

Reflections on the Lipogram

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On coming across a collection of late eighteenth-century Italian sermons written entirely without once using the letter R,¹ I fell to musing on possible reasons for a literary exercise frequently anathematised as trivial, unmotivated and finally pointless. Brief though this work by Luigi Casolini is (running to only 87 pages), it struck me as a remarkable achievement, given the richly rhoticized character of the Italian language.

It was only to be expected, when I chanced upon Casolini's book and read that it was a show-case of devotional essays from which the R had been arbitrarily banished, that I should think of Perec. In more recent times, French novelist Georges Perec, too, has been a practitioner of the wilful foolishness of the extended lipogram—notably in his 1969 lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition*, a work of more than 300 pages written entirely without the use of the letter E, the most commonly occurring vowel in the French language. Perec has written a mock-scholarly history of the lipogram in which he mentions Casolini's work in parenthesis as one of a handful of 'minor' Italian lipogrammatic works.² (That he describes the work as a 'treatise' on the subject, which it is not, suggests that Perec may not have been personally familiar with it.)

Perec was one of a group of theorists and practitioners of texts predicated on formal constraints of both mathematical and linguistic kinds—the OULIPO group (the name being an acronym for 'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle' or the 'Workshop of Potential Literature', founded in 1960).³ He was not very forthcoming on the motive and the significance of his own use of a variety of formal constraints and systematic artifices. His other famous novel, *Life: A User's Manual*,⁴ is based on the Latin bi-square to the power of 10, which makes for pangrammatic plenitude. But my interest for the present is the lipogram, based on the arbitrary exclusion—or more properly, and more violently, the arbitrary *excision*—of one linguistic element.

Georges Perec's own few remarks—at once oblique and acute—on the matter, and Casolini's quite direct and, though obtuse, revealing observations on his banishment of the letter R, both make me reflect on the apparently trivialising practice of the lipogram, among the kinds of formalist games for which their practitioners are often condemned—

on grounds which are finally not literary or aesthetic, but moral. Luigi Casolini's stated reason for the exclusion of the letter R made me reflect on the impulse behind it.

Let me give you something of Casolini's Preface,⁵ a semi-serious, possibly only half-intentional parody of the eighteenth-century Address to the Reader, which in any case is characterised—in English and Italian works alike in this period—by a certain facetiousness, usually in the prosecution of the 'topic of modesty':

I hereby offer this my Essay and Example of a series of Eulogies composed without the letter R.

Spurred on by friends, induced thereto by Envy in its many guises, pricked on by Wit, seduced aside by an innate desire for a modicum of praise, I submit them here at last in Print to a Publick which, since it is pleased to give me a gracious hearing in the Pulpit, is thereby possessed of a well-earned qualification to judge any one among my endeavours....

In a Century when men are indeed so infatuated by the demonic ubiquity of the Printing Press that not a Day passes without Opuscles, Epistles, Essays, Announcements, Commentaries, Explications and Systems of every kind seeing the light of that Day, to be purchased, read, and to pass into general circulation, while God Himself alone knows what they may contain of true Substance or genuine Novelty, since many of these works consist in little else but their Title—thus, say I, in a Century such as this, the Publication of these my Eulogies can scarcely be accounted a Crime.

The complaint about a characteristically modern superfluity of books runs throughout the eighteenth century, and is well ventilated in the burgeoning periodical literature. The complaint is as much about the excess of printed matter as it is about the increase in knowledge (now we would call it information). In 'the Year of Our Lord 1715', an inspired solution had been offered in

*The One-book Man,
OR:
an entire Library
in one Small Book
devised expressly for those Persons of Wit
who yet lack Time, Opportunity, even a Life
sufficiently long to read the thousands of Authors
who have written to date on the State of the Nations of the World,
on the chief Religions, on developments in
the Sciences and the Arts,*

*and who are yet Concerned not to appear Ignorant in Conversation;
all of which they will find within,
in Summary form,
from the Beginning of the World
until the Year of Our Lord 1715*

by Noël Eudes De l'Arche. Casolini's remark seems to me to have the familiar ease of a commonplace regarding the emergent mass culture that is recognised by this proposal for a 'one-book man' which, after first appearing in French in 1715, circulated widely in an Italian translation.⁶

Having facetiously asserted his right to add to one of the problems of the age, Casolini goes on in his Preface to draw attention to his adoption of the arbitrary constraint of the lipogram: 'Nor shall I omit to own to some small liking for the difficult Task, and to the sleepless nights that these Eulogies have cost me; and nor do I think that they may be accounted entirely useless, or blameworthy'. Then comes a complete lapse in prefatorial decorum; bluntly, Casolini declares: 'I pronounce my Rs somewhat defectively [Io sviluppo la R alquanto blesa]'. To continue:

Among the ranks of those who cannot see farther than their own Noses are some who, foolishly confounding Wit with the ability to give it Tongue, were wont to scoff at the Speech and allow no weight to the Ideas.

In their distaste for the Sound, they disdained the Substance. As if to be tongue-tied, or a stammerer, is of necessity to be an unredeemable Dolt, and slow of Wit.

Piqued by an Injustice perpetrated not against me alone, but against not a few who, even more defective than I in their Speech, are capable of Thought notwithstanding, and who compose and write sublimely, with diligence, difficulty, and the sweated brow, I was at pains to conceal this Defect of Nature, and did therefore banish my innocent Enemy from these Eulogies, and thereby had the better of my carping Criticks.

I have bested them indeed. Let them perform, if indeed they can, what I have performed here, and then only may they insult and mock me as they will, and I will not say them nay.

Casolini next raises the question of substitution as a means of complying with the lipogrammatic constraint, remarking that 'there are those who hold as a matter of conviction that all can be achieved, and expeditiously at that, by means of the Epithet and the Synonym'.

Critics hostile to the lipogram have cited substitution—the resort to

the synonym—as the easy way around a false problem, and inimical to the true lipogram. The very skimpy Italian history of the lipogram has focussed very largely on the ‘non-letter’ R. In his summary history Perec cites ‘some stupid scorners [who] claim that Orazio Fidele’s poem [*L’R sbandita sopra la potenza d’amore nella quale si leggono mille e settecento versi senza la lettera R* (Turin, 1633)] has no value whatever, that it suffices merely to say *Cupido* for *Amore* and *Cintia* for *Venere*.’⁷ On the matter of the solution of substitution, Casolini thinks that

to be given to such a belief is either to be entirely without an understanding of such matters, or to be quite deluded.

The Italian Tongue rests entirely upon the Infinitive, upon the Subjunctive, and upon the Causal construction.

Who is there who does not know that herein lies that very Thing I must perforce flee?

Thus it behoves me to devise a new Syntax and a new Method, and I might venture so far as to say I must needs coin a new Language.

This, and not the Synonym, nor the Epithet, is the means by which I have succeeded—not to be sure without some measure of happy accident,—in the Mutilation of the Alphabet, and thus have I won my Cause.

Now it is for the Wise, to whom alone I appeal, to take measure of the incalculable and inestimable Labour expended in an undertaking of the kind ...

As indeed they have.

For on delivering my Eulogy on the Passion of Our Lord, in the Church of the Holy Martyrs, I was met with the indulgence of the Congregation, who found it not displeasing, and the judgement of the Publick may be estimated insofar as that Publick has subsequently read it in two Editions.

Now that with the ... present Volume, I proffer further Proof that *volenti nil difficile*, I believe I may expect something more than mere indulgence from those same ranks of the Wise....

That there are those who have gone before me, I well know, and I take no offence at the thought that some will follow me in this manner of Composition.

Indeed I call to mind having read in my youth an Eulogy set out in accordance with this very Method. But so contrary to Good Taste was the entanglement of Ideas, the confusion of Things, the clouding of noble Sentiments that were contained in this tedious Farrago, that I let it drop from my hand and from that time forward have avoided it like the very Plague.

In these my own Eulogies, on the contrary, I flatter myself that the

Ideas are sufficiently clear and distinct, the Style competently fluid, the Meaning simple, the Sentiments such as afford nourishment to the Spirit, always making allowances for some few words and parenthetical clauses which smack somewhat of Novelty: a Crime that may be accounted excusable on the grounds of sheer Necessity.

All is ordered so that the Reader who sees fit to espouse my own natural, cheerful and fantastical good Spirits will be scarcely aware, if at all, of the felicitous Deception I practice upon him here.

Such at least was the case when I delivered my Eulogy on the Passion of Our Lord, since there were those who, conscious of the Challenge therein, were hanging, motionless, on my words, not entirely convinced of the possibility of the new Style; while there were others, not apprised beforehand, were entirely inadvertent to it, and having heard it, expressed their approbation, and departed satisfied.

(Something similar, it is amusing to recall, occurred with *La Disparition*. In his biography of Georges Perec, David Bellos cites one reviewer who railed against the novel's mannerism, its idiosyncratic style, without having noticed that it was written without the most frequently occurring letter in the language.)⁸ 'My remarks thus far', Casolini concludes,

are not intended in praise of my Self, but in an honest Defence of my good Name. I know that it has been said—and on the matter of the name of my Detractor my lips are sealed, since I am man of the Cloth, and consequently am forgetful of offences against my Person, and love the offender—I know that it has been said that "These are mere waggish Buffooneries on Casolini's part."

Far be it from me to enter into a Quarrel; I make no claim to be a competent Judge in my own Cause. I stand to be corrected: I know myself, and do not count myself infallible: on the contrary, I willingly go to school to the generality of Persons.... I submit ... to the judgement of a wise, enlightened, humane and just Publick. I ask no praise and will not scorn blame.... That said, I give you leave to judge me as you will; whatever the case, I will rest content.

Amid that semi-serious parody of the conventional eighteenth-century Address to the Reader is an arresting statement of intent: self-vindication. What might seem buffoonery, a benign squib or a mere game, stems from a passion for vengeance. It is vengeance on the 'innocent enemy' that is the letter R, on those who make fun of the author's speech-defect; it is vengeance, through artifice, on nature itself, the source of that defect. To excise a letter from the alphabet is to inflict a wound on it in compensation for a wound inflicted. But as the writer's

resourcefulness ensures that the maimed alphabet will continue to function for him, that its wound is invisibly sutured (inaudibly, in Casolini's case), is the writer's wound healed, its hurt assuaged by his making it secretly public in his work?

Which brings me to the question of Perec's cicatrix.

Perec made much of a scar he had on his upper lip; he theorised it as a mark made on him by life, as if history had written upon his person, his self.⁹ This, however, is not the scar that Perec's famous lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition* bears witness to. From his late 'teens, Perec was often in analysis to come to terms with the loss of his parents when he was a child—or rather, to find terms for the loss. Perec's parents were Polish Jews who had emigrated to France between the Wars. His father was killed in the second World War, in 1940. At the end of 1942 (Perec would have been six), his mother was deported to Auschwitz. There never was any official notification of her death; she had simply disappeared. None of this was ever matter for Perec's writing. 'Their memory is dead to writing', was how he put it—referring at the same time to the deportation of three of his grandparents: 'Writing is the memory of their death and the affirmation of my life'.¹⁰ Perec had an early 'fear of remembering', followed by a 'fear of forgetting' supervening in the mid-1970s, his biographer avers, each of them—remembering and forgetting—constituting a scar on the psyche, by either incision or excision. He was reluctant to speak or to write about his Jewishness. In his autobiographical writing, his silence about his mother is even more striking, as David Bellos has remarked, to the extent that it draws attention to itself as a self-designating gap that provokes readers to find out those hidden markers that Perec has placed as a kind of secret memorial to the mother who disappeared without dying, and thus could not be formally or ritually mourned.

The lipogrammatic novel called *La Disparition* is not about that disappearance at all; ostensibly, it is a political thriller based on a presumed kidnapping and murder of the mid-1960s, known as 'the Ben Barka affair'. Nor is it exactly 'about' the formalist device that drives it—the lipogram on the letter E, although Perec has gnomically pronounced that a true lipogram should in some essential sense be about its own lipogrammatic condition; 'a lipogram that did not advertise itself as such (but can we conceive of this?) would have every chance of being overlooked,' he concludes in his 'History of the Lipogram'.¹¹ The grudging review of *La Disparition* as a piece of crime fiction with a few stylistic foibles must have seemed to Perec

an endorsement both of his game and of the tragic view that the game masks.

For he had proved that writing can go on in the absence of something you might think of as indispensable—in this case the ubiquitous letter E. The historical analogy with the disappearance of the Jews in Europe might seem strained, but it is telling. It is a monstrous absence that *can* be lived with, because it must. Where Perec used the alphabet, another deracinated European secular Jewish writer, Primo Levi, has used the periodic table belonging to chemistry as a formal device and ‘objective correlative’ in order to speak of the historical condition of Jews of the Diaspora. This is the opening of his novel/ autobiography titled *The Periodic Table*:

There are the so-called inert gases in the air we breathe. They bear curious Greek names of erudite derivation meaning ‘the New’, ‘the Hidden’, ‘the Inactive’, and ‘the Alien’. They are indeed so inert, so satisfied with their condition, that they do not interfere in any chemical reaction, do not combine with any other element, and for precisely this reason went undetected for centuries.... They are also called the noble gases.... And, finally, they are also called rare gases, even though one of them, argon (the Inactive), is present in the air in the considerable proportion of 1 percent: that is, twenty or thirty times more abundant than carbon dioxide, without which there would be not a trace of life on this planet.¹²

‘The little that I know about my Jewish ancestors presents many similarities to these gases’ he continues, subsequently developing the analogy with great wit and pathos.

Argon; the letter E: both so common—indeed omnipresent—as to be invisible even while each is indispensable and in its own way a part of the plenum of existence. And yet, Perec has shown, it is possible to carry on with a semblance of normality in the absence of the indispensable, in the presence of a lack. It must have required an effort so great, difficult and painful—and at the same time, gratuitous—as to be nearly impossible to understand or to sympathise with. Fellow Oulipian Harry Matthews’s response to *La Disparition* was that it was nothing less than a writer’s self-infliction of the ‘linguistic equivalent of Oedipal blinding and castration’.¹³

The principle of self-vindication, a close relation of vengeance, underpins the practice of the lipogram by Luigi Casolini—wounded by Nature—and by Georges Perec—scarred by History. By means of a game that some doubtless continue to consider egregiously trivial and essentially infantile, Perec proves a painful proposition: that the world

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics

goes on regardless, fissured though it might be by injustice, grief and loss. Beyond the page, there is no final Author to restore—arbitrarily or whimsically, as the case may be—what is missing.

Notes

- 1 Luigi Casolini, *Saggio di Elogi senza la R*, Roma, 1802. The copy consulted in Biblioteca Sarti of the Accademia di San Luca has a dedication to Sarti on verso of flyleaf: 'Al suo Chiarissimo Professor Ant. Sarti [name illegible] offre questa memoria di sua Famiglia scritta da suo Zio.' Luigi Casolini was a cleric in minor orders and theologian attached to 'La Sapienza' University in Rome.
- 2 'History of the Lipogram' in *Oulipo. A Primer of Potential Literature*, trans. and ed. Warren F. Motte, Lincoln & London, [1986], pp.97–108.
- 3 For a summary of the aims and history of the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle on its twenty-fifth anniversary, see Noël Arnaud, 'Prologomena to a Fourth Oulipo Manifesto—or Not', and Jean Lescure, 'Brief History of the Oulipo', in *Oulipo. A Primer of Potential Literature*, pp.ix–xiii, 32–39.
- 4 *La Vie mode d'emploi. Roman*, Paris, 1978; *Life, a User's Manual*, trans. David Bellos, Boston, 1987.
- 5 I have foreborne to rise to the challenge of translating Casolini without using the letter R. The full text of the Italian original appears in an Appendix to the present paper.
- 6 My acquaintance with this work is in the following translation by a certain 'Arione Rochi da Matalona' (possibly an anagram): *L'Uomo di un libro; ovvero Libreria intiera in un sol piccolo libro fatto apposta per le persone d'ingegno, che non ponno avere nè tempo, nè comodità, nemmeno una vita bastevolmente lunga per leggere migliaia d'Autori, che hanno scritto del governo degli Stati, del culto delle differenti Religioni, di ciò ch'è accaduto circa le Scienze, e le Arti, che perciò averanno il contenuto di non comparire affatto ignoranti nella Conversazione; del che troveranno qui la sostanza universalmente prodotta, benché in modo conciso, dal primo anno del mondo, fino all'anno di Cristo 1715*, Padova, 1718.
- 7 Perec, 'History of the Lipogram', p.103.
- 8 David Bellos, *Georges Perec. A Life in Words*, London, 1993, pp.431–2.
- 9 See the personal memoir of Perec by his former teacher, Jean Duvignaud, *Perec ou la cicatrice*, Arles, 1993.
- 10 'Leur souvenir est mort à l'écriture. L'écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l'affirmation de ma vie'; quoted by Duvignaud, *Perec ou la cicatrice*, p.59.
- 11 Perec, 'History of the Lipogram', p.106.
- 12 Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table [Il sistema periodico, 1975]*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, London, 1984, pp.3–4.

13 Quoted by Bellos, *Georges Perec. A Life in Words*, p.430.

Appendix

Casolini, D. Luigi, *Saggio | di Elogj | senza la | R | composti dall'Abate D. Luigi Casolini | Licenziato in Filosofia, e Teologia | ed Accademico Teologo | nella Sapienza. | MDCCCII | Nella Capitale dello Stato Pontificio | Dalle Stampe di Lino Contedine | Con pubblica Facoltà.*
8vo. pp. xii + 87

L'Abate Luigi Casolini a' suoi amici	pp.iii-vi
Avviso a chi legge	pp. vii-xii
La Passione di Gesù	pp.1-19
Elogio della SS. Annunziata	pp. 20-33
Elogio di S. Giuseppe	pp. 34-53
Elogio della Santissima Assunta	pp. 54-68
Elogio del Nome SS. di Gesù	pp. 69-86:
Sbagli Emende	p. 87

AVVISO a chi legge

Ecco il *Saggio di Elogj* da me composti senza la *R*. Gli amici le tante volte mi ci han stimolato; l'invidia in molte guise mi ci hà indotto; l'ingegno con tanti pugnoli mi ci hà spinto; l'innato desio di qualche laude mi ci hà lusingato: ed io finalmente con le stampe li sottopongo ad un Pubblico, il quale se tutto di mi ascolta benignamente sù i Pulpiti, hà acquistato ogni titolo al sindacato, e Giudizio delle mie qualunque fatiche. Ma che ne attendi tu poscia, e qual ne senti lusinga? Quella d'un Uomo schietto, e sensibile, che dopo una qualche non comune fatica, non contento di quella tacita compiacenza, che accompagna le azioni, ma che ben spesso inganna; ne chiede il sentimento non sospetto dei Saggi; disposto egualmente alla giusta emenda, se sia condannata, ed alla onesta esultanza, se si commendi. E' ella questa una intenzione degna di biasimo? In un Secolo, in cui il Cacademone della Stampa hà infatuati gli Uomini in guisa, che tutto di veggon la luce, *Opuscoli, Epistole, Saggi, Avvisi, Commenti, Spiegazioni, Sistemi* quali poi acquistansi, leggonsi, e vanno in mano di tutti; e Dio sà cosa contengono di sustanzioso, e di nuovo; poichè ben spesso tutto finisce o nel Nome, o nel Titolo: in questo Secolo, io diceva, non ho temuto che in me solo fosse un Delitto la pubblicazione con le Stampe, di questi *Elogj*.

Nè penso poi, di condona una piccola ambizioncella allo stento, e alle veglie che mi costano questi Elogj, nè penso poi, che siano del tutto inutili, o condannabili. Io sviluppo la R alquanto blesa. Qualche Sciolo di quelli

Che non veggon più lunge di una spanna,

confondendo l'ingegno con la favella, motteggiava la lingua, e non pesava le idee: Si disgustava del suono, e non degnavasi della sustanza. Come se lo scilinguato, e il balbuziente siano di necessità inappellabile stupidi, inetti, e di plumbeo talento. Piccato di una tale ingiustizia, che si faccia non solo a me, ma a tanti, e tanti, che di me anche più blesi, pensano ciò non ostante, compongono, e stendono sublimemente; con impegno sudato, e difficile, occultai questo difetto natio, tolsi la mia innocente nimica da questi Elogj, e convinsi col fatto gli ingiusti Zoili. Sì gli hò convinti. Facciano Essi, se puonno, ciò che hò fatto io; e poi mi insultino, o mi dileggino, che son contento. Ma questo è il nodo di Edippo.

Pensa qualcuno, lo sò, che con gli Epiteti, e co' Sinonimi speditamente si giunga a tutto. Ma chi pensa così, o non intende, o si inganna. La Lingua Italiana tutta è appoggiata agli *infiniti*, ai *congiuntivi*, a *causali*, a *monosillabi*. Che non sà che in questi *Tempi* in queste *voci*, ad ogni passo s'imbatte appunto in quel che io sfuggo? Mi è stata adunque indispensabile una nuova Sintassi, un nuovo Metodo, una Lingua quasi dissi di nuovo conio. E questa sola è la via, non il Sinonimo, e non l'Epiteto, onde son giunto, non senza qualche felicità di evento, alla mutilazione dell' Alfabeto: e in conseguenza hò vinto la causa. Pesino adesso li saggi, ai quali solo mi appello, la incalcolabile, non conosciuta fatica, che mi è costato sì fatto impegno; e ciò mi basta. Ma Essi già l'han pesata. Quando declamai la *Passion di Gesù* nella Chiesa degi Agonizzanti, fui compatito, e non dispiacqui; e si volle che il Publico ne giudicasse, leggendola in due Edizioni dalle Stampe del Puccinelli, e del Pilucchi. Adesso che moltiplicando le Composizioni, nuovamente convinco, che *volenti nil difficile*, attendo dai Saggi istessi qualche cosa di più del compatimento.

Si aggiunga a tutto questo la difficilissima connessione d'idee, la quasi impossibile intelligibilità nitida del sentimento, la confusione, e l'inviluppo, che mi hanno posto ogni istante a cimento, quando hò stesi questi *Elogj*

Io sò, che qualcuno mi è andato innanzi, e non sdegno che alcun mi segua in questa specie di Composizione. Mi sovviene appunto, che lessi negli anni miei giovenili un Elogio del S. Angelo Custode steso sù

questo metodo. Ma mi disgustò tanto l'inviluppo delle idee, la confusione delle cose, il velo dei sentimenti, e lo stile incolto: che non intendendo il più di quello, che conteneva la stucchevole composizione, me la tolsi impaziente di mano, e la evitai come un Supplicio. Ne' miei Elogj all'opposto mi lusingo, che le idee siano abbastanza distinte, lo stile competentemente fluido, facile l'intelligenza, sostanzioso il sentimento; se si tolga qualche voce, o inciso, che sanno un poco di nuovo: delitto condonabile alla cicca necessità. Cosichè accoppiatagli la mia natia vivezza, gaja e fantastica, poco o niente si avvegga chi legge del felice inganno che gli hò tessuto.

Almeno tanto avvenne nella *Passion di Gesù*; poichè declamandola, nel momento che alcuni, conscii dell'impegno, pendeano immobili delle mie voci, non ben convinti della possibilità del nuovo stile; vi fù qualcuno che non sapendolo innanzi, non se ne avvide sul fatto, e fè plauso, e fu pago.

Non aggiungo di più, affinchè non si dica, che commentando questi miei *Elogj*, hò fatto encomio a me stesso. Ben mi sovviene, che Salamone insegnava: *Laudet te alienus, & non os tuum*. Quando dunque hò accennato fin qui non lo destino già a mia laude, ma ad onesta difesa del Nome mio. Sò che si è detto da alcuno, e taccio il nome di chi mi insulta, poichè sono Ecclesiastico, e in conseguenza dimentico le offese, ed amo chi mi offende; sò che si è detto: *Queste son poi sciocche buffonate di Casolini*. Lunge da noi il piato: Io non sono Giudice competente nella mia Causa. Le eccezzioni, le attendo: conosco me stesso: non mi stimo infallibile: anzi vado a Scuola da Tutti. Ma se si vuol, che mi emendi, e che mi spogli de' miei difetti; tuoni almeno che puole: insegni che ne è capace; e sia veggente chi si fa guida di un Cieco.

Cessiamo una volta. Io sottopongo i miei *Elogj* ad un Pubblico Saggio, Illuminato, Umano, e Giusto. Non chieggo laude: non sdego di biasimo. Ma in ogni evento sappia il Pubblico istesso che la laude mi fa sensibile, non ambizioso: il biasimo mi fa cauto, non ostinato. Dopo ciò si decida di me ciò che si vuole; ch'io in ogni caso son pago. Vivete felici.