

The Significant Insignificantants -
An Exploration into the Subjective Idea that Small Things are Important in their own Right.

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Introduction

The Orange

At lunchtime I bought a huge orange—
The size of it made us all laugh.
I peeled it and shared it with Robert and Dave—
They got quarters and I had a half.

And that orange, it made me so happy,
As ordinary things often do
Just lately. The shopping. A walk in the park.
This is peace and contentment. It's new.

The rest of the day was quite easy.
I did all the jobs on my list
And enjoyed them and had some time over.
I love you. I'm glad I exist.

— Wendy Cope (2023, p 2)

The Orange was written by British poet Wendy Cope around 1989. Although it is addressed towards a man whom Cope was in a new relationship with at the time, the poem is more of a self reflection and observation of Cope's own inner feelings of contentment with the common, everyday aspects of her life. It happily describes an ordinary day punctuated by small joys. Cope purchases an orange that is larger than usual at lunchtime and meets her friends, Robert and Dave. All three of them find enjoyment in the comical size of the orange and the poet goes on to share it with Robert and Dave before she goes about the rest of her day, completing all of the jobs on her list. She recognises that she feels peace and contentment, and there is some emotional weight to the fact that this is a new state of mind for her. It is a simple and humble poem - twelve lines encapsulating a grateful homage to the small things in this life.

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According to Faber and Faber (2023, n.p), *The Orange* is the favourite of many. A basic google search and you will find countless people sharing their love for the poem in the form of tattoos, posters, blogs, and homemade merchandise (figure 1).

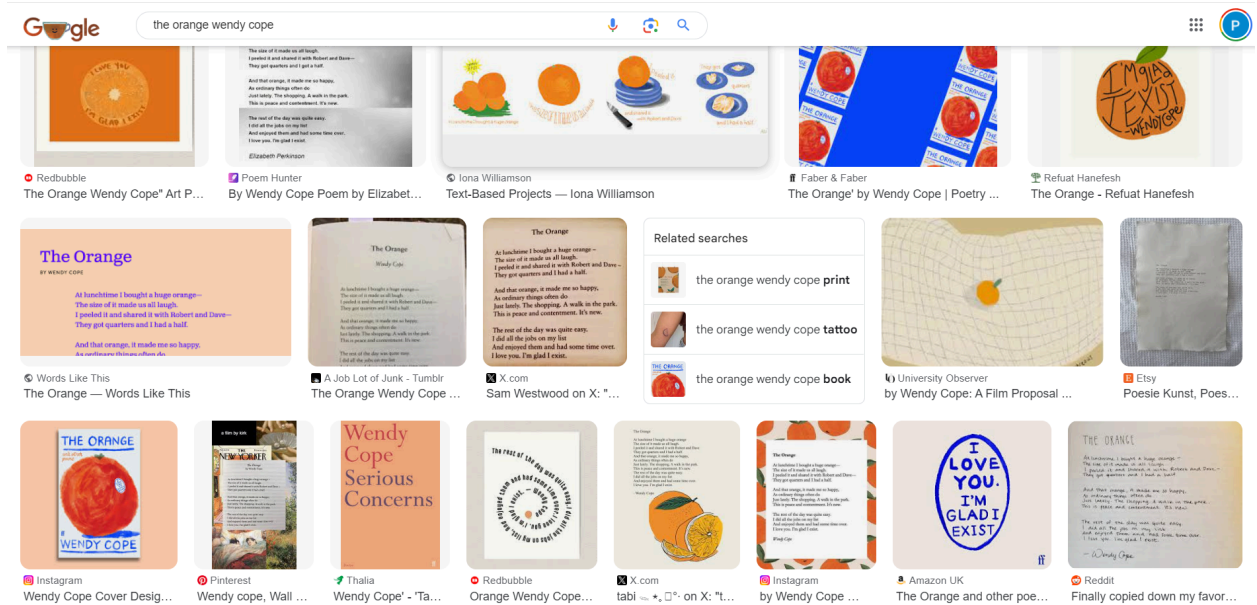


Figure 1: Google Images, *The Orange Wendy Cope* search results, 2024.

While it may not have received much critical or academic attention, it can certainly be said that *The Orange* is a people’s poem. On Tik Tok, you will see thousands of video posts where *The Orange*, recited by a man with a soothing voice, is the soundtrack to people appreciating the present. ‘People post compilations of simple but divine moments in their days: cuddling their dogs, playing the piano, watching bees land on lavender, standing by calm running streams, hula hooping, or even just reading a book’ (Thompson, 2023, n.p). First published in 1992, as part of her second collection, *Serious Concerns*, its continued popularity has resulted in its re-release in a new book of the same title, *The Orange*, published by the renowned Faber and Faber in 2023.

This begs the thought, or perhaps the question, of our relationship to the small things like those described in the poem. In a world where there is a constant flow of serious political, economic, social and cultural matters, we continue to find a significant place for objects, thoughts and actions that are by comparison, insignificant. They are present in

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literature, art and ideals throughout the ages, from historical to contemporary. We as people have a variety of perceptions towards them and naturally, a similar variety of perceptions of the big things in relation to the small things.

To speak subjectively for a moment, for as long as I can remember I have been concerned with small things - the experience of a brief pause in time while we wait by counter in the kitchen for the kettle to boil, the glow of one side of a building as the sun hits it in the evening, ice creams purchased from petrol stations to break up a long drive, fingerprints on windows - the significant insignificantants. In my painting practice, while I focus on questions of home, rural living, loss, stillness, silence and contentment - ordinary



Figure 2: Polly Maher, *Lace Curtain*, 2023, Oil on Plywood, 32 x 27cm, Hamburg.

moments and objects form the foundational influence of images that I paint, an example of which can be seen in figure 2, *Lace Curtain*. I am aware that this is a personal perspective, however the sheer volume of love for *The Orange* points to the fact that the term ‘small things’ is a universal one. While sometimes they are connected to a larger idea, moment or

event, or on other occasions they are said to be symbolic of something bigger, my subjective position is that the small things are important in their own right - there is no need to tie them to a figuratively 'bigger' matter. Essentially, in this thesis I want to explore and find support for this position through the lens of objects like the orange and the creation of ideals, poetry, literature and theories as a result of the existence and appreciation of these objects, highlighting our long term fixation and affiliation with the smallest of small, despite the biggest of the big.

What is a Small Thing?

In *The Orange*, the orange itself is described as an 'ordinary thing'. Of course, when you purposefully put research into the process of how oranges are grown, exported, transported, sold and consumed among other actions it can be almost insulting to brand them as ordinary, however this view is subjective to Cope herself who was living a relatively comfortable life in England at the time. Instead, the orange can be seen as an analogy for things that occur regularly in our lives. Cope is often in the presence of oranges in her daily life, therefore, to her, they play a small or ordinary role, making them small things. The fact that it took the orange being slightly unusual for her to really take note of it shows just how regularly she comes into contact with them without noting their presence. In an article written for the french journal *Sociétés*, Phillippe Filliot surmised that,

'The ordinary is that which constitutes the very matter of our lives, and, at the same time, that which escapes intellectual and sensible grasp. This is the paradox often noted in the experience of the ordinary: the too close is inaccessible, the too familiar is unknown, the too visible is *unseen*.' (2015, p 40)

By this measure, it is actually very difficult to pinpoint the real small things, or, if measured on a scale, the most ordinary. Even though they surround us, they are almost impossible to grasp hold of. As soon as we have identified something as ordinary, it becomes less ordinary by the very fact that we have taken note of it. If the orange was a regular size, Cope may not have given it the same level of thought. A regular orange presents itself more subtly, it

simply exists without being commented upon - the regular orange, the one that the poem was not written about, is the true ordinary, the true small thing.

We can, on top of oranges, or objects in general, stretch the limit further to include the many subconscious actions, thoughts, exchanges and moments we do or have on an everyday basis, in the definition of small things. ‘Sages, poets, artists, invite us to find the extraordinary in the ordinary and to "see the miraculous in the banal", to use the phrase of the American philosopher Emerson’ (Emerson cited in Filliot, 2015, p 41). While it is difficult to pinpoint the small things, it is easier to appreciate the poetry, literature and art that is created as a result of their existence. However, even then, in order to identify the true small thing, you must look to the thing adjacent to the poem, book or piece of art - the thing that did not inspire. In Cope’s case, the regular sized orange.

In this context, ‘small’ includes but is certainly not limited to physically small objects. In *The Orange*, and subsequently in the context of this thesis, objects such as the orange allude to the small thoughts, small moments, small actions and gestures, small expressions, small habits and routines, the small nuances that present themselves subtly, casually - almost subconsciously, in our daily lives. These small things have a quality that is quietly emblematic of humanity. Commenting on the phenomenon in his article surrounding ordinary aesthetics, Monteiro writes,

‘It is an “arrangement of insignificant things,” which becomes a source of silent and enigmatic wonder. In those moments of epiphany, the human being establishes a “new and premonitory relationship with all existence” and begins to think with the heart. It also includes moments of profound peace.’ (Monteiro, 2023, p 5)

Some of these ‘small things’ are unique to each individual, others are shared universally by those who try to take note of them. Although I will mainly be focusing on the object of the orange, when I use the phrase ‘small things’ I mean to include these figurative examples as well as the literal examples. Of course, the phrase is subjective, as is significance - even within the circumstance of *The Orange*, this can be seen.

The Historically Significant Insignificantants

Cope's poetic commentary on the small things is by no means the first. Throughout the ages, and in varied corners of the world, people have taken the time to offer their own perspectives on and definitions of the small things. If we first take just a small step back in the grand scheme of time, Nietzsche's writings in *Ecco Homo* show a kind of tension between the small things and the big things. Although many see the book as a product of early dementia, it is perhaps telling that in this state of mind, Nietzsche bounces back and forth between an obsession with world historical arguments and small statements such as his aversion to coffee. He then goes on, in an attempt to justify this battel of things, by saying,

‘One will ask me why on earth I've been relating all these small things which are generally considered matters of indifference: I only harm myself, the more so if I am destined to present great tasks. Answer: these small things-nutrition, place, climate recreation, the whole casuistry of selfishness-are inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important so far.’ (Nietzsche cited in Domino, 2002, p 51).

In his deteriorating state, he goes on to give a rather rambling reel of thoughts on the matter without explicitly explaining the link between the small things and the world important. It takes philosopher and writer Brian Domino, to pick apart his words a little and come to the conclusion that Nietzsche is using the ‘casuistry of little things’ as a means of understanding larger world problems. ‘Through his casuistry, Nietzsche hopes to improve “the big things” by improving the way in which individuals understand the “little things.” (Domino, 2002, p 52). While I will go on to discuss this idea of a relation between ‘small things’ and ‘big things’ in more depth in the coming chapters, for now it is amusing, if nothing else, to note that somebody as infamously known for his clear cut judgements and confident statements as Nietzsche, failed in his attempt to define this linkage between the small things and the big. This failure somewhat supports my statement that small things are important of their own accord - perhaps he could not find, or explain the link, because it is simply not always there.

Looking back a considerable amount further in time, Ben Sira, author of the book of Sirach which can today be found in Catholic bibles wrote, *He that despiseth little things shall*

perish little by little (The Holy Bible, Book of Sirach, 19:1). This statement can be viewed with at least two lenses. Pitiless, yet poetic, it can be viewed as a warning (as can many biblical statements). It can be understood that your punishment for not appreciating the little things in your life will be that you suffer a slow and painful end, '*little by little*'. The second lens is perhaps less cynical and more relevant. It is that; one that neglects the little things cannot feel the great joy that they can bring - it is not so much that there will be horrific consequences as a result of a lack of appreciation for the little things, it is more that you will deny yourself some of life's most beautiful pleasures by passing up the opportunity to take note of the small things. This idea can be applied to *The Orange*. Before Cope took note of the wonders of the orange, the shopping, friends and walks in the park, she was metaphorically 'perishing'. The orange, and the other small events of her day played an important role in the improvement of her mental state. This is perhaps why there is such emotion in her statement 'This is peace and contentment. It's new' (Cope, 2023, p 3).

This idea of the importance of our appreciation of the small things is also historically widespread. To take a focused look in a culturally different direction than the bible, the Japanese have a long tradition and appreciation for rituals surrounding ordinary daily habits. In his article titled, *A View of the Philosophy of the Tea Ceremony*, Yasuhiko Murai (1991) explains the process and importance of the tea ceremony. Having originally arose from zen tea practices, it began to establish itself independently in Japan around the 14th century. The participants sit and begin the process of making green tea. Each object (figure 3) is given special attention.

'The most special utensil is the tea bowl, tea container and the tea spoon which is all appreciated and admired after tea has been drunk, symbolising that it is essential to appreciate things that are around us, appreciate the simplicity, and notice the smallest details that make them special.' (Ali, A. et al., 2013, p 2394)

It's interesting that criticisms of the tea ceremony include confucian ideals that maintain that the tea ceremony is too materialistic. Theorist Yabunouchi Chikoushin believed the tea ceremony should not exist to appreciate objects like the tea bowl, rather it should be an opportunity to devote time to teaching ethics and moral lessons to the common people of his

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times (Murai, 1991, n.p). This is a fair point of view, it can almost always be said that more time should be spent teaching ethical and moral lessons. However, it is also true that these



Figure 3: Asian Art Museum website, *Tea Host Sozo Shato Prepares Tea*, 2023.

ethical and moral lessons can come about as an indirect result of appreciating the functional objects that are needed on a daily basis. This idea is encapsulated by Allen when describing the actions of Chinese historian Zou Yan. Allen concludes, ‘wisdom was “to examine small objects, and from these [draw] conclusions about large ones, until he reached what was without limit’ (2017, p. 362). Cope’s appreciation of the orange brought about her appreciation of her friends, her work, her hobbies and her life in general - the object of the orange was an important catalyst. Murai believes the function of the tea ceremony is similar. He describes the ceremony as one that has ‘maintained a position that possesses both an everyday and a special life essence’(1991, n.p). Until now, a flaw in my position has been that if something small becomes important, I can see how it metaphorically becomes big. For example, the small object of the orange became the thing that resulted in Cope’s happiness and so the orange is now actually a big character in her life. However, the view of Murai has solved this internal dilemma. It is possible to look upon an everyday object or moment and without it becoming metaphorically bigger, acknowledge that it is special, or important in its own right. It can exist simultaneously in the world of the small and the world of the special.

How Much Does an Orange Cost?

Having come to this point in research and writing, it is apparent that the appreciation of small things can often be an incredibly economical method of finding happiness or contentment. Taking a very literal delve into this idea, 1 kg of oranges in Germany costs, on average €2,07 (Numbeo, 2024, n.p). That is roughly 21 cents per orange. In these terms, happiness, as it turns out, can be relatively cheap.

So, how long until we capitalise on this low cost method for happiness? Thankfully, bar inflation, oranges continue to be relatively affordable, however small things, or the idea of small things, have of course become subject to monetisation. Looking, unsurprisingly, first to the world of fine art, two examples come to mind. The first, *Natura Morta* (figure 4), completed in 1959, was one of many still lifes painted by Giorgio Morandi. Morandi, known for his pure and understated portrayals of everyday objects in the form of paintings and drawings here depicts six vessel-like objects sitting on a grey/beige table with a grey wall as a backdrop. The viewer sits almost at eye level with, just a little above, the objects. Three vessels sit in front of three more. In the front row is a small green container alongside a vase with a rounded blue base and a white stem, beside this is a similar, but slimmer vase in complete white. Almost directly behind these sit two grey cylindrical forms - they are painted in limited detail. Sitting between them you can see the slim stem of a blue vase that curves outwards at the top. They are simple, everyday objects painted in a delicate, yet purposeful manner. There is intention and a carefulness behind each brush stroke. In his article regarding Morandi's art and Ordinary Aesthetics, Luis Monteiro concludes;

‘The inspiration of Morandi’s work emphasises the importance of being in tune with the nearby reality, with what is part of our lives. Instead of seeking something extravagant, the truly extraordinary is simultaneously contained in the unremarkable, if there is an openness and willingness to embrace it.’ (2023, p 9)



Figure 4: Giorgio Morandi, *Natura Morta*, 1959, oil on canvas, 25,5 x 30,2cm, private owner.

Much like *The Orange*, Morandi's works are a simple homage to the everyday object. Interestingly, in November 2023 *Natura Morta* sold in auction at Sotheby's for €3,423,000 (Sotheby's, 2024, n.p). While it is clear that the valuing and sale of art is subject to many factors, (and I don't mean to disregard that) when broken down, the core of Morandi's painting is the ordinary. He helps the viewer notice it and appreciate it. In his paintings, he treated the most ordinary objects with the same delicacy that would be given to the extraordinary - he was concerned with purity. While there is something impure about this monetisation of this purity, it does provide us, in theory, with a kind of numerical value for small things. Or at least, it shows just how in demand Morandi's work is as a result of it first being noticed for his delicate treatment and highlighting of small things. Yes, it is likely that the buyer of this particular piece perhaps only saw this painting as an investment, but the

steps it took that painting to get to that level of demand proves that we as humans have an extreme personal value on the small things - once they are pointed out, or presented to us.

Stepping away from value as a monetary concept in favour of concentrating on value as a personal expression, the second example, perhaps a more direct link to *The Orange*, is a



Figure 5: Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Nature Morte au Bocal de Poissons Rouges*, 1906, Tempera on Board, 50.5 x 74 cm, Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal

painting by German artist, Paula Modersohn-Becker. A still life, *Nature Morte au Bocal de Poissons Rouges*, (figure 5) was completed in June 1906, just a year before her death. Composed so the viewer is just above eye level with the objects on a table, which is covered with a light cloth, the painting is a delicate, yet uncanny observation of three orange toned items. On the left is a large traditional jug, peering from the rim of which is a flower. Centred and slightly further from the viewer is an orange bowl with a white trim, filled with oranges. On the right, is a fishbowl with a tall stem, almost resembling a large wine glass. Three large goldfish are depicted inside. Orange peels are strewn at the base of the fish bowl. The painting is full of expression and intention. Rejecting deep illusionism, she painted objects

and figures for what they were. She was concerned with composition, structure, form and colour (Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, 2024) and she saw value in the object itself, not in what it possibly symbolised. Unfortunately, it was only after her death that her extensive work was viewed and she was recognized as a great pioneer of modernism. However, its rise to popularity and its presence in museums all over the world is a testament to humanity's ability to see value in objects as they are. For Modersohn-Becker, a jug as a jug was enough, goldfish as goldfish were enough, and fittingly, oranges as oranges were enough.

Wendy Cope

This is perhaps quite a late point to talk in more detail about the poet herself, Wendy Cope, however I will admit that before this point I was more concerned with the idea of small things rather than the person who put the idea into poetic words. However, having, almost by chance, read an article about her early life, I now know that Cope herself is an essential factor in this research.

Wendy Cope was born in 1945 - she is now seventy-eight. Having trained primarily as a primary school teacher, after almost twenty years of teaching she became a freelance poet in 1986, following the success of her first three publications. Today, she continues to be one of Britain's best loved poets and in recent years her work has become more appreciated on an international scale. In 1998, she was chosen to be the Poet Laureate by the BBC and their listeners. While her first two collections have together sold almost half a million copies, Waterman, the author of *Wendy Cope* (one of the only critical pieces written on her poetry) states that it is surprising that her work has little to no critical or academic acclaim or attention (2021, p 1). He surmises that many academicians mistake Cope's stylistic timeliness for the opposite, anachronism (2021, p 2). However, perhaps fittingly to her work, she is very much celebrated as a people's poet. Having advocated strongly for various causes including civil partnership for heterosexual couples, and copyright enforcement, she has a fierce conviction and a strong sense of justice. This seriousness is coupled with a definite but light wit, which can perhaps be most clearly seen in her poetry. Despite this, there is a subtle undertone of sadness present in both her work and her person. This, she recognises herself. So much so that when having her photograph taken for an article in the *Independent* (figure

6), she commented “I look a bit sad, but that might be truthful – you know, there’s some sadness in me.” (Cope cited in Isaacson, 2014, n.p)



Figure 6: Micha Theiner, *Wendy Cope, English Poet*, 2014, digital photography, Independent Archives.

This prompted me to make contact with Wendy Cope. I had read just about every piece of commentary available on ‘The Orange’ however Cope’s own commentary was limited to a few sentences on the Faber and Faber website. I wrote an email to her agent in the hope that it would be forwarded to Cope. While I cringe at my own dramatics, I think it is important to state that her reply gave such an alternative insight to what I had previously conceived that it is now counter to my position on small things. While I won’t say that it caused irreparable damage to my position, it has given me a great deal to think about and I expect it will change the outcome of this piece of writing. Thus, it warrants the start of a separate chapter.

Just a note, I would urge you to look at the appendix to see the full version of Cope's correspondence, it is so raw and beautifully written that it would be a shame to miss out on reading it in full.

Catalyst - A Short, But Important, Note

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, 'catalyst' is a relatively new word in the English language (2024). Appearing at the beginning of the 20th century first for its chemical meaning - a substance that causes or speeds up a chemical reaction without itself being used up in the reaction, it quickly developed a figurative meaning also. Figuratively, a catalyst is a 'condition, event or person that is the cause of an important change.' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

The Big Things

In response to my question, 'Why do you choose to write about ordinary things like the orange?', Cope replied,

'I would say that the poem is about a big thing - being in love - and how that makes everyday life happier and easier. Having a love affair go wrong, obviously, has the opposite effect...A poem such as *The Orange*, which seems to be about little things, really isn't.' (2024)

The final line, *'I love you. I'm glad I exist'* now has more importance than what I had originally given it. Cope had this beautiful, simple day and subsequently wrote this poem of the same description as a result of being in love. Up until now I thought that the ability to note the small things, and appreciate them, was a kind of secret for achieving happiness. I hadn't given much thought to the idea that happiness, or love, is the secret to making note of, and appreciating the small things. Earlier in this piece of writing I commented that the orange was a kind of catalyst for appreciation of all the other bigger things in Cope's life. However, with Cope's shared response in mind, it is important to make a switch - love is the catalyst for our appreciation of the small things, not the other way around. Cope also commented in

her response that ‘the big things are love and death. It has been said that they are the only subjects for poetry’ (2024). It is disappointing that the poem I credited as a champion of the small things in their own right, is consequently about the big things - but at the same time it is hardly surprising that love, and subsequently death, are more important. The big things and the small things do not exist separately, the poem illustrates that the big things inspire, and are the makers of small things.

Furthermore, I can hardly believe that I had boiled the big things down to economic and global issues. I had talked about Nietzsche, capitalism and the bible, all the while missing the main, and perhaps most obvious big things, love and death. In response to an interviewer who asked, renowned Austrian author, Arthur Schnitzler, what he thought about the critical view that his works all seemed to treat the same subjects, he replied, ‘I write of love and death. What other subjects are there?’ (Schnitzler cited on the Mahler Foundation website, 2024). From both Cope and Schnitzler’s point of view, everything boils down to these two phenomena. This is also why I decided not to delete what I have written about Nietzsche, capitalism and the bible - at their core, these subjects are too about love and/or death.

In his paper on the little things and their connection to sage knowledge, philosopher Barry Allen states, ‘To really see the little things is to see the big things they betoken, before circumstances make the evolution obvious.’ (2017, p 360). In the case of *The Orange*, the object of the orange betokens love. However, now that I have spent so much time pondering the small things I feel kind of defensive and can’t help but wonder if this belittles the little things? Although my position has been proved wrong in terms of my case study, I still believe that the small things should be seen as special in their own right. For example, an orange should be enough of an absolute wonder in itself as an object, that there should be no need to connect it with a ‘bigger’ event or idea. Is there meaning enough in the simple fact that it is an orange, it exists and we can love it or loathe it for the object that it is? How selfish is it that we need an emotion as big as love or death to draw our attention to small things? The ‘Unseen... should not be confused with the invisible’ (Filliot, 2014, p 40). However, the fact is, and this is unfortunately counter to my original position that small things are important in their own right, for now, my research shows that oranges (as well as

similar objects) are often met with indifference so we need to connect them with larger events, or emotions, in order to combat this indifference. As I write I am in the process of questioning this view and hope that I have proof of an argument in favour of my original position by the end of this research.

Our Perceptions, Sage Knowledge and Natural Beauty

While thinking about the state of my own position and its new-found lack of support from *The Orange*, I continued my research into small things in the hopes of regaining some kind of proof that others feels the same as me;

Different arguments can be made in regards to our view of the small things. In *The Orange*, Cope's attitude towards the small things is resoundingly positive. We now know that this is because she was in love at the time of writing. Had she not been in love, it would have been a different view, or she may not have thought about the orange at all. Remaining in the world of poetry, it is relatively easy to find contrast to this attitude. In his poem *The Waste Land* (2002) T.S. Eliot notes the devastation of 'little things' in the section titled *A Game of Chess*. He describes the day of a resentful and unhappy couple as they await the end of their time; *'The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four. / And we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.'* The husband in this poem describes the painful monotony and emptiness of their small, daily routine. Still, while Eliot certainly doesn't romanticise the small things as Cope does, it cannot be said that he meets them with indifference. There is still a recognition of their existence and furthermore, their significance in the protagonist's misery. Similar to how the orange symbolises peace and contentment for Cope, for the protagonist of *A Game of Chess*, the chess and hot water symbolise despair. In his article in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Barry Allen argues that this recognition of the small things is connected with sage knowledge.

'Sage knowledge knows the evolution of circumstances from an early point, when tendencies may be inconspicuously, "effortlessly" diverted...its effortlessness is not a matter of effort versus no effort, but of the intensity with which effort tends to vanish. The value of such knowledge and the explanation of its accomplishment in terms of

perceiving incipience or “really seeing the little things” criss cross lines among Confucians, Neo-Confucians, Daoists, and Art of War thinkers’ (Allen, 2017, p 359).

With this view in mind, it does not matter how you perceive the small things. The ability to perceive them at all, be it in a good or bad light, is a quality to be respected.

Taking this idea on board, it is interesting to note that the acknowledgement and creation as a result of small things is quite contained to the world of the arts. While I don’t think this means that sage knowledge is confined to artists or creators, it does say something about the fact that artists create a kind of opening for the small things to be looked upon. In his review and summary of Thomas Leddy’s, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, Christopher Dowling writes,

‘Artists are especially practiced at the apprehension of 'aura', as, perhaps, are those *aesthetes* who seek to see the world with the eyes of the artist. In both the experience of the artist and of the artist-like perceiver, what is important, aesthetically, is this way in which the ordinary can be made extraordinary. In this sense Leddy explains that artists are the true experts in everyday aesthetics (121). Thankfully, the rest of us may become more aware of such experiences via the mediation of art’ (Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, 2024).

Furthermore, many small things, like the orange, have, or at least can be associated with, natural beauty. An article written by Edward Guetti, exploring ordinary aesthetics contained some interesting insights into arguments by German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Hegel, that gave a critical opinion on the appreciation of natural beauty.

Hegel’s argument against natural beauty has at least two steps. In a thumbnail sketch, the first step is that any appreciation of natural beauty as such is done from a distinctly human perspective...that what we are appreciating is not really the natural scene as an external reality but rather the natural externality is an obscure mirror of our own capacities for judgement (Guetti, 2023, p 5).

So, Hegel argues that our ability to appreciate natural beauty is flawed. Our ability to appreciate natural beauty, particularly nature, is a self reflection rather than external one. ‘We appreciate ourselves in appreciating nature’ (Guetti, 2023, p 5). While Guetti is critical of

Hegel's argument here, he agrees that it is not difficult to apply it to our everyday circumstances. Jessop had a similar view in his essay, *The Definition of Beauty*, saying 'the connection between appreciation and the object appreciated is more open to inspection than is the connection between creation and the object created' (1933, p 162). With this in mind it is not surprising that Cope found so much delight in the orange. The fact that she was in love, and felt loved, meant that she projected all of those feelings onto orange, hence not truly appreciating the orange for the object that it is, but employed it as more of a vessel for the happiness and contentment that she felt at that time in her life. Cope realised this, which is why she was frank in her email to me, saying that the poem 'is about a big thing' (Cope, 2024) rather than the small.

These views on perceptions, sage knowledge and natural beauty are interesting. They provoked thoughts on the act of appreciation and how it is connected to our own, literal and figurative, reflection. However, they do not exactly support my argument that the small things are important in their own right. If anything, they say the opposite - that our appreciation of small things is as a result of our own emotional state and our relationship to love and death.

'How Little Mirth'

From my tone, you have surely sensed that I am disappointed about the discovery that *The Orange* is not a homage to the little things. However, Cope did reference a poem in her response that says something about the human ability to enjoy activities that are, in the grand scheme of things, small;

'I can tell you there's a poem by A.E.Housman that is relevant. It begins *'Twice a week the winter thorough'*. He sees people enjoying football and cricket and reflects on the fact that it takes so little to keep them going' (Cope, 2024).

Published as part XVII, in his 1896 collection entitled, *A Shropshire Lad*, this poem is an acknowledgement to the fact that we require only a very small amount of joy in order to keep ourselves from giving up on life entirely;

XVII. Twice a week the winter thorough

Twice a week the winter thorough
Here stood I to keep the goal:
Football then was fighting sorrow
For the young man's soul.

Now in Maytime to the wicket
Out I march with bat and pad:
See the son of grief at cricket
Trying to be glad.

Try I will; no harm in trying:
Wonder 'tis how little mirth
Keeps the bones of man from lying
On the bed of earth

— A. E. Housman (1896, p 24)

In the first stanza, the speaker describes how, in his youth, he played football during winter. Although he does not elaborate on whether it worked this way for himself in particular, the speaker does recognise that football was a way of 'fighting sorrow' and keeping sadness from one's mind. In the second stanza, the season progresses to May. In keeping with the seasons, the sport of choice is now cricket. With his cricket gear, the speaker marches onto the field and takes note that he is doing his best to be 'glad' despite the fact that he is grieving for his father. The last stanza serves as a reflection that it takes little joy, or happiness (such as the brief release from sorrowful thoughts when playing sport) in order to keep us from giving up on life.

In telling me about this poem, Cope wrote, 'I share his surprise that we all manage to carry on enjoying things despite world events and our own mortality. And thank goodness we do' (2024). So, while this poem is not about the recognition of small things in the form of objects, it is a recognition of the fact that figuratively small activities, such as football or cricket, hold an importance in their own right. Instead of a recognition of the little things as a result of the big things, Housman offers a recognition of the small things *despite* the big things. They are not just vessels to hold our bigger emotions following bigger events, such as

love and death. Thankfully restoring my faith in my original position, Housman concludes that yes, they offer limited matter and little 'mirth', yet in times of despair it is the small elements of this life that generally keep us wanting to live it - that is a pretty important role.

Conclusion

Despite support from Housman's interpretation of small things, I found it difficult to begin writing this conclusion as it seemed that my position that small things are important in their own right, was vastly unsupported. I knew this was okay - the purpose of a thesis is not to prove a point but to investigate it and have it proved or disproved. However, even so, it seemed like a personal loss. Not only had my subjective position been unsupported by an array of sources but *The Orange*, the poem that I had once championed was now about love rather than small things. I don't mean to disregard poems that are about love, but there are just so many already, and it seems unfair to assume that those who are not in love (and I mean in the many senses of the word, not just romantic) don't have the capacity to see joy in small things. I have not missed the point that it may be the fact that I myself have known love in my life has resulted in my ability to relate to this poem so deeply. If this is the case, what a lovely realisation.

So, it seemed my research had resulted in another question - is it possible for us to appreciate, or even notice the small things without the attachment of these external 'big' feelings of love or death? It seemed unlikely, but I liked the question. It prompted me to read back on Wendy Cope's interviews. Upon this, a phrase struck me that seemed relevant for this moment. When asked about the idea of her poetry being illustrated or written about, Cope commented, 'Poems exist in their fully finished forms' (cited in Isaacson, 2014, n.p). She believes that poetry should not need to be explained more than it already is (having read this I'm surprised and grateful that she replied to my email asking her about *The Orange* at all). It made me realise that my own misinterpretation of the poem is actually the main support of my position. The fact that I read the poem enough times to decide to write a thesis on it, and still maintained the interpretation that Cope's noticing of the small things were the catalyst for her new-found happiness - not the other way around, is a reflection that I find

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happiness, or at least meaning, in the small things. To me, they hold an importance of their own accord - this is apparent in my painting, my photography and my life in general. I was worried that my misinterpretation meant that my position lacked support when really my misinterpretation provides proof of support.

I am aware that this does not negate the other side of the argument, and the question of whether it is possible for us to appreciate, or even notice the small things without the attachment of these external 'big' feelings of love or death still stands. However it does give some truth to my position. Small things are important in their own right - even if it is solely my own proof for now.

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List of Image Sources

Figure 1: Google Images (2024) *The Orange Wendy Cope search results*.

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Figure 2: Polly Maher (2023) *Lace Curtain*, author's own image.

Figure 3: Asian Arts Museum (2024) *Utensils for a Japanese Tea ceremony*.

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Figure 4: Sotheby's (2024) *Giorgio Morandi, Natura Morta*.

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Figure 5: Artsy (2024) *Paula Modersohn-Becker, Nature Morte au Bocal de Poissons Rouges*.

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/paula-modersohn-becker-nature-morte-au-bocal-de-poissons-rouges>

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Figure 6: Theiner, M. (2024) *Wendy Cope*.

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Appendices

Correspondence with Wendy Cope

Polly Maher <maher.polly@gmail.com>

Mon, Jan 15, 2024 at 10:29
AM

To: omartin@unitedagents.co.uk

Hi Olivia,

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Polly, I am a visual artist from Ireland. I have always had an awareness and affection for life's subtleties, the small moments and everyday nuances that are emblematic of our existence - it is what my painting practice has been loosely based upon for the past five or six years. Perhaps because of this, when I came across *The Orange* by Wendy Cope as a teenager and, as I'm sure is the case with several others, it stuck with me. Currently I am writing my critical culture thesis for an MA course that I am studying on in Hamburg. The topic I have chosen to write my thesis on is 'little things' - the significant insignificantants. If it is possible for a thesis to have a protagonist, *The Orange* plays that role currently in my research. It is a kind of catalyst for the rest of the research and I find myself bouncing back to it in each paragraph that I write.

For this reason (and also because I am a long-term admirer) I would love to ask Wendy some questions about her own feelings towards the poem and its topics. I can assure that, although it is a critical culture piece, the thesis will only paint *The Orange*, and subsequently Wendy Cope, in their deserving light - in any case, I imagine it will only be read by my two supervisors and my mother.

Here is the list of questions I hope to ask;

- How would you define the term 'ordinary things' or 'little things'?
- How would you define the term 'big things'?
- Why do you choose to write about ordinary things like the orange?
- Some other poets (T.S. Eliot comes to mind) also describe small moments and nuances but with a tone of despair. In their case, the recognition of the small things brings about a kind of depression that we are living such a small life. While I don't think it is possible to interpret *The Orange* in this way, there are twinges of sadness around the edges of the poem. In another state of mind, do you think *The Orange* could have been written in a similar tone of despair?
- In the past year, *The Orange* has had a new surge of popularity on the internet through tiktok and instagram, among other platforms. Why do you think this is?

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- There are so many serious social, economic, cultural and political events happening in the world today and everyday - that said, why do you think we as humans continue to find a significant space in our lives for things that are by comparison insignificant?
- Many people believe the little things are in a way related to the big things, that subconsciously the small parts of your life signify the larger parts. What do you think about this?
- What is your current favourite ordinary moment in your everyday life? And, what is your least favorite, or is there one that you find sad?

I would be hugely grateful of any response,
Kind regards,
Polly Maher

From: "Wendy Cope"
To: maher.polly@gmail.com
Sent: Monday, 15 Jan, 24 At 11:37
Subject: Your message

Dear Polly,

Thanks for your message and your interest in my work.

I can't answer all these questions, partly because of lack of time and partly because I wouldn't know what to say.

But I can tell you there's a poem by A.E.Housman that is relevant. It begins 'Twice a week the winter thorough'. He sees people enjoying football and cricket and reflects on the fact that it takes so little to keep them going. It ends 'Try I will, no harm in trying/ Wonder 'tis how little mirth/ Keeps the bones of man from lying/ On the bed of earth.' It's number XV11 in A Shropshire Lad.

Housman is obsessed with death, so that's probably what he's thinking about, rather than world events. But the same applies. I share his surprise that we all manage to carry on enjoying things despite world events and our own mortality. And thank goodness we do.

As for The Orange, I would say that the poem is about a big thing - being in love - and how that makes everyday life happier and easier. Having a love affair go wrong, obviously, has

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the opposite effect. Why did I choose to write it? I just felt like writing it. That's the reason for most of my poems.

I'm delighted about my popularity on Tik Tok but it's not for me to try and explain it. Partly luck.

My favourite thing in everyday life at present is sitting down after lunch with a cup of coffee and a crossword puzzle. Least favourite: laundry and ironing. I feel sad when I remember my age and the fact that my husband and I won't be together for ever.

The big things are love and death. It has been said that they are the only subjects for poetry. A poem such as The Orange, which seems to be about little things, really isn't.

I hope that's helpful.

Best wishes,

Wendy

Polly Maher <maher.polly@gmail.com>

Mon, Jan 15, 2024 at 1:36 PM

To: Wendy Cope

Hi Wendy,

Wow, thank you for your reply.

I know some other work by A.E. Housman however I hadn't taken note of that poem in particular. I've just read it - it's beautiful and also kind of devastating. I like it. I also like the idea that love and death are the big things. I was thinking more in terms of economic, political and cultural events as big things but the majority of these do boil down to love and death, I think this way of seeing things will suit my thesis (and me).

It is lovely to hear your favourite things in everyday life and I sympathise with your dislike of laundry and ironing. I would say that ironing can be completely cut out of life but that would also mean cutting out the feeling of ironed clothes. I sympathise further with your

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sadness about age and your husband - not that it makes it much better, but the same theory as the ironing can be applied.

Also, for all my reading and thinking on *The Orange*, I had not read it exactly from that angle. So it is really nice to be able to look at it in this different light.

Thanks again for sharing your answers with me, I really (really) appreciate it.

Kind regards,

Polly