

Michon and the Birth of Scientific Graphology

by Shaike Landau

Jean-Hippolyte Michon, Catholic priest, educator, preacher, archaeologist and author, is the undisputed father of graphology. In the last decade of his life, after spending more than thirty years collecting handwriting samples and conducting research, he published a series of works on graphology that still constitute the foundation for all schools of graphology to the present day.

Despite Michon's importance, none of his books has been translated into English. The descriptions of Michonian graphology by authors belonging to the German school that are available to the English reader are based on half-truths and descriptions taken from second or even third-hand sources. Those authors were acquainted with Michon mainly through the first books written by Crépieux-Jamin, which had already been translated into German by the early twentieth century soon after their publication in the original language. But Crépieux-Jamin - who processed and consolidated Michon's theories into a systematic and structured system that remains the foundation of French graphology - does not, however, always do justice to his illustrious predecessor.

On the basis of the criticism that Crépieux-Jamin leveled at Michon, those authors described Michon's work as graphology of isolated signs with a fixed meaning that was not context-dependent and that focused on trivial formal elements of the handwriting, ascribing exaggerated importance to the meaning of the forms while disregarding the aspect of movement in handwriting.¹ This stage in the development of graphology is commonly referred to in the literature as „the school of isolated signs“.² This article attempts to correct the historical injustice done to Michon and to provide a more credible description of his graphological system.

Educational and scientific work

First, however, we turn to a short account of Michon's eventful and prolific life. He was born on November 21, 1806, in a small village in the département of Charente in Western France. He completed his studies at the Angoulême Seminary and in 1830 was ordained to the priesthood and appointed priest to a small parish. A year later, he established a school in the town where he lived, and served as its principal until it went bankrupt and closed in 1842 after ten years of operation. It was here that he first heard about the notion of analyzing people's

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¹ Saudek, Robert. 1925. *The Psychology of Handwriting*, London: Allen & Unwin, 13-19; Jacoby, H.J. 1939 (1968). *Analysis of Handwriting*, London: Allen and Unwin, 22-23; Stein-Lewinson, Thea & Zubin, Joseph. 1942. *Handwriting Analysis*, New York: King's Crown Press, 4-5; Roman, Klara G. 1952. *Handwriting: A Key to Personality*, New York: Noonday Press, 4-5.

² Thea Stein-Lewinson, who never went to the trouble of reading Crépieux-Jamin in German translation, associates even him - the father of holistic graphology, diametrically opposed to fixed signs - with the school of isolated signs, and this nonsense is regurgitated over and over in the professional literature in English.

character through their handwriting from Father Flandrin, who taught philosophy at the school from 1834 to 1836. When the school closed, Michon resigned from his post as priest in which his talents were underused, and turned instead to preaching and scientific endeavors; he quickly became renowned as one of France's greatest preachers. He devoted most of his energy to historical and archaeological research of the region and published several works on the religious history of Charente. The jewel in the crown of his scientific work during that period was his great treatise on the monuments of Charente, a work he accomplished with government support and published in installments over the period 1844 to 1849. Based on meticulous mapping of the ancient historical sites of the département, the work describes the region's political, religious and societal history and provides detailed documentation of its historical monuments, categorized by period and type. This endeavor earned Michon recognition as a leading historian and archaeologist within the scientific community of his time. It led in 1850 to his being invited to join a scientific archaeological expedition to the Middle East and the Holy Land as an archaeologist and botanist. Michon was one of the only members of the priesthood at the time to display any interest in science and he was familiar with empirical research methods; this would profoundly influence his religious thought and, as we will see later, his work as a graphologist.

The Catholic Protestant³

Michon was one of the most important Catholic liberal thinkers of his generation and devoted the best years of his life to battling the conservatism of the Church and its resistance to the spirit of the time.⁴ During the 1848 revolution, he sought election as the Liberal representative for the Constituent Assembly. On his return from the Middle East, Michon relocated his activity to Paris where he founded a liberal Catholic periodical. When it closed, he continued publishing his polemical writings in other journals.

In tandem with his journalistic activity, Michon published numerous essays in which he called for a change in the Church's attitude towards science, liberalism and democracy; for separation of Church and State; a reduction in the power of the Pope; intensified democratization of the ecclesiastical hierarchy; and for comprehensive reform of the Church. With the „Roman Question“⁵ already reverberating in the background, Michon voiced his objections to the monarchical rule of the Pope, called on him to restrict his authority to the spiritual sphere, and proposed that he transfer the Papal seat to the most appropriate city — Jerusalem.

Whereas Michon's scientific and liberal background underpinned his efforts to bring about a reconciliation between religion and the modern world, his journey to the East and his encounter there with members of various non — Catholic Christian denominations allowed the utopian element to filter into his religious philosophy — the aspiration towards a rapprochement between the different Christian sects — which ultimately became known as ecumenism. To prepare the way for this, Michon suggests treating other non — Catholic Christian denominations with greater respect and brotherly love, and calls for convening a joint council, stressing that executing such a plan would be impossible without a process of renewal within the Catholic Church itself.

But the most complete and integrated expression of Michon's religious thought is found in his book, „**On the Renewal of the Church**“ (1860), which synthesizes all his previous ideas into a uniform ideological whole. He believes that renewal will start, paradoxically, in contemporary secular culture as it moves towards a united, global civilization,

³ As Spencer refers to him in his book: Spencer Philip. 1954. *Politics of Belief in Nineteenth-Century France*: Lacordaire, Michon, Veuillot. New York City: Grove Press, 160.

⁴ The comprehensive biography of Michon by Savart which I use in this article is entirely devoted to Michon's religious doctrine and activity and refers to his graphological pursuits in only a few pages: Savart Claude. 1971. *L'Abbé Jean-Hippolyte Michon, 1806-1881. Contribution à l'étude du libéralisme catholique au XIXe siècle*, Société d'édition „Les Belles Lettres“, Paris.

⁵ The national movement to unite Italy, which was sweeping the Italian states at the time, was a threat to the monarchical power of the Pope, and the revolutionaries considered the Pope, whose state spread across the entire center of the country, separating the north from the south, as a hindrance to unification. In 1860, the Pope lost most of his lands, which joined the unification, with only Rome remaining within his jurisdiction. In 1870, the Italians conquered Rome which became the capital of a united Italy as the Pope's state ceased to be.

a process he views as an evangelical instrument of divine providence: „The day is coming when the peoples of the world will come together, when the interests that propel the world will lead to a fusion between nations that for such a long time have been kept apart by impassable borders. This is a period of preparation for the merging of all the truths in the world.“ That cultural and ideological unification of humanity is to be built on the ruins of the past, which will undergo a rigorous process of sorting and selection; what would remain would be „sustainable principles ingrained deep in the consciousness of the nations constituting the eternal laws of their society.“ The religious world would follow in the footsteps of its secular counterpart, but this, too, could not happen without discarding the outmoded patterns of the past.

Le Maudit (The Pariah)

Michon's essay was greeted with horror by the Church. It was added to the **Index of Prohibited Books**, and Michon was forced to publicly retract what he had written in the book and to halt its distribution. In the years that followed, Michon — stung by the Church's attitude towards him — opted for a new tactic in his battle to reform the Church. Instead of theological treatises aimed at a limited audience, he turned to a broader community of readers through a series of sensational anticlerical novels published between 1863 and 1869 under the pseudonym, Father ***. The first of them, „**Le Maudit**“, relates the chronicles of a young priest, Father Julio, undoubtedly created in the likeness of Michon himself, who is hounded by his supervisors because of his progressive opinions and his desire for renewal in the Church.

The novel takes issue with the Church for its greed, intolerance, resistance to the dissemination of knowledge, and its desire to impose theocratic rule instead of reconciling itself with the modern world. He scorns the superstitions of the Church, and believes that people from all cultures who work for God but worship him differently are good Christians. Special attention is paid to describing the difficult life of humble priests, subject to the tyranny of their superiors, transferred frequently from one diocese to another, and threatened with dismissal for any hint of disobedience. He also criticizes the vow of celibacy that priests must take, thus precluding them from having a family, as a custom that is inappropriate for the modern period, preferring the attitude of the Eastern Church which is to allow priests to marry. „The grim critics of all the pleasures linked to the senses by God have always ignored that exalted and noble emotion called love. Unlike what they claim in their crude psychology, love does not ruin our character, but is a sacred and pure emotion,“ writes Michon in one of his later novels, „**The Confessor**“. Michon gives voice here to his own personal tragedy — his great and unconsummated love for Emilie de Vars, his close friend and confidante, who was actively involved in his graphological work and even put in writing the story of the birth of graphology as primary source witness⁶.

It was a resounding success and was translated into several European languages⁷, a triumph not achieved by any of his graphological texts. Upon publication, the novel became the talk of the town in religious and intellectual circles throughout Europe. Everyone tried to guess the name of novel's mysterious author, and Victor Hugo and George Sand were among the 'suspects'. The Church went to great lengths to discover the 'traitor' within it, but failed. It was only after Michon's death that the riddle was solved, when his student, Varinard, in a modest monograph in his memory, revealed that Michon was the author.⁸

⁶ De Vars, Emilie. 1874. Histoire de la graphologie, Paris: Baschet.

⁷ The novel appeared in English translation entitled Under the Ban.

⁸ Varinard, Adrien. 1881. J.-H. Michon, fondateur de la graphologie, sa vie et ses œuvres, Paris: Bibliothèque graphologique, 12-13.

In 1866 Michon was accorded some measure of satisfaction when his long scientific essay on the life of Jesus⁹ was favorably received in Rome. Michon was summoned to an audience with the Pope in the course of which he taught Pius IX the geography of the Holy Land.

Michon's satisfaction was to be short-lived. The first Vatican Council was summoned in December 1869, the first since the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. It was intended to make the 1864 Syllabus of Errors binding dogma: the Syllabus was a papal document that condemned most ideas of the time¹⁰ and launched an attack on everything in which Michon believed. The Council was also intended to strengthen the Pope's authority in his fight against the modern world, by means of the dogma of papal infallibility — the notion that the Pope, who is guided by the Holy Spirit, cannot err in his apostolic role when he rules on issues of faith and morality. Michon warned participants in the Council of the schism liable to occur in the Catholic world and declared that he, like many other Catholics, would not accept that illegitimate decision. Following the capture of Rome by the Italian Army, which put an end to the papal state, the Council was suspended before it could make the Syllabus binding dogma, however the dogma of papal infallibility was passed by a large majority.

Despite more than a few dilemmas, Michon remains loyal to Catholicism, but the decisions of the first Vatican Council mark a turning-point in his life. From then on, Michon abandons his religious battles almost entirely and channels all his energy in a new, stimulating direction — founding graphology and spreading it throughout Europe. We will never know to what extent the existence of graphology is due to the conservatism of Pius IX or, if matters had unfolded differently, whether the 'new science' would have remained forever locked in the teeming brain of its discoverer.

The Mysteries of handwriting

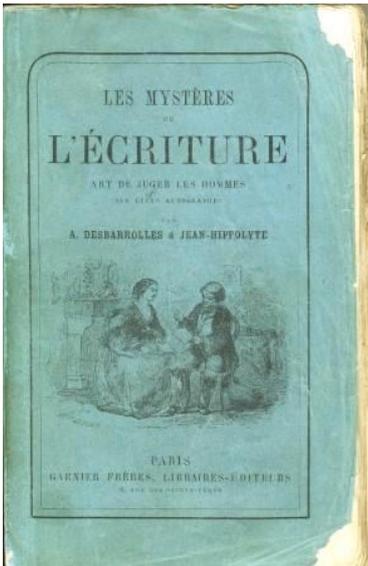
In December 1868, a meeting was held in Paris that would be of crucial importance for the future of graphology. Adolphe Desbarrolles, an eminent chirologist, who had tried in vain to develop a method for analyzing handwriting for use in his chirological analysis, was introduced to Michon at the salon held by de Saulcy, head of the archaeological expedition to the Middle East in which Michon had participated, and discovered that he had a fully formed method of analysis — the method for which he himself had fruitlessly sought for such a long time. Desbarrolles persuaded Michon to publish his method and undertook to finance the project. Michon consented, on condition that his name would not appear on the essay.

It soon transpired that the partners had differences of opinion regarding their partnership. Michon was amazed to hear that Desbarrolles was insisting on having a hand in the writing and hoped to play a crucial role in it. After some discussion, they agreed that Desbarrolles would write the preface, but this was not the end of Michon's troubles. Desbarrolles insisted on combining chirology with graphology in the preface, and even threatened to sue Michon should he delay printing. Despite Michon's strong objections to mixing occultism and graphology, he was forced to agree to the 'ridiculous preface'. By late September 1869, Michon had finished writing the book, but meanwhile the Franco-Prussian war had broken out and it was only in April 1872 that the book was finally published. Michon loathed the book's title „**The Mysteries of Handwriting**“¹¹, which made it essentially the sequel of a previous book

⁹ The full name of the essay was „The life of Jesus, according to the Synoptic Gospels, translated literally from the Greek, with the addition of philological, typographical and archaeological notes“.

¹⁰ The Syllabus of Errors included a papal denunciation of eighty modern opinions that contradicted the Catholic faith and was a declaration of all-out war against the ideas of the time, like rationalism, liberalism, socialism, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech. The declaration denounced the demand for a separation of church and state, the notion that it was possible to attain redemption outside of Catholicism, and the demand for an end to the church's earthly rule. Last in the list of errors, and the encapsulation of the entire Syllabus, was the idea that „the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.“

¹¹ Desbarrolles, A & Jean-Hippolyte. 1872. Les mystères de l'écriture, Paris: Garnier.



Cover of *Les mystères de l'écriture*

by Desbarrolles, „**The Mysteries of the Palm**“, and maintained that it was more evocative of magic and Kabbalah than of serious science.

Michon decided to dissolve the partnership¹² and devote himself to disseminating the ‘new science’. On November 18, 1871 the first issue of his graphological journal was published, and in it Michon publicly uses the term ‘graphology’ for the first time. In order to convince his readers of the effectiveness of his method, he offered a free graphological analysis as a bonus for subscribers to the journal.

On November 24, 1871, Michon held his first public meeting in Paris in which he presented his discovery to the public. In the years that followed, he traveled to all the large French towns and to other cities in Europe to win people over to his theory. During his lectures, he usually demonstrated a few principles of his methods and then analyzed anonymous handwriting samples written by people in the audience. Michon set about disseminating ‘the new science’ with the same

enthusiasm he had shown to preaching his religious ideas, and even used to describe his work in

terms of a religious mission. Further to his utopian vision, he perceived graphology as a means for profound self-recognition, for self-improvement, and for the moral revival of humanity: „Graphology has proved itself to be a new tool for the moral world, one that has appeared through divine intervention at the height of material advances brought about by the discovery of the steam engine and electricity.“ (258-259).

In the years that followed, Michon published two books — which he considered to be complementary texts¹³ — setting out his fully evolved method. In 1875, „**Systeme de graphologie**“¹⁴ appeared, presenting the Michonian system of signs, followed in 1878 by the sequel, „**Méthode pratique de graphologie**“¹⁵, which describes the principles of graphological analysis of handwriting as a whole. In 1879, „**Histoire de Napoléon 1^{er} d’après son écriture**“¹⁶ was published, in which Michon provides a longitudinal analysis of Napoleon’s handwriting from his military service as a young artillery officer until his exile on St. Helena, towards the end of his life. On May 8, 1881, lucid and with his faculties intact, Michon died from complications of pneumonia.



Michon's *La graphologie – Journal des autographs*
An extremely rare copy from the author's collection

¹² Later, Desbarrolles even laid claim to Michon's status as the founder of graphology. We learn of the way matters developed in this affair from the detailed description by Emile de Vars, in her *Histoire de la graphologie*, *ibid.*

¹³ In this article, I use the 1970 edition which includes both books in one volume, and all the page references in parentheses in the body of the article refer to that edition: Michon, Jean-Hippolyte. 1875. *Systeme de graphologie suivi de Methode pratique de graphologie*, Paris:Payot.

¹⁴ Michon, Jean-Hippolyte. 1875. *Systeme de graphologie*, Paris: Bibliothèque graphologique.

¹⁵ Michon, Jean-Hippolyte. 1878. *Methode pratique de graphologie*, Paris: Bibliothèque graphologique.

¹⁶ Michon, Jean-Hippolyte. 1879. *Histoire de Napoléon 1er d'après son écriture*, Paris.

The new science

In the nineteenth century, the possibility that handwriting could reveal the writer's personality was already a commonly held notion. The herald of modern graphology was the renowned physiognomist, Lavater, whose book „**Physiognomic Fragments**“¹⁷ raised the idea and also offered a theoretical basis for it. He argued that handwriting reveals the personality, as do other expressive manifestations such as the way people walk and talk, but he did not suggest any method of performing such an analysis.

Unlike previous works, like that of Camillo Baldi in the seventeenth century, which had little impact and fell into oblivion, Lavater's book was widely read throughout Europe and sparked off considerable interest in the subject. A variety of essays were published restating and even adding to Lavater's ideas, and graphologists who worked intuitively were soon active in a number of places in Europe.¹⁸ Michon's intention was, however, quite different:

„All those who wrote about graphology before us, of whom the most famous is Lavater, only examined the general impression made by handwriting (...) which has nothing to do with science. When we say science, we are talking by necessity about exact rules, about a method based on experience, about principles and laws that derive from the nature of what is being described.“¹⁹

Michon is an empiricist in every fiber of his being:

„Experimentation means submitting a theory or method to testing. Nothing can be accepted as a true and irrefutable principle, nothing can be accepted as a science (...) unless it has passed the rigorous test of experimentation. Graphology has passed that test successfully (...).“ (24 footnote 2)

An idea of Michon's empirical work can be obtained from the following description:

„When I wanted to create this group, I employed the natural method, which in all the sciences leads to practical results in a manner that leaves no room for error. I began by classifying my collection of autographs of strong-willed authors and weak-willed authors (...) The comparative research of thousands of handwriting samples shows that all weak-willed people cross their 't's feebly. The line is always weak, filiform, and terminates with a scarcely noticeable pin-head (...) in contrast, all strong-willed writers cross their 't's forcefully and firmly, while exerting strong pressure on their pens.

This is the graphological principle. It holds not only for the 't' bars but for all strokes without exception, short or long, that have an end point.

„The process is carried out in the following way: we select at random the handwriting of people known for their strong will, and note that the writer always crosses his 't's strongly. This style of writing is not acquired in school (...) Using the experimental method — the great teacher whose conclusions are indisputable — shows that strong-willed people never use rounded handwriting, but instinctively tend to angular writing, strongly formed strokes, and club-shaped endings.“ (133-134).

Handwriting as soulwriting

Michon is not satisfied with empirical proofs to justify his method, and believes that graphology needs, like every science, its own philosophy, that is to say a theory that explains how it works.

¹⁷ Lavater, Johann Caspar. 1775-1778. Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe, 4 Bd., Leipzig und Winterthur: Weidmanns Erben und Reich und Heinrich Steiner und Compagnie.

¹⁸ On this early period in the history of graphology see the monumental work in three volumes by Seiler. Seiler, Joseph. 1995 (Volume I), 2000 (Volume II). De Lavater à Michon. Essai sur l'histoire de la graphologie, Fribourg, Suisse: Editions Universitaires. The third volume was still to be published at the time this article was written.

¹⁹ Desbarolles, *ibid.*, 2.

His point of departure was Lavater's analogy between handwriting and other manifestations of personality, like speech and gait. The source of all these, so Michon claims, is the soul:

„This philosophy of the manifestation of the soul through graphic signs is based on the intimate connection which exists between each sign (...) which emanates from the human personality, and the soul, which is the substance of that personality. Who can doubt that every word is the spontaneous and immediate translation of thought? And who can doubt that handwriting is as spontaneous and immediate a translation of thought as speech?“ (31). And he concludes: „All handwriting, like all language, is the immediate manifestation of the intimate, intellectual and moral being“ (39).

But if handwriting is to reflect the internal being, it must be spontaneous. When we learn to write, our writing is not dexterous or fluent. The model by which we learn follows a uniform pattern, and our teachers are insistent on uniformity in the way we write and how we form the letters. This mechanical form of writing cannot faithfully reflect the soul: „The reason is obvious. This calligraphy only creates fixed, regular and immutable forms, and the brain of the man who traces them has only one thought in mind; to produce them as beautifully as possible“ (34).

Only when the handwriting is spontaneous and unconscious does it become an expression of the soul:

„When we have had long experience of writing (...) the soul writes directly (...) the letters are no longer any more than signs used unconsciously to express the thought (...) when the child, the adolescent or the adult who has been instructed in calligraphy, enters into spontaneous and free life and wants to express his thoughts and feelings towards other people quickly, without effort, without study, without being concerned in the least about forming the letters well or badly, he instinctively abandons his habits of calligraphy and shifts to a writing with unique characteristics (...)“ (32-34).

Writing is therefore nothing less than soulwriting. But as a scientist, Michon cannot be satisfied with this explanation, and addresses himself to a clarification of „what the physiological processes are by which the soul ceases to paint, that is to say to form beautiful letters, and begins to reproduce itself in writing“ (35). The organ responsible for this is obviously the brain. Michon now reviews the scientific knowledge of his day concerning brain research, beginning with Descartes and ending with new discoveries by Paul Broca.²⁰ The brain, according to Michon, is the dwelling place of the soul. He describes the structure of the brain and its various functions, concluding that: „It follows from what we have said that we have a special organ in us, from which originate all our impressions and perceptions and, consequently, from which emanate all the expressions of our intellectual and moral being“ (37). The brain also controls the movement of limbs through the nerves, including such complicated movements as writing with the fingers (38). It would appear that Michon was already familiar with the notion of handwriting as „brainwriting“, identified with Preyer²¹.

The graphic signs are fixed

Even the term „fixed signs“ (signes fixes), central to Michon and the object of so much misunderstanding and erroneous interpretation, is only a part of his scientific program and without it the entire foundation of graphology is destroyed. The employment of rigid rules tested by experience is what, in Michon's opinion, distinguishes science from occultism:

²⁰ Michon mentions Broca in Appendix H, p. 250.

²¹ Preyer W. 1895 (1919) Zur Psychologie des Schreibens, Leipzig: Leopold Voss, pp. 33-45.

„It is thus the fixed significance of the sign that is the main principle of graphology. The conjecture that is the stock in trade of the craniologist and the lavaterian physiognomist has no place here. We are on much firmer ground when we base ourselves on signs that have been verified thousands of times by experience.“

Michon later returns to this subject in greater detail:

„Here is the first law of graphic physiology to which there is no exception: a graphic sign never expresses the opposite trait to the one it represents. For example: large strokes, capital letters lost in the whiteness of the paper by excessive development, disproportionate with the height of the lower-case letters are a graphic sign of a wild imagination, being carried away with an idea, lack of restraint and sense of proportion, indicating an ebullient and ardent nature. This sign is never to be found and will never be found in the handwriting of a person who is in complete control of his imagination, who curbs it and keeps it in check; a person who is in no way volatile and impulsive, but calm and cool-headed.“

„Extremely simple letters, no higher than required for the correct formation of the letter, with no extensions above or below the body of the letter, regular letters, in standard juxtaposition, maintaining a constant order, irrespective of the speed of writing, letters that have no trace of irregularity, artificiality, or excess motion, are the signs of a calm nature. A person with a wild imagination, when he writes quickly, naturally and spontaneously, cannot confine himself to this simple, regular, and monotonous style of writing.“

„The second law is a corollary to the first: the graphic signs are fixed, because they are the product of fixed conditions of psychological and physiological creation. In fact, it is not feasible that two forces of contradictory and conflicting movements can produce an identical movement.“ (72-73)

It is easy to see that this principle has nothing to do with isolated signs with fixed meaning.²² Michon is concerned here with the necessary condition for creating science, taking as his example the syndrome of signs and not an isolated sign. It may well come as a surprise to many, but Michon deals in his books mainly with graphic syndromes that relate to various personal characteristics. In his first book, the characteristics are introduced in alphabetical order, whereas in **„Système de Graphologie“** they are put into eight categories structured in layers from the very first predispositions of the mind which are innate and immutable to learned external behavior which is the result of a person's development and education.

Complex signs and the law of resultants

Michon's system of signs is still the primary basis of our graphology. But Michon claims that only a small number of characteristics are represented by a simple graphic sign, *signe simple*, in his terminology. There are many more characteristics than graphic signs, and most of them are represented by a group of graphic signs which constitutes a *signe complexe*. The importance that Michon ascribes to complex signs can be seen from the following:

„The theory of complex signs (...) opens a vast horizon for the new science. The game of possibilities, states, and movements of the human mind can provide countless combinations (...) there is an immense field of research here for students of graphology. A science that does not progress is not a science. And I am happy to provide them, through this fruitful gift, with a precious working tool. It is this horizon, of infinite proportions, that I am opening up to future graphologists.“ (293)

But Michon does not stop here. In **„Méthode Pratique de Graphologie“** he develops the idea of complex signs and expands it into a synthesis of the whole. In the same way as a plurality of simple signs creates a complex sign,

²² Ludwig Wirz was the first to remark on the erroneous understanding of the principle of fixed signs in a 1981 article marking 100 years since the death of Michon: Wirz, Ludwig. 1981. Die Lehre Michons von den signes fixes als Grundlage der Graphologie. in: Zeitschrift für menschenkunde, Heft 2/1981, 73-86.

so do the different characteristics in writing influence one another and create new meanings. Michon calls this expansion the law of resultants (loi des résultantes).²³

„The law of resultants is based on the psychological fact that one trait affects another. It never eliminates it when it is well delineated (...) but (...) gives it a special kind of nuance. Every graphic sign is therefore nuanced by another sign.“ (296)

We will demonstrate this with one of the mental powers most central to Michon's characterology — emotion. The basic sign of emotionalism is right-slanted writing, because it is „far more flowing and easier to do“ (90), whereas vertical writing is characteristic of people who control their emotions and their heart.

Michon thinks that even the simple signs may represent a variety of nuances of traits that alter according to the intensity of the sign and the frequency of its occurrence in the writing. Thus, for example, emotionalism may be mild or extreme according to the extent to which the writing slopes. When it slopes far to the right, the writer is controlled by his urges and passions. Will this emotionalism be expressed in love or in hate — at this point we need the complex sign:

„The graphic sign of hate is identical to the graphic sign of love (...) The steep slope of the writing is indicative of the ability to love with a passion. It is therefore also the graphic sign of those who can hate with a fury. Moreover, if writing with a steep slope is accompanied by signs of tenacity and obstinacy, of impetuosity bordering on tempestuousness; (...) if the sense of self is paramount, if pride is strongly indicated, wounded pride is unforgiving; if vanity and pretension are evident in the writing, pricked vanity also becomes implacable. Here you have the clear complex sign of a nature capable of hate.“ (227)

Michon developed detailed laws to describe how the signs affect one another long before Saudek proposed the idea of Counter-Dominants.²⁴ The effect can be to intensify or mitigate, and contradictory signs may serve as counterweights to each other:

„It must not be forgotten that, because of the requirements of the analytical method, we consider every nuance of a [mental] faculty in isolation and completely independent of other dispositions and manifestations of the mind which might act as a counterweight. Thus, for example, emotionalism, extreme impressionability, takes the mind to the extremes of passion. However, if writing that indicates this intense emotionalism also contains the graphic signs of powerful resoluteness (...) the result is that — and this is an important psychological note — deep down this person will always remain emotional and feminine, but with a counterbalance, assisted by willpower, to enable the mind to counteract excesses of emotionalism. It will no longer be a rudderless ship at the mercy of the waves, but a frail human craft with a lever with which to navigate through the waves and avoid the cliffs. Similarly, if the willpower (...) is lacking in emotionalism, if the emotional side is not developed, the willpower, deprived of a counterweight, will plunge into excesses of power.“ (132)

When the writing contains contradictory signs, it indicates a complex and contradictory personality in which „at certain times or on certain days one situation dominates the mind, and at other times the contrary state of mind is dominant“ (369). Occasionally this is a sign of an unresolved inner struggle:

„Restrained emotionalism manifests itself in writing in which the letters tend to be straight, almost completely vertical, mixed with letters with a right inclination. This is the handwriting of all those of an impressionable nature who feel threatened by their natural sensitivity and suppress it so as to obey a plan of ambitious conduct, qualms of consci-

²³ The law of resultants is at the very heart of this book which was never translated into German, and the report of it by Saudek and Klara Roman (see note 1), who attribute the law of results to Michon's successor, Crépieux-Jamin, is baseless.

²⁴ Saudek, *ibid.*, 205-213

Writing as an expression and a movement

We have seen that emotion as a basic power of personality is expressed in writing through a simple sign. The more specific the trait the more complex is its graphic syndrome. Here is how ardor is expressed in writing, identified by Michon with activity, a passion for doing, animation, spontaneity, and impulsiveness:

„All the movements are animated, brusque, executed with the shortest strokes possible, and above all, the t-bars are formed in extreme haste; the writing is careless and slipshod with no attempt at legibility, at creating identifiable letters or words that can be read; there is a predominantly upward slope to the letters and lines and the writing almost always has the sign of emotionalism and impressionability. The ardent are emotional.“ (177)

On the other hand, indolence, to which Michon attributes lack of vitality and activity, failure to develop the powers latent in the human personality, and the desire to avoid activity and effort are expressed as follows:

„The writing of the indolent completely avoids angles and firm strokes, and shows a propensity towards curves and malformed or half-formed letters (...) the lack of ardor and movement in the writing logically attests to indolence of the motor mind (...) it is one of the great proofs of the scientific value of graphology. The energetic and the apathetic never write like each other, whether they write in Hebrew, in Arabic, in Greek, or in French (...) [the indolent] makes no attempt to give letters their height and their elements, it's as if they were saying: read this if you can.“ (164-165)

Although in both cases the handwriting is sloppy and legibility is poor, the different context and mainly the different kind of movement give rise to completely different interpretation. Is this how isolated signs look that are independent of context?

Although Michon does not yet have any developed conceptualization of movement, his graphology is far from being purely concerned with form. The aspect of movement in writing is an integral part of his system and his descriptions of movement are occasionally even surprising in their subtlety. This is how he describes the emotion of happiness:

„The happy character is the logical antithesis of the sad, gloomy, cold, and depressed character. Such people are impressionable, sympathetic and tender. Laughter parts the lips, and gaiety opens up the letters in the writing. Graphic signs: many curves in the writing which is sloping, free, and unrestrained. The letters are animated, set down in haste on the paper. The cheerful cross the t with a curved and delicate bar. Letters are never compressed. There is a total absence of the signs associated with cold, sad, or restless natures.“ (202)

The muddy ground

Systematic symbolic thinking first appears in graphology with Max Pulver's presentation of space symbolism in his book **„The Symbolism of Handwriting“**.²⁵ We have seen that Michon's graphology is based mainly on expressive theory, but even there it is possible to discern the first glimmers of pictorial-analog symbolism.

We have seen how Michon explains the difference between the spontaneity of right sloping writing and the stiffness of perpendicular writing in terms of physiology. But alongside the physiological explanation, he adds an interesting visual symbolic one:

„Everything that is gentle, weak, and compliant – bends. Everything that is stubborn and inflexible will not bend but stands up straight. One is like a reed that bends in the breeze, whereas the other is like the trunk of a tree that even the storm cannot budge“ (89).

²⁵ Pulver Max. 1931. Symbolik der Handschrift, Zurich: Orell Füssli.

According to Michon's graphology, the clearest sign of egoism is the backward moving crotchet form at the beginning or end of a letter (166), which in time became known as centripetal writing in French graphology²⁶, and as left tendency (Linksläufigkeit) in German graphology²⁷.

„The backward returning crotchet, which I call 'the egoistical crotchet, is always a sign of selfishness, of the I, of a preference for the I over others. The human soul turns in on itself, concentrates on itself, does not radiate outside of itself, converges on itself; and if it does look outwards it does so like a leech, in order to suck out something for itself from the person on to whom it attaches(...) The pen makes the same movement: it returns to the letter; it closes in on itself like talons that close tight when they have seized their prey“ (293-294).

Apart from the gesticulative visual symbolism (grasping prey), we also have here the beginnings of spatial symbolism – the letter's turning back on itself is a return to the I and symbolizes internal as against external. This combination of symbolism of body language and a symbolic concept of space is also evident in Michon's relationship to arrogance, which is another aspect of egoism.

Arrogance, claims Michon, is „the great sickness of the human soul. But its source is in a real feeling, in an instinct for self-preservation that is a natural law. It is therefore a distortion of an eminently useful social requirement, self esteem. It is not bad except when it strays beyond the precise limits of the truth“ (169-170). In Michon's opinion, there is pride that is noble and legitimate, but the perversion of arrogance is a selfish egoistical feeling directed at self-aggrandizement and at the same time the disparagement of others:

„What makes arrogance negative (...) is the selfish and egoistical feeling that puts us above others (...) the nature of arrogance is a preference for the self over others“ (170).

How is pride expressed physiologically? The arrogant man lifts up his head and juts it out, swells up like a peacock spreading its tail, hence the expression „swollen with pride“. The same is true of handwriting:

„Handwriting follows a natural physiological movement, or rather is the immediate, instantaneous expression of one. Writing rises up, writing spreads out, writing inflates, writing becomes elongated. And such are the graphic signs of a sense of superiority: letters that cover a large amount of space, letters of exaggerated height; the capital letter M, constructed of three downward strokes, the first stroke of which (...) is often close to double the length of the other two; and so also of the capital N; letters that stand up straight, stretch out and taper off, like stalks too much in the shade that strive to reach higher towards the sun and the light“ (170).

Michon also attaches symbolic significance to the stroke, which expresses the level of sensuality or spirituality of the writer. Like pride, lust too is one of the seven deadly sins, and so apparently of great importance to Michon who keeps to the classic division into gluttony and, worse still, sexual lust.

The graphic sign of sensuality is pasty writing, in which the letters are „thick, pasty and formed with strong pressure along their entire length“ (91). In contrast, the lustful have spindle-shaped writing and the points are made with strong pressure (184). And why does pasty writing indicate sensuality? Because „the material is heavy and tangible“ (91).

On the other hand, fine, airy writing „is constructed of lightly applied strokes. It avoids pastiness and swollen letters. It is fine and flutters over the paper. The modest soul is the dove that hesitates to set his foot on the muddy ground. I call this kind of handwriting airy“ (184). The non-sensual writer is by nature spiritual and does not yearn for sensual lust; even in love, the pleasure he seeks is mainly mental.

²⁶ Crépieux-Jamin, J. 1930 (1997). ABC de la graphologie, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 183-187.

²⁷ Klages Ludwig. 1917 (1989). Handschrift und Charakter, Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, pp. 143-150.

Michon stresses that the pasty stroke is not purely a technical effect of the pen: „Ten people could write with the same pen one after the other (...) using the same pen does not impart the same thickness to the body of the letter“ (90-91).

The intuition of the East

The division into intuitive and deductive thinking according to the degree of connection was a new discovery by Michon in 1872 and does not appear in his first book (25). Disconnected writing was perceived by Michon as „the sudden explosion of ideas“ (111), indicative of intuition and imagination and the ability to form ideas, whereas connected writing is indicative of the ability to reason logically, to make connections between ideas and to develop them into a comprehensive thought. Michon considers lack of connection to show resistance to routine processes of thinking: „The writing quill appears to resist the impetuosity of thinking.“ He is quick to add an important proviso that for some reason is ignored in later literature on the sign: „It moves the hand in brusque movements that quickly form the parts of the letter absolutely essential to making the word legible“ (105). The combination of staccato progression („the sudden explosion of ideas“) with swift movement and extreme abstraction of the letters, explains the intuitive, creative nature of this writer.

The deductive writer is practical, pragmatic and logical. He does not find ideas within himself, but is capable of assimilating the ideas of others, of processing them and making them his own (116). The intuitive writer, on the other hand, especially in his extreme form, is a theoretician, a Utopian, an idealist, a dreamer of dreams (109). This is the writing of artists, poets and philosophers (108), but also of simple folk „who do not assimilate ideas from outside but seek them instinctively from within“, no matter how strange and bizarre these ideas may be (109). Deduction in its extreme form, especially when combined with small or diminishing writing indicative of ingenuity and cunning, is a sign of logical ingenuity taken to an absurd level, and the sophisticated use of logical analogies that do not lead to truth but only to a semblance of truth, a characteristic common to many attorneys (115). More even characters result when there is a balance in the writing between connection and the lack of it, which is an indication of the writer's ability to integrate his creative side with his logical-practical side, although such people are not generally inclined to profundity (117).

Michon believes that intuitive people are not generally highly developed emotionally (upright writing) because they are preoccupied with intellectual and creative work, and although intuition is not necessarily at variance with emotion, „the two polar powers of personality do not develop simultaneously in it“ (109).

Particularly interesting is the somewhat speculative analogy that Michon finds between the standard forms of writing Semitic and Indo-European languages and the collective nature of these cultures:

„In my book 'The History of Writing' I examined this interesting topic at length, that the peoples of the East, mainly the Semitic race, influenced by senses and impressions they received from outside, living a life of piety and philosophy, constantly borne into a world of intuition and idealism, unequipped for anything that requires precision, logical, meticulous and analytical deduction, and foreign to critical philosophy – have manifestly intuitive writing with letters that are totally disconnected, like Egyptian, Phoenician or Sumerian scripts and square Hebrew script as well as all the derivatives of Phoenician writing in Western Asia, whereas the races trained in logic and reason, dedicated to philosophy and critical and analytical thinking, seeking to make sense of everything and living a life of productivity, practicality and pragmatism, like those of the Greek and Latin worlds, and in our own days ourselves – the Western world, including Europe, America and all the lands colonized by Europeans, developed a flowing form of writing with connected letters.

(...) The East is mystical and sensual. It feeds on images; it idealizes everything; it has a profound religiosity; it is open to ecstasy, divine inspiration, prophecy. The man of the East sees God. The West is philosophical, metaphysical, analytical and critical. It embraces the dialectic that extends to refined sophistication, to nit-picking and sophistry. It adheres to cold and calculating logic and is attracted to abstractions (...) it shuns faith, and has no desire to reach God except through wisdom. All this explains the two opposing faces of writing. One is the writing of inspiration and vision. It explodes suddenly from the papyrus dipped in ink or from the quill pen. The other is the writing of rational investigation. It creates a string of connected letters in the same way as it creates a string of connected thoughts“ (111-112).

It is interesting that whereas Michon's interpretation of unconnected writing is rejected out of hand by Crépieux-Jamin²⁸, it is adopted in the German graphology of Klages and his followers as one of the main interpretations of the level of connection in writing.²⁹

Beautiful and admirable simplicity

The concept of harmony, which was to become the trademark of French graphology, is a thread running through Michon's creativity. This striving for harmony is what underlies his religious philosophy: harmony between different Christian denominations, between religions, between religion and the secular world, universal, unifying harmony.

This concept is also evident in the way he approaches writing. We have already seen in our discussion of fixed signs how Michon identifies unbridled imagination with disharmony in all aspects of writing, expressed as an excess of movement, exaggerated extensions that interfere with the organization of space, artificial or irregular design of letters, and disruption of the rhythmical regularity of the writing.

Harmony is first and foremost in the inner reaches of man's mind:

„It is the nature of vanity not to find in ourselves a noble contentment in our value and what we are, but to look outside of ourselves. All the nuances of vanity are indicative of a desire to be prominent and to expect from others the esteem which we believe increases our value.“ (192).

„Beautiful and admirable simplicity shines out in the writing, like a white flower in a grassy thicket that enhances its freshness and splendor. Even [apparently] ugly writing perfectly expresses a sense of the mind's modesty (...) All writing that indicates modesty and simplicity attests in this way to the nobility of the writer's mind. Fools are pretentious.“ (194)

„Study the writing of the elite, the great writers, all manners of superior men. The mark of their intellectual value is an absence of any kind of superfluous, ridiculous, or contrived embellishment. All artificiality is a sign of intellectual inferiority.“ (220)

Harmonious writing is the clearest sign of distinction, good taste, and all that goes to make up the famous French esprit (196). On the level of social behavior, it is expressed in social refinement (finesse) - the ability to express thought elegantly and implicitly, not directly, and in charmer. Finesse is expressed in writing in „elegant and harmonious writing forms and particularly in the total absence of vulgar letters, of bad taste“, and charmer is expressed in „a shape of letters that is at the same time simple and artistic and in their harmonious organization in the space“ (208).

28 Crépieux-Jamin, J. Ibid, pp. 391-392. Crépieux-Jamin saw connection as the decisive factor in writing speed, and argued that unconnected writing is an expression of the slowness and constraints in writing flow, for various reasons. He notes with cynicism that the interpretation of intuition is far more popular than his because people prefer to attribute themselves with profound intuition than to see it as an expression of awkwardness and immaturity of writing (among children or uneducated adults), of excessive carefulness and inhibition or of diminished physical or mental activity.

29 Klages, Ludwig. Ibis, pp. 124-132

In contrast, in vulgar writing which Michon identifies with grossness, mediocrity, lack of distinction, intellectual shallowness, crassness, lack of manners and social refinement, and bad taste:

„The graphic sign is the complete absence of harmony in the letters, and the capital letters are gross and unwrought. Writing may be ugly – that is to say hasty and malformed – and yet not vulgar. Vulgar writing has crooked pen strokes, disproportional connections between letters, improbable uprights, perpetual disharmony.“ (196).

There is also moral harmony, as expressed in the following description, dedicated to the handwriting of a highly respected judge:

„This writing, from the very first, is striking in its great regularity, which however is not the monotonous repetition of calligraphic letters; the human personality is plain to see. That he has a heart, that he is prone to sentimentality, albeit restrained, is clearly evident. But we admire his natural order, which allows for the play of light between the words and the lines, his scrupulous and undoubtedly unconscious punctiliousness, which never permits the pen even the slightest deviation of the long extensions (...) You don't have to be a graphologist to be struck by the [special] character of this beautiful writing, ugly perhaps in terms of calligraphy, but impressive as a visible expression of a venerable gravity and gentleness of personality of which it is the vital and spontaneous expression“ (44).

I will conclude with Michon's personal craving for harmony - the great and unconsummated love of Michon and Emilie de Vars:

„I have lived my entire life in a relationship, which because of a vow of abstinence, could demand nothing of the senses and I had an affection (now consigned to the grave) that expressed the most passionate love, the warmest intermingling of souls, without the bliss of consummation for the enamored souls (...) Only once in forty years did we share the same bedroom, the place where she used to sleep like an angel every night; it was the night after she breathed her last, and I wanted to be the only one there to watch over my dead beloved. We were wedded in death.

This pursuit of love without the attendant senses (...) is not recommended from a moral point of view (...) a thousand times we were saved when we were aflame with desire. She was so beautiful! Now, after our last farewell, I am consoled (...) by the thought that I had the rare and exceptional privilege of not having violated this splendid creature. And yet, our way was the opposite of the truth, because every day we broke the holy law, the law of nature(...)“³⁰.

Despite the long way that graphology has come since the days of Michon, the foundations on which modern graphology was constructed are already contained in his work. It seems that if Michon was suddenly to reappear, he would not find himself in strange territory but would quickly adjust to the changes he himself predicted:

„It is a law of every new science that it is constantly evolving and improving (...) A science that cannot be improved is not a science; and my numerous disciples following in my path will one day develop it in a way that even its inventor never conceived of when he established its first principles.“ (265).

³⁰ The letter was published in its entirety by Varinard, *ibid*, 57-63.