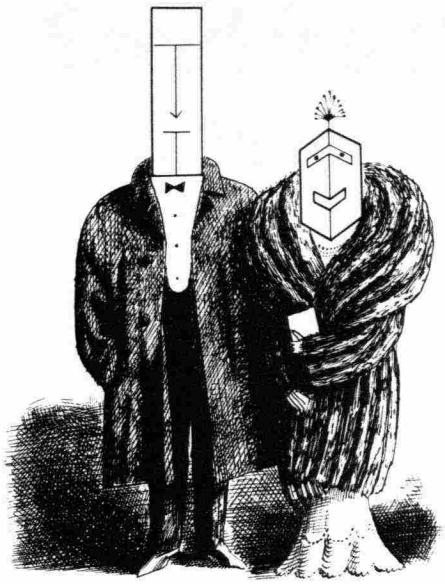

Fig. 6 Steinberg, *The New World.*

The hoarse, rough verse should like
the torrent roar.
When Ajax strives some rock's vast
weight to throw
The line, too, labours, and the words
move slow.

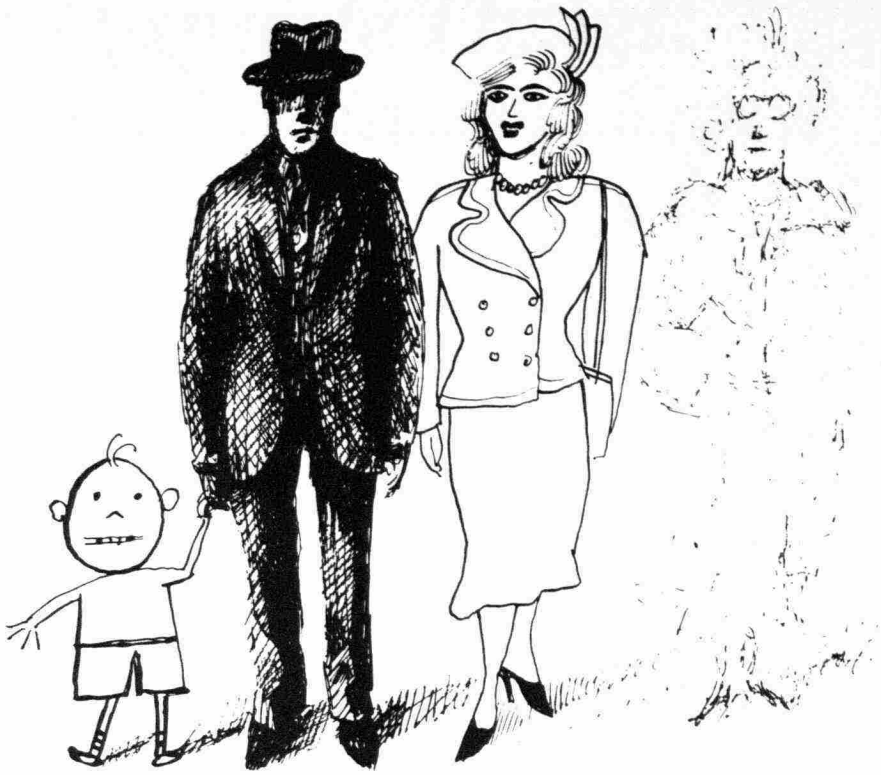

Fig. 7 Steinberg, "Family," *The Passport,* 1954.

As I have indicated in the last chapter of *Art and Illusion,* attempts have not been wanting in the past to apply this doctrine to the visual arts, but we had to wait for a Steinberg to apply it with utmost simplicity. In many of his drawings it is again the line or the graphic medium which seems "an echo to the sense."

His "Family" ***(Fig. 7)*** shows us the father firmly modeled, the mother with undulating lines, the grandmother all but fading away between hesitant pen strokes, and, of course, the child drawn in the style of children's scribbles.

From here it is but one step to the representation of what are called our synaesthetic reactions, the depiction of one sense modality by another. The sounds of "Giuseppe Verdi" floating through the window ***(Fig. 8)*** do not leave us in doubt that it is early Verdi.

As this example shows, there is no distinction in Steinberg's manipulation of "ink" between representation and writing. He can incorporate all the means of visual communication in his images. To quote his words once more: "I appeal to the complicity of my reader who will transform the line into meaning by using our common background of culture, history, poetry. Contemporaneity in this sense is a complicity."[2]

The conventional device of a "balloon" surrounding words or thoughts is used to delightful purpose in the image of the rocking chair dreaming of being a rocking horse ***(Fig. 9)***. The question mark, as so often in real life, takes off and pursues us, the

Fig. 8 Steinberg, *The New World.*

Fig. 9 Steinberg, *The New World.*

conventional lines indicating its bounces ***(Fig. 10)***. But Steinberg has also used script and words more insistently, indeed more philosophically, in such compositions as Figure 11, where he contrasts the firm foundation of the words I AM with the ramshackle instability of I HAVE and the radiant triumph of I DO.

Everybody will have his own favorites among Steinberg's ingenious visualizations, such as his mapping of time where we are shown the frontier of March and April which is just being crossed by his favorite cat, or his parodistic manipulations of patriotic symbolism in his Grand Tableaux of political rhetoric. Nor should we forget that he is not merely a master of line but can use all the means of trompe l'oeil in his spoof picture postcards or his meticulous engineering drawings.

At the end of Plato's *Symposium*, when the rest of the company had either fallen asleep or gone home, we hear that Socrates was still arguing with Agathon and Aristophanes. Socrates was driving them to the admission that the same man could have the knowledge required for writing comedy and tragedy, at which Aristophanes began to nod and then Agathon, while Socrates walked off, apparently happy in the knowledge that he had won the argument.

But has he? The idea persists that the comedian or caricaturist is a mere entertainer, hardly worthy of the attention of the superior persons who study and analyze the creations of serious "artists."

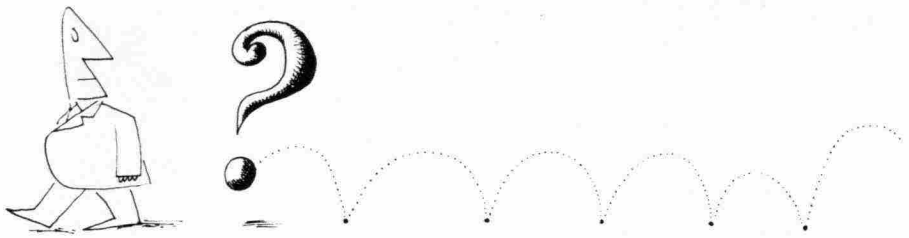

Fig. 10 Steinberg, *The New World.*

Unless I am much mistaken, Steinberg's work is not referred to in the standard books on twentieth-century art, nor does he seem to figure in the survey courses explaining and tabulating the various "isms" said to make up the modern movement. Whether he resents this comparative lack of attention accorded him in the curriculum of art historians I do not know. But it seems to me that one of his drawings ***(Fig. 12)*** offers the best comment on this situation: A solemn procession of stereotyped graybeards is marching past a dull official building aptly inscribed as "The National Academy of the Avant-Garde." Maybe they will all be forgotten when Steinberg is still remembered with gratitude and pleasure.

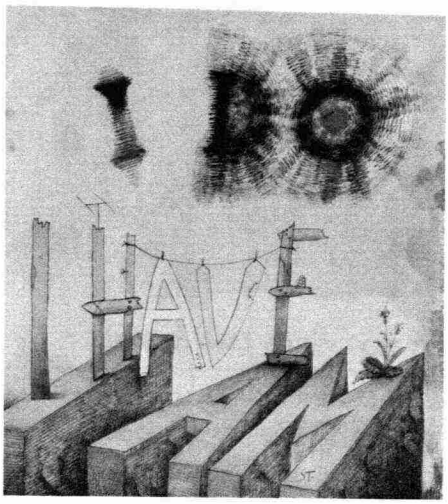

Fig. 11 Steinberg, *The Inspector.*

Notes

1 Harold Rosenberg, *Saul Steinberg*, New York and London, 1978, p. 19.

2 Quoted ibid., p. 22.

E.H. Gombrich *was formerly Director of the Warburg Institute and Professor of the History of the Classical Tradition at the University of London. Among his many publications are* Art and Illusion, Meditations on a Hobby Horse, The Sense of Order, *and, most recently,* The Image and The Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation.

Fig. 12 Steinberg, *The Inspector.*