

Taking a Walk with Judith Thompson: Flânerie Tames the Lion in the Streets

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Taking a Walk with Judith Thompson: Flânerie Tames the Lion in the Streets

BRECKEN ROSE HANCOCK

The *flâneur* indicates why the problems that rear their heads in the urban spaces tend to be recurring rather than resolvable.... In a sentence, it might be said that even though the *flâneur* does not choose his urbanity, he senses himself responsible for it. It is his inescapable fate. — Keith Tester, Introduction to *The Flâneur*

No matter what trail the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime. — Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*

WHEN SHE SAT DOWN to write the play commissioned for radio that would become *Lion in the Streets*, Judith Thompson “couldn’t think of a thing to do.” She says of the experience, “I thought I just can’t bear some giant narrative, somebody taking this immense journey. So I thought, well, write a bunch of little plays, like two women in a restaurant and one says, ‘Guess what?’ I had no idea what it was going to be. It was an improvisation” (Zimmerman interview 188). Thompson’s preoccupation with urban spaces, already evident in earlier plays such as *The Crackwalker*, channelled the improvisation toward an exploration of city life; the result is a meandering narrative that exposes pockets of urbanity in a relay structure, or “daisy chain” as Robert Cushman describes it, whereby one character creates a bridge between two unrelated scenes. I use “meandering” here not in a pejorative sense, but in order to begin to make a connection between the pace and design of *Lion in the Streets* and flânerie, described by Keith Tester as “the activity of strolling and looking” (Introduction 1). The structure of *Lion in the Streets* — in which each “little play” acts as a window through which the playwright (and the audience) pauses to gaze — mimics the practice of the flâneur who “reads the street,” recognizes the narrative inherent in faces and objects, and deciphers the

“ever-new book” that Franz Hessel, in *Ein Flâneur in Berlin*, describes as the text of the city itself (qtd. in Frisby 81). Judith Thompson’s description of her creative process as improvisation is compatible with Hessel’s insistence that the path of the flâneur is winding and improvised: “In order to engage in flânerie,” he says, “one must not have anything too definite in mind” (qtd. in Frisby 81).

Significantly, however, although the journey of the flâneur begins as improvisation, the indefinite act of strolling accumulates purpose, and this was true even for Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, who saw the figure as a poet/artist. In this case, *Lion in the Streets*, a play Thompson started before she had outlined a narrative trajectory, evolves to become the journey of a ghost who seeks the man who killed her and who finally “ascends, in her mind, into heaven” (stage direction 288). Although Thompson remembers not wanting to engage with a “giant narrative” or “immense journey,” she authors a text that details quite an immense journey indeed. While it might seem that the resulting play, with its crescendo of quest fulfillment, is incompatible with theories of flânerie, analyzing Thompson’s dramaturgy and Isobel’s journey through this critical lens allows *Lion in the Streets* to take on dimensions beyond a Christian quest for love and forgiveness. Furthermore, its religious overtones and overt moral become more complex when we keep in mind the *urban* context of the play and explore theoretical options that shed light on the city setting and secular theme. Particularly helpful are seminal discussions of flânerie, such as Baudelaire’s account of the urban artist’s search for meaning on the streets and Benjamin’s description of the detective impulse, but more contemporary criticism on city life is also useful, including Michel de Certeau’s ideas about urban pedestrians in *The Practice of Everyday Life* and Jane Jacobs’s narrative of bustling sidewalks in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

The figure of the flâneur, even in its initial incarnation as a poet/artist described by Charles Baudelaire in nineteenth-century Paris, was more than an aimless pedestrian. In “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire documents the lifestyle of Constantine Guys, an artist who, for Baudelaire, epitomized the “man of the world, man of the crowd” (“Painter” 5). Here Baudelaire distinguishes between the denotation of *flâner* (“se promener sans but, au hasard; user son temps sans profit” [*Petit Littré*]) and the practice of the strolling poet:

And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what? Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him — this solitary [figure], gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert — has an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur*. . . . He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory. (12)

The poet *flâneur*, then, always has a goal. The wanderer observes the urban crowd in order to learn something fundamental about human relationships, to discover universal insights among the minutiae of the city, to determine constancy within the ever-changing particularities of the throng.

Where Baudelaire describes the poet *flâneur* in search of the eternal, Walter Benjamin, writing on Baudelaire and the figure of the *flâneur* in the 1930s, sees, evolving out of Baudelaire's searching walker, more socially accountable characters — the journalist (*Arcades* 446-47), and, most appropriately for my purposes, the detective (*Arcades* 442; *Baudelaire* 40-45). Benjamin, in his extension of Baudelaire's ideas, explains how *flânerie* necessarily acquired a dimension of social responsibility:

In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in a situation where he has to play detective. Strolling gives him the best prospects of doing so. Baudelaire wrote: "An observer is a *prince* who is everywhere in possession of his incognito."¹ If the *flâneur* is thus turned into an unwilling detective it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant.

(*Baudelaire* 40-41)

So while Hessel's description of the *flâneur* as one without anything definite in mind is closest, in the strictest sense, to the definition of *flâner*, both Baudelaire and Benjamin, the two writers contemporary critics most often look to when discussing the *flâneur*, see the lack of definitive purpose as meaningful in an accumulative sense. The more one wanders, the more one becomes acquainted with the subtleties of urban life on the streets. The poet who strolls aimlessly will inevitably distill meaning from a wealth of random experience and, as connoisseur of the street, become astute at reading the threats in a crowd. Furthermore,

Benjamin's suggestion that social responsibility inevitably follows acute observation seems to justify Tester's assertion, quoted above, that the flâneur "senses himself responsible for [his urbanity]. It is his inescapable fate" (8).

It is in this context of social responsibility and accumulative meaning that *Lion in the Streets* can be seen to replicate the journey of a flâneur — both in Thompson's approach to writing the play and in Isobel's journey as wandering pedestrian-*cum*-detective. For the poet/author, flânerie unites the practices of observation (an indefinite, spontaneous inclination) and authorship (a fixed recording of the original spontaneity); the flâneur wanders the city, "collecting scenes and impressions," in order to relate those scenes and impressions "through stories and histories of the city and its streets" (Gleber, "Women" 55). Thompson participates in this tradition by creating a text that replicates the journey of a pedestrian wandering through a Toronto neighbourhood. Thompson herself acts as author/observer, but she also creates the character of Isobel, the only recurring character, to perform these roles within the urban journey that is the play. Isobel, as pedestrian, weaves together the individual stories within the larger play through her experience in, and attentive observation of, each scene. Furthermore, Isobel enacts the social function of the flâneur: her journeys through urbanity, at first confusing and randomly violent, lead her to develop a skill for discovering crime and, ultimately, allow her to find the man who killed her.

A reading of Thompson as flâneur/playwright not only opens up possibilities for understanding the discussions of her own craft that Thompson offers in interviews with Cynthia Zimmerman and Eleanor Wachtel, but presents new opportunities to extend previous critical work on Thompson's plays such as Robert Nunn's discussion of spatial metaphor in *The Crackwalker*, *White Biting Dog*, and *I Am Yours* ("Spatial"). Thompson infuses *Lion in the Streets* with metaphors of urban textuality and pedestrian-as-author and reinterprets the figure of the flâneur in her use of Isobel as pedestrian, thereby participating in a critical tradition that uses the flâneur, a figure originally gendered exclusively male and tied specifically to nineteenth-century Paris, to comment on a woman's experience of contemporary Toronto. Tester identifies this tradition and explains that

the *flâneur* has been allowed, or made [by critics of various disciplines], to take a number of walks away from the streets and arcades of nineteenth-century Paris. Not least, the figure and the activity appear regularly in the attempts of social and cultural commentators to get some grip on the nature and implications of the conditions of modernity and post-modernity. (1)²

By having Isobel repeatedly confront violence in the city, Thompson shows her audience the dangerous side of city life — the lion that lurks in the streets. In Isobel’s journey, however, Thompson also offers a possible solution to that violence. By shifting the urban walker away from upper-class, male-centred, high-art paradigms, Thompson writes a politically charged text that locates freedom and power for a lower-class, female, immigrant child³ in the art of *flânerie*; ultimately, Isobel can offer an alternative to urban violence because of her experiences as pedestrian in the city.

Considering Thompson’s fascination with urban spaces, as well as her dedication to “bring[ing] the world closer” (Zimmerman interview 185), it is perhaps not surprising that she should author a play that both indulges in the pleasures of *flânerie* and reveals the undercurrent of violence that any urban dweller is bound to witness. Isobel walks from scene to scene, stopping to watch other characters, and effectively mimicking the habits of a *flâneur* who “stoll[s] at an overtly leisurely pace, allowing [herself] to be drawn by intriguing sights or to dawdle in interesting places” (Shields 65). But Isobel’s *flânerie* is not that of a happy, leisurely pedestrian; instead, her wanderings are those of a drifting ghost who happens upon various forms of anger, abuse, and oppression. Thompson turns the figure of the *flâneur* on its head; Isobel is an inversion of Baudelaire’s ideal masculine poet/observer who finds the positive aspects of urbania — “the heart of the multitude, ... the ebb and flow of movement, ... the fugitive and the infinite” — to be “an immense joy” (Baudelaire, “Painter” 9). Isobel’s wandering is accidental, not because she has a bourgeois artistic investment in the sights of the city, but because she is lost, homeless, and disenfranchised. She is at once a child who cannot find her parents and an adult ghost who can only vaguely grope for salvation. In this state of chaos and confusion, Isobel can articulate that she wants to go home or go to heaven, but she cannot find her own way; she asks, “Who gonna take me home?” (266), and, later, “WHO WILL TAKE US TO HEAVEN, HA?” (272).

Without a guide, Isobel is left to drift and hope that she will somehow discover what she's looking for. She is led to continuously confront the dangerous side of city life: from the opening scene in which she is harassed by children on the playground, to the violence she observes between neighbours, to her final meeting with the man who murdered her, Isobel is thrust into the thick of conflict and must struggle to come to terms with it. As she slowly comes to understand the dangers her neighbours face, she comes closer and closer to finding the man who killed her.

The contradiction between Baudelaire's city and Thompson's can be illuminated by Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau emphasizes that the city is a space of highs and lows where "extremes coincide — extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space" (91). Thompson's characters experience and represent those extremes. Characters such as Bill, Laura, Christine, and Edward are imbued with societal power — whether because of gender, class, race, or physical ability — that allows them to degrade, abuse, and even kill other characters at will. Isobel sees them as predators; she yells at Christine after Christine gives Scarlett the "kiss of death" (stage direction 278), "SLAVE! You are a slave of the lion!" (278). The "lion" that Isobel refers to is, in Thompson's words, "something buried, a force that can be great or terrible. We've buried it for so long that when it comes out it comes out roaring, like a caged animal" (Zimmerman interview 183). The caged animal — which in Thompson's earlier play *I Am Yours* is the animal behind the wall, the terrible but titillating dream that threatens to "seep into the day" (*Other Side* 141) — is the destructive force that must be tackled. In *Lion in the Streets*, the violent animal originates both from within each character's psyche and from the world outside; the characters' survival is threatened by external forces, but also by forces that bubble up within themselves. They are at war with the dangerous forces on the street, but they also struggle for control over their own penchant for violence, and, in Thompson's plays, they often lose that struggle.

Thompson admits that the impetus behind her plays is to explore the separation between what people show to the world and what is inside of them: "That's why I'm a playwright — to explore the huge chasm

between the social persona and the inner life, to find out who people really are” (qtd. in Steed E5). Robert Nunn calls attention to the ways in which Thompson employs spatial metaphors to dramatize this disjunction between the surface of the everyday and the powerful id that lies beneath the veneer of civilization. Considering the multi-levelled sets created for *The Crackwalker*, *I Am Yours*, and *White Biting Dog*, Nunn observes that the multiple levels on stage “[call] attention to vertical and horizontal dimensions and to walls and partitions between one part of the set and another. In the texts there are many metaphors of surfaces and what is beneath or behind the surface always threatening to become visible” (“Spatial” 4). In *Lion*, the spatial metaphor is expressed in the tension between outdoor and indoor spaces, tension that mirrors the conflict between external threats and the hidden animal of the psyche.

In the end, Isobel is able to calm both the lion in the streets and her internal lion because of her unique perspective — she is the only character to witness all the scenes and she is therefore the only character who can piece together connections (between Christine and Ben, for instance) that lead her to understand violence as a pattern of falling dominoes. For the most part, Isobel witnesses the scenes unnoticed; she is a voyeur and she alone can weave the outdoor spaces together with the indoor, melding the public sphere with the private. This is only possible because she is a ghost and has thus inadvertently acquired one of the key advantages of surveillance — incognito. As a ghost, Isobel is able to see private, indoor incidents that no mortal pedestrian could access; she penetrates walls, drifting from playground to kitchen to office to restaurant without being seen. The invisibility Isobel is afforded as a ghost makes her a more effective flâneur, for the flâneur is likewise necessarily indiscernible and inconspicuous. In order to truly observe, the “flâneur remains anonymous, devoid of personality, unremarkable in the crowd” (Ferguson 28). Both Baudelaire and Benjamin stress the importance of anonymity to the flâneur’s activities: Baudelaire associates it with the artist’s occupation (the painter and poet must observe but not *be* observed) (“Painter” 9); Benjamin links the flâneur’s anonymity with the figure’s evolution into detective (*Baudelaire* 40-41). But, significantly, both Baudelaire and Benjamin attribute the flâneur’s invisibility to demography: the flâneur is a white, bourgeois man who blends into the crowd. Isobel, an immigrant, female child would not be afforded this same ability to “blend”; as an alive child, she was killed

and possibly raped because she was far too noticeable, far too visible. But in the play, because she is a ghost, she is granted invisibility.

Thompson highlights the importance of Isobel's invisibility even further in moments when Isobel is suddenly seen by other characters in the play (the children on the playground, Sue); the characters that see Isobel inhibit her journey, either by abusing her or by attempting to save her. Even though, in contemporary Toronto, some women (maybe white women or middle-class women) might be able to stroll with some degree of anonymity, Isobel is not the kind of female to be afforded that luxury. Thompson makes this clear immediately when the children at the beginning of *Lion* ostracize Isobel with insults and racial slurs, yelling, "She looks like a crazy dog," "[She lives with] all the other pork and cheese west of Christie Street," and finally simply, "Faggot! Faggot!" (261). The revelation later in the play that she was murdered emphasizes that Isobel is a target for violence and also a victim in need of rescue. That Isobel cannot wander safely in the city supports even a contemporary application of Janet Wolff's claim, in her study of "the invisible *flâneuse*": the role of the female *flâneuse* is necessarily "non-existent" because in the nineteenth century, when the figure first emerged, "Women could not stroll alone in the city" (41). The city may have been dangerous for Isobel when she was alive; as a ghost, however, she cannot be detected and she begins to take advantage of her position and adopt the practices of the *flâneur*.⁴

Admittedly, that Isobel witnesses indoor scenes as readily as outdoor ones distinguishes her from the traditional *flâneur*, who wanders in public spaces. Notably, however, Benjamin describes the *flâneur* as one who "can transform Paris into one great interior — a house whose rooms are the *quartiers*, no less clearly demarcated by thresholds than are real rooms" (*Arcades* 422). He sees nineteenth-century Paris as a place where the private and public spheres run together:

The intoxicated interpenetration of street and residence such as comes about in the Paris of the nineteenth century — and especially in the experience of the *flâneur* — has prophetic value. For the new architecture lets this interpenetration become sober reality. (423)

Pointing to architects like Le Corbusier, in whose buildings "the integuments separating inside from outside fall away" (Giedion qtd. in *Arcades*

423), and to the arcades themselves, Benjamin dwells on how “Parisians make the street an interior” (421).

But can Benjamin’s descriptions of nineteenth-century Parisian life really shed light on a late-twentieth-century Canadian play? I would argue that *Lion in the Streets* clearly demonstrates that Thompson, at least, sees public and private spaces interpenetrating one another in contemporary Toronto. Her depiction of Seaton Village, the Annex neighbourhood where the play is set (Wilson, Introduction 11), is somewhat based on her own experiences living in downtown Toronto, and Thompson uses this setting to dramatize what she recently called a disappearing close-knit small-town feel (*à la* Jane Jacobs) in the middle of Toronto (“Playing”). The proximity of characters to one another breeds interconnection, and the ostensibly friendly atmosphere of the neighbourhood leads the private and public to blend together early in the play.⁵ One of the first scenes Isobel witnesses as ghost flâneur is Bill’s rejection of Sue in their friends’ kitchen. Sue tries to end the fight by pleading with Bill, “Stop it, this is private — ” but he replies, “It is not private, Sue, nothing we do is private for Christ’s sake, you tell your friends everything, they all — know — everything — about us, don’t they?” (264). Thompson pushes this link between public and private even further when Christine uses her public persona as journalist to interview Scarlett about living with cerebral palsy. When Scarlett confesses to Christine that a mysterious man who makes sexual house-calls visits her under the new moon, Christine is disgusted but sees an opportunity to publish a sensational story. Scarlett begs Christine not to print that story because “this’d kill” her mother and father and cause Reverend Pete to think her a “slut” (277). Filled with the self-righteous confidence of one who represents public interest, Christine dismisses Scarlett’s request, stating, “You are trying to obstruct the freedom of the press, lady” (277). Implying that her reading public has a right to know the intimate details of Scarlett’s private life, Christine effectively rids Scarlett of what little privacy she enjoys in her own home between visits from volunteers and her parents.

Thompson continues to question the viability of privacy in the neighbourhood as her locations shift from public places to private ones and back again; the settings in *Lion* include three homes, a daycare, a restaurant, a church, and an office. Systematically, Thompson reveals each refuge to be unsafe as characters experience horrible violence at the

hands of their friends, lovers, and business associates. Most powerfully, at the end of the play, all illusions that domestic spaces provide sanctuary from abuse are shattered when Ben reveals to his adopted mother Joan that he has become a lion of the streets because he grew up with a lion at home:

Ben: NOT MY FATHER NOT MY FATHER.... He he he he
 he used to force me.... WHY DO YOU THINK THIS BOY
 IS HELL.... You never noticed anything, NOTHIN strange?
 Whyd'ja think, whyd'ja think he left the bed every night?

Joan: To have a snack, he ... always said that he had had
 a ... snack.

Ben: (laughs) Yeah right. (286)

Ben's admission that he was sexually abused by his adopted father conclusively destroys any link between home and safety. Not only did Joan fail to protect Ben from the abuse, but she denies knowing that the abuse occurred. Ben reveals to Joan that their home was a place of menace and chaos, unpredictably dangerous and unmanageable. Because his home was unsafe, Ben's anger spills into the streets, as uncontained as the home itself.

The streets Ben stalks are those of the neighbourhood in which he grew up; they are also the streets that Isobel haunts. This community, which Thompson effectively shows to be contained, provides a finite area in which the characters interact and pervades whatever specific set is used. Thompson's deliberate choice to concentrate on this small neighbourhood betrays the same interest in character-as-community-member that she expresses in other plays, such as *Habitat* and *Sled*. As early as her first play, Thompson was using material from her own community life; Teresa, her protagonist in *The Crackwalker* was inspired by a woman Thompson met when she worked as an adult protective services worker (Tomc interview 23). Isobel, like Teresa, was inspired by a real person, in this case "a little local girl of Portuguese parents in Thompson's immediate neighbourhood" who "used to eat dirt and kick people" (Glaap 110,111). By focusing on the very particular space of an actual Toronto neighbourhood in *Lion*, Thompson can depict one possible complex reality for the disturbed girl she encountered in real life.

In following the improvisational urge that led her to Isobel's character, Thompson plays out a detective impulse that causes her to imagine what might, what *does*, in our "real" encounters with people, remain

hidden. She admits, in her interview with Eleanor Wachtel, that she has this detective compulsion, a desire to discover the reality beneath the surfaces of people's lives:

I suppose [*Lion in the Streets*] is Isobel's journey-odyssey through an ordinary neighbourhood, which is becoming gentrified, so we get a little bit of everything — rooming house, basement apartment, renovated Victorian house — and she descends into the underworld of these lives, what we don't see. You're walking down the street and you see lights and houses and you peek through and see a television or a little dinner party going on, but what's happening really, inside each life? (37)

Thompson imaginatively jumps into each life in *Lion* by inventing behind-the-scenes scenarios for Isobel to witness. Thompson's compulsion to peek through windows echoes a similar sentiment expressed by Baudelaire in "Windows," a poem from *Paris Spleen*:

There is nothing more profound, more mysterious, more pregnant, more insidious, more dazzling than a window lighted by a single candle. What one can see out in the sunlight is always less interesting than what goes on behind a window pane. In that black or luminous square life lives, life dreams, life suffers. (77)

Appropriately parallel for furthering a discussion of Thompson and flânerie, both this section of "Windows" and Thompson's admitted attraction to voyeurism detail the writer/flâneur's desire to uncover the hidden realities of urban life.

Beyond their common desire to uncover hidden realities, Baudelaire and Thompson share other philosophies and opinions, particularly about the impulse to write. As mentioned above, for Baudelaire the "business" of the poet/flâneur is to "extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distill the eternal from the transitory" ("Painter" 12). He believes the artist should look for "modernity," by which he means "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (12). His advice to artists provides an interesting comparison with Thompson's unusual style, as she seems simultaneously concerned with contingency and universality. Critics often describe Thompson and her writing as postmodern, and emphasize how Thompson "refus[es] to present [her] characters as comfortably unified subjects" (Knowles,

“Achievement” 35); how her monologues express “conflicting visions of reality ... and assert the postmodern concept of reality as incoherent, ambiguous and ultimately fragmented” (Maufort, “Exploring” 196); or how *Lion* “records the sensitivities of human beings relegated to the margins” (Maufort, “Poetic” 34). But if Thompson exemplifies contemporary fashions for provisional meaning and explorations of peripheral experience, in interviews she also voices her dedication to rooting out a “golden egg, this moment we’re all striving for, this moment of pure experience. What I call Truth ... a moment, say, in theatre or in any art that transcends time, culture, generation, place” (Rudakoff and Much interview 98).

For both Baudelaire and Thompson, “eternal” moments, or moments of “Truth,” are to be found in the artist’s observing of and empathizing with contemporary people. Baudelaire emphasizes how the artist, in capturing the immediacy of the cultural moment, must delight in “fine carriages and proud horses, the dazzling smartness of the grooms, the expertness of the footmen” (“Painter” 11) and show “how great and poetic we are in our cravats and our patent-leather boots” (“Salon” 32). Thompson, adopting a similar awareness about the details of city life, also seeks to capture the immediacy of her cultural moment. But while her approach to finding universals in particulars echoes that of Baudelaire, she finds those universals not in the high art culture of Toronto’s upper class (*à la* Baudelaire’s Parisian bourgeoisie) but in the postmodern transient refuse of contemporary popular culture. Her references to Christie Street, the number ten bus, Cornwall, the subway, Trans-Ams, doughnut shops, Kraft slices, tuna casserole, Fuzzy Navels, REEboks, chocolate bars, toilet paper, and Dominion bags situate the play squarely in contemporary Toronto and become both the fashion and debris from which she attempts to distill “Truth.”

While the urban *space* of *Lion* may seem more psychic than literal, especially because its staging doesn’t require the actual *artifacts* of urbanity for props,⁶ Thompson’s preoccupation with objects causes her to write the materiality of the city into her dialogue, thus bringing into focus the relationship between characters and the particularities of their urban environment. For example, after Joanne asks Rhonda to help her die like Ophelia from the poster, drowning in a heavy dress covered in flowered garlands so she won’t have to face cancer treatments and eventually die in a hospital, Rhonda ruthlessly deconstructs her naïve romanticism:

No no, Joanne.... I mean it's all very lovely and that, your picture, in your room, but that's a picture, that's a picture, you dimwit! The real of it would be awful, the stalks of the flowers would be chokin you, ... and the stream, well if you're talking about the Humber River or any stream in this country you're talkin filth, in the Humber River you're even talkin sewage, Jo, you're talkin cigarette packages and used condoms and old tampons floating by. (271)

For Rhonda — who is attempting to reach out to Joanne, to convince her to endure the treatments because “they do work sometimes” (271), to show her that asking a friend to aid suicide is a form of cruelty — the waste in the Humber River signifies how Joanne’s fantasy can’t possibly prettify death or ease the harsh reality that cancer ensures. The debris is also part and parcel of city violence, in league with the “longhairs and goofs on the banks yellin at you callin you whorebag and sayin what they’d like to do to you” (271). The details Rhonda offers cut through Joanne’s fantasy of dying “good” (271) and thereby reassert a bond between the women more powerful than the death-dream — the bond of friendship, love, and support, which comes with a healthy dose of honesty.

Laura Levin calls descriptions like the one offered by Rhonda “exorbitant references to local detail” (125), and argues that they signal “a deep interactivity between people and things” (125) in Thompson’s work. For Levin, the fact that Thompson’s “characters constantly engage with the minutiae of Ontario consumer culture” (125) marks her plays’ affinities with a naturalist aesthetic. But they also demonstrate Thompson’s affinities with Benjamin; Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, in the forward to their translation of *The Arcades Project*, explain that

it was not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the “refuse” and “detritus” of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of “the collective,” that was to be the object of [Benjamin’s] study. (ix)

Like Benjamin, Thompson transforms the disparate materiality of the city into meaningful inter- and intra-psychical relationships.

Thompson believes that these inter- and intra-psychical relationships will ideally extend into the audience; she stresses that she wants audiences to take home “a kind of intensity about being alive, about living

in the world *at this moment*" (Zimmerman interview 193; emphasis added). In line with Baudelaire's insistence that writers root themselves in contemporary artifacts and fashion, Thompson strives to comment on the fleeting, the transient experiences of life. And also like Baudelaire — who goes on in "Windows" to explain how he invents stories for the people he spies behind windows and how these stories convey suffering that helps him "to live, to feel that I am, and what I am" (*Paris* 77) — Thompson believes that a writer might convey the suffering within transience and thereby lead herself and her audience to a larger understanding of what it means to be human. Again, however, her approach to the ways in which communal suffering might lead to social empathy is quite different from that of Baudelaire. This difference can most certainly be traced to the very particular disparities between mid-nineteenth-century Paris and late-twentieth-century Toronto — the differences between carriages and subway cars, between cravats and used condoms. Thompson's confrontation with contemporary Toronto necessarily highlights how cities drown in ugly, commercial, pre-packaged waste, and breed repressed, angry, anti-social citizens. While Baudelaire's flâneur wants to discover the heroic in contemporary life, Thompson's flâneur is made to continuously confront the villainous.

Thompson's confrontation with the villainous side of urban life is intended to help the audience "experience the painful thing of looking in the mirror" (Zimmerman interview 193). She does this by obeying her own impulse to discover hidden realities, but also by exploiting the advantages of the theatre. For Thompson, the "ideal theatrical experience" touches on "a kind of collective unconscious so that it's like a dream happening" (Tomc interview 19). The dream may be happening *to* the audience on one hand, "the play is penetrating the audience while they sit back passively" (Tomc interview 18), but, on the other hand, the audience "peek[s] through" (Wachtel interview 37) the fourth wall into the lives of the characters on stage, acting as voyeur and replicating Thompson's initial voyeuristic impulse. In this way, the play requires collaborative meaning-making and asks the audience to participate in identifying the particular moments of context-free truth that resonate beyond the initial experience of witnessing the drama. Although the dream "happen[s] to you" (Tomc interview 19), it also requires input from the dreamer to make it mean. This collaborative meaning-making between playwright and audience parallels the interaction between

the city and the flâneur, for the wanderer steps out onto the pavement and observes the city but then must also “search for meaning” (Tester 2) within the unfolding drama of urbanity.

These parallels between spectatorship and flânerie have been explored by Anke Gleber in *The Art of Taking a Walk*; Gleber associates the voyeuristic gaze of the flâneur with that of the movie camera: “[the flâneur] represents a disposition that is closely affiliated with the gaze of the camera, renders the sensitivity of a director who records his [or her] own vision, and repeats the spectatorship of a moviegoer who perceives the images of reality as an ongoing film of modernity” (6). I would suggest that the gaze of the flâneur is also theatrical, resembling the gaze of the theatre-goer, who witnesses a play as live action. Not only does an audience’s experience of a play replicate the immediate experience of a pedestrian, but also each production of a play is unique, as is each performance of each production, paralleling the individual excursions of a flâneur, who, when walking, may follow the same streets and encounter the same people, but whose experience is never exactly the same. Just as the text of the city is time-sensitive, plays happen in real time, dissolving as they progress.

The theatricality of flânerie is inherent in Thompson’s use of script and theatre-space. By recording her imaginative experiences of the city — taking an image or a person she encounters in her neighbourhood and exploring the possibilities for drama — Thompson positions herself as poet/flâneur. She says of her own creative process, “It takes me years to collect images.... I see something in the subway, I hear about a friends’ grandmother.... [I’m ready to] steal my stories from anywhere” (qtd. in Hunt 11). Richard Paul Knowles, who has written several articles on Thompson’s work and edited two volumes of criticism focusing on her plays, characterizes Thompson as a playwright who “cuts great lines, and even great scenes, with alarming alacrity. She also revises and rewrites with an enviable disregard for past success, critical acclaim, or anything, it seems, except the dynamics of the moment” (“Great” 8). By continuously revising the script, Thompson uses the temporality of theatre to maximize possibilities and to recreate, to some extent, the original spontaneity of the flâneur’s journey. Providing for even further variability, Thompson’s published plays sometimes offer choices for directors; for instance, in the edition of *Lion* published in Jerry Wasserman’s *Modern Canadian Plays*, two “scene options” with

Ben are printed (*Lion* 283-87). Thompson also exploits the theatricality of flânerie by creating the character of Isobel, whose liminal existence as audience guide represents Thompson's authorial wanderings as she journeys from scene to scene and the role of the audience that observes the scenes.

The dramatic flânerie of *Lion in the Streets* allows Thompson to blur borders, not just between indoors and outdoors as mentioned above, but also between playwright and audience, between playwright and characters, and between characters and audience. As Isobel weaves together the stories Thompson has invented and stands in as audience guide, she creates an interaction between playwright, characters, and audience that requires audience members' identification with and/or repulsion from what they witness. The result is that Thompson connects the "lion that is in the streets [and on the stage] ... to the lion within" (Zimmerman interview 191) — within the characters and within the audience members themselves. The permeability of identity borders among characters, in particular, demonstrates the connection between violence that arises external to the self and violence that arises within the self. The breakdown of solid identity is most explicit in the scene where George becomes Isobel's mother Maria. George then speaks in the voice of Maria, who describes the day her husband died: "I am foldin a light sheet of blue then and sudden, I can see through his eye, am at subway, in him ... I am his head ... a killin wave turn turn me in circles with teeth in circles and under and over I fall!" (267). This shift in identity from George to Maria to Maria's husband makes it possible to see other characters in the play as alter egos of one another: Laura/Rhonda, Rhonda/Joanne, David/Father Hayes, Christine/Scarlett, Rodney/Michael, and even Edward/Sherry considering that, in the first version of the play, Edward didn't exist and Sherry had a soliloquy where she internalized the blame for her rape, yelling, "I deserved everything I damn well got" (qtd. in Knowles, "Great" 25). In a reading that allows for these alter-egos, the shocking judgements and vigilante punishments that characters in *Lion* visit on one another are all the more disturbing because they also signal self-hatred.

As audience members are made to witness the complex interplay between judgement, injustice, and self-hatred in the play, they are also drawn into the equation as Isobel continually breaks down the fourth wall. The audience is brought into the play's dramatic space when Isobel

addresses it directly, making observations about events within the play, and forcing audience members to acknowledge their roles as watchers/voyeurs and judges of the characters. For instance, as Act Two begins and Isobel starts her search for the lion, she conspiratorially informs the audience: “This girl, Christine, Christine, this girl, SHE will take me to the lion, yes, for she ... she is very hard. Harrrrd. HARRRRRRRD!!” (275). Pointing to the play’s “cumulative revelations” and “the use of Isobel as a guide for the audience,” Craig S. Walker sees Thompson gesturing “very naturally beyond the frame of the play towards aspects of human nature in which the onlookers are implicated” (393).

Onlookers, however, may not universally agree that these cumulative revelations and gestures beyond the dramatic frame successfully convey a cohesive message about brutality and the audience’s individual responsibilities for systemic violence in urban culture. Even those who eventually come to appreciate Thompson’s use of structure may, as Walker describes, at first feel that Isobel’s “naive and initially uncomprehending odyssey” is “merely a random exposure to the series of horrifying events that constitute the play” (385).⁷ Isobel’s journey is erratic, non-linear, and disorienting. The people she encounters seem unconnected outside the relay structure of the play. Some reviewers, such as Pat Donnelly, feel that Thompson alienates her audience by “discard[ing] her multiple characters like paper cups after use” and that, as Donnelly puts it, the link between individual sketches and Isobel herself is “far from obvious” (D13). But I would like to suggest that the relay structure, in its erratic nature and non-linearity, functions as a crucial device; Thompson’s use of Isobel as flâneur allows her to explore the unique setting of a Toronto neighbourhood: its urban spaces, its fragmentation, its violence and confusion.⁸ As Benedict Nightingale, another reviewer, writes of the relay structure, “Somewhere here is Thompson’s answer to the obvious objection: that her play is too scattered and confusing, its invention too arbitrary. What should we expect of a jungle — sense, clarity, and a nice narrative path from beginning to end?” (27). It is perhaps in this structural paralleling of the urban jungle that *Lion in the Streets* most closely replicates the journey of the flâneur, for just as the flâneur can be understood as a person who walks without purpose only to cumulatively acquire a goal, Isobel’s experiences cause some viewers to dismiss the sequence of scenes as merely random while others seek the meaning *through* that same randomness.

In choosing a narrative strategy that replicates the wanderings of a flâneur, Thompson moves toward a theoretical representation of city neighbourhoods; reviewer Ray Conlogue points out that the play replicates “how people really live in cities. Not in a self-contained community, but connected by tendrils to a series of different worlds” (C7). Michel de Certeau’s approach to city life, particularly his ideas about the urban pedestrian, might again provide insight — insight into these connecting tendrils, these different worlds, and into Isobel’s relationships with the people she encounters. De Certeau says of people who walk in the city,

They are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining ... elude legibility.... The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator.

(93)

Isobel, then, “writes” the play’s text, but she is an unwitting creator who is only able to experience the text, not “author” it or “read” it. And if the “manifold story” has no spectator, the audience is further implicated in Isobel’s journey. Audience members are not impotent spectators but are compelled to actively participate in the creation of the text; the journey is not only Isobel’s, but also our own.

More than this, the text that Isobel writes can be compared with de Certeau’s description of the pedestrian’s urban text: she walks around her neighbourhood, exploring “the paths that correspond in this intertwining,” and her story is “shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of space” (de Certeau 93); her journey alters space so that it is no longer cohesive and linear. Moreover, the people she encounters are interconnected, but they elude legibility; they elude deciphering. This disruption of the continuity of traditional narrative — especially in this particular way, following an observer where she may wander — allows Thompson to dramatize how “the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface” (de Certeau 93).

And de Certeau is not the only critic who can help to locate Thompson’s fragmented story within theories of the everyday strangeness of urban living or help us to understand the tangled tendrils of her

characters' interaction with one another; Benjamin, before de Certeau, marvels at the coincidences, the overlapping acquaintances, the repetition of sights and experiences that one encounters in the city. In "A Berlin Chronicle" he meditates on how he was once compelled to draw a diagram of his life "resembling a series of family trees" (614). He describes the diagram, which was later lost, as a labyrinth with "many entrances leading into the interior" (614). Although he has forgotten the particularities of the diagram, Benjamin relates the general organizing concept of the labyrinth: the entrances are the equivalent of "primal acquaintances" (614), and each of Benjamin's acquaintances marks a different path through the maze. As each relationship inevitably leads to new acquaintanceships, "after a time they branch off these corridors" (614). What is most fascinating about Benjamin's reflection on this representational labyrinth is that he notes the possibility of pattern and coincidence. He comments on repetition of experience within the labyrinth: "there are perhaps paths that lead us again and again to people who have one and the same function for us: passageways that always, in the most diverse periods of life, guide us to the friend, the betrayer, the beloved, the pupil, or the master" ("Berlin" 615). Isobel's labyrinth of acquaintanceship, though chaotic and indecipherable in de Certeau's sense, clearly leads her again and again to the lion.

Isobel's winding, labyrinthine journey toward the lion begins when she follows Sue home from the playground and witnesses Bill's heartless public rejection of his wife. Although Isobel thinks she is looking for her home, she stumbles, confused, through the neighbourhood, observing scene after scene of what Thompson calls "soul murders or physical murders" (Zimmerman interview 183) until the pattern of violence reveals to Isobel that she must "KILL THE LION" (*Lion* 275). Throughout the play, she is led "to people who have one and the same function for [her]" — that is, they teach her how to detect depravity. In her ability to discover social crime, Isobel is akin to Benjamin's detective, a particular type of flâneur whose evolution was conditioned by the urban environment from which the poet flâneur first emerged. Discussing the rise of the detective novel, Benjamin comments on the city's unique capacity for breeding perversion:

[The detective novel] investigated the functions which are peculiar to the big city. One of these claimed particular attention; it had been emphasized by a police report as early as the turn of the nine-

teenth century [that] “It is almost impossible ... to maintain good behaviour in a thickly populated area where an individual is, so to speak, unknown to all others and thus does not have to blush in front of anyone.” Here the masses appear as the asylum that shields an asocial person from his persecutors. (*Baudelaire* 40)

As noted earlier, the flâneur would naturally have the “best prospects” for seeking out miscreants (*Baudelaire* 40-41). Through attentive observation and strolling, the urban wanderer would flush out the criminals hiding in the midst of the crowd; under the keen observation of the flâneur, all criminals would be under a gaze to make them “blush.” However, perhaps because there aren’t enough flâneurs to go around, depravity continues to thrive in the city and the wanderer will never run out of criminals to discover. In describing the plot of one detective story by Dumas, Benjamin notes, “No matter what trail the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime” (*Baudelaire* 41). In *Lion in the Streets*, every trail Isobel follows leads *her* to a crime.

Isobel’s journey — in its seeming randomness, in its accumulative acquisition of a goal, in its interweaving of lives and tendrils of story, and in its evolution from confusion to detection — is a secular one, but we must also consider the play’s obviously religious ending. When Isobel resists her urge to seek revenge and decides instead to tell Ben “I love you” (287), she is rewarded by “ascend[ing], in her mind, into heaven” (stage direction 288). Some critics have attacked the religious overtones of this ending and many have resisted Isobel’s forgiveness of Ben in this last scene. Kathy Chung, for instance, argues that the play’s “quasi-religious ending” is “troubling” and “seem[s] pitifully inadequate” as a solution to the problems that the play struggles with, namely “the patriarchal construction of identity, and ... the plight of individuals faced with a variety of social problems” (133).⁹ But other critics have come to terms with the ending. Ann Wilson calls Isobel’s forgiveness a feminist “mechanism for healing” (“Culture” 168), and Robert Nunn believes it to be a necessary challenge to the audience after the many scenes “of characters doing terrible things to others in order to force the abject outside their own threatened boundaries” (“Crackwalking” 319). To take these divided opinions in a new direction, I would like to suggest that a secular reading of the play that accounts for its urban context might helpfully be juxtaposed with the Christian overtones to add a new dimension to Isobel’s Christ-like forgiveness of Ben. At the

end of the play, when Isobel “is about to kill [Ben] with the stick, the forces of vengeance and forgiveness warring inside her,” “Forgiveness wins” (stage direction 287). It is not only a realization that Christian love can stop the cycle of cruelty that stays her hand; Isobel has also gained an emotional maturity and has learned to take responsibility for her place in the interconnecting web of civic violence and the delicate pattern of psychic bonds that dictate citizens’ lives in the city.

Many critics have explored the religious aspects of *Lion in the Streets*: notably, Knowles details the elements of grace in the play (“Achievement”); Marc Maufort explores ideas of sacrifice (“Exploring” 198); Wilson sees in *Lion* “the child as the heroic agent of redemption, which echoes Jesus’s promises in the Sermon on the Mount” (“Culture” 169); and Jennifer Harvie calls Isobel “a Dantesque guide through inferno and purgatory to heaven” (85). Walker also discusses the Christian moral embedded in the play, but he places it in relation to play’s existential theme, helpfully paving the way to recognition of a marriage between religious redemption and more secular philosophies:

Isobel’s forgiveness of Ben suggests that sensibility is essentially Christian. But it is important to notice that Thompson does not present [Isobel’s forgiveness of Ben] as a response to a moral imperative — i.e., the Christian command to love one’s enemies ... — but as a natural outcome of the recognition of one’s self in others.

(394)

Isobel recognizes her own tendency toward violence when she raises her stick against Ben; rather than quench her thirst for vengeance, she decides to relinquish her role in the cycle. All paths have led her to the lion; all paths have taught her to detect depravity. She now recognizes it in herself and is thus able to subvert it. But the recognition of herself in others (or others in herself) is not the only reason Isobel is able to stop the cycle of violence. While Walker’s reading of the ending allows a nice parallel between Isobel and Baudelaire’s existential flâneur who suffers on behalf of others (“Windows,” *Paris Spleen* 77), I’d like to suggest a further reading that favours the detective flâneur and sees Isobel as socially responsible pedestrian whose ventures into the streets culminate in a safer, more community-minded neighbourhood.

Exploring the title of the play provides a helpful bridge between religious and secular themes in *Lion in the Streets*. The critics mentioned above have all noted that the title comes from Proverbs 26:13, which

reads, “The slothful man saith, There is a lion in the way; a lion is in the streets” (KJB). Again, Walker introduces secular themes and points out that “Thompson needn’t have been thinking specifically of Proverbs when she chose her title. The image has been often used to convey a sense of the danger lurking within civilization” (384). Walker pulls the pairing of “lion” and “streets” from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, the title of a 1953 James Cagney movie, and a poem by Wallace Stevens to suggest that echoes beyond the biblical passage might “provide [analogues] that can help us to understand what Thompson is doing in her play” (386).¹⁰ Obviously, what Thompson is *doing* is informed by Christian principles, but her message isn’t simply a gesture toward spirituality and faith. In fact, the imperative to go out into the streets and brave the lion has very practical implications for city safety.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs emphasizes the correlation between pedestrians and safety in the city and urges city planners to build wider sidewalks, to blend housing with busy commercial areas, and to put green space in the midst of bustle rather than in isolated areas — all this in order to encourage citizens to spend more time in the street. Orthodox city planners, Jacobs argues, uphold notions that stunt the positive evolution of large cities, notions such as that

the street is bad as an environment for humans; houses should be turned away from it and faced inward toward sheltered greens.... Commerce should be segregated from residences and greens.... The presence of many other people is, at best, a necessary evil, and good city planning must aim for at least an illusion of isolation and suburbany privacy. (20)

Her refutation of these ideas is simple: “everyone already knows: A well-used city street is apt to be a safe street. A deserted city street is apt to be unsafe” (34). If the streets are safe, Jacobs further contends, the city will be safe too, and thus another equation emerges: if people do not feel safe on the sidewalks, they won’t spend time in the streets; if people don’t spend time in the streets, the sidewalks will become less and less safe.

In *Lion in the Streets*, Isobel wanders the streets of the same neighbourhood in which she was killed. Unlike the sluggard of Proverbs 26:13, who uses the lion in the streets as an excuse for his own social lethargy, Isobel must brave the very lion who killed her and, more than that, avoid perpetuating the violence committed against her. She is not

only learning a moral lesson, but also a lesson about what it means to be a good citizen, contributing productively to the city's safety. She learns "the first fundamental of successful city life," which, according to Jane Jacobs, is that "people must take a modicum of public responsibility for each other even if they have no ties to each other" (82). Isobel does one better than this and takes public responsibility for a man whom she has powerful reasons to hate — by telling him that she loves him, she takes responsibility for the circumstances that have led him to become a lion of the streets, namely the violence that has been committed against him, and she thereby takes responsibility for the violence warring in his psyche. In this way, Isobel introduces a new theme, one of gentleness and love, into the interwoven web of city psyches. As de Certeau and Benjamin might say, then, Isobel has forged a path amid the intertwining that has led the entire community toward a more positive destination; and she has encountered the same representational figure again and again in order to learn how to open a new entrance in the city's labyrinth.

Isobel's new, positive approach to city life introduces an encouraging example for the other characters in the play and for the audience. At the end, just after Isobel forgives Ben and just before she makes her last speech, "the players enter singing a religious-sounding chorale with a sense of sadness and triumph" and "the actor playing BEN join[s] them" (stage direction 287-88). The players converge and represent, for the first time, the entire *community* within *Lion* coming together to support Isobel.¹¹ Here is the nexus of the interwoven stories, the centre of the labyrinth. For Jacobs, this last scene might fulfill what she sees as the city's potential to be an "intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole" (50). Like the citizens of Jacobs's neighbourhood who protected two young girls from their harasser by forming "a wary semicircle ... around him, not too close, until the police came" (53), the citizens of *Lion* finally compose an orderly whole, rallying round Isobel as they didn't do during her life. When the actor playing Ben joins his peers, the audience realizes that, although Isobel didn't "kill the lion," she has not failed to sheath its claws and quiet its roar. By venturing out into the streets and by spreading forgiveness rather than hatred, Isobel has safely incorporated the criminal back into the community. Rather than suggesting a literal

reincorporation — now that Isobel has forgiven Ben, he is healed and is ready to join society — the actor's move to join the chorale makes a suggestion beyond the scope of the play's plot: that is, that community members can foster safe environments where healing can occur. The healing, religious in nature from the tone of the chorale, is also a pointed message for urban communities: as citizens, we can create harmony (in this case, literal harmony) if we follow Jacobs's advice and spend time in the streets taking public responsibility for one another.

The chorale, at first sad but triumphant, perhaps signalling consensual grief for the horrific events of the play but also confidence that the horror will not continue, becomes "joyful" (stage direction 288) at the very end as the players, unified, usher Isobel into heaven. What was embedded in the title becomes overt near the end when the play's religious implications cannot be denied. Retroactively shedding light on the rest of the play, the religious ending informs how we read Isobel-as-ghost — she seems a lost soul on a mission to set things right. The Christian sensibility in the play has thus caused critics to label Isobel a "local saint" (Zimmerman, "Judith" 204) and a "child martyr, guardian angel" (Adam 45). Isobel even calls herself a "saint" near the beginning of Act Two (275) and declares at the end that she has come back from the dead to "take [her] life" and to tell the audience, "I want you all to have your life" (288). But Thompson deliberately leaves clues as to how Isobel's journey is relevant for any audience member, even one impervious to religious crusade. Isobel's story is not a typically religious one, and, even at the end, "heaven" and "religious" are only mentioned in the stage directions, not in the actual dialogue; just how "religious" the play's tone is is somewhat left to the audience. Throughout the play, Thompson gives us the opportunity to interpret Isobel as a detective flâneur who roots out crime in the city and unites the community to calm the eruptions of violence that sometimes tarnish city life. Thompson accomplishes Isobel's dual identity — at once Christian saviour and secular pedestrian — by characterizing Isobel's walk through the urban jungle as essential to both Isobel's psychic healing and the psychic healing of the community. As pedestrian, Isobel's last sentences — "I take my life. I want you all to take your life. I want you all to have your life" — are imbued with social responsibility; to "take" one's life is to fight sloth, to brave the streets, to protect one's neighbours in the city.

In Isobel's victimization we witness the threat to those who venture

onto the street, but in her *flânerie*, we witness how the delicate tendrils of social interconnection might lead to positive relationships in the city. In this context then — that is, in the context of socially responsible *flânerie* — Isobel’s walk through *Lion in the Streets* need not solely be defined as a shocking, horrific, tragic experience. Thompson herself explains that even the tragic aspects of the play are redemptive: “To me, tragedy is never depressing because it rips open a kind of huge shroud we have to walk around in, and you feel electrified, just like going out into the fresh air” (qtd. in Bemrose). The play itself documents a positive journey, that of Isobel on the streets: writer of text, uninhibited pedestrian, female and child *flâneur* who has plunged into the heart of urbania and accepted accountability for its failings. Thompson, through Isobel, provides an example of a responsible urban pedestrian. Isobel decides to take responsibility for her life and for the lives of others in her community; what’s more, she compels the audience to do the same — to make strides in the urban jungle, to tame the lion in the streets.

NOTES

¹ Benjamin is quoting Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life” (9).

² For the sake of economy, I have avoided critical debate about the historical context of the *flâneur*. However, it is important to note that there is some resistance to the contemporary application of Baudelaire and Benjamin that Tester is describing. Critics such as Peter Brooker have insisted that the *flâneur* be understood as a historically bound figure—“belong[ing] strictly to the early and mid-nineteenth century, even especially to Paris” (116). Tester, however, has identified a “paradox” in the evolution of the *flâneur*:

There is a certain ambiguity concerning the *historical specificity* of the figure of the *flâneur*. On the one hand, there seems to be little doubt that the *flâneur* is specific to Parisian time and place. On the other hand, the *flâneur* is used as a figure to illuminate issues of city life irrespective of time and place. (16)

³ Isobel’s identity is not simple. She is not only a lower-class, female, immigrant child; she is, more specifically, an adult ghost who thinks she is still a child. As a ghost, she may wander unseen, both in outdoor and indoor spaces. I will explore her fluid wandering in more detail later in this essay.

⁴ In that Isobel adopts the behaviour of a *flâneur* — wandering and observing people in her neighbourhood, even becoming a detective who discovers city crime — I find it fascinating that Thompson casts her as an adult woman who experiences the urban environment as a nine-year-old child, her age when she was killed; Baudelaire compares the *flâneur* to a convalescent and to a child in “The Painter of Modern Life.” He explains how the *flâneur*, in seeing with the eyes of a child, “is possessed in the highest degree of the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things” and that the “child sees everything in a state of newness” (7, 8).

⁵ The set has, at times, emphasized this lack of distinction between public and private spaces in *Lion*. For its premiere production in June 1990 at the du Maurier World Stage Theatre Festival, *Lion's* set comprised a single, vertical structure that supported several playing levels. Architecturally (to echo Benjamin) ridding the production of any distinction between outdoors and indoors, Sue LePage's design highlighted the fluidity of space within the play and the permeability of enclosure, an effect that complemented themes of pervasive danger in the text. As the public and the private become indistinguishable, safe demarcations between the violence on the streets, the violence inside the home, and the violence erupting within the psyche cease to exist.

⁶ That it can be staged rather sparsely is perhaps due to its conception as a radio play.

⁷ Walker himself does not feel that the events are ultimately random: "[Isobel's] journey turns by slow degrees into a terribly earnest crusade, a quest to locate the 'lion in the streets': in effect, to seek out the agony, violence, and despair that lie at the core of these characters" (385).

⁸ Thompson is also interested in the unique multicultural environment of Toronto neighbourhoods, and both the positive and negative results of that multiculturalism. In her discussion of *Sled* with Jennifer Fletcher she expresses her desire to represent "Toronto neighbourhoods as being quite unique from the world. They are somewhat ghettoized but there's a lot of mixing happening, especially in the central area" (40).

⁹ Likewise, Cynthia Zimmerman finds the hopeful ending in *Lion in the Streets* an "unconvincing additio[n].... In short, [it] offer[s] a hope we have had no cause to anticipate" ("Judith" 204).

¹⁰ Incidentally, it intrigues me that an analogue of Proverbs 26:13 appears in Baudelaire. In his poem "Crowds" from *Paris Spleen*, Baudelaire writes, "The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusk in his shell, will be eternally deprived of" (20). The differences between Thompson's city streets and Baudelaire's life in the crowd are again stark — Baudelaire's flâneur, above all, *enjoys* the city — but what intrigues me is the parallel sentiment between this passage and the Proverbs passage: in both Proverbs and Baudelaire, the lazy person stays away from the streets. Elsewhere in his writing, Baudelaire acknowledges that, although the flâneur finds the streets delightful, they are as full of danger as a jungle: "Man ... is always ... in a state of savagery. What are the perils of jungle and prairie compared to the daily shocks and conflicts of civilization?" (*Fusées* qtd. in Benjamin, *Arcades* 443). Baudelaire, like Thompson, has his flâneur braving civilization's jungle.

¹¹ I'd like to suggest that the players here not only represent the characters they portrayed, but, because they each played multiple roles, and because they appear at the end as "players" not as characters, they also represent the audience members and the world outside the play that should learn from Isobel's journey.

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