Objections, Reflections, and Anticipations

Dennis R. MacDonald

I am profoundly grateful to the contributors to this volume, especially to Mark G. Bilby, who have devoted their erudition to *The Gospels and Homer*, *Luke and Vergil*, and *The Dionysian Gospel*.[1] Even though I take exception to several criticisms, my responses in no way diminish that heartfelt gratitude. My brief responses obviously do not permit the exhaustive attention that these contributions deserve, but I trust that my comments will suffice to advance the discussion.

Defending Mimesis Criticism

Although most essays express misgivings about details of my comparisons of New Testament narratives to classical Greek literature, none so broadly dismisses them as Kay Higuera Smith in "Mark and Homer." She concedes many of the parallels but argues, as have others, for an "indirect" influence rather than a strategic and hermeneutically freighted direct one.

Neither the Markan author's socioeconomic nor sociolinguistic location make it likely that Mark could have had the education or the rhetorical training that would be required to argue with sufficient plausibility that he followed

[1] Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* (NTGL 1; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Dennis R. MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature* (NTGL 2; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); and Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Dionysian Gospel: The Fourth Gospel and Euripides* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

ancient models of Greek education by consistently and directly imitating Homer and other classical Greek sources.[2]

To support this objection Smith asserts that "Mark's marginal socioeconomic status and his poor grammatical skills would have made a classical education unlikely."[3] She obviously knows much more about the anonymous author's "socioeconomic status" than I. Concern for "those of low social status" by no means was restricted to the marginal themselves, as the Lukan Evangelist amply illustrates. Such concerns appear also in the Homeric epics and Athenian tragedies and among many other texts by cultural elites. I strongly disagree that distaste for taxation, slavery, and "economic exploitation" were "not the concerns of social elites but of those who identify with the social margins."[4]

On the other hand, Smith rightly complains that Mark's syntax leaves much to be desired and that his vocabulary is pedestrian; even so, his skills as a narrator are extraordinary. This apparent contradiction, however, appears in other works known for their imitations of classical Greek poetry, such as the Book of Judith—which similarly displays significant Semitic interference—3 Maccabees, and the Testament of Abraham. Among Christian texts I would adduce the Acts of Andrew and the City of the Cannibals and the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Written by Aeneas the Jew, a Byzantine recension of the Gospel of Nicodemus. The best-known pagan imitations of Homer appear in Vergil and Lucian, but many others appear in compositions by *hoi polloi*. Some authors even complained about how common they were.

I do, however, concede that that some of the parallels between Mark and Homer might be indirect, as the

[2] Kay Higuera Smith, "Mark and Homer," *supra*.
[3] Smith, "Mark and Homer," *supra*.
[4] Smith, "Mark and Homer," *supra*.

contribution by Richard C. Miller illustrates.[5] I suspect that Luke's story of Jesus's ascension imitates Livy's Latin account of the ascension of Romulus, whereas Miller prefers a less direct, broadly cultural influence of mythologies of postmortem exaltations of kings and emperors.[6]

But even if some parallels are not direct, others surely are. Perhaps I could have distinguished, as I have elsewhere, between the author's occasional direct and visual imitating and the readers' memory or non-textual exposure to Homeric episodes and characters. Clearly the Markan Evangelist could not have expected his readers to have had access to these scrolls. I created the seven criteria of Mimesis Criticism in large measure to establish whether parallels between any two texts imply a direct or indirect imitation—or no mimesis at all. I am, however, gratified by Smith's gracious conclusion that "no study of the New Testament henceforth can ignore the classical literature of ancient Greece."[7]

Refining Mimesis Criticism

I know of no more penetrating and provocative assessment of the avoidance of Mimesis Criticism in the history of New Testament scholarship and higher education than the opening section of Mark Bilby's "Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism." Exposure to classical Greek literature—especially Homeric epic and Athenian tragedy, the intellectual foundations of Greek identity in the early Roman Empire—is almost entirely absent in departments of religion and theological seminaries. Miller similarly speaks of "an

[5] Richard C. Miller, "Neos Dionysos in Textual and Cultural Mimesis," *supra*.

[6] See MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil*, 196–200.

[7] Smith, "Mark and Homer," *supra*.

altogether sad, pandemic-level lack of training and familiarity with classical culture in the Romano-Greek East."[8]

The trilogy of my books attempts to compensate for this cultural void, but Bilby rightly notes that

> One person may pioneer a movement, but he cannot make it. As mimesis criticism becomes more mainstream and widespread, it must become more nuanced, more diverse, and yes, more provisional and more contentious, too. MacDonald's pioneering effort … is invaluable. Yet, as primarily the work of one person rather than a community or school, it is inevitably going to be idiosyncratic at points.[9]

Later he adds: "Mimesis Criticism must move beyond one person and become a shared methodology and discourse."[10] As I understand it, this was the driving force behind the collection of essays that comprise this volume. The idiosyncrasies of my work include, says Bilby, advocating for direct literary parallels that are less compelling than others or that one might explain otherwise, such as rhetorical topoi, or popular culture, or the influence of the Septuagint, which I have never denied. In many cases, one finds multiple antetextual influences and intertextual strategies, such as quotation, allusion, and redaction.

Several contributions to this volume clarify the various literary and theological motivations for mimesis of classical Greek texts, a topic highlighted by Michael Kochenash in "Even Good Homer Nods," and more urgently advocated by Chan Sok Park, who presses for more attention to "the politics of imitation."[11] For example, Park asks if Dionysian influence

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[8] Miller, "Neos Dionysos," *supra*.

[9] Mark G. Bilby, "Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism," *supra*.

[10] Bilby, "Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism," *supra*.

[11] Michael Kochenash, "Even Good Homer Nods," *supra* and Chan Sok Park, "John's Politics of Imitation," *supra*.

on the Fourth Gospel reflects the origins of the Johannine tradition and not merely the literary creativity of the author. Furthermore, he asks if attention to mimesis of Euripides and the complex compositional history of the Gospel might shed light on the development of "the Johannine community."

Because of such intramural disputes among mimesis critics, Bilby advocates extensive and collaborative evaluations of such proposals among scholars in professional meetings in order to rank their plausibility and significance.[12] Such collaborations would address Miller's observation that scholars too frequently dismiss a new hypothesis "by pointing out its weakest link."[13] One might say that the volume at hand is an initial step in the direction of identifying the most compelling mimetic connections.

In his response to *The Dionysian Gospel*, Bilby provides another example of differences among practitioners of Mimesis Criticism; namely, how best to integrate this new methodology with alternatives.[14] For example, he finds compelling recent work on Luke-Acts that dates the final redaction as late as 150 CE, late enough to argue against an early form of Marcionism as expressed in a hypothetical reconstruction of a putative primitive version of Luke, without Acts. According to Bilby, "the first edition of John," the Dionysian Gospel, "used Luke, but not the final version" of it but the anti-Marcionite final redaction.[15] He thus argues that the direction of dependence at this stage moves in the other direction, from John to Luke.

He bolsters this conclusion with two observations: first, many Lukan pericopae find no equivalents in John. I would

[12] Bilby, "Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism," *supra*.

[13] Miller, "Neos Dionysos," *supra*.

[14] Mark G. Bilby, "The First Dionysian Gospel: Imitational and Redactional Layers in Luke and John," *supra*.

[15] Bilby, "The First Dionysian Gospel," *supra*.

counter that authors have no obligation to use anything in their sources. Second, Bilby finds support for this view in Pliny's correspondence with Trajan on the Christian movement in Asia Minor, which he sees as a historical watershed for both Luke and John; in each case, an earlier version of the Gospel precedes it and one or more later versions follow it.

I have no principled problem with the notion that Marcion knew a Gospel different from and shorter than the text known to the likes of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Epiphanius, and others, but I do find exceedingly problematic the view that the proposed pre-Marcion Luke was Ur-Lukas, the Evangelist's original composition. All of the competing reconstructions of the pre-Marcion Gospel share the following characteristics: like the canonical Lukan Gospel, the hypothetical earlier truncated version follows the Markan sequence and carefully redacts it. However one views Luke's agreements with Matthew against Mark—either as evidence of Q/Q+ or Matthew—the two proposed compositional strata share the same redactional tendencies. And what is most relevant to the book at hand, both compositional strata display the same mimetic creativity on the same models, Homer and the Bacchae, though they are greatly expanded in Acts. I fear that the hoopla over the recovery of a likely pre-Marcion *Evangelikon* will blind future researchers to the literary and brilliant consistency throughout the Gospel as we now have it.

My conclusion to this volume obviously is not the place to criticize Bilby's creative proposal in detail; rather, it is the place to thank him for providing an example of methodological eclecticism that takes Mimesis Criticism seriously. Mimesis is a new and promising tool, but it is not the only one in the exegetical shed. Gospel texts are notoriously complex and thus require multiple methodological approaches. Mimesis is messy and, despite my application of criteria to diminish the subjectivity of identifying it, the venture remains vexing. Scholars inevitably

disagree. I warmly welcome Bilby's proposal that what now is too often my idiolect become a scholarly sociolect. I am far less interested in making faithful disciples than in making waves that one day will wash ashore even at the beaches of contemporary religion, which brings me to Bilby's other major concern.

"For mimesis to get a fair hearing, we also must address faith-based approaches to the New Testament and how Mimesis Criticism relates to them."[16] I make no apologies that I am a Christian who evaluates religious language, including God-talk, as a cultural anthropologist and not as a believer. I am a humanist who studies religion as someone colorblind might study Renaissance oil painting. In many cases, one does not need historical bedrock or even antecedent tradition to explain New Testament narratives or the existence of many characters, but there are exceptions, and Bilby rightly notes that I do not deny the existence of Paul even though the Acts of the Apostles portrays him as a Christian Socrates.[17] Kochenash notes that Mark seems to have burnished traditions about John the Baptist by imitating the beheading of Agamemnon in Greek epic and tragedy.[18]

I make a similar claim for Jesus himself in *Mythologizing Jesus: From Jewish Teacher to Epic Hero*.[19] I am not a mythicist: of course Jesus existed, but he also soon became the target of mythologizing to compete with Jewish and Greek gods and heroes. On the other hand, I am highly skeptical that the following Gospel characters ever existed: Mary Magdalene, Judas Iscariot, Joseph of Arimathea, the young man who fled

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[16] Bilby, "Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism," *supra*.

[17] Bilby, "Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism," *supra*. See also Ilseo Park, "Acts 2 as an Intertextual Map: Moving from Dionysian to Platonic Identity," *supra*.

[18] Kochenash, "Even Good Homer Nods," *supra*.

[19] Dennis R. MacDonald, *Mythologizing Jesus: From Jewish Teacher to Epic Hero* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

at Jesus's arrest, and many others.[20] Similarly, the existence of the following characters in the Acts of the Apostles is highly problematic: the Ethiopian eunuch, Aeneas, Dorcas, Cornelius, Eutychus, Jason, and others.[21] Obviously, such skepticism is not shared by the vast majority of Christian believers, including many New Testament critics.

Literary assessments may inform but need not be determinative for making historical judgments, as the examples of the Baptist and Jesus in Mark and Paul in Acts demonstrate. It is one thing to argue, as I do, that one does not need historical events or characters to explain their appearance in early Christian narratives, but it is quite another dogmatically to deny their existence. Kochenash makes a similar suggestion which merits repeating:

> some readers will likely be turned off by MacDonald's assertion that Mark and Luke created narratives from scratch in order to imitate literary models. Instead, an agnostic approach might be more palatable for a broader reading public. Mark and Luke may have created narratives inspired by nothing more than their

[20] For Mary Magdalene, see MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 13 and 94–98. For Judas Iscariot, see MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 11–12, 281–82, and 315–18. For Joseph of Arimathea, see MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 104–12. For the young man at Jesus's arrest, see MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 247–50.

[21] For the Ethiopian eunuch, see MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 113–17. For Aeneas, see MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 47–49; see also Michael Kochenash, "You Can't Hear 'Aeneas' without Thinking of Rome," *JBL* 136.3 (2017): 667–85. For Dorcas, see MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 138–40; see also Michael Kochenash, "Political Correction: Luke's Tabitha (Acts 9:36–43), Virgil's Dido, and Cleopatra," *NovT* 60.1 (2018): 1–13. For Cornelius, see Dennis R. MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2–65 and MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 33–46. For Eutychus, see Dennis R. MacDonald, "Luke's Eutychus and Homer's Elpenor: Acts 20:7–12 and *Odyssey* 10–12," *JHC* 1.1 (1994): 5–24 and MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 226–29. For Jason, see MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil*, 48–50.

> literary models on occasion. At other times, however, they may have been inspired to elaborate their compositions due to the similarities between traditions about Jesus, Peter, and Paul and certain exemplary literary models.[22]

Later he adds: "I wonder whether an agnosticism about possible sources [e.g., reliable oral tradition] could have improved the chances of positive reception among moderate conservatives on the one hand and liberals approaching the narratives from a twentieth-century form-critical framework on the other."[23]

But Bilby goes much further in making a case for the value of Mimesis Criticism for Christian believers:

> Time and again, what struck me in MacDonald's works were the ways in which mimesis critical readings underscored a *high* Christology. The Jesuses of Mark, Luke, and John not only surpassingly emulate the roles and feats of epic heroes, but even those of epic deities. One might see in many mimesis critical readings so many opportunities for theologians and preachers to proclaim a Christ that does not merely recall but indeed completely surpasses all other models and objects of devotion.[24]

He goes on to suggest that the influence of Greek literature on the high Christologies of the Gospels historically established the terms of debate for later theological disputes. Put otherwise, Mimesis Criticism does not trivialize the Jesus of the Gospels but exalts him.

> Indeed, the Christological controversies of ancient Christianity can easily be read as the profoundly

[22] Kochenash, "Even Good Homer Nods," *supra*.
[23] Kochenash, "Even Good Homer Nods," *supra*.
[24] Bilby, "Introduction: Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism," *supra*.

> difficult effort to come to terms with the implications of the appropriation of classical models in the Gospels. How to reconcile Jewish monotheism with the epic depictions of Jesus—this lies at the heart of early Christian theological debates and liturgies. These debates also repeatedly evince a lively tension between competing appropriations of Greek epic and Greek philosophy. As readers will see later, this tension stood at the core of the emergence of proto-Orthodox/Catholic Christianity and was already very much in evidence in Acts and the later redactional layers of the Gospel of John and Gospel of Luke. Even outside of Christian circles, we find that the primary objections lodged by rabbinic Judaism and Islam against Jesus's deification and Trinitarian theology demonstrate an incisive awareness of the patently obvious connections between classical stories and early Christian claims, and an informed objection to Christian theology being a legitimate appropriation of Jewish monotheism and Greek philosophy.[25]

According to Bilby, the tracing of Greek poetic influence on such disputes thus is "a massive area for future research."[26] It also helps in understanding the high Christologies in much of modern Christendom.

Expanding Mimesis Criticism

The last three contributions in this volume offer further explorations of my applications of Mimesis Criticism. Austin Busch shows that Mark's story of the Gerasene demoniac, a likely imitation of Homer's Polyphemus, finds a later analogy in Philostratus's clever use of Polyphemus in the *Life of*

[25] Bilby, "Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism," *supra*.
[26] Bilby, "Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism," *supra*.

Apollonius.[27] Even more significant, in my view, are his references to analogous imitations of the Homeric tale in texts earlier than Philostratus, such as Theocritus's *Idylls* 6 and 11 and especially Vergil's *Aeneid* book 3.

Ilseo Park insightfully explores how the author of the Acts of the Apostles shifted the Dionysian madness of Pentecost into the Platonic political idealism of pooled wealth in Acts 2 (and 4).[28] Furthermore, he notes that in *Luke and Vergil* I argued that the parallels with the *Bacchae* appear predominantly in Acts 1-16 and those with Plato and Xenophon predominantly in Acts 17-28 where Luke portrays Paul as a Christianized Socrates. Park's original contribution is to propose that Acts 2 prepares the reader to see in the narrative a transition from Dionysian enthusiasm to Socratic philosophical sophistication. Kochenash similarly points out this transition from parallels between the Euripidean Dionysus and Paul in Thessalonica in Acts 17:1–15, on the one hand, and between the Platonic Socrates and Paul in Athens in 17:16–34, on the other.[29]

I warmly welcome these insightful expansions of my work and encourage the application of Mimesis Criticism not only to the canonical Gospels and Acts but also to extracanonical Jewish and Christian literature, without ignoring the importance of the methodology to fictional composition in antiquity more generally. Among my own forthcoming publications I will mention *Luke and the Politics of Homeric Imitation: Luke-Acts as a Rival to the* Aeneid and "The Jewish Agave and Hera: A Mimetic Reading the Book of Judith," which argues for imitations of the *Bacchae* and *Il.* 14.

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[27] Austin Busch, "Scriptural Revision in Mark's Gospel and Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius*," *supra*.

[28] Park, "Acts 2 as an Intertextual Map," *supra.*

[29] Michael Kochenash, "The Scandal of Gentile Inclusion: Reading Acts 17 with Euripides' *Bacchae*," *supra.*

In the first half of *From the Earliest Gospel (Q+) and the Gospel of Mark: Solving the Synoptic Problem with Mimesis Criticism*, I will argue that the lost Gospel extensively and polemically imitated the Book of Deuteronomy to portray Jesus as the promised prophet like Moses. In the second half, I use Mimesis Criticism to examine the vexing overlaps between Q/Q+ in the Gospel of Mark. In other words, this underutilized methodology sheds light on the echoes of Jewish scriptures in the lost Gospel and on Mark's eclectic imitations not only of the Homeric epics but also the earliest Gospel. It is my hope that these studies, together with the work of scholars such as the contributors to this volume, will propel this methodology toward the center of New Testament scholarship, as Mark Bilby has advocated.