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Dear Colleague:

Why is Vaclav Havel so popular in the West and not Solzhenitsyn? They have much in common: both condemn crass capitalism, both see the need for a spiritual dimension to politics, both speak of the human condition with religious undertones. But they differ in one striking matter. Havel pays homage to pop culture, Solzhenitsyn calls it "manure." Manure? If a pop musician gives the label "Manure" to his music, it is smart. But if a high-brow artist uses that word on pop culture, it is definitely not acceptable. There is an asymmetry here, which suggests to me that, hard as we try, we can't quite escape the old habit of ranking. Beethoven calls his work the *Missa Solemnis*. What if a pop musician says, "Hey, that's just a piece of *Missa Solemnis*," would Beethoven mind?

You are a citizen if you truly speak the language. Solzhenitsyn, resident in Vermont for eighteen years, doesn't. His sons, who went to Vermont schools and then to Harvard, do. When son Ignat was asked by a reporter whether his father ever stopped working, he said: "No, he's never said, 'Today I'm just gonna chill out, take a jog, and blow off this 'Red Wheel' [massive Solzhenitsyn novel] thing.'" Isn't that great? Chill out. I like that. America will remain a literary superpower so long as it continues to invent such poetic expressions.

Solzhenitsyn's wife, Natalia, has gone back to Moscow for visits. She went into the Moscow metro and heard the banal announcement, "Careful! The doors are closing. The next stop is..." But it was in Russian! You are home, lady. Hearing these words in English is just not the same. Another time, she encounters the words Moloko and Khleb on a storefront; they say something real and nourishing to her, in contrast to "Milk" and "Bread," which are just conventional labels. But I wonder about her American-raised children. Natalia has done her best to keep them Russian. However, when the acid test comes--when they see the word "Moloko" in Moscow, will their hearts throb? Will someone who has learned to say "chill out" find special comfort in Khleb?

I don't know, but it is an interesting question. One reason why I've not sought to visit China is the fear that I'll hear Man to (Chinese bread) and fail to feel the expected pang of patriotism. As for being American, people here still ask me, "And how long have you been in this country?" My answer (increasingly) is, "A great deal longer than you have, kid." But how can I be American when I cannot say unselfconsciously, as Solzhenitsyn's sons can, "chill out" or "blow off"? (See *New Yorker*, February 14, 1994).

Best wishes,

*Zi-Fu*