

For the five years leading up to 1907, when *Neue Gedichte* was published, Rilke was in Paris, where the sculptor Auguste Rodin influenced him deeply. In his introduction to his translation of these poems, Edward Snow notes that Rilke strove to write “*poetry that would somehow manage to belong to the world of things rather than feelings.*”¹ Rilke shows an interest in translating actual, physical objects into poetry. Two consecutive fourteen-line poems in this volume demonstrate this, *Jugend-Bildnis meines Vaters* and *Selbstbildnis aus dem Jahre 1906*.² In both poems, the speaker examines an image and describes what he sees. In one poem, it is a daguerreotype of the speaker’s soldierly father; in the other, a portrait of the speaker himself. Robert Lowell translates these titles as “*The Cadet Picture of My Father*” and “*Self-Portrait*.²” In contrast, Snow offers “*Portrait of My Father as a Young Man*” and “*Self-Portrait from the Year 1906*.³”

The poems from this era of Rilke’s writing pose specific challenges to his translators. Phrases that cannot be translated literally offer telling points of contrast among those who attempt to bring his words into English. Rilke’s phrase “*ein Gerechtes / Aussagendes*” in *Selbstbildnis aus dem Jahre 1906* represents one such challenge.

The phrase describes the speaker’s mouth in his portrait. Snow describes a mouth that offers “impartial / testifying” and Lowell imagines it is a month that “says its yes, / when forced to act.” It is not possible to ~~translate~~ bring Rilke’s phrase directly, literally into English. Snow’s version is closer but limits the actual meaning of Rilke’s lines. Lowell departs from the literal meaning of Rilke’s German to arrive at something closer to Rilke’s actual intentions, proving Christopher Ricks’s idea that “in translation, as in other realizations of the poet’s art, nothing would be riskier than playing safe.”⁴

¹Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems*, trans. Edward Snow (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), x.

²Robert Lowell, *Imitations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), 98–99.

³Rilke, *New Poems*, trans. Snow, 121–23.

⁴Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 320.