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oan Crexells (1896-1926). Details for a biography

Melcior Font (1905-1959)

Joan Crexells was one of the most remarkable Catalan intellectuals of the 1920s. But he died at the age of thirty, while still in full and multi-faceted activity. Initially he envisaged a possibility of dedicating himself to philosophy in the institutions and in the magazines regularly created by Eugeni d'Ors. But in 1920 he distanced himself from that world and moved to Berlin as a correspondent for *La Publicidad*. He was a brilliant journalist. Two years later, he won a competitive examination for civil servants specialising in economics held by the Barcelona City Council. He travelled to Germany and England to increase his knowledge in this field. During the Primo de Rivera dictatorship he was stripped of his office, but then Francesc Cambó found him a position as consultant of Foment del Treball Nacional. While never abandoning journalism altogether, he gradually came to specialise in economic analysis. Nor did he abandon philosophy, and he was chosen by Joan Estelrich, the director of the Bernat Metge Foundation, to commence the translation of Plato's *Dialogues*. He died in 1926, before the third volume could be published. Josep Pla, in the biographical profile of *Homenots* dedicated to him, said that Crexells, had he lived longer, would have come to be a very valuable high-level civil servant. In contrast, the poet Melcior Font, in the biography he wrote for the *Revista de Catalunya*, believed he was destined for prominence in academic life.

Melcior Font was a few years younger than Crexells and an apprentice writer. He was presumably entrusted with the task because he had come to know Crexells in the editorial offices of *La Publicidad* in Spanish, which by then had become *La Publicitat* in Catalan. Carles Riba and Joan Estelrich provided him with some information. He had access to a number of letters. He also made use of the articles by Capdevila, Serra Hunter and Nicolau d'Olwer published in *La Nova Revista*. Crexells' philosophical production, partially unpublished until then, was not collected into one volume until 1933. The *Primers assaigs* (Early Essays) –as the book was titled– were edited by Estelrich and Riba.

Joan Crexells (Details for a biography)¹

Melcior Font
(1905-1959)

I. Biography?

Can we say that Joan Crexells (1896-1926) has a biography? It can be told in a few brief words: a life of thirty years, entirely dedicated to study at his own choosing. His contact with the world was never turbulent or adventurous. His will was totally faithful to his vocation. For his studies, oblivious of distances, he travelled around almost all of Europe. One sole love filled and adorned his life: the one that had created his home. Even in the difficult test of a long period spent abroad, an experience that holds out many temptations, no hint of adventure clouded his existence or distracted him from his task. He led a sober and modest life everywhere and at all times.

His life story, then, is one that is free of slips, and particularly of face-tiousness. A life that was rich but spent in concentration. All the things that happened to him did so in a simple, normal fashion, they were never dramatic or life-changing. But we do not need to search for data, relive events or gather anecdotes when we have his work in our hands. And Joan Crexells, the richest and most enviable kind of man of our present-day Catalonia, leaves us a full, mature, exceptional body of work. Nevertheless, for future studies of the man, I am pleased to recall here a few details.

II. A note

At this point –with the physical presence of my friend still painfully alive in my mind’s eye– I would like to make a sketch of his appearance.

Joan Crexells was a tall, thin, rangy man, with rather airy gestures, but with his head always held high. His features were normal, well-formed and somewhat forceful, with an almost invisible veil of doubt or profundity that Josep Pla saw in him. His pale face, with its rosy cheekbones, became more refined day by day. The thick lenses of his spectacles could not entirely dim the brightness of his eyes, which had a look partly of abstraction and partly of enthusiasm. His shiny black hair tumbled over his forehead. His gestures, firm and noble,

faithfully illustrated his words. The smile on his finely-profiled lips was sometimes childlike, but more often seemed rather bitter.

In evoking my friend, I can feel in my hands that subtle, tremulous sensation of fever that his effusive handshake conveyed in the last days...

III. Infant

Joan Crexells was born on the 15th of March, 1896, in a rather gloomy house at number 10 of the Rambla de les Flors in Barcelona. An inner courtyard cast a bluish light into the house, and it was to this that he opened his eyes.

His family had little or no intellectual background, but their blood teemed with determination and energy. Were these two decisive qualities in Joan Crexells' life a paternal inheritance? It is easy to imagine.

Take his father's marvellous example of tenacity. Born into one of the poorest families of L'Hospitalet, he was a simple builder. One day when he was eighteen, walking across a field with his sister, he crossed a stream, stopped, and in a kind of moment of enlightenment exclaimed, "If I knew I had to die poor, I'd throw myself into this stream right now!"

His words were not lost on the wind. Shortly afterwards he moved to Madrid, and it is not hard to imagine the hardships of the journey. Once there, he discovered that his neighbours made mirrors. Having no clear idea of what he wanted to do, the decision was simple: he would make mirrors, too. And so began the conquest of the chemical formula. He had to get hold of the first ingredients. But how was he to ask for them at the pharmacy when he did not know their names? Sniffing the pots, he learned to recognise the substances he needed. He began to perform tests, with the meagre savings he had slowly put together as a builder. And he succeeded in making mirrors ... but they reflected two faces. More tests, and finally the perfect mirror emerged. The dream had come true. The ambition he had expressed that day by the stream was beginning to see the light. And before long it was completely fulfilled.

But young Joan Crexells, at the age of three, was sent to live in a farmhouse owned by his parents in Sant Joan d'Espí –not due to illness, as some have believed, but simply out of maternal concern. He was never a noisy or boisterously playful child. On the contrary, he had a peaceful, smiling nature.

He did his first studies in Sant Joan d'Espí. His first teacher, he said, taught him everything he needed to know at that stage. When he was nine, he left the school to return to Barcelona, and there were speeches and tears to bid farewell to the brilliant young master from the city. Was this not the first display of his gift of cordial amiability, in addition to his early scholarly prestige?

IV. Student

On returning to Barcelona, he continued his studies at the Col·legi Peninsular, close to the Mercè convent. He also studied the first two years of secondary education there. Officially, he did the other four years at the Institut. His schoolmates say that friendship and admiration flourished around him. He was never absorbed by the hubbub of the cloisters. He read or spoke seriously of literature with his colleagues. His highest admiration, then and always, was for Joan Maragall. He was serious, but extremely kind and friendly. His friends of the time remember his constant, restless playing with a silk cord that held his glasses. The cord later became a fine chain. Joan Crexells was no dilettante, even then. Quite the contrary. In each task he applied that fire of enthusiasm, that imperative of will that he brought to bear on all things. His passion for reading was insuperable. It was at this time –at the age of sixteen– that his devotion for Shakespeare began, and it remained one his purest and most permanent. In the final year of secondary school he began to study English, whereupon –always tempted by difficulty!– he began read the author of *King Lear* in the original language, and then did the same with Goethe when learning German. At the same time he began training as a teacher of commerce. While a student and in his later years, he had a deep love for mathematics, of which he admired its transparency and praised its infallibility. “Can you imagine anything more lovely,” he used to ask, laughingly, “than this: two and two make four?” And ultimately, was not clarity one of the principal virtues of his work?

I said earlier that his life was free of anecdotes. Nor do I know of any in his adolescent years. His books, bedroom and classroom were his world. We could cite some brilliant scholarly achievements, certainly, but are these not to be taken for granted?

V. Philosophical vocation

In 1913 he completed his secondary education. Should he start a university career? If so, which? His family wanted him to finish his studies there and then. His vocation was philosophy, it called to him irresistibly. He had to be studying all his life. On his wedding day, on signing the certificate, he hesitated a moment before stating his profession. Finally, he wrote ‘student.’ The priest, a friend of his, was surprised. “I’m a student,” he insisted, “and I aim to be one all my life.” Here we see his vocation. Pure as it was, it had to pass the test, which was by no means easy. His mother wanted him to continue the family business, being the eldest son. And her son’s vocation must have seemed to her a mere dream, an adventure, a luxury, or simply madness. In addition, to understand and agree to it, it was necessary to have faith in his intelligence. There was ample proof, of course, but not in everyone’s grasp. His father was dead. I do not want to

speculate on whether his father, had he been alive, would have assented or objected to that wish, but I clearly remember, among other things, how his father quietly enjoyed having him come down to the shop to speak French with the customers when necessary.

In a letter to Carles Riba, written in February 1923 from London, we find this passage, which could be autobiographical: "In England they have a sporting concept of education and science: they study Greek and mathematics for years and years without thinking of whether they'll ever be useful, simply for the pleasure of knowing them. It's the Greek concept of education, the opposite of the *Catalan concept*, that when a child is seven years old, the teacher is told to make him study arithmetic, because that's what he'll need later on." In writing these words, Joan Crexells must have recalled his parents' indications.

His mother advised him at least to combine the two things: the business and philosophy. To please her in part, Crexells bought the books for the first year of Law. This was the year when he was to start the philosophy course. In Law his family saw a more obvious utility. But on reading the first pages of Díaz's *Roman Law*, he said to himself "That's enough. Let's forget it." And he dropped the idea. He could not overcome the repulsion. Those first Baroque sentences confirmed his premonitions. It may be that his true vocation increased this sensation of distaste: it demanded for itself all his devotion. And he could not refuse it.

J. Serra Hunter, in recalling his student and friend, wrote: "I had heard about Joan Crexells long before he came to matriculate for History of Philosophy. What I had been told, in contrast with what is common in such cases, was fully confirmed by our very first conversation. He gave me the impression of a man who was anxious for suggestions and knowledge, rather than initiatives and a will to know. Fortunately, for him and for me, it was not necessary to undo in the new student any intellectual prejudices acquired at school. His case was the reverse. He had a temperament in which concerns arose as he penetrated into the essence of things and shuddered at the magnitude and difficulty of the problems. Crexells was the student who never leaves you in peace, who is constantly interrogating you, who expresses his doubts to you, who always comes to you with new books and always asks for your opinion." And he added, "In conversation, I could always observe two things that were equally significant for his vocation: his advances in intellectual training and the gradual disappearance of certain extremisms engendered by an excessively rapid vision of systems."

VI. Teacher

We are between the years 1916 and 1918. Joan Crexells' vocation for teaching is becoming clearer and clearer. At this time his fondness for reading is still

growing. His devotion for Shakespeare is more alive than ever, as is his love for language. He reads Croce's aesthetics and learns Italian. He attends the courses given by Rubió i Lluch at the *Estudis Universitaris* and the Montessori lectures of 1916. He also goes to the Saturday afternoon courses given by Eugeni d'Ors at the *Institut d'Estudis Catalans*, and those of Serra Hunter.

His first teaching task was as an assistant at the Philosophy Seminar, appointed by d'Ors to give a course on Epistemology. It was in this period, Josep Pla has said, that the imbalance between his knowledge and his age was most visible in him. His colleagues and students testify that he spoke with great confidence and absolute mastery of the subject, and at the same time with a very refined sense of new developments. He made a visible effort to simplify the issues and to assume a rather reserved air. But it was a timidity that did not deceive anyone.

Perhaps it is now time to state, as proof of his strength of mind, his attitude regarding d'Ors at the latter's moment of greatest glory. At that moment, d'Ors's followers surrounded him with fervent, devout admiration. The censer passed from hand to hand and the cloud of smoke was permanent. He proclaimed intelligences. He made knights of the figures of *Noucentisme*. He erected dogmas. Having one's name in his *Glossari* – albeit only cited in passing – was the most coveted of consecrations.

But are we to place Joan Crexells among these followers? The answer is clearly 'no.' He never felt absolute devotion for d'Ors. And in many aspects he nobly indicated his discrepancies. One of the reasons was his temperament, perhaps: Crexells was incapable of approaching anyone with mistrust. He said what he had to say from the outset. And this, when dealing with d'Ors – as everyone knows – was not possible, for he repaid admiration and docility with impertinence. Joan Crexells quickly discerned in 'Xènius' the struggle, skilfully and elegantly dissimulated, between seriousness and simulation. Those Saturday lectures, which were initially dedicated solely to a handful of students previously selected by the professor, were not attended by Crexells until they were declared open to all. His attitude as a listener was not that of wonderment or thirst for knowledge that so many adopted.

Crexells was not the type simply to bow to someone else's will or to subscribe to any idolatry. D'Ors – need it be said? – assigned to each person the instrument he had to play when he wanted it to sound: this one the violin, the other the flute. "You," he would say to one, "have to do history of philosophy." "You," to another, "have to do mathematics."

In his position as professor, Crexells gave a number of lectures at the University of Salamanca on the latest currents in German philosophy, and the document summarises the solidity of the works of his prolific adolescence. It is

said that Professor Unamuno, sitting in the lecture hall, asked how old Crexells was. When told he was only twenty-four, he exclaimed “Prodigious, prodigious!” in amazement.

Later on, Crexells taught philosophy at the *Estudis Normals* of the Mancommunity of Catalonia and was the speaker of the Philosophical Section of the Second Catalan University Congress. He also gave courses and lectures on philosophical themes at various educational and cultural centres.

At the University of Barcelona, he was for a few years an auxiliary professor of the department of Fundamental Logic, and finally a professor of Spanish Language and Literature.

A university chair was clearly Joan Crexells’ future destination, and undoubtedly the place where his work could be most fruitful.

VII. Journalist

Joan Crexells’ first work as a reviewer that we know of is from his early youth. While still at school, he answered a survey on the most peculiar textbooks, criticising with subtle humour a “History of the World” by Martiniano Martínez. His was the most intelligent and acute reply.

But Crexells’ work in this field was not very extensive. He began by collaborating in *Quaderns d’Estudi*, with a series of reviews of books and lectures and a number of studies of contemporary philosophers: Cohen, Eucken, Claparède, Riehl and F.C. Schiller, and a knowledgeable, well-documented and extremely perceptive study of “The philosophy of Bertrand Russell.”

We should not overlook his collaboration in the *Revista de Catalunya*, where he published four very interesting articles: “From Hobbes to Maurras,” “Science and the future,” “The arguments of Xenon of Elea” and “History in reverse.”

He also wrote a few priceless articles for *La Revista*: “Modern philosophy,” “Pragmatism,” “The creationism of Leonardo Coimbra” and “Knowledge and the object.” Through these writings, some from his youth, we can follow his spiritual restlessness and the prodigious advances his intelligence made every day. In his commentaries on other thinkers’ doctrines, his own always shines through, clearly and nobly.

And what of his journalistic work? Crexells was fond of journalism, even though we may suspect that it was not easily reconciled with his true vocation. He was an insatiable reader of newspapers. More than once he described the structure and tone of the newspaper he had dreamed of creating. Although modest in volume, his journalistic task is by no means negligible. He poured

into his articles the density of his thought, expressed with pleasing clarity. And how could anyone be surprised by this ability? He was enormously well prepared, with a wealth of doctrine that enabled him to penetrate through the flimsiest banality or illuminate the most obscure themes with suitable colours.

He worked as a journalist both from Barcelona and from abroad, always in *La Publicitat*. As it seems more appropriate to discuss his foreign writings in the context of his travels, we will speak now of his work at the editorial offices in Passeig de Gràcia, particularly that of the later days, when he attained a radiant maturity.

At the newspaper, his participation was exceptionally valuable. He had to go there every day, now for one thing, now for another. Apart from his anonymous work in various sections, notes, commentaries and translations, in February 1925 he took charge of the economic page, to which he gave a character and personality it had lacked till then. His pseudonym of “Observer” immediately gained great prestige. “Observer” provided reliable, highly intelligent and well-documented guidance. It was through this page that his status as an economist became evident.

In these later years, Crexells had adopted the custom of dictating his articles, With a few notes in his hand, usually just figures, and pacing slowly with long, firm, rhythmic steps in front of the typist, or seated and nervously smoothing his hair with his fingers, he dictated the articles and then polished them with a few final touches.

His journalistic work is as far removed from pedantry as it is from improvisation. He always had a noble sense of responsibility. It may be in his journalism more than in any other of his activities where it could be sensed that his knowledge was not superficial and that he had resisted the impatience and flattery of early fame. Perhaps Joan Crexells was not a journalist in the conventional sense of the word; however, I have no doubt that the study of this activity will provide very valuable data for achieving a complete vision of him.

VIII. Travels

Was it a thirst for space that drove Crexells to travel? Was it not rather a longing for knowledge? I suspect that both temptations were equally strong in him.

Perhaps we should mention in the context of this moment one of Crexells' virtues, inherited from his forebears. Let us recall here his father, whose comfortable economic position would have allowed Crexells to devote himself to the study of his vocation, forgetting about earning a living. But he never wanted to avail himself of this solution: it seemed too easy to him, even vexati-

ous, he said. His high-minded moral sensibility had made of this scruple a duty. For this reason, he carried out his activities in branches of his specialities that afforded him an income. He applied for a position with the municipal authorities, and in the later years acted as the secretary of statistics for the employers' organisation Foment del Treball Nacional. And for the same reason, he never made any journey until he found the opportunity of earning the means to do so. And when he was abroad, he meticulously balanced his income and expenditure.

What, then, was the piece of good luck that enabled him to undertake this first journey? It was in 1920: *La Publicidad* decided to send Joan Crexells to Berlin as a correspondent, and he set off with Josep Maria de Sagarra. This trip also offered Crexells the chance to perfect his German, which he was then beginning to master. Their ship was the *Capitán Revuelta*. When they reached Berlin, there were still barricades standing. His eagerness to arrive and start work deprived him of a large part of the contemplative enjoyment of the journey. On arrival in Berlin, after a few days of obligatory inactivity, he went to the Parliament, where he immediately made friends with the foreign press attaché. He performed his task as correspondent with an extremely faithful awareness of his duty, sometimes even excessively so.

With Professor Stammler he studied philosophy of law. He also frequented the classes of Greek philosophy. He overcame all the intricate and tiresome bother of matriculating officially, and did so with good fortune.

How did he live in Berlin? Dedicated to studying. He always used the underground railway and saw hardly anything of the city. Eager to be in the classroom and industrious in documenting his articles, he had little social life. His friends went to visit him in the modest neighbourhood where he lived. They tell us that they were received by the children in the street with shouts that jangled their exiles' nerves. These shouts cost Crexells a few cents.

But what kind of passion did Joan Crexells feel for Germany? All his work testifies to the profound admiration he felt for the Germany of art and wisdom. He was also enamoured of the average Germans' cult for the specialisation of items of everyday use. This virtue attracted him above all others. In other aspects, he spoke of them with a smile that inscrutably combined disdain and respect. In the end he captured their nuances: he learned immediately to perceive the exquisite nobility of the people of the Rhine, but also the brusqueness of the Bavarians. In Germany he made pure and respectful acquaintances, but he often complained of the gypsies who he often came across –the most mindless and deplorable in the world, he said.

On his return to Barcelona, he commenced an active and brilliant period of his work as a professor and journalist.

Crexells, a man of multiple activities anxious for new conquests every day, was tempted by the study of finances, and threw himself into it wholeheartedly. He brilliantly obtained a grant from the City Council associated with the position of head of statistics. This position, it has to be said, was later denied to him and is still pending an appeal.

In the spring of 1922 he made his second journey to Germany. The security of his grant-bearing post in Barcelona led him to decide to get married, in the autumn of the same year. He and his wife spent a leisurely honeymoon in Germany. But his determination to earn his grant never left him: he did not fully enjoy the sights surrounding him until the Christmas holidays. And then he enjoyed life to the full. He went to the theatre in the afternoon and again at night. He went back to the museums he already knew. And he visited several times the places that had most charmed him. Faithful to friendship, he travelled from Berlin to Freiburg to spend Christmas with some Catalan friends and a Catalanophile German lady. It was a Catalan Christmas spent beside a *Tannenbaum* (fir tree) of the German carols, which he loved; he stayed in one of those guest houses that call themselves Christian, in which guests are informed by notices of the hour of meditation and prayer so that they will lower their voices when speaking.

There is a good story from this second journey. On arriving in Munich, Crexells was immediately appointed to the Municipal Institute of Statistics. There he met a Spanish student who had just arrived but who knew hardly any German and not even French. Crexells treated him very kindly: he translated for him what was necessary; he explained to him the pile of papers the students were burdened with on entering, and guided him to the classroom. And at one moment –perhaps of excessive gratitude– and in a tone of well-intentioned advice but also exuding superiority, the Spanish student said to Crexells: “I can’t understand why you insist on jealously maintaining and furiously cultivating a language like yours that is useless for travelling the world!” We can imagine Crexells’ wry smile, the only suitable reply...

In this stay in Germany, Crexells had the pleasure of seeing an article of his sent from Bavaria published in Catalan for the first time in *La Publicitat*.

In Berlin he followed the courses of Professors Botkiewicz and Meerwart. Then he travelled to Italy, where he visited various universities and statistics centres.

From there he went to London and studied at the Galton Laboratory with Professors Pearson, Elderton and Irving. These studies in England were decisive in his education. In the above-mentioned letter to Carles Riba, he gave his first impression of the British capital. It is well worth reading:

“London is a swindle. It is poor, poor, poor. When you’ve been in London for a while you realise what an ideal country Germany must have been before the war. What a powerful and well-off middle class Germany had before 1914! Here the middle class seem to me much poorer than their German counterparts. In their famous homes you could freeze to death. Those “men of the hour,” like Soler de Sojo, who sing the glories of the England of the metropolitan railway and automobiles and comfort, are completely off the mark. The metropolitan railway is not bad; but for me Paris’s is better. As for their automobiles and traffic, I confess I’m unmoved. And when they tell me that, for example, forty trains leave Victoria Station every hour, or a thousand trains a day pass through Clapham Junction, I don’t bat an eyelid, it makes no difference to me if ten or twelve thousand pass through every day. What I mean is, give or take ten or twelve thousand a day, I couldn’t care less. But what is a complete swindle is this business of comfort. In the houses and most of the hotels it’s as cold as in Barcelona, and that’s all you can say. Intellectually, the “man in the street” is the shabbiest in the world. The average Englishman is inferior in absolutely every way to the Frenchman and the German. The only thing that saves them is this tiny little Protestant soul they carry inside them, that coats the things of daily life with very pure emotion. The other day I was talking about the advantages of central heating. And the lady of the house answered me, “Yes, but it’s not *homely*.” They have to see coal burning, as Dickens’s characters do, both in their homes and in their offices. The Chairman of the Board of the Bank of England, who spends half an hour in his office in all the month, needs it to be *homely*, not warm.

“The ordinary Englishman, then, is a very, very mediocre type. But, my friend, we must take our hats off to the man who has been educated at Oxford. I have had the chance to meet two or three of them, and they are truly the finest and most distinguished people you will find anywhere in the world. Really, the minority that rules in England is the most select in the world. Someone like Professor Pearson, for example, is something divine. Professor Pearson is an eminent mathematician and biologist. But on entering his office, the first thing you see is an engraving by Michelangelo. And when you leave you see his golf clubs in one corner. And he works frantically all day on matters of mathematics and statistics, but that doesn’t make him lose his sense of humour or exhaust him at all. For me, all of this comes from Oxford. It is the sporting concept of education and science...”

On returning to Barcelona he graduated in Law.

A few months before dying, Joan Crexells went to Poland, sent by Foment. It was his last journey. He hesitated before taking it. He felt unwell, but was encouraged by the attentions of his wife, who accompanied him. On this trip, he once again displayed his exemplary tenacity and sense of duty. He had

asked Foment for two weeks' leave. The doctor of La Preste prescribed him a three-week regimen. After the second week he wanted to return to Barcelona. His wife had to make a special journey to ask for permission.

On reaching Barcelona, he felt somewhat stronger for a few days, but then began to feel definitively ill. He went to take a cure at the sanatorium of La Preste.

IX. The Hellenist

Tomorrow and eternity, Nicolau d'Olwer has said, were Joan Crexells' fields of speculation and action. He came to Hellenism by way of philosophy. In Crexells, then, translating Plato was not a matter of chance but a normal continuity of his work.

On beginning to distribute the tasks of the Bernat Metge Foundation, it was immediately decided to call on Joan Crexells. As Joan Estelrich says, all the required conditions were recognised in him: specialised knowledge, capacity of study, serious character. Consequently, he offered magnificent guarantees for translating Plato into our language. He hesitated for some time before accepting. On making the decision, he resolved to increase his knowledge and skill as far as possible in order to bring the work to a worthy conclusion.

Carles Riba says that Crexells possessed that arduous technique of the translator that can only be achieved through effort and discipline. He spent long hours poring over documents. We must not forget that, like all of our generation, Crexells had educated himself. His work was conscious, tenacious and totally honest. You will never find him evading a difficulty or making those leaps that are all too common in translations. His sense of responsibility always guided his pen. "I remember," Riba says, "that he spent an entire afternoon searching for a Catalan word corresponding to a Greek term of weaving technique, which in more than one translation signed by glorious names had been eluded."

Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer has written of Crexells the Hellenist:

"Crexells, a model of translators, was not at all a professional: he would have refused to translate from the Greek authors who did not harmonise with his studies. And he did not translate for pleasure, but for interest: for the very noble interest of valuing personally the slightest nuance, the deepest reaches of Platonic concepts. Interest – and also a demanding sense of duty. For his own benefit, he would have had enough with precise comprehension of the text. But he wanted to add to this the effort of translating it, to offer the dialogues of the divine Athenian to all our people, whom he loved so much!

"This is the key to the character of Crexells' translations. To say that they are faithful would be to say little. If I may be allowed the word, I would say they are *spiritual* translations – not as an opposition to literal translations but as a step beyond

them. The letter and spirit of the text are respected equally. The letter, thanks to Crexells' mastery of the Greek language; the spirit, thanks to his philosophical culture and his urge to reach to the very core of ideas. The Socratic method of approaching an idea from all angles, of stripping it of all the associations, I dare even say "all the reflections," it arouses – the central strategy of the Platonic dialogue, which for this reason advances so slowly and carefully, but so surely, as if walking on tiptoe, to use an expression that Socrates would have liked – dissecting in silent internal dialogue each Catalan word that came to his pen to translate a Greek one."

In the two volumes of Plato that he translated, we can see Crexells steering a smooth course through the intricate philological, literary and philosophical problems of the text. His sense of order and hierarchy in ideas, Estelrich says, were of priceless help to him. He adds that it would be imprudent to say that Crexells was a devotee of Classicism from early on. But we can say that once he entered that world, he was instantly seduced by the ideal of Ancient Greece in all its glory. On the value of the classics for the modern man, he once wrote this synthesising passage: "If the man of science were to read his Homer or his Thucydides every morning, he would have much clearer ideas about the world, and even about the value of his own science, than he has now." This is the intellectual aspect.

"Morally," the director of the Bernat Metge Foundation continues, "he had reached the deep-rooted conviction that, in the end, the ideal does not lie in certain literary or scientific abstractions but in the firm-willed man, the lucid vanquisher of all troubles, the stoical enjoyer of the joys and anxieties of living."

Crexells said, "Now that I'm translating Plato, I want to make the most of the work." How exemplary and well-justified those words were!

By his own confession, this was the task that he dedicated himself to with the greatest enthusiasm: "I hope at least I'll be able to finish Plato," he would say in his last days to his friends and relatives, in reference to his illness.

Classicism had not imposed any consequence of spiritual limitation on Crexells. He was open to all the ideas of our time. His own example shows us that no-one is as open to all ideas and all modern phenomena as the man steeped in classical culture.

The Bernat Metge Foundation will publish the third volume of the works of Plato, completed, and with a dedication to the sadly missed translator, in addition to a volume of miscellanea.

X. His authors

When speaking of Joan Crexells the student, I said that his authors then were Maragall, Goethe and Shakespeare. He came to Goethe thanks to our poet

Maragall. He was, therefore, a true humanist. He did not conceal his scorn for the medieval and modern cultures: "After the Greeks, Shakespeare," he said – "and after Shakespeare, nothing more," he added firmly.

But during his second stay in Germany, a very vivid passion was sparked in him for Hölderlin and Kleist. In the feelings and the intellectual curiosity of the German people, these two poets were living again in glorious proximity. Until then, Hölderlin had been somewhat forgotten, yet he is the most profoundly German poet in Germanic literature. Crexells particularly loved in him a marvellous couplet that tallied with his conception of ancient tragedy. He used to read it ardently in German, drawing out the declamation with a certain pomposity. It is an epigram to Sophocles:

"Many have sought in vain to say joyfully the most joyful; here, finally, it expresses itself to me: here, in mourning."

Joan Crexells, a Renaissance man, was extremely widely read. After he fell ill, whenever he had some free time, he had Dostoyevsky in his hands. His range of favourites was very broad; it included Courteline. Historical memoirs, Chesterton and Shaw were permanent readings for him.

In his illness, he spent the last days between cushions and books. *Faust* was his bedside book until his death: "Whenever you want to write an article," he said, "you only have to open *Faust* at random. The first line your eyes rest on will serve you as a theme."

He had recently decided to note down the most wonderful sentences he found in his readings.

XI. A generation

Crexells –let us reflect– is an entire generation: his own. We already know this from the nature of his sense of ancestry. Crexells' patriotism was entirely opposed to the vision quaveringly sung in the old ballads. Illusion never clouded his clear, naked vision. The living homeland was for him the present-day one, not the one of the future or the one of the past. It is not enough, he said, to live under the spell of thinking that we are the best land in the world. We can be if we want to be, yes, but we have to create this reality.

It was encouraging and highly exemplary to see the gratitude with which he valued what each person had done for the ideal. Thanks to this gratitude he excused weaknesses, pardoned defects and vehemently and minutely sought out the virtues to oppose them to those failings. And he truly found them, no matter how well hidden. His colleagues confess that more than once he infused this spirit in them in a concrete judgement.

Crexells felt an indomitable passion for justice. It was curious how severity and placidity coexisted in him. It was curious, too, to glimpse a powerful fire and enthusiasm beneath that acute critical spirit. Amid the sentimental and –why not admit it?– intellectual desolation of a large part of our young people, he adopted a pure attitude of intelligence, freedom and justice.

His enjoyment of common pleasures was so lively that in later years it aroused in him a new, sincere and noble interest: football. Naturally, he placed purer and higher values on the fact of winning or losing a match. A story from his last stay in England is illustrative. On one of those grey, misty, drizzly English afternoons, he was watching a match that was just as dismal. The standard of play was doing nothing to excite or even interest the spectators, but Crexells soon found a way to cheer things up. “You see those?” he said to his wife, pointing to the bolder team. “Let’s suppose they’re Barcelona. Now let’s watch how they play.”

On League days, which is when the significance he looked for in football was keenest, it was heart-warming to see him. When he was ill in his last days, he would ask his friends to phone him at home on Sunday evening to tell him the results. And it has to be said that this attitude was a natural product in him, it could not have been further from snobbism. It has been said, we should remember, and Joan Crexells says it to us again, that no-one feels so profoundly and consciously his belonging to the land as the man of universal inclinations.

Crexells took pleasure in everything dynamic. This was the first impulse of his temperament. Little by little, however, we see that taste purifies instinct and knows, when necessary, to tip it in the other direction. And so, in music, to give one example, he greatly adored Beethoven and Wagner. He even hummed Beethoven’s tunes quite often. But how he came to love Mozart in later years! The pure, angelic composer of *The Marriage of Figaro* – and also the delicate Grieg of *Peer Gynt* –encharmed him with a lasting magic.

“Before,” J.M. Capdevila has said, “he was more sincere in taste, but later he was more so in thought. Before, what he liked in literature was drama, more than poetry and sculpture; he liked action, liked to see temperaments in motion. He read and reread *Hamlet* and thought it was the summit of poetry.” And he adds, on studying his ideology, “He loved good sense and harmony and gave no importance, as he did before, to the latest ideological games.” But is his vision of the Catalan 19th century not significant? He found its loss of prestige unjust. “In the rhetorical field,” Crexells said, “as in the literary field, as in the philosophical field, the importance of the Catalan 19th century is gradually becoming visible.” And he added, “Of the 19th century we can say that it promises little, but gives what it promises.” Now can we say whether this human nature that thirsts for permanent ideas and is capable of forgetting mutable accidents is not, in our

country, the change of course of the generation that is approaching or has just passed the age of thirty?

Another thing that was admirable in Crexells –and also a conquest of his time– was his profound, imperturbable respect for any man who had a speciality that was not his own. This reverential attitude may have been born out of his perfect awareness of the true extent of his knowledge in each subject. It has been said that what Crexells loved of ideas was not the dry, dogmatic husk but the fertile essence. He had a discreet sense of humour, a Catalan slant on British humour. A sublime gentleman, a loyal friend, a family and club man, a paradigm of intellectual honesty and human morality.

His clear, plain, unadorned style was not yet what he aspired to. His ideal of style, he told a friend one day, was that of Pompeu Fabra: of severe, clean lines. This aspiration was easy to reconcile with his constant desire to formulate ideas correctly. This word was common in his writing and in his conversation. What he treasured in exposition was an absolute sobriety of means.

In view of these and the other things we know about him, let us stop to reflect: is Joan Crexells not the first great example of his intellectual generation?

XII. Illness and death

On returning from his journey to Poland, Crexells felt truly ill. He had placed himself in the hands of the doctors since March. His illness was more serious every day and new concerns were beginning to appear. From this point on he began to display an alternation of his all-conquering optimism and an awareness of the grievous omen he felt hanging over his life. Occasionally he would tell his friends, in an unsteady voice, that he felt very ill –but then, serene and brave, he would give one of his resigned, benevolent smiles in an effort to combat the pain.

Finally he was advised to undergo surgery as the most rational way of halting the disease that was consuming his body's energies. He did not hesitate much before accepting the recommendation of science. But in the final days he felt a strange unease. He kept repeating, forcing a smile, that he did not want to die before completing his *Plato*. In Sitges that summer, he said –and I cannot believe it was a premonition– how horrible it must be to die at the age of thirty. A few days before entering the clinic, smiling as if in a game, he lifted his two-year-old daughter in his arms, gazed deep into her eyes and asked her to give him a good long look, because he was going on a long journey and would not be returning.

On the 6th of December he entered the clinic with a determined optimism that never left him for a moment during his illness, and that he even

conveyed to the friends around him with his unforgettable smile. On the 11th the doctors operated on him. All their attentions were in vain. At half past one on the Monday morning he closed his eyes forever.

The serenity and courage with which he had resisted and fought against the pain in the last hours of his life were the most moving proof of the grandeur and resolve of his spirit. That last evening, with a distant smile, he said his goodbyes. He asked for his spectacles and carefully cleaned them to see clearly those around him. With an expression of cruel gentleness, avoiding all sense of drama, he slowly reached out his hands. He begged his tearful wife to be calm. "Let's not make a scene," he said, gripping her hands for what he was sure was the last time. "Look after my daughter," he told her, and asked her to wrap him in the flag of the ideal that had fired his heart and for which he had worked with exemplary passion and glowing intelligence.

XIII. A complete man!

Carles Riba, one of Joan Crexells' dearest friends, wrote this moving evocation on the very day of his death:

"The last time I talked to Crexells –good Lord, only five days ago, and he was still brimming with future plans!– we were leafing through the books that he occupied his periods of convalescence with. Some of them were about Napoleon: not the clamorous narrations of the conquests, but the warm and human account of his private life. And with that smile of his, that lit up his entire face, he invited me to admire the highest praise that the emperor had found for Goethe: "You are a complete man!" The distress of knowing that we could lose you, my friend –and we have lost you!– suddenly made me think that this was also the best eulogy for you. No-one has taught us better than you, a humanist, a Renaissance man, a universal man, the great and so necessary lesson that the humanities are only a living thing with humanity; you, a man who with so much joy and kindness took on yourself all the responsibilities, all the duties, all the struggles of being a man! You have been a complete man! At that moment I did not dare tell you that, and now I would be incapable of keeping it silent; now that you have travelled into the sacred and terrible mystery; now that my trade as a writer seems so wretched and inadequate, when we can still see you walking away and turning to bid us farewell, and we mumble, like that poet of ours whom we loved so much, with whom you now find yourself, and whom, in the best of you both, you resembled: Farewell, but not goodbye!"