

## ***THE DIVINE COMEDY*** ***DANTE ON TIME AND ETERNITY***

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Dante's *Divina Comedia* represents the Augustinian synthesis of *eros* and *agape*.<sup>1</sup> The poet's own personal experience of love is at its centre. The poem describes the universe as the stage of a drama whose theme is the connexion between time and eternity. Its red line is the idea of *contrapasso* ("divine retribution in the right measure") as an expression of the justice of God: God's Judgment *is* the exposure of our temporal deeds to the Light of Eternity.

Dante is often mentioned together with Homer and Shakespeare; and rightly so. In his *Divine Comedy* is infolded not only the variegated life of a whole epoch, but the very urge of the entire Middle Ages. Its poetry is a kind of metaphysical architecture which in its solemn grandeur has been likened to the gothic cathedrals of the time.

For a modern reader the key to Dante's cathedral is found in the *motto* of the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen: *A poet's vocation is to pass judgment upon himself\**

Dante's poem is a true doomsday-book: over himself, over his contemporaries, and over Man in his relation to God. Ending happily it was given the name of *Comedy*. Interpreting the unknown 'beyond' by the images of what is already known and given, it is realistic and even modern. Visualizing the meaning of human life by evaluating the lives and deeds of man *sub luce aeternitatis*, it is both *epos*, *drama*, and *lyrics* - the ultimate contrast to an absurd theatre.

Dante carries a light which he does not intend to hide under a bushel:  
*Here begins the Comedy of Dante Alighieri - florentine by birth, but not by conduct!*<sup>2</sup>  
With such words he introduces his poem. He even insists that it should be read on a par with the Holy Scripture of the Bible! For this he gives guidance several places, see for instance *Inferno* (Canto 9,61):

*Oh, ye who have the gift of reason:*

*behold the teaching which is dimly hidden  
behind the veil spread out by my odd verses! \**

Rooted in the catholic tradition for Biblical exegesis, he follows the lead of St. Thomas Aquinas by reckoning four different layers of sense, or meaning, which will here be rendered liberally as follows:

- 1) the immediate, or literal, sense (*historical*)
- 2) the transferred, or pictorial, sense (*allegorical*)
- 3) the edifying, or educational, sense (*anagogical*)
- 4) the uplifting, or spiritual, sense (*mystical*)

Dante describes his work as an allegory. Since *allegoresis* is in general rejected by protestant theology and discarded by aesthetic theory, it seems pertinent to consider whether this lessens the dignity of the comedy as an item of genuine poetry. For my part I side with Kurt Leonhard (*Der gegenwärtige Dante*, 1966):

*An allegory is a pictorial presentation that unfolds itself with the aim of depicting a definite and clear-cut concept. It speaks only to the reason and is emptied as soon as we have grasped the concept. A symbol, by contrast, is a form having its own inner life ... If a true poet were to create an allegory, it would change under his hands to become a symbol. \**

Taken in the outward sense, the Comedy presents a journey of our poet, made in the holy year of Jubilee 1300, through Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso. In the inward sense, it is an account of our poet's way to conversion and faith. Further, it is a moral guide for every Christian on her/his pilgrimage to God. Finally, the Comedy may be interpreted as a token of Divine Providence and its temporal Act of eternal Grace aiming at the salvation of Man.

Formally, Dante's Comedy is composed according to very strict aesthetic rules. It contains 100 songs (*canti*), the first one serving the purpose of introduction, and is divided into three parts corresponding to the three "realms of the beyond". Each part comprises 33 songs, on the average containing  $12 \times 12$  lines each. The verses are *terzini*, strophes of 3 lines each, where the second line in each strophe contains a rhyme of the first and third lines of the following.

The contents of this cosmic poem appear at first sight as a peculiar blend of fact and fiction, a *mixtum compositum* of myth, history, poetic phantasy, and autobiography. The frame of the poem is the myth of Lucifer. In the Old Testament, Jes.14.12, we hear of the king of Babel who was like the bright shining morning-star but, for the sake of his haughtiness was thrown down from heaven into the abyss. Dante, in agreement with an already wide-spread tradition, interprets this myth as a metaphysical drama which takes place at the cosmic stage encompassing the entire world of creation.

Lucifer, from the very dawn of creation, was one of the most dignified angels and a member of the heavenly choir; but aspiring to be the foremost among angels, he revolted against God, his own Creator. As a rebel against the law of heaven, he came to be regarded as the root of everything evil in this world; indeed, he came to be seen as the personification of the very principle of evil. Only on the background of this exceedingly strange myth can we hope to understand the urgent need, felt by medieval believers, for the Divine Act of Salvation.

The myth of Lucifer further determines the entire topology of the Comedy. When the evil one was cast out from the gates of heaven, it happened so fast that his wings were set ablaze by his fall. The Earth, who beheld this awful creature approaching, was so terrified that her belly opened itself like a funnel having its entrance right beneath the hill called Golgatha, or "place of skulls"; and the impact of the fall, by which Satan (his real name) was wedged into the center of this globe, was so violent that a mountain arose as its antipode. But, during all that turmoil, the heavenly circuits remained undisturbed.

The world-picture of the Comedy, of course, which Dante inherited from Aristotle and Ptolemy, is *geocentric*. Galileo, the famous physicist, later wrote a small treatise concerning the geography of Hell; but, in my opinion, his literal interpretation of the words of Dante is wholly off the track. Dante is perfectly conscious of the deep chasm that separates fact from fiction. Nevertheless, he obviously regards his poem as being both dream and reality. How can that be? This is one of the questions we must answer.

At the beginning of his pilgrimage, the poet finds himself in a forest, terrified by three ferocious beasts. His state is one of sensual confusion, and passions attack his mental health. He can spot the sunny peak of a distant alp, the mountain of purification, but his ascendance is impeded by the animals. The situation is dreamlike, and the figures act stily like dolls in a dolls theatre. Suddenly the shadow of the long departed Roman poet Vergil appears next to him, "hoarse like one who did not speak for long". Dante wouldn't listen until now.

Vergil personalizes the wisdom which Dante so frivolously has forgotten. Three heavenly women have perceived his distress and have decided to help him. Beatrice, the early deceased love of his youth, therefore left her place in heaven and visited the limbo of hell in order to persuade Vergil to rescue their friend, his admirer and, as a heavenly tool, guide him back to the path of righteousness. In spite of the fact that Vergil, as a pagan, is doomed for his lack of true faith, his noble and munificent nature is easily motivated to comply with their plea. Symbolizing unassisted reason, Vergil generously accepts to be the guide of Dante, albeit realizing that even the noblest of wisdom, if pagan, cannot be saved.

But to take the straight path to the peak of purification is impossible. Dante is so weak that he is unable to choose heaven unless he is confronted with the plagues of those doomed to hell. Hence Vergil tells him that his only option is to accompany him on a detour through the sites of eternal suffering. So they choose instead the broad way through the always wide open gates of hell. Its inscription is sinister: *All hope should be left outside!* Still worse is this: *Eternal love prepared me, and I shall stand forever!* Such words are incompatible with a human perception of love unless it be interpreted as implying that the possibility of separation from God by sinning was inevitable.

Inside the gates of hell they immediately run into the half-hearted. These people are the wretched who are neither let into heaven nor into hell; since they did not care to keep themselves alive they are not allowed to die either, so they stumble around without purpose just as they spent their time on earth. In retaliation for wasting their time with trifles they are harrowed by insects; or, rather, the insects that bite them are an eternal token of that mess of vain trifles which occupied them in their temporal existence.

This is the first example of just retaliation, but already sufficient to enlighten the principle of retribution according to right measure, *contrapasso*.

The point to be grasped is that the torments of hell are not sanctions from the outside laid upon the departed spirit by the supreme authority, God. The spirit judges itself, and its punishment is just because it is nothing but the very wickedness of its sin as this is exposed to the clear light of eternity. In this respect Dante is very realistic. Hell as the place of divine punishment is nothing but the decoding of a fact, viz. what sin has done to the life of man. According to this view it is not God who invented hell in order to punish man. That He could safely leave over to man and his wickedness.

Shortly later Vergil and Dante crosses Acheron, that is, the river of death, and the ferry of Charon lies heavily in the stream because Dante is onboard. Of all characters in the Comedy, Dante is the only one to be alive and, as a living human being, he carries his body with him, but that body is material. This is displayed in Inferno by his weight, and in Purgatory by his shadow - but in Paradise the traces of his earthly origin are no longer perceptible. The description of how the ferry takes him over, of how the dead gather at the shore like the fading leaves whirled away by an autumn storm, and of Charon, daemon of death, hitting the procrastinate with his oar, has a horrifying power.

Terror induces the doomed spirits to damn God and their parents, the day of their own birth, and their whole life on earth. But suddenly their terror is transformed into a burning desire: now they long for death and judgement! This illustrates another crucial point in Dante: every human being is allotted to partake in eternity in accordance with his or hers deepest desire. God has created Man as a free nature and gives to everyone after one's longing - this holds both for the saved in heaven and for the doomed of hell.

The first site Vergil and Dante arrives at is Elusion, abode of Vergil. As compared to the Christian Paradise that of paganism is placed in an abyss! Everything here is clean and nice, and the dead are missing nothing - except hope. Dante sights many great philosophers and poets and is greeted as their equal. But then the two rovers arrive at the first genuine place of torment; here the lecherous are punished by being chased around by a never ceasing whirlwind, the picture of their own barren passion and sensuality. In a famous scene we meet two lovers, Francesca and Paolo, who had the misfortune to be found and killed *in flagranti* by the woman's infuriated husband.

The gluttonous, lying almost dissolved in hellish rain, are passed over in silence, and likewise the avaricious and the prodigal who are carrying heavy burdens around in opposite directions are ignored. These circles, together with that of lechery, display all conceivable variations of the sin of impudency. The way down to the narrow circles of central hell is crossing the river Styx; they are taken over the stream by Phlegias who ignited the temple of Apollo and by this despicable act scorned its famous inscription: *Know thyself* ! On their way they pass by some mute beasts gurgling for fury and rage in the mud, showing that the lack of selfknowledge may lead to the loss of language.

Dante and Vergil are now confronted with the walls of central hell. The poet here depicts the repressed regions of mentality as an infernal stronghold. He thus forebodes the idea of the "unconscious", six centuries ahead of Freud!

The devils, the custodians of the castle, will not let them in and try to separate them; but, separated from reason, insanity threatens, and Dante may perish. He is now in desperate need of good counsel, but his heavenly guardians have sent good help already: an angel is on his way, hovering forward without touching the mud while trying with his hand to keep the evil odour away from his nose. With his wand he lightly touches the gate, and the gate is opened at once. Dante and Vergil enters - and the entire shocking scenery is changed in a sudden: First, a burning castle with wildly screaming devils and furies on its ruined parapet. Next, a silent wasteland with flaming graves as far as one can see.

The denial of God gives entrance to the inner strongholds of hell. The first figure to be observed by Dante is the arrogant *condottiere* Farinata. From then on the way opens further downwards to the crimes of violence: first murder, then suicide and, as the third, self-centered lascivious sodomy. The murderers, whose blood boiled over, are now boiled in their own blood. The suicides, who allowed themselves be overwhelmed by self-compassion, are transformed into a lifeless brushwood that, when wounded, pours out clotted blood with a hissing sound. Dante already knows the "knotty man".

On the brink of a precipice, usurers and skinflints are densely seated. Prompted by his guide Vergil, Dante utilizes a monk's girdle as an angler's line, and there is a catch at

once: a disgusting beast showing the face of an honest man but having the body of a serpent covered by gaudy scales and provided with the poisonous stingtail of a scorpion. This is Geryon, the picture of sly deceit, who is going to take them down into the deep. Here are basements filled with rats and snakes, and much else. The lick-spittles are covered with dung right up to their mouth. The office-vendors are knocked down into the ground and sit like stakes stuck into this earthly flesh. The circle is full of clerks.

Then follows one of the most absurd and grotesque scenes of the poem. Dante obtains an audience of pope Nicolas 3rd. The pope, who has given offices away for bribe (grease) and thus has trampled the sacrament (ointment), stands with his upper body half down in the ground while sprawling with his ignited soles (a parody on the flame of the holy ghost). Knowing that his successor Boniface 8th will meet the same fate as himself, he mistakes Dante for Boniface and is at first pleased by his arrival before time, but is immediately disappointed. Dante, who indeliberately disclosed the pope's secret, feels like a confessor to an unrepenting criminal sentenced to death.

In some other dungeons in hell Dante meets fortune tellers who has had their neck turned round to remind them that their view of truth was distorted, and hypocrites who must carry leaden mantles since, when alive, they had put too much weight on external matters! Here the symbolism is "substantial"! The tale of how the thieves in the snakepit by turn are changed into snakes and back to humans again offers such direct allusions to sexuality that the psychological insight appears to be almost Freudian.

The account of the devils with forks who roast their wretched victims in a boiling pool of pitch is apt to appear wildly grotesque - until one realizes that it is a sober description of what goes on among the officials of a corrupt state. That sowers of discord and agitators for war are punished by being exposed to all the terrors of warfare is not to be wondered. By contrast, it is surprising to hear that coiners and alchemists must suffer under all plagues and diseases of the world - until it is recalled that forgery was regarded as a sin against nature. Evidently, Dante has not eschewed dark humour in order to carry the principle of *contrapasso* through to its utmost consequences.

One of the strangest characters of hell is Ulysses, the ancient adventurer, placed in the dungeons of evil because of his treason with the wooden horse. A false counsellor, he has been changed into a self-consuming tongue of fire. But his real sin is an insatiable curiosity which led him to seduce his tanned crew to set out with him on an audacious voyage across the ocean bound for the antipodes where their ship was wrecked on the cliffs of "Mount Purgatory". Ulysses is an early foreboding of modern man, boundary-breaking in his aspirations. Dante makes him into a bogey, an omen of admonition against effrontery.

The descent into the deepest regions of hell betokens a last gigantic potensation of evilness: from the central abyss tower the bodies of the titans who rebelled against Zeus. On the order of Vergil they get help from Antæus, earthborn adversary of Hercules, who puts them down into the pit. Now all limits are transgressed and, at the very site where superman, moron, and beast become unified, Homeric cunning is transformed into Titanic stupidity as the poet's final explanation of treachery, the ultimate sin.

In this chasm the consuming fire has been superseded by perma-frost. All passion is dead and gone, merely a moronic calculating reason is left, but left is also the most horrifying awful of all scenes in this enthralling drama. Dante discovers two figures, downcast into the ice of the infernal river and unified in a dreadful embrace: they are count Ugolin and archbishop Ruggieri, the victim and his tormentor, amalgamated into a single sculpture: one body, one soul. They were bitter enemies; once the bishop trapped the count with his two sons and two grandsons, locked them up into his tower and - threw the key away! The count, who was the last to die, became a cannibal, and out of inextinguishable revengefulness he now gnaws the bishop's neck in all eternity!

The last great character of the Inferno is Lucifer himself, i.e., Satan. There is something comical about it that makes it difficult to take it seriously. As a furry triceps, encapsulated in the ice and flapping its batwings helplessly, it is a miserable plagiarism of the Holy Trinity, nothing but poor parody. In each of its gaps it masticates a hapless sinner: Brutus, Cassius, and Judas. Vergil and Dante creep around in his fur like tiny lice until they find his hip, which is locked in the very center of the Earth. Here they turn half around, although with great difficulty, and thus they are literally converted. Now they see Satan as he really is - nothing but the very fool of the Comedy!

Being converted they discover a cleft in the rock: this is the lacrymal duct through which all the tears of a penitent humanity flow down from the mountain of purification. Only by following the way of repentance can they find their way out of hell. -

From this exposition of human wickedness we come with our poet to Purgatorio, to whose description is devoted the second part of his poem. Purgatory, however, is not eternal in the same sense as is Inferno and Paradiso; its existence is only transitory, as it will become closed at the day of Judgment.

Vergil and Dante behold a beautiful dawn at the starry heaven at the moment they emerge from the womb of the Earth on the shore beneath the mountain of purification. The first figure they meet is a venerable old man, Cato Uticensis. But, strangely, Cato was both a pagan and a suicide, how can he be saved? The ways of God are inscrutable. He may damn just people like Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and Vergil, and he may save pagans like Cato, Trajan, and Rifeus. Cato is redeemed because he chose death for the sake of freedom, to avoid serfdom; he is here because his motive was love for freedom.

Now Venus (i.e., man's desire) stands in the sign of Piscis (Christianity). On the old man's chest four holy lights are sparkling; these are the pagan virtues: wisdom, courage and temperance, which are further united in justice. Cato crowns the pilgrims with rush for humility and sends them upwards. The plain land is waste, but clean. Suddenly they observe a boat approaching. It hovers over the sea and is driven forth by the wings of an angel of light. Immediately when it is landed a host of souls come out. Newly deceased, they are foreign to the country and behave like a flock of sheep without a shepherd. In spite of peace and no danger they do not know where to go.

Dante is greeted by a youthful chum who reminds him of old days. They flow away by reciting poems of love, but are chased by Cato who directs them from lyrical dizziness to ethical firmness, and so they struggle upwards. On their way they pass the excommunicated, the late repenting, and those who were not absolved by the church; all of these have to wait outside for long. The path is narrow and stony, the cliff is steep, and Dante groans for fatigue. In the meantime twilight is falling on, and they resolve to spend the night in a beautiful valley peopled by princes who did not fulfil their duty.

Every night the inhabitants are haunted by a serpent that comes to test the weak souls whereupon it is expelled by two angels with flaming swords. When daylight (grace) is missing, it is impossible to go a single step upwards, but, in return, the heaven is lit up by three bright stars: faith, hope and charity. So the ascent is dependent on the presence of sunshine. Only by grace is that unity of decision and capacity obtainable which will make good deeds possible. But without any action and deed the soul must wait until the day of Judgement. However, Dante receives unexpected help. At the early dawn he has a dream: a golden eagle strikes down to carry him up unto a narrow gate.

He stands in front of "the needle's eye". Ahead of him are three steps: that of confession, that of repentance, and that of penance. The door is heavy, and inside a narrow path leads towards the stars. An angel marks his forehead with seven P's (for *peccatum*, or sin); these are the signs of his serfdom. For every circle of his ascent the angel guardian of that circle will delete a P. First he must do penance for his arrogance, next for his covetousness. The proud, who walk along bent under heavy burdens, are roused on their pace of penance by the vision of warning pictures cut into the rock.

The sights from Dante's travel through hell are here put into relief. Inferno is thus transformed from mental energy to spiritual symbol, and this change from energy to symbol is essential for a correct interpretation. The envious have been cut off from the objects of their desire by having their eyelids sewn with iron thread; they therefore have to turn their gaze inwards whereby their inner discord between will and duty is clearly exposed to them. The right will must choose a path equally far from anger and blunt.

This leads our poet to ponder the relation between thought and will. The dignity of man consists in veracity of reason and freedom of will. By his fall, this resemblance to God was darkened and defiled. The sin of man was to follow his own craving and desire instead of following the will of God. The divine sanction, according to right measure, was that he was left on his own so as to become a slave of himself and his own momentary impulses. Purification, gained by repentance and penance, leads to recovery of freedom. According to Dante, we do not possess a free will - but we may regain it.

In three circles, avarice and prodigy, gluttony, and lust, are expiated. While the stingy and the wasteful are chained to the rock, the gorgers stretch in vain towards the fruits of a beautiful tree resembling the tree of knowledge. The fate of the gorgers is very significant; they are so starved that the orbits of their eyes together with their noses form the letters OMO, denoting: *man*. In this way the image of God is clarified. The lustful are cleansed by fire. Dante endures this last of trials by thinking of Beatrice. His will is now one and pure so he is free to follow his own impulses. This shows that he is ready, prepared to enter the earthly paradise. He has his light in himself and is no longer subject to any power or authority, so the mediation of the church is not needed - his relation to God is immediate! On leaving Dante, Vergil adorns him with the signs of his new dignity: imperial crown and papal mitra, making him a witness against external authority. By this act our catholic poet takes on an almost protestantic character!

In the earthly paradise Dante has recovered his innocence, his nature is now pure. What remains is the confrontation with Beatrice, the triumph of the church which ends up in a failure, and his spiritual baptism when bathing in the two rivers of paradise: first Lethe which induces to him forget all evilness, then Eunoë, fountain of happiness, the developer of good memories. The aim of the pilgrim is to win himself in his eternal authenticity.<sup>3</sup> On his walk through hell, Dante was everywhere burdened by his own weight; during his climbing of the mountain of purification he still showed a shadow. But the tears of repentance shed at the feet of his beloved one have released his soul, and under his ascension, passing through the spheres of heaven, he gradually becomes transparent to himself.<sup>3</sup> His ascension is ventured by her side, and the power to conquer gravity he finds by staring firmly into her beautiful eyes. Together they fly from circle to circle, ever higher, towards the light. Together they leave the world of time and space and enter the heavenly rose which is depicted as the reflection of Divine Light in the pearl of the globe. First the sight of God Himself - *visio dei* - can in the end satisfy his yearning. God gives to everyone in accordance with his yearning, and more we cannot get; but the crucial question is whether the goal to which we aspire is lofty enough.

In paradise all spirits are alike blissful, but not all shine equally fair. They all have a seat in the heavenly rose, but they appear in different places. The Sun, planet of light, shows an important line of separation in the poem; in the same vein it delineates the border between natural and revealed theology. The lower spheres bear stains of earthly imperfection. The Moon is the site where the weak appear to Dante. Mercury is the site of the busy who sought their own honour. At Venus the lovers appear, lush and joyful. At the Sun human reason and wisdom attain their highest perfection.

Knowledge of God is personified by the Dominican friar St. Thomas Aquinas who lauds St. Francis, and the Franciscan friar St. Bonaventura who lauds St. Domingo. The two mendicant orders, greyfriars and blackfriars, thus agree better in the heavens than upon the earth. Further, the two important intellectual streams of the Middle Ages, Aristotelianism and Platonism, are harmonized (the Franciscans were usually Platonists while the Dominicans were Aristotelians). But it is surprising that the zealous inquisitor St. Domingo seems to attain a higher place than the pious, gentle, lovable St. Francis.

By contrast, it is consequent that the crusaders are placed at Mars. Dante here encounters the progenitor of his lineage, his source, who predicts his destiny *ex eventu*. The heavenly eagle token of the Divine Justice that is not obtained by wishing, but by acting, is first met in Jupiter. The last planet is Saturn: from here a heavenly ladder leads directly up to God. Among the fixed stars Dante witnesses how the archangel Gabriel hails Mary. Then he is called aside by the apostles Peter, James, and John, who want to examine him in the three cardinal virtues: faith, hope, and charity.

The test is passed *summa cum laude*, and Peter is dancing for joy. Dante is allowed to proceed to *primum mobile*, the border of time and space, where Beatrice teaches him about the angelic choirs, their origin and nature. The true heaven, site of the blessed, is that of fire beyond the created world. Beatrice appears in flaming beauty in order to inspire Dante with new power. A river of fire is floating between banks covered with flowers of springtime. He bows to drink from the stream, which then takes the form of a white rose. Beatrice guides him into the midst of a huge crowd of white spirits who are assembled here, mentioning the names of the blessed.

The eyes of all are firmly fixed upon the eternal source of light, God. Dante is overwhelmed like a child by the strength and brightness of his vision. Turning towards Beatrice, he sees in her place an old man in white garment: this is Bernhard of Clairvaux who initiated the cult of Mary, mother of God. St. Bernhard tells that Beatrice has resumed her heavenly site and sent him to guide Dante the last few steps towards fulfilment of his innermost yearning. The face of Bernhard is like the icon depicted on the holy sweatcloth of St. Veronica; he asks Dante to fix his gaze firmly on the heavenly queen and Dante gives himself over to his final union with God (Canto 33,82):

*Oh source of grace who granted me the courage  
to look so steadfast on thy blaze eternal  
that all my power of vision was exhausted!*

*Within thy depths I clearly saw collected  
all leaves that in the universe are scattered  
bound up with love as in a single volume!*

One can say that the theme of Dante's Comedy is: *Time and Eternity*. The poem places the lives and deeds of human beings *sub luce aeternitatis* and describes the world as a great unity, the visible sign of the invisible. With Dante the entire *kósmos*, stage of the struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, is seen as one mighty symbol!

1. Cf. Anders Nygren: *Eros och Agape*, Stockholm 1966.
2. *Incipit Comedia Dantis Alagheri - fiorentini natione, non moribus!*
3. Cf. the Danish philosopher S. Kierkegaard: *Either - or!* (2. part)

The author wants to acknowledge his abiding debt to the sibylline Norwegian poet Ingeborg Refling Hagen (1895-1989) who first introduced him to Dante's immortal poem.