

## ORIGINALITY IN WOOD-ENGRAVING.

WITH ENGRAVINGS BY THE AUTHOR.



THE revival of interest in American wood-engraving during the last twenty years has brought about much discussion in regard to its position among the graphic arts. We are told, upon the best authority, what qualities are inherent in the wood, what is suitable in subject and drawing, and what is legitimate and illegitimate in technique. We are also gravely assured that a neglect of these well-defined lines of expression leads to a decadence of all that is truly beautiful in the art. There is an assumption that what has been best in the past must be the authority for the future, no matter what conditions arise to revolutionize and widen the sphere of its usefulness. We are also instructed that the province of wood-engraving should be confined to reproduction, or the interpreting of artistic thought at second hand, and any departure from the beaten track should be regarded as a temerity punishable with stripes rather than encouraged with approval. All of the traditions and habits inherent in the profession are reverently promulgated, and all of the textures necessary for the printing of fifty years ago are tenaciously insisted upon. All this in spite of the fact that modern machinery has made a new era in the printing of illustrations, as complete of its kind as that incident to the conditions of present warfare in contrast with the old methods of the past—in spite of the fact that in the best of Turkey boxwood we have a material capable of the most exquisite finish, and responsive to any texture or instrument known to the engraver. It is capable of holding its sharpness and delicacy, down to the finest touch, through a limited edition on a hand-press, just the same as an etching or a steel plate. And yet such is the power of habit and tradition that it would be exceedingly difficult to have publicly acknowledged what would be freely admitted in private—that the fine Japan proof is fully equal in quality to that of a high-class etching. Seemingly the first proofs from the wood-engraving should settle its position among the graphic arts, just as the best prints settle the rank of the etching or the steel-engraving. On the contrary, the enormous edition from an electro-plate of the engraving fixes its position and relegates it to the realm of the commonplace.

To illustrate more fully how the purpose or aim of a given work dominates the result, we have only to consider and put in sharp con-

trast two methods of treatment—the one for the etcher and the other for the engraver.

The etcher is encouraged in every possible way to put his personality into the handling of his subject, whether it be an original or a reproduction from another artist. Every inducement is made to have him assume the position of an artist; at least in the sense of being master of the color scheme of his black and white reproduction. Fullness of modeling or exactness of detail is not expected; but only the suggested abbreviation, dashed with a personality that distinguishes his work from that of another man. Even the dominating of the printer, while inking his plate so that each impression shall be unlike another, is regarded a merit and paid for accordingly.

This artistic atmosphere and treatment is supposed to bring something unique and rare, and undoubtedly does bring to each representative impression the best impulse of the moment. It would seem that such methods would destroy all faithfulness in reproductive work; yet, on the contrary, if the artist loves his copy, it is the only way to reproduce its quality. The personal friends of an etcher and his market combine to make him a law unto himself in his method of producing a result.

Without claiming for the wood-engraver such entire consideration, there is much in the plan which recommends itself if we are to have artistic results. There is an assumption in the beginning that we are dealing with a highly imaginative organization, capable of being attracted in some special direction of art, and able to reproduce it through training already established. In the past, and to a great extent in the present, a contrary environment is the lot of a wood-engraver. It is assumed in the beginning that he has not the feeling and imagination of an artist, although he may habitually produce better quality than his copies call for. He is hedged in by mechanical influences that sap the enthusiasm and deaden the ambition; he is harassed till, like a fox chased by the hounds, he would fain give up the merit of his own production and escape to a burrow of peaceful oblivion. And all this because the result must stand the strain of thousands of impressions and because the end is purely commercial, no matter how highly artistic the beginning. These conditions can be changed only when the public recognize and value the engraver's first proofs and the putting of his position on a par with that





OLD MAPLE TREE AT WHATELY GLEN.



of the etcher — this view of the case to be taken upon the supposition that the engraver has the will power to dominate his own plate, using his copy as an inspiration. If, on the contrary, mechanical exactness is the purpose, then all departments concerned in the matter can fall into line with the precision of parade, and a result may be counted upon with ease and certainty. Many artists are looking for such a millennium, when the engraver shall become an electric machine controlled by a button, and themselves produced as in a mirror — forgetting that they themselves would not make an exact copy of their own work, even the same size as the original.

Through such influences art departments are obliged to constitute themselves into halls of judgment, with the elusive and ever-changing standards of the artist on the one hand and the needs of the printer and the pockets of the publisher on the other. It is small credit to those most interested if the whole matter does not take refuge in a process that shall grind with delightful monotony and uniformity all coming to its mill, and with a great saving of conscience and responsibility. If the pages of the great publications should sparkle with the variety and change of such a system, a like machine might be used with profit on the paintings and etchings gathered at exhibitions. It would only be necessary to decide upon a standard, and then bring all work to its measure of perfection.

Many artists may justly feel that they are better reproduced by mechanical means than by engraving. This may be true if they can make the textures necessary entirely themselves; if not, they are dependent on a monotonous texture that is entirely mechanical, thus antagonizing one of the most important principles of their daily teaching and practice — that is, that "nature does not repeat herself, and no one given surface of a picture should be like another." Thus, how can a harmony, made up of many notes, be best produced by a machine having only one note or texture? The result can only be a shadow of the original — a mere lifeless corpse.

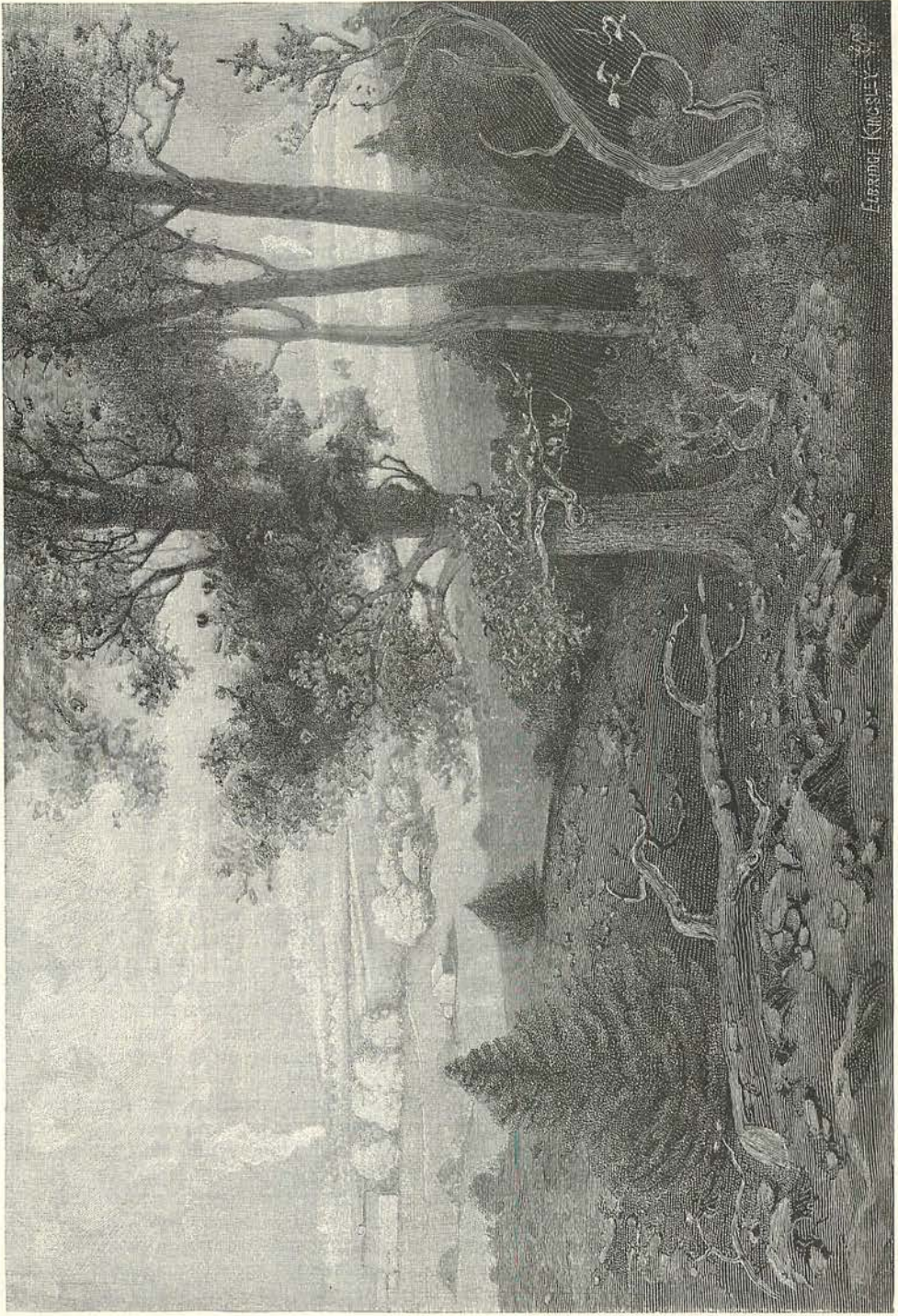
This cannot be entirely true of the engraver's work, no matter how poor, because his personality is bound to show itself in some shape, giving change and variety in contrast with that of another. He cannot get rid of his method any more than of his handwriting. It is a part of himself, and in it is the very element needed for the vitality of an engraving. Indeed, the feelings and ambitions of prominent engravers for personal expression should be exactly the same as those which govern painters and workers in all departments of creative art. And also, each important en-

graver is pretty sure to become a specialist, strong in certain directions while weak in others, just the same as his brethren of the brush and pencil.

Much confusion arises in the inquiring mind concerning this matter, because of the disagreements of professional criticism. The narrowest comments come from where we have the right to expect the broadest and most helpful judgments, so that, unconsciously, and with entire honesty, the engraver's own technique and manner become the yardstick with which to measure everybody else. The only true position for the outsider to take is to regard every prominent engraver as a specialist and judge him upon his own ground. Even then, comparatively speaking, every man's life is made up largely of failures. Only a very few examples reach the high-water mark that gives character to an artist's reputation.

Of course a large share of illustrations used in connection with relief printing have only a matter-of-fact purpose. Many artists also lean to the scientific phase of their art, requiring, with perfect reason, a more colorless medium than the specialist engraver can give. Here mechanical exactness is the better expression. If, however, the demand is in the direction of color, textures, and values, or in the line of tone harmonies, where no part is an exact repetition of another, then the mechanical rendition will destroy the whole sentiment of the picture. It may be scientifically exact and yet have nothing in common with the original. Artists of such subjects cannot possibly find infallibility in reproduction, even if they controlled every stage of the work themselves, because it is not a matter of reason and formula, but of feeling and impulse. Some of the most important work of this kind assumes many phases while in the hands of the engraver. The copy may be a painting that undergoes many changes while the engraving is progressing. When finished, the two results are sure to be unlike in the scientific sense of the term, and yet so near together in quality that the artist may feel himself better rendered than were possible by any other means. It is a species of legerdemain in which present results are only stepping-stones to higher excellence. There is no accepting of standards at a given time, either in exactness of form or in harmony of color. If the engraver is to accomplish anything here he must work in the same spirit as the artist, or not at all. He must mount the steed of his own technique, unfettered by leash or rein, and chase a leader, perhaps mighty in creative force, yet as fickle as the wind. There is no exact classification of the results till long after the actors are dead — either for the artist or for the engraver. Never-





MORNING FROM THE SHADOW OF MOUNT HOLYOKE.



theless, here is the germ of originality for wood-engraving; and if the engraver loves his subject, he will put life and vitality into his production, no matter what may be his method of producing it.

The foregoing naturally leads to the consideration of the engraver as an original worker on wood, both as to the conception of his subject and its execution. Here again the habits and training of his profession and the custom of his patrons tend to force him to continue in the safe routine of copying an established artistic reputation. It requires some daring for an engraver of small means to produce an engraving that he can call entirely his own, because of the uncertainty of its market. He knows very well that its success is more a question of reputation than of merit, and the matter is discussed and settled by his patrons long before his work begins, leading naturally to the conclusion that copying is the only field for wood-engraving.

It is true the old method of drawing upon the wood has become somewhat obsolete, and photography has brought almost every kind of artistic expression to the proper size of the wood block, which convenience the engraver can use for his own work as well as for that of another. Yet habit and want of time often turn the best of conveniences into a snare. Many paintings are reproduced upon the false values of the photograph, without a careful study of the original at all, and of course an engraver can bring a poor result from exactly the same causes. Every inducement seems to come forward for the earliest and simplest way of reaching a result, and the temper of the American people reaches out for the best art by buying it outright, or inventing a method of producing it quickly and cheaply; anything rather than the plodding industry that builds a life work upon character and experience; anything rather than allow the human element to grow and ripen, to settle its own destiny when life is done. Artist friends criticize and say, "Why do you so?" to the efforts of the original engraver, and then commit the same faults in their own work with impunity. If an engraver succeeds in producing a result equal to the ordinary engraving by the professional artist and his engraver, immediately his work is a challenge and his standard is moved up. He must draw like a Meissonier as well as be a great colorist. Of course if reputation and method are forgotten the result can be judged upon its merits, relegating the whole question to ordinary art standards.

This opens the controversy upon what is good and what is worthless in art, a matter which has never been settled, and never will be while the world stands.

There can be found only a few salient points for the artist or the engraver to settle upon. There is no question but that a perfect engraving should combine perfect drawing, harmonious color, and the best of technique with the graver. Yet this can never be, except in theory, while human nature remains what it is; and, indeed, there is no sensible reason why it should be expected. When the greatest reputations in the world of art are analyzed we find that perfection in all directions is but a popular fancy. True, a great mind will seize the essentials and express itself so as to be understood and remembered; while it is equally true that a small mind will spend its whole force over the grammar of its language, and after all have nothing worthy of expression. To illustrate this idea we have but to call to mind a few names of totally different characteristics in the long line of great reputations in the world of art.

In spite of volumes of eulogy, Turner did not draw in the sense that Meissonier would attach to the term; neither did the great Barbizon school of French painters paint to satisfy the technical standards of their own schools of art. They simply had the power to select from nature the qualities they loved best, the technical power to express themselves in harmony with their own feelings, and to express themselves so that future listeners should make no mistake as to the message sent or the personality of the expression. The greatest reputations have been born independent of existing schools of training and thought; nay, to a large extent they have arisen in spite of them.

Perhaps it is not necessary that the engraver follow the painter in all his methods of drawing, sketching, and painting, yet it may be the best way. Many spend as much time with the brush as with the graver. The essential point is to be at home with what one has to say, either by painting or by engraving upon the spot. It is perfectly feasible to engrave under the shadow of the trees in pleasant summer weather, but it does not follow that a winter scene must be produced while the artist is freezing to death in a snow bank.

The writer of this article has found it necessary to leave the city and spend a part of his time in his childhood home for rest and inspiration, and this time has mainly been spent in painting for use in engraving afterward.

Away up the Connecticut Valley, beyond Mount Tom and Mount Holyoke, in a little basin surrounded by hills, nestles the quiet village of Old Hadley—old in the sense of having a history in the beginning of the nation, and connecting directly with the mother country through a Puritan ancestry; and old in the sense of preserving intact much of the tradition





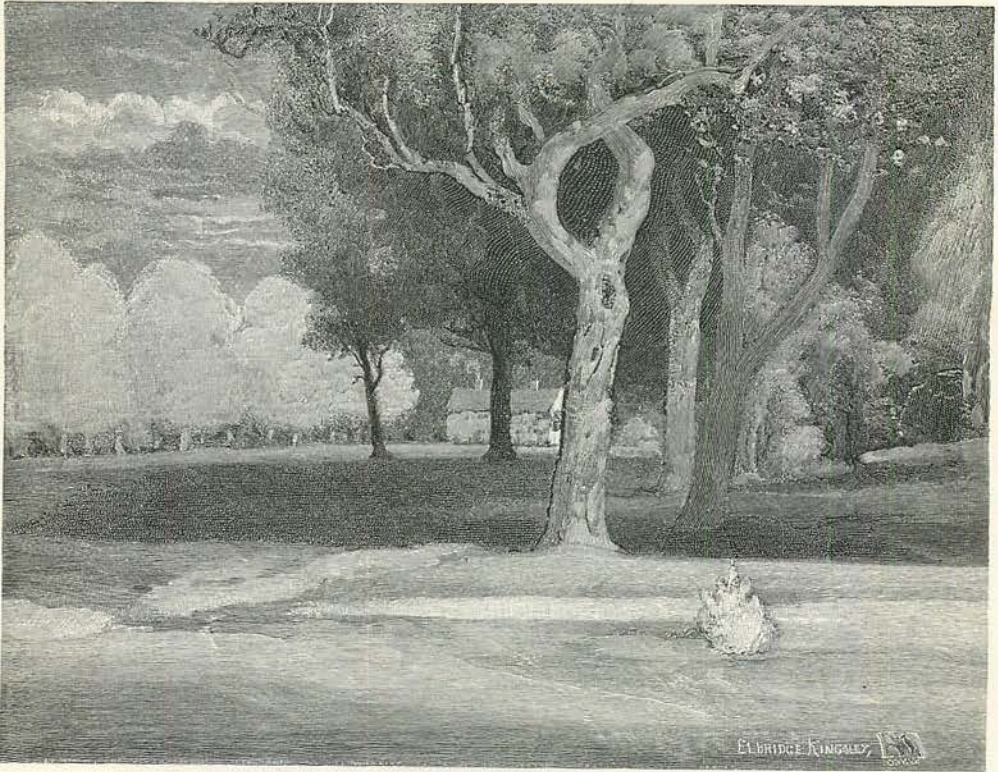
A WINTER IDYL.

and appearance of two hundred years ago. Here are the same houses where the regicides found a refuge, and in sight are the same forest-covered hills where the Indians lurked in ambush, and to this day in going up and down the broad streets can be seen traces of the quaint manners of the Puritan forefathers.

At this moment from a front window can be seen one of the fairest scenes upon which the sun ever shone. It is midwinter, and the ground and trees are covered with freshly fallen snow. A wide street lined with scattered cottages and trees makes up the foreground. In the middle distance the meadows stretch away level as a floor across the Connecticut River to the foothills of Mount Holyoke. The long, cold, blue mountain range rises like a walled precipice sheer from the valley, its rocky sides partly clothed with somber evergreen forests. In the streets of the town the graceful elm is found at its best, drooping under its

burden of clinging white. Each sidewalk shows a double column, rearing their magnificent plumes to the sky. The air is soft, and a faint haze is stealing along the surface of the snow. For an hour not a human being appears; only now and then a faint bit of curling smoke rises above a roof to show that life is within. Over all the setting sun is sending its yellow light, making exact counterparts of the trees in long blue shadows across the street. The eastern sky at the horizon is heavy with purple clouds, and just above is a clear sky of a most delicate green, deepening to a blue-black at the zenith. In the midst of the clear space rides the full moon, faintly emerging and touching the green with a silver rim. She is only waiting for the golden sunlight to weaken in order to show her power. Every house, tree-trunk, and hillock in front gleams like gold, while on the shadow side the roofs and treetops are flooded with silver light. Each luminary is





OLD HADLEY STREET.

throwing out side by side color harmonies of indescribable beauty.

Almost in a moment the scene changes. The sun drops its light, a cloud drifts across the moon, the wind rises and shakes the whiteness from the trees, and sends the drifts scurrying against the window panes. All is darkness and gloom. This is New England in winter.

In the warmer season the picture changes. The spring loosens the ice-bound rivulets, and they flood the valleys with water till the lowlands are a vast lake. Then the buds begin to swell, and by the time the waters have abated, the long meadows are tremulous in the most delicate greens and olives. Billow upon billow arises to meet the eye till lost in the distant blue of the hills. All nature is dancing in the glad sunshine and bowing to the gentle breezes. The song birds are filling the air with music, and the meadow carpets are strewn with brilliant colored flowers.

But it is an autumn picture from the shadow of Mount Holyoke that enchains the imagination, and the experience is held in fond remembrance for many a long year afterward. From early dawn till nearly noon the northern slope of the mountain is in deep shadow, while the valley below is bathed in sunshine. The ground may be white with frost, the air chilly, and

the climb up the jagged rocks toilsome, but when a comfortable outlook is reached the discomfort is forgotten as the gorgeous panorama unfolds itself. A long serpentine wreath of fog may be rising from the bosom of the Connecticut, hiding the distant towns and villages. Puffs of steam and smoke are shooting up through the vapor, showing the beginning of day at the mills. Perhaps a breeze, like an invisible tongue, will thrust aside the fog for a moment and disclose a portion of the cold, steel-like surface of the river, or it may uncover the brow of Mount Tom and let the sunlight in. All up and down the ragged eastern slope the golden light plays, unable to loosen the cold grip of the fog at the base. So we have a mountain hanging in mid-air like a jewel. Soon the all-powerful sun asserts himself, and in faintly rosy tints the spires and roofs of Northampton begin to flash out from the mists against a background of purple hills, with a crown of fleecy clouds overhead. Presently the sun and wind together drive the flying mists down the valley, and far away we can discern the shadow line of the mountain upon which we stand creeping nearer and nearer. Within its limit at our feet the frost rests upon the landscape like a shroud; beyond the line in the warmth and sunshine the



most gorgeous coloring is springing into life. Far away the river is merrily coming down the valley, flashing like a silver thread, and by its side are trooping serried armies of brilliant trees. Gold and crimson maples spring into life one after another out of the shadows, till the foothills are reached, when the more somber forest trees take their places.

But the impression on the mind, as the eye sweeps away to the north for twenty miles, is as if all the armies of the earth were out in the splendor of holiday parade. Only it is so very peaceful — so peaceful that hours pass unnoticed by the unconscious observer. The sun wheels on its course, the mountain reverses

its shadow, a path of streaming light dips into the river below,— is gone,— twinkling stars come out, and the dream is over.

The relation of such impressions to engraving on wood may not appear at first, but one engraver, at least, thinks he cannot engrave well without such experiences. And if other engravers become of like mind and love the Connecticut Valley, it is no assumption for them to find expression through the channel of their own profession. Each one will find material to build according to his liking, and the public in choosing from the results will, in the main, deal with it upon the same principle.

*Elbridge Kingsley.*

## PAINTER-ENGRAVING.

WITH ENGRAVINGS BY THE AUTHOR.



ALL the arts are but the means for expressing thought, and that art is most valuable which interposes fewest obstacles between the thought and its ultimate expression, and receives most readily and retains longest the impress of individuality.

In the more fundamental arts, sculpture, music, and painting of fixed pictures, these attributes do not change greatly; but in the multiplying arts, where the final result is influenced by intermediate operations, their possibilities may be vastly augmented and their value greatly increased by refinements in those operations, so that an art which under certain conditions could not be made available for the ready fixing of refined thought may, when those conditions are improved, become very valuable for such use.

Among the graphic arts none has so long held its position or has had so wide an influence as relief engraving, remaining the same in principle since the first line was cut, nearly two thousand years ago. The development of its possibilities has been coincident with improvements in printing, but the direction of its use has been largely influenced by its adaptability to definite representation in small size, and the consequent convenience in the distribution of its results. During this century it has gained steadily in public estimation and extended use, until, at the present day, it is called upon in supplement to descriptive writing not only to represent the landscapes, archi-

ture, costumes, and customs of every country, but to give a comprehensive idea of the world's work in science, applied arts, and industries, invention, manufacture, transportation, and communication: this it does so successfully that there seems little in the natural or economic life of the universe that cannot be clearly pictured on the page which may be held in the hand of the fireside reader. Its value as a means of distributing information is well known and appreciated, but its artistic possibilities have not been so carefully studied and are not so well understood.

An art which has done so much and has done it so well may reasonably be looked to to do much more; because what it has accomplished in representing numberless forms, textures, and qualities in the widely varying subjects of descriptive illustration indicates its susceptibility to mental control; and if this susceptibility is sufficiently delicate, and it does not oppose too serious obstacles in manipulation, it is valuable as a means of artistic expression.

The reason that it has not been heretofore made use of for this purpose, except in isolated instances, may be found in the fact that the influencing adjuncts of paper-making and printing had not been sufficiently perfected and brought into harmony to make such work possible; and for the want of these favorable conditions neither the public nor the workers in the art have recognized its possibilities.

After the improvements in paper-making and printing referred to, the chief of these has been the reproductive engraving of paintings. In this work the attempt has been made —