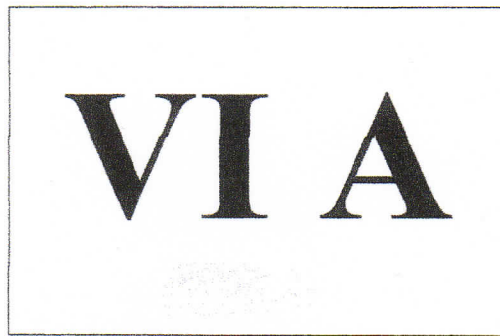


AGREGATION INTERNE D'ANGLAIS

SESSION 2011

Epreuves orales

**EXPOSE DE LA PREPARATION
D'UN COURS**



Ce sujet comprend 1 document.

Extrait de *Solar*, roman de Ian McEwan, 2010

Compte tenu des caractéristiques de ce dossier et des différentes possibilités d'exploitation qu'il offre, vous indiquerez à quel niveau d'apprentissage vous pourriez le destiner et quels objectifs vous vous fixeriez. Vous présenterez et justifierez votre démarche pour atteindre ces objectifs.

5 It was a plastic foil bag of finely sliced potatoes boiled in oil and dusted in salt, industrialised powdered foodstuffs, preservatives, enhancers, hydrolysing and raising agents, acidity regulators and colouring. Salt and vinegar flavoured crisps. He was still stuffed from his lunch, but this particular chemical feast could not be found in Paris, Berlin or Tokyo and he longed for it now, the actinic sting of these thirty grams — a drug dealer's measure. One last jolt to the system, then he would never touch the junk again. He thought there was every chance of resisting it until he was on the Paddington train. He stuffed the bag in the pocket of his jacket, took up his burden of papers and his wheeled luggage and continued across the concourse. He was thirty-five pounds overweight. About his future lightness he had made many general resolutions and virtuous promises, often after dinner with a glass in his hand, and all parliamentary heads nodding in assent. What defeated him was always the present, the moment of vivid confrontation with the affirming tidbit, the extra course, the meal he did not really need, when the short-term faction carried the day.

10 The flight from Berlin was a typical failure. At the start, as he lowered his broad rear into his seat, barely two hours after a meaty Germanic breakfast, he was forming his resolutions : no drinks but water, no snacks, a green-leaf salad, a portion of fish, no pudding, and at the same time, at the approach of the silver tray and the murmured invitation of a female voice, his hand was closing round the stem of his runway champagne. A half-hour later he was ripping open the sachet of a salt-studded, beef-glazed, toasted corn-type sticklet snack that came with his jumbo gin and tonic. Then there was spread before him a white tablecloth, the sight of which fired some neuronal starter gun for his stomach juices. The gin melted his remaining resolve. He chose the starter he had decided against : quails' legs wrapped in bacon on a bed of creamed garlic. Then, cubes of pork belly mounted on a hill-fort of buttered rice. The word 'pavé' was another of those starter guns : a paving slab of chocolate sponge encased in chocolate under a chocolate sauce ; goat's cheese, cow's cheese in a nest of white grapes, three rolls, a chocolate mint, three glasses of Burgundy, and finally, as though it would absolve him of all else, he forced himself back through the menu to confront the oil-sodden salad that came with the quail. When his tray was removed, only the grapes remained.

15 He bought his ticket and settled himself at a table on the half-empty train. Sitting opposite was one of those young men in their thirties with shaved head, chubby face and gymnasium-thickened neck who were, to Beard's undiscerning eye, impossible to tell apart. This man, however, was distinguished by piercings in his ears. For some unacknowledged seconds there was an under-the-table negotiation, a polite ballet, for leg space. Then the younger man proceeded with the message he was tapping into his phone, and Beard, scanning the front pages, experienced the familiar mental narrowing of homecoming. These were surely the very papers he had read before he left, weeks before. Here were the same headlines, over the same photograph, asking the same question. When would Blair go ? Tomorrow ? Straight after the next election, assuming he won ? A year in, or two, or after a whole fourth term ? Was this not exactly the same number of Shia citizens in Baghdad, slaughtered by al-Quaeda as they queued to buy bread ? That story apart (Beard was riffling through his pile), the tsunami had taken over a quarter of a million lives, which had raised for some, just as it had last month, the question of God's existence. Elsewhere, the country was, as ever, pronounced to be in ruins, its governance, finances, health service, justice and education systems, military, transport infrastructure and public morals in a state of terminal inanition. From habit, he looked out for climate-change articles. Nothing today. Solar ? Nothing — but there would be soon.

20 He set the papers down on the seat beside him and attended to his palmtop, scrolling through the fifteen messages it had absorbed since his departure from Berlin Tegel. [...]

50 He put away the palmtop, leaned back in his seat and half closed his eyes. Right
before him on the table, shimmering through his barely parted lashes, were the salt and
vinegar crisps, and just beyond the packet was a plastic bottle of mineral water belonging to
the young man. Beard wondered whether he should be looking over the notes for his
speech, but general travel fatigue as well as the lunchtime drinks had rendered him, for the
55 moment, inert, and he believed he knew the material well enough, and on a card in his top
pocket were various useful quotes. As for the snack, he wanted it less than he did, but he
still wanted it. Certain of those industrial compounds might stir his metabolism into
wakefulness. It was his palate, rather than his stomach, that was looking forward to the
acidic tang of the dust coating each brittle slice. He had shown decent restraint — the train
60 had been moving for several minutes now — and there was no good reason to hold back.

He pulled himself up in the seat and leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands
propping his chin for several reflective seconds, gaze fixed on the gaudy wrapper, silver,
red and blue, with cartoon animals cavorting below a Union Jack. So childish of him, this
infatuation, so weak, so harmful, a microcosm of all past errors and folly, of that impatient
65 way he had of having to have what he wanted instantly. He took the bag in both hands and
pulled its neck apart, discharging a clammy fragrance of frying fat and vinegar. It was an
artful laboratory simulation of the corner fish and chip shop, an enactment of fond
memories and desire and nationhood. That flag was a considered choice. He lifted clear a
single crisp between forefinger and thumb, replaced the bag on the table, and sat back. He
70 was a man to take his pleasures seriously. The trick was to set the fragment on the centre of
the tongue and, after a moment's spreading sensation, push the potato up hard to shatter
against the roof of the mouth. His theory was that the rigid irregular surface caused tiny
abrasions in the soft flesh into which salt and chemicals poured, creating a mild and
distinctive pleasure-pain.

75 Like a master of wine at a grand tasting, he had closed his eyes. When he opened
them he was staring into the level grey-blue gaze of the man opposite. Feeling only slightly
ashamed, Beard made a gesture of impatience and looked away. He knew how he must have
appeared, a plump fool of a certain age communing intensely with a morsel of junk food.
He had been behaving as though alone. So what? As long as he harmed or offended no one,
80 that was his right. He no longer cared much what others thought of him. There were few
benefits in growing older, and this was one. In a simple assertion of selfhood, rather than to
satisfy his contemptible needs, he put out a hand to take another crisp, and as he did so, met
again the other man's stare. It was narrow, hard, unblinking, expressive of little beyond a
ferocious curiosity. It occurred to Beard that he might be sitting across from a psychopath.
85 So be it. He could be a bit of one himself. The salty residue from the first round gave him
the impression that he was bleeding from the gums. He slumped back in his seat, opened his
mouth and repeated the experience, although this time he kept his eyes open. Inevitably, the
second crisp was less piquant, less surprising, less penetrating than the first, and it was
precisely this shortfall, this sensual disappointment, that prompted the need, familiar to drug
90 addicts, to increase the dose. He would eat two crisps at once.

It was at this moment, as he glanced up, that he witnessed his fellow passenger
sitting forward, gaze still eerily fixed, elbows on the table, perhaps in conscious parody.
Then, letting one forearm drop, crane-like down onto the bag, the man stole a crisp,
probably the largest in the packet, held it in front of his face for a second or two, then ate it,
95 not with Beard's fastidiousness, but with an insolent chewing motion, with lips parted so
that one could glimpse it turning to paste on his tongue. The man did not even blink, his
stare was so intense. And the act was so flagrant, so unorthodox, that even Beard, who was
quite capable of unconventional thought — how else had he won his Prize? — could only

100 sit in frozen shock and try, for dignity's sake, by remaining expressionless, to betray no sign of emotion.

105 The two men were locked into each other's gaze, and now Beard was determined not to look away. No question, the man's behaviour was aggressive, the act was naked theft, however trivial the goods. And if it came to physical struggle, Beard did not doubt that he would be on the floor in seconds, with broken arms or head. But there was also a possibility of another element, of something playful behind this steeliness and mockery of an older man's ridiculous pleasure in junk food. Or a tease, in the old-fashioned situationist mode, of a stuffy bourgeois. Or worse, the fellow believed that Beard was gay, and this was a come-on, a kind of modern opening known only to certain subgroups for whom his purple silk tie, as a hypothesis, was an accidental signal, an open invitation to seduction. Wasn't an earring in one ear or the other, he had forgotten which, once a significant marker of sexual orientation? This man had two earrings in each ear. The physicist knew much about light, but about forms of public expression in contemporary culture he was in the dark. Finally, returning to his initial surmise, Beard continued to wonder if his fellow passenger was a psychiatric case on an unlicensed drug holiday from the lithium, in which case it was a bad idea to continue to stare into his eyes. At this, Beard looked away and did the only thing that came to mind. He took another crisp.

120 What did he expect? As soon as the crisp was on Beard's tongue, the man's hand dropped again, and this time he took two, just as Beard himself had intended, and ate them in the same jaunty, vulgar manner. It would surely not be a good move to snatch the bag away from the table — too physical, too abrupt. Dangerous, to be breaking new ground, inviting a scuffle. Would anyone save him if it came to that? Beard glanced around the compartment. Passengers were reading, or staring numb-faced into space, or out the window at the wintry west-London suburbs, oblivious to the drama. What interest was there in two men silently sharing a snack? It was paradoxical, but as Beard saw it, there was more sense in continuing what had already begun. It did not occur to him to avoid confrontation with a stronger man by giving way and letting him have the bag to himself. Beard would not be bullied. He may have been short and overweight, but he had a developed sense of justice and always stood his ground. He was capable of being reckless. There had been some ruinous consequences. He took another slice of fried potato. His opponent, his stare still fixed on Beard, did the same. Then again, and again, for two further rounds, their hands came down on the bag, in steady, deliberate rather than rapid succession, and never quite touched. When there were only two crisps left, the young man retrieved the bag and, in a parody of politeness, offered them to Beard. The only response to this, the final insult, was to turn away.

135 It was an outrage. The train was beginning to slow, people were reaching for their coats, a computerised voice reminded passengers not to leave the train without their luggage. In a move that secured his triumph, the young man balled up in his fist the plastic bag and stuffed it into the waste bin under the table. Diligently, he used a hand to wipe the table clear of crumbs and grains of salt. Beard's humiliation was complete. This was how it was to grow older, to be pushed around by the young, the strong, and have no redress. With a warming touch of self-pity, he sensed that every injustice, every historical oppression, unwarranted invasion, chaotic warlordism, every tyrannical break with the rule of law was compacted in this moment, and he was bound by self-respect and his duty to underdogs everywhere to make a show of resistance. Otherwise, he could never live with himself. He lunged forward, seized his opponent's bottle of water, snapped off its top and drank deeply — he was thirsty anyway — drank it down to the bottom, every last drop of its twenty-five centilitres. He tossed the bottle on the table with a defiant, come-and-get-me look. The blue bottle cap rolled onto the floor.

150 The young man thought for a moment, then stood and stepped into the aisle, revealing his full height, somewhere around six two. Beard, already beginning to regret his defiance, remained in his seat, determined not to cringe. The man reached up, and with one smooth movement of his overdeveloped arm, he swung Beard's luggage to the floor, setting it down gently by its owner. If this was an act of contrition, Beard was not moved, and he returned a snarling look of contempt. His adversary hesitated a moment, gazing down at the
155 older man with an expression of sorrow or pity, and then he turned and loped away down the compartment.

Beard let him get well clear before he stood. He never wanted to see the fellow again. A full minute passed before he stepped out onto the platform. Trembling a little now, with anger or shock, or a little of both, he had some difficulty getting himself into his coat
160 — its belt was tangled around a sleeve. His shoelace was loose. As he kneeled to retie it with fingers not yet fully obedient, he remembered his heap of newspapers and decided to leave them where they were. At last, more or less composed, he made his way along the platform towards the ticket barrier. This was the moment that would remain with him, and come to stand for every recalculation he would ever make about his past, every revised or
165 improved perspective he would ever gain on his own history, his own stupidity and other people's motives. He had stopped twenty feet short of the barrier. He set his wheeled luggage on end and reached under his coat into his jacket pocket for his ticket. There was something else in there, something plastic, bulky, lightweight, crunchy. There came to him a confused childhood memory of a magic trick at a village fete, when some master of the art
170 had pulled from ten-year-old Michael Beard's ear an egg, or rabbit or chicken, something physically impossible, just like this : his crisps, the ones he had already eaten. He pulled the bag clear and, stupefied, stared at it, the Union Jack, the dancing cartoon animals, willing them to melt away. And that other bag ? What a cascade of recalibration of every instant, every impulse, of the nature of the man he never wanted to see again, and of how he, Beard,
175 must have seemed — a vicious madman.

He was so entirely in the wrong that for the moment it felt like liberation, strangely like joy. There could be no excuses, he had no defence. He also felt a mirthless impulse to laugh. His error was so unambiguous, so unsullied, he stood so completely revealed to himself, a naked fool, that he felt purified and redeemed, like a penitent, like an elated
180 medieval flagellant with a newly flayed back. That poor fellow whose food and drink you devoured, who offered you his last morsels, fetched down your luggage, was a friend to man. No, no, that was not for now, the agony of retrospection must be postponed.

Despite the need to hurry to his appointment, he remained on the busy platform a good while, below the distant glass roof and its clattering echoes, while passengers stepped
185 around him, and he held the bag of crisps against his chest, feeling himself, quite mistakenly, intensely illuminated.

From Ian McEwan, *Solar*, 2010, Jonathan Cape, London

(abridged)