



José-Luis Munuera’s Anti-Capitalist Graphic Novel as a Creative Response to Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

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Abstract

Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853) is a short story that offers a multiplicity of readings not only because of the complexity of its main characters but also because of Melville’s imaginary of Wall Street. This paper examines how José-Luis Munuera represents these narrative elements in his graphic novel adaptation *Bartleby, der Schreiber* (2022). I argue that Munuera’s adaptation has its own textual identity and can be read as a creative, graphic response to Melville’s criticism of nineteenth-century Wall Street. Even though set in a similar period to the 1850s original version, Munuera’s authorial choices invite the reader to reflect on contemporary conceptions of work, duty, and agency in a capitalist present.

Keywords: *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Wall Street, graphic novel, adaptation studies, comics and literature

Introduction

Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street (1853) remains to this day one of Melville’s most intriguing short stories. Who was Bartleby? The enigma of the scrivener has inspired not only scholars, but also writers, filmmakers, illustrators, and comic artists. This paper focuses on the recent graphic novel adaptation of *Bartleby* by the comic artist José-Luis Munuera¹ (2022). The term “graphic novel” here is understood as a “publication format of the comics medium, which is a self-contained, non-serialized comics narrative” (Kukkonen, 2013b, p. 172,

¹ As Kukkonen (2013b) mentions, although comics are usually credited as having just one creator, they usually are the product of teamwork. This is also the case for the graphic novel to be analyzed. In an attempt to appreciate this teamwork, I will refer to Munuera for comments on the comic’s illustrations, design, and storyline, but to Sedyas, his colorist, when analyzing the coloring work.

emphasis deleted). This definition differentiates the graphic novel from a serialized comic, which is important for our analysis as the spatial limitation of the novel has a direct influence over the decisions of the comic artists and the overall structure of the final work.

The spatial limitation of the graphic novel is just one of the aspects that comic artists must bear in mind when adapting literary works. As Kukkonen summarizes:

In adapting novels, comics have to translate narrative strategies from the written word into images, words, and sequence. They need to deal with verbal ambiguity, the differences between descriptions in words and images, the pacing and perspectives of narration when subject to panel divisions, and (sometimes) the restricted length of the comic-book format. (Kukkonen, 2013b, p. 75)

Because of the aforementioned challenges, this paper does not deal with graphic novel adaptations in terms of “fidelity” (Kukkonen, 2013b, p. 80), but as unique pieces of art. Each graphic novel is the work of one or more artists who fuse their personal drawing and coloring styles with their interpretation of a certain originating text. It is inevitable that some changes occur in this process of transmedial transportation. Medial challenges aside, it is important to clarify that, as Bryant (2013) states, the interpreting nature of adaptations does not situate them below the original, nor are adaptations “exclusively derivative” (p. 51). Although we cannot truly decipher what Melville *meant*, it seems unlikely that he would have spoken for a unison reading of his works. After the publication of *Moby-Dick*, Sophia Hawthorne wrote to Melville to congratulate him and comment on the book. To this, he answered that her observations were refined by her “spiritualizing nature,” so they were not entirely discoveries, but creations (Melville, 1960, p. 146). Further on, he hints that these *creations* are not inherently wrong:

At any rate, your allusion for example to the "Spirit Spout" first showed to me that there was a subtle significance in that thing -- but I did not, in that case, *mean* it. I had some vague idea while writing it, that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction, & also that *parts* of it were -- but the speciality of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr Hawthorne's letter [...]. (Melville, 1960, p. 146, emphasis in original)

According to this letter, authorial intention does not, or should not, obstruct the reader’s quest for meaning. Although Melville is not direct in agreeing with her observation per se, he agrees with those of her husband, admitting the possibility of fluid significance and allegory in narrative texts. Hence, each reading of *Bartleby*, each theory or interpretation, has its own subordinate degree of validity.

As Kukkonen states: “meaning is not fixed, and individual features allow for different interpretations that develop with the reader’s engagement with the text” (2013a, p. 23). This process applies to adaptations, which in turn will allow for new interpretations and engagement as well. For this reason, my analysis of Munuera’s adaptation of *Bartleby* will not focus on fidelity but on Bryant’s analysis of “the critical distances between versions and on what is the meaning inherent in that distancing” (2013, p.54). In other words, I argue that Munuera’s adaptation slightly deviates from the source text to highlight how important the setting of Melville’s imaginary of Wall Street is for the unfolding of the story. The narrative element of Wall Street is understood not merely as a place but as an economic and social system in which productivity is worth more than individual life and compassion for others. The story of *Bartleby* is still relevant to this day partly because of its captivating characters, but most importantly because the Wall Street of Melville still lives on today. Even though the buildings’ architecture has changed, the foundations of American capitalism are still identifiable in today’s economy.

Even though scriveners no longer exist, the work ethics under which they operated can still be found in contemporary offices. To examine how Munuera's graphic novel portrays this and the implications of its distance to Melville's writing, I will first divide the original story into three key narrative elements: the narrator, Bartleby, and the setting of Wall Street.

The Narrator: Master in Chancery

In Melville's story, the attorney is the epistemic key to our experience of Bartleby. This is not simply because he is the one writing the recount, but rather because he is a homodiegetic narrator who also directly recognizes the limitations of his own experience. The narrator's understanding of Bartleby is mediated by the limits of his senses (what he can see and hear), his inability to make Bartleby abide by him, and his emotions (he saw, after all, with "astonished eyes" (Melville, 1960, p.3)).

Although the narrator makes no mention of his own aspect when introducing himself, he wastes no time in speaking of his career in law. He is defined by his job to the point that even the mention of his advanced age cues towards years of work experience rather than another type of wisdom. According to Smith (1965), making the narrator a Master in Chancery is no arbitrary decision. Masters of Chancery dealt not with the *common law*, but with *equity*, the "ideal application of justice" (p. 736). This, however, was a position that dealt mostly with the disposition of property, worked with written testimonies, and had no criminal jurisdiction (Broderick, 2011). Still, the influence that this role had would be reflected in the narrator's decision-making process, a process that he also punily calls "masterly management" (Smith, 1965, p. 740). The role of Master of Chancery positions the narrator in the story both physically and symbolically. Physically, it locates him in his office on Wall Street. Symbolically, it positions him above his clerks, yet between his colleagues and under the Law. As Smith suggests, in his office, the narrator is "the ordering force, the [...] possibly even divine power who rules over the so various dispositions of his employees" (p. 736). However, this overlooks the power that the attorney's colleagues and the Halls of Justice have over him. The Master of Chancery is not above the common law and must operate *inside* Wall Street, not above it.

Apart from his job title, the attorney is also proud of his own moral values and lifestyle. Lack of ambition, prudence, and method have ensured him a life of safety and peace. As the story progresses, it is made clear that he is also a practicing Christian. Even in 1853, Wall Street is not the first place that comes to mind when we think of this lifestyle. Yet, the narrator prospers in this setting. Kuebrich (1996) calls this effect "capitalist compassion," a term that expresses "a compassion that is 'reasonable' in a culture organized in terms of self-interest" (p. 396). This is the type of compassion that allows the attorney to be charitable without risking his work, income, and reputation. Kuebrich stresses, however, that this is not to paint the attorney as a fraud.

Melville's point is not that the lawyer is a hypocrite, for hypocrisy implies conscious deception, but that the lawyer is self-deceived by the moral categories developed by nineteenth-century U.S. Christian culture as it accommodated itself to capitalism. He candidly reflects the assumption of the larger culture that there is no inherent contradiction between the dedicated

pursuit of self-interest, even when it involves the exploitation of others, and devotion to traditional Christian values. (1996, p. 396)

One of the scenes that best illustrates Melville's subtle and comical critique of the lawyer's attitude is that of the murder dream. In this instance, after quoting the Bible, he thanks charity for keeping his hands clean: "Mere self-interest, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should, especially with high-tempered men, prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy" (Melville, 1987, p. 36). Piety is an option at the service of self-interest. Again, this is not necessarily a sign of hypocrisy. In fact, as Foley (2000) proposes, it could be an act of criticism of the diocese of Trinity Church. During the period in which *Bartleby* is estimated to take place, the diocese of Trinity Church was a wealthy institution that possessed a considerable amount of real estate in lower Manhattan and was taken to court because of its irregular management (p. 95). It is no coincidence that a lawyer who deals with property cases attends mass in a church that was accused of making unjust profit from land property. From this perspective, the lawyer's moral complacency and political blindness seem quite satirical and reinforce Kuebrich's concept of capitalist compassion.

Position and morality aside, the next thing that stands out from this character is his verbosity. It could be argued that this is just to obey the duty of the narrator, but again, this does not seem like a random choice. For Pinsker (1975), the narrator uses rhetoric as a means to understand the world, but also as a means of control. Still, useless against *Bartleby*, language and rhetoric only serve to expose the narrator himself. For Vaughn (1999), the focus of the narrator on *Bartleby's* story surges from the need to fill the "incommensurable gap" of knowledge and understanding (p. 536).

In any case, I consider that the most influencing factor for the narrator's verbosity is that death has given him no other choice. It is easy to forget that, at the moment of writing the story, *Bartleby* has already passed away. After death, *Bartleby* has no possibility to share his own narrative anymore. He also leaves no diaries or letters to glimpse at his inner mind. The narrator must make use of all the information he has, even self-referential information, to construct his own narrative of *Bartleby* (similarly to what the reader will do later with his account). This also sheds a different light on the ghostly references of the narrator. Since he is writing from his memories, it could be possible that he was not haunted in the past, but in the present. Crudely speaking, the *Bartleby* of his present is a corpse. Figuratively, he is a memory, a ghost. With this in mind, Vaughn's "already thereness" (p. 538) becomes a *forever thereness*. *Bartleby* is immobile not because he has always been at No. – Wall Street, but because *he will always be* there, caught in the mind office of the narrator's memories. Although the narrator argues that he writes the short biographical recount to prevent a "literary loss," the story is not far from an in memoriam for a man who otherwise would leave no trace in the world, from a man who once hoped to prevent his death. As far as I know, no studies focus on *Bartleby* as a grieving process, but I consider it a possibility worth mentioning.

To summarize, the narrator is an attorney who works as a Master of Chancery at the time of the events. Although he tries to orientate himself through a set of religious and moral beliefs, his office ties him physically, financially, and socially to his environment. For this reason, his beliefs can only operate between the limits allowed by the attorney's environment: the workplace. The narrator is also a homodiegetic voice, speaking for the voiceless. His use of rhetoric is not simply a personality trait, but how he construes and constructs his experience and understanding of *Bartleby* (either by juxtaposition or extreme opposition). The results of these constructs are up to the reader to interpret.

Bartleby: The Strangest Scrivener

“[A] motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold [...] I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby” (Melville, 1987, p. 9).

The way in which the narrator introduces Bartleby is similar to the way he introduces all the other characters. For example, he makes little mention of Bartleby's facial features, yet suggests an age range by mentioning that he is a motionless *young* man. Youth and motionlessness are not commonly related but, as we see in the following lines, Bartleby is a series of paradoxes: pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, and incurably forlorn. Bartleby's initial description gives more clues about the impact of his image on the narrator than on his actual appearance. How does forlornness express itself physically? Did Melville imply that Bartleby looked wretched and thus poor? Or that he looked forsaken and desolate? The first meaning argues for a political commentary on social class, yet the second would uncover a glimpse of Bartleby's emotional state. Melville's careful word choice makes it impossible to ascertain. The only “true” physical aspect of Bartleby is his pallidness. As Rosenblatt (2008) notes, the narrator mentions pallidness in an almost monomaniacal way due to being entranced with Bartleby's “extreme negativity” (p. 60). Bartleby has a lack of color, of movement, of passion, etc. The narrator must project, or at least juxtapose, himself on Bartleby to try to make sense of his lack.

There is no denying that the main characteristic of the scrivener is his inscrutability. This inscrutability is often referred to as unreadability by academics such as Deleuze (1997). For Deleuze, Bartleby's line, “I would prefer not to”, is the key to unreadability, a formula that “eliminates the preferable just as mercilessly as any nonpreferred” and “renders them indistinct: it hollows out an ever-expanding zone of indiscernibility or indetermination between some nonpreferred activities and a preferable activity” (p. 71). Thus, the reader is not only faced with the problem of the unsaid; the said is equally problematic, if not worse. Bartleby's famous phrase and variants, as Deleuze highlights, create questions of ambiguity more potent than the questions of ignorance that arise from silence. Jonik (2011) expands on Deleuze by proposing that unreadability comes both from a denaturalization of language and a deprivation of particular, continuous identity (p. 23). Pinsker (1975) argues that Bartleby's verbal ambiguity is a supposedly constructed wall that prevents him from being “rhetorically understood” (p. 19), adding a quality of shield (and maybe even weapon) to the disconcerting phrase. Additionally, Pinchevski (2011) considers that “Bartleby is the impersonality in communication personified. His stance is of pure dissemination: like the dead letters office where he is rumored to have previously worked, he is amid undisclosed origins and unknown destinations” (p. 41).

During the 1960s, many academics tried to explain Bartleby's unreadability in terms of causality and symbolic origin more than in terms of linguistic analysis. For example, many saw Bartleby's verbal ambiguity as some sort of sign or result of being the narrator's double or even schizophrenia (Marcus, 1962, Smith, 1965, Widmer, 1969, to name some). Appropriately enough, this is a discussion common in the analysis of ghost stories². Is the ghost real? Is Bartleby real? Although a valid discussion, I will not further examine it. As mentioned before,

² See the discussion on Henry James' “The Turn of the Screw” (1898) for an infamous case.

I consider the narration of *Bartleby's* story as the mourning process of a physical person. This requires the scrivener to exist on his own but still allows for him to be an allegory or an instrument of critique at the same time. For instance, Thompson (2000) considers *Bartleby* an exploration of inexpressible queer desire and anxiety while for Pinchevski (2011) he is an invitation to discuss autism and disability as the result of social power relations. Rosenblatt (2008) remains in the medical field and uses *Bartleby* to question the social relations between doctors and “incurable” patients. Kuebrich (1996), on the other hand, sees him as a critique of capitalist productivity. Foley (2000) follows a similar line yet proposes the story is also “an expression of Melville’s inchoate and largely unacknowledged regret in having aligned himself, however inadvertently, with the resonant name of Astor” (p. 109) and that the death of *Bartleby* reflects his guilt for being part of the ignition of the Astor Place Riot of 1849.

To conclude, *Bartleby's* unreadability is a case of verbal ambiguity turned into narrative strategy. This is achieved both through a cryptic use of language and unyielding silence. To compensate for *Bartleby's* “lacks”, the narrator projects his feelings in the description of the scrivener, complicating matters for the reader. *Bartleby's* rhetoric, although the complete opposite of the narrator’s verbosity, clashes with what is normally expected and keeps the characters and readers in a constant cognitive effort. Again, in the end, just as *Bartleby's* reasons remain veiled from the reader, so do Melville’s intentions and goals when writing his story.

Melville’s Imaginary of Wall Street

As Foley (2000) carefully proves, trying to date Melville’s *Bartleby* back to a specific period is impossible because the real-life events mentioned in the fiction are temporally incongruent. For example, the narrator is supposed to attend mass in Trinity Church at the same time he was starting business as a Master of Chancery. This would clash with his claim that he worked for years because Trinity Church was opened in 1846 and the position of Master of Chancery was revised in 1846 and abolished in 1847 (p. 89). Instead of calling these temporal inconsistencies “mistakes”, I consider them to be a deliberate authorial choice. The events, people, or locations mentioned are not there to make the reader believe that the story of *Bartleby* is a documentary, but rather to incite an emotional response. The mention of John Jacob Astor, one of the wealthiest and most hated men of the time (p. 92-93), does not simply “date” the story. When the narrator mentions Astor’s favorable opinion of him, he reveals both his social status and his political views. The reader of the time, however, would not necessarily approve of a friendship with Astor. The reader’s emotional predisposition towards the only narrator of *Bartleby's* story would inevitably be influenced by their opinion of this historical figure. In other words, even if there is little description of what Wall Street looked like at the time, the mention of people (such as magnate realtor John Jacob Astor), locations (such as, also realtor, Trinity Church, or the Tombs) and events sufficed to create an imaginary of Wall Street that was emotionally more effective than a simple physical description. This is the gestalt of Wall Street.

Now, even though there is no description of Wall Street or Manhattan, the lawyer’s office is carefully mapped. The office is, then, not a mere location but also an important part of Melville’s imaginary of Wall Street. When analyzing the narrative description of the office,

the details of the walls should not be overlooked. The white and black walls that delimit the office are not simply mentioned to humorously connect the story to the name of the street, but to foreshadow and cement the ultimately tragic events of this specific location. The gestalt of Wall Street does not have clear borders. When the narrator goes to church to "hear a celebrated preacher" (Melville, 1987, p.16), he is actually referring to a member of a church that owns most of lower Manhattan yet neglects the poorest sectors to favor the construction of a luxurious church for the rich (Foley, 2000, p.95). When the narrator wishes to escape his problems, it is not enough to leave the office. Yet, as Foley shows, all the places he visits on his trip are (mainly) the property of magnate Astor (p. 93). It is no coincidence that, in a time of social turmoil and anxiety regarding land property, a Master in Chancery cannot set foot on neutral land. Wall Street is not confined to the office, it entails the whole area in which the cradle of capitalist America is starting to rock.

The distinction between domestic household and workplace is also important for the story. The murder-reverie scene is again a good example. While musing on the tragedy of Adams and Colt, the narrator considers that, ultimately, it all happened because of location: "It was the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, up stairs, of a building entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations [...]" (Melville, 1987, p. 36). Because the limits between workplace and home are breached, the office becomes unholy ground. This conclusion proves valid for the attorney's office as well. The peer pressure the attorney suffers to abandon his idea of sheltering Bartleby is not because his group of colleagues is especially ruthless, it is because it violates the nineteenth-century limits between domesticity and workplace. Although the characters might believe that they have a choice, it is ultimately the gestalt of Wall Street that decides the rules of conduct of all who work there. No revolution is to take place here, except for that of financial progress. The narrator's attempt at capitalist compassion will fail because one cannot be unproductive on Wall Street. Bartleby's attempt to inhabit the workplace domestically will also fail, although with much harsher consequences.

Thus, the use of Wall Street as a setting can be considered a strategy because of the significance the trope has for the development of the unfolding events. The lack of overall description, similar to Bartleby's lack of communication, forces us to focus on the details of what little information we have. Wall Street is used as a concept with blurred edges, both a physical and symbolic space. Given its importance as a center of productivity, the limits between domesticity and workplace are strictly separated in it. Breaching this separation has consequences, even for those attempting to follow capitalist compassion.

The Graphic Novel Adaptation

A quick overview of Munuera's *Bartleby der Schreiber* (2022) indicates that this is an announced adaptation. The approximate historical setting seems to remain the same, though the short number of pages suggests that supporters of extreme fidelity will be disappointed to see parts of the written work omitted or transformed. Since this paper does not focus on fidelity, I will focus on whether there is a significant distance to the original that gives Munuera's version a textual identity or not.

The first point of interest is who will narrate the story and how. The graphic novel has, like the original story, the attorney as the main homodiegetic narrator. However, as it often happens in comics, the distinctions sometimes get blurred. At first, Munuera seems to start with a heterodiegetic narrator. The first panel (2022, p. 7) is a full-length drawing, a splash panel, portraying a set of tall buildings against the clear sky and marking the location in a block of text over the sky. The next page is divided into two panels, both portraying the ground at the feet of these buildings, focusing on the people who inhabit this space. Both panels have white blocks of text floating on the upper corners, unconnected to any of the people. This illusion of a heterodiegetic narrator is broken on the last panel of the third page, when the floating text is finally assigned to a specific man on the street. This character, a street orator, prompts the attorney to present himself, passing the narration to him. Interestingly, the wide shot panel of the third panel on page 10 displays a succinct detail on the sign under the orator: “Civil Disobedience – Henry David Thoreau”. It is not clear if this character is meant to represent Thoreau himself, but the dialogue at the very beginning of the comic, though modified to fit the space, belongs to Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*. Even though Melville does not mention Thoreau, his appearance is not out of place. After all, Thoreau’s critique of people’s inability to rule themselves by their own conscience foretells the narrator’s later dilemma. Even if the narrator believes himself to be a free man, he eventually must obey the rules of Wall Street’s economic system rather than his conscience.

After this encounter, the main title appears again, unframed and signaling the end of the introduction and the beginning of Bartleby’s story. The story continues as a dialogue that will only be interrupted on page 14. Here we encounter two blocks of text, unconnected and partly transparent. Compared to the normal speech bubbles, the format signals that these texts are not voiced, but part of the attorney’s *internal monologue*. These thought bubbles allow the graphic novel to follow a narration style similar to the original by giving the attorney both external and internal dialogic protagonism. These bubbles also change the time frame of the entire story from present to past. The past tense used on these bubbles (further corroborated on p. 15, panels 3-4) indicates that the images we see are, again as in Melville’s original, the memories of the narrator. Before this, there was no indication that the story was set in anything other than the characters’ present.

Contrary to the other employees, who are merely “shown”, Bartleby is introduced twice: first by the visual image and then by replicating the verbal description from Melville’s text. As if to further hint that these are the narrator’s memories, the panel in which Bartleby appears has no panel frame and no background to set the time or place. The figure of the scrivener also takes more than half of the page, hinting at the significance of this moment for the narrator.

In the graphic novel, Bartleby’s lines are maintained without much change. This is to be expected as they are not many, and they are short enough to fit into small panels without trouble. The narrator’s speeches, on the other hand, present a much bigger challenge. Bartleby’s cryptic line and brevity of speech challenge communication as it is normally understood, and even open the possibility of new ways of social interaction, as proposed by Pinchevski (2011). The attorney’s loquacity acts as a bridge between the reader and the gap created by Bartleby’s speech (or lack of) and presence (or, again, lack of presence after his death). At the same time, the inner monologue reveals how he is also in a constant struggle between upholding his values and fitting into Wall Street.

In an interview for the podcast *Rumbo a tu Vida* (Jódar, 2021), Munuera shares that, at first, he did not believe that Melville's novella could be translated into comics because most of the story takes place between the same four walls, yet, at the same time, there was an immense amount of *inner dialogue* (33:24). After much thinking, he decided to tackle this challenge by using a technique from the TV series *The West Wing* by Aaron Sorkin (34:17). The technique used was the "Walk-and-Talk"³, which basically consists in having the actors deliver their lines as they walk. This gives the illusion of action and allows the characters to share long blocks of dense dialogue without tiring the audience (34:41). Thus, Munuera was able to keep the character's cryptic and verbose speech while also allowing the reader to explore old New York.

Although the graphic novel is also basically the recollection of the narrator's memories, he is not always in charge of the narration. On page 19, the text blocks that float in the sky of the splash panel have no connection to any character and are semi-transparent, signaling thought bubbles. The following page, however, reveals that these actually belong to a dialogue between the lawyer and a new character acting as a confidant and advisor, maybe even a friend. Those who have read "Bartleby, the Scrivener" before embarking on the adaptation might recognize that this unnamed gentleman also plays the role of the colleagues who ultimately convince the narrator to get rid of Bartleby. He could even be the infamous Astor, though his anonymity makes this unlikely. The flow of dialogue and internal monologue continues in this way until page 63, when, for a brief moment, this new character disrupts the ongoing format. Here the blocks of text are white, like speech bubbles, but have no connection to the characters except for the first bubble of the first panel on this page, which ties them to the unnamed man. This disconnection could be solved by suggesting that the following bubbles are an extension of the first one. Still, this does not explain the strangeness of the image in the third panel. Panel three is a frontal medium close-up of the unnamed gentleman. There is no format-related reason for his bubbles not to be connected to him and cut the flow of natural voiced dialogue. This must be a deliberate choice. In the drawing, the face of the man is blurred by snow and shadow, yet his eyes glow. If taken literally, these cues lead us to conclude that this character is not entirely human. After all, his voice can be heard, or read, even though the coding of the speech bubbles signals that he is not voicing his words. His eyes also glow in a non-human way, like those of an animal at night. This supernatural ability to speak without normal speech bubbles (and thus outside normal voiced speech) allows the gentleman to take over the narration for a brief moment. It could be argued that the disconnection of the bubbles and the glowing eyes is only meant to further highlight the inner turmoil of the attorney as he is told that Bartleby is dead. This could be true, but does not negate the fact that, at this precise moment, the attorney is not in charge. At this moment, he and Bartleby are mere subjects, maybe even victims, of the narration of the unnamed man.

³ It should be noted that this technique is not entirely new nor unique to *The West Wing*. We can find tracking shots of walking conversations in cinema as early as the 1930s, although they were of short duration and normally had an oblique framing (Bordwell, 2007). This contrasts with the long, mostly front-facing shots *The West Wing* is famous for. In Munuera's 'walk-and-talks', the perspective of the framing is often changed. This allows the reader to catch glimpses of the streets from different angles, even though there is no camera moving.

The Many Faces of Wall Street

As mentioned before, the gestalt of Wall Street is an important element, even if the story takes place mainly in the narrator's office. To achieve a visual representation of this, the artist took the narrator out of the office and into a ghostly New York that was meant to represent metaphorically and visually the emergence of a world of capitalism, of the triumph of greed and the elimination of the individual (Jódar, 2021, 35:44).

Philippe Delerm captures the issue of Munuera's allegorical Wall Street perfectly in his foreword to the adaptation. Instead of starting his introduction pondering on the nature of *Bartleby*, he starts by defining what Wall Street is. As he poetically elaborates, Wall Street is many things: the name of a street, a street that leads nowhere, a metonym, an entity, and an icon of both American and global capitalism. In his view, Wall Street represents the irrepressible greed for infinite growth (Delerm, 2022). Just as in Delerm's enumeration, Munuera begins the adaptation by highlighting the physical location. A splash panel portrays a segment of a high building in the foreground. In the background, we can see other buildings of similar color and appearance under a clear sky. The location is written in big letters in the upper right corner: Wall Street, N.Y. City. Sedyas' choice of palette for the exteriors in the comic (except for winterly scenes⁴) consists of warm yet dull ochre colors, reminiscing sepia photography. This palette gives the graphic novel a nostalgic mood which suits the fact that, in the end, these are the main narrator's memories. The address shown at the beginning will not be the only time that Munuera reminds us of the physical location of the story. Page 46 consists of another single panel, covering the entire page with a map of New York that stays in the background while the disheartened narrator walks away from it, almost as if escaping the comic book itself.

Delerm's second description of Wall Street is that of a street that leads nowhere. We can take this literally and point to the map, but we could also point to *Bartleby's* desk. Although originally the wall in front of his desk was described to be black, Sedyas consistently paints it red. Melville's black wall hints at the hopelessness of *Bartleby's* future while Sedyas' red-brick wall suggests a strong and unyielding force staring back at him and the reader. In the end, they both serve the same purpose; the street leads nowhere because the walls have blocked the way.

The contrast between the cold, greyish palette of the interior of the office and the muted warmth of the brick wall is hard to ignore. However, as if to ensure that we do not miss its existence when introducing *Bartleby* to his desk, the first panel is an extreme close-up of the wall looked at from inside the office (Munuera, 2022, p. 17). The next panel is slightly zoomed out but is still a close-up with the outer wall as a focus point. The following panel retreats to a medium shot, and the fourth one, the final part of this sequence, is an unframed full-view shot of the working desk and the red wall out the window. Finally, in the fifth panel, the red wall can be seen even behind *Bartleby's* reflection as he looks out of the window.

⁴ The duration of events is not entirely clear in the comic. It is also hard to identify if there is a change of seasons, or if it is somewhere between Fall and Winter. The only moment we can be sure of the passing of time is at the end. The snowy scene of *Bartleby's* death clearly takes place in Winter (p. 64). However, the exteriors marking the final coda (p. 66) are sunny, so bright that there is a flare effect on the first panel and a blurring of the buildings on the second panel. Clearly, there has been a change of season.

The red wall constantly lurks behind Bartleby. It is a watchful entity, a silent yet menacing participant in the unfolding events. However, Munuera gives an additional face to Wall Street by embodying it in the unnamed gentleman who goes on walks with the main narrator. This character resembles the wall in the way he vicariously witnesses the events through the attorney's account. Still, he becomes an active participant when he compares Bartleby to the faulty brick that could lead a wall to crumble, then compares the wall to a system which can only function by replacing these faulty bricks (Munuera, 2022, p. 63). Finally, he tells the attorney that Bartleby won't bother *them* anymore. The fact that the man uses the plural form in this sentence signals that all of them are part of this wall-system. Still, Munuera also pictures the man on a higher ground than the attorney (p. 63, panel 1), which signals that they are not on the same level and that he has more power than the attorney. Additionally, the man accuses the attorney of not being able to understand that he has been used to further cement the structure of capitalist Wall Street. Here, the attorney's belief in capitalist compassion is exposed as ultimately naïve. He is blind to the fact that he is not really an agent but just another brick in the wall. He is not able to understand that he is simply a character in the hands of Wall Street's masterplan because he is not able to understand *the story* (p. 62, panel 3). The use of the word 'story' (*Geschichte* in the German version) suggests that the unnamed gentleman might also have a meta-awareness of being part of a fiction, maybe even intertextual knowledge of both Munuera's graphic novel and Melville's novella. Is this knowledge inhuman? It would seem so. This character also seems to have knowledge of Bartleby's death (even though it is implied he has died of cold). The awareness of everyone's role plus the aforementioned qualities of his voice and eyes further reinforce the idea that this new character is not entirely human. That being said, I recognize that there is not enough proof to fully ascertain that he is some sort of supernatural creature. In any case, this is not as important as his function in the story. This character's stance on how the workplace must operate remains crucial for our understanding of Munuera's imaginary of Wall Street, both physically and allegorically. Inside the story-world, the unnamed man is a personification of Wall Street, a collective in a single voice. He is a dramatic element in the sense that, although he does not directly kill Bartleby, he lets the events that lead to this unfold. Outside of the story-world, the man plays a role similar to that of a Greek chorus. As Weiner (1980) notes, Greek choruses were lyric interruptions that gave the audience time to think and reflect on the play. In a similar way, the unnamed man interrupts the events between the attorney and Bartleby. However, he also reveals the true nature of the game board to which they belong. His main role is not simply to interrupt, but to expose how economic systems manage to extend beyond the workplace and affect the personal lives of people. Although the critique in Melville's original is more subtle, Munuera's ghostly gentleman directly explains that Bartleby cannot exist in an economic system that requires constant, unrelenting production. Even the value of life is below that of the continuation of the productivity.

The addition of the unnamed gentleman is an element that allows Munuera's version to have its own textual identity. It also makes the 1840s and 1850s eerily familiar to a 2020s audience. Readers now might find it hard to empathize with the anxieties of a young nation or the extinct trade of law-copyists, but this does not mean they cannot understand the affliction of being a worker in a system that values productivity over personal well-being, or even life itself. This is a concern that contemporary audiences can still relate to or identify in the world in some way or another. For example, Dilgen (2012) comments how *Bartleby*, interpreted as a reminder of our responsibilities to the less privileged, could be seen as almost a prophecy of Occupy Wall Street, a movement that protested against corporate greed and inequality. Castronovo (2014) considers that Bartleby "refuses the narrator's charity because its ultimate

goal is to justify the system for accruing wealth that the lawyer represents” (p. 253). The connection between this idea and the Occupy Wall Street movement prompted news media and the occupiers themselves to use allusions to *Bartleby* in their articles and speeches. Although I do not entirely agree with Castronovo’s explanation of Bartleby’s motives, I do agree with his statement that this analogy “creates broad correspondences and establishes insurmountable limits to affiliations among different people” (p. 255). In other words, the multiple interpretations of *Bartleby* complicated the use of it as a single-meaning, unifying analogy for the movement. This also meant that there was not a single reading of the movement itself, which could be seen in the negative articles of liberal-leaning magazines that saw Bartleby not as an activist but as a childish and unreasonable man (p. 256). Thus, it is not a matter of whether *Bartleby* serves as prophecy or whether Melville was openly political, but rather of how our readings (or interpretations, creations, revisions, etc.) can help us process historical events. To give another, more recent example, we can also find *Bartleby* in our post-COVID-19 present. “The Great Resignation” that occurred shortly after workers were forced to return to the workplace despite the risks of the still ongoing pandemic was a phenomenon of workers *preferring not to* go back to work due to “widespread dissatisfaction” (Formica and Sfodera, 2022). If we think of Bartleby, the Great Resignation could also be read as a Great Defiance. Then again, we could also connect this phenomenon to another character. In Munuera’s adaptation, the story ends similarly to the original with the attorney ruminating on Bartleby’s nature and lamenting his death. However, the famous last words of the narrator are different. In the comic, Turkey interrupts the narrator’s thoughts to ask his boss to sign a document. The attorney does not look at him, he just stares at an office desk. In the last image, we can observe the back of the attorney as he answers: “I would prefer not to” (Munuera, 2022, p. 68). This last image is striking not only because it floats inside a white, frameless panel. It surprises because, even though there is no background, the similarity to the image on the cover of the graphic novel is uncanny. On the cover, we also see a man standing in front of a desk. The attorney is behind him, so we must assume that this other man is Bartleby. In the background, people pass by as if they were walking on the street. Due to its similarity, the last image of the graphic novel can be interpreted as something more than grieving. The attorney is not only using Bartleby’s words. He also stands in the same way, in the same space. With this in mind, we could then argue that the Great Resignation was more related to the attorney than to Bartleby. After all, even though most researchers do not name it as one of the causes of employee dissatisfaction, one of the main causes of the Great Resignation was the refusal to expose one’s health to a potentially mortal virus. We could imagine these ‘resigners’ as reticent Bartlebys, but we could also see them as grieving attorneys who have seen their colleagues die for the sake of productivity and have come to realize that they, too, are pieces of the same game board. Ultimately, there is no final interpretation, and certainly no prophecy. Each reading of *Bartleby*, as original or adaptation, will vary from culture to culture, from person to person, and according to the time when it is read.

Conclusion

Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (1853) is a short story that is open to multiple readings. This was achieved by the author through a careful construction of three main elements: a narrator that must construe Bartleby through memory and projection, a scrivener that communicates in crypticity and silence, and a setting that needs no introductions

besides an office description. In Munuera's graphic novel adaptation, these elements are reimagined within the comics realm. In the medial process, Melville's play on the reader's limitations received special attention. As a result, the narrator's internal monologues turn into dialogues that are still part of his memories. Bartleby's interactions have remained mostly the same, though the red bricks of Wall Street constantly lurking behind him are a visual reminder that seems more menacing than the wall allegories and puns from the original short story. Finally, there is the matter of setting. Wall Street is not merely a physical place, but also a concept. A graphic critique of Wall Street that depended only on the landscape would be incomplete. Thus, Munuera divides Wall Street into two graphic elements: sepia urban landscapes and an unnamed man in black. The use of imagery of the 1800s and dull color palettes help the reader situate the storyworld in 1853, while the addition of the unnamed man helps us recognize the wall-system of their world in our present. Munuera's slight deviation from Melville's story is not a distortion because it does not interfere with the main events of the original storyline. On the contrary, it serves to emphasize that Wall Street is not only a street but also a system from which there is no escape. That is, of course, as long as the bricks that form this structure remain firmly in place. Although the alterations of Munuera's graphic adaptation are not many, they are enough to highlight some specific critiques that were more subtle in Melville's words. For example, the dialogue of the unnamed gentleman is enough to expose the attorney's belief in capitalist compassion as ultimately impossible. It also exposes the artificiality of it all. Bartleby is not a tragic character who, in his unwillingness to move, is fated to die. His case is a tragedy because of the absurdity of his world. There was never a real need for it to happen. If his death had really been predetermined, the unnamed gentleman would not have treated their clash as a game of chess. In the end, this was only the result of the attorney's adherence to a social construct in which workplace and domestic space cannot mix, a construct where those who cannot produce cannot survive. Another distance from the original is the addition of a final conversation in which the attorney stands and speaks like Bartleby. Here, the attorney laments the events but is also irreversibly aware of his own vulnerable position in the overall system of Wall Street. Does his repeating of Bartleby's lines signal that he will continue to follow the scrivener's acts of resistance? This is not clear. It could also mean that, in his sadness, the attorney has finally understood what Bartleby meant.

Ultimately, adaptations, in all their forms, are part of a never-ending chain of interpretative re-creation (in Melville's terms) or revision (in Bryant's, 2013, terms). Munuera's adaptation is also part of this chain. By transporting the novella into the graphic realm, Munuera is able to extend the possibility of meaning beyond the limits of textuality. Furthermore, the publishing of the graphic novel following the Great Resignation invites us to rethink our notion of duty towards the workplace and how much our agency is actually limited. Obviously enough, this contemporary reading is not, and will not be, the last. As long as the wall stands, *Bartleby* will continue to haunt it.

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