

Personification as *Élanification*: Agency Combustion and Narrative Layering in Worlding Perceived Relations

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“Nature is a temple in which living pillars
Sometimes let slip some confused words;
Man there passes through forests of symbols
Which look at him with understanding eyes.”

Baudelaire, *Correspondences*

“[Nature]: Did you really think that the world had been tailored to your needs? Now learn that in my structure, order and operations – with few exceptions – I never had any intention to make humans neither rejoice nor suffering.”

Giacomo Leopardi, ‘Dialogue Between Nature and an Icelandic Traveller’
(my translation)

Reviewing recent frameworks in cognitive science (Rowlands), philosophical panpsychism (Goff; Skrbina), new materialist (Bennett) and cognitive literary (Hayles) studies in the current climate of social isolation and ongoing pandemic can be quite comforting. All stress how, as human cognisers, we are not, and cannot be, alone. Rather we are entangled, coupled, enmeshed, tied, assembled – to use but a few of the new conceptualisations of the subjective mind - with the world, in a net of constitutive relations. When we are born as selves and organisms, as environmental philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen puts it, “we come into this world expecting it – all of it – to be alive” and that “means to participate in this aliveness that is encountered everywhere and in everything” (16). We join a world of relations as *joints*: intersubjective hubs of looping feedback, experiential mediators between inner and outer worlds. These connections between individual human minds and social or material actors are there, we are told, regardless of our awareness. This is why we need to be made aware of them, as ecological thinkers are urging, to be responsible agents in this dense network.

Connections, however, are there because we establish them, and keep renewing them, through our actions and perceptions (or perception as action; Noe). Our feeling of belonging to the world is enhanced by our worlding of outer elements, from human to non-human and inorganic or even imagined matter, into meaningful spheres for actions and interactions. Without the possibility of touching in depth on the ethical, ecological, or epistemic concerns of these recent frameworks, the present chapter wants to contribute to this debate by focusing on one specific worlding mechanism, *personification*, by

providing an account of its dynamic interplay in the human “dance of agency” (Malafouris) with the external world. It will reflect on the working of personification by advancing two proposals: first, that personification might be a cognitive process that uses individual agency as its fuel (what I will call *agency combustion*); second, that this combustion of agency unfolds in time, and that narrative might play a role in progressively layering mentality and intentionality into real or imaginary beings or objects. In addition, it will argue that, conceived this way, personification should be reconsidered as part of a broader process whereby humans spontaneously or intentionally structure phenomenological relations with their world (a process that I will call, after Bergson’s concept of “*élan vital*”, *élanification*). It will also suggest that the give and take between personification and combustion of individual agency occurs in a wide range of experiences, from literary writing or reading and child play to religious and hallucinatory phenomena.

Personification as Agency Combustion

The relationship between personification and agency is phenomenologically obscure, energetically dynamic, and conceptually still under investigated. This is partly due to the fact that there is a plurality of agencies that should be considered. To place a selective list of the variety of agencies operating in human experience within a spectrum, this would go from a maximum of (either perceived or factual) subjective internalism to a (either perceived or factual) worldly externalism:

- 1) *Individual agency*: (the feeling of) being the initiator, deviser and master of an action (see, e.g., Davidson);
- 2) *Shared agency*: (the feeling that) agency is distributed between yourself and other individuals (see, e.g., Hutchins)
- 3) *Relational agency*: (the feeling of) someone or something having the capacity of acting for, against, upon you (see., e.g., Westlund)
- 4) *Material agency*: (the feeling that) when you interact with a variety of technologies, from pottery to writing to computers, these material elements have an agency of their own which contributes to the action (see Malafouris; Bernini)
- 5) *Independent agency*: (the feeling that) imaginary beings like children’s companions or fictional characters have autonomous desires, intentions and behaviors independent from your imaginative activity (see Taylor et al.; Fernyhough et al.);
- 6) *External agency*: (the feeling that) animate or inanimate elements of the real world, from people to objects, have an agency of their own (see, e.g., Gallagher, “Socially”; Krueger).

When phenomenological awareness is present, the first three kinds of agency seem to involve a consistent feeling of selfhood (as yourself, or yourself in a group, or yourself in relation to), whereas the second half of the list progressively gives rise to a harboring feeling of otherness (a cooperating technology, an imaginative being, or actual externalities). Within this spectrum, the more individual agency diminishes, the more traces of otherness appear. Here there seems to be already some potential ground for linking individual agency and personification in an inverse proportion.

Before making this move, though, it is important to consider the two notions (or phenomena or processes) as separated. Loosely speaking, agency is about doing, and personification is about being. However, the distinction is not symmetric, and as far as I can see there can be agency without personification, but hardly personification without agency. I can feel or note that my way of walking is 'affected by' these new shoes; that this weather 'has a negative power' over me; that the oil and vinegar 'do not mix'; that water 'extinguishes' fire. Even if all these cases can be easily turned into personifying statements (e.g., these 'vindictive' shoes are 'killing' me), as they are, they point just at agency without personification.

On the other side, personified elements are, for what I can see, always bearers of agentive features (as beings capable of acting). For instance, I can say or note that a 'shy' squirrel is 'escaping' from my camera; or that those waves seem 'happily playing' with each other. Here I am projecting mental states over, or based on, detectable behaviors: shortly, I am personifying elements to account for, or imaginatively expanding on, agents' features and actions.

Agency as a prerequisite for personification (and not vice versa), however, is quite a coarse conceptualization of their relationship. Can we account for the interplay between agency and personification in more dynamic and interacting terms? This is what my first proposal aims to do. To the best of my knowledge, individual agency and personification have never been put in what I would call a *resource* or *energetic coupling*. Individual agency has been treated as something present, diminished or lost, yet independently co-existing with processes of personification (see., e.g., Gallagher, "Multiple"). I would instead suggest to think of agency as a limited cognitive resource (on a par with attention or working memory; see Oberauer); and of personification as a process combusting internal agency as its fuel. Call it the *personification as agency combustion* (PAC) principle. Applying this principle to the spectrum of agencies that I had singled out, *the more individual agency decreases the more personifying dynamics are fuelled*.

The PAC principle seems able to account for – and empirically validated by scientific research on – a variety of experiences across cultural, technological, psychological, and religious domains. Take the case, for instance, of the so-called "illusion of independent agency", whereby literary writers report that fictional characters seem, in the writing process, taking up an agency of their

own in terms of volition, beliefs, emotions, and decision-making (Taylor et al.). Here the individual agency of the writer (her intentions, imaginative behaviour, and creative control) diminishes in the unfolding of the creative process (see Bernini). As a result, characters emerge as autonomous, personified agents (see Foxwell et al.). PAC seems to hold true also for the reverse process of reading. The process of immersion in a fictional world entails the backgrounding and partial fading of the reader's self and agentive control over the unfolding events. This fading of agency is inversely proportional to the vividness and immersivity of readers' simulations, including the simulated relationship with personified fictional characters (Alderson-Day, Bernini, and Fernyhough). The emergent autonomy and personification of characters through narratively scaffolded PAC in writing and reading can acquire a quasi-hallucinatory feeling that can be traced back to children's relationship with imaginary companions (Taylor), and which can approximate the borders of proper hallucinatory experiences such as voice-hearing (Woods et al.) and felt presence (see, e.g., Nielsen 2007). Voices people hear in their head are often accompanied by a feeling of loss of individual agency (it is not me initiating the speech) and by an inversely proportional (and temporally mounting) heightening of personification (the voices often become experienced as an external consciousness, relationally opposed to the voice-hearer; see Wilkinson and Bell).

In writing and reading, however, subjects do not lose entirely ontological weighting of the real world. They rather maintain a "split loyalty" (Ryan) and, I would add, a split agency between fictional and actual worlds. By contrast, in conjuring up imaginary companions and hallucinatory personified presences (on the relationship between the two see Fernyhough et al.), personification is magnified to the point of consuming, sometimes entirely, the phenomenological sense that subjects are agentively responsible for the perceived, personified agents. PAC therefore should be considered as a principle measurable in various degrees of agency combustion, thus able to account for all these variety of personification experiences.

Even some religious experiences, with personified relationship with gods, can be thought of following a similar PAC dynamic. Simon Weil, the French mystic and philosopher, was already reflecting on the inversed proportion between agency and personification, when she writes that "the soul, like a gas, tends to occupy the whole of the space left open to it." In order to let God's grace enter our life, we need, Weil says, to "create a void" (198). If we substitute here 'soul' with a sense of self and individual agency, we can similarly think of a feeling of God (as a personified relation) entering our everyday perception if and only we (either actively or, as Weil notes, as a passive consequence for instance of traumatic events) diminish the level of selfhood and agency within us, letting evaporate an amount of agency that can create an energetic void fuelling personified presences such as God's (see also Luhrmann).

We will come back soon more in detail at the scaffolding role of narrative in PAC dynamics. It is worth noting now, however, how all the experiences mentioned have narrative as a possible *catalytic force* in PAC. Writing or reading literary storyworlds, exploring narrative scripts while playing with imaginary companions, relating to intrusive hallucinatory agents or comforting gods that are often shaped by cultural and stereotypical storyworlds and typified characterisation (Woods et al.): all these are experiences textured by narrative patterns, plot expectations and story-guided predictions (on the latter see Kukkonen). Somehow countering the idea that narrative is a force that keeps together, albeit illusorily, our self as the agentive centre of a story (Dennett), here narrative becomes a (intentional or spontaneous) scaffolding process for lessening agentive control towards the emergence of personified relations. Narrative, due to its well-studied immersive potential (Ryan), lowers our subjective sense of agency, thus liberating an ontological feeling of autonomous worlds and personified presences. We can say that narrative becomes a polyphonic catalyst, whereby, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggested for polyphonic authors such as Dostoevsky, we move from the hierarchically isolated pedestal of the authoring level down to the level of characters in a storyworld, of which we become but one of the perceived, living inhabitants.

I will come back to this hypothesis in the conclusion. For now, it is enough to say that thinking of agency as a limited resource that, once combusted by personifying processes that can be narratively scaffolded, becomes less available to sustain a sense of self, can create a more complex, energetic, understanding of personification too. Before going any further, however, I should provide a working definition of what I mean by personification, and this will lead me to place it within a broader human capacity for worlding perceived relations.

Élanification and the Worlding of Semiospheres: Biomorphism, Zoomorphism, Anthropomorphism, and Personification

In its widespread usage, the term personification is commonly treated as a synonym of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism, as Waytz and colleagues sum up, “goes beyond providing purely behavioral or dispositional descriptions of observable actions (such as noting that a coyote is fast or aggressive); it involves attributing characteristics that people intuitively perceive to be uniquely human to nonhuman agents or events.” They also explain how it “includes both *physical features*, such as perceiving a religious agent in a humanlike form, and *mental capacities* that people believe are uniquely human, such as the capacity to have conscious awareness, possess explicit intentions, or experience secondary emotions (e.g., joy, pride, shame, guilt).” (58; emphasis added).

This is a quite generous definition, encompassing each case in which we are to a certain degree imbuing non-human objects and beings with human-like mental states or forms. However, I think personification should be profitably considered as a distinct process that can be *activated* by anthropomorphic projections or pattern recognitions, yet that is not exhausted by, or limited to them. With the term personification I aim at describing the temporal process whereby we *progressively* ascribe specific psychological traits and phenomenological life to an individual being – either real, imaginative, or fictional. In this respect, the target of personification can either be anthropomorphized objects or beings, as well as real people and fictional human characters.

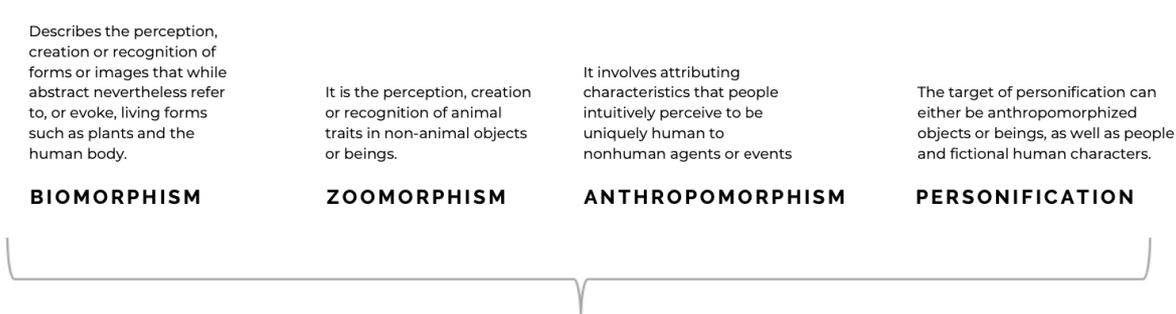
When we read a novel, in fact, we are not presented with all the characteristics, both physical and mental, of a character. We only slowly gain knowledge, make inferences, and gather information from a variety of sources in order to shape what Alan Palmer has called a “continuing-consciousness frame” (175-182) for a character. This constructive (and constructivist) process occurs in social cognition too, and it is *recursive*: the personified frame we construct for a person, imaginary friend or fictional being is constantly under expansion and revision, and we can have numerous epistemic fallbacks in our personifying process due to new inconsistencies emerging. Both for fictional and human beings, we (consciously or not) build on our past experiences of human encounters (a repertoire of “models of person”, according to Herman, *Storytelling*, 193-215) in order to keep layering and constantly adjusting personified traits, which keep modulating worlded relations with the perceiver.

In short, I would suggest that anthropomorphism is a temporally shorter process having as target non-human agents, whereas personification is a longer process having as a target both anthropomorphised non-human agents as well as human beings. More importantly, though, my proposal would be to consider both anthropomorphism and personification as dynamics belonging to a broader gamut of processes sharing a common feature: the contingent or diachronic imbuing, perceiving, and worlding of a richer life energy into the world.

Adapting the concept of “*élan vital*” from Henri Bergson (the “vital force,” or “life force,” or “vital impulse” which, for him, was the substance of consciousness and nature), I would call this wider umbrella of processes *élanification*. By this term, I want to refer to the capacity and drive of human beings to attribute to inorganic matters, non-human animals and human beings richer layers of cognition and vitality. Bergson’s concept of *élan vital* has already been used by new materialist thinkers like Jane Bennett in her influential book *Vibrant Matter*. My use of the term, however, is partly antithetical, partly complementary to Bennet’s agenda. To necessarily oversimplify Bennett’s argument, her use of the concept intends to point at a vitality beyond the

human (to make humans aware of how everything in the world actually *is* entangled and vibrant). Its application here instead wants to conceptualise élanification as an eminently human faculty, whereby humans *make* the world vibrate (or world vibrations into the world). In other words, my use is noncommittal to how the world really is in terms of a polyphony of agents (an ontological thesis); but only to theorise how our interaction with outer elements can be worlded as a polyphony of agencies and perceived relations (a phenomenological and operational framework). Whether élanification as a human process can reveal, detect or recognise something of the real ontology of our world is beyond the scope of this chapter. I can just briefly signal my sympathy for such view, with some provisos I will flesh out in the conclusion.

As for the complementary component of my proposed view, within my framework new materialist accounts can be considered not as theory of élanification, but as élanifying theories: theoretical and conceptual views that can both promote élanification as well as guide human beings to a better practice of it. If critics of Bennet’s work such as Kathrine Hayles (66) have rightly focused on the paradox that new materialist theories, while fighting anthropocentric views, are still made by and for human beings, I see them as implicitly recognising the potentially revolutionary role of some practice of élanification; a process that, while being eminently human, can world beings and relations towards a richer universe of actions and perceptions. Now that the scope of my borrowing from Bergson is specified, let’s review élanifying possibilities, visualised here in a range that goes from minimal to more substantial form of biological and cognitive endowments whereby human beings world agents and perceived relations.



ÉLANIFICATION

At its most basic form, élanification starts with *biomorphism*, which consists in the perception, creation or recognition of forms or images that while abstract nevertheless *refer to, or evoke, living forms such as plants and the human body*. Biomorphic forms have been widely explored by early 20th century artists such as Kandinsky, Miro, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. The second process in the élanification trajectory is *zoomorphism*, which is the perception, creation

or recognition of animal traits in non-animal objects or beings. And then we have *anthropomorphism* and *personification*. By linking these four processes under the same dynamic, I think we can achieve a better account of the continuity and fluidity between them; as well as a better understanding of their common features.

For instance, all these élanifying processes can be either passive or active. When passive, élanification is largely a matter of *perception*: we spontaneously perceive or recognise a richer degree of vitality, agency or cognition in some external entity. When actively performed, élanification can be a matter of *design, conception, imagination* or *simulation*, whereby we devise or project richer layers of vitality into objects or beings. Activity and passivity can take turns, and an intentionally anthropomorphized object can then become passively perceived as autonomously disclosing new anthropomorphic traits. In other words, once activated by élanification, a target can both move and be moved further in the trajectory (e.g., a biomorphised stone worlded as a vital agent can then start behaving in our imagination as an animal or a human being, which can be then personified with complex psychological traits).

In addition, thinking of élanification as a spectrum can show how many examples can be classed as *boundary cases*, at the edge between one modality and another. For instance, the Sage auditorium in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, designed by Norman Foster, lies in-between a biomorphic and zoomorphic architecture (and, according to the latter, spontaneously renamed by people ‘the caterpillar’). Novels such as *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1945) also exploit both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic dynamics.

Regardless of its stage in the élanification trajectory, however, once vitality is activated possible relations between the outer agent and the human perceiver are worlded. This relational field can be characterised as a semiotic field of possible signals and communicative interactions, close to an intersubjective version of what Russian semiologist Juri Lotman called a “semiosphere”: or “the semiotic space necessary for the existence of languages [...]. Outside the semiosphere there can be neither communication, nor language. Of course, the single-channel structure is reality” (123-124). If we extend, as semioticians would do, the concept of language beyond its verbal or linguistic component to include any kind of relational signals (e.g., behavioural, intentional, emotional, and so on), the concept of a semiosphere is quite fit to express the explosion of possible communicative relations that élanification can generate in the perceived reality.

As Lotman phrases it, the internal space of the semiosphere is always a meeting of “boundaries” between the perceiving subject agent and the other communicative agents, thus creating a space that is “unequal yet unified, asymmetrical yet uniform”. According to the PAC principle, however, we have seen how in personification in particular (and élanification in general) the balance of symmetries can shift, when the perceiving subject is stripped away

of her agency, thus becoming unaware to be the source of personified relations within her semiosphere. We noted how narrative can become a key catalyst for the levelling and bridging of boundaries between a human perceiver and perceived agents in the élanified, worlded semiosphere. It is now time to look briefly more into detail at how narrative élanification works.

Prompters and Narrative Percolation in Worlding Perceived Relations

Narrative indeed seems to play a role in élanifying processes, either by prompting, paralleling or following active or passive élanification. Narrative élanification can be prompted by different triggers, from behavioural to morphological features, and lead to a different granularity in terms of personified psychological traits. For instance, in the landmark experimental study on anthropomorphism and 'apparent behaviour' conducted by Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel in 1944, the two scientists showed to the participants a short video with moving geometrical figures (1 big triangle, one small triangle, and a circle). In this video, the small triangle and the circle are approaching the rectangle, which has an open door, but they are stopped and obstructed repeatedly by the larger triangle. There is more, but even this brief description, already showing signs of *storied* anthropomorphic ascriptions, is enough to understand how most of the participants reported what happened in a narrative form, resorting to anthropomorphized characters as intentional agents. They interpreted the scene by layering a quite conventional narrative script of a fight between two lovers on one side (the small triangle and the circle) and a strong and violent third man on the other (big triangle). Here the direction of élanification has gone from *behaviour recognition* (these forms are intentional moving agents) to a *morphological mapping* (e.g., the big triangle is stronger because bigger; the two triangles are men) to a proper *mentalization* leading to personification of their traits (the bigger triangle is a jealous partner)

This is not the only possible dynamic in élanification. Another possibility is to find morphological prompters. For instance, below is a picture I have taken in the woods behind my house in Durham in the United Kingdom.



Can you see something more than a tree in it? The morphology of the tree prompted almost instantaneously in me the image of an elephant (*from morphology to zoomorphic projections*). This morphological recognition then activated in me a wealth of *possible behaviors* in my mind (can he move? Can he talk? Can he feel or judge or hide? Can he see me?). This array of intentional possible behaviours and relational actions (or what Gallagher calls “operational intentionality”, *Enactivist*, 80) disclosed by my worlded semiosphere has spontaneously scaffolded richer narrative ascriptions of a mentality with personality traits (he seems calm and wise; rather at home than lost; I wonder where his parents are?). Here my élanifying direction followed *from morphology to behaviour to mentalization*.

Sometimes, pure mentalization seems to occur, with no particular links to morphology or behaviour. For example, when the protagonist in Proust’s *Recherche* is struggling to fall asleep in an unfamiliar room, he suddenly perceives the ‘hostility of the violet curtains and of the insolent indifference of a clock.’ (12; emphasis added). Here Marcel, due to his fragile mood, is anthropomorphizing and then personifying elements of his room with no particular relation to their forms or behaviour.

Finally, other times élanification can also have what I would call, building on Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of sign (1932-37), an *indexical prompter*. In his theory of signs, Peirce distinguishes between an icon and an index: if an icon is a sign which has a formal relation to its object (such as a painting to the house it represents), an index bears a physical and causal relation to its object (for example, smoke is an index of fire). I would suggest that in voice-hearing, for instance, we can see an *anthropomorphisation by indexicality*. Voice-hearers perceive some, often confused, quasi-auditory stimulus. They then tend to interpret this as an index of a voice, which in turn prompts further ascriptions and personification of this sign (i.e., if there is a voice, there must be a mentality, with some kind of intentions – usually negative and tormenting ones).

This brief and condensed survey of possible prompters for élanification should be sufficient for you to grasp to what extent narrative can be involved in the process. In all these different élanifying experiences, with different perceptual prompters, subjects are scaffolding personifying processes with narrative possibilities. To apply David Herman’s cognitive account of the work of narrative to élanification, different prompters are leading subjects at the same time to “story the world” (i.e., narrativizing behavioural patterns, morphology, inorganic hostility, or auditory indexical signals), and “worlding a story” (towards emerging universes filled with relational jealousy, magic, indifference, or persecution). Narrative seems therefore to be one of the main vehicles for ascribing further levels of vitality and mentality or, in Herman’s terms, an “heterophenomenological density” (*Narratology*, 226-230) to the target objects or beings. Through narrative, we can either actively create or

passively perceive denser levels of cognition and vitality in the object or being we relate to. The link between narrative and élanification is possibly even tighter, since they seem to work in very similar ways.

If we turn to Kendall Walton's seminal 'pretense theory' of narrative and fictionality (1990), in fact, we seem to find a good candidate to explain processes of élanification as well. For Walton, fictional narratives are props in games of make-believe. Suppose that some children play a game in the woods in which they imagine tree stumps to be bears. In Walton's terminology, in this game the tree stumps are "props" and the convention that the children establish by their agreement that stumps 'count as' bear is a "principle of generation" (see also Toon). If we apply this to the experience of the elephant in the wood, the tree functioned spontaneously as a perceptual prop, then becoming a principle of generation of what we can call a wider *narrative percolation* (this elephant can think and talk, this wood might be magic, therefore a lot of other magic beings are probably around and anything can happen). Importantly, and thanks also to the PAC principle lessening subjective agency, once a prop has fired and a principle is established it might be difficult to go back to the previous perception of the world. *Élanification, thanks also to the role of narrative in the PAC principle, might be difficult to reverse.* Once a richer perception of the world is unleashed, the Pandora vase might be hard to reseal. In psychotic experiences, this can be a very distressing constraint, leading to a further loss of agency in their everyday experience. I want therefore to conclude by contrasting the widespread view that sees anthropomorphism only as a biased process empowering human control. Worlding semiospheres of relations rather unleashes a vitality that lessens human individual agency towards what can become exposed, frightful interactions with emerging otherness.

Between Aliveness and Indifference: Towards a Theory of Élanification

The two epigraphs to this chapter well summarise the fragile area occupied by human beings as joints, bridges, hubs for the élanifying and worlding of perceived relations. On the one hand, we have Baudelaire's poem, which epitomises the fascination for blossoming correspondences in élanified, worlded semiospheres between man and nature. On the other we have the 18th-century poet Giacomo Leopardi, who has written extensively on the suffering resulting from the indifference of nature for human concerns (albeit he does personify and narrativize Nature as an agentive, relational interlocutor in the cited story). A theory of élanification might help exploring how humans cannot rest in either options, destined as they are to keep navigating between signals and silence, aliveness and indifference: if the former takes away agency and rewards with a (sometimes intruding or terrifying) vitality, the latter leave us in charge, but of a disenchanting world. Regardless of the ontological truth captured by new materialist or panpsychist views, the proposed theory can be

seen as aligned with panpsychist calls for “re-enchanting’ the universe” (Goff, 217). It also aimed at showing, however, how the PAC principle in élanification in general, and personification in particular, can have distressing outcomes, with percolating, narrativised presences menacing the ontological stability of our individual world. If a theory of élanification is not committal to what world lies beyond the human, it can foster the understanding of the shared relational drive, exposed fragility, and narrative inventiveness behind human worlding.

A theory of élanification can thus provide a common framework for interdisciplinary research on individual ways of worlding relations across the everyday, creative, literary and clinical domains. The intuition that élanification can be informative of the human mind was already at the core of Hermann Rorschach’s test, whereby patients worlded inkblot cards into élanified presences (notably animals or human-like presences) and narrativised relations (see Searls). This chapter wanted to account not only for the reception of outer inkblot signs, but for the very process whereby humans cannot restrain from worlding semiospheres by spreading (actively or spontaneously) layers of agentive and narrative ink from their individual tanks out on the book of the universe.

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