François Noudelmann, *Édouard Glissant: L'identité génèreuse*. Paris: Éditions Flammarion, collection "Grandes Biographies," 2018. 442 pp. (Paper €24.00)

This biography is a massive undertaking. François Noudelmann charts Édouard Glissant's life in detail, emphasizing the enormous number of people who were his friends, acquaintances, and intellectual contacts, and the increasingly nomadic life that he led, moving between Martinique, Paris, and the United States, but also traveling to an astonishing number of places around the world. Noudelmann has clearly done a huge amount of research into Glissant's life, and the result will be an invaluable resource for students and researchers. The biography has, however, become extremely controversial; the anger it has aroused in Glissant's friends and some of his family is exemplified by a blog by Loïc Céry on Mediapart (and available on ÉdouardGlissant.fr). Céry, who is Martiniquan, accuses Noudelmann of seriously misrepresenting Glissant's childhood through his ignorance of Martiniquan society and of denigrating him as having, among other failings, a huge appetite for food and a compulsion to seduce women. I, too, knew Glissant personally; we met often, and I do not recall him ever eating too much, or indulging in seductive behavior toward women. I also agree with Céry that in the descriptions of Glissant's sexual relations Noudelmann's often rather pedestrian prose blossoms into erotic cliché: for example, "*découvrant son corps svelte et voluptueux, sa peau noire et lumineuse ... Tous deux transpirent à l'excès et la sueur acide devient le parfum de leur âcre désir*" (pp. 189–90).

Another feature of the biography is the recurrent characterization of Glissant as embittered by lack of recognition, especially his failure to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. While there is some truth in this, Noudelmann exaggerates it and, moreover, attributes it repeatedly to Glissant's supposed life-long belief that his mother never loved him as much as his brother. This raises a general problem in connection with the status of biography as a genre. Noudelmann recounts many incidents that support this claim concerning Glissant's relationship with his mother, but the evidence is all rather dubious, because although the book as a whole lists a large number of people whom he has consulted, none of the information is specifically sourced. Indeed, he writes in the *avant-propos* that he rejects the "naively positivist" approach to biography (p. 13) in favor of a more subjective attitude: "*L'enquête biographique ... tient moins à des savoirs objectifs qu'à un accompagnement du projet d'écrire, où se mêlent de l'empathie et de la distance, de la fiction aussi, d'où la forme parfois romancée du portrait*" (p. 12).

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This has indeed become a fashionable conception of biography in recent years; but it seems to me that it leads to a potential contradiction, because Noudelmann also strongly implies that he was Glissant's closest confidant in the last eleven years of his life. (This is hotly disputed by Céry.) In so doing, he is in effect presenting his account of Glissant's psychology as having a unique truth status—the opposite of a “subjective,” novel-like biography. His friendship with Glissant “*m'a permis d'approcher, peut-être, la complexité de sa vie d'écrivain et de rendre compte de certains ressorts psychiques, certes avec subjectivité*” (p. 13). Logically, Noudelmann cannot have it both ways. And the situation is further complicated by occasional hints at his assumption of a quasi-filial role in relation to Glissant: the latter for instance reacts to Noudelmann's admiration for Sartre as would a “*père outragé*” (p. 381); and during Glissant's final illness Noudelmann feels for him “*une affection qu'on pourrait qualifier de filiale*” (p. 409), and hints that this is a compensation for his less than satisfactory relationship to his actual father: “*J'ai aimé ce tendre abandon que j'aurais voulu connaître avec mon propre père*” (p. 410). If one adopted his crudely Freudian account of the relationship between Glissant and his mother and extended it to his own “filial” relationship to Glissant, one could perhaps explain the unflattering aspects of his portrayal of the latter as a kind of displaced Oedipal resentment. I would not go as far as this, but I do think that Noudelmann's fantasy of himself as Glissant's son further undermines his claim to having privileged access to Glissant's thoughts and emotions.

It would seem, therefore, that despite the indisputable value of the biography as a reference source for information on Glissant's life, its main interest lies rather in the questions it unintentionally raises about the status of biography in general.

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