CHAPTER 1

Love and Revolution

In Vienna . . . I’ll bury my soul in a scrapbook,
With the photographs there and the moss.
And I’ll yield to the flood of your beauty,
My cheap violin and my cross . . .
O my love, o my love
Take this waltz, take this waltz,
It’s yours now. It’s all that there is.

LEONARD COHEN sings ‘Little Viennese Waltz’ by Federico García Lorca

Epistolaries

The best way to become acquainted with Gramsci’s intimate life is, of course, to immerse oneself in his correspondence. Anyone wishing to do so with sensitivity and respect for the tragedy of the man will, as a preliminary, have to overcome two reservations of Gramsci’s own.

The first is that many of the letters which he wrote from prison had to pass via the censor: he was aware of this, and knew that, in a certain sense, this made them ‘public’; as a consequence, he became even more emotionally reserved (a trait for which he was already known) in his correspondence during those years (1927–33), and occasionally adopted the language of Aesop. In order to decipher this language, the scholar and the attentive reader will sometimes be obliged to turn to other sources, namely the testimonies of relatives and friends inside and outside prison.

The second reservation has to do with an explicit declaration made by Gramsci in some of his letters from prison, echoing something he had already expressed prior to his imprisonment: he felt an irrepressible aversion to written correspondence.

From these two circumstances together, the non-informed reader might hastily surmise that the available material will be scarce and that very few references will be found in the preserved letters to the private life of a man whose principal engagement from his twenties onwards was politics. However, the reality of the matter is somewhat different. Around 700 letters written by Gramsci have been preserved. Of these, almost 200 were written between his years as a student (in Cagliari and in Turin) and the autumn of 1926, which is
when he was arrested by the fascist police. Another 500 were composed from the various prisons and clinics that he passed through as a political prisoner until his death in 1937.

The great majority of the letters written by Gramsci from Cagliari and Turin, between 1908 and 1914, are addressed to family members – to his parents and sisters. Between 1914 and 1919, this correspondence declined, and his letters to his family became very sporadic. Very few letters have been preserved from the revolutionary *biennio rosso* of 1919–20. In these years of great political activity, Gramsci would probably have been in direct contact with the majority of the people that he wanted to communicate with: members of factory councils and comrades from *L’Ordine Nuovo*. However, it is certain that he wrote more letters, especially with a political and trade-union content, than those that have been preserved. In any case, his correspondence increased in volume and became much more interesting from the time of his stay in Moscow in 1922, when he met Giulia Schucht, during the five months that he lived in Vienna working for the Communist Party of Italy in the Communist International, and then, on returning to Italy, during his time in Rome (from May 1923 to November 1926). The correspondence from Moscow (November 1922 to November 1923) and above all from Vienna (until May 1924) and Rome (1924–6) accounts for approximately two-thirds of all of the letters that Gramsci wrote before his arrest and imprisonment.

Almost 500 letters written by Gramsci between November 1926 and 1937, a few months before his death, have been preserved. Although these letters are customarily known as the ‘prison letters’, not all of them were strictly speaking written from the various prisons to which Gramsci was transferred after his arrest. A few of them were composed during his exile on the island of Ustica, where he was sent along with other antifascist militants while he awaited trial and where he lived under surveillance in a private house (December 1926–January 1927). Many others were written from the clinics to which Gramsci was admitted when he was already seriously ill, from the end of 1933 onwards: the clinic of Doctor Cusumano, in Formia (from December 1933 to August 1935), and the Quisisana clinic in Rome, where he remained on parole until just before his death in April 1937. Of this total of almost 500 letters, the majority of those written from the prison in Turi de Bari were addressed to Gramsci’s sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht (some of these were intended for Giulia as well and others were meant to be read by Piero Sraffa, Gramsci’s friend who was an economist and who was acting as an intermediary with the leadership of the Communist Party of Italy); many are addressed to Giulia Schucht, and to their two sons, Delio and Giuliano (who were both with their mother in Moscow). A much smaller part of Gramsci’s correspondence from this period consists