

# Culture

BOOKS | FILM | MUSIC

[BOOKS]

## Student Power

FREEDOM'S ORATOR: MARIO SAVIO AND THE RADICAL LEGACY OF THE 1960s by Robert Cohen  
Oxford University Press, 2009

Review by Bettina Aptheker

**J**UST BEFORE THANKSGIVING 2009, regents of the University of California, in defiance of unanimous faculty and student opposition, voted to raise fees for admission to University of California schools by 32 percent. Even with financial aid programs proposed by the UC President's Office, this fee increase will force many students to withdraw from school and many others to never seek admission. As is so often the case in such situations, it is students of color who will be particularly impacted in a state in which 57.4 percent of the population—an absolute majority—are people of color. The regents' actions precipitated rolling waves of protests, including sit-ins, by thousands of students on five campuses. At UC Berkeley, police in full riot gear were particularly and gratuitously violent, and several students were seriously injured.

Students in today's protests draw upon a rich history of student activism in the 1960s, some of which is described in this excellent biography of Mario Savio, who led the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley in 1964. This biography could not be more relevant or more prescient in its historical sweep and in the issues galvanizing student activists a generation ago.

On December 2, 1964, more than a thousand students under the leadership of the Free Speech Movement occupied Sproul Hall, the administration building at the University of California, Berkeley. They were protesting restrictions on freedom of speech that the regents had enforced to prevent student participation in the civil rights movement, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area. The previous spring, students had successfully mobilized massive protests against the widespread racial

discrimination in hiring practices in the hotel industry, auto sales, and banking. Within two weeks of the December 2 sit-in, the regents reluctantly passed a resolution stating that henceforth their regulations "would not go beyond the purview of the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution." They were forced to do this after an overwhelming majority of UC Berkeley faculty voted to support the Free Speech Movement, and graduate students and staff went out on a strike sanctioned by the Labor Council. Twenty thousand students attended the consequent victory rally.

The Free Speech Movement sent shock waves through campuses across the country and the world, resulting in changes in university regulations and educational access, teach-ins against the war in Vietnam, and (within three years) the historic, pro-democracy student uprisings in Paris and Prague, Mexico City and Santiago. Among the UC Berkeley students who led and participated in the Free Speech Movement were Jack Weinberg, who is now an international leader of Greenpeace; Jackie Goldberg, who until her recent retirement was a member of the California State Legislature; Rabbi Michael Lerner, now editor of *Tikkun*; and Susan Griffin, feminist author of a dozen best-selling books. Hundreds of others, steeled in the movement's fires, have gone on to distinguished professional careers in every imaginable field and have become partisans for progressive and radical social change. Although this was very much a collective, democratic movement fashioned after the participatory democracy of the Southern Civil Rights Movement, our acknowledged leader was Mario Savio, a twenty-one-year-old philosophy major and veteran of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project.



Mario Savio (center), Bettina Aptheker (right), 1964.

In this book Robert Cohen has written a definitive biography of Mario Savio. He accomplishes the complex task of interweaving Mario's personal story with that of his political engagements, and deftly ties both to the history of the peace and social justice movements that followed. Among Cohen's many strengths as a biographer is his almost uncanny ability to understand Savio's motivations, to see the goodness of his heart, and to honestly consider the psychological demons Savio worked so hard to overcome.

Mario was wounded in childhood by, among many things, sexual abuse. He stammered so badly that he required years of speech therapy. He was a lapsed Catholic who had left the church but deeply believed in the compassion of Jesus and the most radical traditions of liberation theology. As Cohen accurately shows, Mario shunned ideological dogma and celebrity and rebuked administrative incompetence and arrogance during his leadership of the Free Speech Movement. He went on to become a brilliant theoretical physicist for whom a theorem was named. He was a loving husband, an adoring father, and a devoted friend. He died tragically and prematurely in November 1996, well before his sixtieth birthday, while campaigning to stop a proposed hike in student fees at Sonoma State University, where he was a lecturer in mathematics, physics, and philosophy.

In courageously discussing issues of child sexual abuse, Cohen exemplifies a feminist awareness of the ways in which the personal and the political are intertwined. And when Savio engaged in a political *or personal* struggle, as Cohen demonstrates, he studied relevant experiences, spiritual practices, theories and laws, legislative mandates, and university regulations all

with uncommon attention, perceiving the logic behind them and analyzing their personal, political, economic, and social implications. Mario's eloquence, his belief in goodness and redemption, his personal horror at the suffering he saw in pictures of the Holocaust from his post-World War II childhood, and that he witnessed in the Mississippi in the 1960s, Vietnam in the 1970s, Nicaragua in the 1980s, and Latino/Chicano immigrant communities in California in the 1990s, shaped his life. Cohen includes one hundred pages of Mario's speeches and writings, and we come to appreciate them as a model of passionate intelligence. They also educate us so that we can see the ways in which systems of domination, hierarchy, greed, and aggression are intertwined.

Robert Cohen's biography of Mario Savio is earnest, comprehensive, and written as a compelling narrative that does justice to its subject. For this we can all be profoundly grateful. ■

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## THE MYSTERY OF FORGIVENESS

BEYOND REVENGE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE FORGIVENESS INSTINCT

by Michael McCullough, Jossey Bass, 2008

NO ENEMY TO CONQUER: FORGIVENESS IN AN UNFORGIVING WORLD

by Michael Henderson  
Baylor University Press, 2008

Review by Roger S. Gottlieb

**R**EMEMBER THAT NERVOUS feeling you have after a fight with your spouse and before you've made up. Or the hidden relish you feel at the thought of payback for some coworker who complained about you to the boss. These are not

emotional quirks or moral failings. Such deep attractions to both forgiveness and revenge are, psychological researcher Michael McCullough tells us, hard-wired aspects of our brain and personality. They are experiential and behavioral tendencies created by evolutionary selection that have proved beneficial in the long-term struggle to carry our genes from one generation to the next.

McCullough confronts head-on the widespread idea that revenge is some kind of disease, for which forgiveness is the proper cure. Rather, both revenge and forgiveness are necessary aspects of human development and, in many cases, the development of other animals, as well. The threat, even the practice, of revenge keeps aggression in check and motivates individuals to take equal responsibility in their groups' tasks and dangers. Forgiveness promotes close ties among families, animal groups, and human communities—ties necessary for mutual support in the fight for survival. McCullough supports his account with various types of evidence, describing how certain Latin American fish have strategies to encourage each other to take equal risks in scouting out predators, or how some of the higher primates are more likely to engage in reconciliation activities like hugging, kissing, and grooming after a conflict than before. He also refers to ingenious computer simulations of the outcomes of various strategies of forgiveness and revenge: a cautious program that allows for the judicious use of each is the most successful in the long run, according to these simulations. Finally, he cites neurological studies that associate feelings of revenge and forgiveness with particular parts of the brain.

*Beyond Revenge* also targets what McCullough calls the "myth of social science"—the idea that human behavior is totally determined by culture, education, and social pressure, and that we have no hard-wired determinants of how we act. Over the course of the book, he compiles evidence to refute this myth.

The irony of McCullough's position is his conclusion: since we are hard-wired to both forgiveness and revenge, it turns out

that social, cultural, and historical contexts determine which will predominate. If the context leads us to the three necessary steps of forgiveness—seeing former enemies as people who are worthy of care and with whom we can empathize; feeling that they are no longer a significant threat; and witnessing some kind of apology or self-abasement from them—then forgiveness can arise. If the context doesn't meet these conditions, forgiveness is unlikely to arise. In practice then, both with and without the idea that forgiveness and revenge are built in, the context is all-important.

McCullough's book is intriguing and well written, but at times I wonder if he is really confronting the problem of forgiveness as we face it in real life. While he pays a little attention to social conflicts like the one in South Africa—where the truth and reconciliation commissions seem to confirm some of his claims about the necessary stages of forgiveness—the vast majority of his examples come from animals who try to discipline group members or experimental subjects who, for example, get insulted by an experimenter.

Are these kinds of examples really germane to understanding the dynamic of forgiveness in dreadful flare-ups like the recent Israeli incursion into Gaza, with its attendant nearly 1,500 deaths; or the less publicized but clearly much more severe violence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, with more than 50,000 deaths; or the civil wars in Lebanon, El Salvador, and Guatemala with over 100,000 deaths in each; or ethnic strife in Darfur, with over 300,000?

Extreme situations like these are the subject of *No Enemy to Conquer*. And in fact many of the narratives in Henderson's serious, thoughtful, and at times compelling book confirm McCullough's positions, but they also include some important elements that McCullough ignores.

As Henderson himself makes quite clear, his approach is story oriented rather than theoretical, and the heart of his presentation are graphic descriptions of situations in which, after almost unimaginable brutality, some kind of forgiveness and

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reconciliation arise. His book is also something of a collaborative effort, including short, powerful, and widely varied essays by eleven other “forgiveness activists,” including Desmond Tutu, British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the late Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, former Ugandan cabinet minister Betty Bigombe, and a number of committed, engaged academics.

Henderson’s book leads us to ask: What will allow us to see our enemies in a new light that will make forgiveness possible? How can a member of an ethnic or political group who raped your sister or murdered your son become someone “worthy of care,” even if he is no longer a threat? For example: how did Judea Pearl, father of the beheaded-for-the-camera journalist Daniel Pearl, commit himself to public action against the kind of “hatred that took the life of my son,” working with a Muslim peace activist in public settings?

From Henderson we know that there are some common points along the journey.

First, there must arise a kind of fundamental revulsion at the process and effects of violence. The broken bodies, families, and communities to which these conflicts give rise must cease to be attractive. An essentially moral horror at the “fruits” of revenge must take precedence over the (evolutionarily based, McCullough insists) pleasure of getting even. Judea Pearl was clear in his assertion that “hate” killed his son, and it was hate that he was opposing.

Only after this kind of perceptual change can empathy arise—a sense of commonality between our grief, frustration, and oppression and that of our enemies. Talking about Ahmed Akbar, his Islamic partner in opposing hatred, Pearl said: “Ahmed was the only Muslim author I read who had expressed empathy for the sense of siege Israelis feel. Empathy is the essence of understanding and the prerequisite to dialogue.”

Third, in order for the transformation of select individuals like Pearl or Akbar to have any public effect, an enormous amount of work is necessary, work that involves listening to the horrific stories of survivors, establishing credibility in

warring communities, and accepting a host of inevitable setbacks.

Many of McCullough’s generalizations, and those of Henderson as well, describe these processes. For those of us who wonder if Palestinian and Israeli, Irish and English, or other warring groups can ever have peace, Henderson’s inspiring examples make clear that any groups, no matter what their history, can be reconciled, if something like the combination of factors described so far occurs.

Yet how do particular *individuals* who themselves have taken part in the violence (and forcefully encouraged others to do so in many of the examples Henderson offers) turn their backs on conflicts that take tens or hundreds of thousands of lives, and come to embrace each other as comrades in the long attempt to heal their common wounds? What gives a person the courage to reject self-righteous hatred and embrace empathy and humility? How can we recognize our own moral weaknesses as well as those of the other side and see that, under comparable conditions, we might act the same way? How do we convince ourselves, on a spiritual and psychological level, that the certainties of conflict are more destructive than the uncertainties of peace, or that love is less painful and more fulfilling than rage and bitterness?

I don’t know, and neither do these authors. They can show some of the conditions under which such shifts in attitude take place, both theoretically and as historical narratives. But no one knows why some people make the necessary changes and others don’t. Despite these authors’ serious attempts to make forgiveness comprehensible, the human heart remains a mystery to us all. Yet at least these books tell us that the changes are possible for us as human beings and have many times, against all expectation, actually occurred. That alone makes both of them very much worth reading. ■

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## POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE IMAGINATION

WAR BIRD by David Gewanter

Phoenix Poets: University of Chicago Press, 2009

Review by Sean Enright

**W**HERE DOES THE IMAGINATION live, and what are its politics?

In David Gewanter’s poem, “American Incognito,” a wounded Afghanistan veteran emails home to say, “As a state ... / Afghanistan is next to Mars.” And in “Hamlet of Merano: The Lotus Eaters,” Gewanter plays with the roles of tour guide and literary historian, knotting together a poem from strands of history and literature, even as he makes something new of the aggrandizing narcotic of the place itself. In both cases the reader can live in a verbal space greater than physical perception or emotional recognition, in the fires sparked by juxtaposition.

A town in the Alps between Italy and Germany, Merano is not only a geographic border, but also a cultural and historical one. Gewanter’s poem is an extraordinary guide to a Merano not in any record, one that hides in imagination’s untouchable shadow, ideal and replete. Pound wrote part of *The Cantos* in Merano; Kafka went there as a cure for tuberculosis (“even Kafka, scowling like Bogart / came to Merano once, for the waters”). This line about Kafka is a wondrous quoting of *Casablanca* that captures the film’s droll irony, as Rick says to Captain Renault, “I came to Casablanca for the waters,” and Renault replies, “The waters? What waters? We’re in the desert,” to which Rick replies, “I was misinformed.”

In the poem’s present tense, undergrad tourists (“the ox-eyed / girls of Appalachia College (study abroad) / stretch for the castle’s champagne grapes, / or play hacky sack in short-shorts ... / O to be a grape underfoot—”) are subordinated to the history of the place. Gewanter summons the Lotus Eaters of Homer, Herodotus, and Tennyson, and the mystical plant that Homer’s sailors eat, which kills their desire to return to the ship and

keeps them locked in their dreams: “The eye sees what it remembers, / the imagination dreams its rut / is fresh, not tragicomical-historical ... / Who, pocketing the chilly grapes, would not / name himself king here, / and forget who is king?”

We’re used to reading political philosophy, history, and cultural objects as themselves first—that is, as definite “non-fiction” texts that revel in linearity and objectivity. Journalism lassoes a topic at best with a fine sprinkling of detail. Gewanter uses politics, history, and culture, but not objectively: he proclaims his poems; character or setting lead, and develop in tone from the set of a character’s mouth, the suggestive atmosphere or shape of a landscape. His diction and associations trip us up and force us back to chaotic juxtapositions built within, or by, sentences; his syntax creates a history of his imagination, which we read as an imagining of our history.

In “1972: The Battery,” the weather, adolescent political feelings, and sexual maturation (“the battery hums along the leg”) conspire with the first hints of adult ennui in the American summer of the Cambodian incursion. Two high school boys, the “Billboard Bandits,” are electrocuted during one of their pranks, and their school becomes a battleground. When the bombing in Cambodia begins, the radical students want to leave the flag at half-mast, their private grief for the Billboard Bandits mutating into a public outcry over the political decision. At end, the hippies and the football players face off in an American political contest in miniature, over keeping the flag down in shame or up high in pride.

“American Incognito,” a startling, longer poem, unites wounded Iraq war veterans at Walter Reed hospital; the discovery of the spine of a prehistoric beast found in Washington, D.C., in 1898; and a primer on breeding hawks. It’s an anguished political howling. A wounded vet who once burned poppies in Afghanistan now finds comfort and forgetfulness only in his morphine treatment (“gorked on pain relief cocktails”). And in the momentous year 2001 when the poem is



set, the future that did happen wasn’t “monkeys talking” as in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Rather, history stepped ahead all over our dreams for it, ridiculously (in the honoring of a Capitolosaurus dinosaur which never really was), politically (in the confused, negating tenure of George W. Bush), and tragically (in a chilling September 11 reference to the moment “when Mohammed Atta decides he cannot date a waitress”). Soldiers patrol in a dust storm in Iraq, a scene crosscut with George W. Bush’s DUI and Laura Bush’s “vehicular manslaughter” conviction in high school (“the car found guilty”).

Gewanter shows great range to superb effect: from “Baudelaire’s Day Book (September, 1993: The Cauliflower)” —an imagistic prose-poem of a death-bed vigil—to “War Bird: A Journal,” a mad riffing on the 2003 poets’ anti-war rally at the White House, in response to Laura Bush’s politically minded cancellation of a poetry “salon.” Then there’s “Desaparecidos: The Un-speakable,” a playful poem about modern critical poetical thinking that is also a moving elegy for the silence real grief imposes when language fails us.

The poems are funny, vicious, and swirling. Many are politically motivated, their ironic language lobbying for connections between strata of meanings. How do politics and history and culture sound in the subjective, as something spoken by the poet who cares about the texture of language, the privileged placement of sound and sense, above a layer of “meaning?” Gewanter’s history feels personal, a history he creates consciously in the present, as a preparation for the future. We want some of our poems, at least, to be beyond knowing, larger than plot-driven, not necessarily lessons in how to feel or what to see, but voices we catch and chase, like a drowsy consciousness drifting toward sleep, suddenly sharply awake, enlightened or puzzled by possibility. ■

*Sean Enright is a poet, novelist, and playwright. His latest play, Home for the Holocaust, is a black comedy about domestic terrorism, and his most recent novel manuscript is The Playboy of Hoboken. He lives in Maryland.*

## [MUSIC]

## QUIET ECSTASY

THE HIDDEN ONE (HANE’ELAM):  
JEWISH MYSTICAL SONGS

by Richard Kaplan, Five Souls Music, 2009

Review by Jonathan Seidel

**R**ICHARD KAPLAN’S NEW CD, *The Hidden One (Hane’elam): Jewish Mystical Songs*, presents a powerfully evocative musical dance between the “hidden” and the “revealed,” as heard in poignant, immediately haunting silences and in the sparse, understated *nigunim* (melodies without words) found in subtle doses throughout the album.

Vocalist and cantor Kaplan, accompanied by an ensemble of stellar musicians and singers, has created a prayerful gem of a CD that I (as one who deeply resonates with Sephardic and Hasidic music) believe will become a classic. It’s as if he were channeling the primordial music of a barely known, esoteric kabbalistic sect, situated somewhere in the spaces between Haim ben Attar (the famous Sephardic mystic who influenced the birth of Hasidism) and the Ba’al Shem Tov. I felt I had somehow heard this music before, perhaps in a previous *gilgul* (incarnation), when we were engaged with a paradigm-shifting Sufi/Sephardic/Hasidic/Proto-Jazz community.

To devotees of Jewish music, this CD is a love song, sung with and without words, sung in Hebrew and Aramaic from the classic liturgy and *Zohar*, or sung to the words of traditional and newly composed *piyutim* (para-liturgical sacred poetry). It is a love song addressed to “You,” the very immanent and personal Divinity that so often remains hidden when we create rigid and imaginary boundaries, which rob us of the mystical encounter. The Hasidic/Sufi trajectory present in these recordings beautifully expresses (*continued on page 79*)



*The Hidden One: Jewish Mystical Songs* is available at  
[www.cdbaby.com/cd/richardkaplan2](http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/richardkaplan2)