If the premise that life writing is solely a "modern" phenomenon is historically debatable, there remains no doubt that the serious business of literary criticism of autobiography, memoir, and life narrative is a late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century development. Following the boom in memoir in the publishing world, critics are now publishing abundant theories about and criticism on life writing. Some of the best and most interesting recent work has focused on ethics in representations of the lives of others caught up in the web of an autobiographer's work.

Recent work by critics of autobiography and life writing has become truly interdisciplinary, integrating the humanistic and the social and biomedical sciences in its accounts of ethics. How this integration takes place is complex and often incomplete. For example, a biomedical distinction between harming and wronging is drawn in chapter one of G. Thomas Courser's *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*, with harming meaning unjustifiably "thwarting, defeating, setting back some party's interests" (28, quoting from Beauchamp and Childress' canonical medical ethics book *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*). This notion of harm has been used both broadly and more narrowly (originally, actual physical harm) and for Couser constitutes part of the autobiographical expectation that writers should "at least do no harm to consenting, vulnerable subjects" (28).1 Wronging, in contrast, involves "violating someone's rights" (30). One can be wronged without being harmed.2 Couser explains: "The point is that whether life writing is ethical or not is not a simple matter of whether it causes harm to its subject; instead the question is whether and how that harm may be justified, and whether it constitutes wrong."

Biomedical ethics is "more comprehensive and systematic" to Couser, although anthropological ethics also involves the notion of harm—in this case, oriented toward communities and groups (30). What a specifically humanistic view of harm in autobiographical writing is is not clear, and that is why the interdisciplinarity feels incomplete. Rhetorical and narrative ethics, undeveloped as they are philosophically, remain unexplored.
I considered Couser's notion of harm in the light of my own writing of life narrative. Perhaps I have harmed my relations, setting back their interests, if not actually violating their rights, by various errors or implications in my published writing. I may have harmed my mother in an essay, for example, by the implication that her mother smelled funny. I could have set back my father's interests by mistakenly claiming in one autobiographical piece to have been born in a chiropractic clinic, although my father has long promoted osteopathic medical education (and I was really born in an osteopathic clinic). My motivation was, originally, to set down my experience in hopes of teaching others to do the same. I can see now that it may also have derived from the more selfish motive of wanting appealing, edgy examples to help sell my textbook. Nonetheless, perhaps then my minor ethical violations were compounded by my life writing's being included in teaching materials without frank and full discussion of the ethics of life writing. These are thoughts on more minor problems in life narrative that I am only able to have just now after a summer's reading on ethics and autobiography.

Couser, who applies these quasi-legal distinctions in *Vulnerable Subjects*, is professor of English at Hofstra University, an Americanist working on autobiography and also author of a book (*Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*) and many articles on disability and life writing. So it is not surprising that he frames much of his ethical analysis with biomedical ethics and frequently chooses medical themes for his cases. He begins *Vulnerable Subjects* with a preface titled "Auto/Bio/Ethics" in which he explicates the intersection of bioethics and life writing. He concerns himself primarily with the "representation of others," explaining that he is "interested in whether and when lay writing raises the sorts of ethical issues that are addressed by professional ethics, and what sort of obligation devolves on life writers—and critics—when such ethical questions arise. Perhaps the question that trumps others is this: To what extent should ethical principles—or other ethical guidelines—be observed in nonprofessional life writing?" (xi).

He has previously asked a host of other, non-trivial ethical questions, not the least of which is "Are auto/biographers obliged to "do good"—or at least do no harm—to those they represent?" (xi). This and the question of possibly harming minor characters in our stories and violating the privacy of those who may not wish to be public in our narratives are significant and complex issues.

But Couser is particularly concerned with the "ethics of representing vulnerable subjects—persons who are liable to exposure by someone
with whom they are involved in an intimate or trust-based relationship but are unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else" by virtue of age, illness, or disempowered cultural status for the most part. Therefore, my father, an author in his own right, may not be vulnerable: he can write his own (corrected) version of my birth if he wishes. (But then what about my private, non-writing mother?) At any rate, I am not really writing about them anyway (although I did); I’m writing about myself!

Couser presents several compelling life writing scenarios after setting up his (mostly) principle-based system based in large measure on bioethical readings. He begins with cases of “cooperative” writing, where authors and subjects collaborate on biographical works, early on explicating the difference between duty-based and principle-based ethics. The duty-based approach analyzes cases and justification for action based on consequences; the principle-based approach uses “ethical rules or principles” such as not lying or stealing. (“One group considers acts in the light of preexisting principles, the other in the light of the acts’ expected results; both are rational and analytical, but one is backward-looking, the other forward-looking.”) Consequences-based ethics lean toward being “inherently less protective of subjects” than principle-based (10). Many of these binary divisions are philosophical, as outlined in Beauchamp and Childers. Here we see the language of social science and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)—boards that have made it more ethical to do medical and behavioral inquiry (sometimes making it at the same time impossible to do true inquiry).

These biomedical ethical principles were first formulated only about twenty-five years ago and were summed up in 1979 in The Belmont Report to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research created in 1974. The principles or “general prescriptive judgments” articulated by the commission were drawn from such documents as the Nuremberg Code after the Nuremberg War Crime Trials of 1947. The immediate exigency was not only the evils of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, but also other contemporaneous newer issues such as the advent of fetal research on aborted fetuses after Rowe v. Wade (the first test-tube baby Louise Brown was only born at the end of the report cycle, so in vitro fertilization issues were not considered in the report).

The original basic ethical principles of the Belmont Report include (1) Autonomy: respecting persons based on their autonomy, with those
protected who have diminished autonomy; (2) Beneficence: doing no harm and making every effort to maximize benefits to research subjects while minimizing harm; and (3) Justice: fairly selecting research subjects and directing that those who ought to receive the benefits do so, while those who ought to bear its burdens also do so (referring to past medical research on the poor and prisoner populations). Thus, Couser, working in the tradition of IRB procedures, brings bioethics together with autobiography (although the original Belmont panel deferred the consideration of “social experimentation,” seeming to restrict their principles to certain disciplinary practices).

Referring the readers to Beauchamp and Childress for the transformations of biomedical principles, Couser brings us up to date with contemporaneous versions of the three Belmont principles: “All four of the major principles of biomedicine that have been virtually canonized—the so-called Georgetown mantra—in the successive editions of the standard text, Beauchamp and Childress’ Principles of Biomedical Ethics—respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice—seem pertinent to life writing, and all may come into play in different ways” (17). He goes on to say that they are not “absolute and inflexible,” and he explicates them in detail in his volume. These principles and their many years of collaborative birth and nurturing should indeed be respected. Nonetheless, they are, obviously, based on a modern Western view of the autonomous individual who is not dependent on social relationships, nor embedded in and constructed by networks of relationships. These biomedical ethics were originally not intended as general research principles for all disciplines and research practices, but, as specified in Beauchamp and Childress, as being applicable to both therapeutic and nontherapeutic biomedical research.

Couser does amplify the traditional, ethical approach of “abstract principlism” by citing Beauchamp and Childress’ invocation of what was originally Carol Gilligan’s “ethics of care,” not attributed as such to her (although she does get a mention toward the middle of the book in a paragraph referencing feminist ethics). The closer the relationship of biography writer to subject and the more vulnerable the subject as a result, the more the partners are bound by an ethic of care. In the medical and medicalized cases treated by Couser, however, ethics of care often means just that—caretakers of the vulnerable ill—and yet, the expansion of a rights-based, individualist ethic does transform to include a relational one in Vulnerable Subjects. He says he uses biomedical ethics because it is “perhaps the most highly developed version of normative ethics available
today” (15). But he also embraces a cultural perspective, calling on anthropology’s ethnographic guidelines that have developed following the unethical consequences of much early colonialist anthropological research. These are used primarily “as a supplement” to biomedical ethics, although they often overlap and are helpful because they work outside clinical settings and are oriented to communities, for “harm can be done to communities as well as individuals” (31).

Nonetheless, his notion of supplementarity is reminiscent of the supplement that comes to supplant, in the by-now classical concept of Derridean post-structuralism. What is added on has an uncanny way of turning the tables on the normative and foundational, which is why feminist theory has had such an impact on rhetoric and composition when it was added on in the late eighties. Feminist and other supplementary ethics added to biomedical ethics do more than sitting in the wings waiting until they are called onstage to say their lines. They tend to rewrite the plot. In Couser’s autobiographical criticism, however, they often do remain a supplement.

This is easiest to see in the longest chapter of the book, focusing on the creative nonfiction of neurologist Oliver Sacks. If there were ethical problems with Sacks’ neurological profiles, as a delighted reader of his cases, I didn’t trouble myself about them. The doctor-patient, or profiler-interviewee relationships seemed so collaborative, often so warm, especially in An Anthropologist on Mars (title from one of his subjects, an autistic professor in Colorado who works with animal husbandry). Sacks himself does adopt the metaphor, casting himself as an anthropologist in neurological terrain, and Couser ultimately judges him on anthropological standards, ironic in that of all the texts examined, the Sacks chapter would seem to be eminently appropriate for biomedical ethics.

In my own leisure reading, especially of Sacks’ later book on Mars, Sacks appears to have met the ethical challenges of anthropology. Many of his cases are not “vulnerable subjects” because they are professionals (the professor, the surgeon who can put his tics from Tourette’s Syndrome on hold, at least while he operates). Couser pretty thoroughly (even at times tediously) combs through ethical dilemmas with each of Sacks’ works, including films and television shows made by others but involving Sacks and his cases. Although he defends Sacks at times, the neurologist-author usually comes up ethically short of biomedical standards.

Overall, Couser praises Sacks for his growing sensitivity to the vulnerabilities of his subjects over the corpus of his work. Yet, in the end, he faults him for the failure to become an exemplary postcolonial
neuroanthropologist: "But perhaps Sacks has set himself an unrealizable goal; perhaps the perspectives of medicine and anthropology are so fundamentally different that the two aspects of his self-designation cannot finally be reconciled—at least by someone trained formally only in one discipline" (122). This indeed is a difficulty, and one Couser cannot himself overcome.

A major criticism remains: that Sacks deals with individuals and not communities of the disabled and thus "obscures the relation between the neurological, on the one hand, and the social and cultural, on the other," perpetuating "received notions of normality." Yet, most of Couser's critiques of Sacks are from the individualist perspective of biomedical ethics with its medical prescriptions not only to do no harm but to benefit the patient-subjects. This is a noble ideal, yet it becomes overly individualist in scope when Sacks is considered as writing creative nonfiction for broader aims, perhaps actually to undermine and broaden notions of normality by educating the general public about the diversity of the human sensorium. If Sacks can do this while doing "no harm," he contributes much by sharing his professional perspective in narrative writing to a broader public, something that more scientists and disciplinary experts should endeavor to do.

Couser's other cases of ethical criticism are diverse and instructive. He begins with collaborative work on a biography between Jeffrey Macdonald, convicted of murdering his family, and Joe McGinnis, a journalist Macdonald made part of his defense team to represent his innocence through auto/biographical writing. Nonetheless, during the trial, the journalist became convinced that the defendant was guilty and later published that personal verdict in *Fatal Vision*. Couser uses this case to raise complex ethical questions about the obligations of writers to those they collaborate with in biographical representations. He also writes, citing Lejeune, about "ethnographic autobiography" as another genre of collaborative auto/biography that raises issues about vulnerable subjects, especially American racial minorities (37).

In a critical review of Michel Dorris' *The Broken Cord* (1989), he explores the ethics of the writer's account of raising an adopted Native American son (with Dorris' wife, Louise Erdrich) who turned out to be diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The ethics of writing about the disabled and children who often cannot represent themselves adequately (although some children have written dialogically as part of their parents' memoirs), concerns Couser throughout his corpus. What concerns him in this chapter in part is that parental memoirs often concern adopted or
disabled children, and: "Like other prerogatives of parenthood, of course, this one is open to misuse. What are intended by parents as beneficent acts may be perceived by their children, once grown, as violations of their autonomy, acts of appropriation or even of betrayal. Disabled children are thus doubly vulnerable subjects—triply so if their impairment compromises their competence or diminishes their autonomy" (57).

A later chapter of the book also deals with parental writing, this time in the heartrending decisions over keeping alive or "pulling the plug" on injured children, which Couser terms "euthanography." Finally, he writes about another medicalized topic, an analysis of the ways DNA and the Human Genome Project determine life narratives. His epilogue defending ethical criticism attempts to disarm or deal with past or future criticism of his program of ethical criticism.

Couser most often views the life writing he criticizes through a "terministic screen" of medicine, affecting his analysis of literary genres, as pathography, case report, euthanography, and the like. Yet, what happens if these authors' essays are weighted toward genres such as the literary essay—or as literary journalism or creative nonfiction? Other humanist/post-humanist narrative ethics might come into play; other language games would be invoked. Would there not then be, between the biomedical and the humanistic, a differend, to use Lyotard's ethical concept? Could not these be incommensurate ethics? Is this what the Belmont panel presaged by limiting their own biomedical principles to medical disciplines?

In contrast to Courser's book, Paul Eakin's collection, *The Ethics of Life Writing*, provides a broader and more eclectic offering of ethical approaches to autobiographical writing, including autobiographical critics as well as authors, some of them, like Nancy Miller, who both produce and criticize life writing. In addition to Couser's focus on biomedical ethics, these authors, part of a colloquium at Indiana University in 2002, represent diverse approaches and points on the spectrum of rigor in holding to their ethical positions or moral judgments in regard to autobiography.

As Eakin stresses in his introduction, some controversial cases discussed in his collection "might suggest that an ethics of life writing is properly concerned with checking its potential for harm" (4). Nevertheless, many authors here place more emphasis on unpacking the "potential for good" that autobiograpy offers: narrating the exemplary life; answering the question "What is it good to be?"; providing "narrative understanding of "life-plans" and adding meaning to life; giving a history
of the "narrator's current orientation in moral space." Other "goods" include sharing a story—a human need that can help us solve problems and develop empathy for others—and testifying publicly to political and social abuses. This volume adds a much-needed positive orientation to the "goods" of autobiographical narrative to balance the negatively rigorous "first do no harm" emphasis. Yet, the principled biomedical ethic is found here as well, with Couser himself contributing a chapter on parental euthanography (writing that considers end-of-life issues whether they are acted upon or not) similar to that of his own book's chapter.

An ethic of narrative is broached here as well when Nancy Miller brings in what might well be another differend: that of story as separate from truth, a distinction she discovers while working on her own memoir. Writing her chapter through journal entries, she explains how her perspective on truth changed when she began to produce memoir herself:

When I began my memoir, I still believed in telling a true story, but I also began to realize that there were gaps that could be filled in only by leaps of the imagination, and scenes that I could recreate through dialogues that were anything but verifiable. I could write down what I remembered, or I could craft a memoir. One might be the truth; the other a good story. I'm not saying that these two processes are mutually exclusive. In fact the two pulls are equally strong. When I sit down to reconstruct my past, I call on memory, but when memory fails, I let language lead. The words take me where I need to go. (149–50)

Is there an unbridgeable gap between the ethical acts of criticizing and producing text? Miller's memory/story process was made even more complicated by the presence of her own forgotten letters to her parents. In fact, this essay itself, called "The Ethics of Betrayal: Diary of a Memoirist," is about letters and memoir. Early in her career, the author had her privacy violated by the unauthorized use of her love letters by a novelist. The letters were recognized and, in consequence, a close relationship at the time was imperiled. Later, as a memoirist, she too was drawn to use her ex-husband's letters to help tell her story. Yet, despite having the letters in her possession, legally the contents of a letter belong to its author. She had to find another strategy to tell the truth about her marriage. Her own complex experience then led her to write: "Sometimes I have the uncomfortable feeling that the truest, ethical position is closely related to silence, or self-silencing" (157). However, she doesn't unfold this ethical dilemma: Is it possibly unethical to self-silence?
Ultimately, for Miller the question becomes, "Whose story is it? However uncomfortable, the truth of human relations resides in the fact of relationship—and to say relation is to say relative" (152). In her chapter as in her memoir *But Enough About Me*, sharing stories becomes a moral endeavor because of the human need for story and sharing life experience as a way to relate to others, solve problems, and thrive in our lives and relationships. This implies that the ethics of story might trump the ethics of privacy at times.

Also in Eakin’s diverse collection, Paul Lauritzen provides a balanced view of the case of Rigoberto Menchu’s autobiography and the controversies it sparked over autobiographical truth and *testimonio* (a must-read for those teaching her life narrative). On the issue of truth in auto/biography, Diane Middlebrook writes on the unethical “misremembering” of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Representing parents is the topic of a fine section on life writing as moral inquiry, and Richard Freedman also writes on his father in the section on trust and betrayal. Four chapters on resistance and counterstories include Couser’s chapter and two others on disability as well as a study of life narratives of black youths in Norway.

In closing, I would like to point to another intersection of ethics and autobiography: the use of autobiography in scholarly writing. Miller’s *But Enough About Me* traces her career as it entwines with her intellectual development and the dramas of “theory” from the sixties to the nineties, especially feminist theory. Feminist theory in the era of post-structuralism as written by Miller rejected binary oppositions such as subject and object as well as mingling the personal and scholarly following the dictum “the personal is political.” Today, it is not surprising to find feminist scholars in composition such as *College English* editor Jane Hindman forging an ethical theory of discourse while calling for the use of the personal in scholarly writing. Last year, the same year as Couser and Eakin, Robert Nash, professor of education at the University of Vermont, published *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*. His book aims to encourage faculty to value personal writing in scholarship, from a postmodern view similar to Hindman’s that truth is not found but constructed. Ethical topics are addressed in two sections: Ethics: Do we own our own lives?” and “Truth: Are Facts the Same as Truth?” Earlier in rhetoric and composition, Deborah Holdstein and David Bleich published their collection on autobiography and scholarly writing, *Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing*. 

**Review Essays**

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In my own writing of personal scholarship or autobiography, I can't help recalling Virginia Woolf's directive to kill the angel that hovers over the writer's shoulder (especially women writers). Recently, Rilla Askew, a fiction writer visiting the University of Oklahoma, worried similarly about writing and self-censorship. Her most recent book, *Fire in Beulah*, concerned the race riots in Tulsa in the 1920s, and she is also working on another novel involving Native American and African American characters. She often draws on autobiographical knowledge (and intimate African American friends) to craft dialogue and description. In response to an interviewer's question about the response of African Americans or Creek Indian readers to the ethnic characters in her writing, Askew responds: "In the time of composing I have to not think about that, because I would just censor everything. It's frightening, but every fiction writer does it. If I'm writing about a white woman who happens to be seventy-five, I've never been that. When I'm writing in my grandfather's voice, I've never been him either. . . . If I get too conscious of it, I simply would not be able to write" (Walker 15).

As a writer of life narratives, I suspect that paying attention to the angel over my shoulder or the responses of relations would make it harder, less pleasurable, and even impossible to invent and craft my stories. Most often self-censorship or self-silencing—not as some would have it, narcissism—remains the greatest damper to autobiographical work.

Some of my surprise over my family's displeasure at my own autobiographical pieces was because I could not have predicted where my memory would go astray, or which elements of my narrative others might object to. A former journalist, I know that few interviewees believe in the accuracy of their own quotes in print, even when they are backed up on audiotape. I do not wish others in my narratives to ever experience displeasure, much less harm or wrong. But I also don't think it will always be possible to surveil myself or check with every person I mention just to play it safe. I can only hope that much of what I have learned through this reading of autobiographical ethics will stick with me and keep me out of trouble henceforth. I know I will be more concerned with writing by myself of students that includes "vulnerable subjects." Nevertheless, despite our power and status as academics, I believe Nancy Miller is right as she ends her chapter in Eakin's collection: "When we expose the narratives of our lives to others through the forms of life writing, do we not all become vulnerable subjects?" (159).

As historians of rhetoric know, the Italian rhetorician Giambattista Vico warns that the "modern" valuing of critical arts over topical arts, of
literal language over metaphor, could stunt the development of rhetorical creativity in youth. Following Vico, while we are developing a strong critical art of autobiography, perhaps we need to create an equally strong topical art of life narrative. Strategies for producing texts that were a part of the heyday of process writing continue to help writers who want to learn to craft strong memoirs; providing such strategies is one goal of my own teaching of autobiography. An overemphasis on criticism, even ethical criticism, could hamper the development of writers’ narratives, much as an emphasis on policing plagiarism may hamper the development of our students’ academic writing.

We should remember that ethics and discourse production have a long history in rhetoric, of which this strand of ethics and autobiography is perhaps just the latest manifestation. A rhetorical ethics, like a pragmatic casuistry, might in part be a bottom-up process of judging and networking ethics from specific cases, their contexts and immediate situations, with provisional yet general principles derived from those—Vico’s probable judgment needed by all mature and functioning citizens to form a practical wisdom.

As human beings who aspire to produce ethical discourse to teach ethical discourse, we necessarily expose and thereby open ourselves to harm and hurt. If we are in one sense inviolably private and separate, we should never forget that, to cite a less scholarly source (Dustin Hoffman, in the film I Heart Huckabees), we are all part of the same blanket. According to Beauchamp and Childress, I guess that makes me some kind of communitarian, although perhaps it only makes me a rhetorician.

University of Oklahoma
Norman, Oklahoma

Notes

1. From the Hippocratic oath “First Do No Harm.”
2. See Beauchamp and Childress 116.
3. For the Belmont Report, see http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/belmontArchive.html. Thanks to Edward Sankowski for sharing this source.
4. Beauchamp and Childress write, “Ethically justified research must satisfy several conditions, including (1) a reasonable prospect that the research will generate the knowledge that is sought, (2) the necessity of using human subjects, (3) a favorable balance of potential benefits over risks to the subjects, and (4) fair selection of subjects.” This set of criteria seems scarcely applicable to life writing in most cases.
5. Beauchamp and Childress devote several pages to analyzing and critiqu­ing ethics of care/relationship-based ethics, focusing on Gilligan and on philoso­pher Annette Baier's accounts (369–76).

6. Beauchamp and Childress criticize feminist theories as being primarily underdeveloped theory and too restricted to the private sphere and women's traditional roles (374–75).

7. My Elements of Autobiography and Life Narratives is based on such strategies.

Works Cited


