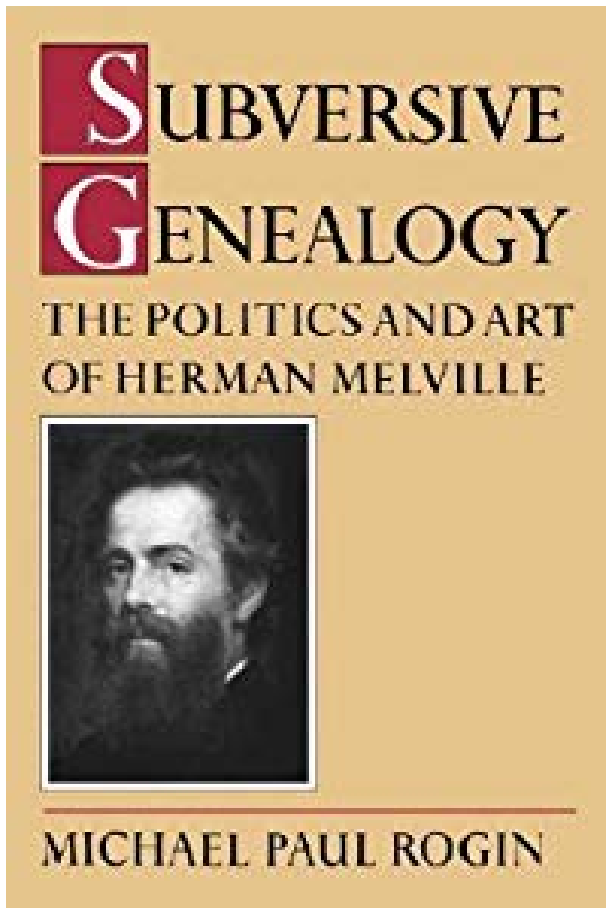


Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville



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In this major reconsideration of Herman Melville's life and work, Michael Rogin shows that Melville's novels are connected both to the important issues of his time and to the exploits of his patrician and politically prominent family--which, three generations after its Revolutionary War heroes, produced an alcoholic, a bankrupt, and a suicide. Rogin argues that a history of Melville's fiction, and of the society represented in it, is also a history of the writer's family. He describes how that family first engaged Melville in and then isolated him from American political and social life. Melville's brother and father-in-law are shown to link *Moby-Dick* to the crisis over expansion and slavery. *White-Jacket* and *Billy Budd*, which concern shipboard conflicts between masters and seamen, are related to an execution at sea in which Melville's cousin played a decisive part. The figure of Melville's father haunts *The Confidence Man*, whose subject is the triumph of the marketplace and the absence of authority. "This book," Rogin writes, "makes several claims which ought to be stated at the outset: • "that Herman Melville is a recorder and interpreter of American society whose work is comparable to that of the great 19th-century European realists; • "that there was a crisis of bourgeois society at midcentury on both continents, but that in America it entered politics by way of slavery and race rather than class; • "that the crisis called into question the ideal realm of liberal political freedom; • "that Melville was particularly sensitive to the American crisis because of the political importance of his clan and the political

history of his family; • "that a study of Melville's fiction, and of the society refracted through it, must also be a history of Melville's family, and of the writer's relation to his kin; • "and finally, that Melville rendered American history symbolically, so that a history of his fiction, his family, and his psyche is also a history of the development and displacement of major symbols in his work."