

*Technology and the Early Modern Self* by  
Adam Max Cohen

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 (ISBN 9780230609877).  
268pp.

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Adam Max Cohen's newest publication, *Technology and the Early Modern Self*, is a book both ambitious and humble in its scope, and one that does not disappoint the reader with its reach. Had Cohen set out to give an overview of all the advances in technology and their impact, this would be a daunting and, invariably, disappointing book. Wisely, he instead limits his approach and centers on a few key technologies and traits. Cohen says his aim is not to 'provide a comprehensive analysis of all of the myriad ways in which technologies encouraged or facilitated particular personality traits' (p. 212). Instead, he aims to bring these two major parts of early modern studies — that of technology, and that of the self — into dialogue with each other.

Divided into four parts, each section of Cohen's book focuses on a different technology and a different facet of the self. Part one, containing a single chapter, discusses the mechanical clock and the idea of discipline that it came to represent. Part two focuses on the technology of the press, and is further subdivided into three chapters: the first focusing on Erasmus, the second on Spenser, and the third on Jonson. Cohen uses each of these authors, and the framework of the printing press, to talk about ambition, particularly authorial ambition. The third part of the book discusses military technology and advances, and pairs this with the traits of physical and mental agility and versatility. Finally, in the fourth part of *Technology and the Early Modern Self*, Cohen discusses 'the relationship between optical technologies and perspective' (p. 19). This final section of the book is also divided

into three chapters: the first providing some history and perspective on refracting technologies and their impact, while the second and third chapters discuss telescopes and microscopes, respectively, and their effect on perspective. Perspective, in this case, is ‘the sense the OED defines as, “The relation or proportion in which the parts of a subject are viewed by the mind; the aspect of a matter or object of thought, as perceived from a particular mental ‘point of view’”’ (p. 19). The third and fourth sections also contain the majority of the figures present in the book.

Presenting his findings and arguments in a well laid out manner without frills, Cohen is utterly convincing. He teases out the complexities involved, particularly when talking about the printing press and the pretenses of humility many of the authors put on. The case of Erasmus claiming his friends forced him to publish, or that his works were stolen and published without his permission, is particularly notable. Erasmus needed the printing press for his authorial name and reputation, but it would also be his undoing. Cohen uses Erasmus to speak about authorial ambition and how the printing press allowed that to flourish. Though Cohen’s conclusions may sometimes seem self-evident, it can be almost guaranteed that no reader will have articulated them before. Putting a pleasant voice to all that needs to be said, he never belittles his audience but instead calmly elucidates his thoughts until the reader finds themselves nodding along in agreement.

An author who is very forthright with his audience, Cohen makes it known from the beginning that he is not an engineer, and he raises the question of what right he, as a literature professor, has to discuss technology. Cohen defends himself by telling the audience that there is a relationship between the fine arts and the mechanical arts, and that *poiēsis* is also a form of *technē*. What’s more, he refer-

ences Heidegger's belief that 'some topics are best studied obliquely' (p. 14). Regardless of whether these arguments sway the reader, Cohen's methodology is more than convincing.

Though he is a literature professor, Cohen approaches his topic from multiple angles. Take the example of the mechanical clock and the trait of discipline. Cohen, of course, references literary texts to make his point connecting the clock with discipline. He speaks about Thomas More's *Utopia*, François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and Jean Froissart's poem *The Clock of Love*, amongst others. However, these are not the only examples and evidence Cohen gives: he speaks of paintings and drawings, the recalling how earliest of which 'show the female figure of *Temperantia* with a clock beside her' (p. 27). He also recalls the etymological history embodied in paintings of Temperance with a pitcher, linking the words and their roots — time (*tempus*), temperance (*temperantia*), and proper mixture (*temperamentum*). Even further, he recounts the historical event of the building of the first public clock in Paris, using this event to make sense of contemporary literature. This interdisciplinary approach ensures that readers from all disciplines will find an approach they can identify with. Furthermore, it serves as a valuable reminder to students and academics not to disregard evidence from a particular field, simply because it is not their own.

The style of the book is extremely accessible. Reading *Technology and the Early Modern Self* does not require the audience to hold a doctorate in the topic, nor must they have had any prior interest: Cohen's straightforward manner combined with his enthusiasm and accessible prose is enough to grab any reader's interest. For academics, Cohen presents many new points and perspectives, while for those with no prior knowledge of this subject, Cohen provides a gripping introduction. After writing such an accessible and inspiring study,

there is no doubt that others will follow in Cohen's interdisciplinary footsteps and continue the investigation he has begun.

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