

An Invitation to INSUBORDINATION

Oh No Bonobo

2003

Insubordination—literally, the utter refusal to submit to order—is not always revolutionary, but it may be one of the first signs that a revolution is brewing.

The insubordinate can be someone rebelling against an institution to which she formerly conformed or someone who never has been any part of the system of authority. Sometimes ideological and sometimes instinctual, insubordination burns the nerves.

One of the most exciting facets of insubordination is that it is ultimately a do-it-yourself activity, an expression of independence that privileges autonomy. As long as it can remain DIY, the raging, stinging urge to smash the knuckles of Babylon's miserabilist deathgrip can avoid being compromised, co-opted, or dogmatized by the forces of marketplace, public opinion, peer pressure, and party discipline.

Maybe, especially in a climate of compulsory obedience and paralyzing perpetual fear, the first gesture towards bringing forth the freedom of an autonomous existence can be found in disagreeing with the standards tooled by the machinery of order and law for reasons entirely of your own.

Inspired examples of insubordination often arrive in music and literature. Published in 1853, Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* is the perversely humorous tale of an inscrutable young man (Bartleby) who has been hired as a clerk in a cramped, dingy office in New York City.

The unnamed narrator is Bartleby's boss, a dull lawyer-bureaucrat who specializes in hand-copying and proof-reading "rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds." One day, Bartleby decides that he no longer wants to work.

Instead, he spends hours staring out the window at the brick wall across the alley. Bartleby doesn't read, doesn't respond to the taunts of his antagonistic co-workers and eats only crackers.

The boss is baffled and alarmed by his employee's actions, and he orders the nonchalant Bartleby back to work. When that fails, he tries reasoning with him, threatening him, and pleading with him, but all Bartleby ever says is "No, I would prefer not to." It soon becomes clear that Bartleby is living under his desk and never goes out. Increasingly frustrated because "necessities connected with my business tyrannized over all other considerations," the boss fires him, but Bartleby won't leave the dreary Wall Street office.

No rationale for his refusal is ever given, and the narrator is at a loss to understand or explain it other than saying that Bartleby simply prefers not to. "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance," the boss sadly confides to the reader.

Finally, the desperate boss is forced to resort to ridiculous measures to free himself of the ex-clerk who is "occupying my chambers, denying my authority, perplexing my visitors, scandalizing my professional reputation, and casting a general gloom over the premises." But even this extreme course of action fails to shake Bartleby from his "dead-wall reverie" and "mulish vagary."

In these days of hyped-up, hyper-conformity, we are all Bartleby. Each of us must conjure up our own strategies and tactics of desertion, rejection, and noncompliance. It would be helpful if we could make more time and space to repeat and recall all of the "quiet refusals, loud refusals, and sad refusals" (as thee God Speed You, Black Emperor

collective succinctly put it) that we've heard about, dreamt of, and accomplished ourselves. But in the end—and in the beginning—dissent springs from the lonely demands and actions of the individual who “prefers not to.”

—Oh No Bonobo

Washington, D.C.,

98th Anniversary of the Potemkin Mutiny



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