

# International No.1 Bestseller

Towards the middle of last year I was having coffee with Hamish MacIntyre from the Tawney Institute. We were comparing strategies for responding to the Research Assessment Exercise, which requires all academics to produce four 'outputs' for grading by a national panel of experts. The greater the success of a department or a university in this exercise, the greater both its prestige and its income. So plenty was at stake. Hamish pointed out that the government, if not this time, then next time, was toying with a metric way of doing things. Careful researchers would count the number of times your work was quoted or cited, and score you accordingly. The more you were talked about, the better. It was at this point that, as if by simultaneous magic, we hit upon the perfect response. The more outlandish a book, Hamish suggested, and the more it challenged the reader by flaunting things he or she couldn't possibly know about, the more widely it would be authoritatively quoted. We remembered that, only a couple of years back, Gabriella Mishkoff's massive and suggestive trans-disciplinary study, *Into the Curate's Barometer: Haydn, Habermas, and the evolution of the post-pastoral mind* had been on the late night talk show agenda for weeks. The book stalked on the edges of lectures and bounced along in discussions. If Mishkoff could do it, so could we.

The problem was deadlines. Could we write an impenetrably brilliant trans-disciplinary tour de force in a month? It was then that Hamish produced his wonder stroke. Neither of us, we realised, had ever read, or even glanced at, *Into the Curate's Barometer*. But we had certainly talked about it, as had most of our friends and colleagues. There was the answer. We were both well acquainted with the London reviewing world, and had friends in the weeklies and monthlies. A few good dinners, and we were all set. Over two consecutive weeks, on either side of 1 April, five members of our conspiracy would print, under their own names, reviews which we had written in five different styles, four greeting with unstinting praise and one with furious hostility our

astonishingly brilliant and wholly unclassifiable work, *Glass, Gadamer, and Godot: the music of timelessness, and the delays of time*. The beauty of the scheme was that since the book would be called into being by the virtual world of reputation, we wouldn't need actually to write it: the reviews would be enough. It would exist in the minds of those who, like Hamish and I with Mishkoff, would never dream of actually seeking out the thing itself.

Within two days of the first glowing discussion in a prominent Sunday newspaper, *Glass* had been quoted in the House of Lords, attacked by two bishops, mentioned in the letter columns of three national newspapers, anathematised on a north American evangelical radio station, and cited in, to our knowledge, at least one LSE lecture. Press and television were seldom off the phone. Our future in the metric stakes was secure.

There was only one flaw in the scheme. If the review panel relied on metrics we were safe. All that mattered was how many times something was cited, not how good it was or even if it existed. But the rumour was that this time round a mixed methodology was going to be used, so the assessors would want to read the book. But then we remembered the Emperor's

new clothes. How could anyone possibly admit that they hadn't already read our sparkling achievement? No one would dare ask to be provided with a copy lest it be thought they didn't already have one, or weren't quite sure what it was about. And so it proved. No one got more stars than us in the final round. We'd got it sorted.

Or so I thought until, a couple of days ago, I met Hamish in the British Library. 'You're looking rather glum,' I said. 'So should you be,' he replied. 'Haven't you read it yet?' 'Read what?' 'Gaskin McIlivray, *Stravinsky and the Revenge of String Theory* – he's dismissed us as naive post-modernists. Look at the reviews.' He smiled, and disappeared in the direction of Egyptology. ■

**Rodney Barker**

