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THE NUMBER THREE, MYSTERIOUS, MYSTIC, MAGIC¹

BY EMORY B. LEASE

The student of the classics is early confronted with the number 3 and its occult meaning. Before he has finished the first book of Caesar (*B.G.* i. 53. 7) he encounters "thrice were the lots consulted," and a little later he finds in Vergil (*Aen.* i. 265) that Aeneas ruled 3 years, Ascanius 30, the Alban kings 300, all significant numbers with a significant total, 333. Advancing a little farther in his reading, he comes face to face with 333, 333½ brass pieces,² the cost of the games that were vowed to the gods in order to appease their anger (*Livy* xxii. 10. 7); and, turning to other countries, he finds that the Japanese had erected an image to the goddess Kwannon (in origin a Buddhist deity), an image decorated with 33,333 smaller images.³ These numbers are startling. But a far more marked determination to glorify the number 3 is shown by the church at Lambach, built in a triangular⁴ form, with 3 towers, 3 windows, 3 doors, 3 façades, 3 organs, 3 altars in marble of 3 different colors, 3 sacristies costing 333,333 florins, and dedicated to the Trinity.⁵ Obviously chance plays no part here. Manifestly the number 3 was not selected for its numerical value. To seek for the key that unlocks this mystery, as well as other similar ones, is the aim of the present inquiry.

Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas.

From time to time in the history of the world various numbers, chiefly those from 1 to 12, have been regarded as possessing a mystical significance, but there can be no doubt that in the extent, variety,

¹ Three important authorities are to be referred to: Usener, "Die Dreiheit," *Rhein. Mus.*, LVIII (1903), appropriately appearing in three parts (pp. 1-55; 161-208; 320-62); Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie* (1909), II, 3, pp. 530 f.; and Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1915), 12 vols. As early as 1618 a treatise appeared, "Petri Bungi," *Numerorum Mysteria*, of almost 100 pages.

² Cf. Lease, *Livy* (1914), notes to i. 1107; xxii. 356.

³ Cf. *Dict. of Non-Class. Mythol.* (Everyman's Library), p. 106.

⁴ For the significance of the triangle cf. p. 71 *infra*.

⁵ Arthur Gaye, *National Review*, XXI (1893), 209 (or *The Living Age*, CXCVII, 666 f.).

and frequency of its use the number 3 far surpasses all the rest.¹ The word "three," itself, shows a threefold use: one definite, its actual intrinsic value; another, symbolic, mystic, esoteric; the third, indefinite, of an indeterminate number of times, even in the sense of "many." The study of the symbolic 3 takes us back to a remote antiquity, into the realms of mythology, religion, mathematics, philosophy, and magic—in fact, into almost every province of knowledge, to many and diverse lands, to peoples civilized and uncivilized, and to nations both ancient and modern.² Of its use may well be said:

Mobilitate viget virisque acquirit eundo:
Parva metu primo, mox sese attollit in auras
Ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit.

So vast is the field of inquiry, so numerous the manifestations, that only a *spicilegium* can be presented.

In the first³ systematic classification of the gods of ancient Greece, in Hesiod's *Theogony*, we already find numerous groupings of the gods by triads, or trinities (Eusener cites 15 Hesiodic trinities and 41 others). This trichotomous tendency also manifested itself in

¹ "Wie fast bei allen Völkern, spielt auch bei den Germanen die Dreizahl im Leben, in der Religion, in der Dichtung von allen Zahlen die wichtigste Rolle."—J. Hoops, *Real-lexikon d. Germ. Alt.*, I (1910–13), 487.

² Cf., e.g., William J. Locke, *The Wonderful Year* (1916), p. 23: Fontibras, the philosopher, on being asked why, after holding a lighted match to the cigarettes of his two friends, he blew it out and used another to light his own, replied: "It arises out of the Russian funeral ritual in which the three altar candles are lit by the same taper. To apply the same method of illumination to three worldly things like cigars or cigarettes is regarded as an act of impiety and hence as unlucky." The impressive ritualistic observances, a threefold query and response, before the portals of the crypt would be opened to admit the body of the emperor, Francis Joseph (November 27, 1916), may also be noted. Cf. also "Trench Superstitions," *Literary Digest* (May 19, 1917), p. 1550. According to *Life* (May 5, 1917), "It looked bad when the fire-alarm went off three times while the minister was preaching Wildway's funeral sermon."

³ It is to be noted, however, that already in the Orphic theogony, there is not only a trinity of gods (Metis, Phanes, Erikepaïos), but also a Chronos with 3 heads, that the Curetes were 3 in number, and that there was a triad of the elements (fire, water, earth). For the "*triplex Cosmogonia inscripta*," cf. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus* I, pp. 482 f., and note that in the Homeric hymn the caduceus of Hermes is represented as a "golden rod, three petaled." Cf. also Reinach, *Orpheus* (1909), p. 33: "the idea of a divine trinity is much earlier than Christianity, for we find that several of the Babylonian deities were grouped in triads, as of Anu, Bel, and Ea, the gods of Heaven, the Earth, and the Waters," and p. 27, in Egypt, "at an early date the divine personages Horus, Ra, and Osiris stand out of the swarm of local deities." For the three cosmic divinities composing the supreme triad of the Mithraic Pantheon, see Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (1910), pp. 109 f.

assigning triads of children to the gods, as to Kronos and Rhea 3 sons¹ (Zeus, Poseidon, Hades) and 3 daughters (Hestia, Demeter, Hera); 3 sons to Zeus and Hera; 3 sons to Ares and Aphrodite, etc. The triadic conception also gave rise to the tradition that there were 3 cyclops, 3 Gorgons, 3 Moirae,² 3 Erinyes, 3 Charites,³ 3 judges of the Lower World, etc., as well as to the custom of offering prayers to triads of gods, as, in Sophocles (*O.T.* 159), to Athena, Artemis, Apollo (Eusener cites 17 such triads), and in the taking of oaths⁴ (Eusener cites 17 such triads, and says that a similar custom prevailed among the Macedonians, Thracians, and Phrygians). A further development in the conception of the triad, and an important one, is marked by the combination of three bodies into one, the "three in one" idea, as in the goddess Hecate,⁵ the fabulous monster Chimaera, Geryon, etc., and by the triplication of certain parts of the body, as in the representation of Zeus Herkeios with 3 eyes⁶ (one being in the forehead), of Hermes, Cerberus,⁷ of the Hydra (originally) with 3 heads,⁸ the dragon of Colchis with 3 tongues, each 3-forked (according to Prudentius, *Cath.*, III, 128); the serpent in Eden had *colla trilinguia*, and (*Ham.* 202 a *linguam trisulcam*). So also the serpent of Ares had not only 3 tongues,

¹ An important trinity, and with parallels in other mythologies, as to them was assigned the triple division of the cosmos into the sky, the sea, and the underworld. Cf. Homer, *Il.* xv. 189, *τριχθὰ δὲ πάντα δέδασται*. Cf. also the Homeric hymn 16. 7 and Preller, *Gr. Myth.*, pp. 86 f.

² Compare the 3 *Parcae* of the Romans, the 3 Norns, guardians of destiny, of the Scandinavian mythology, and "the Sisters Three" of Shakespeare.

³ Cf. Sen. *Ben.* i. 32 *tres Gratiae, sorores, manibus inplexis*, etc.

⁴ Cf. *Τρίτατος δὲ Ἄλδης*, a very sacred form of oath. Cf. also Richard M. Meyer, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (1910), p. 176: "Alt scheint (wie bei den Hellenen) die Dreizahl der 'Schwurgötter': Thor, Odin, Frey, wie denn auch sonst (wie überall) Triaden begegnen"; p. 634: "927 n. Chr. alte islandische Eidformel (Frey, Njord, Thor)." Note also Reinach, *loc. cit.*, p. 118: "the triad, Sky, Earth, and Sea, is used in the formula of a Celtic oath." Cf. also p. 65 *infra*.

⁵ Cf. Ovid *Metamorph.* vii. 94, *triformis Hecate*; Sen. *Agam.* 841, *triformis Geryon*; Hor. *C. i.* 27. 23, *triformis Chimaera*, and Milton, "Goddess Triform, I own thy triple spell"; Swinburne, "Being treble in thy divided deity."

⁶ Sicily, too, had a 3-eyed cyclops. Cf. *Folk-Lore*, XVI, p. 276.

⁷ Cf. Shakespeare: "Cerberus, that three headed canis," and "you are not like Cerberus, three gentlemen at once, are you?"

⁸ Compare also the Slav god, Triglav, and cf. Reinach, *op. cit.*, p. 145. According to p. 118 the Celts also had a three-headed god. For the *Thriae*, the three nymphs, "discoverers of the three magic counters," cf. Robbins, *Class. Phil.*, XI (1916), p. 287.

but 3 rows of teeth (Ovid *Metamorph.* iii. 34; Stat. *Theb.* v. 509; Val. Flacc. ii. 500); Zeus' thunderbolt was trifurcated;¹ not only Hercules' club (Ovid *Fasti* i. 575, but also the club of Theseus (*Her.* iv. 115)) was 3-knotted, and last, but not least, is to be cited the sacred tripod² of the priestess of Apollo at Delphi. So also the Aloidæ, when 3×3 years of age were 3×3 cubits in width and 3×3×3 cubits in height. Note also the threefold distribution in the early account of the fall of Troy into preparation, siege, and wanderings, each lasting a decade (Grote, *Hist. Gr.*, I, 269), that Hector's body was thrice dragged round the walls of Troy (Verg. *Aen.* i. 483; Prop. iii. 2. 28), that Helenus told Odysseus that to take Troy 3 things were necessary (assistance of Neoptolemus, bow and arrows of Heracles, the possession of the Palladium), that the Maenads were divided into 3 bands,³ that there were 3 varieties of the dramatic chorus of Dionysus, as well as 3 principal Doric choruses, that the tragic art of Athens, as also the comic, had its 3 great representatives, that the idea of a trilogy was introduced by Aeschylus, the "three unities" by Aristotle. Furthermore, "the Attic theatre never, in its most palmy days, exceeded three solo actors" (Freitag, *Tech. of the Drama*, p. 148), Aristotle's *Rhetoric*⁴ consisted of 3 books, and there were 3 kinds of oratory, 3 schools of rhetoric (Cic. *Inv.* ii. 6 f.; Quint. iii. 1. 8 f.), according to Varro, "*tria Theologiae genera*," a threefold division of daylight and a threefold division of darkness, as also of the month, besides a sacrifice of 3 animals (the *Τριπύς*), sacrifices 3 days after the funeral (the *Τρίτα*), a triple offering to the dead, of honey, milk, and wine (Soph. *Antig.* 431), etc.⁵ But *satis superque*.

Turning to Italy, we find here also illustrations in perplexing profusion. An interesting use is found in Plautus (*Pseud.* 704 f.),

¹ Ovid *Metamorph.* ii. 325. According to Servius (*ad Aen.* ii. 649) there were three kinds of lightning (*quod adflat, quod incendit, quod findit*) and (*ad viii.* 429) a *triplex potestas fluminis* (*ostentatorium, peremptorium, praesagum*).

² Cf. Placidus to Stat. *Theb.* i. 509, "tripos species est lauri, tres habens radices, Apollini consecrata, propter vim triplicem divinationis. Nam et Sol praeterita vidit et praesentia cernit et futura visurus est." According to Ausonius (*Griph.* 74) "Orpheus huic tripodæ, quia sunt tria, terra, aqua, flamma."

³ Cf. Eurip. *Bacch.* 680 f.; Prop. iii. 17. 24.

⁴ Tripartite divisions of a topic are frequent in rhetoric, as may be seen from Marx's Index to *Auct. Her.* (29 such triads).

⁵ Cf. further, Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, III, 287; Buttmann, *Mythologus*, I, 29; Gerhard, *Gr. Myth.*, I, 141, and Whibley, *Comp. to Gk. Stud.*, pp. 502, 503, 507.

where that "Artful Dodger," before presenting a letter, says: "I am seeking the one to whom I am to impart delights *thrice three, threefold*, acquired by *three* ruses from *three* persons." But long before the time of Plautus, even before the founding of the city, Evander had to fight with one who was endowed with 3 lives and was therefore obliged to kill him 3 times (Verg. *Aen.* viii. 56), and Hercules had to thrice smite the robber, Cacus, who had 3 heads (Prop. iv. 9, 10). The reign of Romulus saw an amalgamation of 3 cantons into a single community, and even as early as this the *Fratres Arvales*¹ were in existence, a priesthood whose membership was composed of a multiple of 3 and who celebrated the festival to the goddess *Dea Dia* with a threefold repetition of the first part of their chant. By the time of Numa there was already a trinity² of gods (Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus) with three *Flamines Maiores* consecrated to their service, and a priesthood, the *Salii*, who worshiped this trinity with a "3 step" (cf. Hor. *C.* iv. 1. 28, *ter quatient humum*). During the reign of the third king, the combat between the Roman triplets, the *Horatii*, and the Alban triplets, the *Curiatii*, took place, during Servius' reign the triple sacrifice, the *Suovetaurilia*³ (cf. the *Tpurrís*) was offered, and when Rome's last king was banished the person who presided over the elections for the consuls had the significant surname, *Tricipitinus* (cf. Livy i. 59. 8). It was about this time that the older trinity was superseded by the great trinity of the Romans, the Capitoline Triad⁴ (Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva), and in 493 B.C.⁵ that the Greek triad (Demeter, Dionysus, Kore) was introduced into Italy. Furthermore, there were *Tres Fortunae*, *Tria Fata*,⁶ 3 Parcae, a festival, the *Ambarvalia*, lasting 3 days, a college of pontifices, augurs, and of the *Epulones*, each consisting originally of 3 members,

¹ Cf. Lease, *Livy* (1914), note to i. 125.

² According to Wissowa, *Rel. u. Kunst*² (1912), p. 23, the Umbrians also had a trinity, Juppiter, Mars, and Vofionus.

³ Cf. Cato *Agr.* 141, and Lease, *Livy* (1914), note to i, 1579.

⁴ This triad, it may be noted, the greatest and most highly honored by the Romans, was composed of two women to one man. Of the 75 trinities of the Greeks cited by Eusener, 14 were so constituted, and 5 were entirely composed of women.

⁵ Cf. Wissowa, *loc. cit.*, p. 51.

⁶ Cf. Wissowa, *loc. cit.*, pp. 261 and 264.

and a cult of *Liber*, *Ceres*, *Libera*.¹ Note also Placidus, to Stat. *Theb.* i. 108: "*trium Furiarum tres memorat potestates: sitis, morbi, famesque*"; and to iii. 511: "*Proserpinam . . . e malo punico gustasse tria grana.*" A few more illustrations may also be noted: the fact that there were 3 principal assemblies of the people, a triple line of battle, a triple division of the month (as among the Greeks), *tria nomina* (the characteristic of a *liber homo*), the *triclinium* with its 3 couches and 3 places on each, and the Roman custom, as also of the Greeks, of eating 3 meals a day.

The number 3 plays a prominent part in ritualistic observances,² as when the priest, as an act of ceremonial purification, thrice sprinkles the mourners with pure water (Verg. *Aen.* vi. 229), and when the pious Aeneas thrice invokes the departed spirit of his friend, Deiphobus (*ibid.*, 506). Similarly, the enchantress, Medea, "thrice purifies Jason with fire, thrice with water, and thrice with sulphur" (Ovid *Metamorph.* viii. 261).³ But perhaps the most remarkable glorification of the number 3 is to be found in the celebration of the *Ludi Speculares* in 17 B.C., with expiatory rites lasting 3 nights and 3 days, the ceremonies opening with a sacrifice by Augustus of 3×3 kids and 3×3 lambs on 3 different altars and ending on the 3d day of June. The festival proper was preceded by 3 days of purification, followed by 3 expiatory offerings of 3 different kinds, and concluded with a poem by Horace, sung by 3×3×3 boys and 3×3×3 girls. The 3 nights were dedicated to 3 divinities, so the 3 days; 3×3×3 cakes of 3 different kinds were thrice offered, and on the 3d night 3 sacrifices were made. With this use of 3 at a pagan festival may be compared its use in the great church hymn,

¹ A Greek triad, in origin. Cf. Cic. *N.D.* ii. 62. The worship of this triad lasted for over 285 years, a temple being dedicated to their worship in 449 B.C., silver statues being erected to them in 197, and prayers offered in their temple in 174 (Livy iii. 55. 7; xxiii. 25. 7; xli. 28. 2).

² As early as Rome's third king expiatory rites were celebrated for 3×3 days (Livy i. 31. 4). For the other *Novendiale* cf. Porphyry to Hor. *Ep.* xvii. 48: *nam novendiale dicitur sacrificium, quod mortuo fit nona die, qua sepultus est.* The ritualistic 3 was also common in the Germanic realm: "Alles, was im altern Ritual wurzelt, muss dreimal geschehen. . . . Nur wenn es dreimal geschieht, hat man Erfolg erwartet."—J. Hoops, *loc. cit.*

³ Cf. Soph. *Antig.* 431, and Verg. *Aen.* ix. 329; xi. 188; Horace *Ep.* i. 1. 37; C. iii. 22. 3; Ovid *Metamorph.* iv. 753; *Fast.* ii. 572; iii. 563; vi. 155, 753; Tib. i. 5. 14; iii. 12. 14; Stat. *Theb.* iv. 465, etc.

the *Dies Irae*, composed of $3 \times 3 \times 3$ stanzas, each consisting of 3 verses and a triple rhyme. Triple repetition of the same act is also observed in the consultation of lots, as in *Caes. B.G.* i. 53. 7; *Tib.* i. 3. 11; *Tac. Germ.* 10, etc., and in the triple clapping of hands to indicate approval, or in cheering, as in *Hor. C.* ii. 17. 26; *Prop.* iii. 10. 4; *Mart.* iii. 46. 8, etc. Cf. "to give three cheers."

Turning to matters far remote, we find the same tendency manifesting itself in the bibulous realm (cf. "three sheets in the wind"): in drinking the law (a *mystica lex*, *Auson. Gryph.*) was to drain 3 glasses or 3×3 (*Hor. C.* iii. 19. 11; *Petron.* 136).

In charms also the number 3 was considered to be of great potency. This particular variety may therefore be denominated the Therapeutic 3. The field is so large that a few illustrations will have to suffice. It is interesting to note that no less a person than the great Caesar, "as soon as he had taken his seat in the carriage, was accustomed to repeat a certain formula 3 times in order to secure safety in his journey" (*Plin. Nat. Hist.* xxviii. 21). So also the enchantress, Medea, indulges in a 3-fold incantation in order to put to sleep the dragon of the 3-forked tongue, and, as a preliminary step to invoking divine aid, "3 nights before the full moon thrice turns about and thrice sprinkles water on her head before crying out a 3-fold supplication to Hecate of the 3 forms (*Ovid Metamorph.* vii. 153; 190). No less interesting is the account in Vergil (*Ecl.* viii. 74 f.) of the means resorted to by the shepherdess to rekindle the fire of love in the heart of one whose ardor had lost some of its fervor: she first twines 3 threads of 3 different hues round the wax image which she had made of her lover, and then carries it 3 times round the altar. Her maid assists by making 3 love-knots of the 3 threads. (Cf. also *Prop.* iv. 6. 7; p. 65 *infra.*) Tibullus acting on this principle enjoins his ladylove to "chant the love-charm thrice and spit¹ thrice when the spell is done" (i. 2. 54; cf. also *Petron.* 131). This spitting feature is a common element in many climes. In *Folk-Lore*, IV, 63, we are told that "to this day in India, when women see a falling star they spit thrice to scare the demon." But

¹ Cf. Nicholson, "The Saliva Superstition," *Harv. Stud.*, VIII (1897); Grendon, "Anglo-Saxon Charms," *Journ. Am. Folk-Lore*, XXII (1909), 105-227; Wuttke, *Der deutsche Volksaberglaube* (1860), p. 138, etc., and Eugene Tavenner, "Three as a Magic Number in Latin Literature," *Trans. Am. Phil. Assn.*, XLVII (1916), 117 f.

we are not without illustrations from nearer home. In cosmopolitan New York City it is a not uncommon custom for certain small boys, whenever they see a dead animal lying in the street, to spit 3 times in order not to "eat it on their bread for supper," or, in case a foreign object gets into the eye, to lift the eyelid and spit 3 times. Ben Jonson, it should be noted here, says "Spit three times for luck" (*Epig.* 134). Pliny is our authority (*N.H.* xxviii. 36) for the statement that "it was customary to spit on the ground 3 times after taking a dose of medicine" to insure its efficacy (cf. also xxiv, 172 and 181). While the scientist might justify this measure on the ground of psychological therapeutics, he could hardly do so in this remedy for boils: "spit 3 times on them when they first appear"; or in the following, which Pliny prudently introduces by "they say"; "if any one while washing his feet will touch his eyes 3 times with the water, he will be free from all diseases and ailments of the eye" (§ 44). To be cured of the gout was not so simple, as we learn from Varro (*R.R.* i. 2. 27) that one must chant a certain formula $3 \times 3 \times 3$ times and with every time spit.

Cetera de genere hoc, adeo sunt multa, loquacem
Delassare valent Fabium.

These uses of the number 3 can be more easily understood and appreciated when studied in the light of the usage of other nations. Furthermore, a similarity in usage shows the homogeneity of the human mind. As there were trinities in the classical world, so also we find them in India, where the great Hindu trinity, the Trimurti (Brahma, Siva, Vishnu), three deities worshiped collectively, is best known. Each god had 3 incarnations, those of Vishnu being connected with the Deluge (Max Mueller, *India*, p. 144) and "Vishnu's Three Strides" covering the heavens was a tale oft told. It is interesting also to note that Siva's emblem, like Poseidon's, was a trident,¹ and that the Hindu priest, as the last step to render the victim sacred, thrice turns round it with a lighted torch. But Buddhism went still farther: "out of the five last Buddhas of the earlier teaching there grew up five mystic trinities" (*Ency. Brit.*¹¹, XVI, 97). There was also a trinity of Vedic gods (Agni, Indra,

¹ For the *trisula* of the Buddhists cf. Thomas Wilson, *The Swastika* (1896), pp. 962 f.

Surya). And Babylon had two divine triads, Egypt many, the chief being that composed of Osiris, Isis, and Horus. The triadic system was also a prominent feature in the religion of the Chaldeans, Mongolians, Phrygians, and Scythians. According to Herodotus (viii. 137) "the first man of the Scythians was a son of Zeus and had 3 sons." The multiple of 3 appears in the Zend Avesta (Spiegel, III, p. lxix), where we are told that Ahriman produced 99,999 diseases, and that one of the gods had a bodyguard of 99,999 *fravashi*.¹ It is also to be noted that the triplicity of the cosmos (heaven, earth, water), found in classic realms, is also a feature of the Japanese doctrine, Taoism, each realm having its own special ruler, and, to go no farther, we may note the great Germanic triad,² Wodan, Thor, and Donar. Tacitus' statement (*Germ.* 2) is peculiarly interesting, to the effect that the primitive man, Mannus, had 3 sons and from these sprang the three main tribes of Germany, with which may be compared the account in Genesis (9:19): "Of Noah's three sons was the whole earth overspread." Somewhat different is the account that the first man in the Isle of Man had 3 legs (*Folk-Lore*, XVII, 469), and it was on a horse who had 3 legs that the Scandinavian goddess of the dead, Hel, first appeared on earth.³ According to the Gaelic account of the Argonautic expedition, there were 3 Argonauts who changed themselves into 3 hawks and by this means were successful in securing 3 of the apples of the Hesperides, in spite of the fact that the 3 daughters of the king had transformed themselves into 3 ospreys and pursued them.⁴

In the realm of folklore the number 3 was particularly prolific, manifesting itself in the triple repetition of the same act. The illustrations from all lands are so numerous that only an abbreviated

¹ For its use in the Germanic realm cf. Meyer, *loc. cit.*: "Neun ist Odins Zahl."

² The earliest triad consisted of Ingo, Irmin, and Isto, the "drei urgermanische Hauptgötter" (the Mercurius, Mars, Hercules, of Tac. *Germ.* 9).—R. M. Meyer, *loc. cit.*, pp. 195. Cf. also p. 530: "die Dreizahl ist Lieblingszahl," and the "literature" there cited; also J. Hoops, *loc. cit.* It is interesting to note that the family motto of Bismarck was "In Trinitate Robur," the arms a clover leaf and 3 oak leaves, and that contemporary caricature pictures him with 3 hairs on his head.

³ Note also the Scandinavian Tree of Life, the Yggdrasil, with its 3 roots going down to 3 realms.

⁴ For the Celtic fondness for triads cf. Charles Squire's *Celtic Myths and Legends*. Cf. also Grendon, "Anglo-Saxon Charms," *loc. cit.*

selection is possible. From Clare, Ireland, comes the interesting remedy for removing warts: "rub a stolen scrap of meat three times round each wart in the name of each person of the Trinity," a curious mixture of pagan mysticism and modern Christianity.¹ An interesting parallel to the custom referred to by Vergil (viii. 78 f.) is recorded by Frazer (III, 304): threads with 3 knots are still used in Argyleshire to cure internal ailments of man or beast, and Highland sorcerers use 3 strings of 3 different colors with 3 knots in each as a charm against the evil eye (VI, 154); and a parallel to the Roman *Ambarvalia* is cited from Dahomey, Africa, where the custom prevailed "of every three years carrying around the city the serpent god, Danbe, to rid its inhabitants of their ills and ailments" (*Folk-Lore*, XVIII, 268).

In oaths and vows² (though differing in ethical value, alike in this respect) the tendency to indulge in "threes" is also marked. In India, e.g., it is the regular custom to emphasize both oaths and vows by repeating them 3 times (*Folk-Lore* X, 410), and Usener (p. 45) says that "from his earliest youth he has heard Catholics when greatly excited cry out 'Jesus, Maria, Josef,'" and adds "we curse 'in drei Teuffels Namen.'"

To change the scene. St. Augustine (*Epist.* lv [ii. p. 141, M.]) says: "ternarius numerus in multis sacramentis excellit." Illustrations are numerous, as, e.g., in the ceremonial at the death of a pope, when a representative of the Sacred College strikes the forehead of the dead pope 3 times with a silver mallet (cf. further the *Cath. Encycl.*, s.v. "Triduum" and "Novena"). A striking use of the number 3 is shown in the blessing of the water on the eve of the

¹ *Folk-Lore*, XXII, 571. Compare the Anglo-Saxon charm (*op. cit.*, p. 187) for recovering stolen cattle: "pray three times toward the East and say thrice *Cruz Christi ab oriente reducat*" and similarly toward each point of the compass; to remove a strange swelling: "sing the Paternoster three times and say *Fuge, diabolus, Christus te sequitur*," and repeat again this formula three times; and (p. 199), a charm against infectious diseases: "over the patient sing three times *Matheus me ducat, Marcus me conseruet, Lucas me liberet, Johannes me adiuuet, semper, Amen*," etc. For an illustration nearer home compare Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (chap. i) "to keep witches away I got up and turned around in my tracks three times and crossed my breast every time." Cf. also *Folk-Lore*, XVII, 70; XIX, 315, 434, 456; XX, 77, 346; XXII, 345, 474; XXIII, 191; Frazer, *loc. cit.*, VII, 198; XI, 180, 184; Wuttke, *loc. cit.*; Henry Williams, *Curious Facts*, pp. 69, 139, 150, 197, 318, and Lease, *Livy* (1914), p. 216, note.

² Cf. also Lobeck, *Aglaophamus*, p. 740, and p. 58 *supra*.

Epiphany (cf. Eusener, p. 2 and note; also pp. 36-46; 180-83). Here another modern illustration may be noted, the *Angelus*, a devotion consisting of 3 scriptural texts, recited 3 times a day, the bell (often 3, each tolling 3 times) tolling 3 times daily, 3 strokes each time; and the Catholic doctrine of a threefold division of the hereafter (heaven, hell, purgatory); compare also Dante's conception. According to Reinach (*op. cit.*, p. 387) "the Trinity of the Jesuits, expressed by JMJ (Jesus, Mary, Joseph) has practically superseded the other." As a striking illustration of the fact that the number 3 "mobilitate viget virisque adquirit eundo" may be cited the tenet of Pseudo-Dionysus (Areopagiticus) of the fifth century, maintaining that there are three triads of the celestial hierarchy between the Triune God and man, with a corresponding three triads of the ecclesiastical hierarchy between Jesus and man, and the Jewish system of theosophy, prevalent in the tenth century and later, the Cabala, with its three triads subdivided into trinities. Biblical illustrations are numerous and familiar, beginning with the first chapter of the Bible with a triad of "lights" (sun, moon, stars), in the fifth with Noah and his three sons, in the fifteenth with a sacrifice of "a heifer of three days old, and a she goat of three days old, and a ram of three days old" (cf. the *Τριππύς* and the *Suovetaurilia*). It may also be noted that Daniel prayed "three times a day" (Dan. 6:10)¹ and that the Apostle Paul said (II Cor. 12:8) *τὴν τὸν Κύριον παρακάλεσα*. Note also the three Christian Graces.

Illustrations are so numerous in English literature that it would need a separate book to record them. We can only note Shakespeare's "the three weird sisters" (note their incantation in Macbeth), Falstaff's remark, "good luck lies in odd numbers, either

¹ It is a custom of the Hebrews at the present time, and one going back for many generations, to offer 3 prayers at the evening service, repeating each 3 times, and at the evening service for the Sabbath to offer four prayers, each given 3 times; cf. *Daily Prayers . . . Vienna* (1857), pp. 251, 333. Anatole Le Braz, in his *Le Sonneur de Garland* (1911), tells us of a very religious woman "who swept the chapel of the church according to the rite on 3 consecutive Mondays," and in his *Le Trésor de Noël* that Jean tested the report that oxen on Christmas nights talked like human beings, by going on 3 consecutive Christmases to 3 different stables (the scene is in Brittany, where such usages abound). Cf. also a Russian Christmas (*Kolyada*) song: "We found Kolyada in Peter's courtyard. In the middle of the court there are *three* rooms," etc., and Dostoevski, *Christmas Tree*: "At a window behind the pane *three* dolls . . . *three* old men," etc.

in nature, chance, or death"; the Ancient Mariner (a tale told to 3 wedding guests), Part 3: "I've won! Quoth she and whistles thrice"; Milton's trinity of trinities in his description of the "Gates of Hell," "thrice threefold" (3 of brass, 3 of iron, 3 of adamantine rock),¹ and De Quincey's "Our Ladies of Sorrow" whom he has made 3: *Mater Lachrymarum*, *M. Suspiriorum*, *M. Tenebrarum*.

There is a wideness in the use of the mystic 3 that is simply amazing. Note the following restricted heterogeneous list: the 3 distinct parts of Solomon's Temple, the 3d consisting of 3 stories supported by 3 successive abatements; the Greek temple, the Heraeum, with its 3 chief parts (*naos*, *pronaos*, *opisthodomus*), the 3 Greek orders of the capital, the triglyphs of the Doric frieze; the use of the trefoil and trifolium in mediaeval architecture, the mediaeval *trivium* and *quadrivium*, the tricolor, the 3-mile limit of international law, the tripartite division of our government (legislative, judicial, executive), and of the army (3 battalions=1 regiment, 3 regiments=1 brigade, 3 brigades=1 division, 3 divisions=1 corps, 3 corps=1 army), the trifacial nerve with its 3 main branches and threefold function, the syllogism with its 3 parts, and even grammar with its 3 persons, 3 numbers, 3 voices, 3 genders, 3 degrees of comparison, 3 kinds of accent, etc.² It is significant mathematically, mystically, and grammatically that the number 3 is called "plural," and that "plural" is used not only for 3, but for any indefinitely large number, a fact which renders the use by some peoples of "three" in the sense of "many" less remarkable. Furthermore, we may also note that according to the philosopher Comte, the human mind in its development passes through 3 stages, that Hegel's

¹ Vergil (*Aen.* vi. 549) has simply: "*Moenia . . . triplici circumdata muro.*"

² Cf. further Wundt, *op. cit.*, I, II², pp. 187 f. But the number three is not restricted to such serious books as the one just mentioned. It also has a use which may be called the Novelistic Three, the number which seems to fall subconsciously and automatically from the pen of the novelist. The reason underlying this use, though it may seem to some to be trifling, has its psychological interest and is one of the problems that is discussed in this study. Illustrations are numerous. See, for example, *Hearst's Magazine* for Dec., 1916. It may be noted also that Maurice Le Blanc, *The Frontier* (1912), p. 238 says: "drunk with rage, she thrice spat in her face." One may cite also (thanks to my colleague, Professor Francois) a popular old French song, *Cadet Rousselle*, who, according to the song, had 3 houses, 3 costumes, 3 hats, 3 beautiful eyes (one being a monocle), 3 pairs of shoes, 3 hairs, 3 boys, 3 dogs, 3 cats, 3 daughters, and to pay his bills, 3 pennies.

philosophy largely centers in this number, with its 3 main divisions, every part following the triadic law, and with its basic principle that every truth has its 3 aspects (thesis, antithesis, and a resulting synthesis). It is to be noted also that Cicero speaks of Plato's *philosophandi ratio triplex* (*Acad.* i. 19), then *animus triplex* (*Tusc.* i. 20; *Div.* i. 61), and that Placidus (*loc. cit.*, v. 82) refers to Pythagoras' *trinam regulam divinae rationis*. Before leaving the realm of philosophy, Kant's "three principles of homogeneity" may also be cited.

To take a brief scamper through another field. Pedagogy has its 3 M's (man, matter, mind), the Corsican (Merimée, *Columba*, chap. 3) his 3 ways in dealing with an enemy, the 3 S's (*scioppétto*, *stilello*, *strada*), the Bourbons their 3 F's, by which they are said to have ruled Naples: *Feste*, *Farina*, *Fôrche*. I shall say nothing of those whose ideas of the proper bounds of education are limited by the 3 R's. The drama, too, has its 3 moments, or crises, separated by 3 important scenic effects (Freytag, *op. cit.*, p. 115); the Odd Fellows, their emblem, 3 rings joined together; the names of most college fraternities, their 3 letters; the pawnbrokers, their cluster of 3 gold-colored balls, etc., *ad infinitum*. It would seem that the various grades of society had agreed among themselves that "Aller guten Dingen sind Drei" and that "the third time's the charm."

As an illustration of the use of 3 in an indefinite sense may be noted the Greek "Τρεῖς ὄχλος," the German "Drei eine Menge" (cf. also "Drei Käse hoch"), the Italian "Tre lo sanno, tutto lo sanno," and the English "three's a crowd." The use of the indefinite "three" and "thrice" in historic times is as old as Orpheus and Homer in Greek and as old as Plautus in Latin. As Plutarch says (*De Is. et Osir.* 36), instead of "many times" we generally say "thrice." Its use with an adjective to form a kind of superlative is particularly common, as, e.g., Orpheus using *τριγίγας* for "a huge giant," Homer *τρίλλιστος* for "often prayed for," the Greek¹ *τρις*

¹ The Greek dictionary (Liddell and Scott) cites 25 compounds of *τρι-*, 7 of *τρις-* and 1 of *τριτο-*, the Latin (Harper's), 6 of *tri-*, 1 of *ter-* (adding that the indefinite sense is frequent), all defined as "very," etc. *Ter* is common in an indefinite sense from Plautus on. This writer, to express the other pole of the superlative idea, to say that something is "trifling," or "of absolutely no value," uses *teruncius* (*Capt.* 477, etc.), a word finding favor with Cicero (*Att.* v. 20. 6, etc.), or *tribulus* (*Poen.* 381, etc.), but Persius (v. 76) to express the very same idea uses *tressis*. The Greek use of *τρία ἐπεα* is paralleled by the Latin *tria verba*. Pacuvius used *tripotens*, with which we may compare the portentous German word, *Neunkraftkraut*.

μάκαρος, Latin¹ *ter felix*, and the English "thrice happy." This usage is also not infrequent in English, as may be seen from the fact that Allibone (*Poet. Quots.*) cites eight poets who use the expression "thrice happy" and that Bartlett (*Concordance*) lists 17 compounds of "thrice" used by Shakespeare. With Shakespeare's "thrice a villain" one may compare Plautus' *trifurcifer*. In the Bible also this use is found, as "a three days' journey" (Gen. 30:36; Ex. 3:18, etc.), and R. M. Meyer (*op. cit.*, p. 529) speaking for the Germanic peoples says: "wir sahen, wie häufig für eine unbegrenzte Zahl von Geistern oder Dämonen symbolisch die Dreizahl eintritt."

EXPLANATORY NOTES

That the number 3 has often a meaning far different from its numerical value has been commented on by the ancients, as, e.g., Aristotle (*De Caelo*, i. 1): "the triad is the number of the complete whole, inasmuch as it contains a beginning, a middle, and an end. Nature herself has provided us with this number for use in the holy service of the gods";² Plutarch (*Fab.* 4 Perrin): "now the reason for the exact prescription of this particular number (i.e., 333,333 $\frac{1}{3}$) is hard to give, unless it was thereby desired to laud the number 3, as being a perfect number by nature, the first of odd numbers, the beginning of quantity, and as containing in itself the first differences and the elements of every number mingled and blended together" (cf. also *Quaest. Rom.* 102; *De Is.* 36. 151). Vergil (*Ecl.* viii. 75) says "numero deus impare gaudet," and Servius in commenting thereon refers to the belief of the Pythagoreans "qui ternarium numerum perfectum summo deo adsignant, a quo initium et medium et finis erat," and adds the significant remark: "Impar numerus immortalis, quia dividi integer non potest, par numerus mortalis, quia dividi potest." His explanation of the use of *ter* in vii. 229 is also to be noted: "aut saepius aut re vera ter," and to 700: "saepius: finitus pro infinito." Ausonius' interest in this number is shown by his composition of a poem in 90 verses, *Gryphus Ternarii Numeri*,

¹ It may be noted by way of contrast that the French and Spanish generally use "four" for an indefinite number of times; cf. *couper un cheveu en quatre*, "to split a hair"; *faire le Diable à quatre*, "to raise the Dickens," etc. Plautus also used in this way, *centum*, *ducenti*, and *mille* (cf. *Arch. f. lat. Lex.*, IX, 178 f.).

² Cf. Diels, *Frg. d. Vorsokratiker*, p. 222: *πάντα τρία*, etc.

showing its varied uses (cf. l. 53 *Tris numerus perfectus*). Cf. also Festus, *s.v. Imparem*: Macr. S. 1. 13. 5, *Somn. Scip.* i. 2. 1; ii. 2. 17; Placidus to Stat. *Theb.* v. 86; and Apul. *De Mundo* 38.¹

This rapid survey of this vast field is sufficient to show the universality of the use of the mystic number 3, and that, too, it is to be noted, not only by uncivilized² nations, but by civilized, and not only in ancient, but also in modern, times. In the quest for an explanation of the mental conceptions that gave birth to this phenomenon, it is obviously necessary in the first place to divest the mind of all preconceived notions, to rid it of all modern conceptions, and with an open mind try to enter into primitive man's simple mental processes. Only when thus oriented can we hope to discover this use in its incipency. His conceptions were not built in a day any more than Rome was. Beginning with matters terrestrial he soon transferred them to matters celestial. The beginning was simple and natural, and there can be little doubt that the idea of triplicity first suggested itself from, and first³ manifested itself, as Wundt (*loc. cit.*) maintains, in a grouping of objects that were closely related, naturally connected together, and therefore assumes as its beginning the triad of persons, father, mother, and child, the simplest form of the monogamic family. This conception was early transferred to the gods, and it is significant that in the most ancient religions there are such family groups of trinities. The conception of three composing one readily resolved itself into its counterpart,

¹ Dante's use of the number 3 (*The New Life*, p. 71, Norton) to prove that Beatrice is a miracle, as also in the structure of his sonnets, is interesting.

- ² It would seem that to primitive man, in the phrase of Voltaire, "God made man, and man returned the compliment," or as R. P. Knight says of the Trimurti "Symbol," *Lang. of Anc. Art and Myth.* § 229: "this triform division of the personified attributes or modes of action of one first cause seems to have been the first departure from simple theism, and the foundation of religious mythology in every part of the earth."

³ In a scientific treatment of this subject note should also be taken of a different explanation of the origin of the conception of a trinity. See, e.g., Inman, *Ancient Pagan and Modern Christian Symbolism*² (1874). According to Richard M. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 68: "Phallische Züge fehlen keiner Mythologie, auch nicht der altgermanischen" (cf. also pp. 52, 486). Cf. also C. Howard, *Sex Worship*³ (1909), p. 12; Creuzer, *Symbol. u. Meth.*³, IV, 872; Lobeck, *Aglaophamus*, I, 660; Preller, *Gr. Myth.*³, pp. 302, 311, 444; *Rom. Myth.*³, pp. 49, 228; Wissowa, *Rel. u. Kunst*² (1912), pp. 243, 299, etc. It seems more natural, however, to assume (absolute certainty is of course impossible) that the trinity-idea first entered primitive man's mind from the more obvious trinity of the family, or from one of the multitude of triads in nature about him.

one composed of three. The former conception led to a trinity of gods, the latter to the creation of beings composed of 3 bodies, as of Hecate, etc., and of those with one member divided into 3 parts, as of gods with 3 heads, 3 eyes, etc. The three-in-one idea was given its simplest expression by the Pythagoreans, who adopted the triangle,¹ "the most perfect geometrical figure, inasmuch as it was the first form complete in itself." It was only natural therefore that the number 3, being graphically represented by the Greek mathematicians by a triangle (a figure composed of 3 lines, 3 angles, its angles measured in 3 ways, and only 3), which was regarded as perfect, should on account of this representation also come to be regarded as the perfect number. There were also other considerations that tended to deepen this conviction, the fact that 3 is the sum of the mystic 1 and of the mystic 2, that is, could not be divided (cf. Servius' note p. 69 *supra*), and was therefore like the gods, immortal, perfect, sacred. Its frequent and natural association with the gods and their worship, the belief in their perfection and in the perfection of their handiwork, the world of nature, could not have been without its influence in giving an impetus to the belief that 3 was a sacred and perfect number. The conception of a triplicity of similar objects easily developed into a conception of a triplicity of dissimilar objects, and these two conceptions, working side by side, led to the vast majority of the symbolic uses of this number in classical and later times. The natural groupings of 3's in the world about him, such as of birth, life, death, as of land, sky, water² (cf. *triplicis mundi*, Ovid *Metamorph.* xii. 40), as of sun, moon, stars, as of the 3 phases of the moon (new, full, quarter) and the consequent 3 divisions of the month, as of the 3 seasons of the ancient Greeks and Germans (Tac. *Germ.* 26), to say nothing of Vedic times (Schrader,

¹ It should be noted that the triangle was not only a symbol of the Trimurti, but was also used in connection with the worship of Mithras, Krishna, Osiris, and Apis. In the minds of the early church Fathers the equilateral triangle was regarded as the simplest and most effective symbol of the Trinity in Unity. The frequent representation in Christian art of the all-seeing eye of God in the midst of a triangle is well known.

² This conception is regarded by Simrock (*Deutsche Mythol.*, p. 100) as the primary cause of triads of gods: "die Götter der Trias waren ursprünglich Elementargötter, dem Wesen jedes der Drei liegt eins der Elemente, Luft, Wasser, und Feuer zu Grunde, und von dieser ihrer elementaren Natur ist erst ihre geistige Bedeutung ausgegangen," a view which is quoted with approval by A. F. Pott, *Zeitschr. f. Völkerpsychologie*, XIV (1883), 133. For the "astrological origin" of the trinity concept see Cumont, *Astrol. and Rel.* (1912), p. 111.

*Spr. u. Urgesch.*³, II [1906], 239, 510), as of the 3 dimensions¹ (length, breadth, thickness), as of the 3 states of matter (solid, liquid, gaseous), as of the 3 kingdoms (animal, vegetable, mineral), etc.,² must have early forced themselves upon his attention and have greatly influenced his trend of thought. It was only natural that the threefold division of the visible world into earth, sky, water, should have developed into the threefold division of the Cosmos into the earth, the sky, and the underworld, with the assignment to each of its own ruler, and as in the family group one member was endowed with superior power and authority, so also in the divine trinity there was one superior to the other two. Such a conception of a trinity of gods found expression, not only among the Babylonians and Egyptians,³ but also among the Greeks and Romans.

In the study of the earliest manifestations of the symbolic 3, regard must also be had for the fact that there have been, and still are, primitive peoples whose ideas of number do not go beyond 3. In addition to this is the fact that there are many peoples who, for one reason or another, never heard of, and, even if they had, could not grasp, the meaning of the Pythagorean arithmetical dogma, and to whom the Aristotelian formula of a beginning, a middle, and an end was as a book sealed with seven seals. Tylor (*Primitive Culture*, I³, 241) cites nations of the Far East who did not count beyond the number 3, and who used that number, not only for the definite 3, but also for a number of indefinite size.⁴ This usage, while characteristic of primitive man, shows some interesting survivals in the usage of the most highly educated, as Vergil's 333 years (cf. p. 56 *supra*), Horace's *ter felix*, Shakespeare's "thrice happy," etc.

¹ To Brinton ("The Origin of Sacred Numbers," *Amer. Anthropologist*, VII [1894], 168 f.) this was the conception from which sprang such expressions as "Indra, Lord of Three Worlds," etc. His conclusion is summed up as follows: "The number three derives its sacredness from abstract, subjective operations of the intelligence and has its main application in the imaginary and non-phenomenal world," supporting his view in part by the law that "all operations of the mind proceed in accordance with the three fundamental laws of thought—Identity, Diversity, and the excluded Middle."

² Furthermore, he must have discovered at an early stage of his development the 3 primary divisions of his own arm and of his own leg, and of their corresponding parts in the common vertebrates, to say nothing of the 3 segments of his fingers.

³ Cf. Jastrow, *Die Religion Babylon. u. Assy.* I, 244 f.; Wiedemann, *Religion d. alt. Aegypter*, pp. 60 f. Cf. also E. A. W. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, I (1904), 113 f.

⁴ H. Diels, *Archiv. f. Gesch. d. Philosophie*, X (1897), 232, regards this fact as the explanation for the early and extended use of the triad. So Eusener, p. 261.

The third of these symbolic uses to be developed was the temporal triad, owing to the fact that one of the 3 elements, the present, is an abstraction, beyond the mental powers of primitive man.¹ The other two ideas, the past and future, he could, and did, grasp. It is a significant fact that there are languages in which the present tense as such is lacking in general use (e.g., in the Hebrew).² As an inherent element in the temporal triad is the threefold repetition of the same act, as in thrice offering a prayer or in thrice repeating an oath (cf. pp. 61 and 65 *supra*), under the belief that in this way it is rendered more potent, more likely to produce the desired effect. This conception, however, was late in developing and found its widest expression in the realm of charms and magic formulae (cf. p. 62f.). The exact details of the explanation of Paul's "I thrice besought the Lord" are left to the theologians. The fourth stage to be developed was the conception of emanations, one of the three chief theories of existence, but the discussion of this we leave to the philosophers and theologians. The fifth and last step in the development of the triad is the conception of the Holy Trinity. The cycle is complete. As Wundt (*op. cit.*, p. 539) says: "Inbesondere bleibt die Göttertrias, wie sie wahrscheinlich die älteste Form der heiligen Drei gewesen, so auch die letzte und anschaulichste."

Taking a general survey of the entire field and of the manifold and varied uses of the symbolic 3 among all nations and all peoples, the conclusion has been reached that its use in general is due to 3 principal causes, in part to primitive conceptions, in part to the philosophical speculations of Pythagoras, Aristotle, and their followers, and, in certain spheres of its later development, to the conception of the Holy Trinity. The modern world is indeed a product of the past, and we can do no better than to conclude with Woelfflin (*Arch. f. lat. Lex.*, IX, 334: "Wenn wir heute sagen 'aller guten Dinge sind drei,' so befinden wir uns damit in Übereinstimmung sowohl mit dem Heidentume als mit dem Christentum."

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¹ It may be noted here that in Latin several uses of the present grew out of the conception that the present is only a variable point, a dividing line between the past and the future, and therefore has no time in and of itself.

² For the temporal triads see p. 59 *supra*.