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## THE BUTTERFLY OF THE POET

—An Essay (2) —

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Though largely based on "Shijin no Cho" in Morio Kita's *Dokutoru Mambo Konchu-ki*, this is intended to be another essay in English.

Friedrich Schnack, a lyrical and realistic poet and novelist, was a lover of nature, and wrote a lot of fascinating books, such as *The Lives of the Butterflies* and *In the Wonderland of the Butterflies*. Among them is a book entitled *Homer's Butterfly*.

Long, long ago in Greece, there once spread a rumor that the old poet Homer, believed long dead, was still alive. The seven cities had been claiming the honor of his birthplace, but none had declared the dignity of his death. About that time a certain Greek youth heard from an olive peddler a story of an old blind poet who was living on an islet in the Aegean Sea. Could this old man possibly be that great poet?

The young man started on a journey in search of him. From island to island he sailed on the sea current. He visited many islands from the Cyclades to the Sporades, asking for the old poet, but in vain.

One day his boat was overtaken by a storm and driven to a small island. The shore was desolate and the waves were bleakly roaring against it. But a little way up inland was a small cottage, where he found an old shepherd living.

The youth asked, "Didn't you ever hear of an old man called Homer?"

"Homer?" the shepherd replied uninterestedly. "Yes, he lives here."

"What!" the first cried. "Homer, the poet?"

"Poet?" the second scoffed, showing his soiled teeth. "No. Homer, the pauper of Asia Minor. Some time ago an olive peddler dropped him here at this island."

The shabby-looking shepherd pointed to the barn at the back. The young man ran up to it and looked into the dark, bad-smelling inside. When his eyes got accustomed to the darkness, he saw a black mass in the hazy corner. His heart throbbed. With hope and despair mixed, the youth went in and approached. And there, just in front of him, in the hay, in the stinking excretions, lay a senile, probably more than a hundred years old.

The old man was blind. His ears were filthy, his legs stiff with dirt, and his fingernails looked like so many small black crescents. The young man felt forlorn and forsaken. Was this, after all, nothing but an exiled pauper?

"Are you Homer the poet?" the youth asked in despair. There was no reply. Impatiently he asked again, louder and slower this time. "Are you Homer, the poet?" Still no reply. Nor did it seem that he ever heard the young man's voice. The poor old man was stone-deaf as well as blind.

The youth took pity on the senile.

He carried him from among the filth and dirt onto the crude bench by the doorway, and gave him wine which he had brought with him from the boat. But the wine, merely wetting his dried-up lips, flowed down his beard and whiskers. Not knowing what else to do, the youth sat beside the old man for some time.

Then, through a rift in the overhanging clouds, a column of sunbeam shot into the barn, and hit upon the wrinkled face of the old man whose life and spirit had been almost evaporated. The face moved. Lifting the jaws up, it tried to search for the light with its void eye-sockets. The withered lips quivered, and a faint voice was heard to mutter, "...Odys-sey..."

The young man choked up. At this great magic he was simply speechless. Was this filthy old man over a hundred years old the very person he had long been looking for, that great poet who was dead but alive at the same time?

"...Odys-sey!" a louder voice sounded again, which continued, stuttering, void and unearthly.

"To—to-day the—the people—celebrate..."

The gray-haired head somewhat tilted. It was as if to listen to some inner song, probably the song of memory, which was coming from another world.

"... the—the sacred—Apol-lo..."

Struck with awe, the youth listened in to this miraculous call, the deep and old sound, which was coming out through the old man's lips.

Then the chapped lips fell into silence. Once they twitched, opened and closed, never to sing any more. The wind was rustling outside. The senile had just breathed his last.

At that very moment the youth witnessed a small butterfly flit down upon the mustache-covered lips that were getting colder. The butterfly had several blood-like red spots on its white wings, which it was softly opening and closing there as if

sucking in raptures the last drop of nectar from its favorite flower. This was the Apollo's Parnassius, believed incarnation of the Great Poet.

Dating from the glacial period, little changed ever since, this Apollo's Parnassius lives in the grassland of high mountains or in the valley of lime stone. For its larvae's favorite food is the sedum with white flowers that grows well in such earth. Though its habitat is around Siberia, it also inhabits several parts of Europe and America.

All the butterflies in the group of this species are classified into the genus *Parnassius* (*Parnassus* is, needless to say, the name of the mountain of Apollo in the Greek mythology) in the family of the swallowtail. However, they are considerably different from ordinary swallowtails: with no tails on the rear wings, they look, at first sight, much more like butterflies in the cabbage white family. Their wings are very thin, not so much white as translucent, and wear black and cardinal dots and spots. Few butterflies may appear so elegant and noble indeed.

The genus *Parnassius* has a variety of species, and even the same single species differs more or less in the wing speckle from place to place. In Europe there are many lovers and collectors of these species, and they swing about their nets in Norway, Switzerland, Greece, Spain, through Middle Asia and even in the Rocky Mountains of America. And with their hundreds of specimens displayed they are fascinated, comparing the slightest differences in dots and spots on the wing.

"Look at this *Parnassius nomion*. It wears more red spots than the usual one. What a bright speckle it has! This is a sub-species called *anna*. I collected it in Mongolia."

"You don't say! I have three specimens of the sub-species *richthofeni*. They have even more red spots."

"Nonsense!" a third interferences. "You couldn't say that if you knew the one in the Chinghai Province. The *richthofeni* is nothing to compare with it."

"What! You mean to insult my *richthofeni*?"

In this way the glove is thrown down, though we may not make out what they are arguing about.

To our disappointment we cannot see the Apollo's Parnassius in Japan. Instead, however, our country raises three peculiar species belonging to the same genus. One is an alpine butterfly, Eversmann's Parnassius (*Usuba-kicho*), only inhabiting Mt. Daise-tsu in Hokkaido. Like the Apollo's Parnassius, this species has some scarlet eye-like spots on its translucent yellowish wings.

The other two species, on the contrary, do not wear any speckles on their dark-veined white wings which are also translucent. They are the White Clouded Parnassius (*Hime-usuba-shirocho*), again

occurring only in Hokkaido, and the Glacial Parnassius (*Usuba-shirocho*), common in Honshu as well.

By the way, how decent they look! They do no particular makeups. It is as though they had their lovely faces unpainted, their neat and clean napes showing unconcernedly. They look somehow feeble and have something shadowy like a concubine living quietly and secretly. They have some elegance of the modest woman who won't even demand a finger ring of her patron or protector.

These butterflies are seen in rather a short period of the year. The Glacial Parnassius, for example, begins to appear on lowlands towards the end of April and at higher places in mid or late May, no longer seen in August. The way they fly is very modest and graceful; scarcely fluttering their wings, they float in the air, softly like a dream. Indeed, they make a natural feature of Japan from late spring through early summer.