THE FAMILY ALBUM:
OUTPORT CULTURE AND A NEWFOUNDLAND WOMAN'S RECITATION

Pauline Greenhill

Le monologue (nommé 'récitation' à Terre Neuve) est souvent considéré par les folkloristes comme un genre composé et joué exclusivement par les hommes. Cependant, "The Family Album", l'album familial, une récitation écrite par Dulsie Spracklin de Terre Neuve, fut présenté par sa soeur Greta Hussey à un concert communautaire célébrant les premiers vingt-cinq ans d'inclusion de la province dans la Confédération canadienne. Utilisant la situation fictive d'une femme âgée montrant ses photos de famille à une nouvelle-venue au petit village côtier, cette rècitation examine le rôle des femmes dans la culture, et le poids porté par les valeurs traditionnelles. Cet article s'adresse à la question de la signification et de l'importance locale de ce genre.

According to folklore scholarship, the monologue is a male-oriented genre. It is performed almost exclusively by men, and usually has contents and cultural views which celebrate traditional masculinity in direct opposition to feminine values.[1] The monologue, "a solo, stylized, theatrically mannered oral performance from memory of a self-contained dramatic narrative in poetic or prose form"[2] (called by Newfoundlanders a "recitation") is an aggressive speech form such as women rarely employ publicly in traditional societies. However, women's monologues may be more prevalent than the literature suggests. The example which I'll discuss here does not have the misogynism of others of the genre, but it shares with them the definitive form and presentation style, and a concern with community and self.

This Newfoundland recitation, "The Family Album," was composed by Dulsie Spracklin of Brigus. Her sister, Greta Hussey, performed it at a community concert of "time" held in her home outport, Port-de-Grave. "Times" are formal occasions. They are put on by church or other women's organisations to raise money for charitable and community efforts, and they attract both local people and visitors from other outports. These occasions allow women to assert values and powers which they downplay, exercise only infrequently, or state in different ways in everyday life. Through the time's social context, women create a situation in which they can perform and be at the centre of attention.[3]

The "time" at which Mrs. Hussey presented "The Family Album" was held in 1974 to celebrate Newfoundland's first twenty-five years in Canadian Confederation. Mrs. Hussey and others in Port-de-Grave organised the event to show the area's young people what life had been like in the pre-Confederation era. They demonstrated everyday subsistence activities like bread baking and wool carding and spinning, and local women and men performed traditional songs and recitations. This concert was quite a success; the adults and children who crowded into the hall provided an enthusiastic audience. Mrs. Hussey's "The Family Album" was the only recitation at this event which was given by a woman:[4]

[Grandma seated as the curtain rises]. Lord yes Mrs. Sturge I must show you my photograph album, seeing as how you're new here and ain't never seen it. It's getting along in years, just like myself, but it looks fair to middling yet. And it ought to, seeing what care I took of it.

Now this first picture, that's Cousin Lemuel Jenkins. Ain't he sad looking, though. I've often said to Hezekiah, says I, "A graveyard is a real cheerful companion to what cousin Lemuel is. He's always just as gloomy." What made him that way? Well I was just going to tell you. 'Twas cause he was crossed in love. My, 'tis queer how different it affects different folks, being crossed in love. Sometimes it affects them crossways, and sometimes it affects them otherwise. Now there was Cy Aren. He was crossed in love about the same time that Lemuel was. But he just cheered up, and danced out of the meadow, he got himself another girl and was married inside of three months. But Lemuel, he just give up and he ain't never grinned more than two or three times since it happened. Yes, just like the poet said, "Of all the sad things that ever were said, the saddest of all, he couldn't get wed, unto the woman he wanted." Did Lemuel ever get married to nobody else? Mercy sake, what woman do you suppose would have such a piece of melancholy sitting by her fireside?

Now this here, this is Uncle John Benson on my mother's side. Awful good man he was. Always singing the old gospel songs and always ready to help. But my land, was he slow. You never knew anyone as slow as Uncle John was. His wife used to push and pull and try to hurry him, but it was all no good. He was an awful [trick] to her, she being as smart as a cricket. Once there was to be a funeral and she said "Now John, I'm going to do my work and get ready and go, and you can come when you gets around to it." So she done the dishes and fixed up the house, she put on her funeral clothes and started on foot, they being about a mile from the church. Well, they had the funeral, and the folks got in their rigs and they started for the cemetery, and still no John. And Sabriney, his wife, got a ride with someone, and when they was more than half ways to the graveyard, they seen Uncle John, jogging along the road, trying to keep up with the procession. My she was dreadful mortified, and Uncle John said he was glad he got a chance to look at the coffin before they laid it away.

Now this one here, that's Cousin Emmeline Bates on my father's side, she always being the lucky one. Her father said she should never get married until she feathered her nest good, so she married a man over to Bay Roberts and they're dreadful well off. One of their girls is an opera singer. She's been to Boston and Germany, and all around learning to sing, and my she trills, and quivers, and she goes away up, and you can't hardly understand a word she says, she sings so lovely.

Now this one here, this is my sister Mary. You think she's nice looking? Yeah. She was the pick of the family for looks all right. She was

dreadfully high strung too. Things always had to go her way. She was the beatenest case I ever seen for wanting to be ahead of everyone else. If any of the rest of the folk done anything extra, Mary had to find a way to beat them. 'Twas the same after she married. And when Cousin Ellen Dean had twins, she was so proud, and folks made such a fuss over them, and she said to Mary, "Well I've got you beat now Mary, you ain't got twins no how." And Mary, she felt real beat, both her children being only single ones. Well, what do you suppose she done? Yes, you're right. Next year she had triplets. And all of them lived. I never seen anyone so proud in my life as she was to beat Ellen that way.

Now this one here, this is my younger sister Suzy. Every time I looks at that picture I've got to have a good laugh. You see, Suzy was the last one of the family and she was so determined to keep up with the times. Oh 'twas about that time that the folk began to cut off their dresses and wear them terrible short. And she went and cut off her best dress. Ma was so mad she said she'd give her a good tanning if ever she put it on. But she sneaked into it once and had this picture took. And what a time she had with it, showing it to everyone. Well, my land, Ma was so ashamed. Just look at her. You can even see her knees. But Ma never did have the heart to give her a tanning after all.

Now this one, this is a likeness of Hezekiah's second cousin on his mother's side. Poor man, he had an awful sad lot. He went to heaven by fire, as it were. No, he wasn't burned to death, exactly, he was a missionary, to the cannibal islands. And them terrible man-eating savages cooked him and ate him up. I've hear that people get to be like what they eat, and I should think some of them cannibals would get to be a missionary before long if that be true.

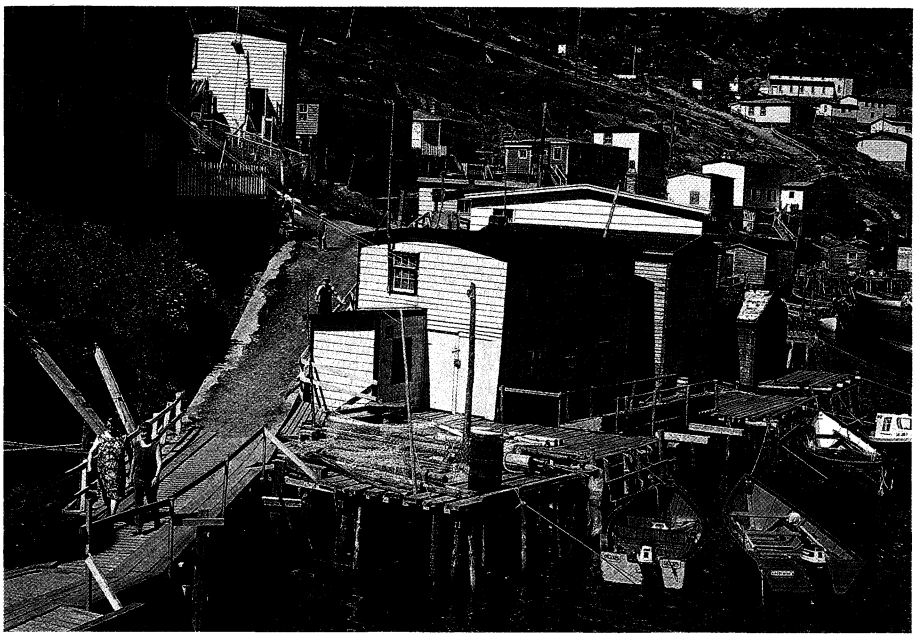
Now this here, this one, this is my brother William. He's real well off. [Section apparently missing]. And what do you suppose Henry got, one of them autmobiles. When I was visiting last summer, nothing would do but I must have a ride in it. And I never thought ever I'd get out of it alive. Well my bonnet stood straight up on one corner and Henry said to me "Take it off, Aunt Jane, or you may lose it." So it took it off, but I said "Nephew Henry, I wouldn't care much if I did lose this bonnet cause it's ten years old now, but if I was to lose my four dollar hairpiece, I'd never forgive you. My", I says, "I don't want to go scooting along so fast you can't see anything." Now Hezekiah and me when we goes along, we want to see who got their fish spread, who's got washing out, whose crops is growing, and the flower beds. Who's there into Clarence Morse's. What happened to George Wilson that was out of politics. But in one of them automobiles, going like lightning and hanging on to your belongings and praying you won't get killed, you've no idea of the scenery.

Now this next one is, what, you've got to go Mrs. Sturge? Well I'm real sorry you can't stay to see all my likenesses, but you'll come again and we can finish looking at the rest. Yes, I'm awful glad you came. Goodbye. [And then] "Should auld acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind." [I picks up the tail and does the sobbing, shows the drawers and the curtain comes down].[5]

Outsiders to Newfoundland culture can understand and appreciate some of the humour and entertainment value of this recitation, but it has other meanings and significance to its local audience. It deals, as do men's recitations and other folklore forms, with local and personal identity. To facilitate my description, I will divide the recitation into nine sections: an introduction, seven vignettes about individual photographs, and a closing.

The introduction orients listeners to the pieces's narrative context and establishes the two characters: newcomer Mrs. Sturge and the speaker, implicitly an older woman. It was traditionally rare for married couples to move from one to another community, so Mrs. Sturge is surely a bride come to live with her new husband. She visits the speaker to introduce herself.

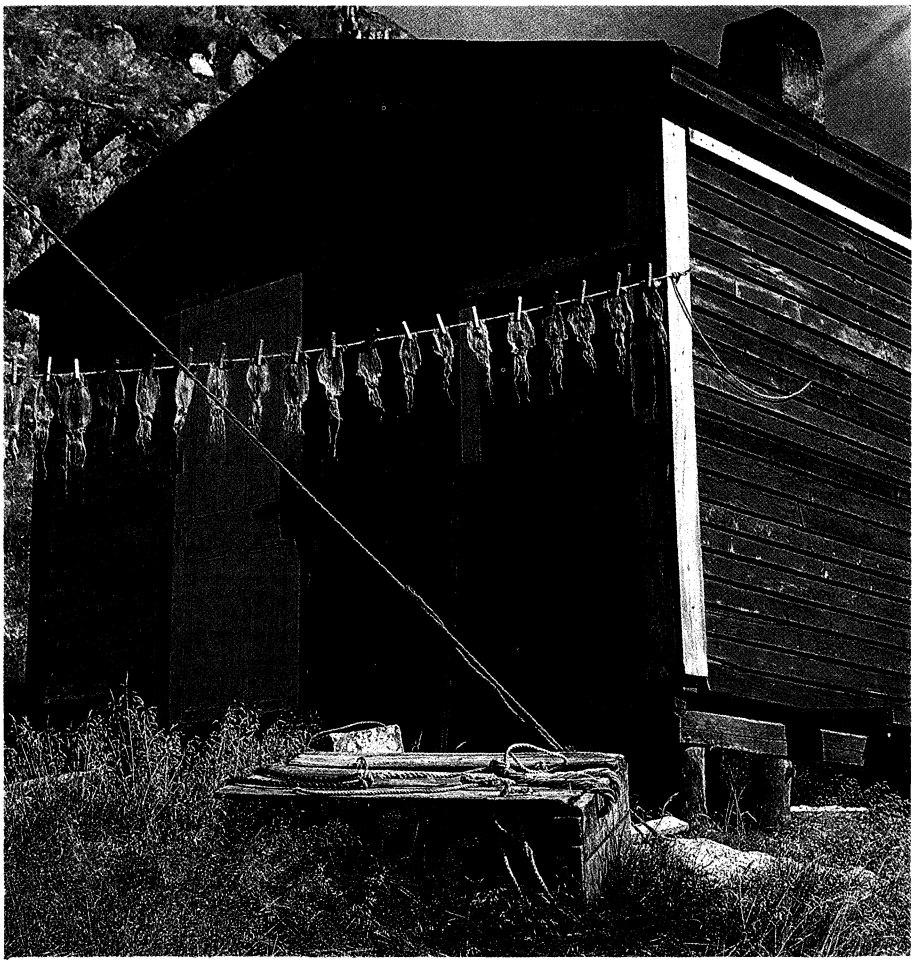
Her hostess thoughtfully uses her photograph collection to introduce her community and family. The first photograph turns the talk to bachelorhood, a subject both problematic and topical. In traditional Newfoundland communities, the bachelor is "socially incomplete, unable to fully participate in the usual pattern of reciprocity that involves food and farm labour such as a wife and children can provide, and . . . is a source of potential disorder, lacking sons that bring



Francois, southern coast of Newfoundland *Credit: Catherine Schwoeffermann*

continuity of land and solidarity of community territoriality."[6] The speaker's view of bachelor Cousin Lemuel is not cruel, but she invites Mrs. Sturge into the community of women who must tolerate socially problematic individuals like him. The next picture presents a cautionary tale for a new bride, indicating that men's characters cannot be changed by their wives. Men like Uncle John have redeeming features – goodness and religiousness – but they also have idiosyncracies, and a wife must accept them.

The first two pictures deal with the domestic domain, the husband/wife unit, and their relation to the community, but the third picture concerns the relationship of one community to another. To Port-de-Grave and Brigus, the home outports of this recitation's author and presenter,



Drying squid for export, communal work *Credit: Catherine Schwoeffermann*

Bay Roberts is the nearest large town and represents wealth and social prominence. However, Bay Roberts people foolishly squander their money on meaningless ("you can't hardly understand a word she says") things like opera singing. Implicitly, then, the good common sense of home outporters is celebrated.

The fourth vignette returns to the family domain. It shows interpersonal rivalry as a positive and productive force, at least in the context of fertility. Women's competitiveness is celebrated as beneficial or, as in the fifth vignette, as humorous. Susie's rebellion against her mother's authority has no potential for community disruption. This is not true of the male/female confrontations viewed in the first two vignettes.

Like the third, the sixth vignette shows the world beyond the community to be somewhat ridiculous. The element of danger added here seems related to distance from home. Though the cannibal islands and Bay Roberts are both problematic, the latter is not so ominous.

The final vignette contains the most positive affirmation of community values with which the recitation is concerned throughout. In Newfoundland, as elsewhere, the automobile has been blamed for the breakdown of community solidarity. Car travel facilitates travel from outport to outport and thus makes intra-community sociability, on which such solidarity depends, less necessary. The recitation's speaker rejects the car's speed as antithetical to the leisurely pace of the traditional community, and to its concern with local events and people.

The recitation's closing returns the audience's attention to the two characters and their situation. Though there is pathos when the speaker is finally left alone with her memories of that past, Mrs. Hussey ended the performance on a light note. She picked up the hem of her old-fashioned skirt and wiped her eyes with it, revealing her lacy pantalettes beneath it. The audience could laugh at the outdated clothing style, but the recitation and the "time" as an event reaffirm that traditional ideals and ways have withstood the onslaught of modernity.

Clearly, the "time" provides a forum for women's collective and personal artistic expression in the traditional Newfoundland outport. In this context, "The Family Album" is from one perspective the personal statement of its author, Dulsie Sprackin, as interpreted by its performer, Greta Hussey. However, as a recitation it is also a celebration of women's speech and of the central place of women's culture in the outport community.

[1]See, for instance, the Afro-American "toasts" in Roger D. Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia (Chicago: Aldine, 1970).

[2]Kenneth S. Goldstein, "Monologue Performance in Great Britain," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 40, p. 8.

[3]Debora Kodish, "Never Had A Word Between Us:' Pattern in the Verbal Art of a Newfoundland Woman," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1981.

[4]For another example of a Newfoundland woman's recitation, see Cynthia Lamson, *'Bloody Decks and a Bumper Crop': The Rhetoric of Sealing Counter-Protest*, (St. John's, Nfld.: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1979), pp. 34-35, 61-63, 82-85.

[5]This piece is transcribed exactly as I recorded it from Hrs. Hussey in March 1978. False starts are the only lexical items removed. Brackets show uncertain or missing wording, and parentheses mark the stage directions Mrs. Hussey used to indicate how she had performed the piece at the 1974 time. I thank the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive for permission to quote this material from my collection, 79-17.

[6]John Szwed, "Paul E. Hall: A Newfoundland Song-Maker and Community of Song," *Folksongs and Their Makers* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, n.d.), p. 163.

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