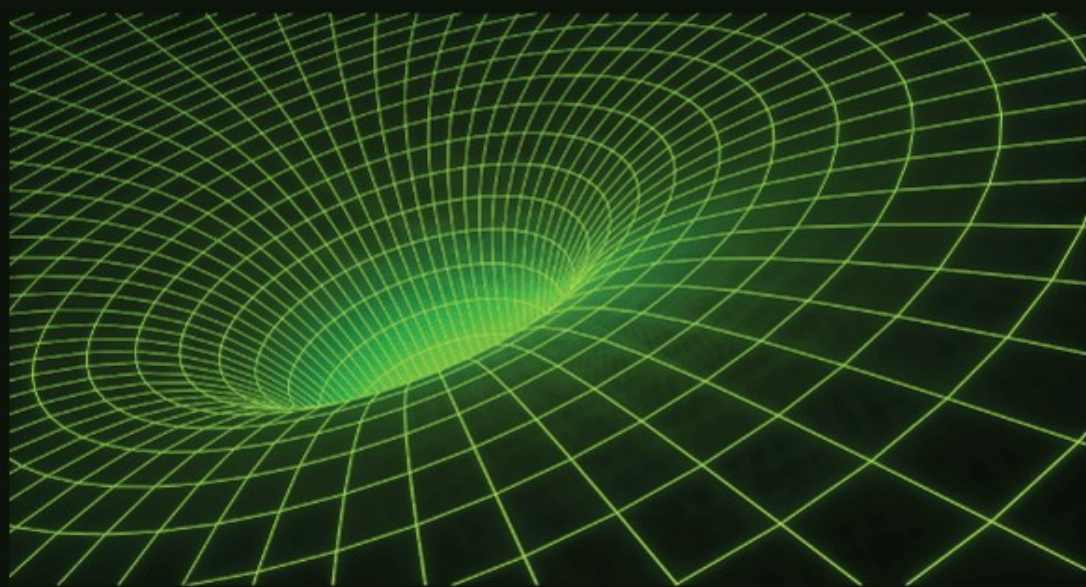


# **Bad Infinity**

**narcissism and the  
problem of time**



**Leslie A. Johnson**

Dimensions of Psychotherapy, Dimensions of Experience

**Bad infinity:  
narcissism and  
the problem of  
time**

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Psychotherapy, Dimensions  
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# **Bad infinity: narcissism and the problem of time**

*Leslie A. Johnson*

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The experience of time is a function of separation. We care about time, we suffer from it, because birth separates us from the inorganic substrate from which we arise and to which we know we will return. Time is the awareness of this relation between being and nonbeing, a relation that defines us

existentially, even as it insults and challenges our narcissism.

The existential awareness of time depends, however, on another prior separation: the achievement of psychic birth or subjecthood, whereby a stable self-representation is differentiated from the internal world of objects, in particular from the maternal object. This process of separation and differentiation may be thought of metaphorically as the opening up of space—real space but also internal mental space structured by the gaps

that begin to emerge in the earliest discriminations of ‘me’ from ‘not me’. Only when psychic birth has opened up this interior does experience become saturated with temporal significance. Feelings such as desire, dread, grief or frustration heighten the awareness of time—they are, in a sense, awareneses of time—because their cathected objects are acknowledged as separate from, rather than coextensive or identical with the self. From a psychoanalytic point of view the experience of time is thus above all a function of intrapsychic



space or separation. Time opens up and comes to matter in so far as we can bear to sustain the gap between the self and its internal objects. There is always a countervailing tendency exerted by omnipotent mental processes to implode this space, to shrink or close these gaps. Ultimately, it is the capacity to undergo the depressive position which keeps space open, respects the integrity of the object, and, in a matter of speaking, lets time temporalize, i.e., be experienced as subjectively real and moving.

Two Greek philosophical terms help to clarify how human beings typically adapt to the temporal exigencies of existence. Time understood as *chronos* emphasizes the ubiquity of change and transience. Personified in the ancient god Kronos, ruler of the cosmos who propels genealogical process (and eats his children), *chronos* designates time as an ever-flowing stream whose regular motion we objectify and measure (Peters 1967). The concept of *kairos*, on the other hand, refers to a span of time that is shaped or made significant

by decisive actions which bring it to fulfillment. In Ecclesiastes, the seasons of life are called *kairoi*, while the Crucifixion is taken to be the *kairos* par excellence, the accomplishment of God's plan whereby Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled and human history redeemed (Kittel and Friedrich 1985). The concepts of *chronos* and *kairos* inform many aspects of experience. They describe, for example, the phenomenon of music, where the *chronos* of beat is shaped into deeply satisfying kairotic structures and resolutions. Likewise,

psychotherapy begins by doling out 50-minute portions of *chronos*. But if it can release the idiom of the self and better structure intrapsychic space, the patient lives more creatively in and with time, turning *chronos* into *kairoi* of work and love.

## **TIME AND NARCISSISM**

This chapter originated in my work with two narcissistic patients who could not make this creative accommodation to time. For them, time tended to expose the gaps and thus the vulnerabilities of the

differentiated self. They defended themselves by foreclosing temporal awareness. As I considered the vicissitudes of their temporal experience, it seemed to me that the narcissistic patient (and the primitive narcissistic core of all individuals regardless of pathology) strives to escape the relentless horizontal flow of *chronos*, to break out in a vertical thrust, a seemingly ‘transcending’ movement that opens onto another kind of duration (see also Ashbach, Chapter 18 in this volume).

To conceptualize this narcissistic move I borrow another Greek term, *pleroma*, from the Christian and Gnostic traditions. Signifying fullness, *pleroma* designates the plenitude of God that comprises the aeons, the infinite sphere of deity, ‘home of all that is perfect, godlike, eternal, imperishable’ (Hastings 1919: 64). References to the *pleroma* occur in Jung (1969) in his ruminations on the mythologies of the Self. I use the term to connote the illusion of God-like self-sufficiency at the heart of narcissism. The *pleroma* connotes a

state of mind in which the self savors eternity understood as an infinitely expanding duration of fullness where time seems neither to pass nor to pass away.

The *pleroma* is reminiscent of the ‘oceanic feeling’ of Freud, with its ‘restoration of limitless narcissism’ (1930: 72). In *pleroma*, however, the accent is on grandiosity and power, rather than on passivity and mystical oneness. In so far as the *pleroma* is not a delusion, but rather an illusory heaven where the self feels full and

without gaps, it also resembles Steiner's 'psychic retreat', a hideaway governed by a state of mind in which painful realities can be 'simultaneously accepted and disavowed' (Steiner 1993: 89). Most of all, the *pleroma* pertains to the zonal geography of narcissism theorized by Meltzer (1992).

In this work, Meltzer transforms the classical notion of zonal fixation into a type of narcissistic part-object relation supported by the persistence of omnipotent phantasies of projective



and introjective identification. In the classical conception, the ego organizes the discharge of energy around oral, anal or genital zones of its own body. In Meltzer's conception, the self is intimately involved with the body and the corresponding zones (or part-objects) of the phantasied maternal imago, in such a way as to resist the integration of that imago into a whole object and also, which amounts to the same thing, to resist the anxieties of the depressive position in relation to it. The three erogenous zones thus become in Meltzer's conception three

phantasied spaces inside the internal object—Meltzer calls them life-worlds or claustra—inhabited by parts of the self: the so-called head/breast, the genital and the rectal compartments of the maternal body (see also Hill, Chapter 17 in this volume).

Despite the indifference narcissists often exhibit toward external objects, Meltzer indicates how incessantly they are engaged with their internal objects through omnipotent mental acts of projective identification. The phantasied inside of the maternal body

exerts a fascination on the self. To be inside of it, to be in control of it, is to inhabit the idealized source of plenitude and power where vulnerabilities disappear and all gaps are sutured. In order for the self to exploit this power, however, the exterior of that internal imago—the boundary which secures its integrity in the imagination—must be breached. Meltzer shows that omnipotent phantasies of intrusion, rape, robbery, and appropriation are rampant in the claustral zones of narcissistic object relations. These phantasies, however,

are not merely mental figments of omnipotent thinking. Projective identification into the internal object is energized and made psychically convincing because it is linked to masturbatory excitation and the fullness of orgasmic sensation (Meltzer 1992). The act of masturbation,' Meltzer stipulates, 'of whatever orifice or body part, derives its urgency and often compulsive force from its capacity to generate omnipotence' (1992: 30). Penetration into 'the imaginary world of the inside of an internal object,' he specifies elsewhere,

‘is based on nothing but the omnipotence of masturbatory processes’ (1992: 102).

The idea of *pleroma* overlaps with the head/breast compartment in Meltzer’s taxonomy—that life-world inside the internal object associated with self-idealization, sensual delight and omniscience. The *pleroma*, however, with its connotation of transcendence of time, highlights the specifically temporal vicissitudes of narcissistic adaptation. The clinical material below, which illustrates the

attainment of *pleroma* through masturbatory processes, indicates how narcissistic object relations are a defense against time and time-saturated awareness. The *pleroma* functions to scotomize time, i.e., to make the perception of time disappear. In so far as the self exploits omnipotent masturbatory processes to breach the integrity of the internal object, it closes the gap which separates it from the object—the very separation out of which the experience of time arises. Thus the narcissistic self avoids loss and mourning by

effacing the tension between ‘now’ and ‘no longer’; it avoids dependency and frustration by effacing the tension between ‘now’ and ‘not yet’; it avoids dread by effacing the tension between being and nonbeing. Fueled by the omnipotence of masturbatory processes, the narcissistic self exploits the internal object in order to dwell in a *pleroma*, a nontemporalizing duration that fosters the illusion of plenitude and self-sufficiency.

## **CASE MATERIAL: MARSHA AND ALAN**

Two patients fostered my thinking about time and narcissism. Both came to therapy depressed and unable to work productively. Marsha, a graduate student in French, began when she was 31 and left almost two and a half years later to take a one-year teaching job. Alan, who taught high-school Spanish, began when he was 24 and stopped four years later to get married. Both took extensive time away from treatment for study or research abroad. Alan came once a week, sometimes less. Marsha came twice a week during the last ten months. The brief notes



that follow are meant to provide a feeling for the grandiosity and omnipotence of these patients, a glimpse into their sexual proclivities, and a sense of their difficulties coping with time. The next section illustrates the problems that ensued when their narcissistic adaptations collided with the time limits of the clinical hour.

Marsha had a secret ambition ‘to be the greatest French professor in the world.’ For years, however, she had been spinning her wheels on her dissertation. She could not tolerate

deadlines, often throwing a tantrum or fit the day before. Orgastic events, these fits would break the tension of relating to *chronos* and to an impending future. I never knew Marsha to mail an application in on time—yet rejection letters didn't seem to faze her. 'Somehow,' she said, 'I don't really worry about the future.' I remember thinking, 'Why bother, if you're already one of the elect?' We began to notice how little time seemed to matter.

Alan, on the other hand, became a Spanish teacher mainly because Latin Americans had celebrated him as a ‘special’ tourist, ‘the best of all’. Convinced of his ‘charm’ (it was an explicit part of his self-description), he often complained when I didn’t gratify him: ‘No adult has ever not praised and flattered me!’ Whatever his abilities, Alan scarcely coped with the time pressures of teaching, because every time he sat down to work he initiated a masturbatory ritual which continued until bedtime, producing nothing but ejaculate. It was high

anxiety in class the next day, but while he was masturbating, he explained, ‘I seem to have all the time in the world.’ Alan’s conscious fantasies seldom involved intercourse. Typically he’d be masturbating in the face of a woman, whose ‘WOW!’ would fill him with a sense of POWER. Then he would drink the actual ejaculate, thereby becoming his own breast and sealing the pleromatic illusion of gapless self-sufficiency.

Marsha never reported masturbating at her desk, but she did

subvert her writing in a masturbatory way. She never got anywhere because she couldn't stop fussing, i.e., playing with her sentences. Nor could she resist playing with her dog. Projecting her idealized object onto the poor beast, she dwelled on his 'greatness' and 'perfection', seeming to identify with the timelessness of canine consciousness. Two weeks before her dissertation was due, she even bought another—as if puppy training were a way out of the temporal stream. Occasionally, Marsha had sex with her husband, but only subject to certain

rules. '*Never*,' she informed me, 'on Sunday,' and '*never, never* before bedtime.' Intercourse was 'boring', and she didn't much care for foreplay. She did, however, enjoy 'orgasming and afterwards'—so long as the 'afterwards' did not involve sleep. Virtually non-relational and anti-sensual, Marsha's sexuality seemed atemporal as well, as if in defiance of instinctual processes whereby excitation builds to release over time. Far from describing the temporal structure of desire, sex for Marsha was a masturbatory process. She exploited

it to attain the illusion of *pleroma*, which is why she had to not sleep but remain conscious ‘afterwards’.

## **TEMPORAL VICISSITUDES IN THE CLINICAL SITUATION**

Because the therapeutic encounter is time-limited, it frustrates the very needs and desires that it awakens. This is especially so for the narcissistic patient who cannot tolerate dependency. By creating a pleromatic state of mind in the sessions, Marsha and Alan persistently sought to make

time disappear. There were several signs that this was happening.

### *Masturbatory motor activity*

What first linked these patients in my mind was the fact that neither could sit still. I now view this activity as a masturbatory process going on before my eyes. Alan's habit, though subtle, was less displaced. Using his fingers, he would lightly tap or rub the arm of the chair; then, unobtrusively dropping his hand down to his thigh, he'd ever so lightly trace the folds in his pants. A compulsive masturbator



from eight-years-old, as a teen he began to stage this activity inside the walk-in closet in his bedroom. By projective identification, my consulting room, and my mind within it, became such an interior space into which Alan deeply embedded himself to control my mind, my gaze, and my attention. Whatever the precipitant for therapy, Alan stayed because he had found another walk-in closet. I became his refuge from a frantic life, the place where he could levitate to *pleroma*. Toward the end, I took a more interpretive stance, thereby enacting

our separateness. He wouldn't think with me about this, but chose instead to quit the masturbatory chamber, terminating treatment.

Marsha, on the other hand, did what I thought of as Rumpelstiltskin's dance. I'd watch in amazement as the feet beneath her chair would jab, stomp or twirl. For instance, the day she confided her vaunting ambition her ankles were twirling like pinwheels. Transferentially, Marsha exploited this masturbatory movement, I believe, to assert omnipotent control over me.

Aware of my degree in literature, she coveted my mind and sought to kick her way into it in order to identify with my supposed power and omniscience. By thus closing the gap between self and object, she could cancel out time-saturated feelings of longing and envy, the awareness of immaturity and lack. When she was charged up and kicking, my room—the interior of her object—became hers, suffused with her *pleroma*.

### *Behavior at the boundaries*

The time boundaries of a session are those points where the narcissistic self comes up most jarringly against the reality of *chronos* and separateness. For Alan and Marsha these boundaries required special negotiation. In Alan's case, the intriguing thing was that he never lingered before leaving. Was he indifferent to time? He certainly seemed indifferent to space: he alone, of all my patients, never commented when I moved to another (much nicer) office. I think that when Alan rubbed his 'magic lantern', he transcended

space, time and desire. The exterior disappeared because in phantasy he was already in the interior, controlling my gaze, my WOW, to restore his grandiosity and power. Masturbatory phantasy was ubiquitous, propelling him into a *pleroma* that, from my point of view, seemed to float him out the door at session's end. And so it went, year in, year out, as Alan insulated himself against the winds of change.

Marsha did sometimes stumble at the boundary. When need would rustle in the transference, she'd scotomize

the hour, coming late and explaining, ‘I was playing with the dog and lost track of time!’ Once I observed that dogs aren’t conscious of time: they don’t know that life, like a counseling session, comes to an end. ‘I don’t particularly want to think about my death!’ she shot back, scorched by the very mention of the future as the harbinger of separation, loss, and mortality. When she came late, I encouraged her to describe her state of mind. A moment would come when she knew she had to leave, ‘But somehow I get engrossed in something

(usually dog-play) and time expands.’ It sounded like a mystical technique: ‘I feel sunken in, focused, like a point of illumination, with everything else blurred or dark.’ A latter-day Gnostic, Marsha engrossed herself in a time-transcending *pleroma* when separateness and limitation threatened.

### *Time in the countertransference*

The countertransferences evoked by Alan and Marsha were difficult and challenging, sometimes involving feelings of contempt and anger. For the

purposes of this chapter, however, I limit myself to the experience of mind-numbing torpor described by Kernberg (1975) and other commentators, which often came over me when working with these patients. If they were ‘transcending’ time, I’d be clinging to the clock for a toehold in reality, trusting *chronos* to do its work and release me from this molasses of mindlessness. Because I had become for them, not so much the object as the internal location of their omnipotent control, I disappeared for them as a separate and exterior other. Profoundly



unrecognized, I would lose the integrity of my own thoughts and become vulnerable to over-identification with them—not just empathizing, but somehow becoming them.

This happened on two occasions, when I ‘woke up’ to find that I too had made time disappear! Once with Alan I caught myself quietly rubbing my *own* thigh—then realized we were five minutes over. With Marsha, I fell into a similar trance the day she threw a fit. She had bent over, breathing

convulsively, then hurled herself onto the couch (I thought of Pete Rose sliding into home), where she lay until I literally bethought myself and saw that we were ten minutes over. Lying there, Marsha recalled her recent fit at the vet's on seeing an X-ray of her dog. Gazing into this image of the interior of her object, she had beheld not the immortal Godhead, but a premonition of mortality. The glimpse of skeleton broke her illusion and demystified her identification with the object as a pleromatic refuge. So, nearing the chronometric limit of our

session, she scotomized it by propelling herself deeper into my room, deeper into the inside of the internal object, deeper into my couch and my mind. Meanwhile, spellbound and, in a sense, reeling from this psychic attack, I was sucked into the *pleroma* as well, a state of bewitched fascination in which time had stopped.

### *The pleroma in dreams*

Two dreams from late in treatment illuminate the narcissistic part-object relations on which the assumption to *pleroma* depends. Alan's dream

illustrates the violence of the omnipotent phantasy. *He is observing an interior space similar to my office: two facing armchairs, a couch to the side. One chair is vacant. A man in his late 20s sits in the other. On the couch a bag of sugar is slashed open, sugar spilling out. A boy writhes in it, belly down, but the man won't let him leave.* Here, insinuation into me (my office) is doubled by the intrusive rape of my idealized head/breast (the sugarbag), source of everlasting admiration and approval.

Marsha also brought a dream of plunder in her quest for intellectual power and omniscience. *She enters an elegant atelier owned by a 'big queen'.* *Inside, she spots a gorgeous Kelly green hat in ribbons and tulle, but she doesn't buy it.* The atelier refers to my sunny loft-like office; the hat to my green beret, fetish of mental potency, that sometimes hung on the chair by my desk. But rather than pay for the hat, i.e., work toward the *kairos* of separation and individuation so that she might have her own thinking cap, Marsha aimed to steal it—as her

associations indicated. She complained about the fancy shops where she loves to browse but is frightened to enter because ‘they always act as if I’ve st . . . st . . . st . . . something!’ Three times Marsha stammered the give-away word, unable to speak the past participle of the verb ‘to steal’.

### *Endings that weren’t: bad infinity*

Some months later, Marsha and Alan left treatment, but neither underwent the experience of termination. Neither was ready to

mourn the loss of the object. Chronometric time ended, but there was no *kairos*. There was no ‘sense of an ending’ (Kermode 1967: title).

Sometimes, albeit rarely and painfully, these patients acknowledged the time that was passing. Marsha, who idealized the student movement of the 1960s, wished that she could have demonstrated and kicked over a few trashcans. ‘But that’s how two-year-olds behave,’ I replied. Eyes widening, she blurted out, ‘That time is *gone*’ She had caught the chilly

draft of time passing—but she couldn't mourn the lost time of therapy. At the third-to-last session the masturbatory process resumed, only this time the toes wriggling away in her sandals were painted—like mine. 'Is she really ripping me off from head to toe?' I silently wondered, thinking of dream hat and the nail polish. Unconscious guilt about stealing probably drove her to 'forget' the next session in my atelier/boutique. 'What are patients supposed to *do* at the end?' she asked provocatively on the final day. I said it was customary to pay the bill and say



goodbye, adding that her husband always signed the checks. She smiled knowingly, but a few days later it wasn't *her* check that came in the mail, it was her husband's, as usual. Staging another manic defense, she had kicked me in the can, hoping to get away with the goods.

What brought Alan back to earth was impending marriage and cohabitation: where would he masturbate? Suddenly he complained that I hadn't cured him after all these years. Refusing to face the end of our

time together, he quit one weekend by phone. But his choice for a bride—a woman who like myself is also in the counseling profession—effaced the sense of an ending. A late dream, however, indicates the profound dilemma posed by the narcissistic solution to the problem of time. *He is seated at his desk in his apartment masturbating before the computer. He wakes up, still seated at his desk in his apartment masturbating before the computer. The illusory pleroma maintained by omnipotent masturbatory processes may seal the*

gap of separateness and scotomize time. But without disillusionment, i.e., without acknowledging the separateness, the exteriority and the integrity of the Other, the self cannot experience the new. As Alan's nightmare uncannily premonitors, the *pleroma* is the claustrophobic realm of sameness—of more and more of the same: the selfsame Self. Seeming to vanquish time, it opens instead onto the ennui of 'bad infinity' (Mautner 1996: 209), an endlessly expanding duration unrelieved by the discontinuities of time, of difference,

of otherness which signal meaningful change.

I sometimes think of these patients as closet revolutionaries. Marsha once dreamed *she was taking over the Dean's office, impacting the hall with filth*. Alan, for his part, was fascinated by Raskolnikov, Dostoevsky's nihilist hero in *Crime and Punishment* (1865). Like Raskolnikov, Alan believed he was special and aspired to *pleroma* by killing and robbing an old lady (slashing my sugarbag). Rosenfeld (1987), and Steiner (1993) after him,

suggest that the citadel of narcissistic self-sufficiency is in fact guarded by an internal, powerful object gang. Meltzer (1992) argues that there is no projective identification into the head/breast of the object without an anal claustrum as well, a compartment for the split-off violence underlying narcissistic self-idealization. Alan's more ominous double in *Crime and Punishment* is not Raskolnikov, but the bored pervert Svidrigailov, who taunts Raskolnikov with a disturbing anal vision of the *pleroma*: 'Eternity is always presented [as] something

enormous, enormous! But why should it necessarily be enormous? Imagine, instead, that it will be one little room . . . a bath-house . . . black with soot, with spiders in every corner' (Dostoevsky 1865: 277). The potentially unending, claustrophobic regression of Alan's nightmare in the masturbatory chamber echoes Svidrigailov's pornographic dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream from which it is difficult to determine if he ever wakes up.

## **APPLICATIONS: OUT OF *PLEROMA INTO CHRONOS***

## **TOWARDS *KAIROS***

Narcissistic defenses are profoundly resistant to change and all too often, as Steiner (1993) observes, intervention provokes deeper psychic retreat. By conceptualizing the narcissistic retreat or claustrum as a pleromatic duration, however, i.e., as a temporal vicissitude, it becomes possible to fashion interventions in the less-threatening register of reality-testing. Narcissistic patients are in and out of temporal awareness, maintaining a capacity simultaneously to accept and to disavow reality. By

tactfully addressing their attempts to scotomize time, by describing or simply naming these evasions, we offer a standpoint outside of the omnipotent state of mind. From this standpoint we may point to the suturing of their gap without making it bleed. It is a matter of bringing *chronos* into the *pleroma*, in order to make the *pleroma* itself an object of consciousness and the experience of time something to think about. As always, one works with the countertransference and the imagery at hand. For instance, I once caught



myself giving a Japanese patient a little more time, a little too often. At first, I rationalized that she needed it because of the language barrier. Eventually, I realized that I was deeply identifying with her assumption that she had ‘all the time in the world’. I discussed this with her, mentioning Peter Pan and Rip van Winkle. Into this transitional space she then brought the parallel Japanese story of Taro and the kingdom under the sea. She began to sense that part of her was hiding in my office, for years on end, in an effort to make time go away.

Of course, it is one thing to point out the clock; quite another to nudge a patient to the threshold of the depressive position from which the path to psychic change is a painful *kairos* of work and love, hate, guilt and reparation. Attention to these temporal vicissitudes, however, may also help the therapist, who otherwise runs the risk of being sucked into a timeless *pleroma*. The refusal of Alan and Marsha to mourn the termination of our relationship also deprived me of a satisfactory sense of an ending. In fact, this chapter arose out of a need to

overcome the inertia I experienced after those endings that weren't. I had to write my way out of bad infinity by transforming my clinical work with these patients into a *kairos* of psychoanalytic meaning and learning. Such intellectual effort activates the true meaning of transcendence as a climbing across, rather than a soaring up. As Yeats reminds us at the end of his lyric, 'Ephemera': 'our souls / Are love, and a continual farewell' (1956: 15). There is no real escape from *chronos*. But there is deed, metaphor and narrative through which

experience can be transformed into significant *kairoi* that bind the time.

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# Table of Contents

[About the Author](#)

[Bad infinity: narcissism and the  
problem of time](#)

[TIME AND NARCISSISM](#)

[CASE MATERIAL: MARSHA  
AND ALAN](#)

[TEMPORAL VICISSITUDES  
IN THE CLINICAL](#)

[SITUATION](#)

[APPLICATIONS: OUT OF  
PLEROMA INTO CHRONOS](#)

[TOWARDS KAIROS](#)

[REFERENCES](#)