Major Corrections

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Major Corrections

An Intellectual Biography of Sebastiano Timpanaro

Tom Geue

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To the people of Livorno, whose youth still drink
a cocktail called 'Violence of the Proletariat'.

And to my mother, Vania Pittioni (b. 1948 Asiago,
d. 2022 Sydney), who is sipping it somewhere.

'In the end we also will be dead, and our own lives will lie inert within the finished process, our intentions assimilated within a past event which we never intended. What we may hope is that the men and women of the future will reach back to us, will affirm and renew our meanings, and make our history intelligible within their own present tense. They alone will have the power to select from the many meanings offered by our quarrelling present, and to transmute some part of our process into their progress.'

E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*

'And the most rewarding of all projects, they say, is to restore to its earlier lustre some relic from the history of ideas. No matter what uses you find for it, or what coruscations you bring to light in its long-obscured surface, you may always enjoy a pleasant mistrust of your estimation of it. The insights you would like to cherish for their completeness may one day be newly enlarged by the merest footnote found in some outdated text. And even though you delight in your possession of neglected notions and discarded ideas, you must acknowledge that someone before your time has considered them in a different light.'

Gerald Murnane, *The Plains*

'Humanism, I think, is the means, perhaps the consciousness we have for providing that kind of finally antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again, as we encounter our own silence and mortality – all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation.'

Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*

Contents

Preface

It is a strange feeling to write a whole book on someone who would have surely despised your work. But here we are. I was originally attracted to Sebastiano Timpanaro for the obvious synergy of our interests: both of us trained in classical philology, both with ties and sympathies to the radical left. But, the more I read of Timpanaro's work, the more I became attuned with his mode of seeing the world, the more I realised that he would have scoffed at my own contributions to the field of Latin literature as superficial, sophistic, and too 'clever' to be *true*. My own training in an intellectual tradition basking in the long afterglow of post-structuralism, of which the Cambridge Faculty of Classics (my PhD institution) remained particularly enamoured in the 1990s and 2000s, was anathema to Timpanaro, the product of a very different culture and historical moment. Timpanaro was a technical philologist committed to truth, science, and objectivity. The kind of things I have written in my life, by contrast, are probably closer to the unhinged interpretations of the Freudian skewered by Timpanaro (see chapter 5) than to Timpanaro himself. If the subject of this book had been able to appoint his intellectual synthesiser and exegete, one thing is for sure: he would not have chosen me.

I first came to Timpanaro through good mentoring. With the final exams of my undergraduate degree at the University of Sydney over, I availed myself of the carnival space of the end of the year to have some frank chats with my beloved supervisor, the classical and renaissance

Latinist Frances Muecke. After four years' hard slog in Latin and Greek, I lived more than ever to read classical literature and literary scholarship on it. What I could not abide – I moaned to Frances – was textual criticism: the dry and dusty art of consulting manuscripts and emending texts. It just did not interest me. Frances asked me if I had read Timpanaro's *The Freudian Slip*. No? Well, then, I should.

I took the book out of the library and imbibed it in a single sitting. It was unlike anything I had ever read in classical scholarship: sharp, funny, lucid, scathing. And on many points it felt . . . true. It connected what I saw at that time to be a disturbingly esoteric, marginal, and hermetically sealed universe – classical scholarship – to some of the most important currents of twentieth-century intellectual history: to Marx and Freud and their afterlives. It opened a portal between the small things of philology and the big things of politics; it made philology *matter*. This was the spark that fired my love for Timpanaro. Sixteen years later, at the end of a project which has seen me go over this thinker with a fine-toothed comb – a workaday domestication perhaps not conducive to keeping that spark alive – I am happy to report the flame burns brighter than ever. The histories of philology and of the left have few figures in their number more eccentric, more compelling, or more penetrating than Sebastiano Timpanaro. He is due some serious attention.

While my admiration for Timpanaro is clear, I should also come clean on my relationship to certain parts of his thought-world. I remain sceptical of the strand of positivism running through his work, which seems determined to discount some of the most important continental critical traditions of the twentieth century, from the Frankfurt school to post-structuralism. I do not subscribe to these dismissals. But making this book has been an exercise, for me, in the salutary process of writing across a divide. As Timpanaro well knew, great thinkers deserve to be read on their own terms, with sympathy and depth, even if we do not agree with everything they say. While I have much more respect than Timpanaro did for the theoretical currents informing Western Marxism in the 1960s and '70s, and also for what came after, I think that Timpanaro's challenges to Freud et al. are fascinating and generative pieces of countercultural criticism, deserving of sustained treatment. What is more, his call for a restored materialism, and a profound marriage between the sciences (especially the physical and biological)

and Marxism, has refreshed resonance in the wake of a global pandemic that has shown us all too sharply the biological limits of which Timpanaro warned, but also the disastrous impact of the cosiness between science and global capital. After writing this book, I have decided that merely issuing critiques of science is not the best way forward for the left. We should be taking back what is ours, rather than leaving it warily to the market or the venture capitalists; and we should be advancing socialism as, among other things, the best vector for scientific progress imaginable. We should be courting, not alienating, the scientists. While I began this project somewhat sceptical of Timpanaro's blunt and (at times seemingly) naive celebrations of science, I end it a partial convert: a properly scientific, properly materialist Marxism remains the only way forward.

Having said that, I would still emphasise that my approach in this book is one of patient and 'sympathetic' explanation, which should not be confused with across-the-board, ringing endorsement. I do think that Timpanaro misses important elements in arguing with his various bugbears, from psychoanalysis to literary criticism; and it is often a case of discursive systems simply being unable to find any productive common ground because they begin from such different premises. But what I have privileged in this book is the goal not of resistant criticism, or active antagonism towards the object of study, but of understanding a particular way of thinking, and of presenting the most important aspects of that system in as generous a manner as possible. In other words, I try to treat Timpanaro the way he treated his favourite poet, Giacomo Leopardi, rather than the way he treated his nemesis, Freud. This has resulted, at times, in a strange merging of voices, a kind of free indirect discourse, where my attempts to ventriloquise Timpanaro sometimes take me dangerously close to fully identifying with his way of thinking. Perhaps not all the way though: Timpanaro would be quick to write off my disclaimer as psychobabble. While I have come to identify with my subject over time, this is the fruit of many years' work. Particularly at the beginning, it was not always easy to treat even-handedly a thinker who represents precisely the kind of philological nitpicker I have spent a lifetime forming myself against (and with whom I have often had unpleasant dealings). But I still believe, taking after Timpanaro, that reading and conversing seriously with those who might disagree with us is one of the most important intellectual

activities in which one can partake. Historical research can be powered by such fruitful tensions.

The problem of treating a 'renaissance' thinker such as Timpanaro – versed in so many fields – as a 'whole' is that you quickly butt up against the hard barriers of your own very circumscribed expertise. I come to Timpanaro from a proper métier in literary criticism on Latin literature, with a general knowledge of the Marxist tradition (but mainly filtered through Marxist literary criticism), and with a smattering of occasional and desultory political activity on the left. As such, I have no hope of pulling off a satisfactory critical evaluation of Timpanaro's intellectual historiography in all of his various fields beyond classical philology: nineteenth-century Italian culture and literature, the philosophical history of materialism versus idealism, psychoanalysis, and linguistics, to name the main subjects of this book. In order to make such judgements, I would have had to acquaint myself with an unmanageable amount of bibliography in alien fields. Even were such a thing possible (Timpanaro himself, inhumanly productive as he was, arguably showed it is not), you would need a lifetime to accrue such knowledge – and probably a job less demanding and time consuming than that of a modern university lecturer. But, I hope I do not risk accusations of ex post justification when I say that this task of evaluation was never my main objective. I set out to show the interrelations within Timpanaro's thought, the particular profile of attractions and repulsions that forms his intellectual universe and system – and for that, I do not think it necessary to issue authoritative opinions on whether Timpanaro was right or wrong about the contributions of Franz Bopp to nineteenth-century linguistics.

What I lack in preparation in all these various fields, I hope to make up in the extensive *Timpanaro* research on which the book is based. This is, I think, the first work on Timpanaro to combine a broad reading of his major published works with a long and laborious sifting of almost all of his correspondence, which was positively Victorian in volume. The Timpanaro archive at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa contains 10,738 letters shared with 1,515 separate correspondents. By my calculations, this equates to about one letter either sent or received every day for about thirty years – in other words, a lot. I worked solidly for six months at this archive to mine some enlightening nuggets from these letters, and I hope their presence sheds new light on the published

content (and vice versa). But, even here, I should admit that my methods have been singularly un-Timpanaran in the way I have combined pieces of evidence. Firstly, Timpanaro, when evaluating a given thinker, believed in a fairly strict ontological hierarchy of the published over the unpublished, whereas in this book I treat these forms of evidence almost interchangeably. Secondly, Timpanaro's use of correspondence in his intellectual historiography usually served a sensitive reconstruction of the granular evolution of a given thinker's thought on a particular subject, *over time*. While this book follows a rough chronological order through Timpanaro's major works and topics – from philology, to the nineteenth century, to materialism, to Freud, to linguistics, to 'literary criticism' – I have not concerned myself with reconstructing subtle historical arcs showing the 'evolution' of Timpanaro's thought in these camps. Rather, I have tried to point out the most striking 'common denominators' which endure in his thought over several years. Timpanaro, again, would have accused me of ahistoricism here, or worse, of being an overly synchronic structuralist neglecting the dimension of diachrony. But I have chosen this broader-brush, temporal-leaping approach for two reasons: first because it helps focus attention on the wood, with some marginal loss of a sense of precisely how the trees within it have grown; and second because Timpanaro, despite constant acts of self-revision, remained substantially consistent on many of the subjects most important to him (see the conclusion of this volume). What is more, the benefit of wide consultation across the entirety of a thinker's published and unpublished output is that the most important habits of thought start to emerge, becoming visible as they cut across contexts, addressees, genres, venues, formats, and years. If I have forfeited some of the history for the sake of the system, I ask for my subject's forgiveness.

I have tried to answer most of the very helpful comments on the manuscript given by a range of readers, from literary critics to philologists to cultural and political historians. The one piece of feedback I have felt shamefully unable to answer is the issue of 'citational justice' – the fact that the book's core material turns on the written word of (mostly) white men. This is in part a reflection of the make-up of Timpanaro's social and cultural world. Academia and politics in post–World War II Italy were spheres dominated by men – ethnically homogeneous men at that. This has had flow-on effects in the work done on Timpanaro since

his death. For diversity of age and profile at least, I have tried to showcase some of the work of a younger generation of brilliant Italian scholars (particularly Luca Bufarale and Anna Maria Cimino) who are employed outside the academy and may not ordinarily have gained much exposure in the anglophone world. But this is a poor compensation for a very skewed citational base. I can only hope to do better in the future.

Finally, a note on the form of the book. In addition to the dotting of *i*'s and crossing of *t*'s in the introduction and conclusion, the bulk is divided into seven chapters, each of which focusses on a different segment of Timpanaro's intellectual output. As such, they are mainly concerned with Timpanaro's life on the page. The chapters are punctuated, however, by occasional snapshots of particularly charged and interesting affairs in Timpanaro's life, points of controversy which throw certain parts of his complex personality into relief. I hope these detailed episodes give some body and colour to the otherwise-cerebral Timpanaro of this decidedly 'intellectual' biography. As we shall see, few thinkers of the twentieth century did more to remind us that we are stuff as much as mind – so it is good to see Timpanaro as a body working in the world.

Timpanaro always thought of himself as prematurely old. But his central field, philology, was cut to treat problems that never go out of date. I write this in full faith and hope that not so much will be said for the biggest problem Timpanaro once confronted, and the problem we still now confront: capitalism. If only it could one day be corrected away, a blip to be removed from the manuscript of history by the philological collective of the future. Timpanaro would have said: *that is a stupid metaphor; stop the wishful thinking; let us get to the real work of it*. We can still feel his corrections acting upon us.

Abbreviations

Sources by Sebastiano Timpanaro

AF *Aspetti e figure della cultura ottocentesca*, Pisa, 1980
AN *Antileopardiani e neomoderati nella sinistra italiana*, Pisa, 1982
CF *Contributi di filologia e di storia della lingua latina*, Rome, 1978
CI *Classicismo e illuminismo nell'Ottocento italiano*, 2nd ed., Pisa, 1969
FGL *La filologia di Giacomo Leopardi*, 2nd ed., Rome, 1978
FR *La 'fobia romana' e altri scritti su Freud e Meringer*, Pisa, 1992
FS *The Freudian Slip: Psychoanalysis and Textual Criticism*, trans. Kate Coper, London, 1985
GLM *The Genesis of Lachmann's Method*, trans. Glenn Most, Chicago, 2006
LF *Il lapsus freudiano. Psicanalisi e critica testuale*, 2nd ed., ed. Fabio Stok, Turin, 2002
NC *Nuovi contributi di filologia e storia della lingua Latina*, Bologna, 1994
NS *Nuovi studi sul nostro Ottocento*, Pisa, 1995
OM *On Materialism*, trans. Lawrence Garner, London, 1975.
PLS *Per la storia della filologia virgiliana antica*, Rome, 1986
SED *Il socialismo di Edmondo De Amicis. Lettura del 'Primo Maggio'*, Verona, 1984.
SLO *Sulla linguistica dell'Ottocento*, Bologna, 2005
SM *Sul materialismo*, 3rd ed., Milan, 1997

VA *Virgilianisti antichi e tradizione indiretta*, Florence, 2001
VR *Il verde e il rosso. Scritti militanti (1966–2000)*, ed. Luigi Cortesi, Rome, 2001

Sources by other authors

BS Paul H. T. d'Holbach, *Il buon senso* (*Good Sense*), trans. and ed. Sebastiano Timpanaro, Milan, 1985
DD Marco Tullio Cicerone, *Della divinazione* (*On Divination*), trans. and ed. Sebastiano Timpanaro, Milan, 1988
SF *Giacomo Leopardi: Scritti filologici (1817–1832)*, ed. Giuseppe Pacella and Sebastiano Timpanaro, Florence, 1969

For detailed notes on the bibliography, see Appendix 2.

Introduction

Bit Parts

Sebastiano Timpanaro was bad at coping with praise. Whenever he felt fawning in his direction, he shut it down. He immediately poured cold water over his interlocutor's enthused panegyric, rattling off a litany of reasons why, on the contrary, he was in fact a worthless nothing. In March 1981, a young aspiring intellectual by the name of Antonio Perin sent Timpanaro some fan mail expressing unbounded admiration for him as a thinker and militant. But Timpanaro would have none of the folly of youth, whose distorted field of vision rendered figures bigger than they actually were. With age, Perin would undoubtedly cut him down to the size he deserved:

> With the passing of time and with the advancement of your studies and your human experience, without doubt you will 'resize' me: you will realise that I don't have the stature of a 'leader', neither cultural nor 'moral' nor political, and that therefore, unfortunately, it's impossible to hope for direction from me, in this society in which I am ever more directionless and to which I feel myself ever more alien, without having the capacity to point to new ways.[1]

Timpanaro denied himself any status as moral or political figurehead. He was not one to look up to. He could offer no guidance to the new

1 S.T. to Antonio Perin, 28 March 1981. Translations from Italian are my own throughout the book, unless marked otherwise.

generation. Someone as disoriented as he could be no source of direction. Our young student would only be disappointed by this old prophet past his prime, now isolated, exhausted, and out of ideas.

Despite prematurely sabotaging the value of any further wisdom that might come from his pen, Timpanaro responded to Perin's request for more details about his life. But there is a problem with content here: even if Timpanaro had managed to write an autobiography, there would be precious little of interest to the next generation. He had lived 'an honest but mediocre life, lacking material that might interest others'.[2] What to mention, if pressed? Timpanaro lost his father young, in 1949, when he was only twenty-six. He got married – one of the few successful experiences of his life. He never had children; he was not sure whether for good or for ill. He had had feelings, strong ones, but of a 'traditional type' – nothing particularly interesting. None of this material could serve to help the younger generation address the problems of their private and public lives. Timpanaro swore to having lived a life of nothing, a biography without note or value – none of it usable to assist future generations to reinvent themselves.

The only way Timpanaro could stomach writing autobiographically[3] – he went on to explain to his mentee Perin – would be if he could make the story about the political climate and personalities in which he was immersed throughout the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. At this point in the letter, as soon as there was scope for escaping the self and inhabiting a context bigger than it, Timpanaro's prose relaxed, unwound. From the clammed-up denial of an interesting life, he finally settled in his chosen position. He took the bit part, that of the secondary opera singer, not shining enough to attract riotous applause but someone who was there on stage, who had seen it and had something to say about it:

> But I'd want to do it [i.e., write autobiographically], indeed, speaking as little as possible – almost not at all – of myself: not for modesty (which would be false modesty), but because I've observed many things and people, I've participated in many discussions and confrontations, but always taking a part not of protagonist and not even of

2 Ibid.

3 Cf. Timpanaro's comments on the ideal autobiographical mode (S.T. to Giorgio Voghera, 15 April 1968).

> important actor: only of an 'extra' or something just above it: as one of those singers in the opera theatre who have always been entrusted only with secondary or even the most minor parts, and who for that reason have never had the applause nor the boos of the audience, but, living in the theatre environment, have seen up close the great singers and great orchestra conductors and the entire 'world of the theatre', and they have something to say about them.[4]

An argument could be made that this statement, in 1981, was penned by one of the most prominent leftist intellectuals in Italy.[5] Timpanaro had by then published a host of books and articles in all of his fields of expertise – classical philology (i.e., the close study of the Latin and Greek languages, and reconstruction and interpretation of the classical texts written in them), nineteenth-century Italian culture (including literature and linguistics), the philosophy of materialism, psychoanalysis and its discontents. Two of these books had been translated into English and won extensive plaudits in the Anglophone world. Timpanaro was a famed and respected classical philologist whose reputation resonated both in Italy and abroad. He was already elected as a corresponding fellow of the British Academy in 1975, at the age of fifty-two (young for this group of the predominantly silver haired). So how could the extreme self-minimisation of the above letter not be a form of false modesty? Perhaps it was: it is a known rhetorical trope of a particular form of male intellectual to disavow authority and thirst for validation in the very same gesture. But we could also try to cast out a suspicious reading and trust this verdict on himself. Timpanaro, eminent philologist and committed materialist, Enlightenment thinker and militant Marxist, believed that the human self, the ego, subjectivity itself, were not worthy of discussion. His attention was always turned to the world outside them. If that ego could earn a place in the opera of life, it could never be

4 S.T. to Antonio Perin, 28 March 1981.

5 Timpanaro's 'fame' within Italy was mainly restricted to the Tuscan leftist intelligentsia. Most of his written output was with academic presses and had limited circulation (with the exception of the *LF* and *SM*); and he did not tend to write for the mainstream Italian press. For an at-a-glance yet comprehensive overview of Timpanaro's oeuvre (incl. a full bibliography) and accolades, see Giorgio Piras's entry 'Sebastiano Timpanaro' in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 95, ed. Raffaele Romanelli, Rome, 2019, 688–92.

as the showy tenor showered in roses at the curtain call. It would have to be the part you barely notice because the whole, everything else, is just that much more interesting.

There was more to Timpanaro than his denial of the autobiographical mode would have us think. He remains, in fact, a singularly interesting figure of the post-war Italian left and its intellectual groups based in and around Pisa and Florence in the second half of the twentieth century. Born in Parma in 1923 to a historian of ancient Greek science for a mother and a physicist for a father, the young Timpanaro's family life was entwined with and imprinted by fascism from earliest childhood. Timpanaro's father, Sebastiano Sr, ended up teaching in a Catholic school to dodge the Fascist Party card requirement in public *licei* (Italian secondary 'grammar' schools).[6] But after these havens were cracked down on, in 1942 he was forced, by financial necessity, to take a job as director of the Domus Galilaeana in Pisa, a cultural institute for the history of science. He was appointed specially by none other than Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944) himself, the Hegelian idealist philosopher who provided the crucial intellectual scaffolding for Italian Fascism. While the decision sat queasily with Timpanaro Sr, the family made the move to Pisa, and the subsequent mild colouring of shame and guilt shadowed both Timpanaro Sr and Jr for the rest of their lives. In the ratcheting up of the politics of past scrutiny after the end of Italian Fascism, the question would become inescapable: What were your family doing during the *ventennio*, the twenty-year Fascist interregnum? Timpanaro Jr would always declare, with full and uncompromising honesty, that his family were 'reluctant' (*renitente*) but not 'resistant' (*resistente*), unwilling non-collaborators, but not all-out partisan heroes.[7] Such guilt at not being in a family at the vanguard of resistance perhaps underlay Timpanaro's locked and unswerving commitment to revolutionary socialism for the rest of his life. At the same time, it set the tone for his self-definition as someone who could never quite be *truly* on the front lines.[8]

6 See also Luca Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro: L'inquietudine della ricerca*, Pistoia, 2022, 20.

7 S.T. to Antonio Russi (numbered 3 in the Timpanaro archive), n.d.; cf. Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 23.

8 S.T. to Luca Baranelli, 6 July 1962; S.T. to Giorgio Voghera, 3 September 1965; S.T. to Luciano Della Mea, 30 June 1976.

Timpanaro was remarkably close to both his parents, and they loom large as figures in his intellectual formation (and beyond). His father died in 1949, when Timpanaro was not yet thirty, and well before he had become a name on the Tuscan left. But Timpanaro Jr would later talk of the influence exercised by early discussions with Timpanaro Sr over his political and intellectual awakening in youth. All three members of the Timpanaro clan joined the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), then a revolutionary party,[9] immediately after World War II. Timpanaro's mother had been involved with the PSI through the multi-party anti-fascist organisation, the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (National Liberation Committee), in which she had been active from the moment of Pisa's liberation in 1944; the father and son Timpanaro eventually followed suit by registering as members of the PSI in 1947.[10] Politically, both Timpanaro generations were more or less on the same page. But Timpanaro's father was of a completely different philosophical orientation: he was a scientific idealist at heart, sympathising with the Hegelian strand of Italian philosophy then dominating through its authoritative representatives Gentile and Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), although he dissented vigorously from their contempt for science.[11] You might say that, though Timpanaro Sr resisted the political conclusions of Gentile, he was receptive to the philosophical. Timpanaro Jr, meanwhile, cut himself from very different cloth. His incipient materialism was hammered out largely in spirited debates with his father – and he would spread this private discussion well beyond the bounds of his household for all his later life, taking the fight against Hegelian idealism so hard that he would even deny the value, for Marxism, of intellectual institutions like the 'dialectic'. Hegel's absolute idealism posited that the world was a kind of unity of subject and object, thought and being. His notion of dialectics, the apprehension of that world through the constant interaction of opposites, extended the logic of the individual human mind to the course of history, where each stage was marked by a tension of

9 On the political tenor and composition of the PSI at this time, see Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 31. Things began to change drastically in the late 1950s (ibid., 36). See also chapter 1.

10 Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 30.

11 Although Timpanaro's father also, importantly, resisted the artificial separation between the sciences and the humanities beloved by neoidealist culture (ibid., 19). On Timpanaro Sr's idealism, see also *VR*, 185, 208.

opposites eventually overcome and subsumed in the next stage within a more encompassing unity. For Timpanaro, this identification of mind and world was rebarbative. The essence of Marxism, in his view, had to be always and ever protected from the corrupting influence of Hegel. Timpanaro's father thus served as a force for Timpanaro's philosophical radicalisation towards an immovable materialism – by conflict, rather than imitation.[12]

Timpanaro's mother was, arguably, an even more outsize (and ongoing) presence in his intellectual landscape. Maria Timpanaro Cardini (1890–1978) was a trained philologist who wrote weighty tomes on the history of ancient philosophy and science. Her party allegiance was more or less directly aligned with Timpanaro's, progressing through the splintering of the Italian radical left as the mainstream socialist and communist parties became increasingly reformist. Timpanaro Cardini shared both philological discussion and party meetings with her son – but also lived with him for the whole of her life, even after Timpanaro married Maria Augusta Morelli (1938–2021; a Tuscan archivist, historian of eighteenth-century culture, and fellow early-Leopardi expert) in 1968. It is hard to overestimate the depth of Timpanaro and his mother's enmeshment. Even if the correspondence in the Timpanaro archive does not reflect the full extent of their relationship (you do not tend to send letters to your mother living in the next room), the outburst of paralysing grief Timpanaro suffered and wrote about after her death in 1978 testifies to the deep bond. In addition to their common interests in philology and leftist politics, as well as their constant proximity, the other important inheritance passed from mother to son was a staunch atheism and a withering contempt for the Catholic Church. For Timpanaro, this was a key part of his intellectual make-up, making him gravitate to many atheist or anti-religious thinkers (such as the poet Giacomo Leopardi [1798–1837]) and the Enlightenment philosopher Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach [1723–1789]). But for his mother, it was almost a way of life. Timpanaro said, on several occasions, that he suspected his mother's real enemy was not so much capitalism as the Catholic Church in cahoots with it.

Timpanaro Cardini's life progression also provides an interesting template for explaining Timpanaro's long-standing investment in the

12 Cf. *VR*, 185–6.

empirical sciences as the only means of phasing into truth about the world. Such an investment would later come to define Timpanaro's battle against the science-sceptical culture of the New Left, inflected by the currents of anti-empiricism in works such as Althusser's *For Marx* (1965) and *Reading Capital* (1965). This strand, of course, came from both mother and father: Timpanaro Cardini was a historian of early Greek science, and Timpanaro Sr a physicist by trade. As Glenn Most points out in the introduction to his translation of Timpanaro's *Genesis of Lachmann's Method*, the Timpanaro family shelves would have been stacked with history of science bibliography, which explains the strange complexion of Timpanaro's most famous work in the history of philology – that is, its greater debt to methods taken from the history of science than from philology.[13] But the imprint of science on Timpanaro did not just come from the general domestic climate favouring all things scientific (itself a rare thing in Italian humanistic culture of the mid-twentieth century, skewed as it was away from the sciences). It was also that Timpanaro Cardini's biography seemed to model a disavowal of certain intellectual activity in favour of scientific philology. As a young woman, Timpanaro's mother had been heavily involved in the avant-garde poetry scene in Naples, around the time of World War I.[14] She later absolutely refused to talk about that moment in her life, both because, so Timpanaro thought, she was ashamed of the nationalist and pro-war politics attached to that scene, but also because she was embarrassed to have fiddled around with what were (to her) the trivialities and indulgences of poetry. The life of Timpanaro's mother – according to Timpanaro's interpretation, at least – was structured around a disowning of the 'soft' creative arts and the embrace of a 'harder' scientific philology. It was, in its own way, a version of the founding Timpanaran gesture with which we opened: an elimination of the self and a move towards the world. Timpanaro would have problems with the alleged narcissism of certain poets and artists, hacks of idealist creativity, for the rest of his life (see chapter 7).

The other significant figure in Timpanaro's domestic life was surely his wife, Maria Augusta Morelli Timpanaro. The two met in the mid-60s

13 See Glenn Most, introduction to Sebastiano Timpanaro, *The Genesis of Lachmann's Method*, Chicago, 2006, 18.

14 Cf. Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 21.

(their correspondence begins in 1965) and married in 1968, the year after Timpanaro and his mother moved to Florence. Though the age difference was marked (she was fifteen years Timpanaro's junior), Morelli was already showing herself to be a brilliant young scholar by the late 1960s. She and Timpanaro committed to some promising collaborative work editing and commenting on the early dissertations of Leopardi – but the prospect fell away for political reasons (to be explained in chapter 3). They also collaborated on an interesting biography of the partisan hero of the Tuscan resistance Aligi Barducci (1913–1944), better known as 'Potente'.[15] Morelli went on to distinguish herself as a scholar of eighteenth-century Italian (particularly Tuscan) history, becoming an expert on the free-thinker and poet Tommaso Crudeli (1702–1745), a victim of the Holy Inquisition in Florence in 1739.[16] Morelli's day job was as an archivist working, at various stages, for the ministry of 'cultural goods' (*beni culturali*), for the regional board of archives for Tuscany (an official government body responsible for managing the entire region's vast swathe of historical records), and for the state archives of both Florence and Pisa. Morelli was an established scholar in her own right. But she was also remarkably devoted to the memory of her husband, leveraging her skills and network as an archivist to put together the exhaustive and impeccably organised Timpanaro archive at the Scuola Normale in Pisa, on which much of the research behind this book depends. If it were not for Morelli's tireless pursuit of Timpanaro's correspondents after his death, her disciplined work requesting copies of his letters, we would be infinitely poorer in writing this chapter of intellectual history.

Timpanaro's family, particularly his mother, was especially important in his formation partly because he suffered from a brutal 'neurosis' (Timpanaro's own word for it) which compromised his ability to travel. This neurosis, never professionally diagnosed, was more manageable in the earlier part of his life. While it influenced his career decisions, it did

15 Gino and Emirene Varlecchi, *Potente: Aligi Barducci, comandante della divisione Garibaldi 'Arno'*, ed. Maria Augusta Morelli Timpanaro and Sebastiano Timpanaro, Florence, 1975.

16 Maria Augusta Morelli Timpanaro, *Per Tommaso Crudeli nel 255o anniversario della morte, 1745–2000*, Florence, 2000; Maria Augusta Timpanaro Morelli, *Tommaso Crudeli. Poppi (1702–1745). Contributo per uno studio sulla Inquizione a Firenze nella prima metà secolo XVIII*, Florence, 2003.

not affect his ability to participate fully in political life (party meetings, etc.). It was only later in life that a kind of agoraphobia, if it was that, kicked in and, in periods of greatest intensity, made it difficult for him to cross the piazza or the street.[17] This long-standing neurosis, combined with Timpanaro's almost textbook Oedipal situation – a competitive philosophical rivalry with his father and a deep enmeshment with his mother – make his lifelong resistance to psychoanalysis (chapter 5) almost comical. Timpanaro himself admitted he expressed a classic hyperdefensiveness against psychoanalysis – and that those defences were not exactly born from rude psychological health.[18] In this book, I shall abstain from armchair analysis (were I even qualified to perform it), but Timpanaro's ongoing anxiety disorder should be kept in mind as we confront his more intellectual refutation of psychoanalysis – not to discount the substance of his thought but to contextualise it.

However, before this neurosis closed Timpanaro's world more definitively, his life was full of intellectual and political stimulation. His working life, in particular, had a huge bearing on his intellectual profile and worldview. In the early part of his career, between graduation from university in 1945 and 1959, he took after his parents in assuming teaching posts at various provincial middle schools outside Pisa (serving students aged eleven to fourteen; from 1948, Timpanaro taught at the now-defunct schools of 'professional training', aiming to equip students from less well-off backgrounds to enter the workforce).[19] Timpanaro loved the work, had deep affection for his students, and managed to hold the job down for a good fourteen years before his neurosis got the better of him and began to make public speaking – even before a class of wholesome provincial tweens and teens – beyond impossible. But this frame of his life continued to have huge consequences.[20] In particular, the requirement to teach Italian history and make the Risorgimento period especially interesting to the young pushed Timpanaro to engage in serious work on

17 See, for example, S.T. to Hugh Lloyd-Jones, 16 May 1998; S.T. to Margarethe Billerbeck, 5 March 2000.

18 S.T. to Francesco Orlando, 30 June 1974.

19 Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 24. Until 1962, Italy's middle school system was divided by class: the *scuola media* allowed entry to the *licei* (academic high schools) and ultimately the university; the *avviamento professionale* led strictly to a blue-collar job at the end.

20 For Timpanaro as teacher, see the cover photo of Nuccio Ordine, *La lezione di un maestro. Omaggio a Sebastiano Timpanaro*, Naples, 2010 – with justification at xvii.

nineteenth-century Italy, which would become one of his flagship areas. He himself attributes the origins of this interest to the classroom.[21] But schoolteaching also infused his later intellectual output *in general*. As the political and intellectual historian Perry Anderson notes, one of the strange and striking features of Timpanaro's style on the page is his crystalline lucidity, bucking the trend of overwrought and byzantine sentences infusing Italian academic prose at the time.[22] While Timpanaro's philological training and Enlightenment principles were no doubt behind his anachronistic written clarity, there was also a *didactic* strand to the prose, something beaten into shape in the harsh studio of explaining history to distraction-prone students.[23] No matter what it is about, a Timpanaro book or article is always graspable, always intelligible, because he never takes anything for granted. He treats the reader as an intelligent but perhaps not quite fully knowledgeable entity, without ever being patronising.[24] We, as readers, emerge so much the better for it.

When Timpanaro made the hard decision to discontinue his teaching career, his options became more limited. The university – the institution which his philological training had naturally equipped him to traverse – was out of the question, because it would involve public speaking requirements even more terrifying than middle school. What else could the job market do with Timpanaro's cerebral skill set? He essentially needed a paid position tolerating introversion, rewarding attention to

21 S.T. to Giorgio Voghera, 27 December 1969. On the other impacts of Timpanaro's teaching, see Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 24.

22 Perry Anderson, 'On Sebastiano Timpanaro', *London Review of Books* 23, no. 9 (May 2001).

23 On the commitment to clarity in Timpanaro's philology, see Federico Santangelo, 'Voler "capire tutto". Appunti sullo stile di Sebastiano Timpanaro', *Anabases* 20 (2014): 61–3. Piras, 'Sebastiano Timpanaro', 689, quotes Santangelo's apt description of Timpanaro's prose as a kind of 'written seminar' (57) (*seminario scritto* – thanks to Frances Muecke for alerting me to this). Such clarity also came from Timpanaro's embeddedness in militant struggle, which showed him the importance of using common, non-academic, non-jargony language (Romano Luperini, 'Testimonianza per Timpanaro: Il dibattito sul materialismo e altri ricordi degli anni sessanta e settanta', in Enrico Ghidetti and Alessandro Pagnini [eds], *Sebastiano Timpanaro e la cultura del Secondo Novecento*, Rome, 2005, 375). As Romano Luperini attests in his fond reflection on Timpanaro's person at the end of Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 103, that non-academic directness extended to all his personal relationships.

24 Or as if the reader were a complete idiot, in Timpanaro's self-deflating account (S.T. to Scevola Mariotti, 30 April 1977). We can see why Timpanaro was attracted to Holbach's repetitive style in *Il buon senso* – see *BS*, lxvi; cf. the conclusion of this book.

detail, and leaving some time for him to conduct his scholarship on the side. In 1959, he ended up securing a job as a copy editor at the Florentine publisher La Nuova Italia. This four-day-a-week position left Timpanaro with a bit of time and energy to write the things he was burning to write, and to participate fully in local leftist life.[25] But it also, perhaps, gave him some on-the-ground, 'embodied' insight into a process that was already important for his intellectual orientation and would later become still more so. The technical side of classical philology known as textual criticism, tasked with the job of considering the manuscript history of a particular text across its chequered record of copying since antiquity, traffics in *error*. The common mistakes across these different manuscripts are the glitches that allow for their genealogical classification to be made (a method Timpanaro would write about in *La genesi del metodo del Lachmann* (*The Genesis of Lachmann's Method*), first published 1963) and enable informed guesswork to approximate a text closer to 'what the author wrote'. But, as an editor reading hundreds and hundreds of pages of copy every week, Timpanaro became familiar with how these errors actually occurred, and what a banal and material thing they were. His day job as a corrector of texts perhaps helped clarify to him that these kinds of human linguistic errors were just that: the stuff of a day job. They fell into certain predictable patterns, followed certain norms, and were rarely accounted for by the Byzantine Freudian analysis he would later impugn in *The Freudian Slip* (see chapter 5). In his novella *Proofs*, George Steiner makes his protagonist into a Marxist philologist-proofreader, based loosely on Timpanaro.[26] This protagonist lives a continuity between his day job and his politics around the idea of correcting an imperfect world, whether on the page or in the piazza. This metaphorical equivalence between text and world as imperfect objects to be relentlessly improved gives us the 'major corrections' of this book's title. But we should not push the neat conceptual wordplay

25 It also gave him genuine authority as a worker (Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 29). Timpanaro stuck steadfastly to an entry-level role at La Nuova Italia and avoided all higher editorial or managerial responsibilities (cf. also Mario Bencivenni's comments, ibid., 10–11). Sociologically, the PSIUP also had much more involvement from traditional workers, and more active links to the working class via trade unions, than other New Left parties (see Daniel A. Gordon, 'A "Mediterranean New Left?": Comparing and Contrasting the French PSU and the Italian PSIUP', *Contemporary European History* 19, no. 4 [2010]: 319).

26 George Steiner, *Proofs and Three Parables*, London, 1992.

too far. Indeed, there was less connection between the real Timpanaro's day job and his Marxism (apart from, of course, experiencing the alienation of work and taking part in union activity)[27] than there was between it and his knowledge of errors later leveraged to debunk Freud. Therein lay the continuity between minor and major correction.

While Timpanaro's eccentric combination of copy editor and Marxist proved fruitful for Steiner's fiction imagination, he became almost as famous for what he was *not*. Timpanaro garnered a reputation for being an outsider partly because he never held a university position. Many other figures comparable with Timpanaro's intellectual stature on the post–World War II Italian left were incubated in ongoing posts at universities. The fact that Timpanaro worked as a rank-and-file copy editor rather than holding a lofty professorial chair certainly gave him an outsider prestige. But we should be cautious overplaying that. While he did not work in the university, his entire suite of social and political relationships were mediated by it. He was deeply, structurally hardwired into that milieu, even if he only received a pay cheque from a university as a 'professor by contract', on an outlier occasion in 1983–4 when he finally managed to pluck up the courage to teach a seminar.[28] Timpanaro was so firm a fixture of the Tuscan university scene that he was even elected, in 1989, to the Accademia dei Lincei – one of the oldest and most prestigious academies in Europe. The story of Timpanaro as outsider intellectual is partly an effect of how compelling and deep set this myth is within Western culture. We want to believe it in his case, and we desire his outstanding work to be a direct consequence of his uncompromised position outside the institution.[29] But the briefest of glances at the makeup of his lifelong correspondence puts the lie to this, showing us just how networked Timpanaro was with so many prominent university-based intellectuals of his day. Timpanaro himself would comment on how his reputation as outsider took on a life of its own: in inventing his biography, believers would make a principled virtue of a decision not to sully himself in the university, when, in fact, it was a product of neurological

27 Timpanaro's union activity was significant (Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 41–2).

28 See Antonio Rotondò, 'Sebastiano Timpanaro e la cultura universitaria fiorentina della seconda metà del Novecento', in Enrico Ghidetti and Alessandro Pagnini (eds), *Sebastiano Timpanaro e la cultura del Secondo Novecento*, Rome, 2005, 5–6.

29 Rotondò, 'Sebastiano Timpanaro', 5, argues this line directly.

necessity and medical constraint.[30] Timpanaro's life itself thus became yet another example of the voluntarist/idealist fantasy, whereby humans would always interpret events as a direct result of human will. Timpanaro the Leopardian materialist knew otherwise: that history was often the result not of active decisions but of our bodies and minds laying down limits, and of us yielding to natural forces beyond our control.

If Timpanaro did not breathe the office air of the university, he was still, as mentioned, embedded in its networks.[31] His main institutional loyalties were twofold. Between 1942 and 1967, Timpanaro frequented the halls of the Scuola Normale in Pisa, though never in a formal capacity.[32] His other foot was firmly lodged in the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at the University of Florence, where he did his undergraduate studies during World War II, and in whose library he would again become a regular after moving to Florence in 1967. This life split between Pisa and Florence cultured the precise overlap of callings at the heart of this book: on the one hand, formal classical philology, under the long shadow of Giorgio Pasquali (1885–1952; a professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Florence, who also taught at the Scuola Normale in Pisa); on the other, revolutionary socialism on the Italian left.[33]

Our popular concept of classical philology (if we have one) bears very little resemblance to the world of the militant left: How could a field concerned with nutting out the minutiae of classical texts share any meaningful space with a political practice devoted to change at the largest scale? What is more, there was an unseemly but concrete link, during the ventennio of Mussolini's reign, between the Latin language and Fascist nativism.[34] Going further back, many of the founding figures of

30 See chapter 4.

31 Rotondò, 'Sebastiano Timpanaro', 4–5, limits Timpanaro's claims to isolation. What he lacked in formal institutional power, he more than made up for in his informal position among the Florentine Faculty of Letters milieu.

32 On the intellectual and political culture of the Scuola Normale from the fall of Fascism to 1968, see Paola Carlucci, *Un'altra università: La Scuola Normale Superiore dal crollo del fascismo al Sessantotto*, Pisa, 2012.

33 See Rotondò, 'Sebastiano Timpanaro', 12–32. Timpanaro was also a student of the literary critic Giuseppe De Robertis (1888–1963), from where he developed his keen interest in Leopardi.

34 See, for instance, Han Lamers, 'Mussolini's Latin', *Symbolae Osloenses* 96, no. 1 (2022): 205–29. See also Ramsey McGlazer on Gramsci's comments on the Latin class's fascist co-optation: *Old Schools: Modernism, Education, and the Critique of Progress*, New York, 2020, 4–7.

nineteenth-century classical philology had been enmeshed with the dark side of racist ethnonationalism and the scientific scaffolding of white supremacy, a connection exposed most forcefully by the Palestinian American scholar-activist Edward Said.[35] In the red Tuscany of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, however, the politics of philology's intellectual landscape looked quite different. There were always many philologists floating about – more than in many other European countries, thanks both to Italy's cultural heritage and its deeply classicising secondary education system. But post-war Italy also had one of the strongest lefts in Europe. Italian Communist Party (PCI) membership was extremely high, reaching a peak of 2.3 million in 1947, out of a population of around 45 million; in the '50s and '60s, the PCI newspaper *L'Unità* had a distribution of a million copies a day.[36] In the 1946 Italian elections, the socialist PSI gained 20.7 percent of the vote, and the Communists 18.9 percent. Even a relatively small party such as the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity (PSIUP) – the party in which Timpanaro later did his most intensive political work – reached a membership of 100,000 and had a peak vote of 4.5 percent in the 1968 Italian election.[37] At its summit, the PSIUP had twenty-three deputies and fourteen senators in the Italian legislature, as well as a strong share of power at the local level.[38] Frenetic activism and self-sacrificing devotion to party, for the advance of the working classes, were almost a norm.[39] With a glut of philologists and a healthy supply of Marxists, then, it was likely some would be pulling double duty.

In the red Tuscan heartlands of Pisa and Florence, in particular, philology and Marxism were starting to mingle. Timpanaro's posse included fellow Pisan philologist Vincenzo Di Benedetto (1934–2013; a professor of Greek and a founding member of the Pisan PSIUP chapter

35 Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, New York, 1978. There is now a significant tradition of critique targeting the complicity of philology and racism, for instance, Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985*, London, 1987. See also Markus Messling, 'Philology and Racism: On Historicity in the Sciences of Language and Text', *Annales* 67, no. 1 (2012): 151–80.

36 Marco Albeltaro, 'Communism and Social Relations: The Life of a Communist Militant', in Stephen A. Smith (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, Oxford, 2014, 446.

37 Gordon, 'A "Mediterranean New Left?" ', 310–11.

38 Ibid., 311.

39 Albeltaro, 'Communism', 449–50.

after its split from the PSI) as well as Antonio La Penna (1925–2024; a professor of Latin at the Universities of Florence and Pisa, with teaching duties also at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, member of the PCI from 1943 to 1967, and of *Manifesto* thereafter, a New Left breakaway from the PCI).[40] Tuscany may not have been crawling with Marxist philologists, but the red tinge of the universities in the area left Timpanaro with some good company in which to hone his craft.

Timpanaro's core circle in 1940s, '50s, and '60s Pisa was a discipline-transcending group which well reflected the diverse interests he would make his own. I give a fuller list of the best-known members of this sprawling intellectual network in Appendix 1. But the main point to stress here briefly is the sheer breadth of Timpanaro's interlocutors, in both the academic and political camps. On the academic side, Timpanaro maintained active friendships and intellectual exchanges with classical philologists, ancient and modern historians, critics and historians of Italian, French, and German literature, linguists, philosophers and historians of philosophy, poets, translators, and novelists. In the more political wing, Timpanaro was organically connected to many activists within his own parties (the PSI, PSIUP, and subsequently PdUP), but also beyond, sustaining a vital engagement even with many members of the party to which he often played gadfly, the PCI. At the heart of these interlocking communities were Tuscany-based print journals, the enabling and meaningful fora for intensive discussion and debate. For broad humanistic topics (political ones too), there was *Belfagor*, run between 1946 and 1961 by the then director of the Scuola Normale Superiore, the literary critic and PCI member Luigi Russo (1892–1961), and dutifully taken on by his son Carlo Ferdinando Russo (1922–2013) in subsequent years. Timpanaro published many influential cultural-historical pieces and reviews here. With a more dedicated political accent, devoted to urgent issues facing the Tuscan new left, the non-aligned journal *Quaderni Piacentini* emerged in 1962. It was edited by Marxists of a slightly younger generation, Piergiorgio Bellocchio (1931–2022) and Grazia Cherchi (1937–1995), both close friends of Timpanaro. The *Quaderni* provided a home for several of Timpanaro's classic articles of political philosophy, including those that would become the core

40 See Anna Maria Cimino, 'L'influenza di Gramsci su Antonio La Penna. Dalla formazione gentiliana all'empiriomaterialismo', *Lexis* 39, no. 1 (2021): 211–36.

of *On Materialism*. In general, Timpanaro was plugged into a vibrant scene of leftist intellectuals, heated conversation with whom, in print and person, served to shape and sharpen his thought in real time. Most importantly, there was a marked overlap between the more rarefied academic and more activist political circles in which Timpanaro travelled. A revolving door connected the seminar room and the socialist rally.

By far the closest thing we have to a Timpanaro in terms of a Marxist-philologist composite, however, would be Antonio La Penna. A brief comparison with the life of La Penna, born only two years after Timpanaro and living a life largely in parallel (indeed as close friends until the 1980s), might serve to throw into relief the common ground shared by this red philologist set. La Penna came from the south, a remote village called Oscata in Irpinia, an ancient mountainous region roughly coextensive with the province of Avellino in Campania. Like Timpanaro's early experiences with his father, La Penna, too, had been saturated in the idealism of Croce and Gentili, as well as the Hegelian aesthetics of Francesco De Sanctis (1817–1883) – all of which influences were rife among the teachers at La Penna's academic high school.[41] When La Penna arrived at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa in 1941, he was still in thrall to such idealism. But as the scholar Anna Maria Cimino has shown in a brilliant recent piece on La Penna's intellectual formation and debt to Gramsci, La Penna soon became a fully fledged convert to materialism.[42] This was owed largely to new exposure to the historicist methods of Pasqualian philology, to a generally anti-fascist commitment among the Normale teachers (e.g., Aldo Capitini, Luigi Russo, Delio Cantimori, and Cesare Luporini), and to the radicalisation of World War II. La Penna joined the PCI in 1943 and remained an official member, with fluctuating highs and lows of political activity, till 1967. But his critiques of the PCI in the 1950s and '60s, as we shall see, were almost completely aligned with Timpanaro's: he identified as a minority anti-Stalinist in an overall Stalinist environment; he picked on the historical 'justificationism' undergirding the PCI's increasing collaboration with centrist power brokers; and he took issue with the providentialist and teleological tendencies of the PCI

41 Cimino, 'L'influenza', 214–5.

42 The following account of Antonio La Penna relies heavily on ibid., 214–31.

brand of Marxism in the 1960s – the idea that the collaborationist line of the PCI was all for the greater good and the eventual victory of communism, from which he took distance as a self-described resistant or 'disorganic' intellectual. In the end, La Penna's revulsion towards idealism proved stronger than his commitment to Marxism. He concluded in the '90s that Marxism was too structurally infected with Hegel to be salvaged. For him, the unresolvable problem of Marxism was that it could not liberate itself from idealism, the unforgivable philosophical cornerstone of Fascism.

As we saw above, Timpanaro would have vigorously countersigned all of this anti-Hegel sentiment. The difference from La Penna, theoretically speaking, was that Timpanaro never decided that Marxism was irretrievably lost to the Hegelian inheritance. Timpanaro's positions on Gramsci were also different from La Penna's: Timpanaro was cooler on Gramsci, thinking the latter to be bound up with the idealism from which La Penna cordoned him off.[43] There were also distinct differences in the way La Penna combined his politics with the study of antiquity: his famous works of the 1960s on the Roman authors Horace, Virgil, and Sallust were exercises in direct hegemony-critique *à la* Gramsci, studying the complex positions of their authors vis-à-vis the dominant political class of the late Republican and Augustan 'revolutions'.[44] Timpanaro, as we shall see, never allowed his politics to take such a direct seat at the table of his philological work. But the things that bound together La Penna and Timpanaro – Pasquali, the Scuola Normale, reaction against Fascism and idealism, a faith in materialism and empiricism – were much more binding than the differences. These intellectuals represented a brief, precious moment in the history of the world where the historical rigour of philology fizzed with the electricity of Marxism – and even, especially, vice versa.

The fairly unique crucible that produced Timpanaro was a vibrant intellectual culture on which it is hard not to look back longingly. From philology Timpanaro took an eagle eye for details, a tendency to scepticism and empiricism, a hatred of a priori assumptions and settled habits

43 As Cimino shows, La Penna's faith in Gramsci as an antidote for Marxism's idealist corruption reaches right up to 1989 (ibid., 232).

44 Ibid., 223.

of thought, and a reflex to return to first principles, to subject every piece of evidence to an intense scrutiny and independent judgement. For Timpanaro, living alongside but firmly antagonistic towards relativising theories like structuralism, scientific truth was still something out there and attainable. Philology trained him to believe in objectivity and material reality and made him dismiss as *civetteria* (intellectual 'coquetry' or 'flirtation'; see chapter 7) any pretentious attempt to problematise these workaday givens. There were many more things that philology contributed to Timpanaro's intellectual toolkit, and some of these were particular to the overlapping Florentine and Pisan circles of Giorgio Pasquali (who had a professorial chair in Florence but taught as a commissioned visiting professor at the Scuola Normale in Pisa from 1931 to 1952).[45] Among other things, Pasquali's approach emphasised examination of the tools of the field itself and its history as much as the field's objects of study – the classical texts themselves – and a democratic approach to the study of ancient texts indifferent to aesthetic value.[46] I will expand further on the concrete intellectual inheritance of Pasqualian philology in chapter 2.

Philology, for Timpanaro, was not just a worldview or a set of intellectual instruments – it was also, importantly, a professional *identity* of ongoing use to him over the course of his life.[47] But it only became especially useful to him precisely from the moment he stopped being a philologist stricto sensu and spread his wings into other disciplines. Almost excessively, Timpanaro took a single line on his intellectual activity: all told, he was a philologist at core; at a stretch, he was also a scholar of nineteenth-century Italian culture; but in everything else he went on to write about in the beating heart of his career in the '60s and '70s – materialist philosophy, linguistics, Freud – he remained, in his own self-description, a stalwart 'dilettante'.[48] And he felt professionals in

45 Giorgio Pasquali was even more attached to the SNS in Pisa than he was to Florence (see Carlucci, *Un'altra università*, 134; cf. 175–6. Thanks to Alessandro Schiesaro for pointing me to this).

46 Rotondò, 'Sebastiano Timpanaro', 31–2.

47 Philology brings respect for professional competence: S.T. to Antonio Perin, 30 December 1983.

48 For Timpanaro's complaints about his dispersivity, see S.T. to Giuseppe Cambiano, 26 August 1979; S.T. to Feliciano Speranza, 14 February 1980, 3 March 1980; S.T. to Ermanno Circeo, 8 March 1980; S.T. to Silvia Rizzo, 3 September 1980; S.T. to Francesca Dovetto, 8 October 1988; S.T. to Franco Giancotti, 12 May 1989. Timpanaro

those disciplines often treating him so, by dismissing his work – or worse, ignoring it. For Timpanaro, whose avowed object in writing polemical interventions was more often than not to 'raise discussion', silence was the worst fate his work could meet.[49] He resented it, but it must be said that he also drew energy from being the philological trouble-maker, creating chaos and being dismissed or ignored for his trouble.[50]

In regularly straying beyond his home field, Timpanaro was consciously traipsing in the shadow of his beloved teacher and mentor Giorgio Pasquali, who had published several collections of 'extravagant pages', that is, writings ranging beyond strictly philological subjects.[51] Not only did philology furnish the launch pad for all of Timpanaro's various Pasqualian 'extravagances'; it provided a kind of protective identity which enabled Timpanaro to make sallies into other disciplinary camps without professional grounding in them. The excuse of being a mere philologist and therefore not adequately versed in another field was certainly another modesty trope. Timpanaro often deployed it to capture an audience's goodwill before diving right into the field at hand. But the vocational identity as philologist also gave him a certain freedom and security to enter another field and ruffle feathers within it, precisely because he remained 'just a philologist' (as he remained always 'just' a 'corrector of proofs', in his own humble self-description). It was a steeling excuse of marginality that allowed him to smuggle himself into intellectual corners unused to having guest philologists rearranging the furniture. But as well as an excuse, philology was also an *anchor* to Timpanaro, a kind of recharge station for scholarly identity after moments of vertiginous disciplinary boundary crossing. His correspondence is full of declarations, at moments in which his more experimental works are nearing completion or newly complete, that he was looking forward to returning to his field of

also downplayed the heterogeneity of topics within individual works, such as the *AF* (S.T. to Giuseppe Valli, 10 October 1980).

49 Indeed raising debate is part of the fundamental 'restlessness' (*inquietudine*) Bufarale identifies at the heart of the Timpanaran approach to research (*Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 42–3).

50 On Timpanaro's obsession with his silent treatments, see chapter 2.

51 Original volume: Giorgio Pasquali, *Pagine stravaganti di un filologo*, Lanciano, 1933.

philology. He was due a return home.[52] Timpanaro's genuinely interdisciplinary activity is a salutary reminder that the best intellectual roving can be predicated on this solid sense of home base. Timpanaro was the prodigal philologist periodically ranging beyond and returning to his native field.

Philology, however, was only one home. Another, perhaps *the* other for Timpanaro, was Marxism. I will give a fuller overview of Timpanaro's politics in chapter 1, but for now, a brief sketch. Timpanaro became a card-carrying member of the PSI in early 1947, when he was twenty-three, and continued as an active member of socialist parties until quitting formal party activity in 1976. What did his brand of Marxism look like? Timpanaro himself gives a nice retrospective self-definition in a letter to the German philologist Siegmar Döpp (1941–; a professor of classical philology at the University of Göttingen) in 1995, a passage to which we shall come round again at the end:

> I've been a socialist of the left, Marxist and Leninist without any particular orthodoxy, with sympathies also for the thought of Trotsky, but with clear hostility to Stalinism, which I've always considered to be a degeneration, not a continuation, of Marxism and Leninism. [53]

As Perry Anderson has written, Timpanaro's politics were somewhat heterodox (or 'without any particular orthodoxy') for the age.[54] A committed anti-Stalinist, he never really looked on the Soviet Union as the great hope for socialism, even before the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary sparked a major crisis of confidence in the Soviet Union for Western European socialist and communist parties.[55] He was sceptical of China and Mao in the late 1960s and early '70s, at a moment in which the radical left was looking

52 For instance, S.T. to Cesare Cases, 9 January 1968.

53 S.T. to Siegmar Döpp, 25 July 1985.

54 Heterodoxy is also Timpanaro's word for his Marxism: see S.T. to Carlo Ginzburg, 5 March 1971.

55 Timpanaro's anti-Stalinist and anti-bureaucratic leanings are some of his most deeply held, there already as early as 1948: see Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 33–4. In this respect, he was perhaps in the minority of his party, the PSIUP: see Gordon, 'A "Mediterranean New Left?" ', 325.

east with wilful blindness to the problems of the Chinese road. He was sympathetic to Trotsky at a moment in which Trotsky's stock was fairly low and 'Trotskyists' were considered an irritation on much of the left.[56] From where, then, did Timpanaran Marxism emerge?

It was surely based on extended, militant, and active party service. Timpanaro's political life was just as deeply felt and lived as his philological one – if not more so. By his own declaration, in his political peak from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s, he often spent more time in meetings and demonstrations than in the study:[57]

> In all these parties I didn't play the part of the basic card-carrying member, nor the 'prominent intellectual': I've served as rank-and-file militant, or else the local 'intermediate cadre' (member of the governing body of the section or federation, or of the provincial executive). I've done a bit of everything, from posting flyers to participating in meetings and river-length discussions. *As much as it may seem exaggerated to you, there have been periods of years and years in which I've dedicated many more hours to party activities than to study.* I haven't had, in the parties I've been in, what's usually known as a 'minority vocation'; I've always understood the dangers, but also the necessity of party organisation and discipline, on the sole condition that the party represent the class interests and needs.[58]

His commitment to a militant Marxism was unswerving, and this militancy took place through active service to a series of socialist parties on the fissiparous Italian left (first the PSI from 1947 to 64, followed by the PSIUP from 1964–72, and then the PdUP from 1972–76).[59] All of these were revolutionary socialist parties at the time of Timpanaro's membership, and Timpanaro's position within them was always to the left of the

56 See chapter 1. Timpanaro never defined himself as Trotskyist or an adherent of the Fourth International (Romano Luperini, 5 February 1975) – but sympathies he certainly had. At *AN*, 11–12, he called himself Leninist–Trotskyist at heart.

57 See the excellent discussion of a similar passage, as well as wider discussion of Timpanaro's politics of *militanza di base*, at Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 29.

58 S.T. to Umberto Carpi, 10 June 1981 (italics mine). Timpanaro repeats much of this self-definition to a wider public at *AN*, 12–13.

59 For a detailed history of these parties, their political content, and Timpanaro's place within them, see Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 29–51, and chapter 1.

PCI. Long and deep immersion in this culture left ingrained marks on Timpanaro's way of thinking.

If the philological environment gave Timpanaro a relentless appetite for truth and an aspiration to shun settled a priori assumptions, these leftist circles also brought a lot to Timpanaro's formation. The first thing to mention would be a kind of 'sideline' positioning that tended to reinforce the 'minor' roles on which Timpanaro drew for energy in other spheres of life – philology, copy-editing, and so on. The party in which Timpanaro was the most active – the PSIUP – was a minoritarian splinter from the mainstream PSI, formed in response to, and escape from, the currents of reformism, accommodation, and collaboration with bourgeois government creeping into the mass left parties (both PCI and PSI) in the 1960s. As the political historian Daniel A. Gordon puts it, 'in the PSIUP's case . . . the initial split [from the PSI] was not so much over specific policies as over the principle of being in a bourgeois government at all'.[60] Timpanaro was at the vanguard of this resistance: in early 1964, he was one of four initial breakaways around which the Pisan chapter of the PSIUP clustered.[61] The issues central to the early PSIUP were varied, as the Timpanaro scholar Luca Bufarale has shown: attentiveness towards the new working class comprising not just mass factory workers but also those with technical qualifications; secular state education; opposition to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); anti-imperialist struggles in the Middle East, Latin America, and Indochina.[62] Internationalism was clearly an important part of its makeup: as Gordon notes, party documents tend to train on the political situation in several other countries before even broaching the subject of Italy.[63] Such 'other-focussed' politics were a nice complement to Timpanaro's philosophical fixation on the world beyond the self. Sociologically speaking, the PSIUP, unlike other grouplets associated with the New Left, was not a party of pure middle-class intellectuals – according to one estimate, up to 94 percent of its members were workers, peasants, or artisans.[64] And, despite having strong ties to the world of middle-class intelligentsia, Timpanaro

60 Gordon, 'A "Mediterranean New Left?" ', 312.
61 Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 38.
62 Ibid.
63 Gordon, 'A "Mediterranean New Left?" ', 314.
64 Ibid., 320.

himself, as an entry-level copy editor at a modest-sized publisher, was also one of those workers.

The founding justification for a party like the PSIUP was to keep the goals of revolutionary socialism alive under the threat of social democratic neutralisation. Its central purpose was not to wield significant electoral power but to nip at the heels of the big parties that did, hauling them to the left, all the while tending the flame of a revolution that looked increasingly distant but still urgently necessary. (Timpanaro's correspondence after the 1950s is full of honest abandonments of aspiration to revolution 'in a brief timescale'; see chapter 7.) But, in practice and over time, the PSIUP became ever more subordinate to and reliant upon the PCI.[65] Timpanaro always maintained a position on the left flank of the PSIUP, following the current of the heterodox Marxist and anti-Soviet Lelio Basso (1903–1978; one of the founding leaders of the PSIUP and a former influential force within the left faction of the PSI).[66] From this left flank, Timpanaro engaged in remorseless critique of the 'leftist' parties to his right for cosying up to capital in the 1960s and '70s – and the PCI became his main target. This minoritarian standpoint was essentially polemical and antagonistic.[67] The PSIUP as a whole became known, condescendingly, as the 'alliance of the *no*'s'.[68] Within the PSIUP itself, Timpanaro's opposition to any form of subservience to the PCI was total and unstinting. Indeed, the central block against which Timpanaro butted his head in political life was the spirit of consensus and accommodation with capitalism he saw infusing the PCI (and PSI) from the 1960s onwards – a spirit which would culminate in the 'historic compromise' of 1976, resulting in a collaboration between the PCI of Enrico Berlinguer and the centre-right Christian Democrats of Aldo Moro.[69] It is no coincidence that Timpanaro finally left organised party politics that very year.[70] His adversarial persona,

65 Ibid., 322.

66 On Lelio Basso, see Gordon, 'A "Mediterranean New Left?" ', 316–18; 324–5.

67 Timpanaro took this position even within the party itself: he maintained that his local Florence branch was far to the left of the national PSIUP executive: see S.T. to Girolamo De Liguori, 10 April 1972.

68 Gordon, 'A "Mediterranean New Left?" ', 312.

69 Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 37. Timpanaro is critical of how the spirit of such compromise ends up creeping into his final party, the PdUP (S.T. to Dante Nardo, 16 March 1976).

70 See Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 47.

built up from the position of revolutionary minority within the PSI and subsequently outside it, was largely formed as a means of cultivating an antagonism towards capitalism which he felt to be fast disappearing from the culture of the mainstream left. It was also about stoking the fire of free critique which, in the PCI's increasingly stale and stalling party structure, Timpanaro thought to be dying out. These spirits of antagonism and free critique are everywhere in his writing, and they were no doubt products of his formation on the minoritarian left during the period of capitalism's entrenchment and the left's recession in post–World War II Italy.

Timpanaro occupied a precarious generational position, poised between Old Left and New Left.[71] Indeed, the PSIUP, like the comparable French PSU, worked to 'form an important bridge between official politics and the new movements of 1968'.[72] While Timpanaro's main opponents were the PCI, and this partly because of the hardening of its party apparatus and lack of internal democracy,[73] he was also no big enthusiast of the groups such as Lotta Continua starting to come into prominence from the late '60s onwards as antidotes to the fossilisation of the Old Left.[74] Timpanaro was certainly on the 'New Left' side of the PSIUP in the mid-'60s, ever frustrated by the tension between the 'innovators' such as himself at the local level and the party traditionalists at the national level.[75] But he was not attuned enough to the potential revolutionary energy of the New Left to see the explosion in '68 and '69 on the horizon.[76] Timpanaro sympathised with the broad goals of that New Left, which formed partly as a means of solving the inevitable problem of inertia and sclerosis that came with party structures congealing, as

71 Timpanaro's attitude towards 1968 shifted between mildly disparaging (S.T. to Mario Untersteiner, 10 November 1968; S.T. to Alessandro Russo, 26 January 1976) and respectful of the spirit of revolutionary break (S.T. to Mario Untersteiner, 20 December 1968). Cf. Luca Baranelli, 'Sebastiano Timpanaro e i "Quaderni Piacentini" (1966–1979)', in Ghidetti and Pagnini, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 380–1. On the PSIUP's relationship with the New Left, see Gordon, 'A "Mediterranean New Left?" '.

72 Gordon, 'A "Mediterranean New Left?" ', 312.

73 This critique only intensified over the years: see Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 48–9, and chapter 1.

74 S.T. to Luciano Della Mea, 26 March 1970, 24 May 1970, 2 July 1970.

75 Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 39.

76 Ibid., 40.

the political historian Terry Renaud has shown.[77] But Timpanaro thought the political tactics of groups like Lotta Continua were more about making a mess than about making revolution.[78] As Luca Bufarale notes, in the late 1960s Timpanaro's relationship with groups of the New Left such as Nuovo Impegno and Potere Operaio could be characterised as 'critical sympathy'.[79] For Timpanaro, it remained important to keep the explicit ideological debate going and not to yield to the lazy temptations of ideological *menefreghismo* – 'not giving a damn'.[80] The party structure was a valuable source of discipline, without which he saw political activity as more or less meaningless. But even if he nursed a slight scepticism towards emerging leftist mess-makers such as the autonomists, the big problems they were born to tackle – the increasingly bureaucratic organisation of the big left parties, their lack of internal democracy, the deficit in direct worker participation in many of the revolutionary parties – were crucial to Timpanaro's formation.[81] He could be stubborn. But his resistance to all forms of dogma and a priori assertion came not just from the philological spirit (see chapter 2) but also from a sensitivity towards the political manifestations of such dogma and assertion within the culture of the Italian left. Timpanaro, as we shall see, was an opponent of methods overreaching themselves, of systems staking too great an explanatory claim on the world – and this too had a political genesis as resistance to the hardening pieties on the mainstream left. Free-thought and independent scrutiny had to be a feature of any party, and any left, worth the name.

As we will see reflected brightly in the detailed episodes of this book, it was at moments of threat to liberty of discussion, public access, and unrestricted scrutiny that Timpanaro pushed back most pugnaciously. His Enlightenment sensibility, insisting on openness in everything at all costs, came out in his coolness towards Maoism and outright contempt of Stalinism, both of which had, let us say, less than spotless records on

77 Terence Renaud, *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition*, Princeton, 2021.

78 S.T. to Luciano Della Mea, 26 March 1970; 24 May 1970; 2 July 1970; S. T to Cesare Cases, 29 September 1972 (and cf. Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 42); but later, more positive appreciation of Lotta Continua's importance on the left can be found at S.T. to Luigi Pintor, 6 May 1976; S.T. to Giuseppe Pacella, 24 July 1977; S.T. to Giorgio Voghera, 15 August 1977.

79 Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 41.

80 Ibid., 42.

81 Ibid., 41.

the publicisation of internal debate.[82] But this need for openness cut through every department of Timpanaro's life – political, intellectual, personal. In his scholarship, he was constantly minded to denounce mystifications and chicanery, but also conduct that compromised public access or threatened debate: the cardinal and philologist Angelo Mai (1782–1854), Timpanaro's nineteenth-century antitype, got a dressing down for his unthinkable practice in restricting access to manuscripts while librarian of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan.[83] Freud himself, another enemy of Timpanaro's, was rendered unsavoury partly because of his possessive looming over the field he created, his tendency to shut down debate like a disciplinary paterfamilias.[84] Even in his personal life, Timpanaro hated any form of secrecy or protectionism: when some young literary historians got in touch to excavate more of his mother's poetic past, Timpanaro maintained that her wish to conceal that past should *not* be respected.[85] Mother, like everything, had to be in the public domain. Truth should not be stopped at the front door when it comes a-knocking.

Timpanaro, like everyone, was cut from his time, and my brief attempt to contextualise him within his intellectual and political universe assumes as much. But the last important thing to mention here is that Timpanaro was also *not of his time at all*. His Enlightenment principles were unfashionable among a 1960s and '70s cultural left taken with Freud, Althusser, and the Frankfurt school. His faith in science landed badly among those for whom science was no more than pure bourgeois ideology (a critique emerging from many on the radical Italian left, who were, thanks to the strict humanities/science apartheid legacy of idealism, already predisposed towards spurning it).[86] Timpanaro was an eighteenth-century fish out of water, and this characteristic – what he would call *inattualità*, the state of being uncontemporary, productively out of relevance – kept him going. He was so drawn to Leopardi partly because he saw him as a kind of Enlightenment, materialist, pessimist

82 See chapter 1. Timpanaro exalts the early Bolsheviks and Lenin also because they maintained freedom of discussion: *VR*, 121.

83 *AF*, 238–9.

84 S.T. to Luigi Blasucci, 10 August 1974.

85 S.T. to Carlo De Matteis, 10 July 1983.

86 On the particularly strong 'two cultures' divide in twentieth-century Italy, see Pierpaolo Antonello, *Contro il materialismo*, Turin, 2012.

outlier in an overall romantic and mystifying age.[87] When the mainstream media and ruling class tried to claim Leopardi's 'relevance' with an outpouring of banality on the 150th anniversary of his death, Timpanaro reacted with outright disgust.[88] He saw himself as playing a parallel anti-relevant role within his own culture and time, though he would never be caught claiming outright that he was Leopardi *redivivus*. His letters creak with admissions of being a dinosaur, a relic, prematurely old and out of date (see chapter 7). But in the Timpanaran system, where truth and value are often stored in apparently antiquated vessels such as Leopardi, hailing from another age was not necessarily a bad thing. Given the non-linearity of intellectual history, truth and progress come and go.[89] Knowledge proceeds more in step with the rhythms of philology, in which old contributions can never quite be discounted; so it is that in the future, Pavlov might prove to be more useful for understanding our minds than Freud.[90] Steps back could also be steps forward: a theme of Timpanaro's *Classicismo e illuminismo nell'Ottocento italiano* (Classicism and enlightenment in the Italian nineteenth century) and the message apothegmatically contained in one of Timpanaro's favourite Verdi quotes, 'Let's return to the past and it will be progress' (*Torniamo all'antico e sarà un progresso*).[91] Timpanaro made it one of his most solemnly sworn duties to be resolutely at odds, and out of joint with, his age. But to be out of fashion is not the same thing as being out of ideas. This is why I think he can be dusted off, why we need him now, and why he will be relevant again – for in every fossil, in every relic, there is some hard truth.

Timpanaro's reception across the varied disciplines in which he worked has been inconsistent. His contributions to so many scattered fields also render this reception difficult to summarise. If his name still resonates at all, it means distinct things to distinct communities. The differences between his respective receptions in the contexts I know best – Italy and the anglophone world – are instructive. In Italy, the memory of his sheer

87 Timpanaro was also dismissive of any attempts to *attualizzare* Leopardi, that is, to bring him 'up to date': see Bufarale, *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, 69, and chapter 1.

88 *VR*, 153–4.

89 *OM*, 54, 217.

90 *OM*, 54.

91 Giuseppe Verdi, letter to Francesco Florimo, 5 January 1871.

range of contributions is still very alive (even if the celebration can tend to cultic levels of respect at times): Timpanaro remains one of the great Latin philologists of his day, an eminent intellectual historian of the nineteenth century who helped transform our understanding of Leopardi, a fascinating materialist, and a committed (if slightly single-minded and eccentric) opponent of Freud in an environment otherwise very responsive to him. Although comparatively little has been written on Timpanaro in Italy in the last twenty years (with the happy exception, now, of Luca Bufarale's 2022 *Sebastiano Timpanaro: L'inquietudine della ricerca*), the spate of (hagiographic, but useful) edited volumes that emerged in the wake of his death in 2000 are remarkable for giving such a comprehensive coverage of all the various Timpanaros. Most of these contributions were written and edited by friends and comrades. The proximity helps to excavate Timpanaro's thought. Sometimes, however, the network effect can be a hindrance. The important social function of mourning and memorial that this kind of scholarship provides does not necessarily make for the sharpest critical lens. What is more, these contributions tend to be short, thematic, and divided by discipline, with each expert author giving their two cents on a particular segment of Timpanaro's output. With the exception of a synthetic 1985 article by literary critic and classical philologist Emanuele Narducci and now Luca Bufarale's excellent 2022 book, there have been few attempts to give a fulsome and attentive account of Timpanaro as a whole, drawing contrasts and connections across his corpus, using both published and unpublished material.[92] Bufarale's *Sebastiano Timpanaro*, to which I refer throughout, in particular should be singled out as an outstanding account of Timpanaro's formation and contribution as an 'anti-moderate' socialist, as well as a fascinating attempt to truly co-ordinate his lived politics with his philosophy. In this book, generally, I lean on this comprehensive spirit of Timpanaro scholarship in Italian, for it has proved vital to appreciating him as a thinker. There is, however, still an urgent need for something even more ambitious. Narducci's contribution, at only article length, is too short to treat topics in depth; and Bufarale sticks mainly to Timpanaro's politics and philosophy, without much excavation of his philological and linguistic work. Instead of siloing Timpanaro's sides off from one another, or assigning his bit parts to

92 Emanuele Narducci, 'Sebastiano Timpanaro', *Belfagor* 40, no. 3 (1985): 283–314.

various experts within larger edited volumes, I am attempting to bring them all together and see what comes out.

The pattern in the anglophone reception of Timpanaro is very different, and quite remarkable in its own right. As Perry Anderson has noted, there is a strange paradox in operation when we look at Timpanaro's work travelling to the English context.[93] Timpanaro's frame of cultural reference was almost exclusively continental – Italian, German, and French were his strongest modern languages, and his coverage of those national literatures and intellectual histories (particularly on topics that interested him, such as the French Enlightenment) was immense. English, not so much: Timpanaro, like many of his generation of Italian intellectuals, could neither speak nor write it. He read it, but laboriously, and his linguistic struggle is reflected in the relative poverty of his references to anything coming out of the Anglosphere (apart from in his home field philology; and outside of that, Timpanaro only had knowledge of English works long translated into Italian). Moreover, when it came to philology, Timpanaro was outright dismissive of the English tradition, which, as we shall see, he associated with outrageous entitlement to indulge in 'conjecture', the freewheeling and arrogant textual interventionism of famous English philologists such as Richard Bentley (1662–1742) or A. E. Housman (1859–1936). It was not just a cultural *gap* for Timpanaro; sometimes it was also a snub.[94]

The paradox is that this relative disdain towards anglophone cultural production was by no means reciprocated. Timpanaro became a well-known figure in England in the '70s and '80s, with his thought gaining wide currency via two major transmission routes. The first was philological. His esteem as a philologist and historian of philology among English classical scholars remained high for most of his scholarly life, especially after his *Genesis of Lachmann's Method* was taken up by prominent professors like E. J. (Ted) Kenney (1924–2019; Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge), who hailed it as a masterpiece and paid it a lot

93 Perry Anderson, 'Timpanaro among the Anglo-Saxons', in Riccardo Di Donato (ed.), *Il filologo materialista. Studi per Sebastiano Timpanaro*, Pisa, 2003, 178; a revised version of the article was republished under the same name in 2021 in *New Left Review* 129.

94 Alessandro Schiesaro points out that this hostility towards anglophone scholarly production was common to Timpanaro's coevals, such as Antonio La Penna and Alfonso Traina.

of tribute in his own work. The lines of communication between Italy and England were opening up in the discipline of classical scholarship from the '70s and '80s onwards (especially between Pisa and Oxford), and two of Timpanaro's close England-based correspondents also had very strong ties to Tuscan philology: Eduard Fraenkel (1888–1970; a professor of Latin at Oxford) and Arnaldo Momigliano (1908–1987; a professor of ancient history at University College London). The politics of language in European academia were fast changing at this time (with English overtaking French as the dominant continental lingua franca), but disciplinary expectations around linguistic competence meant that the footnotes of classics tomes had to be littered with references to all the big European languages or risk being written off as sloppy work. This guaranteed a basic degree of engagement with Italian philology on the part of the English.

But there was something about Timpanaro's work which gave him particular added traction in English classics. So much of an outlier in this respect was Timpanaro that he was even elected a corresponding fellow of the British Academy as early as 1975 – with no other Italian philologist winning election for another thirty years. This burgeoning reputation in England was helped by the motors of correspondence, which Timpanaro maintained vigorously. He had active letter exchanges ongoing with some of the biggest names working in England in the second half of the twentieth century – Fraenkel and Kenney, as well as Harry Jocelyn (1933–2000; a professor of Latin at Manchester), Michael Reeve (1943–; Kenney's successor as Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge), and Otto Skutsch (1906–1990; a professor of Latin at University College London). But it was more than an effect of Timpanaro's prolific typewriter. His Enlightenment principles, commitment to empiricism, and lucid style brought him oddly in tune with some of the most treasured points of self-definition in English classical scholarship.[95] This virtual shared culture of reason, clarity, and empiricism meant that Timpanaro could have as easy a time keeping up a cordial and functional scholarly relationship with an incorrigible reactionary like Hugh Lloyd-Jones (1922–2009; a professor of Greek at Oxford), as he could with the more liberal-centrist Jocelyn. If you want a strange

95 Timpanaro thought English philologists admired him precisely because of his *noterelle*, details-based philology (S.T. to Nino Scivoletto, 6 April 1983).

mix of mutual admiration over good philology combined with intense clashing over the relative merits of the working classes, Timpanaro's correspondence with Lloyd-Jones, the conservative Oxford don, cannot be beaten.[96] Responding to Timpanaro's *On Materialism* with lordly understatement, Lloyd-Jones says, 'Considering how much I detest socialism, it is surprising how much of your argument I can accept.'[97] High praise.

The other line of reception has been through Timpanaro's broader political and philosophical writings, particularly via Perry Anderson and the *New Left Review* throughout the '70s and '80s. The *NLR* translated and published segments of both Timpanaro's most provocative and interesting works, later publishing them whole through the imprint New Left Books: *On Materialism* and *The Freudian Slip*. Both of these texts, still in print with Verso, found a good home in and wide diffusion through the intellectual circles of the British New Left.[98] Timpanaro was grateful for (as well as a little bamboozled by) the vigorous take-up of this work in the Anglosphere. Even if *The Freudian Slip* did not win many fans in psychoanalytic circles, its arguments were at least engaged at a serious intellectual level by psychoanalytic literary critic Jacqueline Rose and British psychoanalyst Charles Rycroft in the pages of *NLR*.[99] It was taken up even more earnestly by the German American philosopher of science Adolf Grünbaum in his lengthy critique of the methods and evidential base of Freudian psychoanalysis.[100] The pattern was similar with *On Materialism*. Timpanaro's strange brand of Marxism–Leopardism stirred the pen of no lesser leftist luminary than Raymond Williams.[101] Timpanaro's memory is still alive and well enough in those circles and their descendants for Perry Anderson to publish 'Timpanaro among the Anglo Saxons' in a 2021 issue of the *NLR*[102] and, now, for

96 See, for instance, S.T. to Hugh Lloyd-Jones, 20 June 1973, 30 June 1973.

97 S.T. to Hugh Lloyd-Jones, 20 June 1973.

98 Timpanaro himself acknowledged that *On Materialism* had a better reception in England than Italy (S.T. to Girolamo De Liguori, 14 April 1984).

99 Jacqueline Rose et al., 'Four Comments on *The Freudian Slip*', *New Left Review* 94 (1975): 74–84.

100 Charles Rycroft, 'Timpanaro and The Freudian Slip', *New Left Review* 118 (1979): 84.

101 Raymond Williams, 'Problems of Materialism', *New Left Review* 109 (1978): 3–17; cf. Anderson, 'Timpanaro among the Anglo-Saxons', 189.

102 See n. 93 above.

Verso to publish a whole monograph on him. Such was the warmth of Timpanaro's reception into the *NLR* fold that sociologist Michele Barrett flatteringly relayed to him an anonymous but revealing comment: that if Timpanaro 'didn't exist, NLB would have had to have invented him'. She goes on: 'There certainly is a feeling in some Marxist quarters that your position on materialism has introduced a note of sanity into the absurd debates that have developed here.'[103]

What accounts for Timpanaro's enduring popularity on the anglophone New Left? There was perhaps an over-representation of high humanities background among the *NLR* set in the 1970s, a common endowment of Oxford equipment, which made Timpanaro's particular profile of cultural knowledge – a combination of hard-nosed historical and philological scholarship, with serious doses of European literature and Marxist classics – not only palatable but *legible*. The *NLR* took learned intellectual history seriously. Products of high literary culture and canonical Marxist theory were part of that, and these were exactly Timpanaro's strong suits. But there was also a profoundly English tradition of Marxism behind the *NLR* which made Timpanaro's push for a restoration of science among the New Left a particularly resonant goal. Part of Timpanaro's mission was to challenge the excessive abstraction and cerebral theorising of leftist politics under the sign of 'Western Marxism': to Timpanaro, *en vogue* obscurantist theory emerging from France – especially Lévi-Strauss and Althusser – but also from germanophone Europe – Freud, the philosophers of the Frankfurt school – was all allied to his major philosophical enemy, idealism. It was, in his estimation, corroding the true materialist essence of Marxism. And it was partly the reason why the left was losing ground. Timpanaro's critique of Western Marxism, then, was not too far removed from Perry Anderson's[104] – except Anderson's scepticism perhaps built on a long English tradition of pragmatic reservation about continental theory which would culminate in *NLR* founder E. P. Thompson's 1978 *The Poverty of Theory* (though Anderson himself was no simple exponent of Thompson's views, and his even-handed response to Thompson shows the diversity within the *NLR* scene).[105] While the English New Left was,

103 Michele Barrett to S.T. (numbered 1 in Timpanaro archive).
104 Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London, 1976.
105 Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, London, 1980.

of course, very alive to new directions coming out of the continent, it also featured strains of suspicion towards some theory emerging from it.[106] Timpanaro could have written much of *The Poverty of Theory* – Thompson's extended critique of Althusserian Marxism – himself. Perhaps the thing that endeared Timpanaro to Hugh Lloyd-Jones was not so different from what endeared him to Perry Anderson. At the very least, Timpanaro was attuned to the urgent debates being waged within the English New Left at the time he found his reception channel via Anderson.

This double-headed reception history in the Anglosphere – philology on the one hand, Marxism on the other – generates a few problems, for which this book is designed as a partial correction. The first is that it amplifies only two aspects of Timpanaro's intellectual life, to the detriment of those aspects less familiar or interesting to anglophones unversed in Italian history and culture – for example, Timpanaro the nineteenth-century cultural historian, Timpanaro the sharp reader of Leopardi, and Timpanaro the genealogist of linguistics never became very well known simply because a misalignment of cultural literacy made these things hard to apprehend from the outside. The project of this book is thus, partly, to give English-speaking readers a fuller picture of this fascinating figure. The second problem is the mutual indifference, verging on mild disdain, between circles of philology and circles of the left. Philology and the left, it would be an understatement to say, are not exactly natural bedfellows. But such mutual indifference is a missed opportunity because it perpetuates the notion that philology has nothing much to do with, nor much to offer, politics. This is perhaps the working assumption of most active philologists. Glenn Most's introduction to Timpanaro's *Genesis of Lachmann's Method* embodies some of that bias, taking Timpanaro's more politically inflected output as something occasion based, ephemeral, and by now superannuated – as opposed to the philology which *lasts*.[107] As we shall see, this separation is partly something which Timpanaro – ever the divided soul – was invested in maintaining (see also the conclusion of this volume). But the

106 On the anglophone reception backdrop – English traditions of empiricism, as well as the weakness of the tradition of theoretical Marxism in England – see Anderson, 'Timpanaro among the Anglo-Saxons', 178.

107 See Most, introduction, 6–7.

rationale of this book is that, when it comes to Timpanaro, we cannot, and should not, discuss his philology without his Marxism, nor vice versa. Indeed, the thing that makes Timpanaro such an acute thinker is precisely this combination of philological punctiliousness and Marxist commitment. In Timpanaro, we have a rare meeting: a thinker trained in a field whose point was to interpret small bits of the world, with a militant working in a tradition whose objective was to change the whole thing. That strange contradiction is the essence of Timpanaro. And it is the basis of all the corrections we will mark in the following chapters, starting with the most major: Timpanaro's politics.