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Doubletalk: Heather McHugh’s “Language Lesson 1976”

The pressure on the repetition of “doubletalk” in the seventh stanza of the poem suggests an emphasis on the multiple meanings of words and language. In other words, when McHugh indirectly references the unstable meaning of the word “hold” in the fourth and last stanza, she unsettles the reader’s understanding of her meaning in the poem, and, consequently, of meaning outside her poem. In “Language Lesson 1976,” hold means both to embrace and to forget. McHugh’s intentional deconstruction and reconstruction of language reminds the reader that narratives, including national narratives of liberty and freedom, mean different things to different people. Circumstances and context play significant roles in the way people understand and interpret words and language. Significantly, McHugh’s language lesson critiques America’s adoption of liberty and freedom narratives that are unable to protect individuals from abuses of liberties and freedoms, reminding readers that the typically positive terms hold negative significations for the disempowered. The poem points to the propensity of Americans to embrace a resolutely positive national identity while at the same time forgetting the misfortune of some of its people.

\*Key:

Three “I”s: Idea Illustration Interpretation

Notice that the third “I” is the biggest.

\*Notice the ratio of strong to weak verbs. Most of the verbs are strong and denote action.