

How's the Form?

Chris Arthur

I

My father used regularly to inquire of family and friends, “*How's the form?*” Despite its familiarity, the question sounds peculiar to me now. It has become one of those odd, archaic regional locutions that no longer belongs in current diction, even though it occupies so secure a place in memory. I must have heard it asked a thousand times. The particular phrasing in which Dad's inquiry was cast was not unique to him, but its use was restricted both by age and locale. I've never heard it spoken outside Northern Ireland, or by anyone of my own generation or younger. We prefer the simpler “*How are you?*” or some variant on this more widely recognized form of address.

In part, the peculiarity that now accompanies “*How's the form?*” stems simply from the fact that time has passed and I've moved on. My father's generation has gone, taking with them – as every generation does – a handful of expressions unique to them, forged by their particular encounter with history and, for whatever reason, not taken forward into the store of common talk by those who followed in their steps. In any case, long before their tongues had fallen silent I'd left the County Antrim environs where the words they shaped determined what was commonplace and unremarkable.

As well as these obvious reasons of time and place, the aura of peculiarity that nowadays wreaths “*How's the form?*” is generated simply by seeing it written down. It is, so far as my experience of its usage goes, an entirely oral expression. Though my father wrote to me regularly after I left home, it was only face to face, or on the phone, that I was met with this particular form of words. There's a disconcerting mismatch when what was only ever spoken appears upon the page. It's like encountering an always casual friend dressed in a sharply tailored business suit. It looks all wrong.

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The question was a favourite standby in the lexicon of ordinary social greeting used by men of my father's age and class. Curiously, I can't recall more than one or two instances of a woman using this exact phrase – a reminder of the fact that in the patois of our everyday parlance there are gender dialects as surely as there are those of region, class, religion. If you listen hard, it's amazing how much can be heard behind the deceptive simplicities of speech.

“*How’s the form?*” was designed to elicit a response that was as brief, superficial and formulaic as the question. Usually it was met with either “*Not so bad*” (sometimes repeated, often paired with “*I can’t complain*”), or “*Not too good*”, sometimes “*Not great*” (both usually paired with “*I’m afraid*”). Why “*How’s the form?*” was never met with a simple robust affirmative in reply – “*OK*”, “*Good*”, even “*Great!*” – I don’t know, but it had less to do with how the respondents were actually feeling than with the ritual expectation that had grown up around this question like ivy on some old stone building. Tradition demanded that any reply be prefaced with a negative and couched in such familiar terms as to be blandly uninformative.

II

“Form” is an interesting word. Derived from the Latin *forma* for shape, it is perhaps appropriate that it offers so malleable an array of shape-shifting meanings. Not only can it denote shape, but a pattern or mode of being, order, regularity, style and arrangement. It can mean a socially accepted mode of behaviour, such that good form and bad form in this context refers not to how someone’s feeling, but to whether they’re acting in accordance with the norms of polite society. It can be used to denote structural unity in music. Form can name a document that needs to be completed, or can refer to having a criminal record. It can be applied to a racehorse’s varying potential for success on any given day, or to a class in school. In the sense in which my father and his generation of Ulster speakers meant it, the nearest dictionary-listed definition would be “condition of fitness”. Interestingly – though I’m reluctant to accept the criticism implied – the dictionary, with grammatical hauteur, dismisses as “colloquial” any usage prefaced by the definite article.

“*How’s the form?*” was a way of inquiring after someone’s general health and happiness, a means of asking along life’s path how things are going. We have various such devices for unobtrusively taking the pulse of our fellows in casual conversation. “*How’s the form?*” is a blood-brother of “*How are you doing?*”, “*How’s things?*”, “*Are you OK?*”, “*How’s yourself?*”, or Ulster’s much parodied “*Bout ye?*” – a contraction of “*What about you?*” (i.e. “*How are you?*”). This is usually found – at least in comic conjunction – as an answer to “*On ye?*”, an even briefer way of asking the same thing, but as first speaker. “*On ye?* ‘*Bout ye?*” has become a kind of stereotype of vacuous local buffoonery, summing up entire conversations in four words. But as so often with humour, there’s an acute observation embedded in the jest. For a great deal of our discourse, however many frills of distraction we may weave about it, is concerned with establishing little more than “*How are you?*” and expecting very little elaboration in reply.

Questions like “*How’s the form?*” are not intended to elicit more than the crudest approximation to one’s actual state and assume an answer of conventional superficiality, usually accompanied by a mirror question returned to the first speaker and meant to spark a similarly low-key response. It would be bad form to reply to “*How’s the form?*”

with a detailed specification of one's actual condition. It operates in the realm of convention, not in-depth communication, inviting reciprocal ritual, not revelation, in response. It's simply a means of greeting, an approved opening gambit, a recognized way of starting a conversational exchange of niceties, rather than a means of establishing in any depth, or with any detailed accuracy, how someone is really faring upon life's hard journey. It is the verbal equivalent of grooming.

III

"How's the form?" has become a kind of aural familiar that I'm sure will always haunt me. It's one of those unintended fractional prisms in which – through no design of mine – remembrance of my father is stored, so that every now and then, as the restless mind tends its crop of memories, this is one of the grains it harvests. It's something rooted deeply in the loam of remembering and it produces a regular crop of recall, but over the years the way in which the light of present consciousness reflects off its surface has altered. When I think about *"How's the form?"* now, two things about it strike me which didn't occur to me when it was part of the ordinary conversation with which I was surrounded every day. First, I now see as strange the way in which one's wellbeing is phrased such that it seems to be an independent – even impersonal – entity, existing apart from the self. Not *"How are you?"*, or *"How's your form?"*, but *"How's the form?"*, as if it was something separate that could be examined as it stood beside you, as if it was sufficiently distant and impersonal to allow a kind of detached scrutiny and comment. I suspect this use of the definite article was quite deliberate and due to a more interesting cause than the "colloquial" with which the dictionary haughtily dismisses it, implying that this is merely the kind of slipshod error one might expect in the rough hewn dialect of provincial poltroons. Far from being a mistake, it is a strategy, something designed to keep things superficial. Its intention is to promote a certain detachment, distance and impersonality, to maintain a gliding over of surfaces rather than any falling into depths. The second (and obviously connected) thing that strikes me whenever I hear *"How's the form?"* now – or, rather, remember it, for I never hear it spoken in the world outside my mind – is the huge gulf that lies between the sort of dialogue it engenders and the way things really are.

Of course, "the way things really are" is – at least to some extent – a matter of opinion, temperament, circumstance, rather than an unvarying verdict of plain fact (if fact is ever that). The hands we are dealt by the unevenness and unpredictability of personality and fate clearly foster different views as to how things really are. William James, mapping the diversity of people into types, identified two polar extremes of mentality. There are the so-called "sick souls", who see the human condition as a wretched plight. For them, existence is a pain-filled experience that gives rise to tears and terror. In contrast, there are the "healthy minded" who see life as a thing of joy and wonder. They do not see – or choose to overlook – the shadows. James's two psychological

types bear out Wittgenstein's observations that "The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man".

IV

Only rarely do we occupy the simple, unambiguous extremes that James and Wittgenstein identify. Mostly, happiness and unhappiness are infused with each other's colour, even if it is no more than the faintest tinge of memory or hope. Mostly we are located somewhere on a continuum, a psychological gradient, between the sick soul and the healthy mind, between joy and misery. It is comparatively rare to be at the extreme of either pole. But despite all the variations in our outlook and experience, all the gradations of personality and position, there are some nonnegotiable facts, to do with time and death and loss, which constitute some of the basic features of experience and have strong claim to substantially determine the way things are, however differently we may be disposed to interpret and react to them.

One of the most striking sketches I've come across of these basic features, of the way things really are, what life's like in its elemental as opposed to incidental sense, occurs in an ancient Eastern story. It's found in different sources and versions, making it difficult to be certain about its date of composition and original author, but one particularly good version is given by the seventh century Jain writer, Haribhadra, in his *Samaradityakatha* – the story of Samaraditya. Ted Hughes once described stories as "little factories of meaning". The best ones' productivity is unaffected by chronological or national boundaries. They seem able to supply meaning on a near universal basis. Certainly Haribhadra's story has gradually migrated into the Western consciousness, where – among others – it has had a profound effect on Tolstoy, who cites it at length in his *Confessions*, precisely as a statement of the ways things really are.

In very condensed form, the story goes like this. A certain man (Samaraditya – but the name is unimportant, this individual is meant to represent anyone and everyone) was walking through the countryside. Suddenly he is surprised by a wild elephant which charges him, trumpeting ferociously. Desperate to escape, the man looks around frantically for some place of sanctuary. A massive tree is growing nearby, so he makes for it, hoping to climb to safety. He finds that its branches are too far off the ground for him to catch hold of one and pull himself to safety. Then, at the foot of the tree he notices an old well. Terrified by the closeness of the enraged elephant, the man jumps into this apparent haven. It turns out to be deeper than he thought, but as he falls he reaches out and grabs hold of some vegetation growing halfway down the well-shaft. For a moment he thinks he is safe. The elephant can't reach him and he has managed to break his fall. Then he begins to take his bearings. As his eyes become accustomed to the dim light, the true horror of his plight becomes clear. At the bottom of the well there is a giant serpent waiting to devour him. Not only are his arms tiring, but the roots of the plant from whose fronds he is precariously hanging are being steadily gnawed by two mice, one white, one black. It is only a matter of time until he falls.

Meanwhile, back on ground level, the elephant continues to charge madly about. In its rage it crashes against the tree whose branches overhang the well. This dislodges a bees' nest from its upper branches. It falls into the well and hits the man on his head. He is stung by a swarm of angry bees. But a drop of honey trickles into his mouth and, in the moment of savouring its flavour, he forgets all about the dangers surrounding him and is lost in the enjoyment of its sweetness.

V

"How's the form?" "Not so bad, not so bad. I can't complain" – never mind that the serpent of death is waiting below me and that my arms are tiring. Time's unstoppable elephant charge has catapulted us into the well-shaft of life, where we are stung by numerous afflictions. Day and night, caricatured by the white and black mice, steadily saw at the precious stem of our life-span. *"How's the form?" "Not great, I'm afraid"*, referring to some minor, passing ailment – a cold, perhaps, or a headache, or a recent bout of flu. But we almost never mention the incurable aspects of our situation. We shy away from the way things *really* are and concentrate on the honey, whether its sweetness is given or withheld. What else can we do? I don't have any answer, nor am I decrying the efficacy of *"How's the form?"* and the level of concern and communication it weaves around us, swaddling us from fear. With its determinedly conventional sphere of operation, its deft distancing via the definite article, *"How's the form?"* is less any species of inquiry than a screening device devised to weave a dense curtain of superficiality across the savage imponderables that underlie us and in whose depths meaning flounders. Sometimes, though, glimpsing the horrors of history, remembering the stacked skulls and ash-pits of genocide, knowing that all around us savagery and illness, hunger, pain and unhappiness rage – and that whatever our current form may be it is fated for annihilation – a primal yell of agony, a convention-smashing howl, would seem the most fitting answer to any inquiries about our condition. Seen in this light, meeting *"How's the form?"* with a primal scream of terror seems saner than the niceties of any socially sanctioned reply. But perhaps it is precisely our sanity that we seek to preserve in opting for the accustomed camouflaging superficialities.

The French diarist, Henri-Frédéric Amiel, once remarked that "the universe seriously studied rouses our terror". Serious study can, of course, bring less terrible rewards, but there is no denying the fact that certain aspects of existence *are*, frankly, terrifying, and the more we think, the more likely we are to discover them. In his psychoanalytic study, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker sums up well the kind of terror-arousing insights thought can foster:

It cannot be over-stressed that to see the world as it really is, is devastating and terrifying. I believe those who speculate that a full apprehension of man's condition would drive him insane are quite literally right. Anxiety is the result of the perception of the truth of one's condition. What does it mean to be a self-con-

scious animal? The idea is ludicrous if not monstrous. It means that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothingness, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating yearning for life and self-expression – and with all this yet to die.

My father and his generation have all lost their hold on the sheer wall of life's terrifying well-shaft and fallen to their deaths. Stung by cancer, stroke, pneumonia, heart attack, or some other of the myriad of blades that speed the severing of our life-thread more ruthlessly than any mouse's nibbling. The serpent has devoured them. They have become food for worms. Their savouring of life's honey has ended and our turn comes next. Even now, our arms are tiring. Listen carefully and you can hear the saw of passing time as it cuts ever deeper into the vein of our continuance. There are angry buzzings all around us and the serpent's cold eye shines undimmed. It beckons, however extravagantly we try to screen out its unwavering glare with temporary expedients of comfort, indulgence or distraction.

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Thinking about the way in which "*How's the form?*" tends to be answered with a negative – "*Not so bad*", rather than a simple "*Good*" – I wonder if it was perhaps considered a reckless tempting of fate to lay claim too confidently to wellbeing since, at the back of everyone's mind, there must surely be some awareness of the fact, no matter how little public voice is given to it, that "the form" is really far from OK. Whatever wellbeing we may claim for it is perilously founded and will one day be snuffed out completely. Everyday existence – our world of routines and the commonplace – is inextricably entangled with things of a different order altogether. We wake up, get dressed, go downstairs, have breakfast and are lulled by the mundane routines of the ordinary. But somewhere dwells the certainty that one night we may go to bed and never be downstairs again. That some breakfast will be the last one that we ever eat. Is there any consolation to be had beyond whatever precarious wellbeing the present moment may offer? Is there any succour more lasting than some honeyed drops of accidental sweetness? Perhaps it's bad form to raise such matters at all; maybe the essayist's questions exhibit the metaphysical equivalent of being ill-bred. Be this as it may, beyond the demands of civility and the illusions of piety, it's hard to grant much credence to a positive answer when we're asked "*How's the form?*". "*Not so bad*" and its cognates (and the same holds for "*Not so good*") suggests a talent for incredible stoicism, understatement or sheer blind stupidity.