

On finding a small fly crushed in a book

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On Finding A Small Fly Crushed in a Book- essay Charles Tennyson Turner is somewhat unfairly regarded as a lesser poet than his more famous brother, the Poet Laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Although he was a vicar by profession and not known as a poet in his own lifetime, he wrote over 340 sonnets and, as "On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book" shows, was an accomplished writer in his own right. The poem is a sonnet, but an adapted one that has a rhyme scheme that does not exactly fit any of the traditional sonnet forms: Petrarchan, Spenserian or Shakespearian. This variation (the "break" in meaning, that usually occurs after the octet, actually comes in the middle of the eighth line) allows Turner to express himself more freely, and at a casual glance the poem remains a typical sonnet. This is also evident in its seemingly generic title: the construction "On..." was extremely common among reflective poems of the 17th to 19th centuries. Yet "On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book" cannot be considered a generic or typical poem. It is unusual rather in its rather daring choice of subject and its subtly radical message. As Turner was a clergyman in a very conservative era where the Church of England was one of the most powerful forces in British life, it is somewhat surprising that he should choose death as a subject, as opposed to his rough contemporary, the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins, who devoted the bulk of his work to the praise of God and all his creations (although this was also a highly radical theme in its own way). Turner lacks Hopkins' linguistic inventiveness, but his poem is finely crafted and certainly decidedly unchurchlike in its approach. The poem's beginning belies its deeper character. "Some hand that never meant to do thee hurt" has killed the fly, begins Turner, and it seems like the beginning of a slight, modest

poem about finding a fly. The third line, however, hints at Turner's concern for the nature of man and his relation to life, as well as his abiding compassion for all things. " But thou hast left thine own fair monument", he writes, and while simply stated is touching to see such honest and unironic feeling shown towards something commonly considered so petty and insignificant that the hand that killed it did so unknowingly. The rest of the poem consists of Turner's reflections on life and death and the similarities and differences between himself and the fly. He contrasts the fly's more elegant death, that has left a beautiful (to him, although not necessarily to all readers) " lustre" on the page that he has opened, with the end of human life. The sight of the fly awakens Turner to the fact that his death rapidly approaches: " Our doom is ever near:/The peril is besides us day by day", he writes, and one can clearly hear the echo of Marvell's lines, " But at my back I always hear/Time's winged chariot hurrying near; "* although this is not a humorous poem even if it lightly written. Turner uses the metaphor of the closing book to refer to the death of both fly and human, and in this way equates the two as equal. Yet while they are equal, to him they are so rather different. He sees no beauty or warmth in the remembrance of a human life that once was. Whereas the fly has left a lovely testament to its own beauty and spark, in Turner's views memories, perhaps his own, are a poor equivalent to the fly's legacy. In part, he sees this as because the fly has lived a " blameless life", while he, even though he was a man of God by profession, clearly believes that he hasn't. To see a fly as more blameless than a human is a view that is little short of revolutionary in an era where Darwin's theories were condemned not only because they repudiated

Christianity but because, in Thomas Carlyle's famous phrase, they were seen as "gorilla damnifications of humanity". "On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book" is a short poem that says little directly, but is also a poem that is rich with compassion, humility and an ability to appreciate beauty. These are great qualities not only of poetry but also of a human, and it is therefore a testament to the beauty not only of Turner's writing but also of his thought. The enduring message, that death is a great and invincible leveller for both human and fly, reminded me strongly of an old Italian proverb that links the game of chess with death: "at the end of the game, the king and the pawn go back into the same box".