The Renaissance author, when he undertook a translation, was faced with that problem common to all translators—the relative importance to accord the *res* (that is, the sense of a passage) on the one hand and the *verba* (the exact words and syntax) on the other. The reactions to this are similar, regardless of the poetic school, and Pléiade poets are often found agreeing with their poetic enemies. Peletier, one of the leading theorists of the Pléiade group, expressed his longing enthusiasm for a direct translation (*verba*) of Virgil: "qui pourroét traduire tout Virgile an vers Françoes, frase par frase, e mot pour mot, ce seroét une louange inestimable." But, in practical matters, in his own translation of Homer, for example, he found that only some categories of words could come directly into French: the sense was the best one could hope for:

\[\text{J'y a voulu [sic] les epithetes mettre} \\
\text{En ne voulant d'Homere rien omettre:} \\
\text{Et m'a semblé sur ce, qu'en les ostant} \\
\text{Hors du François, ce seroit tout autant} \\
\text{Que l'on ostoit d'iceluy mesme livre} \\
\text{Habits, bancquetz, et manieres de vivre,} \\
\text{Qui japieça sont d'usage estrangées,} \\
\text{Et en façons tres diverses changees:} \\
\text{Mais il convient garder la majesté,} \\
\text{Et le naif de l'ancienneté,} \\
\text{Pareillement exprimer les vertuz} \\
\text{Des adjectifs dont les mots sont vestuz,} \\
\text{Et bien garder en son entier l'obget} \\
\text{De son authueur auquel on est suget.}^{2}\]

Henri Estienne, an advocate of the superiority of the French language over Italian and so tangentially affiliated with Pléiade thinking, had the same longing and the same deception. When he undertook to furnish examples in French of "vers mesurez," he contented himself with one example because

\[\text{[il est] plus difficile d'en faire de bons en traduction (et principalement où on} \\
\text{rend non seulement vers pour vers, mais aussi mot pour mot), que quand on les} \\
\text{fait sans ainsi s'astreindre.}^{3}\]

In the same way, Salel, whose poetry brought him the favor of François I and benefits that the Pléiade hoped to attract, felt, although more strongly, that a direct translation was impossible. He says flatly:

\[\ldots\text{ personne vivante} \\
\text{Tant elle soit docte et bien escrivante,} \\
\text{Ne scçauoit faire entre(r) les épithètes} \\
\text{Du tout en rythme. Il souffist des Poètes} \\
\text{La volonté estre bien entendue,} \\
\text{Et la sentence avec grace rendue.}^{4}\]
But the clearest statement of the difficulty of achieving a direct translation comes from du Bellay himself, who made perhaps the greatest demands on the translator. He formulated a "law of translation" which obliged one to remain within the limits of the author, but he himself rebelled against it. Having previously underlined the greater difficulties faced by the poet-translator who wanted to render period for period, epithet for epithet, proper noun for proper noun and finally saying neither more nor less than the model whose author was not forced to stay within the limits of another's invention, he later remarks:

Je n'ay pas oublié ce qu'autrefois j'ay dict des translations poétiques: mais je ne me suis si jalouzement amoureux de mes premières apprehensions, que j'aye honte de les changer quelquefois.\(^5\)

This, then, is the basic problem. In varying degrees, one wanted, in one's theories, to be totally faithful to the *verba*, and found oneself, when one attempted to do so, trying to salvage as much of the *res* as possible. To understand why a Renaissance poet-translator failed to reach his goal, we must determine why literal fidelity was important in the first place, before examining what distractions hindered him.

The sixteenth century, one generally believes, saw the increasing breakdown of medieval attitudes, but certain ways of thinking had not changed.\(^6\) The original text, for the medieval author, had to be mentioned, even if it was an invention (*istoire*), and could only be added to. Merit was acquired only by virtue of the pedigree of the fiction being told. Various Renaissance authors, because of their particular sense of national inferiority when faced with the classics, tended to extend to them the same sanctity that a medieval author would have. Perhaps the most prolific prose translator under François I, Jean Martin is under this spell when he speaks of his author. He is, he says,

*si religieux en son endroit, que je n'ay jamais voulu amplifier ny diminuer aucune chose aux clauses qu'il avoit faictes, sinon par fois muer leur ordre, à fin de les rendre plus faciles.*\(^7\)

Belleau, a younger member of the Pléiade, exhibits the same feeling:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{J'ay saintement suyvi la trace de ces vieux} \\
\text{Qui premiers ont escrit} \\
\text{.................................} \\
\text{J'ay bien voulu les suyvre, en imitant la trace.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

However, one man's revealed religion is another's grossest superstition. Sebillet, against whose *Art poétique* the Pléiade, through du Bellay, launched its *Deffence*, warns:

\[
\text{ne jure tant superstitieusement aus mos de ton auteur, que icycle delaissez pour retenir la sentence, tu ne serves de plus prés a la phrase et propriete de ta langue, qu'a la diction de l'estrangets. La dignite toutesfois de l'auteur, et l'ennergie de son oraison tant curieusement exprimée, que puis qu'il n'est possible de représenter son mesme visage, autant en montre ton oeuvre, qu'en représenteroit le miroir.} \(^9\)
\]

Ronsard agrees with him:

\[
\text{... le mot ne sert de rien,} \\
\text{La sentence fait tout, qui se dict aussi bien}
\]
En Grec comme en François, nostre langue commune:
Les mots sont différens, mais la chose est toute une.¹⁰

Martin and Belleau, although of differing orientations, firmly represent the older “magic word” tradition of the Middle Ages, while Ronsard and Sebillet reject any inherent sacred character of the written word. It seems highly probable that the importance Peletier, Estienne and du Bellay attached to a translation that conserved the *verba* stems from a lingering belief in the inviolable nature of the *verba*. As this belief weakened, it created a void, and this void was filled by *copia*.

It is impossible to fix with accuracy the date when *copia*—Quintilian’s amplification in Renaissance robes¹¹—began to exert so great an attraction, but Larwill, treating pre-1527 translation, detects a certain emphasis on what is termed a “declaration” in translating. This is the addition to the text of a small “glose” in the form of an explanation or of an additional example.¹² But whatever form it takes, it parallels the rhetorical principle of amplification:

*Ces procédés d’insistance, de répétition, d’amplification par voie d’équivalents, loin d’être des travers personnels à tel ou tel traducteur, nous sont apparus comme des auxiliaires de la clarté. Consacrés par un long usage, on en est venu peu à peu à les considérer comme des éléments du beau langage* (p. 53).

The initial purpose of the addition was clarity, but addition rapidly became a literary requirement.¹³ A classic example of this is Erasmus. The author of the well-known *Adages*¹⁴ showed a continuing interest in these stylistic problems in a variety of didactic and pedagogic works such as the Colloquies, *De copia*, *De conscribendis epistolis*, etc., in which he provided his readers with a wealth of apt and well-balanced phrases of pure Latinity for their use.

Additions and amplifications in literary style, whether they were new examples or the result of the employment of rhetorical devices, proliferated for reasons similar to those given for the use of “*nombres*”: “sans l’observation des nombres, on ne peut estre esmerveillable en quelque composition que ce soit: et sans yceulx les sentences ne peuvent estre graves et avoir leur poids requis et legitime.”¹⁵

*Copia* had a dual goal: to make the final product dazzling (“*esmerveillable*”) and to render it serious. The final product dazzles because it is filled with rhetorical stuffing, and when it surpasses its original in this, it will be manifestly better. The translator who had the misfortune to choose an author whose work was already rhetorically replete felt obliged to excuse himself:

*l’oeuvre de soy est si recommandable et si excellente, qu’elle pourra faire excuser le defaut qui s’y trouvera de ma part, pource que je confesse avoir plus estudié à rendre fidelement ce que l’auteur a voulu dire, que non pas à orner ou polir le language, ainsi que luy mesme a mieulx aimé escrire doctement et gravment en sa langue, que non pas doucement ny facilement.*¹⁶

Thus, the original purpose of rhetorical figures—aids in the art of convincing—was for the mid-Renaissance poet-translator transformed into a display of the elements of his craft: the fuller, the better. There is of course a kind of primitive standard of opulence involved: to achieve the plenty contained in the concept of *copia*, the Renaissance launched itself, more than any other period, on a project of conspicuous rhetorical consumption.
But, more consciously than unconsciously, it was the second goal of *copia*—the search for gravity—that turned the poet-translator furthest away from a direct translation. In 1579, Estienne furnished some interesting examples of the way in which an original passage could pass into French. Estienne picked two verses of Ovid and then supplied Ariosto’s translation of them:

Proh superi, quantum mortalia pectora caecae
noctis habent.  

*(Metamorphoses, VI, 472-473)*

O sommo dio, come i giudicii humani
Spesso offuscati son da un nembo obscuro.

*(Orlando furioso, X, 15)*

He then presents five French versions of his own which he groups as follows:

[1]  
Mon Dieu, que sont en une nuict profonde
Plongez les cueurs de tous hommes du monde.

[2]  
Dieu tout-puissant, que des mortels les cueurs
Sont entoure de tenebres d’erreurs.

Then, “me donnant encore un peu plus de liberté:”

[3]  
Que de brouillars offusquans nos espris
En nos discours nous font estre surpris.

[4]  
Qu’une grande nuict, occupant les cerveaux
De tous humains, leur cause de grans maux.

To these he adds a fifth translation “qui est encore moins astreinte que les autres:”

[5]  
Mon Dieu, qu’on voit l’humain entendement
Se fourvoyer par son aveuglement.

Estienne concludes that it is certain that one could translate these two lines so that they would have even more gravity.

Now, it must be pointed out first of all that Estienne is trying to show that French can be better than Italian, but the way he chooses to make it so is by creating increasingly general moral observations. (Of course this is very unfair to Ariosto who was unaware that his version might become a major element in a translating competition.) However, what is of immediate concern to us is that the five passages that Estienne presents show first his concern with the choice between *res* and *verba*, and secondly his concern that his moral gravity impress us.

Estienne’s first two variations maintain a certain literal fidelity to the original Latin passage. They have several interchangeable parts—“mon Dieu” / “Dieu tout-puissant,” “mortels” / “tous hommes du monde,” “une nuict profonde” / “tenebres”—whose choice at first glance appears to depend more on the necessities of syllabification and rhyme than on any profound difference of meaning. The differences between the first two and the third variation are much greater however than those that would be explicable by taking “a little more liberty” with one’s source. There is a qualitative difference of gravity involved since the third variation contains a personalization of the meaning. “Tous hommes”
"mortels" are transformed into "nos espris" / "nous" and there is a realization on "notre" part that obscurity exists. The first two variations, on the other hand, are independent observations. The third changes the view to participation.

The fourth and fifth variations return to the viewpoint of the first two, but with significant differences. The fourth contains some vestige of poetic imagery—"une grande nuict"—but the fifth is devoid of any striking image whatever. The participation of the third version, and the relative concreteness of "tous hommes" and "tous humains" in (1) and (4) have all been replaced by the more general "humain entendement" and Estienne prefaced this by the moralistic "on voit." We have passed into the realm of sentence.18

We arrive there because the poet-translator, after examining his original, broke it down into its constituent parts. Estienne has apparently extracted four elements from Ovid's passage: "Gods" as an interjection, "human," "[verb]," and "darkness." These were then considered as separate categories and the res/verba dichotomy came into play. For example, the interjection is reduced to the singular, and occurs in (1), (2) and (5): in the same way, in (5) the word "mortalia" keeps its adjectival function appearing as "humain," but it was transformed from the plural to the singular. The original words—verba—are grammatically modified, adjectives are added, res carries the day.

Once the choice is made between res/verba, copia—aimed at gravity—starts to work. If we consider Estienne's five variations as a single unit, interesting parallels exist with Erasmus' De copia. In it,19 Erasmus devotes considerable attention to synonymous ways of expressing the same concept, much as does a dictionary of synonyms. Chapter CXXVI—"Ignorandi aut contra"—contains as partial listings "scio, non ignoror, non me fugit, non me latet, non sum nescius: intelligo, video, sentio" and so on. This is what Estienne has actually done with his four categories. Under the heading "Gods" we find "mon Dieu" and "Dieu" in Estienne's examples. We might expect the category to continue with the names of specific gods: Jupiter, Juno, Pan, Bacchus and so on. Estienne's possibilities under the "human" category include "hommes" and "mortels" in (1) and (2), "humain" as a noun (4) and as an adjective (5), and—answering the question "Who is human?"—"nous" in (3). The category [verb] presents an enormous range, as does the category of darkness: "nuict profonde," "tenebres," "brouillars," "grande nuict," and "aveuglement." Having compiled this miniature thesaurus on the two lines, Estienne then eliminates those possibilities that, to his mind, have less gravity, but which, to a modern reader, may have more poetic interest than the ultimate sentence.

I suggest that the process I have outlined in this article and the example of it that I have analyzed in Estienne, have a general validity for all Renaissance poet-translators, and that, as the sixteenth century unfolded, the poet-translator, rapidly discouraged in his longer poetic undertakings by the impossibility of literal fidelity, no longer believing in the inherent validity of the words of his source, and swayed by copia, abandoned the verba for the sense of the original. This he cloaked with moral gravity and presented for universal admiration. If we, as twentieth century readers, find that large quantities of these verses enervate us, we have missed the importance of the undertaking.

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Notes


6 What he has said elsewhere about translations refers to La Difence et Illustration de la Langue Francoys, ed. H. Chamard, STFM (Paris, 1948) i,v, pp. 36, 87-89; i, vi, pp. 94-97.


12 Lee A. Sonnino, in A Handbook to Sixteenth Century Rhetoric (London, 1968), p. 3, n. 1, points out that the methods that Erasmus uses for obtaining copia of thought are closely related to Quintilian's section on amplificatio.

13 Paul Herbert Larwill, La Théorie de la traduction au début de la renaissance (Munich, 1934), p. 25.


15 From 1500 to 1536, through successive editions and revisions, Erasmus expanded the Adages to some five times the original number; at his death, there was a total of over 4,100 adages. See Margaret Mann Phillips, The 'Adages' of Erasmus (London, 1964) for details, especially pp. ix-xiii.


17 De la Précéllence. The discussion is based on the examples from pp. 50-51.

18 George Orwell ("Politics and the English Language," in A Collection of Essays [New York, 1954], p. 169) is able, for other reasons, to render "I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all" as "Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account."