

The Mnemonists

Eric Schwitzgebel

April 23, 2013

When he was four years old, my Oligarch wandered away from his caretakers to gaze into an oval fountain. At sixteen, he blushinglly refused the kiss he had so desperately longed for. A week before his death, he made plans (which must now be postponed) to visit an old friend in Lak-Blilin. I, his mnemonist, have internalized all this. I remember it just as he does, see the same images, feel the same emotions as he does in remembering those things. I have adopted his attitudes, absorbed his personality. My whole life is arranged to know him as perfectly as one person can know another. My first twenty years I learned the required arts. Since then, I have concentrated on nothing but the Oligarch.

My Oligarch knows that to hide from me is to obliterate part of himself. He whispers to me his most shameful thoughts. I memorize the strain on his face as he defecates; I lay my hands on his tensing stomach. When my Oligarch forces himself on his friend's daughter, I press against him in the dark. I feel the girl's breasts as he does. I forget my sex and hallucinate his ejaculation.

At my fiftieth birthday, my Oligarch toasts me, raising and then drinking down his fine crystal cup of hemlock. As he dies, I study his face. I mimic his last breath. A newborn baby boy is brought and my second task begins.

By age three, the boy has absorbed enough of the Oligarch's identity to know that he is the Oligarch now again, in a new body. A new apprentice mnemonist joins us now, waiting in the shadows. At age four, the Oligarch finally visits his friend in Lak-Blilin, apologizing for the long delay. He begins to berate his advisors as he always had, at first clumsily, in a young child's vocal register. He comes to take the same political stands, comes to dispense the same advice. I am ever at his side helping in all this, the apprentice mnemonist behind me; his trust in us is instant and absolute. At age eight, the Oligarch understands enough to try to apologize to his friend's daughter – though he also notices her hair again in the same way, so good am I.

My Oligarch boy does not intentionally memorize his old life. He recalls it with assistance. Just as I might suggest to you a memory image, wholly fake, of a certain view of the sea with ragged mountains and gulls, which you then later mistake for a real memory image from your own direct experience, so also are my suggestions adopted by the Oligarch, but uncritically and with absolutely rigorous sincerity on both sides. The most crucial memory images I paint and voice and verbally elaborate. Sometimes I brush my fingers or body against him to better convey the feel, or flex his limbs, or ride atop him, narrating. I give him again the oval fountain. I give him again the refused kiss.

A madman's dream of being Napoleon is no continuation of Napoleon. But here there is no madness. My Oligarch's memories have continuous properly-caused traces back to the original events, his whole psychology continued by a stable network of processes, as he well knows. His plans and passions, commitments and obligations, legal contracts, attitudes and resolutions, vengeance, thank-yous and regrets – all are continued without fail, if temporarily set aside through infancy as though through sleep.

The boy, now eleven, is only middling bold, though in previous form, my Oligarch had been among the boldest in the land. I renew my stories of bold heroes, remind him of his long habit of boldness, subtly condition and reinforce him. I push the boundaries of acceptable technique. Though I feel the dissonance sharply, the boy does not. He knows who he is. He feels he has only changed his mind.

The boy approaches his thirteenth birthday and my separation from him. He needs me less and is now equally bonded with his new mnemonist, who has long since emerged from the shadows. She has, still, a reckless, too easy smile, a jaunty step. I finish her training. She knows not only every feature of the boy's life but also everything possible from his previous bodies. Ordinary men's decades-old recollections of adolescence and early adulthood are always sparse and half-fictionalized. We mnemonists do far better. Generations of mnemonists can remember more vividly and accurately than can one ordinary man across his lifetime. Twelve hundred years ago, the Oligarch saw that fountain, refused that kiss.

I leave my Oligarch for the first and only time, to the quiet wooded manor for retired mnemonists. We continue our painting and storytelling, but only to each other, into dead ends of mortal memory.

I learn that my Oligarch's mnemonist has fallen to her death. The Oligarch was enjoying his flourishing teenage body, clambering high on the manor rooftop, having slipped away from his caretakers. She of course followed. A tile broke and her leg buckled. She tumbled down the steep roof, could not find a grip, landed unluckily.

An Oligarch can cast his body off like a shell. But if his mnemonist dies, the only recourse is to bring a new mnemonist immediately. She will learn him as well as possible, but without the guidance and expressive skills of the elder mnemonist, the Oligarch must convey his thousand years' memories to her himself, and Oligarchs have no special skill in this. The result can only be faint, flawed shadows. Knowing this, my Oligarch has, I hear, refused a new mnemonist. He will hike and hunt and sail and chase women for the remainder of his life, without his one most intimate companion, without his full memory, and without the one infallible sign of his former status.

The Oligarchs always number forty-four. They must find a new member. They would rather recruit a foreigner than elevate a peasant.

You aspire to be a philosopher? Consider the Oligarch philosopher Jortiv-Lla. His career covers the entire modern period, back to his teacher Ptalkit-li-Nlal six hundred years ago. You desire eternal companionship? One gay Oligarch couple has loved each other for fifteen hundred years, through body after body, sometimes both old, sometimes both young, sometimes (though less commonly) of mixed age. The memory of their early trysts stays always with them, rekindled, re-felt, kept vivid, enduring without limit. They remember picnicking together in youthful bodies in the flowered fields of the twelfth century. They remember riding sooty trains by the sea and drinking wine together as old men in the nineteenth century. They remember touching fingertips together as youths again under our country's first electric lights in the twentieth

century. The elite of your country could do all this, with ordinary mnemonic techniques. No magic is necessary, nor even computer technology. Your elite choose instead to die.

You will live with us. A mnemonist will devote three years to fully memorizing your short life, with the aid of the secret surveillance videos we have been taking since your birth. After those three years, in accord with our custom, you will drink hemlock and a new boy will be you. The new boy will be more perfectly you, in twenty years, than you yourself would be in twenty years if you stay in your country. In sixty years, instead of decrepitude, death, and forgetting, you will be enjoying for the third time the bloom of youth, full still with the vivid memories and character you enjoy now, though matured and enriched and layered with a lifetime of additional new experiences.

Do you accept?