

THE SPAGYRIC ART

JOHAN TRITEMIUS, ABBOTT OF SPONHEIM

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translated from THEATRUM CHEMICUM by: Pat Tahil

Before the universal water of the abyss that is mentioned in Genesis was divided it was one. By this division alone, the one produced two, the first of all the numbers, not in essential substance, but by the chance of circumstance. It is a number and is quantified, yet it is not a number and is not quantified. It is not quantified because it is single in character, and it is quantified in so far as it is composed of chance happenings. However, it cannot so far be quantified because there is no number previous to it. His understanding of unity is that which Hermes declared in other words, and he explains it by a simile taken from Genesis. For it is supernal, he says, and the rest follow. For two is defined by Hermes as above and below. Trithemius says, If two is thrown away, then three will be converted to one. Hermes says the same in other words, For carrying out the miracles of the one thing. Here it must be particularly noted that unity is distinguished from either of two in two ways, because Hermes counted unity as above and below, as we have said, while Trithemius defined the first number as one. Later, for very different reasons, either of two defines unity, one by the reduction of above and below, like a miracle, two by the rejection of two and the (subsequent) conversion of three to one. It is truly wonderful that both agree. There is therefore a certain natural unity, divisible into, or rather, enumerable as, two, and three can be turned into the other unity, which is called the second unity, beyond which it is not proper to proceed.

As all the operations of nature within its limits consist of wonders, it descended from unity through the double to the triple, not, however, before the quadruple had arisen by a simple series of steps. For if you wish to count to four, you can only begin with one, and you say One, Two, Three,

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Four, which taken together make ten. This is the perfect consummation of all number, for then there is a return to one, and there is no simple number above ten. The ignorant will wonder at the profundity of this connection, which we use as the principle responsible for performing miracles, or whether we have the help of demons, or whether we are superstitiously relying on conjectures contrary to our Christian faith. We, however, judging these things for ourselves on account of the ignorance of those who preceded us, do not wonder. For as Holy Writ tells us that no one except him who has received it can understand the internal experience of God, so whether one is versed in these things, or whether one cannot make use of it unless by divine favour he has received a unique insight into understanding nature by nature, there will be fire in him besides the light, a wind with the fire, power with the wind, and with the power, knowledge and purity of mind; for this is the foundation of deep matters, and the root of all creation. The first division of nature produced the root of sound science, to which I make this note. There are four mothers for those in the latest order, and four fathers for those in the first, the binding of all these, and the first logical connection, the final elemental pure one-and-only, alone pervading all things. Earth is an element pure and simple, the first to proceed from the one, it is not compounded, it is not changed, it does not suffer combination, but remains as it is, incorruptible, and one consists of one, yet not one, it is not a number, yet it is a number, it is not quantified, and it is quantified, between one and itself there is no number. One remains unity, and by union it makes three; eight times by including this reduces all to one, by a marvel of nature; no teacher is able to explain its power over all.

It is not the same as the God whom we worship; it is an image created in the mind of man, neither alive nor dead that produces wonderful effects for all kinds of knowledge. And I tell you nothing but God's truth my friend, for whoever is uplifted by the sheer idea of this pure simplicity will be

perfect in all natural science, will perform wonderful works, and will discover remarkable results. The single one-and-only is good, and from it flow not only like things, but many dissimilar things. Compound earth is a natural element, pure, simple, and unique, but because it is compound it is necessarily varied, multiple, and impure, but can nevertheless can be reduced by fire to water, from this to fire and from this to homogeneous unity, and it is a number and is counted, and it is not a number and is not quantified. It is not quantified because it is of an uncompounded nature, and compound only by chance occurrence. Therefore it cannot be quantified because there is no number before it. A one that is not absolute but inclusive is counted after unity, and one says One exclusive, One inclusive, and one by means of one from the one, (that is, the soul of the world) and three is arrived at: this naturally wishes to be with the one: one powerful in itself, but impotent either as one or the other, always rolls into a ball: one remains as a fire, but not such as one can conceive of. If it is reduced to its elemental state by purification with fire and suitable washing, it can perform all the mysteries of profound knowledge.

The compound earth is an element and not an element, through which two is reduced to three and four, distinct from one by several steps. It contains wonders, it is manifold, and multiple, and corruptible, yet it does not stray outside the circle of unity: the mastery of all secrets is this, as well as (knowing how) three becomes one by the agency of two. And whatever wonderful human inventions exist, they are subject to its power, and can be effected by the complete operation. It respects number, degree and order, by means of which nature performs all its miracles. It is able to perform marvels, and more things than one can believe that require neither insult to God, nor a spotted soul. Through it wonderful works are done: through it is obtained full knowledge of all human inventions, and effective performance in secret matters, for its power, proceeding from

understanding, does not allow the worker to go astray for three stages. It discerns everything men say. A task begun with it cannot be led astray into error. Whatever astronomers, mathematicians, magicians, alchemists, those jealous investigators of nature, do, and whatever the worse kind of necromancers promise demons, it can discern, rectify, understand, discover, and, prepared by its beginnings, bring to completion without wickedness; it is an element, yet not an element, removed from itself by number, joined to itself by simply reducing to unity. Without knowing by numbers stages and degrees its middle, beginning and end, no magician can give power to his imaginings without wickedness, nor can he do so even if he performs unrighteousness: no alchemist can imitate nature, no man can bind spirits, nor can prophets foretell the future of the world, nor can any inquisitive person understand the reason for his experiments.

And so the workings of all nature existing within its limits consist of miracles; it descends from unity to the tertiary by way of the binary, not however, before it has risen from the quaternary to oneness by a series of steps, as was said above, etc. Natural knowledge, therefore, which sometimes consisted of pure simplicity, founded upon natural principles, was mixed with so many lies and impurities and so much deception, that there is no one unless he is extremely learned in both natural and supernal science who can distinguish the one from the other, or understand it. I myself have known (he says) so many men go astray in natural philosophy, however learned, of whom some by devoting themselves to alchemy lost time and money, some lose their life together with their goods, others, seeking to make a medicine by it, produce nothing after long labors, others, seeking wonderfully powerful secrets, can arrive at no result, others, eagerly desiring to foretell the future, speak lies instead of truth, others, carry empty notions in their heads, having recently read records that they do not understand; they ignorantly produce the good and the true, and the bad and the false. Accordingly, these three

principles of this natural, spagyric and occult philosophy, without perfect knowledge of which no worker can produce results, must first be known and declared.

The very beginning consists of one, through which, not from which, the power of the miracles of nature produces its effect, of which we said, "because the purity that comes from unity does not form a compound, nor does it change". There is a progression to it, the monad, from the ternary and the quaternary, in order to complete (the number) ten: from that there is a regression to the number one, as well as a descent to four, and an ascent to the monad. Ten can only be completed by itself: the one is gladly converted to the three. All those who do not know this beginning after the beginning with unity neither accomplish anything in the ternary, nor reach the sacred quaternary. For even if they have all the philosophers' books, and know the paths of the stars, their powers, their abilities, and their workings perfectly, and although they may understand their images, rings, signs and great secrets to the full, nevertheless they can produce no miraculous effects in their works without knowing this beginning from the beginning in the beginning. Therefore however many practitioners of natural philosophy there are, either they have achieved nothing, or have fallen into vanity, frivolity and superstition in desperation after long and useless endeavours. Indeed, this second beginning, separated from the first by degree, but not by superiority, because the coming into existence of one makes three, is that which works wonders by means of the binary. For there is unity and non-unity in one, it is uncompounded, yet compounded of four; when it is purified by fire into gold, pure water comes forth, and when it has returned to its pure state it will show the worker the accomplishment of secrets. This is the centre of natural wisdom, whose circumference is joined to itself; its vast arrangement recalls the circle to an infinite degree: its power when purified is above all, but when elementary is less than anything compounded beyond the fourth degree.

However, the Pythagorean number four supported by three, if it observes order and degree, when purified to absolute unity from the triple in the twofold can perform wonderful secrets of nature. This is the tetrad within which the two in the three combined with one make a whole that performs miracles. For three is a number reduced to one by the power of sight, it contains all in itself and can do what it likes.

The third beginning is not a beginning in itself, but between it and two is the boundary of all science and mystic art, and the undisputed center of the middle: it is the easiest place to make a mistake, for there are very few living in the world who understand its depths. It is variable and composite, and by means of seven it becomes eight times three and remains fixed. In itself it is the perfection of number, order, and degree, and by its means all philosophers and true investigators of the secrets of nature achieve wonderful results, by it reduced to the simple element in three ways wonderful cures of ill health and natural sicknesses are effected, and the work of the practitioner of natural and supernatural knowledge produces its results. Demons flee from the regular arrangement of four. Prediction of the future is verified by it, and in the nature of things secrets are penetrated by it alone. By this means alone is the secret of nature laid bare to the alchemists, without it no knowledge of the art is acquired, nor does the work reach any result. Believe me, he says, they err, they all err if they think they can do any work on the secrets of natural science without these three beginnings. It is however, a great source of error that the sages of yore who were possessed of the secrets of nature either said nothing about them or hid them so very obscurely that no one except their peers could understand them. The secret and heavenly philosophy of this arrangement is that if anyone really wishes to know and understand it, he must flee human turmoil, put the world aside, and contemplate the heavens not only with his eyes, but also with his mind; the spirit of God bloweth where it listeth and lightens whom it

will, and whomsoever it shadows with its power it leads to full knowledge of the truth. Let him who has received it give thanks to God, and be eager to repay the gifts he has received with the fruits of good works, and let him realise he has received them, and not find there any reason for pride. However, let him to whom it has not been given to know these sublimities either realise the weakness of his intellect, for his striving did not bring him knowledge, or praise the compassion of his creator who created obstacles to his knowing for his own good: and if he has not acquired this knowledge, let him say that he is not in debt to God for such a gift, and not complain. Thou art my friend, he says, to hear thy friend taking thought for thee, and thou knowest what thou hast done. Victor over thy neighbours tread down the fire of envy, not mortal aspirations, which is an insult to immortal God: levity brings danger. Flee the gatherings of men and worldly cares, bind thyself to heavenly meditation. Thy safety is in the swallow's nest, thy peril in hens' dung. Thou shalt follow a veil borne away on the wind, seven times shalt thou be wearied, but thou shalt rise again to unity by means of the three, and find thyself fortunate. If thou hast begun thy work with Sol, which in nature appears to set, so that thou shalt turn from all to God, the true Sun, with zeal for knowledge, thy mind purified from lower things, with desire in thy soul, in the fervor of sacred love, and he shall show thee another. For the art of divine love is long lasting, while time is short, and it is better for the creator to cherish truth rather than his creatures. These are Trithemius' words, showing others that he supported the Hermetic art.

It is true, as Hermes says, certain without a word of a lie, and most certain by acquaintance with unity. What is below is like that which is above, and the reverse, seeing that every number is made up of single ones, for performing the many miracles of the one substance. Does not everything flow from the single goodness of One, and whatever is united to one cannot be of a different nature, but gives fruit in

the simpleness of and by the adaptation of one. What is obtained from one, except three? Listen, One is simple, two is composite, three can be reduced to the simpleness of one. I am not Trithemius the triple-minded, but of one mind taking delight in the number three, and that indeed gives birth to a wonderful child.His father is the Sun, his mother the Moon.
The air carried the seed in its womb, the earth nourished it.
This is the father of all that is perfect in the world. His power would be uncorrupted and vast if indeed he existed on the earth. Thou shalt separate the earth from the fire, the thin from the thick and three, already gone back into itself with great skill and gentleness, shall rise from earth to heaven, and then, adorned with power and beauty, shall return to earth and shall receive strength from above and below and shall be powerful and glorious in the brightness of unity, ready to produce all numbers, and all darkness shall flee away. Three must therefore be reduced totally to one, if one's mind desires to reach a full understanding of these matters. For unity is not a number, but all numbers arise from it. As one withdraws from one, two is the first composite number. Two may therefore be rejected and three will be converted to the simpleness of one. All numbers consist of single units. Does not everything flow from the goodness of one, see above, and whatever is joined to one cannot be of a different nature but brings forth fruit in the simpleness of and by the adaptation of one? What is born of one, except three? Unity therefore is simple, two composite, three reduces to the simpleness of one. Unity is pure beginning. Leaving one behind, two is composite, because it is impossible for there to be two beginnings. Therefore three alone is sacred, powerful, and virtuous, and two, having been excelled, returns to its beginning, not naturally, but by affinity: in this the mind sees no contradiction, and understands very well all the mysteries of a series of secrets. This is the beautiful virtue of courage, that conquers all worldly things. It is very true that certain things are necessary for any man who wishes to

do useful work in the art, using natural wisdom.

Firstly it is necessary to have the right disposition for the art, not merely be inclined to it, or at least to have a master of the teachings at one's beck, because of the rectification of three into one by division by two. Secondly one ought to have sufficient command of language to prevent the common herd from understanding the great majesty of this science of natural wisdom. A knowledge of the fundamentals of astronomy is necessary, or at least one should have at hand someone who knows them. Thirdly, many books on this science are necessary, only those that have been most carefully corrected, such as are seldom found to-day, or someone at hand or ready to correct their mistakes, otherwise there is no profit. Fourthly a teacher learned and expert in this art is necessary, for the science is so wrapped up in mysteries that without a very skilled teacher one cannot understand, unless Almighty God wishes to illuminate the mind with extraordinary giftedness, which very seldom happens.

Fifthly, a knowledge of the division of the whole universe, superior and inferior from one into four, then its settling into three, is required. Likewise one ought to know the order of ascent and descent, degree, number, bending back and forth, existence and non-existence as one and as three; it is indeed very difficult to know this, for the whole origin of miraculous effects, by whatever means they are accomplished, whether by natural or supernatural wisdom, depends on this principle as a foundation; therefore all who understand this order and the means to acquire it, will be supreme in every science, and the depths of wisdom, and will achieve marvellous results for their labors. But since it is very difficult to know these things, there are very few who do useful work in the spagyric science and many who labor fruitlessly. Sixthly, one ought to learn a suitable mode of living, the order of the work, the hour of the day, the matter, and the ruler of the material, that is, its planet, the right place, form and material, and the mixing of

materials, pure or impure, simple or composite, and how to bind those things that are conjoined: and after all this [one should learn] the capacity of one's mind, its strength and its inherent power of goodness. Seventhly, one ought to know under the rulership of which planet, spirit of the hour and spirit of the season exists with its substance, casual properties, and effect that mundane substance through which they operate best. For things below are subject to things above and are assimilated to one by resembling each other: this one exists in its substance, inessential qualities, power, strength, number, degree, and properties because of the application of the one to the other, and when it has been established by the art useful work may be done by the miracles of natural wisdom.

Eighthly, it is necessary for the worker in this craft to know and understand all the properties of the intelligences, their degree, place or location, names or words, and their function or work, how they exist at the ends of the series, how they may be used for working on any universal purpose. Otherwise one must first know how they are perfected for certain, as meat is preserved with salt so that it does not putrefy. Ninthly, one must have companions for what one cannot achieve alone, whether they be naturally worthy, or made worthy by their office, for one's comrades' unworthiness impairs work in any operation, whether of natural or supernatural wisdom.

Tenthly, the worker ought to have a firm belief in this art, and consequently have no doubt or hesitation about its results, not because belief in any way helps to attain these, but because doubt discourages the resolve of the worker to go from the middle to the end, and weakens him, and unless he is steadfast he will not have the desired inspiration from on high. Eleventhly, anyone wishing to work profitably with natural wisdom ought to keep everything highly secret, and reveal to none either the assistance of other men, or the failings of the worker, or the work itself, or its meaning, or the art, or the right time, except to a teacher or

disciple: for this subject flees disclosure, and if divulged rarely yields perfect fruit.

This our philosophy is heavenly, not terrestrial, like that highest principle that we name God, so that by the mind's insight with faith and knowledge we may see the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one principle, one God, and believe truly in the one greatest good existing for ever in the persons of the Trinity, know, and for ever adore with reverend service and the most fervent love Him from whom come all things which can exist anywhere. Unless the inspired mind rises to this [level] it will understand nothing that is excellent, but will waste away in its ignorance. This ascent is not for the common person, nor is imitation of those who are carried up on one wing at most sufficient, but [it is for him who] is familiar with the few, namely those who with him return neither wrongly nor rashly to unity. Many try, but not all have the triple mind. When we look at the sky must we not first raise our heads, and draw them back after we have looked up? It is given to the eyes alone to see the sun, the ears do not see. Therefore, as the eye and the heart cause the soul to rise, not the ear, so unity is made by the triple participation of goodness in the beginning, for One is the all-powerful good, not Two or more. For unless One is made, no joining into its likeness can be made in the mind, nor can goodness take part, and there is no transcendence without these: for unless these come first, no one will be able to understand either the meaning of those things that are above, or how properly to employ those things that are below. Things universal as well as things particular are necessary, and [various] states of things, some of which are clear, some clearer, some extremely clear, and there are others that are obscure, more obscure, or most obscure, both to sense and to reason: in such diversity does nature operate. So it is that certain wiser men climb beyond the others. However, it is said of the wise man rather that he sees less of appearances. We are opening a way for the intelligence of these men. Accordingly, whoever aspires to

learn either natural or supernatural philosophy can prepare his way into either of the two through the other, nevertheless, he will proceed more safely if he reduces himself from two to three by means of the fourth degree before he attempts or presumes to do so in the natural world. Although he can indeed arrive conversely at the supernatural through the medium of the alchemical medicine, this other way is more faulty, nor is there any in which error is more likely, therefore I would persuade everyone to choose to go by the other way. Agree with this, excellent reader, and do not strain either your waiting soul or your ears in vain.

An Interpreter's clearer explanation.

Natural man is one and is not numbered, but supernaturally he is counted as two, as spirit and body, which form a duality in him. Now on account of the original corruption the latter overcomes the other, so that the spirit cannot produce anything wonderful. For that to happen in this life, the double must be overcome by the triple, that is, the body must conform to the nature of spirit, and the spirit be joined to the body, so that it finds peace in it in turn. When this is done, the triple, already in existence, rejoices in the perfect second unity; for by two previous commands one was united into three. Still, this conjunction should be made using the fourth degree, that is, by transmutation of the elements, of which the body is made, into a single highly purified element, in this way:-

First, a certain water is produced from the earth of your body, that is, your stony, earthy and sluggish heart becomes soft, and eager to know its God, and to reach Him: thus certain images and thoughts of the spirit can be impressed on it, like signs on wax. Afterwards, air is made from this water, that is, raise yourself upwards to heaven to Him who has created your humble and contrite heart. like air that always tends to rise, and entreat Him with prayers to open your mind to the understanding of those things that come

from God. Finally, fire is produced from this air, that is, your heart, already risen, turns its whole desire to love (to which fire is compared because of its heat) of God and your neighbour here on earth, so that its flame shall never be extinguished. In this way your two, namely spirit and body, are joined by affinity into a perfect three, using the three steps of the quadruple, as you have heard. Now, dear reader, you already have the key of the contemplative philosophy that opens the ascent to the heights, and none closes it against you. Of the way of descent that closes so that none can open it you shall hear in what follows. So you must again descend to the earth from the heaven to which you have ascended to receive the strengths of above and below. Behold how few are the things that alchemists both ancient and modern have tried to conceal under the wraps of so many and various riddles: I have tried to explain them to your free mind, and also to all students of things hidden by my meagre labors. Unwearied, I shall endeavor to expound to you many things that are closely connected with this philosophy, so long as you are watchful and attentive, which indeed is to your advantage. Hear more concerning the order of number and degree.

Number consists of order and measure. Nor can order exist without number and measure. Measure, however, consists of number and order. This unity-and-trinity does not allow of number, but, stripped of all plurality, consists of the first order in its own innate simple purity. This is the way to the gods, by which the ancient sages set out, guided by the light of understanding and reason, and learned much that is now considered beyond human knowledge by our own sages. Hear further: Study brings knowledge, knowledge gives birth to love, love to imitation, imitation to participation, participation to worth, worth to power, and power does miracles. This single way leads to the perfections of the adept's philosophy, both natural and supernatural, from which all that is supersitious, deceitful, and devilish is kept at a distance, and thrown into disorder. Since therefore, the goal of the contemplative science and science of the adept is

truth, and the goal of the practical alchemist is the work, we know as much as we can understand of the knowledge of God, who alone is truth: we understand in proportion to our labor. For the true and healthful knowledge of God gives birth to understanding, understanding to love, love to companionship, companionship to trust, trust to the obtaining of all that you have asked for. Knowledge surely precedes the pursuit of virtue, for no one can long for what he does not know of. Recognition of truth and love of the right prepare the surest way to happiness. However, as we have said, recognition comes before love, for indeed no one can love what is unknown to him. Therefore our Lord Jesus Christ said of his father in the Gospel, This is eternal life, that they shall know thee to be the one God whom I have sent, Jesus Christ. For what is the height of the more-than-heavenly delight of the blessed spirits but the knowledge and love of the divine majesty? For a healthy understanding of science has love attached to it, nor can the perceptive mind have a part in the eternal benefits, if understanding is without love, and love without understanding.

Certain evil demons understand, but since they have no love they cannot reach the fruit that is born of both and not of either singly. Certain heathens outside Christianity to-day, perhaps even many of them, seem to have love of the highest truth, but since they do not know the one true God of all, and our Lord Jesus Christ whom he sent, their thoughts are empty and they shall in no way attain the benefits of the highest good. Our Saviour Jesus Christ himself said in the Holy Gospel of those who having come to him in this world do not recognise him, He who does not believe is already judged, for truly knowledge comes from faith, and love from knowledge. Therefore he who lacks it will never have knowledge. Moreover, he who has no knowledge lacks love, and he who does not love will be balked of reward. For this is what our Lord Jesus himself revealed to his disciples as he was about to ascend into Heaven, Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is

baptized will be saved: he who does not believe will be condemned. So the way to God is first science or knowledge, through faith, without which no one shall be saved. All other sciences and studies must be referred to this true knowledge, because unless that is done, those wise men who distinguish their studies from those we have spoken of will be destroyed in vain and foolish labor. The true wisdom and knowledge that we have propounded greatly affect the knower with their goad, do not raise up [his spirits], do not allow him to be proud, but cause him to groan, according to the word of the wise man, He who adds to knowledge adds to sorrow, for in much learning there is much unworthiness. Therefore let us see that our studies are real ones, while we have the time. This is what he says. So that I can make clearer to you what I have explained to you concerning the ascent of the two to the triple by means of the four, observe:- The first step of the ascent upwards is striving for faith, for this disposes the heart of man to dissolve into water. The second step is the knowledge of God through faith, which disposes the contrite heart to ascend into the higher air, and the hope of a better life. The third step is love of God by knowledge through faith and hope, disposing the airy heart to love and charity and to the flaming fire of desire, through imitation of union with God. The fourth is constant company by which the love that has begun is continually refined through frequent meditation joined with prayer, cherished in growing faith, hope, and the love already conceived, and the heart turning to the heavens is almost united with them. The fifth step is familiarity which is acquired by constant dealings of this sort with the divine. The sixth is trust, by which we, made bold by the constant offering of faith, hope, and charity, dare to make our petitions personally to God, being certain that we shall obtain that which we desire from our Father. The seventh is getting those things we have asked for and desired in the name of Jesus Christ, by which we have the benefit of his glory, our salvation. finally we are prepared for all

mysteries, natural and supernatural, and as adepts of the philosophy created by God, are filled with all wisdom. It must certainly be noted that as our heart rises, leaving the vile, dirty and corruptible earth, in the first, second and third steps, so in the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh it descends into a renewed, incorruptible, solid and constant earth, strong to resist the assaults of any enemy, and never again separable from the unity in which it is joined. Altering his words a little, Trithemius previously divided this ladder into nine steps, that can be interpreted, as above, into either the philosophy of the adept or the alchemist; for both exist as parts of one and the same wisdom, Theory of the higher or supernatural knowledge, Practice of the lower natural wisdom. Since all knowledge of natural secrets depends upon knowledge of the supernatural, we shall interpret the said steps more easily and clearly by the contemplative philosophy, thus.