Brecht has always presented a challenge to conventionally minded scholars and critics, for the simple reason that his literary and theatrical genealogy is so unorthodox. As he himself once explained, the German tradition that influenced him was not the recognized classical mainstream, leading from the Enlightenment through Schiller and Goethe to Gerhart Hauptmann and the great bourgeois novelists, but a parallel, semiunderground river whose outstanding rocks are named Grimmelshausen and Lenz, Büchner and Wedekind. If this is true of his dramatic writing, how much harder must it be for traditionalists to stomach all the other multiple aspects of his theater. For theater is almost by definition a ragbag, eclectic, ephemeral art that picks its ideas and influences from all sides, without the least respect for the academic decencies. Indeed, Brecht actually prided himself on being what he called “a thief,” remorselessly stealing whatever he found useful in other people’s work. What differentiated him, and made him so well worth trying to understand, was his ability to knit the results into a coherent and instantly recognizable whole.

Deeply rooted as he was in Germany—and even in a certain South German provincialism—he represents a specially awkward problem for academic Germanists because of the strong Anglo-Saxon element in his work. For, from very early on, a large part of its ingredients were taken from England and the United States, often in a very odd, and at times perverse, way. This was not an entirely
uncommon phenomenon in the 1920s (which were roughly speaking Brecht’s own twenties too), the early days of the American cinema and the English detective story, when Nick Carter and Sherlock Holmes were international mythical figures, echoed as far away as Moscow in Marietta Shaginyan’s “Jim Dollar” thrillers. But Brecht did not merely parody or copy; he took what seemed to him relevant in the English-speaking world and used it for objectives of his own. Looking back now, we can see that England and Ireland were, in the main, literary influences, providing him with many of his models and even to some extent penetrating the actual language in which he wrote. By contrast America, as this book will show, provided unforgettable images for his poetic fantasy to work on—the “cold Chicago” of his early writings, greedily sucking in ingenuous families from the flatland; a paradigm of that city/country antithesis which he felt operating within himself—and at the same time giving him vivid, undisguised insights into the economic jungle we live in: something that fascinated him increasingly from the mid-20s on.

Together, too, they gave him much of what Dr. Parmalee aptly terms his “nonchalant geography.” Two maps could be drawn, after the fashion of those early diagrams of the world as imagined by Herodotus or Strabo: the world according to Brecht and the United States according to Brecht. In the one you would have the preposterous India that he acquired largely from Kipling: Haiderabad (sic), Rangoon, Mandelay (sic), the South Pandjab (sic), Cape Town, Cooch Behar, and Tibet, with Hongkong (sic) not far away; then Tahiti (lapped by the Gulf Stream), Malaya, and that unknown country of his diaries where Maori women live in kraals. The second would center on Chicago and take in Miami and Alaska, Manhattan and San Francisco, Havana and Oklahoma, Lake Erie and the savannahs. It would be threatened by all kinds of natural catastrophes, ranging from earthquakes and hurricanes to that ever-present desert which lurks around in his late Hollywood poems, just waiting to take over the shining freeways and lush gardens of the City of the Angels. This new cosmography would quite exclude the countries where Brecht’s deeper interests lay: Germany and, from the late 20s on, the USSR (though maybe the medieval Georgia of the Caucasian Chalk Circle might figure somewhere in the larger map). It would include the two towns that he himself saw as successful “poetic conceptions”: Kilkoa with its army cantonments some-
FOREWORD

where in India, and The Threepenny Opera's ragged, corrupt Victorian London.

The interaction of English and American elements in Brecht's work was quite recently brought home to me by a rereading of his only complete work in novel form, The Threepenny Novel, with its London setting. For there are three mutually complementary aspects to this remarkable exercise in fiction, which is itself, of course, a development of the Brecht-Weill Threepenny Opera and the film that G. W. Pabst made of it—or more precisely, of Brecht's dissatisfaction with that film. The shady business intrigues that go to make up its rambling story are fairly clearly inspired by those readings in American financial biography of which Dr. Parmalee gives such an intriguing account: Gustavus Myers's splendid three-volume History of the Great American Fortunes, for instance (which she virtually rediscovered for us), seems to have provided the idea of selling unseaworthy ships for use as troop transports, and Brecht's refurbished and upgraded Macheath has plainly learned a good deal from the noble examples of Pierpont Morgan and Dan Drew. From the literary point of view the novel reflects English models: not only John Gay, whose Beggar's Opera underlies the whole undertaking, but Kipling and the vastly successful 1920s thriller writer Edgar Wallace. Then third, there is the picture of London itself, whose "poetic conception" here could well have been pieced together from recollections of Dickens, the Sherlock Holmes stories, and the illustrations of Gustave Doré (though we do not know how well Brecht knew them) and possibly also from Friedrich Engels's Condition of the English Working Classes in 1844. (One of the few points where I am skeptical about Dr. Parmalee's conclusions concerns Brecht's reading of the Marxist classics. Until some scholar goes into the question properly and marshalls all the evidence, I shall question its alleged extent and depth.)

In such ways The Threepenny Novel provides a quite characteristic instance of Brecht's ability to pick his material from the most unexpected sources—he would have had no inhibition about marrying Dickens with a hastily-written yellow-bound crime story such as Wallace used to churn out—then turning the whole improbable mixture into an original work of art. But of course his debt to English literature was much more extensive than that. It was grounded in Shakespeare, who to him was certainly the greatest of all dramatic
FOREWORD

writers, and also embraced his adaptations of Marlowe and Webster; later he based *Trumpets and Drums* on Farquhar and *Señora Carrar's Rifles* on synge. If Kipling gave him his attitude to Imperial India (and to private soldiers), his approach to Chinese and Japanese literature was through the translations of Arthur Waley; *Der Jasager* was indeed a virtually complete translation from one of the Waley *Nō Plays of Japan*, which he and Weill turned into a “school opera”; likewise his “Chinese Poems” are all but one of them taken from Waley’s versions. As for the detective novel, he came to see it as a model of what modern writing should be: it posed problems, traced out a rational solution, had little (in those distant days) to do with psychology, played fair with the reader, and altogether fulfilled Brecht’s requirements for the art of what he termed “the scientific age.” Oddly enough, the kind of story that Brecht had in mind here was not the tough-guy thriller in the wake of Hemingway, which he dismissed as “Hollywood run wild,” but the highly artificial crime puzzles of Englishmen like Austin Freeman and John Rhode. Georges Simenon, to him, was a less modern writer than Conan Doyle.

He was avid in his reading of such stories: in 1956 his country house at Buckow had a room lined with paperback crime stories, which he ranked with cigars as his “means of production.” Not that he didn’t also read more serious works: thus his diary of 1940 shows him reading Macaulay and Arnold, and Boswell’s life of Johnson, and when he reads Wordsworth’s “She was a phantom of delight,” his imagination goes out to an England that is preparing for a possible Nazi invasion. What these gave him was something very unlike the vivid imagery and astounding socioeconomic revelations that he got from America. It was far more a sense of a vastly rich literary tradition, rooted in an England (and an English theater) quite different from that of his own time: an awareness of three centuries’ worth of writers who still seemed to be living in the same city and the same age—something that a fragmented country like Germany could not hope to have. What it did not give was an awareness of a complex modern society such as he got from his American reading. In fact, even when he came to visit London in the mid-1930s, his few poems (like “The Caledonian Market” with its Kipling references) are written from an almost antiquarian point of view; London is a city of gaslights and old clothes, with none of that
deceptive modernity that is so devastatingly conveyed by his long New York poem.

Look at his actual language, however, and it seems to reflect both aspects of our shared tongue. Expressions like “poker face man” (sic; and to begin with, he spelled it “pokker”), “hard-boiled,” “k.o.,” and such come clearly from this side of the Atlantic; the deeper permeation of his style and syntax (as in the un-German word order of “Als wir kamen vor Milano”) and the English-language thinking and writing that went into the long-drawn-out work on Galileo and The Duchess of Malfi are due to his more literary readings. A central figure here was his collaborator (from the mid-20s on) Elisabeth Hauptmann, whose role in his early American researches is described by Dr. Parmalee. She had studied English literature and for a time had taught it, and until he went into exile, she acted as his interpreter and adviser where anything to do with England or America was concerned. It was thus she who translated Gay and Waley for him and actually wrote the two English-language “Mahagonny Songs” that were later taken up in the opera; then after Brecht’s return to Europe in 1947, she largely resumed her old role, notably in adapting The Recruiting Officer as Trumpets and Drums. By then Brecht himself could not only read English with apparent ease but also write it, to judge from a translation of the first scene of Man Equals Man that is in his handwriting and can be found in the Eyre Methuen edition, fitting almost imperceptibly into the English text of that Kiplingesque play.

Much of this is of course outside the scope of Patty Parmalee’s illuminating and highly enjoyable book, which is concerned rather to establish the foundations of Brecht’s interest in the United States, then to show the far-reaching use that he made of the insights and images to which it led him. She stops her investigations in 1933—the time of Hitler’s accession to power and Brecht’s removal to exile—at which point another new book has recently taken over. This is Professor James K. Lyon’s Bertolt Brecht in America, which has appeared almost simultaneously from the Princeton University Press and retraces Brecht’s subsequent real-life experience of the country (his previous knowledge having been based more imaginatively on reading, rumor, picture-books, and the movies). It should do much to clarify Brecht’s slightly ambivalent relationships with Broadway, Hollywood, and the American political and theatrical
Left, besides setting out the American angles of *Galileo* and *Arturo Ui* and the four plays actually written here, from *Simon Machard* to the *Duchess of Malfi* adaptation. What will still remain lacking is any full study of the literary influences that came to him from England and (more marginally) Ireland. Some of the relevant information can be found in *Brecht in Britain*, a paperbound publication issued some years back by *Theatre Quarterly* to accompany an exhibition at the National Theatre. James Lyon, once again, has published a short monograph on Brecht's special debt to Rudyard Kipling, and there is a subtle analysis of his treatment of Arthur Waley's translations in Antony Tatlow's *Brecht's chinesische Gedichte*.

So much for the context of *Brecht's America*. I read this book in typescript some time ago, and have always greatly admired it. Unlike most of the secondary literature about Brecht that keeps piling up year after year, it is in the first place extremely useful: I have repeatedly had to turn back to my heavily marked up copy to look up references to half-forgotten authors like Gustavus Myers and Bouck White, or extracts from previously unpublished poems by Brecht—for which Patty Parmalee's work is the sole source outside the Brecht Archive in East Berlin. Moreover, it is exceptionally well written; it is actually interesting, to an extent that is rare among academic publications. This because it has so much that is new to communicate, and communicates it with the freshness of discovery. Some of Dr. Parmalee's insights may since have been shared by others, but they remain original and infectious; they are imbued with her own critical yet deeply affectionate feeling for American society, and they have the—by Brecht's own standards—essential merit of being *fun*, a genuine source of enjoyment. To some extent this is the result of her close contact with Brecht's writing and thought, which can perhaps only be properly appreciated by those who have worked with his actual manuscripts and typescripts. For Brecht's writings are not just something finished and fixed, to be published in twenty volumes; they are also a long process of getting there, full of false starts, unrealized conceptions, sidetracks and byways and alternatives, all of which together make up something much greater, tenser, and more imaginative than the final text: a writer in motion.

Once you encounter Brecht in this way, you begin to pay much
more attention to his judgments, whether about America itself and its institutions or about the books that he happened to come across and read. As with all great artists, his choices and opinions are often disconcerting; but there is likely to be something inspired about them, and again and again they are worth following up. I myself, for one, am grateful to Brecht, Hauptmann, and Patty Parmalee for, between them, putting me on to Frank Norris’s novel *The Octopus*, that epic story of the Southern Pacific Railroad which seems to call out not merely for revival but for a great film director to make a movie of it. (Though less useful to Brecht, it is a far better book than *The Pit*.) Perhaps one day we shall have an annotated list of Brecht’s recommended reading, with some of his recorded comments; it would be a lot livelier and more illuminating than the average Students’ Guide. Unfortunately such pointers are only really convincing once you recognize the man’s genius, and this is something that not all his interpreters help one to do. This again is where the present book is among the rare exceptions: you may or may not like the man who emerges from it, but the genius comes across. Here is a writer getting his insights and imaginative inspiration from far outside his own culture—indeed, very largely from a form of revolt against it: sometimes getting them wrong, yet finally fusing them with all kinds of other opinions and intentions to make something new. About America’s meaning for Brecht’s theater and his political development Dr. Parmalee is surely right; it contributed something essential at a crucial turning point in his life and work. And this is a fascinating process to watch.

And yet if we look across to Germany, we find a very different, somewhat jaded view of Brecht. For years now he has been thought to have acquired what Max Frisch described as the all-pervading ineffectiveness of classical status, no longer offering any fresh stimulus to the theater and half-smothered on the bookshelves by the ever-increasing weight of academic dissertation. At least this seems to be so in the Federal Republic, and farther East too he is now in a kind of limbo. For whereas once his works were outside the official canon of Socialist Realist esthetics, and therefore very inviting to the younger generation in the Communist countries, today the gradual liberalization of such standards has made him appear tamely acceptable. It has indeed become a case of a prophet being better honored not only outside his own country but also outside his
own camp. There he is a classic, whether of German literature or of progressive socialist art; and it is a moot point that is the more mortifying. Meanwhile, in the Third World countries and in America, England, and Australia, he is still an inspiration and a force, to be felt both artistically and politically, even though the emphasis differs according to what each of those areas is looking for most. He is alive and well, but living away from home.

The lesson of this book, then, is a double one. It shows that a scholarly, investigative approach to Brecht's work does not always have to be stupefying and soporific, provided that the writer is truly interested and stimulated by what she is finding out. That stimulus—which is at bottom an awareness of genius—can sometimes be passed on to the reader, just as it can and should be passed on to the audience by any true staging of the plays. At the same time, however, it does seem that a full understanding of the non-German elements in his writing, however seemingly eccentric, does a lot to help bring it to life. Brecht is not really suited for a plinth in Valhalla as a German classic; he is something much more universal, or at any rate many-sided—a selective, restless explorer with a South German mind but exotic tastes. This is something that the critics in his own country seem to find difficult to accept, to judge from the way in which they ignore the work done on Brecht's non-German aspects by scholars in other parts of the world. It is also very noticeable—and surely not coincidental—that they base themselves much less than their English-speaking colleagues on direct study of his scripts. No wonder that they should have managed to remove him from the interesting mess of real life to some higher and windier cloud up in the eternal sky. Let us hope they lower their heads, read what follows, and feel ashamed.

John Willett