

S F VANNI: Germinating From Old Roots

Alessandro Cassin (March 05, 2015)



Reopening the landmark bookstore S F VANNI has been a long time dream for us at Centro Primo Levi. We are finally about to realize this dream, in an updated, 21st Century incarnation.

The bookstore, in business from 1884 to 2004, reopens as a pop-up bookstore, cultural space and headquarters for our own CPL Editions.

In a city in constant transformation, we believe in the symbolic value of the places that embody its cultural memory.

The Amato Opera Theater was forced to shut its doors for good in 2009, the last of several downtown independent Italian institutions.



We feel strongly that we need to go against the current by reviving and preserving the ancient Italian tradition of independent publishers- booksellers and attempt to redefine its role in the age of Amazon.

The new VANNI space has been reimagined with help from architect Bonnie Roche and designer Jonathan Wajskol. The first of the two-room bookstore has become a multifunctional space for book presentations, lectures, and film screenings. The second room —with the original books published by S F VANNI— will be preserved as ‘urban archeology’. As one proceeds inside, it becomes a journey back in time, as it were, from color to black and white.

The import of Italian books in New York began with Lorenzo Da Ponte, (Mozart’s librettist), who first brought his library to Columbia University in 1805. In 1884 S F Vanni opened the first Italian bookstore (at 548 West Broadway); bookseller and publisher Andrea Ragusa, brought it into the 20th century on Bleecker Street and then to its present address, at 30 W 12th Street.

What strikes me about this lineage—one that we are proud to take part in— is that it was carried out not by big corporations, but by a handful of visionary individuals. Another powerful example is Paolo Milano, the literary critic who arrived in New York in flight from the Racial Laws in the late ‘30s. His Portable Dante single- handedly sparked fresh interest in Italian literature throughout American academia.

For the past 15 years, spearheaded by Natalia Indrmi’s unwavering commitment, Centro Primo Levi has established itself as a platform providing access to resources on Italian Jewish Studies and current affairs. CPL Editions, our new publishing venture, is a natural extension of Centro Primo Levi’s online presence and its role in bridging the linguistic gap between Italy and the English-speaking world.

Our publications, produced in partnership with OR BOOKS, will be available as e-books and print-on-demand, through the free CPL Editions APP, available at iTunes.

We are deeply grateful to Professor Olga Ragusa for giving us the opportunity to link our new adventure to this history-laden location.

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CPL EDITIONS.

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