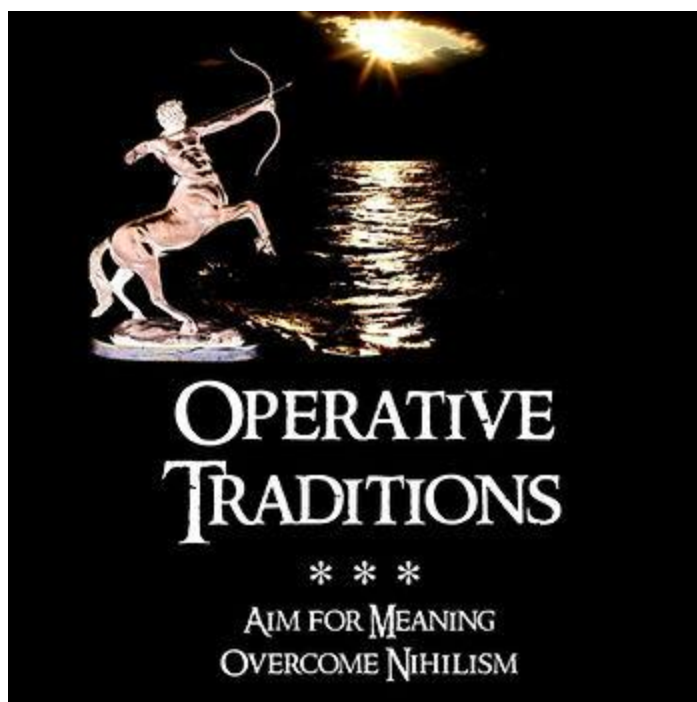


Operative Traditions - Introduction

Aiming for *meaning*,

by [Miguel A. Fernandez](#)



The main objective of the [four volumes of Operative Traditions](#) is to develop a multidisciplinary approach that defines human goals which relate to the frenetic processes of change taking place at all levels in today's world.

Probably more than ever before, in today's societies there is extreme uncertainty about the future. Amidst a highly networked world characterized by an unprecedented degree of complexity, the aim of defining goals for the human condition appears to be very much compromised by the massive mobilization of technological and economic means at a worldwide scale, a mobilization that has incentivized a dizzy perception of things which challenges any synthetic and stable view.

As a consequence of the latter, the overflow of technological and economic means fosters exponential production of information in *real-time*, inducing also a human cult of the present moment and leaving very little time for addressing the past and the future. These dynamics

have created a modern society where *means* have defeated *meanings*, a society where the individual attachment to all sort of means appears as a desperate intention of keeping up a human identity, in a world where the frenetic dynamics of both communication and transport are constantly dissolving all former boundaries and human identities.

In today's urban-industrial societies it is also easy to observe that the human condition appears to be desperately subservient to the dynamics imposed by the means (especially in the case of technological and economic means). Whereas in more traditional cultures the goal is to attain a human mastery of means, in today's societies the means impose their demands as never before, and the human condition clearly appears to be experiencing a twilight, especially in terms of how to configure these means so they can serve to artistically expose the highest virtues of the human condition, as already occurred in the grandiose cultures of the past.

And yet this is not a new problem. It was already diagnosed more than a century ago, as a key philosophical problem...

* * *

Since the 20th century it was often claimed that we live in a society characterized by a human crisis or human *decadence*. Many philosophers have addressed this issue in the past and have aimed to point out the motives that underlay a sentiment that spread wide in Western thought, especially before the two World Wars. Particularly in the case of the key insights on the issue provided by Oswald Spengler and José Ortega y Gasset, these early 20th century philosophers considered that the motives of such decadence were linked exclusively to *cultural factors*.

During the decades before World War I a massive development took place in the industrialized world, a development that catalyzed growth in the economic sphere, in technology, industry and in demographics. Consequently, in these realms of human activity it seemed totally implausible to refer to any type of decadence; rather, a sense of social optimism and euphoria in human progress impregnated the most active and frenetic developments.

So it might certainly appear as *paradoxical* that several important philosophers were addressing the issue of decadence during times when growth at all levels was rampant, and when the feelings of social euphoria hadn't yet clashed against the hard circumstances imposed by World War I and World War II. Intuitively, the terms *growth* and *decadence* have both rather opposite meanings, so it appears here as very convenient to understand how both dynamics of growth and cultural decadence could have been compatible during the first years

of the 20th century. And in this respect, several decades before such crucial years, already Friedrich Nietzsche had provided his striking diagnosis: *nihilism*. These are his words:

“What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect”(1).

Nihilism is a human state that shall be addressed in all volumes of Operative Traditions (especially in [*Operative Traditions II – Nigredo*](#)). By now, let’s introduce a definition that can be as briefly as possible... It can be affirmed that nihilism corresponds to a human state that denies the possibility of *meaning* in life. *Meaning* was already implicit in former historical religious frameworks (Christianity, Islam, Kabbalah, etc.) in the form of a *teleonomy* [From the Greek: τέλος, “objective”, “purpose”] where human salvation is considered to be directly linked to the possibility of gaining theological knowledge of such goal. But during modernity these religious frameworks became progressively incapable of revealing the ultimate meaning of a vast set of novel developments taken place in society, politics, economy and industry, which all demanded a more rational, scientific, mathematical and analytical approach. These latter methodologies all deny any *teleonomy* or *meaning*, since their focus is ultimately over the *means*. Consequently, the capacity to control and predict the development in time of the most diverse means (material, natural, economic, technical...) was the main goal of the novel modes of knowledge -such as modern science- that supplanted the old religious frameworks, not necessarily in the minds and belief-systems of the individual, but in the style by which humans related actively to the forces operating upon the earth.

Nihilism is always the initial state of departure in the [*four volumes of Operative Traditions*](#), a departure that is presented in order to provide eventually the reader with a vision that becomes eventually capable of overcoming such state. And in all volumes is also constantly emphasized that the attainment of such vision *is not exclusively an intellectual endeavor...* This assumption, which is always implicit in these four essays, surpasses the tendency of modern thought to deposit exacerbated hope in the capacity of human subjectivity when aiming to understand the processes that take place in the human spirit, in nature and in the cosmos at large. Also in these volumes is superseded the hope that is still today projected in the

typical aspiration towards objectivity that characterizes the ideals of modern science. Ultimately, these two modalities of hope deny validity to any mode of knowledge that can't be framed in conceptual structures, or in other words, *in modern thought only what is successfully framed into concepts is accepted as valid knowledge*. Not only this presupposition is one of the most damaging seeds of nihilism, but also it implicitly assumes that ideas are only to be considered valid to the extent they can be explained or conceptualized. If anyone asks all those great surfers *how* they are capable of “dancing with the waves of nature”, their response shall always be absolutely mute.

What's more, as is shown in [*Operative Traditions II – Nigredo*](#) the realm of philosophy also became infected by this nihilistic seed of finding an explanation for everything, thus deriving mostly into a mere recreational activity where intellectual speculation lost all contact with the forces operating in one's time, in one's life, in one's experiences, and in one's relation to the world. Even Nietzsche himself pointed out the rather *insipid* deterioration of speculative philosophical activity and wrote: “*The history of philosophy is a secret raging against the preconditions of life, against the value feelings of life, against partisanship in favor of life. Philosophers have never hesitated to affirm a world provided it contradicted this world and furnished them with a pretext for denying this world*”(2)

Yet as an “antidote” for the latter, in all of the Operative Traditions volumes is always proposed an approach to reality that is firstly based in awakening the extraordinary faculties of the human senses. These faculties have become extremely numbed in modern times, yet once these senses are awakened like “antennas” they provide access to a realm of first-hand experience characterized by a type of knowledge that, although unexplainable, nonetheless isn't less efficacious upon reality. Hence, this type of knowledge is neither conceptual nor dialectical, but *operative*. The word *operative* derives originally from the Latin term *Opus/Operis* and refers essentially to a type of work that aims to manifest in nature a symbolic meaning. An *operative* activity allows individual participation in the mysteries that link the natural and the supernatural, providing a first-hand and direct experience with the world where human life acquires *meaning*, and where all nihilist despair becomes simply inconceivable.

One of the key features of this type of operative knowledge is that the barrier between subject and object is dissolved, and an “extension” of the human faculties is then defined with the means at reach. Renown Canadian scholar, Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), researched deeply into these “extensions of man” and not only did he conceive them as the key artistic

predispositions which define culture and communication, but also showed how through technological means these “extensions” are directly linked to specific human perceptive faculties. The fact that these “extensions” neither can be explained nor easily observed doesn’t deny their decisive power when operating upon reality, even with one’s eyes closed.

The dissolution of this subject-object barrier also dissolves *dualism*, not in theory but in practice. Let’s briefly recall that dualism derives from a historical Judeo-Christian mindset that essentially defines a strict separation between creator and creation. This separation is in-existent in Pagan cultures, and yet has infiltrated very powerfully into most realms of modern culture, to the extent that even many of those who aim to recover the memory of the powerful Pagan *ethos* are unaware that they are intending it often from a dualist standpoint. Therefore, overcoming dualism is the first requirement in order to overcome nihilism, a requirement that implies focusing in the *categories of experience*, rather than in the *categories of thought*. This encourages an *active nihilism*, a path where *works speak louder than words*. And along this path the first step is to approach the powers of time, not from a speculative standpoint but from an *operative* one.

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As the initial aim of an operative discipline, the dissolution of dualism requires a very different approach to the specific technical means that allow us establish a relation with nature (tools, weapons, methods, techniques, etc.), especially when compared to the approach that characterizes modern techno-science. This approach carries us, in all volumes of Operative Traditions, to the depths of the *technical phenomenon* already addressed by French philosopher, Jacques Ellul (1912-1994). Whereas in an operative discipline the pursuit is to progressively relate to the *meaning of the means*, in modern techno-science the focus is exclusively on the means, aiming for maximum efficiency and wield. But focusing on means necessarily implies *reductionism*; it implies defining strict boundaries between the means, and consequently a denial of any meaning that can connect their dynamics. Also, this type of reductionist focus assumes that means are passively obedient to *laws* that do not vary on time.

Operative disciplines impregnated entirely the work of the medieval guilds and corporations, and during such pre-modern period, the Operative Freemasons were entitled to further develop such spirit towards its higher architectural and sacred-imperial expression, which was mostly affirmed in Gothic culture. This was a time when it was assumed that *culture can only exist to the extent it can be artistically built...* Although this radical assumption on cul-

ture was fiercely embraced by the Knight Templars as the “building of the Temple” ([See here](#)) it seems completely incomprehensible to the modern worldview, and this is so because the self-same origins of modern thought were historically uprooted in the 14th century from a much deeper vision of the universe where humans are not assumed as passive receptors of formal knowledge, but as *active creators* of it. The Copernican revolution ran parallel to the overthrow of such heretic vision, and as a consequence, a gap was progressively widened between the dynamics of nature and the human capacity to work on providing a transcendent and symbolic meaning to such natural dynamics.

This gap was later aimed to be filled with a type of knowledge that was no longer *operative* but *speculative*... In effect, not only most religions progressively adopted a speculative and moralistic character –as well expressed in Protestantism- but even the basic assumptions of modern science are also purely speculative, regardless of the claims of those who believe that modern science was originally built upon unquestionable foundations. For instance, even Descartes’ faith that nature can only be known by measurement was contradicted by Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in 1927. What’s more, the concept of “measurement” simply does not exist in an operative discipline, since in these disciplines it is not about *comparing* nature with any rational and abstract scheme, but rather about allowing nature *flourish* towards creations that symbolically expose the transcendent forces that effectively determine the dynamics of nature, therefore allowing the *higher truth of nature* (that which Martin Heidegger referred to as *Wirklichkeit*)(3) to end up being affirmed in nature herself, and not affirmed in a set of abstract constructions of the human mind.

As History shows, modern thought no longer aimed to surrender to the authority of the old cosmologies and religions, and it was after the Middle-Ages that a new human adventure commenced *from scratch*, where it was assumed that the forces that govern the destiny of both humans and matter were to be progressively revealed by timeless laws, that is to say, governed by formal and abstract laws which were assumed as capable to even substitute both the deities and transcendent powers that were formerly implicit in the old religious, operative and spiritual frameworks. During those centuries, the Operative Freemasons finally disappeared from the cultural scene, and were substituted by the Speculative Freemasons in London, during 1717. This event coincided historically with the greatest hope in the power of science to unravel all mysteries of the universe and to entrap such mysteries into formal laws. By resorting on old alchemical notions, Goethe constantly criticized such *Mephistopheles* po-

sition yet was completely outshined by the prestige gained by Isaac Newton in the scientific realm of the West.

And yet those who were seduced by Isaac Newton's *Principia* believed that the scientific unveiling of such laws constituted a progressive production in History of a sort of "ultimate cosmic ruler". As shown in [Operative Traditions I](#), it was precisely in the philosophical school of *transcendental idealism* (i.e. Immanuel Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Fichte...) where is very much implicit such assumption, an assumption that is exposed in [Volume I](#) to be extremely limited, especially in terms of the real, direct and *first-hand* modes of experience an individual can gain with the external world.

This "ultimate cosmic ruler" was supposed to be composed of a set of laws and fixed categories that act beyond the boundaries of time and space, and consequently, such ruler was assumed to have the same status and power as any of the former transcendent and religious modes of knowledge. Ultimately the core project of modern science was to effectuate a gradual process of revelation of a formal type of knowledge supposedly capable to predict and control the behavior of all things in the universe.

So based on a purely reductionist focus which aspires to predict the behavior of things in time, if there is consequently any *meaning* in the fields specifically addressed by modern science, such meaning are expected to be revealed in the *future*, not only in the case of the physical dynamics of matter, but also in the case of human lives, societies, entire civilizations and the universe, which were all conceived as *passive matter*. Modern science denies that there is any meaning in the present moment and assumes that such meaning is revealed exclusively in the future, that the laws that compose the "ultimate cosmic ruler" shall be verified as only valid in the future, once all events are expected to comply passively to such rational guidelines. The sociological projection of this type of reductionist view generated the ideology of *progress*, which also assumes that human salvation no longer requires any teleological or operative framework, and that such salvation is to also be expected in the future; an expectation that grants hope, optimism, and the feeling that tomorrow shall be better than today, that tomorrow justifies today, that tomorrow redeems today and provides meaning to all of today's actions and deeds...

Based on Oswald Spengler's and Ortega y Gasset's insights on the history of civilizations and culture, the fact that most of modern societies no longer aimed to inherit the old traditions of the past and became much more focused in the supposedly redemptive power of the

future through the ideology of progress can be a behavior conceived as a human expression of decadence, especially by considering –as very much pointed out by Spengler- that the more powerful cultures of the past were much more devoted to a cult of their legendary and mythical past, instead of a cult of the future. And yet by means of the *spell* caused by the ideology of progress, such decadence went hand in hand with a feeling of hope, optimism and confidence; a state of mind where life is believed to find its meaning, not now, but in the future.

In essence, one of the key symptoms of nihilism is the unquestioned assumption that the value of life ought to be found in the future, instead of in the present moment. Even Nietzsche wasn't completely immune to such nihilism and historicism, because the German thinker assumed his *Superman* figure to be the ultimate goal which would provide *in the future* a higher meaning to the human species. As Nietzsche writes in his Zarathustra: "*Perhaps not you yourselves, my brothers! But you could transform yourselves into forefathers and ancestors of the Superman: and let this be your finest creating!*"(4)...

Yet it ought to be questioned what actually impedes Nietzsche's Superman to exist in the present moment.

Aiming Towards the Power of the Present

But before the ideology of progress became infiltrated like a Trojan horse inside the basic premises of modern thought (as occurred clearly with evolutionism and all its particular branches) there existed a more powerful idea of progress which is related to the conditions of existence of the present moment. This idea of progress goes hand in hand with a much more qualitative understanding of time, where every single fact that is directly experienced by the senses responds to a *meaning* or *teleonomy* that is already present, yet not necessarily acknowledged by the individual. In these contexts, the knowledge of *time* is equivalent to the knowledge of the *spirit of time*, this is, equivalent to the knowledge of the patterns of behavior that characterize other living beings and natural dynamics, since it is precisely this knowledge what provides a symbiosis with the meaning of a given fact, or in other words, it integrates and assimilates such fact, a key requirement of any life form.

Without this symbiosis, facts are perceived by consciousness as simply random and chaotic. But if a being is capable of predicting the higher meaning of a phenomenon, *mastery* then

emerges as a state of being that verifies in the present moment the existence of such meaning. If any living being can predict the dynamics of its environment during present circumstances, such being also gains a *mastery* over the powers of its time, this is, over the *spirit of its time*. This is well demonstrated in the animal kingdom, where the predatory power of a wild species upon another species demands the capacity to anticipate the prey's behavior in *real-time* circumstances. Amidst complex ecological conditions where flora and fauna are interconnected through a very delicate web of relations, superiority of one species upon the other is not determined by the brute physical capacity of a given species, but by how such physical capacity can act as a means to develop a *technique* which can harness the energy of the prey in its own advantage, such as occurs very clearly in the case of the technique of Aikido masters when defeating their opponents with very subtle yet powerful gestures, gestures that cause their opponents to “backfire” the momentum of their movements against themselves. In this martial arts context, the understanding of the specific meaning of a human gesture is of crucial importance, as it allows to master whatever means are used during tensions and conflict. An exposition of these main operative premises is developed in [*Operative Traditions I*](#) by pointing out the personal experiences of German philosopher, Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955) when learning *kyūdō* (traditional Japanese archery) during the 1930s in Japan. Along this pursuit the experiences of Herrigel are framed in *Operative Traditions Volume I* under a much unknown philosophical framework: the *Theory and Phenomenology of the Absolute Individual*, developed by Italian Philosopher, Julius Evola (1898-1974), during the same years.

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In [*Operative Traditions III – Albedo*](#) is exposed the crucial importance of energy as a key factor for acquiring mastery of phenomena with our own perceptive faculties and techniques, yet the concept of energy that is exposed in such volume greatly differs from the concept employed in modern techno-science/engineering and resembles much more the *Ch'í* Eastern notion. The bridge established in this book between the Western and Eastern notion of energy is elaborated through basic home-made experiments and some brief explanations on thermodynamics, which both constitute the basic frameworks required in order to build such West-East bridge. And along this exposition it is didactically demonstrated how *meaning* is implicit in the present moment, as a symbolic configuration that allows life at large to defeat temporarily the energetic decay defined at all levels by the 2nd law of thermodynamics. This conclusion is of utmost importance, as it first exposes the fact that teleonomy is ubiquitously operating in the present moment, and as a corollary of the former deduction, it is also concluded in such

volume that human actions and works are necessarily integrated in such teleonomy, regardless of the modern tendency to constantly deny it, although the masters in operative disciplines like to refer to such teleonomy as “IT”, especially *when pointing out* the existence of such teleonomy in a higher realm that is not accessible to the grey clouds of intellectual speculation. However, such denial did not exist during the flourishing of Gothic culture in the Middle-Ages, and during such times the only way to demonstrate such teleonomy was to actually *produce it*, in the form of a cosmology that materialized in architectural configurations and art.

The idea of *Opera/Opus* that impregnated Gothic culture implied the chance of individual participation in a meaning of life at all levels, by building such meaning through operative disciplines, and consequently, in this cultural atmosphere any trace of nihilism (this is, that the value of life is inexistent in the present moment) was completely absent. Here, the effective production of magical phenomena that transcend the boundaries of time, space and causality implied necessarily to hypothesize the existence of teleonomy operating at all levels, and also demanded realizing that the teleonomic “attractor” of all and every event is not fixed in time but rather is constantly varying in time, in the same way an excellent architect or engineer has to often improvise the final idea of a building or machine when all sort of unexpected contingencies emerge during the actual *work-in-process* construction. This teleonomic “attractor” was referred by the extinguished Operative Freemasons as the *Great Architect of the Universe*.

Based on this qualitative and creative concept of time, *the future is assumed to be produced in the present moment*; in other words, we don’t have to wait for the future because *it is already here*, operating in the present. Hence, if according to this idea of time the future determines teleonomically the outcome of phenomena in the present moment, some might be inclined to hypothesize that a mere intellectual description of such final “plan” is feasible before such production actually takes place. This intellectual temptation corresponds to that of controlling the outcome of phenomena through a speculative and subjective approach which necessarily denies any capacity of the dynamics of matter to be self-determining. But precisely in an Operative Tradition is eventually revealed in practice the fact that matter is by no means as “inert” as assumed by modern science, but that all matter actually has implicit potentials for evolvment towards higher states of organization. Alchemy, in the most operative sense of the word, assumes that human work upon nature ought to respect these potentials and contribute to catalyze their transformation. This type of operative work is what provides

richness to nature, in the sense that all element of nature participates and contributes in a creation that expresses the complete fulfillment of life at all levels.

But especially after the Industrial Revolution, both the availability of fossil-fuel energy and the capacity to channel such energy into mechanical work allowed human activity to be technically able to repress the self-determining potentials of nature. This capacity for controlling the forces of nature provided modern culture with the “mirage” of “the power of humanity upon nature through techno-science”, still very present in our times. But why is this a “mirage”?... The key explanations are provided in detail in [*Operative Traditions IV – Rubedo*](#), but let’s initially present one of the doctrinal assumptions of an operative discipline, which presupposes a key spiritual subject-object correlation... According to this presupposition, *the way an individual works upon nature at a microcosmic scale corresponds perfectly to the way nature works upon the same individual at a macroscopic scale*. So a simple corollary of this proposition is that an individual who aims to exploit nature by resorting to techniques of control that repress nature’s self-determining capacity is actually being exploited and controlled by nature at large, hence impeding such individual to gain any self-determination, or in other words: impeding any freedom. Consequently, the material wealth that is controlled – not *mastered*- by such individuals or organizations actually ends up controlling them, this is, rendering them into passive objects of mobilization that serve the greater works of nature at large; greater works which never halt. As occurs in modern science, the success in controlling phenomena is expected to be verified in the future, so inevitably the only consolation of those individuals who are controlled by the forces of nature at large is to hope their true human values shall be liberated in the future, after the human experiment developed by nature takes place in the urban-industrial *laboratory*. Here is again extremely present the spell caused by the modern ideology of *progress*.

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By re-dignifying the creative potentials of nature after seven centuries of intense techno-industrial repression, [all volumes of Operative Traditions](#) aim to enlighten the *meaning of the earth*. As formerly pointed out, this *meaning* is not intended to be discovered in the future, but in the present moment. By relying extensively on the excellent works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, A.K. Coomaraswamy, Jacques Ellul, Ernst Jünger, Julius Evola, R.A. Schwaller De Lubicz and many other authors, in these volumes is assumed that the root of all of today’s planetary unbalances and crisis can be traced back to the moment when the human species began to tyrannically impose upon nature a set of abstract notions on nature herself; such is

the core source of today's conflicts and unbalances. This imposition was technically feasible due to the power provided by fossil-fuels, but as a consequence, the self-determining powers of the earth were no longer felt as *present* by human senses, and an unprecedented alienation from nature emerged in the urban-industrial populations at large. This alienation is constantly consoled by the ideology of progress, not only justifying human passivity but even providing a happy and euphoric outlook to such human surrendering to chronological time.

But the recovery of a direct presence with the earth's creative potentials allows access to a more powerful idea of time, an idea of time that is shared by all living beings and that also connects all living beings. This long-range communion of all beings is the *opera of life* – which is explained in detail in [*Operative Traditions IV – Rubedo*](#)- and such *opera* is an inexhaustible source of *meaning* for all beings that participate in it, allowing all works, arts and productions to become harmonically integrated, just like during the construction of a grandiose palace amidst a mysterious and remote forest. The miracle that takes place in these extraordinary constructions is never explained in history books, and this is so because such miracles only pertain to the realm of legend and myth.

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(1) Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Will To Power*, Vintage Books Edition September, 1968, PREFACE (Nov. 1887-March 1888) (2) Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Will To Power*, Vintage Books Edition September, 1968, 461 (March-June 1888) (3) Martin Heidegger. *The Question Concerning Technology*. Garland Publishing, INC. New York & London 1977, 158

(4) Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Penguin Books.