

# The Folktale and Folktale Style in the Tradition of French Newfoundlanders

Gerald Thomas

Volume 1, Number 1-2, 1979

Le Conte Populaire au Canada  
Folktales in Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081015ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081015ar>

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

## ISSN

1481-5974 (print)  
1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Thomas, G. (1979). The Folktale and Folktale Style in the Tradition of French Newfoundlanders. *Ethnologies*, 1(1-2), 71-78. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081015ar>

## Article abstract

"Le conte populaire et le style du conteur dans la tradition des Franco-Terreneuviens"

Quoiqu'il soit actuellement impossible de qualifier la tradition de conter de longs contes merveilleux de vivace dans les communautés francophones de la péninsule du Port-au-Port, Terre-Neuve, il est tout de même encore possible de recueillir d'excellents exemples du genre, chez des conteurs de talent.

L'examen de certains aspects stylistiques du conte et de son exécution nous suggère qu'il existe des degrés déterminés dans la disparition d'une tradition.

Le style ancien, plus proche de ses racines métropolitaines, suit la "règle de trois," est attentif aux détails, a un débit courant et ininterrompu, et respecte les formules associées au conte merveilleux. L'exécution est caractérisée par du mouvement et des gestes corporels extrêmement vigoureux, étant donc hautement dramatique.

Dans la tradition moribonde, ces aspects ont tendance à être laissés de côté, en fonction de l'âge et du caractère du narrateur. Les contes sont raccourcis par l'omission ou l'abréviation d'épisodes répétitifs, des détails sont omis à cause d'un défaut de mémoire ou tout simplement de pure négligence, et le débit est coupé de pauses, d'hésitations, de répétitions et de corrections. Le discours macaronique apparaît çà et là, les formules sont changées ou supprimées, les mouvements et gestes du corps sont soigneusement contrôlés par peur du ridicule.

Il est intéressant de noter que deux conteurs contemporains qui suivent le plus fidèlement le style ancien sont tous deux considérés comme des "originaux" et qu'on les traite avec un certain humour condescendant.

---

# *The Folktale and Folktale Style in the Tradition of French Newfoundlanders\**

---

GERALD THOMAS

Much of the activity, past and present, of the Centre d'Études Franco-Terreneuviennes (C.E.F.T.) has been focussed on the folktale in its many forms and manifestations. Considerable field collecting has been undertaken, primarily in the communities of Cap-St.-Georges and La Grand' Terre, but also at l'Anse-aux-Canards, and a substantial number of folktales of all kinds has been collected. The Centre's archive currently contains over 130 Aarne-Thompson tale types in more than 300 versions or variants.<sup>1</sup> Almost all have been transcribed from original tape-recordings, and a detailed motif analysis was completed in August 1977.<sup>2</sup> The recording and classification of this material is, of course, only the means to an end, and not an end in itself.

The tales have been collected from a population base of little more than 1200 people, the approximate total of the three communities mentioned above. A number of questions immediately spring to mind in face of this fact. How is it, for example, that collectors are still able, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, to collect long and full versions of *Märchen*, the imminent disappearance of which from western tradition has been assumed by generations of folklorists? What are the factors which permit the continued existence of such a narrative tradition, especially in the face of competition from the media and other forms of entertainment? What lines of transmission exist to maintain a storytelling tradition? What changes, if any, are to be observed in the manner in which tales are told?

---

\* This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 1977 meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of the C.E.F.T. holdings, see my article "L'état actuel de la recherche sur le conte populaire chez les Franco-Terreneuviens," in Jean-Claude Dupont et al, eds., *Mélanges en l'honneur de Luc Lacourcière: Folklore française d'Amérique*, Montréal: Leméac, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis of folktale types and motifs was undertaken by Geraldine Barter. Her research was made possible with the financial assistance of a Canada Council (General) Grant, which I gratefully acknowledge.

Geraldine Barter discusses questions of transmission in the same tradition as the subject of this paper, in her essay entitled "The Folktale and Children in the Tradition of French Newfoundlanders." It is the intent of this paper to suggest some answers to the last question, concerning changes to be found in storytelling style. It will address itself only indirectly to questions of survival and the influence of the media, in so far as they touch on style. I have discussed the relationship of folktale and television elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Franco-Newfoundland narrative tradition is no longer lively, it is not dead. If the *veillé*e is a thing of the past, it is not of a so distant past that one cannot find storytellers with tales to tell. But the more one records narrators the more one realizes, as do many of the narrators themselves, that tales are not told as they used to be told. Close examination of narrative styles and an attentive ear to comments made by narrators and audiences alike suggest however not that there has been a change in narrative style, but rather that there exists, and probably has long existed, two distinct narrative styles in Franco-Newfoundland tradition.

The first narrative style, the one which has received most acknowledgement both from the scholar and the "folk" audience alike, is what I term the public style. The second, characteristic of most contemporary Franco-Newfoundland storytellers, is what may be called the family or private tradition. I shall outline their distinctive features, and try to justify the terms I have used to describe them, with reference to particular storytellers.<sup>4</sup>

In discussing narrative style, it should be made clear that one is dealing with two distinct but related subjects. The first has to do with textual content and manner of delivery, and involves such matters as structure, attention to detail and formulaic speech; the second has to do with body movement and gesticulation.<sup>5</sup> A further point is that certain formal aspects of

---

<sup>3</sup>I have examined this question in more detail in an unpublished paper entitled "Other Worlds: The Folktale and Soap Opera in Newfoundland's French Tradition"

<sup>4</sup>Edward D. Ives had come to similar conclusions with regard to folksong tradition in the Maritimes, in his paper entitled "The Two Traditions" read at the 1977 meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada.

<sup>5</sup>A growing body of research is devoted to the concept of performance style, of which body movement and gesticulation are important elements. A brief selection of relevant works includes: John Ball, "Style in the Folktale," *Folk-Lore*, LXV (1954), 170-172; Richard M. Dorson, *Negro Folktales in Michigan*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956, and "Oral Styles of American Folk Narrators," in Horace P. Beck, ed., *Folklore in Action: Essays in Honor of MacEdward Leach*. Publications of the American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series, General Editor Tristram P. Coffin. Vol. XIV, Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, Inc., 1962, 77-100 (reprinted from T. A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language*, Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press & John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1960); Ruth Finnegan, *Limba Stories and Storytelling*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967; K. Haiding, *Von Der Gebärdensprache der Märchenerzähler*, Helsinki: Folklore Fellows Communications No. 155, 1955; Francis C. Hayes, "Ges-

style are consciously recognized as such by narrators and audience, and this is also true for aspects of gesture. There are other features which tend to be recognized by the folklorist alone. Both subjects are aspects of the concept of performance,<sup>6</sup> and both require analysis which can only be partly based on textual study. It may be argued that careful observation and analysis, in addition to comments made by storytellers and audiences, indicate a shift of emphasis in the storytelling tradition which has little to do with the simple decrease in the number of narrators or the size of their repertoires.

The first feature concerns the structure of *Märchen*. As is well known, in Western tradition tales tend to be triply repetitive — in the three brothers, their three dogs, three horses and three swords, the three life signs of a tale such as AT 303, *The Twins or Blood Brothers*. At one time or another, the majority of storytellers today will themselves draw attention to the triplication of events in a tale. It can be considered a typical feature of the public style when narrators adhere faithfully to such repetition. Conversely, in the private or family tradition, narrators tend to simplify the structure of tales, eliminating one or more of the repetitive elements. Indeed, one quite excellent storyteller expressed her distaste for long folktales precisely because, as she put it, “Everything goes in threes.”

This repetition is equally important at the level of detail. Thus the brothers Tom, Bill and Jack<sup>7</sup> each have a dog, and each dog has a name. In the public style, narrators are careful to name each dog: Brise-Fer, Brûle-Fer and Passe-Partout, and to mention the dog by name wherever it is appropriate to do so. Similarly, the stock description of *la vieille sorcière*, the old witch who turns Tom and Bill to stone — “Ver de terre, poussière d’mes mains,” says the narrator, “eune vieille qui sort, les choux pis la barbe y traînaient par terre!” — will be repeated. In the

---

tures: A Working Bibliography,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* XXI, 4 (1957), 218–317; Melville Jacobs, *The Content and Style of an Oral Literature*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959; Istvan Sándor, “Dramaturgy of Tale-Telling,” *Acta Ethnographica*, XVI (Budapest, 1967), 305–338.

<sup>6</sup>The concept of performance is one of the major preoccupations of contemporary North American folklorists. The following list notes a number of studies on the subject: Richard Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance,” *American Anthropologist*, 77 (1975), 290–311; Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974; Dan Ben-Amos, “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” in Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman, eds., *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971), 3–15 (and published as a separate volume, Austin, 1972); Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein, eds., *Folklore Performance and Communication*, The Hague: Mouton, 1975; Dell Hymes, “Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communication,” in John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, eds., *The Ethnography of Communication*, *American Anthropologist* 66, 6 (1964), 1–34; Dell Hymes, “Breakthrough into Performance,” in Ben-Amos and Goldstein (1975), 11–94; William Hugh Jensen, “Classifying Performance in the Study of Verbal Folklore,” in W. Edson Richmand, ed., *Studies in Folklore, in Honor of Distinguished Service Professor Stith Thompson*, Bloomington: Indiana University Publications, Folklore Series 9, 1957, 110–118.

<sup>7</sup>The influence of English tradition on Franco-Newfoundland storytelling is evident in the latter’s use of English names for heroes of tales told in French. The individual hero of French tales in Newfoundland is now almost invariably Jack, and if Jack has two brothers, they are always Tom and Bill.

public tradition, the storyteller will repeat the whole sentence, word for word, each time one of the brothers confronts the witch. In the private or family tradition, the narrator may omit it after the first encounter, if the stock description is used at all.

The omission of such conventional descriptions may be taken to represent a general inattention to detail which is typical of the private style. One can easily multiply the examples of a lack of attention to detail on the part of private or family storytellers, in contrast to the finely detailed narratives of the public storyteller.

A consequence of fidelity to the structure and detail of folktales is that tales tend, in the public tradition, to be quite long. Many informants have commented that 'in the old days' old so-and-so could tell tales that would last up to two or even three hours.

In the private tradition, tales are usually quite short, and narrators are quite well aware of this. They may explain the brevity of their tales by emphasizing how long it was since they last told the tale, implying that they have forgotten much of the story. While this is certainly true, part of the explanation is that private narrators do not pay attention to detail and may even consciously omit it. It is a rare narrator today who can make a tale last as much as half an hour.

Many contemporary storytellers in the Franco-Newfoundland private or family tradition express a positive dislike for long tales. It is arguable that this dislike for lengthy tales is related to the influence of television. Both public and private storyteller alike have found in television a potent rival in their rôles as entertainers. It may be that storytellers have come to think in entertainment units of thirty minutes or an hour, the usual length of television dramas. This is especially possible with the soap opera, the daily melodramas which keep French Newfoundlanders glued to their television sets. Soap operas are referred to as *contes*, the same word used for *Märchen*. It may well be that thirty minutes or an hour are now thought of as appropriate time units for tale narrations.

It is possible, of course, that the experienced informant is anxious to encompass his or her narration within the bounds of the usual thirty-minute tape recording. One notices how informants glance frequently at the recorder, and ask if the tape is finished, or nearly so; nowadays, the tape recorder is often found in the homes of the "folk." A number of my own informants have recorded themselves or their friends, and are perfectly well aware of the length of a tape.

Narrators in both the public and private traditions will comment on the length and repetitive structure of tales. They also recognize and appreciate certain formulaic elements in tales. The consistent use of formulas seems to characterize the public style of narration, and public storytellers

use faithfully opening and closing formulas, such as the following: "Y avait eune fois, par eune bonne fois," or "Bien, y a eune fois, et pour vous dire eune fois, c'est pas dans mon temps ni c'est pas dans vote temps, mais c'est dans l'vieux temps — y avait un homme et pis eune femme don." The usual closing formulas are "Et s'i sont pas morts, i vivent encore," or "Et quand j'ai pâssé par là" plus some anodine addendum such as "i m'avont donnée eune tassée d'thé" or again a combination of all these.

Opening and closing formulas are the most readily recognized types, but in the private or family tradition they tend to be omitted or mangled. This is equally true for formulaic expressions found internally, within the body of a tale. The most common are used to indicate rapidly and conventionally a long passage of time. One kind involves the triple repetition of a verb, such as "Il a marché, il a marché, il a marché in bon bouté." Another states simply that "Dans in conte ça pâsse vite." Another is in rhyme:

Marche aujourd'hui, marche demain,  
A force de marcher on fait beaucoup de chmin.

A sign of the private tradition is not only the omission of such formulas, but also the parodying of them:

Marche aujourd'hui, marche demain,  
Si tu tombes pas ton nez dans la marde,  
Marche pus loin,

or, "à force de marcher fourre ton nez dans la marde."

Attention has been drawn so far to formal aspects of style which can be observed through textual analysis. Further features of style which require discussion are only rarely indicated in textual transcriptions, and then only with difficulty. The first concerns the rhythm of narration. When both the public and private styles can be characterized by their attempts to reproduce the rhythm of natural speech in dialogue, and while exponents of each style will attempt to make use of the dramatic possibilities of voice, for example by dropping the voice as a suspenseful prelude to a striking or violent event, there are significant differences.

In the private tradition, a narration is almost always interspersed with hesitations, corrections and non-dramatic pauses. Faulty memory no doubt contributes to the cause of these features, but the frequency of such phrases as "No — euh — I'm ahead of my story," followed by a rearrangement of motif sequences, interrupts the normally fluent flow of the tale. In the public tradition, such breaks were not normal and would detract from a storyteller's reputation.

In so far as it might prove disconcerting in a bilingual context, macar-

onic speech may also distract from the fluency of a narration. While it is not necessarily a sign of either style, but simply represents the reality of being a French minority amongst an English majority, it suggests that storytellers no longer have full control, linguistically, of the tales they tell. A storyteller with an expert command of his or her own language is less likely to pause before the choice of an appropriate word or phrase, and would not normally borrow unnecessarily from the competing language. Modern narrators, in the main those of the private or family tradition, show the penetrating influence of assimilation and its chief agent, television.

A final feature of style which serves to distinguish the private and public traditions is an aspect of the concept of performance, and concerns the use of body movement made by narrators. In the public style, the storyteller was uninhibited in his use of gesture and gesticulation. The C.E.F.T. archive has descriptions of older narrators which emphasize the flailing of arms, the constant movement of the hands, the jiggling of the body, the elastic face. One was in danger of being stepped upon by a vigorous storyteller, if any unwary member of the audience sitting on the floor did not move quickly enough when, carried away by his emotions, the narrator jumped up to his feet, the better to describe the combat between Jack and the Seven-Headed Monster.

Today, hardly any narrator performs in this fashion, and storytellers and audience alike associate these *magies* or movements with "Les vieux Français de France," in other words the early representatives of the public style. It is certainly true today that a child given to much body movement or hand waving will be mocked for it, and compared to the old Frenchmen. Taste now is to the economic use of gesture as perhaps exemplified by the actors on day-time television dramas.

By far the majority of storytellers recorded in the Franco-Newfoundland context are of the private or family tradition. They do not consider themselves to be storytellers, *conteurs*, reserving this title for narrators who performed in the public style. Most of the great public storytellers are now gone, or no longer find audiences. However, there are a few individuals who for reasons not explored here, do perform occasionally, and in the public style. It is instructive to note the attitudes of their peers towards them and their style.

It has already been noted that the exaggerated use of gesture is considered old-fashioned and is mocked. Two French storytellers who narrate in the public style are both considered locally to be "characters," "des originaux" as it were. This judgement goes beyond their storytelling. Both are gifted musicians and one, Emile Benoit of 'Anse-aux-Canards, is known beyond the confines of the French communities of the Port-au-Port

peninsula. But local people say he is not faithful to local style, that he is too much of an individualist, too much of a clown. The other, Cyril Robin of Cap-St.-Georges, is humoured for his gifts as a 'clown,' as a musician, and as a storyteller. Both men can be the life and soul of parties. But they are no longer taken seriously. They are too out of the ordinary for most people's taste.

The reasons for this attitude are not hard to find. Both are men who perform in the public style, preserving a performance style which is no longer typical and which is looked upon as old-fashioned, something almost to be ashamed of. This view, which is not universal by any means, reflects the changes in taste brought about by the pressures of assimilation. Private narrators are, of course, less influenced by such pressure because their performances are not public and therefore not known.

It is significant that both Emile Benoit and Cyril Robin are men who have not lost their pride in their French origins and regret the diluting of their heritage. Many French Newfoundlanders have attempted to divest themselves of their French identity, but those who do not are tarred with the brush of inferiority. Emile Benoit and Cyril Robin would have been artists in any tradition, but because they are so visibly representatives of the older and now largely unappreciated tradition, their reputation has suffered for it.

It is fortunate that one can still appreciate the artistry of storytellers from the now all-but-dead public tradition. Their dynamic, evocative and vigorous style certainly added a richness to the spiritual life of their peers. But the private or family tradition remains alive and in good health, although it is not easily accessible to the outsider. Storytelling should continue to be a living art in Franco-Newfoundland tradition for further generations, although it may be in a more subdued and less dynamic form. What is significant for folklorists is that similar private storytelling traditions may yet continue where the public tradition has gone and where, one may have concluded, storytelling is dead. This is certainly a conclusion one might have reached in Franco-Newfoundland communities, had one restricted oneself to brief forays into their tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Centre d'Etudes Franco-Terreneuviennes  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

---

<sup>8</sup>This paper is derived from my Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Stories, Storytelling and Storytellers in Newfoundland's French Tradition: A Study of the Narrative Art of Four French Newfoundlanders*, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977.



**Extrait**

*“Le conte populaire et le style du conteur dans la tradition des Franco-Terreneuvien”*

*Quoiqu’il soit actuellement impossible de qualifier la tradition de conter de longs contes merveilleux de vivace dans les communautés francophones de la péninsule du Port-au-Port, Terre-Neuve, il est tout de même encore possible de recueillir d’excellents exemples du genre, chez des conteurs de talent.*

*L’examen de certains aspects stylistiques du conte et de son exécution nous suggère qu’il existe des degrés déterminés dans la disparition d’une tradition.*

*Le style ancien, plus proche de ses racines métropolitaines, suit la “règle de trois,” est attentif aux détails, a un débit courant et ininterrompu, et respecte les formules associées au conte merveilleux. L’exécution est caractérisée par du mouvement et des gestes corporels extrêmement vigoureux, étant donc hautement dramatique.*

*Dans la tradition moribonde, ces aspects ont tendance à être laissés de côté, en fonction de l’âge et du caractère du narrateur. Les contes sont raccourcis par l’omission ou l’abréviation d’épisodes répétitifs, des détails sont omis à cause d’un défaut de mémoire ou tout simplement de pure négligence, et le débit est coupé de pauses, d’hésitations, de répétitions et de corrections. Le discours macaronique apparaît ça et là, les formules sont changées ou supprimées, les mouvements et gestes du corps sont soigneusement contrôlés par peur du ridicule.*

*Il est intéressant de noter que deux conteurs contemporains qui suivent le plus fidèlement le style ancien sont tous deux considérés comme des “originaux” et qu’on les traite avec un certain humour condescendant.*