

# Performing the Teacher

William Cobett

Tuo Wang and I met in Boston. I admired his work, especially his short videos. Perhaps my words of praise led to his asking me to act in *Vanitas: Real and Natural*. Or I was the only teacher of literature that he knew. I didn't ask and he didn't say.

When I agreed, Tuo gave me an assignment: Had I read Theodore Fontane's *Effi Briest* and Émile Zola's *Therese Raquin*? Yes, but years ago. Would I read them again in...what was it?...the next few days? Yes. Over the weekend I skim-read both novels and went to his studio prepared to talk about them and the larger subject of realism and naturalism in fiction.



*Vanitas- Real and Natural*, video stills

Tuo filmed me in his drawing studio. I sat on a stool and he stood at the camera and asked questions. Couldn't be simpler. I felt like I was in a classroom describing how the Fontane and Zola novels are examples of naturalism and what exactly naturalism is. I knew that Tuo would edit this footage into his story but had no idea what role my twenty or so minutes would play in his video.

A few months later I saw an early version of the video on a computer screen. I expected the camera to add a few pounds to my face and it did. I expected to look a little older than I think I look and I did. What surprised me was the role

my straightforward, at least so I thought, talk on naturalism and the novels now played.

Tuo had intercut my answers to his questions between tight close-ups of a man and a woman, husband and wife and lovers whose speeches were taken from the Fontane and Zola novels. These actors told a dramatic story enhanced by being shot close up to emphasize the passion of their telling. The camera served as witness and interrogator. Both actors spoke vehemently and I thought I was seeing and hearing firsthand accounts from their own lives. To me both actors seemed intensely real.

On the other hand I came across as an academic and a fictional character. Juxtaposed between the “reality” of the man and woman, my explanation of a literary form and its history seemed unreal, a fiction made up to categorize human behavior so as to construct a narrative that could be taught. This categorization, true enough in a classroom setting, had nothing to do with the story told by the man and woman. My explanation left out real life in order to organize the mess of literary history and, in Tuo’s video, it had nothing to say about why and how stories engage us.

Who cares about naturalism and realism? And by extension who cares about all the terms—impressionism, modernism, post-modernism--we use? We know that these are no more than guides, ballpark figures that we should use in quotes but in classrooms they are used to organize our understanding and explicate movies, painting and art.

Was this doubt I felt what Tuo had in mind to create or was it a byproduct of his larger design? It doesn’t matter. I felt the inadequacy of teaching and the classroom as a measure of the world as we experience it. The literary terms I used sounded empty and false. My earnest attempts to answer Tuo’s questions made them sound like a, “Here is what is really happening” argument—the height of what we mean when we dismiss a point of view as “academic.” Tuo had artfully turned the tables so that fiction became real exactly as it is when we read a short story or novel. In contrast my academic treatise pointed up this reality because it sounded, at least to my ears, so forced and beside the point. I was insisting on a rule, a law that had little to do with life or art.

I felt a stab of chagrin. Did I really believe in these terms? Is the classroom, where I have spent much of my life, such a distorting and ultimately unreal place? Was I as glib as I appeared to be on film? As, well, so given to vanity?

But I was an actor in the video, both me and not me. And the man and woman were actors too speaking from a script and their lived experience as well. Yet their words sounded authentic and mine sounded like the professional jargon

they are. By some subtle alchemy Tuo's *Vanitas* revealed to me several poses of my own vanity. In the act of describing, analyzing and judging I felt seen through

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William Corbett is a poet, memoirist, art writer, editor and publisher who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Among his published works are books on the artists Philip Guston—*Philip Guston's Late Work: A Memoir*—and Albert York. His most recent books of poems are *The Whalen Poem* (Hanging Loose Press) and *Elegies for Michael Gizzi* (Kat Ran Press). Corbett edited *Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler, 1951-1991* (Turtle Point Press) and he directs the small press *Pressed Wafer* and sits on Manhattan's CUE Art Foundation's advisory board. For the past twenty-two years of his forty-eight year career as a writing teacher Corbett taught at MIT. He is at work on books about the painters Sharon Horvath and John Walker. In summer 2015 his book on the painter Stuart Williams will appear.