

BOOK REVIEWS.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Philosopher and Poet. By ALFRED H. GUERNSEY. New York: D. Appleton and Co. 1881.

THIS quasi-edition of Emerson is one of Appleton's new handy-volume series. The volume is certainly handy; and in this age, when everybody travels by rail and steamboat, and carries one or two cheap books that can be taken up for a few minutes when nothing else claims attention, and which may be stolen by fellow-passengers addicted to petty larceny, or lost amid the rush at a station without much regret, the series to which it belongs doubtless fills a place in our literary economy. To an author who dislikes to be judged by bits and scraps, as you would judge a house by seeing one of the stones of which it is built, such a series must be an additional jar to sensitive nerves, an additional black mark to be scored against the race of publishers. Formerly, it was considered that 'selections' were intended only for young ladies at fashionable boarding schools. Now, when Matthew Arnold gives us dainty editions of choice portions of Byron and Wordsworth, we need not wonder at a series compiled on the scissors-principle. The inevitable and ineradicable sin of such compilations is that they do not let the writer speak for himself. Worse, they often distort his thought, for part of the truth may be the greatest falsehood, as our wise old forefathers knew well when they enacted that in giving evidence the witness must speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. A reader, with the instinct of an artist, revolts against expurgated editions. The instinct of truthfulness revolts against an edition of professed tit-bits. Of course, the inevitable evil is aggravated, according as the editor or scissors-wielder fails to understand his author, sees with eagle-eye contraries that he considers contradictory, hears discords, but not the harmony in which they are reconciled, tears off limbs from different organisms, and

putting them side by side, loudly calls our attention to the fact that they are not alike, and on every occasion sits as supreme Jove high on a throne, and pronounces judgments with exasperating editorial infallibility.

From the volume on Emerson, some interesting details about his life may be learned, but little more. Often, his wise pregnant aphorisms, the outcome of profound philosophy, are misconstrued, and held up to moral reprobation. Thereby, the discerning reader is made very angry. The undiscerning reader is put on a wrong track, or confirmed in his Philistinism. For instance, the following paragraph is quoted from the Essay on 'Prudence':—

'PRUDENT COMPLIANCES.

'So neither should you put yourself in a false position with your contemporaries by indulging in a vein of hostility and bitterness. Though your views are in straight antagonism with theirs, assume an identity of sentiment, assume that you are saying precisely what all think, and in the flow of wit and love roll out your paradoxes in solid column, with not the infirmity of a doubt. So, at least, you get an adequate deliverance. Assume a consent, and it shall presently be granted, since really and underneath their external diversities all men are the same.'

Emerson, of course, is advocating the positive statement of truth as against the controversial. He would have us 'be more than conquerors.' Where it is at all possible, we should aim at converting instead of merely smashing those who differ from us; cut away the foundations of the hostile position instead of hammering it into hardness and invincibility. The more cannon-balls you pitch into earthworks, the more formidable you make the enemy's battery. Everyone who knows how barren controversy is, and how deteriorating its effects are on the characters of those who engage in it, must recognise the wisdom of the advice. As the Essayist puts it in a preceding paragraph—'If they set out to contend, Saint Paul will lie, and Saint John will hate.' For instance, let two men, each honestly desirous of advancing a good cause, try the different methods in addressing either an indivi-