

John Michael Archer. *Technically Alive: Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

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What does the Renaissance poetry of paradox, euphuism, rhetorical antithesis, and dialectical aporia have in common with thinking by reversal of modern philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, and their postmodern successors, Derrida, Foucault, and Agamben? Can we productively match the *skepsis*, *askesis*, and nihilism of Shakespeare's sonnets with the *skepsis*, *askesis*, and nihilism of the philosophers? These are the kinds of questions that emerge from a reading of John Michael Archer's recent contribution to the comparative study of Renaissance literature and philosophy. Archer has identified points of contact between Shakespeare's philosophical poetry and modern philosophers on technology and life — terms, words, and intricate modes of thought; in doing so, Archer gives us Shakespeare on the philosophers rather than philosophers on Shakespeare. The originality of his approach lies in the choice of technology in relation to ontology, rather than approaching the sonnets through the route of ethics or the philosophy of language. For Archer, taking his cue from Heidegger, poetry itself brings things into being; therefore, it straddles the gap between technology and life. His project is grounded in the intellectual sophistication of "a collection of poems written on the cusp of modern technology" (6), which enables him to reveal many Shakespearean anticipations of modern philosophy. In tracing these "echoey associations" (145) he succeeds in showing us that "technology, life and consciousness are tied together in an exigent knot" (1).

Archer's method of proceeding may not increase your enjoyment of the sonnets, however, if you do not appreciate sentences that snake together, often zigzagging in different diachronic directions, and juxtaposing numerous quotations. To his credit he is able to engage the philosophical tradition as fully present, but the decision to omit original dates of publication means that the reader often can't appreciate the radical repositioning of these philosophers' texts. For example, if Heidegger will eventually be admitted as Hitler's willing philosopher (182–83), then it is essential to be able to place his works in a historical trajectory; to have them cited as 1977, 1993, or 2001 frustrates the reader's thinking on the issues raised. Long disquisitions on Heidegger's approach to technology and being (nineteen publications by him alone are cited in the references, quantifiably more of the book may be dedicated to him than to Shakespeare), often subjected to critique from earlier, contemporary, and later philosophers (as well as those mentioned above, who are the most frequently cited, these range from Marx to Nancy and Rancière, from Plato to Benjamin and Lacoue-Labarthe), while impressive in their range, can effect the reader as dizzying rather than enlightening. Archer's "near readings" (18) of Shakespeare's poems are most productive when he brings the philosophers' concepts to an analysis of particular poetic words — puns, etymologies, homologies, and word clusters, such as his reading of "store" in relation to Heidegger's standing-reserve (*Bestand*); his delvings into aristocratic unproductive breeding in relation to

the young man of the procreation sonnets; his insights into the poet-speaker's claims for immortality, revising Agamben's form-of-life; his consideration of blackness and darkness under the heading revaluation; and his probing of the problematic final two Cupid's bath sonnets in relation to the inoperative in a way that ties them firmly to the series. His readings across the animal-human divide and his linking of machine technology to two early modern examples (via the virginal-player and the print shop's compositor), although less successful, invite further cogitation. Archer is alive to the multitudinous — and contradictory — meanings that can be extracted from these cunning poems in a way that offers a no-holds-barred model for pursuing literature as thought. But perhaps Archer's greatest achievement is to expand the meanings of the word technology itself, from agricultural land use to aristocratic primogeniture, from *poiêsis* to early modern machines, from *Gestell* as installation to technical life as a kind of storage. By declining to construct a clear line of reasoning that would work out similarities and differences, synthesize disparate viewpoints, float possible historical bases for Renaissance-modern mirrorings, or point up implications for present and future considerations of technology and life, Archer leaves the reader with much to puzzle out on his or her own.

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