

## Mock Headmaster's essay No I/VII

(mistakes in the manuscripts not corrected in the typed version)

time allowed: 45 minutes

### “Describe your best childhood memory”

One of the memories of my childhood which has left me a profound trace in my perception of the world and my attitude towards various questions that one may say are philosophical.

That memory, that experience, was of leaving the tumultuous, loud and industrial-vibrant city of Paris – the place where I was born, hence my favourite city – to climb aboard the TGV train, and leave in the early morning when the bakers had just opened their boulangerie, off and away from the noisy bazaar, away, away, and to go south.

Indeed, my childhood memories that had been cherished most dearly in the bosom of my heart was of the French Riviera, where I had stayed at a small place of a paradise hidden away amongst the volcanic red rocks of the Massif d'Estérel.

For to stay in the bay of azure waters, all tranquil and meditative, that sky so pale and light though so deep, cloudless – and those lushful vegetation.

The place was situated in a bay with red rocks meeting fiercely with the waters to have clashes, the long beach where southerners reposed, having siestas; there were some mediterranean climate trees – palms – and pine woods and cactuses by the hills, and overlooking the bay was a large small mountain of 300 metres stretched out like a slug, watching down upon the little villas, the anchored sailing boats and beautiful nature.

It is no doubt true that Antoine de St-Exupery, author of the Little Prince, once said that Agay, for thus was the name of the small town, was a jewel amongst a desert of sand.

For to set aside the beautiful nature – red rocks, pine woods, azure waters, cloudless sky – there was also the aspect of that magic wafting through the almost humid air, lurking behind the cactuses in the twisting alleys slithering snake-like up the hills up to the old-style hotel.

During evening, when having plunged to refresh oneself from the intolerable heat, the sun went incardanide, and set in the horizon.

It was the golden hour, and all was ablaze with golden lights to have the effect that here forth was the garden of Eden in which we all had been exiled.

The air was vibrant, not with loud, unpleasant machines we have unfortunately polluted in this world so beautiful, but of a different kind.

There was a whole orchestra, amongst the scarce villas and innumerable pine trees, palms and cactuses, one would hear a frog croaking, a wild boar snuffing and not only the fair breeze that came after the fierce mistral that shook trees down, but also cicadas all murmuring and making, placing the place quite a heaven-like appearance.

I remember a wild burst of ecstasy, alighting inside me, for here indeed the poetic being was feeling at home.

Those murmurs, silent, whispering amongst the bushes, those spirits of nature sweeping by, that languid air to drowse your consciousness to a point where all useless everyday problems disappeared from one's mind and instead a bliss swooped down your body.

There was a thrill of joy, to be walking up to the hotel, the lights now a-twinkling, the sun casting its last adieus of benevolent warmth, the sweet-scent of intense perfume coming from the flowers, that light wind and that feeling of complete happiness that one only acquires and feel during summer when it reveals all its charms.

Such a memory has lasted still and I think will stay in me for the rest of my life, and though misfortunes and war and grief may upset my life and make me plunge into the abyss of darkness, I would still have a memory of that Mediterranean-equivalent of Wodehouse's Blandings. Fitzgerald's atmosphere and Evelyn Waugh's reveries are what best describe the sort of state I was in, a trance of deep lightness of living in total beauty – the opening scene of Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray" in which Lord Henry Wotton sits on the Persian Saddlebags can be read to be able to understand the sort of Arcadia that exist in a world of surrealist irony.

I totally agree and have strong empathy for the poet John Keats when he exclaimed:

“O for a beaker of the warm south!”

That I may see that place again and be free.

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Paul Ostroverhy, 2021