

CHARACTERISTICS OF GEORGE INNESS.



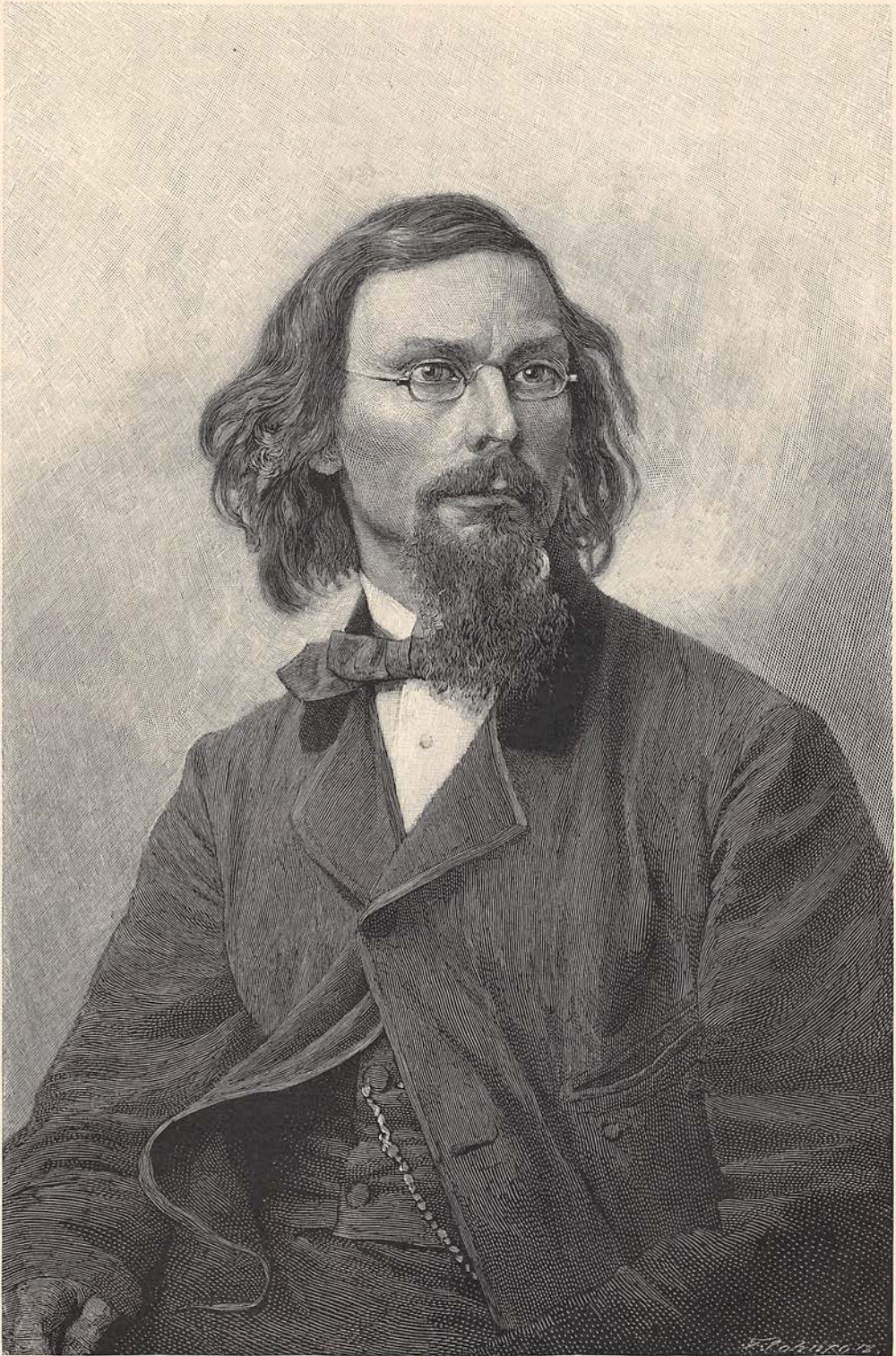
THAT George Inness most enjoyed, in his hours of ease, was talking and writing on metaphysical subjects like the Darwinian hypothesis of evolution, and the distinction between instinct and reason. He had neither the time nor the inclination to become well read in these matters, but he would wade through a treatise of Archbishop Whately's or John Stuart Mill's, and industriously record the more notable of his animadversions. Certain he was that man could not have descended from the ape, that a brute must always remain a brute, that no class or function could be merged in another class or function. For years he studied the science of numbers,— into which Swedenborg also made many incursions,— and in several of his manuscripts he demonstrated that the number one represents the infinite; the number two, conjunction; the number three, potency; the number four, substance; the number five, germination; the number six, material condition; and so on. And wherever these numbers occurred in the Bible, he was ready, in conversation or with his pen, to prove their symbolical significance. So fond was he of these speculations that, had he been rich, he said, he would have pursued them to the exclusion of painting. In reading a manuscript of Inness's it was not always easy to understand his meaning. His sentences were long and involved, and lucidity of expression suffered from haste and inexperience. The art of writing he had never mastered, principally because he never really cared that what he wrote should be read. The extracts from his manuscripts which I have contributed to various periodicals are sometimes obscure in spite of my efforts to get him to explain them. "I don't expect everybody to understand these things," he protested. On one occasion he showed me an essay, of perhaps five thousand words, on Zola's "L'Assommoir," in which he had endeavored to prove that this French novel was the greatest temperance tract ever published.

In his conversation, however, especially when answering questions on art matters, he was particularly concise, forcible, and clear; and if he had cared to be reported often enough by a competent person, the result might have been a treatise on painting more useful than Leonardo's. I never knew a man whose off-hand thoughts were so well worth preserving;

and I never took a stroll with him, or welcomed him at my house, or met him at his own, without wishing that some invisible scribe might make a stenographic report of his talk, and, after submitting it for editorial revision, print it for the benefit of art students.

"A work of art," he said, "is beautiful if the sentiment is beautiful; it is great if the sentiment is vital. Details are to be elaborated only enough to produce the sentiment desired. A picture in which the evident intention has been to reach the truth is the picture that the true artist loves. The sleek polish of lackadaisical sentiment, and the puerilities of impossible conditions, are never admirable. Here is a pencil sketch of my own — a young girl about to slip into a brook from the overhanging trunk of a tree. She is entirely disrobed. I made this sketch with the purest kind of motive, feeling that the subject was beautiful, and that in no other way could I convey the sentiment that I had chosen. I shall put it on canvas, keeping the background cool and sweet, and trying to idealize as much as possible. Such a subject, so treated, is as pure as any other. Moreover, I paint the girl at a distance of thirty or forty feet, which gives at once a subdued effect. The mind does not receive the full impression of an object looked at unless this object is viewed at a distance of three times its own length or height; and if it is in the midst of accessories, a proportionate distance should be allowed."

Swedenborgianism interested him as a metaphysical system, especially in its science of correspondences; but he never formulated for himself a theological creed, because, as he said, a man's creed changes with his states of mind, and the formulation made to-day becomes useless to-morrow. He never doubted the immortality of the soul, nor felt that other proof of it was necessary beyond the fact that men generally believe and have believed in immortality. "The consciousness of immortality," he declared, "is wrapped up in all the experiences of my life, and this to me is the end of the argument. Man's unhappiness arises from disobedience to the monitions within him. The principles that underlie art are spiritual principles — the principle of unity and the principle of harmony. Christ never uttered a word that forbade the creating or the enjoying of sensuous form. The fundamental necessity of the artist's life is the cultivation of his moral



ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON.

AFTER A PHOTOGRAPH BY BRADY.

GEORGE INNESS.

powers, and the loss of those powers is the loss of artistic power. The efforts of the Catholic Church to excite the imagination of worshippers are admirable, because the imagination is the life of the soul. Art is an essence as subtle as the humanity of God, and, like it, is personal only to love, a stranger to the worldly-minded, a myth to the mere intellect. I would not give a fig for art ideas except as they represent what I, in common with all men, need most — the good of our practice in the art of life. Rivers, streams, the rippling brook, hillsides, sky, and clouds, all things that we see, will convey the sentiment of the highest art if we are in the love of God and the desire of the truth."

Sometimes, when feeling a subject deeply, he expressed himself in verse as well as on canvas. A landscape called "Breaking Up," in which storm-clouds were dissolving over the crest of a mountain, an impression dashed off in four hours, suggested to him a poetical "Address of the Clouds to the Earth." Shelley's clouds wandered in thick flocks, shepherded by the unwilling wind. Inness's clouds were brothers, and benefactors of the earth, wooers of the wind that made groves and meadows ring with joyous laughter. In another landscape autumn leaves are falling into a river, and floating along toward the sea. Some lines of symbolism describe each leaf as "a little truth from off the tree of life," going to join other truths that had preceded it, and to report progress in the interest of the brotherhood of truths. Rhyme and meter do not count in Inness's poetry. He did not wish them to count.

The hero of a novel of Jane Austen's says: "I like a fine prospect. I do not like crooked, twisted, or blasted trees. I admire those that are tall, straight, and flourishing. I am not fond of nettles, or thistles, or heath-blossoms." One summer afternoon, when Inness and I were walking in Montclair, New Jersey, — his home and mine, — near the foot of its beautiful mountain, where the "prospect" was particularly fine, the subject that engaged his attention was the delightful gradation of grays in an old rail fence; and on another occasion, when driving down that mountain, from the green slopes of which the trees and cottages of Montclair appear so picturesquely grouped, he feasted his eyes on the rich, creamy tones produced by sunlight shining through the hairs of our gray horse's tail. No natural object was ugly to him. So beautiful was the meanest natural object that no other natural object seemed more beautiful than it. He fondly loved the gnarled writhings of old apple-trees, the affectionate drooping of their branches toward the earth that nourished them, the crooked, twisted olive-trees of Italy, which told stories of

man's relations with them. And the landscapes that he painted — civilized landscapes, not savage and untamed — pleased him the most when they most communicated the sentiment of humanity.

In his "Life of Turner," Mr. Hamerton quotes "the following opinion expressed by an intelligent and accomplished American artist, Mr. George Inness":

Turner's "Slave-ship" is the most infernal piece of claptrap ever painted. There is nothing in it. It has as much to do with human affections and thought as a ghost. It is not even a bouquet of color. The color is harsh, disagreeable, discordant.

"These views," says Mr. Hamerton, "while interesting for their frankness, are severe; and their severity is partly due to reaction against Mr. Ruskin's eloquent praises." I remember well the circumstances in which Inness spoke. The "Slave-ship," after having been sold by Mr. Ruskin, had just been removed from New York, where it was coolly received, to Boston, where it became a subject of hot newspaper controversy. I casually asked Inness what he thought of the picture. He expressed himself at once with indignant emphasis and in the most unqualified terms. "But has it no value as color?" I asked. "Not the least in the world," he replied. "Its color is harsh, disagreeable, discordant." Mr. Hamerton is mistaken in supposing that Inness's severity was even partly due to reaction against Ruskin's enthusiastic commendation. Inness was not interested in Ruskin, and nothing occupied him less than the lucubrations of art critics. When he discovered insincerity and falseness in what might have been a great picture, he became angry; he detested insincerity and falseness. Mr. Hamerton admits that the introduction into the canvas of the sharks, the manacles, and the human hand and leg, is so horrible as to revolt him, and that the color is crude.

I have dwelt upon the strength and activity of Inness's intellect because these qualities produced and explain the beauty of his landscapes. Art, like language, is a means of expressing ideas, and in the work of George Inness the ideas are great and noble. Most of the pictures in the dealer's collections could be described, he thought, by the phrase "intellectual dish-water." "My compositions," said Beethoven, "are not intended to excite the pretty little emotions of women: music ought to strike fire from the soul of a man." This is what Inness's best pictures do, and his recreations in theology, poetry, and metaphysics are less interesting in themselves than in the evidence they afford of his intellectual power.

His struggle was, while obtaining objective

force, not to lose sentiment. He sympathized with Corot, who had had the same struggle, and had confessed himself beaten. He admired Daubigny, because in the struggle Daubigny had been less unsuccessful. He deplored in Meissonier the wilful sacrifice of sentiment to objective force. He considered Millet chiefly as a painter of figures rather than of landscapes, and he thought him the greatest figure-painter that ever lived, because his figures best and most often expressed the tenderest and purest sentiments of labor and of home, with just enough objective force for perfect lucidity. He almost worshiped Rousseau, because, above all other landscape-painters, he preserved the local color of trees, of grass, and of sky, while maintaining the general tonality of his picture. He had no patience with Cabanel, Bouguereau, Lefebvre, Verboeckhoven, and scores of other painters, foreign and native, who, though sought by American collectors, seemed animated by the spirit of commercialism. He believed in objective force, and it was for their lack of it that he criticized the young painters who founded the Society of American Artists, and who had elected him a member of their organization. Speaking of one of their exhibitions, he said, "The poetic quality is not obtained by eschewing any truths or facts of nature which can be included in a harmonious representation"; but at the same time he insisted that men of artistic genius could often dash off an impression which would appeal to the cultivated spectator as more vital than the most laborious efforts of artists less generously endowed.

In his sympathies and his works Inness belonged to the school of Barbizon. As early as 1850 a few of its paintings had found their way to the United States, and Inness was the first American landscapist of distinction to welcome them. He soon went to France to study the methods of Millet, Rousseau, Daubigny, and Corot. Millet, then in his thirty-fifth year,—Inness was ten years younger,—had just abandoned the painting of nude subjects, the sale for which was easy and rapid, and had started upon his unique career as the interpreter of French

peasant life. When Inness returned to France, sixteen years later, the Barbizon school was making itself felt. Had he been a Frenchman he would have been recognized as a member of it, with an individuality as distinct as that of Daubigny. At this time he fixed his method of painting, which was as follows: after staining the white canvas with Venetian red, but not enough to lose the sense of transparency, he drew, more or less carefully, with a piece of charcoal, the outlines of the coming picture, and confirmed them with a pencil, putting in a few of the prominent shadows with a little ivory-black on a brush. His principal pigments were white, Antwerp blue, Indian red, and lemon chrome. He began anywhere to paint, and worked in mass from generals to particulars, keeping his shadows thin and transparent, and allowing the red with which the canvas was stained to come through as a part of the color. When the pigments were sufficiently dry, he added to his palette cobalt, brown, and pink. The last steps were glazing, delicate touching, and scumbling.

George Inness had no jealousies and few amusements. He smoked some, and took long walks. Often he painted fifteen hours a day. On the dozen or more canvases in his studio he worked as the humor seized him, going from one to another with palette and maul-stick, and always standing when painting. He had two styles, one restrained, the other impetuous; and as he grew older the latter prevailed. Correctness of linear design was less important than color, atmosphere, and chiaroscuro; but first in importance was the resolve to convey distinctly the impressions of a personal, vital force. Believing that he obtained with oils all the delicacy of water-colors, and much strength in addition, he did not paint in water-colors. His sincerity, his faith, his earnestness,—all that which escapes like a perfume from his works,—increased with his years, and with the honorable fame and competence that he had earned. One of his landscapes is called "Light Triumphant"—a name that fitly describes them all.

George William Sheldon.

THE GOSPEL OF ART.

WORK thou for pleasure: paint or sing or carve
The thing thou lovest, though the body starve.

Who works for glory misses oft the goal;
Who works for money coins his very soul.

Work for the work's sake, then, and it may be
That these things shall be added unto thee.

Kenyon Cox.