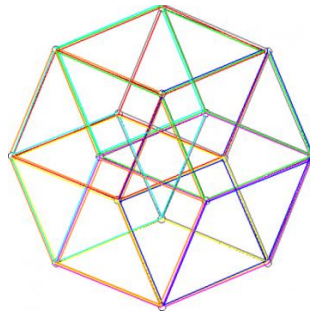


Part 2 – The Shift from an Industrial to a Planetary Civilization

by William Irwin Thompson

"We Irish think otherwise" Bishop Berkeley



Ice Age culture is organized around the single basin of attraction of the Great Mother. She is not so much fat as vast because she contains everything; we come from her in birth and return to her in death. In the terms of complex systems, the Great Mother is a point attractor. As such, this Ice Age culture was enormously stable and lasted from Chauvet Cave to Lascaux, or over twenty thousand years! But in the next pulse of culture, from Azilian to Mesolithic, there is a marked decline in beauty and craftsmanship. Why? Because humanity was hit with a series of catastrophes.

The transition from the Pleistocene to the Holocene involved the end of the Ice Age and a global melting of glaciers resulting in a rise of sea levels of 300 feet, and this rise engulfed the shore settlements where great numbers of our ancestors lived. The Mediterranean broke over its land bridge and flowed into the Black Sea and now archaeologists are finding many prehistoric settlements there under water. Myths of floods are to be found in Mesoamerica, Ireland, and the Near East for good reason. Then, after a period of warming, there was an oscillation back to a little Ice Age, and then again a warming period that encouraged the growth and gathering of wild grasses in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains; but agriculture did not start, and when it did, only slowly, around 8500 BCE. A whole new cultural system emerged, but it too would have its price as the proximity to domesticated animals brought forth new viruses and plagues. The birth of what is now the common cold was probably a case of the world's first swine or avian flu.

With the appearance of agricultural settlements human culture became organized around a periodic attractor, one that oscillated between the two states of urban and nomadic societies. Human culture became a story of cities and barbarian invasions. Thus we see that the transition from Ice Age hunting and gathering to agriculture involved a dark age, and so did the transition

from open agricultural villages to walled cities. “Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur” is a poem from 2000 BCE and is one of the great markers of the period of the ancient civilizations.



Hohle Fels

[figurine was sculpted from a woolly mammoth tusk and had broken into fragments, of which six have been recovered, with the left arm and shoulder still missing. In place of the head, the figurine — which probably took "tens if not hundreds of hours" to carve — has a perforated protrusion, which may have allowed its owner to wear it as an amulet.]

The transition from Ancient to Classical Civilizations is also characterized by a dark age, this one known as the Aegean Dark Age. And once again the unstable region of the Mediterranean basin, where the African and Nordic tectonic plates collide and push up the Alps along with all the Italian and Greek volcanoes, was probably responsible for the catastrophes this time. More than one gigantic volcanic explosion seems to have occurred, and tree rings in Ireland reveal that there were no summers for 18 years around 1159 BCE, and so there was a crisis of food resources and peoples were on the move in search of food. Minoan and Hittite civilizations fell, Indo-Europeans moved into northern India, Sea Peoples of refugees banded together in Viking-like groups of raiders, the Hebrews invaded Canaan, and the whole era of the Ancient Civilizations came to an end and a new cycle began. Slowly the Greek peoples recovered, and the movement from Homer to Plato and Aristotle became our Western founding story. The Swiss German cultural historian Jean Gebser sees this transition as the shift from the Mythic to the Mental structure of consciousness.

But the periodic attractor with two state-spaces, civilized and barbarian, did not disappear, and a sequence of waves of invasions from Central Asia caused Goths to move west and put pressure on Rome; so illiterate Huns, Goths, Vandals, and Mongols wrote their history with horse tracks across the single continent of Eurasia, of which Western Europe is nothing but a small peninsula. Down came Classical Civilization and a new dark age literally stepped forth.

This dark age is, of course, The Dark Age that we Americans learned about in school—or at least did in my grammar school days. It was not, however, a global dark age because the Eastern Roman Empire did not fall, and Byzantium and pre-Islamic Gondishapur in Persia were brilliant centers of learning that were followed by Baghdad's House of Wisdom that gave us algebra. India experienced a flourishing of mathematical and architectural developments that gave us our numerical system, and China shone forth in its brilliant period of the Tang Dynasty. In the Americas, our native civilizations were at their peak in a moment of climax succession right before the droughts, desiccation, and Mayan collapse set in.

It took Western Europe centuries to climb out of its period of darkness, and it was primarily thanks to its encounter with Islamic civilization that the primitive European Crusaders were able to return home and show what they had learned from Arabian and Persian hygiene, medicine, astronomy, philosophy, music, and poetry. In the thirteenth century, Western Europe experienced a brilliant period of cultural development in mathematics, architecture, philosophy, literature, and art. Islamic science and Greek classics filtered into Europe through Palermo and Andalusia, and the Troubadors and Dante began to feel the early beginnings of the Renaissance. But then came the "calamitous fourteenth century" and the Black Death.

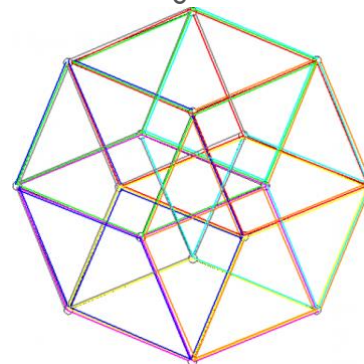
The bubonic plague is estimated to have killed a third to a half of the population of Europe. Once again, the transition from medieval civilization to modern is characterized by a catastrophe bifurcation. And as has happened before in evolution—from anaerobic bacteria to dinosaurs—the catastrophe also had positive effects.

The massive die-back of the human population served to bring down the system of feudalism with its exploitation of serfs and laboring classes because there were no longer enough people around to do the work. The value and esteem of the individual increased. The craftsman began his slow ascent from being a domestic servant or lowly tradesman to a valued specialist, a foundation for international trade and commerce, and as an artist, a visionary of new worlds. Capitalism was born in catastrophe, and it is now clear that it will also live out its old age in another period of catastrophe.

The most likely transition from industrial to planetary civilization is, therefore a dark age, as has been intimated by thinkers as different as city planner Jane Jacobs and artist Gustav Metzger. (See *Nature*, October 1, p. 598). But human beings are masters of denial, so it will not be the generation that prospered under industrial growth and development that will be able to perceive this end of an epoch. It will be the generation now being born that will be able to perceive time and history in ways we can't.

The artist is someone who is a foreigner in his native land and an alien in his own time, because he sees in his imagination the time that has not yet happened. (See my "Manhattan Morning" in these pages.) But what we also learn from complex systems is that modern civilization is a chaotic attractor and that time is open and unpredictable and sensitive to initial conditions—the proverbial butterfly's wings flapping in Africa and starting the cascade that ends with a hurricane in Florida.

What artists and prophets see in their visions is not the future, but the quantum potential states of the present before they collapse into the causal linearity of a classical Newtonian physical system. Prophecy is merely the sensitivity to the implications of the present, and just as Heisenberg showed that our measurement and perception of a physical system cannot both predict its momentum and location, so our consciousness of a system is part of it and can change its outcome. (Notice that none of Edgar Cayce's famous prophecies for the nineteen-nineties has come true.) So if our young men will see visions and our old men will dream dreams, (Acts 2:17), then the End Time is not a line but a multifaceted hypercube in which the facets are possible faces of actuality.



It is in this spirit that cultural historians take the long view, and I can be a catastrophist and optimist at the same time. Although I expect that there will be a catastrophic transition between industrial and planetary civilization, in the coming columns I shall be a gradualist and sketch out some tiny steps to lay down a path in walking into a new civilization. Watch this hyperspace!



Poet and cultural historian William Irwin Thompson contributes his column Thinking Otherwise on Fridays for Wild River Review. Inspired by the mathematician [Ralph Abraham](#), Thompson designed a K-12 evolution of consciousness curriculum for the Ross School in East Hampton, New York, and it has been in use for the last fourteen years.