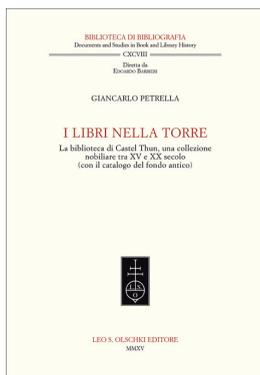


GIANCARLO PETRELLA

I LIBRI NELLA TORRE

LA BIBLIOTECA DI CASTEL THUN,
UNA COLLEZIONE NOBILIARE TRA XV E XX SECOLO
(CON IL CATALOGO DEL FONDO ANTICO)

In the foothills of the Alps, north of Vigo di Ton (Trento), strategically placed in the Valle del Noce along one of the routes connecting Italy and northern Europe, the imposing edifice of Castel Thun is located. The feudal castle was the residence from the 13th century onwards of the noble lineage of the counts of Thun, one of the most influential aristocratic dynasties in the Trentino and the Tyrol. There were several branches of the family but from the sixteenth century onwards the two principal ones lived in the Trentino and Bohemia. There were many members of the family in the higher echelons of the Church, including four titular bishops of Trento. A gradual but inexorable decline set in, reinforced by the secularisation of the Principality, the loss of ecclesiastical benefices and an imprudent management of the family finances which, in the 1860s, obliged count Matteo II (1812-1892) to start selling off the family patrimony, beginning with the sale at auction of the family palace in Trento (today the seat of the city council) and continuing with the dispersal of most of the fam-



ily's collections of paintings. Similarly it is entirely possible that the avid attentions of Baron Anselm Rothschild, Ludwig Rosenthal and the other antiquarians and dealers who visited Castel Thun were also drawn to some of the outstanding volumes in the library, whose size and extent remain almost completely unknown to us. In

1992 the entire complex of buildings was acquired by the 'Provincia Autonoma di Trento' which undertook a long process of restoration together with the transfer of the library collections - or what remained of them (over 8,000 items, comprising monographs, pamphlets and periodicals, published between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries) - from the room where they were originally housed, in the southwestern tower of the castle, to the Provincial Archives in Trento.

What today is still known as the library of Castel Thun is a composite, stratified organism which developed over more than five centuries, the result of acquisitions unsystematically made by individual members of the family, each with different tastes and concerns in what books they



read and which subjects they studied. Yet nothing can be known of these stratifications and personal choices because of the absence, prior to the nineteenth century, of historical catalogues and other bibliographical information created within the library which would show how the collection developed and what it was like at certain junctures in its history. Such suspicions arise because so few incunables and other valuable editions survive today when compared with the two hundred or so volumes listed by the young count Matteo II in a letter written as early as 1829. From the collection about which the bibliophile count, still in his teens, boasts in the letter, the product of a collecting fever characteristic of the early nineteenth century, a mere four incunables and a few Aldine editions survive.

Notes of ownership and provenance in general are the only clues left today to those trying to research the development of what is apparently a uniform and monolithic family library built up silently over twenty or so generations. Examining the surviving books themselves does not enable us to trace provenances back beyond the third generation of the counts of Thun. On the other hand, the surviving historical/archival documentation provides clear evidence of the purchase and use of books in the Renaissance period. There are initial indications of this in two *post mortem* inventories. The first is an inventory of the moveable and immovable assets belonging to Vittore Thun (1445–1487) and records the presence of twenty or so volumes. The choices of language and

content reveal a small private library put together with rather conservative tastes. The second and substantial *post mortem* inventory, taken after the death of Michele III Thun (died 1522) reveal an unexpected but intense interest in devotional and homiletic literature. But once again it is the notes of ownership which enable us to glimpse how the family library grew over the course of the centuries as individual counts, each with their own predilections and cultural leanings, acquired books on their own account. A considerable number of eighteenth-century French editions stand out, all with the ownership inscription of count Francesco Matteo Giuseppe, better known as Matteo I (1742–1810), who updated the library with a series of encyclopedic dictionaries capable of satisfying the need for rapid and succinct information on a vast range of topics ranging from mythology to chemistry. The shelves of Matteo's library reveal a continuous and consistent concern for the products of the Enlightenment culture of his time. It is also probable, though we must be cautious in the absence of explicit evidence, that Matteo I was also responsible for the purchase of many of the works, including the more subversive texts, of the *philosophes*. If we move forwards a few decades into the nineteenth century, we find that the Thun library grew notably under Matteo II, a bibliophile of refined tastes from a very early age. Almost nothing – for understandable reasons – survives of this collection in the library today, since it was sold off piecemeal (there is no record of a public sale by auction of the



Thun collection) in private and personal deals with antiquarians and collectors, as another letter, from 1865, which mentions the antiquarian dealer Ugo Bludowsky's interest in acquiring several volumes, including a valuable missal printed by the Giunta, would suggest. Of even greater interest – from a methodological point of view as well as for the reconstruction of the historical library – are the lists of incunables and sixteenth-century editions, including many Aldines, which Matteo drew up no doubt with a view to possible purchasers and which now serve instead as documentary evidence in piecing together what has been irretrievably lost.

Another external source of documentation much used by scholars of library history are booksellers' invoices. Rather earlier on the other hand – from the 1820s and 1830s – is a copious exchange of letters, again to be found in the Thun archive,

with the Remondini booksellers in Bassano. The only bibliographical tool which sheds light on the library patrimony of the Thun family is a large catalogue, arranged by subject, consisting of about 400 pages and almost certainly compiled at the end of the nineteenth century by the countess Maria Teresa (the fifth child of Matteo II) who re-organised the collection on a subject basis; the catalogue continued to be supplemented and updated until the second half of the twentieth century. Yet when compared with the centuries-old history of the Thun library, the subject catalogue is merely a point of arrival, a snapshot of a collection which was no longer actively growing or could indeed be considered dead. We need to search in other directions to uncover the original forms of the Castel Thun library and find the missing fragments of what was once a flourishing aristocratic collection.

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