

## PARRY, PROPP AND LITERARY STUDIES\*

It is of course an old rather outworn truism that Homer's epics are the beginning of European literature, and also one of its highest peaks. While the first part of this statement has never been seriously called in question (in spite of the recent discovery of some oriental influences in his poems), the second part of it suffered a heavy blow during the epoch of rationalism when a number of distinguished experts pronounced serious criticism of the poems pointing out many strange features displayed by them in metrics, composition, choice of words, etc. Such observations prompted some of them to adopt a sceptical attitude towards the otherwise generally accepted view of Homer's poetic preeminence. And several more radical critics even inferred a rather nihilistic conclusion: since they deemed it unbelievable and impossible that a poet enjoying such fame as Homer did would commit so many mistakes in products of his art, they denied not only his authorship of the Iliad and the Odyssey, but also the very reality of his historical existence. As is well known, though already in antiquity there appeared now and then some critical, opinions of Homer, before the age of rationalism nobody ever questioned the basic soundness of the ancient, admittedly half-legendary, view of the blind bard from Chios. Farthest in their scepticism went a small group of heretics in Alexandria in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B. C. who suggested separate authorship of the epics, but their voice was quickly by the great authority of Aristarchus and other famous philologists of that time. Nevertheless, it is a noteworthy fact that even Aristarchus was puzzled by some peculiarities of Homeric poetry: narrative inconsistencies, apparently unmotivated repetitions, inappropriate use of epitheta, etc., and that he felt obliged to search for a rational explanation for them. Similar embarrassment was showed by some other ancient sources too: the author of the justly celebrated treatise „On the Sublime“, for

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example, tried to explain the differences in style between the Iliad and the Odyssey with the hypothesis that the poet composed the former work in the full bloom of his creative forces and the latter one in his more advanced years, when „one may liken Homer to the setting sun: the grandeur remains without the intensity“.<sup>1</sup> But ancient people as a whole never ceased thinking of Homer as the Master of poetic art and the historic author not only of the Iliad and the Odyssey but also of a number of smaller epics and some satiric poems, all of which are lost to us save for a few scanty relicts. It was only in modern times that the controversy over the Homeric Question burst out with all its vigour.

As mentioned earlier, in the latter part of the 17th and in the 18th century several scholars, thinkers and interested amateurs expressed their doubts of the correctness of the ancient tradition on Homer. Their suspicions were of various degrees, reaching from reservations regarding the traditional attribution of both epics to the same poet to a firm refusal to accept the historical reality of Homer's person. The strongest arguments in support of such theses were put forward by the French priest abbé d'Aubignac, the Holland humanist Voorbroek, the Italian philosopher Vico and the English diplomat and traveller Wood. To these illustrious and well known names there could be added the name of the Ragusean Ignjat Đurđević,, who wrote on the same topic at the turn of the century and produced a quite fantastic idea that the Homeric epics had been composed by the „notorious swindler Pythagoras“.<sup>2</sup>

The arguments of these critics were gathered, critically reappraised and presented to the academic circles and to the general public in a more systematic form and with great force by the German scholar F. A. Wolf in his famous „Prolegomena ad Homerum“, published in 1795. With this work, remarkable not so much for the freshness of its ideas — Wolf compiled them for most part from the writings of his predecessors — but for its enormous influence, the discussion on the Homeric problem was put on a new basis. The year of publication of Wolf's „Prolegomena“ is therefore with good reason regarded as the date of birth of the Homeric Question, but it is also the date of birth of scientific philology: Wolf was the first Professor of Philology at a University.

<sup>1</sup> Fyfe's translation („Longinus“, *On the Sublime*, in Loeb Classical Library № 199, rev. ed. London/Cambridge, Mass, 1932, repr. 1935).

<sup>2</sup> See Đ. Körbler, *Ignjat Đorđić prethodnik Wolfov u Homerovu pitanju* (Ignjat Đorđić, Wolf's predecessor in the Homeric Question), Rad JAZU №. 186, Zagreb 1911, pp. 1—34.

In his book Wolf argued that

1) the single parts of Homeric poems had been composed without the aid of writing because the alphabet must have been unknown to the Greeks in the year 950 B.C., the supposed year of composition;

2) about the year 550 B. C. a commission appointed by Peisistratos gathered, rearranged and put into writing the scattered lays on the War of Troy and on the Return of Odysseus;

3) the coherence of the parts of the epics is due partly to the coherence of the original myth and partly to the work of the commission, but not to a uniform poetic conception inherent in the epics;

4) the original lays had not been all composed by the same poet, although Wolf admitted that probably the majority of them had actually been Homer's work.

Wolf's theses made a very strong impact and became the starting point of a long, stubborn and violent debate among scholars who split into two sharply opposed parties: the Analysts, who proceeded along path pointed by Wolf and worked out a number of theories explaining how in their opinions the epics came into existence, and the Unitarians, who tried to save Homer from the attacks of his detractors and operated predominantly with aesthetic arguments.

In the writings of the partisans of the two branches of Homeric criticism one sometimes finds feelings of animosity towards the „sinners against light“ of the other party and no infrequently also expressions not to be expected in scholarly discussions: „Es gibt Bücher über Homerisches,“ wrote Wilamowitz, „die ich ungelesen beiseite gelegt habe. Ihren Verfassern rate ich dringend, es mit dem meinen zu machen,“<sup>3</sup> or in another book of the same author: „Bücher, die mich doch nichts von bedeutung lehren können, zu lesen, fühle ich weder verpflichtung noch neigung.“<sup>4</sup>

It had taken a whole century of futile disputes and lost efforts before it was realized that neither the analytic nor the unitarian point of view, or method of interpretation, could solve the Homeric enigma: it became gradually evident that the results obtained by different practitioners of the ill-famed analytic „Schichtenanalyse“ were contradicting each other, and, on the other hand, it had to be admitted that the Homeric text does present obvious difficulties to an impartial reader and that the procedure of minimizing or

<sup>3</sup> Die Heimkehr des Odysseus, Berlin 1927, p. VI.

<sup>4</sup> Homerische Untersuchungen, Berlin 1884, p. 4.

even ignoring them altogether, practiced by the Unitarians, was not a sound solution either.

In the first decades of the present century the whole controversy underwent a thorough transformation owing to the work on Homeric linguistics performed by K. Witte<sup>5</sup>, K. Meister<sup>6</sup>, P. Chantraine<sup>7</sup> and several other scholars, but the actual turning-point was marked by the revolutionary and penetrating ideas of Milman Parry. His deeply insightful suggestion that the Homeric poems must be regarded and studied as a final product of a long and ancient tradition of oral poetry or, to put it in his own terms, of oral verse-making, gave a new basis for discussion and offered a better solution for some of the most difficult problems of Homeric criticism. Parry saw clearly that the technique of oral poets and the conditions of their singing, in the first place improvisation *ex tempore* with the help of a store of set phrases, formulae, themes and action patterns, were the determining cause of all unusual distinctive traits displayed by the Homeric style. Trying to verify his conclusions in the thirties he travelled twice through Yugoslavia where he learned (probably from M. Murko) about the oral tradition which was still alive. The results of the field-work he did there confirmed the basic soundness of his theory.

Because of the prevalence of Crocean aestheticism of those days generally, the theory did not receive due attention at that time. Then Parry's premature and most unfortunate death prevented its further elaboration and the Second World War made all field-work impossible. But after the War a considerable progress was made along the lines indicated by Parry thanks to the intensive and fruitful efforts of many distinguished Homerists: Lord, Notopoulos, Bowra, Kirk, Combellack, Hainsworth, Hoekstra, Edwards, Nagler, and others. Gradually the theory was accepted by the whole scholarly community and there appeared a number of excellent works, inspired by Parry's ideas and dealing with different aspects of the poems.

Lately, Parry's methodology was applied to the study of other epic and non-epic traditions: Professor Lord analysed three medieval poems, the Anglo-Saxon „Beowulf“. the Old-French „Chanson de Roland“ and the Greek „Digenis Akritis“;<sup>8</sup> James Notopoulos used it in his work on modern

<sup>5</sup> s. v. *Homeros: Sprache* in Pauly — Wissowa, RE VIII, coll. 2213ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Die homerische Kunstsprache*, Leipzig 1921, repr. Darmstadt 1966.

<sup>7</sup> *Grammaire homérique*, I—II, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Paris 1953.

<sup>8</sup> *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, Mass. 1960.

Greek folk poetry,<sup>9</sup> and other scholars studied the traces of oral origin in the Bible,<sup>10</sup> in Ancxo-Saxon narrative poetry,<sup>11</sup> in Middle-English alliterative poetry,<sup>12</sup> in medieval French and Spanish epics and ballads,<sup>13</sup> etc.

But the results of Parry's work reach beyond the limited interests of the classicists and comparatists and offer solutions for an age-old dilemma of literary studies. This aspect of the theory of oral poetry, as yet not sufficiently appreciated in the opinion of the present writer, may prove to be the most significant contribution of Homeric studies to literary scholarship since the days when Wolf's „Prolegomena“ provided a basis for the establishment of philology as a humanistic discipline.

For more than a hundred years many literary scholars have been trying eagerly and devotedly to organize the somewhat chaotic literary studies into a true science of literature founded on the same epistemological principles as are those which underly natural sciences. The results and achievements of such a science should be objective, verifiable, and should not depend on the subjective attitude of the scholar, and in this century a further requirement has been added, namely, that they should be measurable and expressible in numerical terms. It must be admitted however that all these efforts have proved unsuccessful. Apart from some marginal fields. such as textual criticism (for which already

<sup>9</sup> *Homer and Cretan Heroic Poetry: A Study in Comparative Oral Poetry*, AJP 73 (1952), pp. 225—250; *Homer as an Oral Poet in the Light of Modern Greek Oral Poetry*, Yearbook of the American Philological Society for 1953, Philadelphia 1954, pp. 249—253, etc.

<sup>10</sup> W. Whallon, *Old Testament Poetry and Homeric Epic*, CL 18 (1966), pp. 113—131; *Formula, Character and Context: Studies in Homeric, Old English and Old Testament Poetry*, Cambridge, Mass., 1969; R. C. Culley, *Oral Formulaic Language in the Biblical Psalms*, Toronto 1967.

<sup>11</sup> F. P. Magoun, Jr., *The Oral Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry*, Speculum 28 (1953), pp. 446—467, also in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. by L. Nicholson, Notre Dame 1963, pp. 189—221, and in *The Beowulf Poet*, ed. by D. K. Fry, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1968, pp. 83—113.

<sup>12</sup> R. A. Waldron, *Oral-Formulaic Technique and Middle English Alliterative Poetry*, Speculum 32 (1957), pp. 792—804.

<sup>13</sup> T. Fotitch, *The Chanson de Geste in the Light of Recent Investigation of Balkan Epic Poetry*, in: *Linguistic and Literary Studies in Honor of Helmut A. Hatzfeld*, Washington 1964, pp. 149—162; A. D. Deyermund, *The Singer of Tales and Medieval Spanish Epic*, Bulletin of Hispanic Studies 42 (1965), pp. 1—8; R. House-Weber, *Formulaic Diction in the Spanish Ballad*, University of California Publications in Modern Philology 34, №. 2 (1951), pp. 175—277. See further K. Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*, Oxford 1968. Useful information can be found in *A Bibliography of Studies relating to Parry's and Lord's Oral Theory* by E. R. Hymes, Cambridge, Mass., 1973, although there are lacking some important items in it (e. g., no mention is made of the writings of Rm Menéndes-Pidal).

Karl Lachmann established a rather complete and satisfactory methodology) and metrics (greatly improved by the Russian formal school and the Czech structuralists), literary studies in the more narrow sense have risen to the dignity of a proper science and have in fact remained what the American linguist Joshua Whatmough maliciously called „an exchange of private opinions“. There was only one exception to that total failure.

In the same year in which Parry's two French *thèses* were published, there appeared at the other end of Europe a structural analysis of the Russian folktales by the young Russian scholar Vladimir Propp.<sup>14</sup> There were some interesting similarities in the fate of this work and that of Parry.

Propp's structuralist procedure met with a hostile reception in the Soviet Union and the book remained practically unknown to the rest of the world. Only after an English translation was published in the United States in 1958,<sup>15</sup> and after a decade later a new edition of the original, prepared by Meletinski, appeared in Russia in a changed political climate,<sup>16</sup> Propp's approach to the study of Russian folktales began to exercise a strong influence on various departments of anthropology, structural semantics, and literary

Although Meletinski, in the excellent afterword to his edition of the „Morphology of the Folktale“, argued that Propp had never been a member of the formal school, there is no doubt that he had been well acquainted with its ideas. His method of elucidating various plot patterns and of reducing them to a number of recurrent invariable types is in fact well in accord with the basic axioms of the formalists. On the other hand, though it is quite improbable that Parry was aware of Propp's book, and his acquaintance with the views of the representatives of the formal method, if not impossible, is hard to prove, it is interesting to note that he continually talks of oral verse-making, emphasizing the technical aspect of singing, in the same manner as the formalists insisted that the literature is „manufactured“ similarly to all other products of human crafts.<sup>17</sup> However, the most plausible explanation of this remarkable coincidence is that both Propp and Parry participated in an emerging reaction

<sup>14</sup> V. Ja. Propp, *Morfologija skazki* (Voprosy poetiky, XII), Leningrad 1928.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*: International Journal of American Linguistics 24:4 (1958, 2nd rev. edition Austin, Texas, 1968).

<sup>16</sup> *Morfologija skazki*, ed. by E. M. Meletinskij, Moskva 1968.

<sup>17</sup> See for example: B. Eichenbaum, *Kak sdelana „Sinel“ Gogolja*, in *Poetika*, Petrograd 1919; V. Šklovskij, *Tehnika pisatel'skogo remesla*, Moskva/Leningrad 1927.

against the intuitionist theories of literary creation prevailing in the first decades of this century.

Another interesting point is the attitude of Propp and Parry towards the tendency of trying to explain literary works predominantly in terms of their genesis. This tendency, part of the so called literary positivism, was in the first decades of this century the generally accepted method of literary studies. Propp's critique of it is explicitly stated in his notion that „synchrony must precede diachrony“, which means that a synchronic description of a folktale is a *conditio sine qua non* for all further research work and speculation on its origin. Therefore, he undertook to give a structural analysis of Russian folktales and as a result obtained their invariable elements and plot patterns. His procedure is applicable to every kind of narrative literature.

Parry, on the other hand, often insisted that a historical approach is indispensable in the study of oral epic poetry as well as of other literary monuments from ancient past. But although he never neglected the diachrony, his efforts were actually aimed at giving a taxonomic description of the style and devices of oral epic singers. In his work he used a method that could be best defined as historical-comparative.

In the earlier years of his life Parry concentrated on the study of some other epic poets, in the first place on the epic formulae. The discovery, made in his two French dissertations, that in oral singing every singer uses systems of set phrases, characterized by a considerable thrift and length (Parry's terms), was perhaps the most significant single contribution to the Homeric studies and „Higher Criticism“ in this century, especially because it was established in a most objective and scientific manner. It would be idle to go into details of that part of Parry's work which is now widely known and whose validity has been proved by a number of scholars who have applied the same procedure in their study of various other epic traditions. As we have been told by some eye-witnesses to Parry's work (Lord, Adam Parry) — and there are certain indications for it in his later papers — in the latter part of his prematurely ended life Parry's interest was turning more and more from the formulae and problems of poetic language to the larger narrative units recurrent in oral poetry, such as feasts, arming, sacrifices, etc. Death prevented him from developing his ideas and from elaborating a theory of them similar to his theory of oral poetic language. Albert B. Lord and some other scholars have

done good work along these lines,<sup>18</sup> although it must be admitted that their writings often suffer from excessive preoccupation with the myth underlying the story. Perhaps a procedure similar to that of Propp would render better results. In fact, M. N. Nagler, in his book on „Spontaneity and Tradition“,<sup>19</sup> undertook something like a structuralist analysis of the Homeric epics, but the above criticism applies to a certain degree also to him. It is interesting to note that in his valuable review of Propp's book<sup>20</sup>) Claude Lévi-Strauss objects that Propp neglected the mythical content of the folktale and that an attempt to establish a morphology without its semantics is a failure, an objection that loses sight of the essential difference between the folktale and the myth.

Although some inconsistencies in the development of the story do appear now and then in written literature too, they are more conspicuous in Homer. These peculiarities, which actually induced Wolf and many other sensible scholars to deny a single author of the epics and to postulate multiple authorship, consist in apparently unnecessary repetitions of considerable portions of the story or of entire episodes, in illogical behaviour of the participants in the actions described in the epics, in apparent „forgetting“ of some important details of the previous course of the narrative from which arise obvious contradictions, etc. Professor Lord, who defined the theme as a complex of actions or events that are regularly used in telling of stories, has established that there exists a „tension of essences“ resulting from the fact that the poet respects the tradition and sings each single theme in the fixed form taken over from his teachers and predecessors. For those who are well acquainted with this convention of oral poetry, having witnessed to it in their own countries, such seeming defects are not very puzzling and Sir Maurice Bowra's book on heroic poetry abounds in good examples from various epic traditions.<sup>21</sup> A characteristic one from a Yugoslav epic lay will illustrate the point.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> W. Arend, *Die typischen Szenen bei Homer*, Berlin 1933; J. I. Armstrong, *The Arming Motif in the Iliad*, AJP 79 (1958), pp. 337—354; B. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad*, Hermes Einzelschriften Heft 21, Wiesbaden 1968; H. Patzer, *Dichterische Kunst und poetisches Handwerk im homerischen Epos*, Wiesbaden 1972; M. N. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition; A Study in the Oral Art of Homer*, Berkeley etc. 1974.

<sup>19</sup> See the preceding note.

<sup>20</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'analyse morphologique des contes russes*, International Journal of Slavic Linguistics 3, 1960, pp. 122—147.

<sup>21</sup> C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, London 1952, especially chapter VIII „Some Peculiarities of Composition“, p. 299ff.

<sup>22</sup> A communication by Professor Svetozar Petrović, of the University of Novi Sad.



In that lay we are told that the hero sits in his castle drinking red wine, when suddenly his wife runs into the room crying that the Turks have broken into the cellar. The hero springs up, seizes his arms, mounts his horse, dashes out of the castle to the plain in front of it, and after a short and violent fight kills the Turks. Now a sophisticated reader would protest immediately: how could the fight have taken place in the plain, when we had been told a moment earlier that the Turks were in the cellar? Such an objection would amaze both the singer and his public: of course there cannot be a fight in a cellar, it must be in a plain! The contradiction between the previous episode and the subsequent one would escape them, and even if it should not, it is unimportant. In an authentic epic milieu nobody worries: the poet does not care and the public does not mind. The principal tenet is that each theme be sung in its proper way, canonized by the long tradition of oral story-telling, whose claims must be respected.

The oral poetry theory has taught us that we commit a grave mistake in measuring all literary works of art by the critical standards and criteria made on and for the written literature only. The history of Homeric criticism has shown what fatal consequences can result from the application of inappropriate principles of criticism. Resulting from a misunderstanding of the formal conventions of oral poetry it led the critics to searching for an explanation of what seemed to them as strange and odd features or even mistakes of the poet in elaborate theories of the genesis of the Homeric epics.

Parry's work has completely changed our perspective, but in the days of the appearance of his writings it received little attention and still less recognition. Apart from Martin P. Nilsson, who grasped the implications of Parry's theory and dedicated to it a considerable part of the chapter on Homer's language and style in his book „Homer and Mycenae“,<sup>23</sup> the only sympathetic reviewer was Pierre Chantraine who wrote in the „Revue de Philologie“ in 1929 that Parry's discovery of formulaic systems „renouvelle la philologie homérique“. Actually, it did even more.

Parry's study of a single oral epic tradition, that of ancient Greece, made possible the formulation of laws valid for, and applicable to, the study of any oral tradition. The possibility of inferring such laws is, as we know, the litmus-test for the existence of a proper science. And here we are very near to the constitution of a true science of literature comparable in methods and results to natural sciences, to

<sup>23</sup> *Homer and Mycenae*, London 1933 (repr. New York 1968), pp. 179—184.

psychology or to modern sociology. Parry's analyses of the use of epic epitheta or of enjambement in Homer and in later Greek and Latin epic poets are paradigms of a truly scientific approach to literature.

But Parry, and more so some of his disciples, did not quite realize an important point, namely basic identity of written and oral literature. It has often been argued that the two differ *toto caelo* from each other. Such a position is untenable and therefore the positive achievements of the oral theory school should not be limited to the rather narrow field of Homeric criticism, but should stretch their influence to all branches of literary studies. The refreshment, of which Chantraine spoke, applies especially to the methodological problems of literary studies: combined with the structuralist procedure of Propp at the level of plot,<sup>24</sup> Parry's methods of analyzing the elements of poetic language of oral singers furnish an excellent basis for the foundation of a true literary science. That science would have to abstain from aesthetic judgments. Such matters will probably forever be reserved to the literary critic in the strict, „continental“ sense. But this does not mean that the problems dealt with by this new science would be unimportant. They would comprise the study of the genesis of literature, its growth and decline, the manner in which it functions, literary conventions, genres, literary taste (sociology of literature), the problem of literary influences, etc.

Such methods would make a useful tool for the treatment of some aspects of Homeric epics, not sufficiently taken into consideration by the Higher Criticism up to now. As has been once well remarked, it is high time we stopped asking what is wrong with the oral bards and started instead giving more attention to what is all right with them. In other words, Homer and all other oral singers should be criticized and interpreted in the same way as all other poets who wrote their works. Parry made it possible for us to try to elucidate Homer's personal achievement, his individuality, the personal marks of his poetic genius. That would be nucleus of a new approach to the study of oral heroic poetry. The first steps have already been made in two recent books, Harald Patzer's „Dichterische Kunst und poetisches Handwerk im homerischen Epos“ and M. N. Nagler's „Spontaneity and Tradition“.<sup>25</sup> They helped us to realize that an oral bard is not a slave of his Tradition, but, to use a recent dictum, its Master. Such works can contribute substantially

<sup>24</sup> See also Alsace Yen's paper *On Vladimir Propp and Albert B. Lord: Their Theoretical Differences*, in *Journal of American Folklore* 86 (1973), pp. 161—166.

<sup>25</sup> See n. 18.

to our deeper understanding of the art of each oral singer *qua* artist by throwing new light on his creative devices and by offering a useful instrument for interpretation. Far from being a Darwin of Homeric studies,<sup>26</sup> Parry actually created a possibility for a new, objective and exact study of literary communication and transmission of literary messages in general.

There are people who seem to feel uneasy at the idea that Homer's masterpieces be compared with, and set on the same footing as, the products of some anonymous Balkan poetasters.<sup>27</sup> But there could hardly be any quarrel about Homer's poetic preeminence, least of all with Milman Parry who was inspired in his work precisely by his admiration for the beauty of Homer's poetry, as we can now see in his previously unpublished Master's thesis.<sup>28</sup> Were it not for the charm of Homer's epics, we would never have got Parry's analysis of the technique of oral bards. So once more Homer proved to be true to his renown as a teacher of mankind.

Zagreb.

Z. Dukat.

<sup>26</sup> H. T. Wade-Gery, *The Poet of the Iliad*, Cambridge 1952.

<sup>27</sup> G. Germain dans *Revue des Etudes Grecques* 74 (1961), p. 475: „... ne faut-il pas admettre qu'il existe entre Homère et ces chanteurs populaires une différence qui n'est pas seulement de degré, mais de nature?" See further Ch. R. Beye, *The Iliad, the Odyssey and the Epic Tradition*, Garden City, N. Y., 1966; A. Parry, *Have We Homer's Iliad?*, YClS 20 (1966), pp. 177—216; A. Amory, *Homer as Artist*, CQ 31 (1971), pp. 1—15; F. Dirlmeier, *Das serbokroatische Heldenlied und Homer*, Heidelberg 1971. In a more cautious way some reserves have been expressed also by G. S. Kirk, *Homer and Modern Oral Poetry: Some Confusions*, CQ 10 (1960), pp. 271—281, also in: *The Language and Background of Homer*, Cambridge 1965.

<sup>28</sup> *The Making of Homeric Verse; The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. by A. Parry, Oxford 1971, pp. 421—436.