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## Chapter 3

# Guillaume de Lorris's Unmaking of the Self: The Dreamer's Queer Failures

All of us know, whether or not we are able to admit it, that mirrors can only lie, that death by drowning is all that awaits one there.<sup>1</sup> There seems to be something queer – something ill at ease – in Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*. The Dreamer, figure for the narrator and the reader, is an impossible character, torn between his own misguided interpretations and the text's glossing of itself. Guillaume embraces misinterpretation and the dangerous queer artifice of writing, which terrify his near-contemporaries Alan of Lille and Jean de Meun. Throughout the *Roman*, Guillaume gestures toward uncovering the hidden meanings of this dream vision, as promised in the prologue. His text disintegrates as the Dreamer, our slippery protagonist, fails to understand the hermeneutics of the text and himself, as his homosocial quest for the elusive rose leads to accusations of improper relations – *mauvais acoitement*. In embracing the queer artifice of writing, Guillaume's text can only fail, flail, and disintegrate. It is this very impossibility, the improbability of the subject and the narrative, that asserts a space beyond and across binaries, illegible and imminently desirable at the same time. The queerness of this romance rests in its refusal to satisfy the expectations of its protagonist and eventually its readers. As Tison Pugh writes, “[w]hen backgrounds of generic heteronormativity are shattered, the queer emerges with a vengeance for auditors and readers anticipating the pleasure of a heteronormatively inscribed genre but discovering something altogether different.”<sup>2</sup>

The queerness embraced here frames desire as always seeking to uncover the uncoverable, to unmask the unmaskable. That is, the quest to find one's ideal beloved is problematically teleological, and the *Rose* offers a critique of how we seek to fulfill and understand those desires. The thrust of the text is perhaps an iteration of the genealogical parody of reproduction in the “unlimited” or “impersonal intimacy” of barebacking described by Leo Bersani in *Intimacies*, which Adam Phillips glosses as “believ[ing] in the future without personalizing it.”<sup>3</sup> That is, the future can be sought without having a fixed or

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1 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 95.

2 Tison Pugh, *Queering Medieval Genres* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2.

3 Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 43–53; 117.

expected telos. Bersani is specifically invested in “self-divestiture,” which “has to be rethought in terms of a certain form of self-expansiveness, or something like ego-dissemination rather than ego-annihilation.”<sup>4</sup> For Bersani, this is accomplished in impersonal acts of unprotected anonymous sex as the receiving partner “enters into an impersonal intimacy” with his partners: “His subjecthood is, we might say, absorbed into the nameless and faceless crowd that exist only as viral traces circulating in his blood and potentially fatally infecting him.”<sup>5</sup> This is the nature of the futurity Bersani and Phillips seek: impersonal yet mythologized and romanticized. There is a kind of impersonal intimacy in Guillaume’s notion of interpretation, wherein the end is desired but never articulated. Posterity emerges not as a fixed legacy but as something that must be continually examined and reinterpreted. Guillaume shows, through his protagonist’s quest and failure, that even impersonal futurities are fraught. The Dreamer seeks his rose, at the expense of himself, and his quest for conquest leads to his, and the narrative’s, disintegration.

The impersonal for Bersani opens up the possibility of radical forms of desire, akin to desire in the *Phaedrus*. Here, the impersonal nature of this desire is formulated in the projection of a godlike persona onto one’s lover:

the self the boy sees and loves in the lover is also the lover’s self, just as the lover, in remembering and worshipping his own godlike nature in the boy, is also worshipping the boy’s real (ideal) soul. Narcissistic love in both the lover and the beloved (can they even still be distinguished?) is exactly identical to a perfect knowledge of otherness.<sup>6</sup>

Bersani sees impersonal narcissism as a radical gesture toward otherness and against the individualism and ego of modernity. This gesture is performed in the *Rose* as the Lover seeks out a beloved that is at once other (a plant) and impersonal (a fetish). Thus, Guillaume de Lorris can help us trace these desires, and his retelling of the Narcissus myth offers a critique of fetishizing desires and a lesson on idealized desire.

*Intimacies* is primarily the work of Bersani, with a gloss and continuation by Phillips, seeming all the more germane to the *Rose*. I will note that, for the purpose of this chapter, Guillaume’s text will be read independently of Jean de Meun’s continuation. This allows us to approach Guillaume’s text without reading it as part of or prologue to Jean’s version of the *Rose*, which reframes and repurposes Guillaume’s text. Jean’s vision and version is very much at odds with Guillaume’s: he fundamentally reimagines what Guillaume’s *Rose* offers

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4 Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 56.

5 Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 53.

6 Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 84–85.

us in his continuation. My reading of Narcissus in the *Rose*, and its critique of our misguided reliance on certain tropes to understand relationality, suggests that this type of impersonal narcissism can only lead to our obliteration, and not in the sexy-shattering-of-the-ego manner espoused by Bersani. The *Rose* opens the possibility for a novel hermeneutics of queer desire, a continuous unlayering and undoing of identity. This is continuous self-fashioning and revision, reproduced and mirrored in the Dreamer *cum* interpreter *cum* reader. This always feels “improbable,” to cite Michel Foucault.<sup>7</sup> This improbability, a resistance to attempting to find coherent identities, seeks alternate ways to think through desire and identity as linear or teleological concepts.

The *Roman de la Rose* is a thirteenth-century best-seller that offers its reader a *roman*, which is at once a text in *romans*, the vernacular, as well as a nascent form of vernacular literature, “romance,” which eventually leads to the modern French novel, the *roman*. This *roman* is also a dream-vision, highlighting the fraught yet tight relationship between fiction and mysticism. As Guillaume explains, this is an ambitious *ars amatoria*, an art of love, in the wake of Ovid:

Ce est li romanz de la rose  
 Ou l'art d'amours est toute enclose.  
 La matière est bone et nueve:  
 Or doit dieus qu'an gre le reçoive  
 Cele pour cui je l'ai empris. (vv. 37–41)

This is *The Romance of Rose*,  
 Where the art of love is entirely enclosed.  
 The subject is good and novel,  
 So may it please god that it be well received  
 By her for whom I undertook this task.

Guillaume de Lorris's hubristic description tells us that this art of love is entirely new – and entirely good – both of which we soon see to be lies. The narrator is split in his roles as our narrator, as the Dreamer whose vision is the *roman*, and as the Lover who pursues the rose, both euphemism for vulva and metonym for his disembodied love interest. Guillaume never finishes his art of love, and Jean de Meun rebaptizes the *roman* as the “mirror for lovers” – *le miroer aus amouereus* (v. 10655) – and thus shifts from an ostensibly encyclopedic work to an explicitly didactic text.

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, “De l'amitié comme mode de vie” (interview with R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet and J. Le Bitoux), in *Dits et Écrits*, vol. 2, text no. 293 (Paris: Gallimard [Quarto], 2001), 982–83; trans. John Johnston, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1998), 137.

Guillaume retells the story of Narcissus, an exemplum familiar to his contemporaries from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as vernacular translations.<sup>8</sup> He retells this story to frame the Dreamer's gazing into a fountain, which leads to him falling prey to Amor, the god of love. Guillaume both misreads Ovid and then in turn misreads his own reading of Ovid, using allegory against itself, forcing the reader to question the very process of reading a text, to question the role – and danger – of interpretation in extracting meaning from a source. What does it mean for an author to misread his own work, and then to encourage his reader to engage in misinterpretation? Guillaume's *Rose*, in these misreadings, interrogates the role of interpretation in reading and in retelling, and assumes the foreclosure of a singular reading of his work. These various hermeneutic failures – or provocations – suggest an ever-present danger for language to be misinterpreted and for literature to be translated, transformed, and transfigured at each step of its production. Guillaume's *Rose* becomes a perilous mirror of itself, reflecting, refracting, and disintegrating as it goes on, ultimately collapsing abruptly.

Guillaume's misreading of Ovid asks the question of what it is to rewrite Narcissus. As David Hult points out, the "paradox of Narcissus is not 'Why one cannot possess oneself' but rather 'Why one needs to go beyond oneself.'"<sup>9</sup> Guillaume's Narcissus loses himself in the mirror and doesn't need to seek a lover outside of this illusion. If Ovid's Narcissus doesn't need to seek love beyond himself, he dies realizing this; Guillaume's Narcissus fails to recognize this illusion, as if lost in a dream. Guillaume's misreading feels jarring, as a reader might very well recognize that she or he was being tricked by this new version of Narcissus. Walter Benjamin asks, "[i]s translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?"<sup>10</sup> whereas Guillaume's text seems to ask a different question: What is the task of the translator for readers who *do* understand the original, or have heard this tale before? Benjamin is concerned with the afterlife in a work of art, with the relationship between form and sense, with the translator at odds with the poet: "[t]he intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative,

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<sup>8</sup> Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Armand Strubel (Paris: Lettres Gothiques, 1992); Guillaume's *Rose* is based on Ms. BN fr. 12786 (s. xiii<sup>ex</sup>/xiv<sup>in</sup>), the only manuscript without reference to Jean de Meun or to his text (Strubel, "Principes d'édition," 38–40).

<sup>9</sup> David F. Hult, *Self-fulfilling Prophecies: Readership and Authority in the First Roman de la Rose* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 285.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 69–82 at 69.

ultimate, ideational.”<sup>11</sup> If fidelity to the sense of words is at odds with fidelity to the whole, the translator is working with as well as against the original. Thus, “[m]eaning is served far better – and literature and language far worse – by the unrestrained license of bad translators.”<sup>12</sup> Guillaume fights against both of these trajectories, embracing the “bad translation” in making misreading and failure so apparent. His dream vision appears thus destined to be cast into a future where it may never become fully legible. As Marta Powell Harley notes, Guillaume’s “abbreviated” version maintains details such as Narcissus hunting before the episode, suggesting knowledge of his source.<sup>13</sup> As Eric Hicks notes, “si l’on n’ose affirmer que Guillaume de Lorris ait connu le texte, il semble difficile d’admettre qu’il ait ignoré la tradition dont il est issu” (if one dare not admit that Guillaume may have known the text, it seems difficult to suggest that he could have not known the tradition from whence it came), citing Latin and French adaptations of Ovid that would have been available to Guillaume as didactic or moralized versions of Ovid.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, there are many other uses of Narcissus before the *Rose* in twelfth-century vernacular literature: Chrétien de Troyes compares the hero Cligès to Narcissus, for his beauty compares to that of Narcissus, but his hero surpasses Narcissus in wisdom:

Mes tant [Clygés] ert biaux et avenanz  
 Que Narcisus, qui desoz l’orme  
 Vit an la fontaine sa forme,  
 Si l’ama tant, si com an dit,  
 Qu’il an fu morz quant il la vit,  
 Por tant qu’il ne la pot avoir.  
 Molt ot biauté et po savoir;  
 Mes Clygés en ot plus grant masse,  
 Tant con li ors le cuivre passe  
 Et plus que je ne di encor.

For Cligès was as handsome and worthy  
 As Narcissus, who under the elm  
 Saw in the fountain his figure,

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” 76–77.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” 78.

<sup>13</sup> On Guillaume’s Ovidian influence, see also Marta Powell Harley, “Narcissus, Hermaphroditus, and Attis: Ovidian Lovers at the Fontaine d’Amors in Guillaume de Lorris’s *Roman de la Rose*,” *PMLA* 101.3 (1986): 324–37, esp. 327.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Hicks, “La mise en roman des formes allégoriques: hypostase et récit chez Guillaume de Lorris,” in *Études sur le Roman de la Rose de Guillaume de Lorris*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1984), 53–80 at 57.

And loved it so much – as they say –  
 That he died when he saw it  
 But yet could never possess it.  
 Great was his beauty but little was his intelligence,  
 But Cligès head a much greater wealth of it,  
 Just as gold weighs more than copper,  
 And much more of which I will not tell.<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere, Aimon de Varennes's Florimont is warned against the folly of Narcissus by his tutor, Floquart.<sup>16</sup> In Benoît de Saint-Maure's *roman antique*, the *Roman de Troie*, Achille also compares himself to Narcissus, loving not only his reflection but also loving death itself.<sup>17</sup> In these instances Narcissus is used as a reference, as a point of comparison for protagonists. Thus, we can see Narcissus as a trope, as representative of madness, vanity, and foolishness. These examples help to establish Narcissus as fitting a certain mold in medieval literature in French, one which Guillaume defies.

Alan of Lille refers to the youth in his twelfth-century Latin prosimetrum *Plaint of Nature*. He says of Narcissus that “[b]elieving himself to be this other self, he brought upon himself through himself a perilous love.”<sup>18</sup> That is, his

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<sup>15</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligès*, ed. Laurence Harf-Lancner (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006), vv. 2748–57.

<sup>16</sup> “Volez vos sembler Narcisus | De folie ou Piramus? | Cist dui furent mort per amor” (Do you want to be like Narcissus or Piramus? Those two died on account of love); Aimon de Varennes, *Florimont, ein altfranzösischer Abenteuerroman*, ed. Alfons Hilka (Göttingen: Gedruckt für die Gesellschaft für romanische Literatur, 1932), vv. 3959–61.

<sup>17</sup> Achille cries out:

Narcisus sui, ço sai e vei,  
 Qui tant ama l'ombre de sei  
 Qu'il en mourut sor la fontaine.  
 Iceste angoisse, iceste peine  
 Sai que jo sent: jo raim mon ombre,  
 Jo aim ma mort et mon encombre.

I am Narcissus, I know it and I see it, he who loved his own shadow so much that he died of it at the fountain. This anguish, this pain – I know what I feel: I'm in love with my shadow, I love my death and my failure.

Benoît de Saint-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, ed. Léopold Constans, 6 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot et c<sup>ie</sup>, 1904–1912), 3: vv. 17690–94.

<sup>18</sup> “seipsum credens esse se alterum de se sibi amoris incurrit periculum” (Alan of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, in *Literary Works*, ed. and trans. Winthrop Wetherbee [Cambridge: Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 2013], 8§10).

misrecognition is what causes his death. These twelfth-century Latin and vernacular sources, with references to Narcissus that seem to need little glossing, suggest that a reader would be expected to recognize the figure of Narcissus, and would be familiar with his story, rather than encountering it as novel. Chrétien and Aimon both note that Narcissus falls in love with his image in the fountain and, like Guillaume, their Narcissus does not overtly identify with this reflection. Nevertheless, he sees “sa forme” (his form, 2750) in *Cligès* and “tant ama l’ombre de sei” (so loved his own reflection, 17692) in the *Roman de Troie*, whereas in the *Rose* he falls for “un enfant bel a desmesure” (an outrageously handsome child, 1485). In contrast, a twelfth-century vernacular translation of “Narcissus” maintains the moment of recognition, Ovid’s *iste ego sum*:

Le cors, le vis que je la voi,  
Ce puis je tot trover en moi.  
J’aim moi meïsme, c’est folie!  
Fu onques mais tes rage oïe?

The body, the face that I see:  
I can find it all in myself.  
I love myself, it’s madness!  
Was there ever such madness heard of?<sup>19</sup>

This is reprised in the early fourteenth century in the vernacular translation of the *Metamorphoses*, the *Ovide moralisé*, which also retells the Narcissus story.<sup>20</sup> In this version, which is particularly concerned with referencing the original and in faithful translation,<sup>21</sup> Narcissus recognizes himself:

J’aim moi meïsmes, et, sans faille,  
Je pors le brandon et la faille  
Dont je meïsmes sui espris. (1, bk. 3: vv. 1729–31)

I love myself, and without fail,  
I bear the torch and the flare  
With which I set myself on fire.

<sup>19</sup> *Narcisse*, in *Pyrame et Thisbé, Narcisse, Philomena*, ed. Emmanuèle Baumgartner (Paris: Folio, 2000), vv. 869–72; this text is faithful in the *iste ego sum* moment, but it makes other alterations: Echo is replaced by “Dané.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ovide moralisé: Poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*, ed. C. de Boer, 3 vols (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1915–1938).

<sup>21</sup> For example “se la letre ne ment”; “Ensi com la fable recite”; “si com la fable recite” (1, Bk. 3: vv. 1464, 1525, 1576).

Given Narcissus being a common figure across genres, and his association with what has since been defined as “narcissism”<sup>22</sup> – or with sodomy, according to Alan of Lille<sup>23</sup> – it seems reasonable to assume that Guillaume’s reader would have expected Narcissus to recognize himself, especially in a work as learned as the *Rose*. As Nicholas Ealy argues in *Narcissism and Selfhood in Medieval French Literature*, “selfhood is always infiltrated by otherness, that subjectivity is always intersubjective in nature,” and the Narcissus tales we see across medieval French literature expose that.<sup>24</sup> Guillaume’s version refuses recognition, encourages misrecognition, and offers a critique of the genre. As Ealy notes, “the unavoidable imperative to deny Narcissus as our reality is the only way we can accept him, accept our desire, accept our very self. *Iste ego sum!*”<sup>25</sup> Guillaume fights the telos of identity: the idea of self, desire, and the other are always unfolding and being rewritten, rather than a stable concept. Thus, Narcissus operates as a mirror for the Dreamer and for us readers, as Guillaume encourages us to make the same failures. The tale is altered in that recognition becomes impossible and the closest one can come to *being* is a penultimate, rather than definite, identity.

Our protagonist – the Dreamer – falls asleep and finds himself wandering along a river which leads him to an enclosed garden whose walls are adorned with portraits of the Vices (vv. 129–462). He wanders through the garden, stalked by Amor, and happens upon a fountain, upon which is engraved that Narcissus died here (vv. 1432–35). In the span of fifty-eight lines (vv. 1436–93), Guillaume’s narrator, the Lover, recalls the story of Narcissus, his memory triggered by the epitaph:

Si vit en l'yaue clere et nete  
 Son vis, son neis et sa bouchete.  
 Ilcil maintenant s'esbai  
 Car ses ombres tout le traï,  
 Qu'il cuida veoir la figure  
 D'un enfant bel a desmesure. (vv. 1480–85)

<sup>22</sup> In 1914 Freud writes: “The word narcissism . . . denote[s] the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way as otherwise the body of a sexual object is treated” (“On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in *General Psychological Theory* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991], 41–69 at 41).

<sup>23</sup> Alan of Lille, *Plaint of Nature*, 8§10; Guillaume also makes references to homosexuality: Male Bouche accuses the Lover of having a “mauvais acointement” with Bel Acueil (vv. 3519–23).

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Ealy, *Narcissism and Selfhood in Medieval French Literature: Wounds of Desire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 227–28. For a detailed analysis of echoes of Ovid’s Narcissus in medieval French romance, and trauma and wounds in relation to selfhood, see this excellent volume.

<sup>25</sup> Ealy, *Narcissism and Selfhood*, 231.

So (Narcissus) saw his face, his nose, and  
 His mouth in the clear, clean water.  
 Now he was stunned,  
 For his shadow betrayed him,  
 Since he thought that he saw the face  
 Of an outrageously handsome child.

Narcissus's legacy soon becomes fraught and bleeds into the present, mapping onto our protagonist. Guillaume's Narcissus falls prey to the fountain's illusion and never recognizes himself; the Dreamer, not recognizing his own weakness, doesn't see that he too will fall prey to the folly of Love.

Let us recall that Ovid's Narcissus falls in love with his image, and calls out: "Why, O peerless youth, do you elude me?" (3: vv. 454–55) but soon realizes his mistake and dies knowing his blunder, crying out *iste ego sum!* – "I am he!" (3: vv. 463–64).<sup>26</sup> As Nicholas Ealy writes, "Ovid's myth of Narcissus establishes itself as a narrative about selfhood," and the *iste ego sum* moment "establishes a central understanding of how selfhood emerges from the tense interplay with something *other*."<sup>27</sup> Ovid's Narcissus dies knowing that he can only love this image of himself: the result is self-annihilation, death, and vegetal rebirth. On the other hand, Guillaume's Narcissus has been tricked (*trai*) by his shadow, and falls in love with the *enfant bel a desmesure*: he never recognizes himself in the reflection. He dies soon thereafter, and that is, quite simply, the end of the story: "Ce fu la some de la chose" (v. 1493). There is no narcissus flower, just a legacy of misrecognition and fatal desire. Guillaume's retelling – at fifty-eight lines – is a fraction of Ovid's 141 lines (3: vv. 370–510), and Narcissus neither speaks nor recognizes himself. His transformation into madness is explained once he is dead – for he never would be able to satisfy his desire:

Si en fu morz a la parclose:  
 Ce fu la some de la chose.  
 Quar quant il vit qu'il ne porroit  
 Acomplir ce qu'il desiroit  
 Et qui l'avoit si pris par fort  
 Qu'il n'en porroit avoir confort  
 En nule fin ne en nul sen  
 Il perdi d'ire tout son sen  
 Et fu morz en pou de termine. (vv. 1492–1500)

<sup>26</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. Frank Justus Miller, Books I–VIII (1921; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>27</sup> Ealy, *Narcissism and Selfhood*, 7–8.

And so in the end he died:  
 That was the whole story.  
 For when he saw that he could not  
 Fulfill that which he desired,  
 Which had taken him so strongly,  
 That he could not have any solace  
 Neither in any resolution nor any feeling,  
 He lost all reasoning by anger  
 And died soon thereafter.

Amor avenges Echo by exploiting Narcissus's *grant orgueil* – great pride – and his contempt for and power over Echo, but we don't see Narcissus realizing this (v. 1487), just as the Dreamer will later refuse to acknowledge the danger in which he places himself (v. 1519).

The Dreamer does not explain where or when he has learned the story, but the memory is strong enough that he is afraid to look again:

Quant li escriz m'ot fet savoir  
 Que ce estoit trestout pour voir,  
 La fontaine au bel Narcisus,  
 Je me trais lors ·i· pou en sus,  
 Que dedenz n'osai regarder,  
 Ainz commençai a coarder,  
 Et de Narcisus me sovint  
 Cui malement en mesavint.  
 Mes je pensé que a seür,  
 Sanz paor de mauves eür,  
 A la fontaine aler porroie  
 Par folie m'en esmaioie. (vv. 1508–19)

When the inscription informed me  
 That this was entirely in truth  
 The fountain of the handsome Narcissus,  
 I went a bit further up,  
 But I did not dare look inside,  
 And I began to act cowardly  
 And I recalled Narcissus,  
 Who experienced such horrible misfortune.  
 But I thought that I could safely,  
 Without fear of bad luck,  
 Go to the fountain,  
 And that it was folly to be alarmed.

He assures himself that he is safe – it would be mad to worry about sharing Narcissus's fate. But the Dreamer *does* share Narcissus's fate of failing to recognize the object of his desire. Furthermore, Guillaume's misreading of Ovid asks the question of what it is to rewrite Narcissus, for other twelfth-century Latin and vernacular sources containing references to Narcissus attest to the fact that a reader could easily have encountered a more faithful adaptation. Moreover, Guillaume's version writes Narcissus as a mirror for the Dreamer, but the tale is soon confusingly glossed. Guillaume misreads his own retelling of the tale, and finishes it with a lesson, a warning to women:

Dames, cest esemple aprenez,  
 Qui vers vos amis mesprenez,  
 Car se vous les laissez morir,  
 Dieus le vos saura bien merir. (vv. 1504–7)

Ladies, you who mistreat your lovers,  
 Learn from this exemplum,  
 Because if you let your lovers die,  
 God knows well how to pay you back.

The female reader, in this exemplum, is discouraged from spurning her lover and letting him die, for God will repay her in kind. But, as Guillaume has already explained, it is Echo who dies after having been spurned by her would-be lover (vv. 1450–60). The reader cannot help but be surprised at this seemingly contradictory glossing of the tale. The tale is reversed again and the reader is asked to accept this incompatible moral – to misread what she or he has just read. Narcissus – and in turn the Dreamer – are both mirrors for us, the readers. This mismatched moral lesson – which the Dreamer accepts (and uses to justify his own invulnerability to the fountain) – also encourages the reader to take part in these misreadings, to go forward under false pretenses. The Lover assumes that he cannot be Narcissus, a boy who unwittingly falls for his own reflection, rendered sodomitical in his love for the unidentified *enfant bel a desmesure* and then feminized in the warning for women. He is tricked by language, much like a cuckolded husband of a fabliau: in accepting the exemplum's mismatched lesson, he ignores the very real possibility of losing himself in the fountain, in a reflection of himself or of his desire.

The mismatched morals of this narcissine fable might have been part of the very fabric of the tale. Alan of Lille's *Plaint of Nature*, a twelfth-century prosimetrum in which Nature bemoans the perversion of grammar and sex in the contemporary world, uses Narcissus as a warning tale against effeminacy and sodomy. Nature explains to Alan's Dreamer that

Believing himself to be this other self, [Narcissus] *brought upon himself through himself a perilous love*. And many other young men, endowed with glorious beauty through my favor, but drunk with the thirst for wealth, have converted their hammers of Venus to perform the function of the anvil.<sup>28</sup>

Nature has already warned that hammers must only perform their natural, creative function, lest they transgress the natural order.<sup>29</sup> Alan thus warns that narcissism leads to sodomy, and that men have traded in their hammers, or penises, for anvils, or vaginas.<sup>30</sup> Narcissus thus functions as a figure for inversion, for misgendered relations.

Meanwhile, Guillaume's Dreamer falls prey to the fountain and to Narcissus's folly: first he sees two crystals (v. 1535), which inexplicably become one (v. 1546), and then he sees a reflection of the Garden of Deduit (Pleasure) in the perilous mirror. As Suzanne Conklin Akbari writes, "the crystals mark a liminal moment in Guillaume's allegory of vision, for after the Lover looks into them, he passes from the realm of reflected vision, *intuition*, into that of refracted vision, *detuitio* or *deduit*."<sup>31</sup> A warning follows, explaining that even the most noble have succumbed to the perilous mirror:

C'est li mireors perilleus  
 Ou Narcisus li orgueilleus  
 Mira sa face et ses yauz vers,  
 Dont il jut puis mort toz envers.  
 Qui enz ou mireor se mire,  
 Ne puet avoir garant ne mire  
 Que tel chose a ses ieulz ne voie  
 Qui d'amors l'a tout mis an voie.  
 Maint vaillant home a mis a glaive  
 Cil mireors, car li plus saive,  
 Li plus preu, li plus afaitie  
 I sont tost pris et agaitie. (vv. 1568–79)

**28** "Narcisus etiam sui umbra alterum mentita Narcisum, umbraliter obumbratus, seipsum credens esse alterum se, de se sibi amoris incurrit periculum. Multi etiam alii iuvenes mei gratia pulchritudinis honore vestiti, siti debriati pecuniae, suos Veneris malleos in incudum translulerunt officia." Alan of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, 8§10.

**29** Alan of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, 10§2.

**30** Cf. Jan Ziolkowski, *Alan of Lille's Grammar of Sex: The Meaning of Grammar to a Twelfth-Century Intellectual* (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1985), 30.

**31** Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*," in *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 45–77 at 67.

This is the perilous mirror  
 Where Narcissus the haughty  
 Saw his face and his bright eyes  
 For which he fell dead, backwards.  
 And he who looks at himself in the mirror  
 Cannot have security nor a doctor  
 To assure that his eyes do not see that  
 Which it placed in the way to love.  
 This mirror has led many a valiant  
 To the sword, for the wisest,  
 The most noble, and the most adroit  
 Have been taken and ambushed here.

Narcissus dies both *toz envers* – reversed – and *en vers*, in verse: he dies at the fountain and he dies in translation, rewritten as a different figure, a refraction of Ovid's figure. This, as Ealy notes, is echoed in René d'Anjou's *Livre du cœur d'Amour épris*, although René's "alter ego appears to be the true literary manifestation of his tormented experiences with love."<sup>32</sup> In Guillaume's version, the Dreamer will soon follow suit, and his fall pulls him away from Guillaume-as-narrator and away from the Ovidian tradition. Instead of being transformed into a flower, he becomes a trite warning to haughty dames. The Dreamer soon realizes that he too has been deceived – "Cil mireors m'a deceü" – and realizes that which Narcissus fatally failed to do (v. 1606); nevertheless he too is lost in the mirror, mesmerized by the reflections of rosebushes. Amor strikes him with an arrow, and the Dreamer then performs Narcissus's death, falling to the ground and passing out (vv. 1697–99). Now *tantost versez*, the Dreamer has performed Narcissus's death (*mort toz envers*). He has been distracted by the reflection in the fountain and has fallen prey to Amor. The Dreamer continues his refusal to recognize himself as mirroring Narcissus.

This is decidedly not Ovid's Narcissus, but neither is it Alan's. As a reader, the gloss which maps Narcissus onto brutal female lovers encourages the reader to misgender Narcissus, and thus we are encouraged to misplace and swap our own hammers and anvils. The repetition of *mireor* ("mirror") and *mírer* ("to look," cf. vv. 1568–79 above), with the addition of the homophone *mire*, or doctor, focuses the reader on visual aspects, despite a warning in the prologue that in dreams one sees *Maintes choses covertement | Que l'en voit puis apertement*, that one sees "all sorts of hidden things that one later understands overtly" (vv. 19–20). If we, the readers, keep waiting for an overt understanding

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32 Ealy, *Narcissism and Selfhood*, 104.

of the text, then we are moving forward as clueless as Narcissus. As Jonathan Morton notes, part of the intrigue of the *Rose* is that this promise of overt resolution is never fulfilled.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the *roman* is perhaps more about the process of uncovering meaning and decoding, rather than in actually finding that hidden truth, as I also argue here. I see Guillaume's fountain as both a mirror and a crystal, and thus it not only reflects but it alters and refracts: Guillaume's Narcissus is distracted, and his Dreamer's search for the rose results in what Male Bouche names a *mauvais acoitement* – an inappropriate relationship – between Bel Acueil and the Dreamer (3519–23). When Jalousie imprisons Bel Acueil (3624–26), the Dreamer is stricken and once again performs Narcissus's fall: "Et je sui cil qui est versez!" (And I am he who is turned upside-down [3989]), crying out that Bel Acueil is both his joy and his salvation ("ma joie et ma garison | Est tout en lui et en la rose" [my joy and my cure is entirely in him and the rose] [3995–96]). Bel Acueil becomes a mirror of the rose, a substitute for the desired object. The tale then abruptly ends as the Dreamer loses all confidence (*fiance*) in others.

There is a radical failure of the text to provide narrative coherence or resolution, and Guillaume's failure to finish the text may be, as scholars have only recently accepted, part of its textuality. In other words, as scholars such as Paul Strohm, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, David Hult, and Peter Haidu have argued, the first part of the *Rose* can be read as a complete document, its "unfinished" nature integral to this reading of the work.<sup>34</sup> This also allows for Guillaume's version to be read outside of the admittedly fraught but pervasive focus on heterosexual reproductivity in Jean's continuation. Furthermore, Jean's scholasticism and references to Alan of Lille serve in certain ways to recover meaning and to rehabilitate what Jean sees as the mediocrity of Guillaume's version. Hult's influential *Self-fulfilling Prophecies* argues that *Rose* is complete, "insofar as it can be seen to form an artistic whole consistent with stylistic and narrative standards of judgment as well as with medieval poetic traditions."<sup>35</sup> He also asserts that the "misreading" of Guillaume's text as unfinished, and as needing to be finished, results from accepting Jean de Meun's claims. The art of the *Rose*, he argues, is

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33 Jonathan Morton, "État-présent: Le roman de la rose," *French Studies* 69.1 (2015): 79–86 at 79.

34 Paul Strohm, "Guillaume as Narrator and Lover in the *Roman de la Rose*," *Romanic Review* 59.1 (1968): 3–9; Peter Haidu, "Problematising the Subject: *Rose I*," in *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 215–38; Hult, *Self-fulfilling Prophecies*; Akbari, "Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*."

35 Hult, *Self-fulfilling Prophecies*, 6.

that it is an “elaborate *trompe d’œil*”: “Guillaume’s *trompe d’œil* is the unfinished edge that becomes a part of what is from another point of view a completed masterpiece.”<sup>36</sup> Haidu sees the *Rose* as an exercise in retreating to an internal space of love, freed from the constraints of courtly violence: “[w]arrior violence, even its submission to love, is elided in the *Rose Novel*. Only love’s desire remains, rather than ‘honor,’ to propel the narrative.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, “[i]n the place of the subject, it leaves only *d’amer volonté pure*: the pure desire to love, the pure will to love. That purity itself dissolves the subject,” which would have led the author to abandon the *Rose* and never write again.<sup>38</sup>

Hult’s and Haidu’s proposals are compelling, but what seems to be happening in this work is even more complicated. Haidu sees the *Rose* as attempting to create a space outside of politics and Hult sees this as a *trompe d’œil*. As this chapter demonstrates, in using misreading as a device for translation and for allegorical production, Guillaume interrogates the use of allegory itself, and embraces the artifice of identity and the slippery nature of posterity. Rendering the Narcissus myth courtly, and then rendering it a *fabliau*, is at the center of the work, suggesting that meaning shifts in contexts and that interpretation is often a trap. Ovid is neither read simply as an exemplum – as a classic source providing a Christian lesson – nor is he rendered entirely comic in the narcissine *fabliau*. Guillaume uses Ovid as the material with which he interrogates allegory and interpretation: the levels of mirroring, decoding, and interpretation in *Rose* force the reader to acknowledge their own complicity in falling into Guillaume’s trap. His *Rose* finishes as the Dreamer mourns his friend Bel Accueil, losing sight of the rose just as Narcissus lost sight of himself in the fountain. As Masha Raskolnikov writes, Jean, in mourning for Guillaume in his continuation, “self-consciously places himself in the future impossible, into a queer future, giving an unrepayable continued life to Guillaume, letting him be the one who gets the girl.”<sup>39</sup> And thus Jean perhaps finds himself as lost as we, as readers, find ourselves, in navigating Guillaume’s text.

The Dreamer becomes non-viable in this narrative, he is unable to navigate the twists and turns of the text and to understand the fables within the *roman*. Just as Narcissus dies before recognizing himself, the Dreamer’s final complaints prevent him from seeing his own downfall. The Narcissus exemplum, repeated in his multiple misrecognitions, leads to a failure to take up a life independent

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36 Hult, *Self-fulfilling Prophecies*, 8–9.

37 Haidu, “Problematizing the Subject,” 218.

38 Haidu, “Problematizing the Subject,” 238.

39 Masha Raskolnikov, “Between Men, Mourning: Authorship, Love, and the Gift in the *Roman de la Rose*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10.1 (2003): 47–75 at 69.

of Narcissus. Concerning translation and the “afterlife” of a work of art, Walter Benjamin writes:

The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. . . . The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life.<sup>40</sup>

Concerned with the “kinship of languages,”<sup>41</sup> Benjamin notes that there is always a near-impossibility in reproducing the meaning of the original, given the differences between languages and their socio-historical contexts. Thus, “[t]he task of the translator consists in finding the intended effect [Intention] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it an echo of the original.”<sup>42</sup> Producing an “echo of the original” reduces the text to linguistic analysis; thus Benjamin’s earlier comment about the “bad translator.” But this echo is always problematic: Ovid’s Echo replies “adest” to Narcissus’s “equis adest” (3: v. 380), for the echo never fully captures the first speech act. Guillaume is aware of this: an echo reflects but it also refracts, breaking the sound into parts that return in such a way that the intended effect of the first sound is lost in the distortion. But for his *Rose*, the echo is purely a literary device: Echo is mute in his version. For the Narcissus fable to take on a new life of its own in the *Rose*, the fable needed to reflect the ways in which Ovid’s intention might be lost on readers more than a millennium later. Thus, the only way to read Ovid is through misreading, for the context of the original is but a hypothesis to the later reader. Guillaume thus “misreads” Ovid, his Dreamer misreads the misreading, and the reader is forced to take part in the game: either we fall into the many traps, knocked over in the tumult of interpretation – becoming lost *toz envers* and *toz en vers* – or we are left wondering what we can ever glean from a text without falling prey to our own Narcissism of interpretation. The *Rose* ultimately collapses as the interpretive game reaches its climax: the Dreamer is lost in his affection for Bel Accueil, a mirror of his desire for the rose, and the narrative itself disintegrates *en vers*, breaking off until Jean de Meun attempts to resuscitate the poem, itself a project of interpretation, misreading, and echoing of the original.

The narcissism of Guillaume’s Narcissus arises in the wake of both Ovid and Alan of Lille, and offers a version that falls out of line with both. The narcissism of Ovid’s Narcissus is predicated on that *iste ego sum!* moment of recognition, on, as Freud would later excavate, a libidinal desire to “[seek oneself] as

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<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” 71.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” 72.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” 76.

a love-object” in opposition to the Oedipal desire for one’s mother.<sup>43</sup> The failure of Guillaume’s Narcissus to recognize himself dislodges, paradoxically, his queer desire from the narcissism of Freudian Oedipal socialization. The homosexual, as Guy Hocquenghem has trenchantly argued, is a product of capitalism and Freudian oedipalization,<sup>44</sup> just as, one could argue, the sodomite is a different but equally artificial construct of rhetoric. Moreover, as Jonathan Morton notes of both Alan of Lille and Jean de Meun, the very act of writing is a queer activity, for, as he notes, “the only way to remain totally straight is to abolish the ego, and to avoid writing, speaking, or thinking, to be no more than an un-individuated sex-machine.”<sup>45</sup> The sexual poetics and politics in Jean de Meun’s *Rose* are absent from the less scholastic *Rose* by Guillaume. What Guillaume offers is an impossible subject, one who is mapped back onto the reader through a series of gestures that collapse allegorical figure, lover, dreamer, narrator, writer, and reader. What makes Guillaume’s Dreamer/Lover queer is this refusal to accept failure, in the face of failure. This might be akin to Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism”: “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”<sup>46</sup> Guillaume’s Dreamer certainly has this quality: when he falls flat on his back, accused of sodomy and failing to secure his fetish-object, that unattainable rose, the narrative dissolves only to be repaired with Jean de Meun’s verbose series of conflicting adventures and narratives that likewise fail to provide a coherent account of love. And yet he continues in our reading, and misreading of his tale. As José Esteban Muñoz writes, “[q]ueerness is utopian, and there is something queer about the utopian”;<sup>47</sup> the queerness of the Dreamer’s journey is not about sexual identification, rather it is in how Guillaume shows that fixation on one future, on one clear identity, is an impossible venture. “The present is not enough,” Muñoz writes: “Opening oneself up to such a perception of queerness as manifestation in and of ecstatic time offers queers much more than the meager offerings of pragmatic gay and lesbian politics.”<sup>48</sup>

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43 Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” 54–55.

44 Guy Hocquenghem, *Le désir homosexuel* (1972; Paris: Fayard, 2000), 23–29.

45 Jonathan Morton, “Queer Metaphors and Queerer Reproduction in the *De planctu naturae* and the *Roman de la rose*,” in *Dante and Desire in the Middle Ages*, ed. Manuele Gagnolati, Tristan Kay, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Legenda, 2012), 208–26.

46 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

47 José Esteban Muñoz, Joshua Chambers-Letson, Tavia Nyong’o, and Ann Pellegrini, *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 26.

48 Muñoz, Chambers-Letson, Nyong’o, and Pellegrini, *Cruising Utopia*, 27, 32.

If the point of Guillaume's *Rose* is not to provide answers, but rather to provoke our desire for them, how can we make sense of the queer figures of Narcissus and the Dreamer, of the Lover and the reader? The *Rose*, despite its failure to imagine any future, does not embrace a resistance to futurity; rather, it always gestures toward a difficult, perhaps unattainable, but always indecipherable next step. There is something improbable, something impossible, in the fractured figure of our protagonist, at once and at times dreamer, lover, reader, writer. The didacticism of the *Rose* is pervasive in the lessons that it attempts to teach but insidious in its constant attempts to dupe the reader as he or she is watching the protagonist fail at decoding his dream world. The queerness of the Dreamer is in his failure to navigate the courtly codes of the romance: the rose – at once abstraction, metonym, and fetish-object – is lost as the Dreamer's journey to conquer the rose becomes more of a journey with Bel Accueil, leading to Male Bouche's aforementioned accusation that the two are involved in a *mauvais acoitement*, perhaps sodomy (vv. 3519–23).

In a 1981 interview, Foucault attempts to reimagine *askesis*, to return to its classical origins in reflection and self-fashioning. This move is a sort of reparative reading of the *askesis* described in the third volume of his *History of Sexuality*. Here, Foucault speaks of an art of existence that is predicated on self-fashioning, on “taking care” of oneself.<sup>49</sup> Foucault imagines a “homosexual asceticism” in an attempt to imagine friendship outside of institutional, familial, and professional relations. He argues that

L'ascétisme comme renonciation au plaisir a mauvaise réputation. Mais l'ascèse est autre chose: c'est le travail que l'on fait soi-même sur soi-même pour se transformer ou pour faire apparaître ce soi qu'heureusement on n'atteint jamais. Est-ce que ce ne serait pas ça

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49 “On peut caractériser brièvement cette ‘culture de soi’ par le fait que l’existence – la *technē tou biou* – s’y trouve dominé par le principe qu’il faut ‘prendre soin de soi-même’; c’est ce principe du souci de soi qui en fonde la nécessité, en commande le développement et en organise le pratique. Mais il faut préciser; l’idée qu’on doit s’appliquer à soi-même, s’occuper de soi-même (*heautou epimeleisthai*) est en effet un thème fort ancien dans la culture grecque” (Foucault, *Le souci de soi* [Paris: Gallimard, 1984], 60–61) (“This ‘cultivation of the self’ can be briefly characterized by the fact that in this case the art of existence – the *technē tou biou* in its different forms – is dominated by the principle that says one must ‘take care of oneself.’ It is this principle of the care of the self that establishes its necessity, presides over its development, and organizes its practice. But one has to be precise here; the idea that one ought to attend to oneself, care for oneself [*heautou epimeleisthai*], was actually a very ancient theme in Greek culture”) (*The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Pantheon, 1986], 43); N.B.: This is in contrast to the Christian asceticism described in the 1981 lectures at Louvain, where penitence and confession are shown to be a new form of asceticism in which the truth of the self ceases to be self-fashioned and becomes textual and external with the rise of Christianity.

notre problème aujourd'hui? Congé a été donné à l'ascétisme. À nous d'avancer dans une ascèse homosexuelle qui nous ferait travailler sur nous-mêmes et inventer, je ne dis pas découvrir, une manière d'être encore improbable.

Asceticism as the renunciation of pleasure has bad connotations. But ascesis is something else: it's the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the self appear which, happily, one never attains. Can that be our problem today? We've rid ourselves of asceticism. Yet it's up to us to advance into a homosexual ascesis that would make us work on ourselves and invent – I do not say discover – a manner of being that is still improbable.<sup>50</sup>

This feeling of crisis and desire for the unknown or unrecognizable is echoed a decade later in the memoirs of queer artist David Wojnarowicz, who fears, but also celebrates, that “one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is in the imagination.”<sup>51</sup> This queerness of fiction and writing is hardly modern, as Alan of Lille's *Natura* worries about the creative potential of the pen, and explains that Venus must use her stylus correctly, lest she produce *falsigraphia*, or false writing:

For the purpose of inscription I bestowed upon [Venus] a most powerful pen, that she might depict the different kinds of creatures, according to the rules of my orthography, on pages, provided through my kind generosity, that were prepared to await the inscriptions of this pen, so that she might never stray from the past of truthful description into the sidetracks of false writing.<sup>52</sup>

Writing this poses the existential danger of undoing truth, of inviting the “improbable,” in Foucault's terms, of being open to radical gestures without the guidance of *Natura* and faithful attention to orthography and grammar.

Guillaume's Dreamer reads, rereads, and misreads out of his own narcissism and refusal to see himself as echoing Narcissus. Thus, much like barebacking for Bersani, there is “impersonal intimacy” in hermeneutical desire.

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50 Foucault, *Le souci de soi*, 82–83; *The Care of the Self*, 137.

51 “I'm beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination. At least in my ungoverned imagination I can fuck somebody without a rubber, or I can, in the privacy of my own skull, douse Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire or throw congressman William Dannemeyer off the empire state building. These fantasies give me distance from my outrage for a few seconds. They give me momentary comfort. Sexuality defined in images gives me comfort in a hostile world. They give me strength” (David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* [New York: Vintage, 1991], 120).

52 “Ad officium etiam scripturae, calamum praepotentem eidem fueram elargita, ut in competentibus schedulis ejusdem calami scripturam poscentibus, quarum meae largitionis beneficio fuerat composita, iuxta meae orthographiae normulam, rerum genera figuraret, ne a propriae descriptionis semita in falsigraphiae devio eumdem divagari sustineret” (Alan of Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, 10 § 2).

Bersani's impersonal narcissism is predicated on Socratic pederasty, wherein the beloved is a godlike phantasm of the lover, a composite of projection and idealization. "The similarities between the theological notion of 'pure love' and the dangerous sexual practice of barebacking may not, to say the least, be immediately clear," Bersani writes. "And yet both can be thought of as disciplines in which the subject allows himself to be penetrated, even replaced, by an unknowable otherness."<sup>53</sup> Like the idealized love in the *Rose*, this impersonal intimacy seeks to replace, to render incomprehensible, the self. For Bersani, the Platonic ideal becomes a form for the fantasy of "impersonal narcissism," a love relation that he considers to be "revolutionary":

The boy we madly love does not simply remind us of the Beauty we saw before being imprisoned in a body. Remember that every soul followed a particular god in his heavenly flights; on earth, "every one spends his life honoring the god in whose chorus he danced." This entails seeking a boy "whose nature is like the god's." . . . The boy's beauty is a likeness of an ideal Beauty; more specifically, he also has a particular nature that is the type of being most fully realized in a particular god. . . . The beloved loves the lover's image of him, which is of course the version of himself that makes the lover remember both heavenly Beauty and the god with whom the lover's soul had flown. . . . In a sense, the lover recognizes *his* ideal ego in the boy, desiring the boy is a way of infusing the boy with an ideal self that is both the boy's and the lover's.<sup>54</sup>

Adam Phillips glosses:

The similarities between the theological notion of "pure love" and the dangerous sexual practice of barebacking may not, to say the least, be immediately clear. And yet both can be thought of as disciplines in which the subject allows himself to be penetrated, even replaced, by an unknowable otherness.<sup>55</sup>

The *Rose* unveils the danger of this fetish – embodied in the disembodied rose – as it asserts the impossibility of escaping Narcissus's fate. The falling *toz envers* and *en vers* is a thrust forward toward a different iteration of ourselves and our desires, but we cannot ever reach the Dreamer's rose – or Bersani's boy – in Guillaume's world.

As Lee Edelman notes, "the social order exists to preserve for [the] universalized subject, [the] fantasmic Child";<sup>56</sup> Alan of Lille would push that further, I argue, and say that writing itself exists to preserve for reproductive futurity.

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<sup>53</sup> Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 53.

<sup>54</sup> Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 81, 83–84.

<sup>55</sup> Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 117.

<sup>56</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 11.

Guillaume preemptively undoes this by demonstrating how the reader is always reproducing him- or herself in failed ways. This is our *only* manner of interpretation, in his view. The constant uncovering in the *Roman de la Rose* reminds us that interpretation is not the revealing of truth but rather hermeneutical layering, supplementing, and bugging of a text or situation that always evades us at present and is only revealed as a reflection, refracted like the rose seen in two crystals at the bottom of Narcissus's fountain. The fountain, Guillaume assured us, was a mirror that showed us things *sanz coverture* (v. 1554) – openly – and yet this is also the perilous mirror of perception, deception, interpretation, and the means by which we construct our plastic and contentious identities. Penultimately – for there cannot be a final interpretation with Guillaume – what the *Rose* teaches us is that the traps of coherence and identity politics will be our downfall. We must resist, and become *encore improbable*.

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