Judges’ Commentary on “The Journalist”
by
Emily Shelly

“The Journalist” won second prize in the University of Pittsburgh’s 2008/09 Composition Program Writing Contest

Like the First Prize essay for 2008-2009, Emily Shelly’s “The Journalist” was written for a Seminar in Composition assignment inviting students to create an experimental essay inspired by Susan Griffin’s “Our Secret,” in which she explores the childhood of Heinrich Himmler.  Like Griffin, Shelly tells a double story, but in one sense her project is, arguably, even more challenging than Griffin’s: whereas Griffin is describing her own search to understand how a boy becomes a Nazi brute, Shelly’s journalist-narrator is a fictional character operating in nineteenth century Japan. To create context for her story of an ambitious young journalist’s efforts to better understand the military leader Hijikata Toshizo (in preparation for writing an article the journalist sees as an unglamorous but viable route to career-advancement), Shelly must also acquaint western readers, far removed from the culture she is depicting, with the history of the 1867-68 overthrow of Japan’s Tokogawa shogunate.

Shelly handles these narrative challenges with considerable care: she provides copious footnotes to fill in historical details, unravel complicated intrigues, and share editorial decisions she is making as a writer. She also shows an assured sense of story-telling: details of setting, character, and incident are paced so as to maintain interest and develop suspense. As the story unfolds, we join Shelly’s journalist-narrator in gaining a fuller understanding of the contradictory nature and actions of a military figure the journalist originally considers “the worst of traitors” but comes to see as “both deeply flawed and deeply human.” Shelly's final footnote reinforces both her project’s complexity and its current relevance by informing readers that

Today, Hijikata Toshizo is considered a hero. He and the dreaded Shinsengumu have been heavily romanticized in
books and movies. Despite that winners may inevitably skew history in favor of their own rightness, Hijikata survives as a quintessential Japanese hero: far from pure, but willing to die for his convictions with no thought towards personal gain.

To read the full text of Emily Shelly’s essay, click here