If one goes into a London restaurant today, diners are as likely to be photographing their food to share on social media networking platforms, or fiddling with their smartphones to be abreast of the latest Twitter update, as talking to the person sitting opposite them. Such phenomena have led multiple commentators to argue that we now inhabit a world full of ‘digital narcissists’ (Keen, 2007) – a term implying that the wider cultural shift to narcissism is now being partially shaped by the digital revolution (e.g. Carpenter, 2012; Szoka and Marcus, 2011). Is this a fair complaint? Does social networking produce new problems, or is the accusation of self-obsession just another manifestation of cross-generational misunderstanding (Prensky, 2001)?

As a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, clinical psychologist and supervisor, I have a complex relationship to the digital revolution that has occurred during my years of clinical practice. Unlike most colleagues, I have a Twitter account, a Google+ page and a YouTube channel, through which I attempt to disseminate psychoanalytic thinking. These small personal attempts to provide psychoanalytic resources in cyberspace reflect my belief that not so doing would be a thanatonic act for one of the few disciplines that has something nuanced to say about human subjectivities. At the same time, I try to keep personal opinions and information to a minimum in cyberspace, so as to avoid shutting down what gets transferred onto me in the consulting room. This attempt at neutrality does not stop my patients’ frequent interpretations of what my cyber-communications ‘actually mean’. Though such disclosures can be telling, I often find myself leaving a clinic feeling protective of my patients, who are all too easily bruised in cyberspace; for example, when a Facebook update from an ex-boyfriend reactivates a grief, or when a carefully crafted act of creativity meets with absolutely
no response. It does not surprise me that social networking is continuously associated with the exponential rise in alienation, loneliness and anxiety (e.g. Mental Health Foundation, 2010). The aim of this chapter and the clinical case I will present is to help the reader to think about these complexities, as my clients’ adventures of creation and destruction in cyberspace have elaborated my own relationship to the cyberworld that now shapes all our lived experiences.

Narcissism in Psychoanalysis

The term ‘narcissism’ derives from the Roman poet Ovid’s myth of Narcissus, the handsome and boastful son of the river god, Cephissus, and the nymph, Liriope. Echo, a nymph, falls in love with Narcissus but is spurned. Rejected, she fades away, leaving only her voice to linger. Hearing Echo’s prayers for vengeance, the Goddess, Nemesis, makes Narcissus fall in love with his own image in a pool. Narcissus sits mesmerised by his own reflection until he dies, turning into the Narcissus flower. Words and the voice here are associated with the capacity to love others and also oneself; by contrast, infatuation with the image is indexed to a deathly self-absorption.

Narcissism has a rich and complicated history within psychoanalysis (see, for example, Campbell and Miller, 2011). The initial focus of both Freud (1905) and Ellis (1898) was of a self-gratifying, pathological form of sexuality. This was advanced by two theories. Firstly, Ernest Jones (1913) conceptualised narcissism as a character trait called the ‘God complex’. In this account, this personality is aloof, cut off, self-important, excessively self-loving, exhibitionist and overconfident. He or she is described as having fantasies of omnipotence, a belief in his or her own specialness and an excessive thirst for admiration. This definition has clear similarities with narcissism as defined as a ‘personality disorder’ in the diagnostic manual DSM-V (APA, 2013). It is also remarkably similar to lay usages of the term (e.g. Hirsch, Kett and Trefil, 1988).

By contrast, Freud (1914) described narcissism as a function of the developmental process. Writing about the case of the psychotic, Schreber, Freud noted: ‘There comes a time in the development of the individual at which he unifies his sexual instincts (which have hitherto been engaged in autoerotic activities) in order to obtain a love-object; and he begins by taking himself, his own body’ (Freud, 1911, p. 60). Freud saw this stage of ‘primary narcissism’ as occurring from around the age of six months. Narcissism is seen as a defence to protect the infant