



WHO IS AN IDIOT IN ANCIENT CRITICISM?*

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concept of ἰδιώτης, often translated as ‘layman’, in Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ critical essays, where he places particular emphasis on validating the judgement of the ἰδιώτης in aesthetic evaluation. Dionysius’ focus on the impact and reception of art enables him to lay the groundwork for shifting the semantic meaning of ἰδιώτης from being in strict opposition to the artist/critic to a more fluid category, ranging from ‘unskilled’ listener and layman to a relatively experienced ‘amateur’. By conceiving the change from ἰδιώτης to τεχνίτης in criticism as a more gradual process (rather than one of irreconcilable division), Dionysius shows the discipline of rhetoric and literary criticism to be a particularly relevant form of learning that speaks to the sensibilities of Imperial Rome.

Keywords: literary criticism; aesthetic evaluation in antiquity; Dionysius of Halicarnassus; Greek criticism in Rome; experts and expertise; ancient education

Recent work on skilled labour, professionalization and expertise in the ancient world offers an opportunity to revisit the meaning of ‘everyday person’, ἰδιώτης (henceforth also *idiōtēs*), a concept that is frequently used, though almost never fully examined or even addressed, in these contributions as the stable opposite against which ideas of professionalism are developed.¹ Scholarly discussions on ἰδιώτης have thus far focussed on two major contexts: first, the lawcourts or more generally the public sphere, where ἰδιώτης is generally taken as the opposite of ῥήτωρ (henceforth also *rhêtôr*) ‘politician’ or simply the publicly engaged citizen,² and secondly in the context of crafts, where ἰδιώτης is used as an opposite to τεχνίτης (henceforth also *technitēs*), the professional

* I am grateful to audiences at NYU and UCLA; to Richard Hunter, David Levene, Bryant Kirkland, and David Blank; and to *CQ*’s reader. Greek text of Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ essays as in G. Aujac’s Budé editions. Translations occasionally modified from S. Usher’s Loeb volume.

¹ See E. Stewart, E. Harris and D. Lewis (edd.), *Skilled Labour and Professionalism in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Cambridge and New York, 2020). Discussion on the concept of ἰδιώτης is absent from the most recent contribution on the philosophical debates around τέχνη ‘craft’ or ‘skill’, T.K. Johansen (ed.), *Productive Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy: The Concept of Technê* (Cambridge and New York, 2021).

² The standard passage is Pl. *Apol.* 32a, where Socrates sets up the opposition between ἰδιωτεύειν ‘to be a private citizen’ and δημοσιεύειν ‘to be actively involved in *dêmos*’. See L. Rubinstein, ‘The Athenian political perception of the *idiōtēs*’, in P. Cartledge, P. Millett and S. von Reden (edd.), *Kosmos: Essays in Order, Conflict and Community in Classical Athens* (Cambridge and New York, 1998), 125–43; also J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Power of the People* (Princeton, 1989). Closely connected is the use of ἰδιώτης as ‘private citizen’, often in reference or direct opposition to people of power (e.g. Hdt. 1.59, Pl. *Alc. I* 121a8. For the extent to which jurors could be conceived of as *idiōtai*, and what that would mean for the democratic system, see M. Landauer, ‘The *idiōtēs* and the tyrant: two faces of unaccountability in democratic Athens’, *Political Theory* 42 (2014), 139–66.

skilled labourer.³ The economic, social and political circumstances of the two groups seem to suggest that they are defined either as standing in opposition to one another or, even more strongly, as the negations of each other (*idiôtês* in the *agora* is anyone who is **not** a *rhêtôr*, etc.).⁴ Either way, in both arenas, *idiôtês* seems to be generally treated as a relatively specific and uncontested term, thus offering a perfect opposition for the arguably more complex notion of a professional in Greece and Rome. Perhaps this is indeed so in certain contexts, but it is by no means the case universally. Indeed, even a cursory look at the use of *idiôtês* in the Platonic corpus (a context which more than any other has brought to the spotlight the knowledgeable expert at the expense of the ignorant *idiôtês*) will quickly reveal this as a much more complex notion than often acknowledged.⁵

While a more comprehensive account of the meaning and history of ἰδιώτης in antiquity remains a *desideratum*,⁶ the following exploration will take a closer look at the use of this concept at one crucial moment in literary history, in first-century B.C.E. Rome, when we notice it emerge particularly emphatically in the critical writings of Dionysius of Halicarnassus.⁷ There we see the concept of *idiôtês* being discussed (for the first time?), in the context of aesthetic experience and practice, not in opposition to the expert and literary critic (as we would expect), but rather as somehow akin to

³ On *technitês* vs *idiôtês*, see E. Stewart, E. Harris and D. Lewis, 'Introduction', in E. Stewart, E. Harris and D. Lewis (n. 1), 3, which also offers definitions of the two concepts: 'As distinct areas of expertise develop, so it becomes possible to distinguish between a skilled worker (in Greek τεχνίτης, in Latin *artifex/peritus*) who is acknowledged to have mastered a given discipline, and a layman (in Greek ἰδιώτης, in Latin *imperitus*)'.

⁴ In economic terms, *technitai* are generally taken to make money with their skills, whereas *idiôtai* do not (e.g. in the case of dramatic performances, see E. Stewart, 'The profession of *mousikê* in Classical Greece', in E. Stewart, E. Harris and D. Lewis [edd.], *Skilled Labour and Professionalism in Ancient Greece and Rome* [Cambridge, 2020], 269–92). Furthermore, *technitai* and *idiôtai*, similarly to the distinction in the economic terms of their labour, belong to different social classes: the former to the lower and the latter to the upper classes. One might also add a third layer of distinction between *idiôtai* and *technitai*: the latter is trained, whereas the former is cultivated, i.e. the *idiôtês* may have a specific set of skills, but these are acquired to cultivate their *persona* for a social purpose and not deliberately honed as skills in professional contexts. All these layers could use a separate analysis, one that would also further examine Greek and Roman suspicion against professionalism in certain contexts (e.g. Roman suspicions against Greek philosophers as indicated in M.T. Griffin, 'Philosophy, politics, and politicians', in M.T. Griffin and J. Barnes [edd.], *Philosophia Togata I* [Oxford, 1989], 1–37).

⁵ Plato's *Ion* 532d–e uses a more generic opposition between σοφοί and ἰδιώται, where Socrates is casting himself into the role of an ἰδιώτης (clueless about poetic wisdom, only able to speak the truth) and explicitly—if of course also ironically—contrasts his position to that of Ion and other *sophoi*. Socrates is associating himself with *idiôtês* elsewhere in Plato, e.g. *Tht.* 154e4, *Prt.* 345a8 (we, 'non-experts' in medicine), *Prt.* 327c5 ('non-experts' who know nothing about *aulos* music), *Alc. I* 121a8 ('we, private citizens' as opposed to rulers; cf. also *Plt.* 259a7, *Leg.* 767b5, 779c3) and of course *Ap.* 32a (in political context), when read alongside the definition of a philosopher as ὄνῃ ἰδιώτης in *Grg.* 526c2. There are also less normatively loaded uses, primarily where *idiôtês* is used in opposition to the city or the community (e.g. *Grg.* 507d4, 525e3; *Cra.* 385a4; and most famously in the individual vs soul opposition of *Resp.* 441cd, 536a5, 579cd), almost in the sense of 'individual', or in some passages where *idiôtês* seems to denote an amateur or a simple practitioner (e.g. *Hp. Mai.* 287a1; *Leg.* 916c1, 933d5). There are two curious passages—*Tht.* 178b–e and *Phdr.* 258d—which seem of particular importance for the following examination: the former discusses Protagoras' relativism with regard to judging about sense perception, the latter launches into a discussion about how to distinguish good writing from the rest.

⁶ A.W. Sparkes, 'Idiots, ancient and modern', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 23 (1988), 101–2 calls attention to this.

⁷ R. Hunter, 'Dionysius of Halicarnassus and the idea of the critic', in R. Hunter and C.C. de Jonge (edd.), *Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Augustan Rome* (Cambridge, 2018), 37–55.

them. Even though Dionysius' discussion is certainly not without a political dimension (for aesthetic leaders ought to be/become political leaders),⁸ his discussion is not overtly political and he appears to approach the concept of *idiôtês* from a different—aesthetic—angle. Through his frequent references to *idiôtai*, it is hard to escape the impression that Dionysius is trying to give a provocative account about the importance of the *idiôtai* for art and politics in first-century B.C.E. Rome. But why?

I

In his critical essay *On Lysias*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus makes references to one of the most controversial as well as intriguing ideas of his critical practice, the concept of ἄλογος αἴσθησις (henceforth *alogos aisthêsis*),⁹ as a way to explain a crucial virtue of the orator, his charm (χάρις).¹⁰ Unlike other virtues of style, Dionysius makes this surprising point that charm is equally accessible (at least so it seems) to both experts and *idiôtai* (*Lys.* 10.3 ῥῶστον μὲν γὰρ ἔστιν ὀφθῆναι καὶ παντὶ ὁμοίως ἰδιώτῃ τε καὶ τεχνίτῃ φανερόν), but despite its apparent universality, the concept is difficult to explain in words (χαλεπώτατον δὲ λόγῳ δηλωθῆναι). Subsequently, Dionysius goes on to compare the concept of charm to other similar ones, like the 'bloom of youth' (ῥορά) in physical beauty (11.1 ἐπὶ κάλλους μὲν σωμαίων), and then poses an overarching question: in every act and fact, what do we call 'timeliness' (καιρός) and where is the 'mean' (τὸ μέτριον)? In responding to his challenge Dionysius says that 'each of these cases is detected through senses and not through reason' (αἰσθήσει γὰρ τούτων ἕκαστον καταλαμβάνεται καὶ οὐ λόγῳ). In other words, those most essential and impactful characteristics of literary compositions will be captured not through vigorous theoretical reflection of the work of art, but rather by some kind of sensation that the works arouse in us, without recourse to reason (*logos*), thus somehow unintellectually.¹¹

In that essay, and indeed elsewhere, Dionysius evokes other fields, such as music and art (sculpture or painting), to explain how this kind of sensation might work in criticism. In music, for example, teachers advise those who wish to 'acquire an accurate sense of melody' to simply 'cultivate the ear, and seek no more accurate standard of judgement (ἀκριβέστερον κριτήριον) than this' (*Lys.* 11.5). The same applies to readers of *Lysias*

⁸ See Dion. Hal. *Ant. Or. praeef.* 2.3 ἐπαινεῖν τὸν παρόντα χρόνον καὶ τοὺς συμφιλοσοφούντας ἀνθρώπους, together with 3.1 ἀρχὴ τῆς τοσαύτης μεταβολῆς ἐγένετο ἢ πάντων κρατούσα Ῥώμη [...], εὐπαιδεῦτοι πάνυ καὶ γενναῖοι τὰς κρίσεις γενόμενοι.

⁹ Dionysius' treatment of *alogos aisthêsis* is complicated. Different interpretations are offered by D. Schenkeveld, 'Theories of evaluation in the rhetorical treatises of Dionysius of Halicarnassus', *Museum Philologum Londiniense* 1 (1975), 93–107, who argues that Dionysius is simply inconsistent; C. Damon 'Aesthetic response and technical analysis in the rhetorical writings of Dionysius of Halicarnassus', *MH* 48 (1991), 33–58 concludes that Dionysius' work is unfinished; and J.I. Porter, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (Cambridge, 2010) takes Dionysius as merely carrying forward the ideas of the *kritikoi*. I hope to discuss Dionysius' *alogos aisthêsis* more extensively elsewhere.

¹⁰ See also L. Viidebaum, 'Dionysius and Lysias' charm', in R. Hunter and C.C. de Jonge (edd.), *Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Augustan Rome* (Cambridge, 2018), 106–24.

¹¹ Unlike some later eighteenth-century philosophers (e.g. David Hume) who claim that one can (rationally) explain the sources of irrational sensations, Dionysius seems to think both that the sensation (*alogos aisthêsis*) is not rational and that it does not lend itself to verbal or theoretical explanation.

who wish to learn the nature of his charm: ‘to exercise *alogos aisthēsis* by extended practice and unreflected feelings over a long period’ (ibid. χρόνῳ πολλῶ καὶ μακρῶ τριβῇ καὶ ἀλόγῳ πάθει τὴν ἄλογον συνασκειν αἴσθησιν). According to Dionysius, this kind of practice is valuable and indeed essential for achieving a full appreciation of the artwork, because charm is the most important and characteristic virtue of Lysias’ writings and, at the same time, one we have access to only through *alogos aisthēsis* (11.6).

Dionysius’ treatment of *alogos aisthēsis* constitutes perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of his criticism, but in the following I would like to focus on a very specific aspect of *alogos aisthēsis*, namely the way it is used by Dionysius to bring together two important groups that evaluate works of art, the expert (κρίτης or τεχνίτης) and the so-called layman (ιδιώτης), who are regularly treated in critical and political discourse as standing in opposition to one another. Dionysius’ provocation as laid out in the passages above—and it is something that he emphasizes on several occasions—is that when it comes to the essential features of art (broadly construed) an ιδιώτης is on an equal footing with the expert. This is quite a surprising statement and, as such, says much about Dionysius’ view about (successful) artistic production more generally. But what exactly does this mean, and how might such a view have resonated in the intellectual context of Augustan Rome? Dionysius’ decision to single out and empower this particular group, the *idiōtai*, seems particularly curious in light of the fact that the wholly pejorative term ‘idiot’ had taken hold of Roman intellectuals already a while before as a result of translating the Greek term into Latin.¹²

II

All three concepts—*technitēs*, *kritēs* and *idiōtēs*—have an important place in Dionysius’ literary criticism, but how exactly should we interpret the inner workings of this triad? Let us start with what seems to be the least problematic of the three, the so-called expert, the τεχνίτης. The standard passage for its meaning is *Comp.* 11.44, where Dionysius discusses asymmetry in the production and reception of artworks: recognizing (and criticizing) a good work of art is a much broader ability than the specific skill that enables the artist to produce it.

καίτοι γ’ εἴ τις κελεύσειε τὸν ιδιώτην τούτων τι ὧν ἐνεκάλει τοῖς τεχνίταις ὡς ἡμαρτημένων, αὐτὸν ποιῆσαι λαβόντα τὰ ὄργανα, οὐκ ἂν δύναίτο. τί δὴ ποτε; ὅτι τοῦτο μὲν ἐπιστήμης ἐστίν, ἧς οὐ πάντες μετεilhραμεν, ἐκεῖνο δὲ πάθος ὃ πᾶσιν ἀπέδωκεν ἡ φύσις.

And yet if anyone told the unskilled listener to take up the instrument himself and play any of the passages whose performance by professionals he was calling out for mistakes, he would be

¹² e.g. Lucil. fr. 649 M., which suggests that the Romans were already acquainted with the Greek ιδιώτης as a pejorative term. Cic. *Verr.* 2.4.4 also supports this transition; Cicero is undermining Verres’ claims to connoisseurship by arguing that an ordinary person (*idiota*) can appreciate it as much as he can. Hence, while the term is pejorative (which was presumably Verres’ point in using it), Cicero is reclaiming it critically. S.K. Dickson, *Cicero’s Verrine Oration II.4: With Notes and Vocabulary* (Detroit, 1992), 91 translates *idiota* as ‘culturally ignorant person’, and comes thus close to an account of the ιδιώτης that Dionysius will later develop more fully in his critical essays: cf. Cic. *Pis.* 62 and 65, *Sest.* 110; Gell. 1.2.6. The Christian authors seem to add another dimension and positive spin to the concept, as does Dostoevsky much later in his novel.

unable to do so. Why ever is this? Because the latter is a matter of knowledge, which we do not all share, while the former is a matter of feeling, which nature has conferred upon everyone.

The professional, the artist, is here understood as a *technitês*, who has a specific kind of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) that is essential for *producing* art, whereas the ability to experience and evaluate the quality of this art is available to everyone.¹³ Here and elsewhere in Dionysius, the figure opposite to the artist or technical craftsman is in fact the *ιδιώτης*.¹⁴

Occasionally, the artist (*technitês*) and the critic (*kritês*) are treated as interchangeable concepts, so that the one who creates the art will also be in a very good position to evaluate its success.¹⁵ In his essay *On Lysias*, for example, Dionysius calls Lysias a most acute *kritês* (19.3):

καὶ γὰρ τοῦ εἰκότος ἄριστος ὁ ἀνὴρ εἰκαστῆς καὶ τοῦ παραδείγματος, πῆ τε ὅμοιον εἶναι πέφυκε καὶ πῆ διαφέρον, ἀκριβέστατος κριτῆς τὰ τε σημεῖα διελεῖν τὰ παρεπόμενα τοῖς πράγμασι καὶ εἰς τεκμηρίων δόξαν ἀγαγεῖν δυνατώτατος.

For the man is excellent at representing the case from probability and from examples, with things that are naturally similar and different; he is the most accurate judge at distinguishing the evidence which actions leave behind them, and most capable in elevating it to the status of positive proof.

Similarly in another passage of the same essay, where Lysias is described as a *kritikos* (15.5):

κριτικός ὢν δεῖ λέγειν καὶ ὅτε μὴ πᾶσιν ἐξῆν χρῆσθαι τοῖς εὐρεθεῖσι, τῶν κρατίστων δὲ καὶ κυριωτάτων ἐκλεκτικός, εἰ μὴ καὶ μάλιστα τῶν ἄλλων ῥητόρων, οὐδενός γε ἥττον.

For he is a good judge of what ought to be said; and when it has not been possible to make use of all the arguments that he has discovered, he is equal, if not superior to other orators in his ability to select the most cogent and the most important.

In these last two passages, Dionysius suggests that the roles of the artist (be that of the poet, rhetorician, historian, musician, etc.) and the critic overlap or, rather, that the skill required to produce an artwork is somehow closely connected to passing a judgement about particular (technical) aspects of the craft.

While it may be a rather straightforward claim for contemporary readers that artists also count as experts who are good at evaluating their art, our sources before Dionysius often suggest an opposition between the judges and the artists (at least when tracing the use of the specific terminology of *idiotês* and *kritês*). Plato's *Ion* makes it explicit that the artist is not always, or by default, the best judge of their art.¹⁶ And Aristotle defines the κριτής explicitly in the context of public decision-making processes, reserving another term (θεωρός) for epideictic/literary performances (that is, for the domain

¹³ See also *De Isaeo* 4.13 τεχνιτεῦσαι in the same sense of 'artistically creating'.

¹⁴ Cf. *Thuc.* 4.12 and 27.19, *Lys.* 10.22.

¹⁵ It is possible that this group would also include the 'teacher', given that the critical essays have a very didactic undercurrent, that Dionysius was actively involved in education and that ancient literary criticism as a 'genre' was closely related to instruction rather than scholarship. Cf. Hunter (n. 7), 47.

¹⁶ The term used in that dialogue is, in fact, κριτής (*Ion* 532b6). As an opposite to rhapsodes, actors and poets, Socrates sets up himself as ιδιώτης ἄνθρωπος (532e1) and calls attention to his questioning as θέασαι ὡς φαῦλον καὶ ιδιωτικόν ἐστί καὶ παντὸς ἀνδρὸς γνῶναι ὁ ἔλεγον. Plato also makes it clear that the layman (or a member of the *hoi polloi*) is not a competent judge. Cf. A. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton, 2002), 285.

that we would now associate specifically with the ‘critic’).¹⁷ Despite the increasingly technical nature of criticism from the Hellenistic period onwards, where the term *kritikos* starts to be appropriated to refer to scholars we would now associate with ‘critics’,¹⁸ it seems that the concept was still somewhat broad to allow Dionysius to handle the term in a rather flexible way.¹⁹ In fact, even an *ιδιώτης* can be a legitimate critic, as we see from the passage quoted above from *On Lysias* (10.3) as well as from Dionysius’ rather passionate discussion in *On Thucydides* (4):

οὐ γὰρ εἰ τῇ δυνάμει λειπόμεθα Θουκυδίδου τε καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀνδρῶν, καὶ τὸ θεωρητικὸν αὐτῶν ἀπολωλέκαμεν. [...] ἐὼ γὰρ λέγειν, ὅτι πολλῶν ἔργων οὐχ ἦτων τοῦ τεχνίτου κριτῆς ὁ ἰδιώτης, τῶν τε δι’ αἰσθήσεως ἀλόγου καὶ τοῖς πάθεσι καταλαμβανομένων, καὶ ὅτι πᾶσα τέχνη τούτων στοχάζεται τῶν κριτηρίων καὶ ἀπὸ τούτων λαμβάνει τὴν ἀρχήν.

The fact that I fall short of Thucydides and other authors in ability does not mean that I have lost the right to reflect on their work. [...] For it suffices to say that the layman is no less competent a judge of many things than the expert—those things which are apprehended through *alogos aisthēsis* and by the feelings—and that all art forms aim at these faculties and it is from them that they take their beginning.

Dionysius makes here a distinction between the different domains that the expert (*technitēs*) and the *idiōtēs* can access: in the domain of feelings and *alogos aisthēsis*, the expert and the *idiōtēs* are equally legitimate critics, because their judgement depends on their human capacities.²⁰ We may presume that the expert critic is better able to explain other elements of the works, though it is left unspecified what exactly those other elements might be. Either way, Dionysius clearly draws attention to the fact that while a *technitēs* can be a critic (an obvious assumption), so can also the *idiōtēs* (less obviously). In other words, a legitimate critic can be anybody who is confronted

¹⁷ *Rh.* 1358b3 and 1358b7. He comes back to this and explicitly discusses the proper terminology in 2.18.1 (1391b15–19). The typical κριτής is hence conceived of as a ‘simple person’ (ἀπλοῦς, 1357a11) who will not be able to follow a full syllogistical demonstration, and generally judges about their own things (περὶ οἰκείου κρίνει, 1354b29). In a few other passages, however, Aristotle also employs κριτής as an equivalent to ‘expert’ or ‘interpreter’ (e.g. *Div. somn.* 464b7).

¹⁸ Ford (n. 16), 272–3; Hunter (n. 7).

¹⁹ Dionysius’ frequent appeals to adjacent fields strengthen the interpretation that he is carving out a practice for the critic through references to fields that he can expect his readers to be more familiar with (i.e. art or music criticism). Cf. Hunter (n. 7), 47–8.

²⁰ Dionysius’ language here may suggest that he is thinking of two separate processes: the *alogos aisthēsis* as the faculty for perceiving sounds, and the *pathos* as the means by which a decision is reached. In other words, it is the *pathos* that will be judged, not the sensation. Dionysius is clearly tapping into a contemporary and very controversial polemic about *aisthēsis*: is sensation wholly irrational or does it have, somehow, a logical component? The Epicureans were adamant that *aisthēsis* is by default *alogos*, whereas the Stoics thought that it had a rational component. I am grateful to David Blank for highlighting this interpretative possibility and have greatly benefited from his discussion in ‘Do you hear what I hear? Philodemus on Diogenes of Babylon’s “scientific perception”’, *CErc* (forthcoming). A quick look at other passages in Dionysius (e.g. *Lys.* 10 above) indicates that he does not strictly distinguish between *aisthēsis* and *pathos*, so that this distinction, even if made here, is not necessarily something that Dionysius is committed to throughout. From Dionysius’ argument here and elsewhere we see that he is sympathetic towards the Epicurean position, i.e. he is emphasizing the explicitly ‘irrational’ kind of *aisthēsis* and wants to divorce it from any kind of rational judgement-making tool. On the other hand, the fact that he deems it necessary to discuss *alogos aisthēsis* (and not simply *aisthēsis*) suggests that he is willing to consider the possibility of *aisthēsis* also having a rational component (it is just that in this context he is not focussing on it), which thus indicates Stoic sympathies. We do not have enough information to count him fully as a member of either camp and, indeed, it seems very plausible that Dionysius—as an eclectic—is situating himself consciously somewhere in-between, to take the best from each.

with an artwork and passes a judgement, and hence this is a role that both the expert and the layman can assume. Furthermore, Dionysius adds that it is the more ‘basic’ perception, the one that is accessible to everyone, *that gives rise to art itself*. In other words, the specific tools of the expert—whatever these are—are only secondary in importance when it comes to assessing art, and it is the commonly shared *alogos aisthēsis* that enables us all to understand and participate in the more fundamental aesthetic experiences. In fact, in many passages Dionysius suggests that what distinguishes the ‘speech expert’ from the rest is not, as one could assume, a more rigorous technical/theoretical instruction, but rather the fact that they have ‘a lot of experience with speeches’ (μεγάλας ἔχουσι τριβάς περὶ λόγους).²¹ The expert, in other words, is simply someone who has read a lot of speeches.

This treatment seems to be in some tension with a passage from *On Thucydides* (27.4), which has become the standard point of reference for Dionysius’ views on aesthetic evaluation, and it is here where the *technitai* and the *idiōtai* each seem to have their own ways of aesthetic assessment:

... τεκμαιρόμενος, ὅτι πᾶσα ψυχὴ τοῦτω τῷ γένει τῆς λέξεως ἄγεται, καὶ οὔτε τὸ ἄλογον τῆς διανοίας κριτήριον, ᾧ πεφύκαμεν ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι τῶν ἡδέων ἢ ἀνιαρῶν, ἀλλοτριούται πρὸς αὐτὸ οὔτε τὸ λογικόν, ἐφ’ οὗ διαγιγνώσκειται τὸ ἐν ἐκάστη τέχνῃ καλόν· οὐδ’ ἂν ἔχοιεν οὔθ’ οἱ μὴ πάνυ λόγων ἔμπειροι πολιτικῶν εἰπεῖν, ἐφ’ ὅτω δυσχεραίνουσιν ὀνόματι ἢ σχήματι, οὔθ’ οἱ πάνυ περιττοὶ καὶ τῆς τῶν πολλῶν ὑπερορῶντες ἀμαθίας μέμψασθαι τὴν κατασκευὴν ταύτης τῆς λέξεως, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ τῶν πολλῶν καὶ <τὸ> τῶν ὀλίγων τὴν αὐτὴν ὑπόληψιν ἔξει· ὁ μὲν γὰρ πολὺς ἐκεῖνος ἰδιώτης οὐ δυσχερανεῖ τὸ φορτικόν τῆς λέξεως καὶ σκολιόν καὶ δυσπαρακολούθητον· ὁ δὲ σπάνιος καὶ οὐδ’ ἐκ τῆς ἐπιτυχούσης ἀγωγῆς γιγνόμενος τεχνίτης οὐ μέμψεται τὸ ἀγεννὲς καὶ χαμαιτυπὲς καὶ ἀκατάσκευον. ἀλλὰ συνῶδον ἔσται τὸ τε λογικόν καὶ τὸ ἄλογον κριτήριον, ὅν ἂν ἀμφοτέρων ἀξιοῦμεν ἅπαντα κρίνεσθαι κατὰ τὰς τέχνας.

... judging from the fact that this kind of style appeals to all minds alike, since it offends neither our irrational criterion for understanding, which is our natural instrument for distinguishing the pleasant from the distasteful, nor the logical criterion, which enables us to recognize beauty in individual art. Nobody, even the most inexperienced student of political oratory, could find a single objectionable word or figure of speech, nor could the most expert critic with the utmost contempt for the ignorance of the masses find fault with the style of this passage: the taste of the many and that of the few will yield the same judgement, for surely those laymen, and there are many of them, will find nothing base, crooked or obscure to offend them, while the rare expert with his specialized training will find nothing ill-bred, humble or uncultivated. But the logical and the irrational criterion will combine in one voice; and these are the two faculties with which we properly judge all works of art.

This is a very rich passage and it may well be that the problem of the ‘criterion’ is outlined here in a rather specific manner when compared to Dionysius’ other discussions.²² The expert (τεχνίτης) is defined as someone who has recourse to the logical criteria and training (*agōgē*), the *idiōtēs* is defined explicitly through a lack of this kind of training

²¹ Dionysius must be here in polemical conversation with Plato’s famous definition of rhetoric as simply a knack in *Gr.* 463b4. Debates around this passage are recorded, for example, in Quint. *Inst.* 2.23–7. Dionysius seems to be fundamentally motivated by the idea that no technical or philosophical instruction on speech making (e.g. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*) can be sufficient for expertise in the field. This is extensively argued in his *First Letter to Ammaeus* with the examples of Demosthenes and Aristotle.

²² There seems to be a lacuna just after this section, which may have originally elaborated further on Dionysius’ interpretation of the *criterion*, a major preoccupation in Hellenistic philosophy, of which Dionysius was surely well aware.

and expertise. The latter will have to rely wholly on *alogos aisthêsis* when passing judgement about an artwork, whereas the former will judge, in as far as he is an expert, with the so-called logical criterion that will have been built up through training. It is unclear whether the expert (*qua* human being) can have direct access to their *alogos aisthêsis* (does training in the art of criticism numb some of our natural instincts?) in a way that is similar to what is available to the *idiôtês*. We might assume that this is the case, thus further strengthening the position of the ‘true’ critic. Indeed, in this particular essay, which is more targeted towards a specialist critical audience, the implication seems to be that the view of the expert should be given more weight, if only because he has a more varied set of tools to use for his critical assessment. But, nevertheless, Dionysius’ discussion makes it clear that the opinion of the *idiôtês* counts too.

Strategically, and despite the views he expressed about the potential proximity of the *technitês* and the *idiôtês*, Dionysius makes full use of the perceived opposition between the two groups. Now, even though he does not, unfortunately, explicitly define the term *idiôtês*, looking at the contexts where this concept is used (law courts, musical performances) we get a sense that what he might *not* have in mind, in fact, is the complete *ignoramus* in the field, a random layman,²³ but rather someone with some kind of prior exposure to the art, though not skilled enough to practice the art himself (for example, in the context of politics, someone who is not unfamiliar with political speeches, but is never writing/delivering them himself; in music, someone who (regularly) attends musical performances, etc.). Matters are complicated by the fact that occasionally Dionysius seems to count himself and his readers among the *idiôtai* (for example *De Comp.* 11.44 or *Thuc.* 4, both quoted above), though more frequently he refers to the *idiôtês* as an ‘ordinary man’, someone with less (ambition for) education than those who have picked up his critical work.²⁴ Indeed, Dionysius’ occasional gestures towards his audience make it clear that he is not addressing a group of *idiôtai*, though we should bear in mind that Dionysius’ work may not be uniform in that respect.²⁵ In the *Lysias*, for example, he refers to his readers as ‘those who know’ (πρὸς εἰδότας, 10.1),²⁶ suggesting that the readers will be familiar with at least some of the basic information about the author.²⁷ Now, while the opposition

²³ The only exception I notice is *Dem.* 15.2–3, where *idiôtai* comes close to ‘idiots’ in informal, everyday English (Usher translates the passage as ‘simpleton’). Perhaps this is more important than meets the eye, because it indicates Dionysius’ awareness of the full range of meanings for *idiôtai*, especially its fully negative undertones.

²⁴ E.g. *Lys.* 3.3, 4.2; *Dem.* 2.1; *Thuc.* 54.6; *Comp.* 26.43.

²⁵ C.C. de Jonge, *Between Grammar and Rhetoric: Dionysius of Halicarnassus on Language, Linguistics and Literature* (Leiden and Boston, 2008), 23–5: Dionysius’ critical essays have a pedagogical purpose, thus seem to be aimed not at the expert, but rather at the cultivated or advanced student. His essay on *Thucydides*, however, seems to be explicitly written for an expert reader: τῶν ἄλλων φιλολόγων τῶν ἐντετυομένων τῇ γραφῇ (25). See also C.E. Schultze, ‘Dionysius of Halicarnassus and his audience’, in I.S. Moxon, J.D. Smart and A.J. Woodman (edd.), *Past Perspectives: Studies in Greek and Roman Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 1986), 121–41; C.E. Schultze, ‘Authority, originality and competence in the *Roman Archaeology* of Dionysius of Halicarnassus’, *Histos* 4 (2000), 6–49; N. Luraghi, ‘Dionysios von Halikarnassos zwischen Griechen und Römern’, in U. Eigler, U. Gotter, N. Luraghi and U. Walter (edd.), *Formen römischer Geschichtsschreibung von den Anfängen bis Livius. Gattungen – Autoren – Kontexte* (Darmstadt, 2003), 268–86.

²⁶ Cf. *Dem.* 46 οὐ γὰρ δὴ γε τοῖς ἀπειροῖς τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τάδε γράφο.

²⁷ Different levels of expertise are discussed in *Lys.* 8, where Dionysius distinguishes between *idiôtai*, *philologoi* (experts of other domains) and *technitês*. All three agree that Lysias was persuasive, but while the first two attribute his success to simply speaking in ordinary ways, without art, the latter detects the highly constructed nature of Lysias’ style.

between *idiôtai* and *technitai* remains a very productive category for his criticism, and is frequently assumed.²⁸ Dionysius makes an important point throughout his essays that anyone aiming to be a successful practitioner of the art (of speech) must take the opinions of the *idiôtai* into consideration. Why should that be the case and why are the *idiôtai* so important for Dionysius?

III

Dionysius might be motivated to conceive of his critical practice as an encompassing *technê* that includes both the expert and the layman for two main reasons. First, there is the classicizing argument: Dionysius is committed to reviving or weaving into his critical methodology references to the classical past.²⁹ Since artwork in ancient Athens would have been judged in most cases by the general lay public,³⁰ and indeed we speak of ‘aesthetic judgement’ (*krisis*) first in the context of ancient drama competitions, Dionysius’ emphasis on the impact of the artwork on the common person may be interpreted as his adherence to the paradigm of classical Athens. Furthermore, Dionysius’ ‘democratic’ tendency to open up the aesthetic judgement to a wider audience might also be an attempt to showcase the influence of the *kritikoi*,³¹ a group of Hellenistic critics who are discussed (and antagonized) at length by Philodemus and whose ideas had probably received a negative response from Augustan intellectuals.³² Either way, Dionysius’ view of (literary) criticism as available to everyone carves out a broader space for criticism, and this should probably be read in the context of his emphatic arguments about the arrival of a new era (*Ant. Or. praef.* 1.1 πολλήν χάριν ... τῷ καθ’ ἡμᾶς χρόνῳ, 3.1 τῶσαυτή μεταβολή and 3.3 τηλικαύτη μεταβολή) that offers fresh and more appropriate tools for self-expression, education and culture.³³

Second, though related to the previous point, Dionysius was indeed primarily concerned with that kind of aesthetic judgement that was made in public places, mostly of course speech performances, but he is clearly drawing on parallel aesthetic practices in sculpture, music and fine arts. On all those occasions, the artwork is created to receive a public judgement on its success or failure. When Dionysius claims that under the new leadership (both political and cultural) ‘the sensible section of the population has increased its power and the foolish have been compelled to behave rationally’ (*Ant. Or. praef.* 3.1 ὑφ’ ὧν κοσμούμενον τό τε φρόνιμον τῆς πόλεως μέρος ἔτι μᾶλλον ἐπιδέδωκεν καὶ τὸ ἀνόητον ἠνάγκασται νοῦν ἔχειν), he seems also to

²⁸ Cf. *Lys.* 3.8 ὁμοίως δὲ τοῖς ιδιώταις διαλέγεσθαι δοκῶν πλεῖστον ὅσον ιδιώτου διαφέρει καὶ ἔστι ποιητῆς κράτιστος λόγων, where Lysias may appear to be one of the *idiôtai*, but turns out to be ποιητῆς κράτιστος. Lysias’ clientele also typically includes ‘νέον καὶ ιδιώτην καὶ ἀπαράγμονα’ (*De Isaeo* 11.1), so the orator’s art seems to appeal particularly well to that group.

²⁹ On Dionysius’ classicism, see N. Wiater, *The Ideology of Classicism: Language, History, and Identity in Dionysius of Halicarnassus* (Berlin and New York, 2011).

³⁰ Cf. Ford (n. 16), 272–93.

³¹ See Porter (n. 9) on the *kritikoi* as offering a serious opposition to the idealistic (and elitist) approach to aesthetics.

³² On Dionysius’ engagement with the *kritikoi*, see further De Jonge (n. 25), 37–41 and the ‘Introduction’ in R. Hunter and C.C. de Jonge (edd.), *Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Augustan Rome* (Cambridge, 2018), especially 22–6.

³³ See also T. Hidber, *Das klassizistische Manifest des Dionys von Halikarnass. Die Praefatio zu De oratoribus veteribus. Einleitung, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1996).

imply that by giving the *idiôtai* more exposure and training in their sense of taste the social cohesion of the community will be significantly improved.³⁴ Furthermore, there seems to be a useful side-effect to this outward-reaching programme. It may be, in fact, that the natural sense/ability of the *idiôtai* to discern a successful piece of art will be a useful wake-up call for the ever-specialized literary critics, who have become slightly too obsessed with their literary ‘darlings’, thus unable to exercise fully their critical acumen.³⁵ In other words, your regular *idiôtês* might actually function as a reliable safeguard for a more objective critical practice.

Dionysius’ inclusion of the ἰδιώτης as a legitimate participant in the process of aesthetic evaluation might also resonate particularly strongly in Rome, a city which by that time had secured her reputation as an exciting hub of innovative linguistic, rhetorical and political thought.³⁶ It may well have been that opening up new avenues for literary critical thought amidst the new political realities of Rome was perceived as a particularly good move. Given that (rhetorical and literary) criticism had always been closely tied up with ethical and educational questions, rather than strict excellence in a specific skill or theoretical knowledge of the field,³⁷ Dionysius may have ventured to add a more political spin to his discussion. In that reading, his emphasis on the importance of the judgement of the *idiôtai* at a time when explicit political speech was no longer possible by the ‘professionals’, at least not in the same way that the Romans were used to until 27 B.C.E., suggests other ways for cultivating and expressing political involvement.³⁸ Hence when attempting to find an attractive and (perhaps even) novel angle to his critical scholarship and teaching in his contemporary Rome, it may have indeed made sense for Dionysius to ‘advertise’ his art (of criticism) as something accessible to everyone, as an arena where the political ‘amateur’ or *idiôtês* counts as much as the sparse expert (emperor).³⁹

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³⁴ The idea that cultural leadership was essential for political leadership seems to be suggested also in Roman literature of the time: e.g. E. Dench, *Romulus’ Asylum: Roman Identities from the Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian* (Oxford, 2005), 26 with reference to Verg. *Aen.* 6.851–3.

³⁵ E.g. *Thuc.* 34.3–5, *Dem.* 23.6. Hunter (n. 7), pp. 48–50 on Dionysius’ reaction to his contemporaries who are too hung up on their ‘darlings’ Plato and Thucydides and cannot take any form of criticism.

³⁶ De Jonge (n. 25), pp. 25–34; Hunter (n. 7) on the various streams of criticism that come together in Dionysius’ critical output. In a forthcoming article on Philodemus and Diogenes of Babylon, D. Blank situates Dionysius carefully in this complex environment and rightly suggests that we take his works seriously as competent reflections of the ongoing philosophical debates about the role of the senses in the reception of art and music.

³⁷ D.A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (London, 1981), 11.

³⁸ See more in J. Connolly, *The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, 2007), ch. 6. I thank Bryant Kirkland, Lydia Spielberg and Francesca Martelli for jointly drawing my attention to this possibility.

³⁹ Cf. I. Peirano, ‘Hellenized Romans and barbarized Greeks. Reading the end of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae*’, *JRS* 100 (2010), 32–53 on the impending possibility of moral decline that pervades Dionysius’ otherwise praising account of Rome’s conquest of the world, which may have been an important motivation for Dionysius’ histories. If this is the case, I suspect that a similar concern pervaded his critical works, and here Dionysius may have the ‘classical’ example of Isocrates as his model; cf. L. Viidebaum, ‘On coming after Socrates’, in M. Fantuzzi, H. Morales, T. Whitmarsh (edd.), *Reception in the Greco-Roman World: Literary Studies in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, 2021), 121–44.