Introduction

In 1995, Monthly Review published an essay by David McNally entitled ‘Language, History and Class Struggle’. It resisted the temptation ‘to conduct another critique of linguistic idealism’ (in the form of postmodernism), and sought instead to demonstrate that ‘Marxism has the resources for an account of language and its position within the constellation of human practice that is richer and more profound than these idealist views’. In particular, it sought to demonstrate ‘that this Marxist account can understand language as, among other things, one site of social interaction which is decisively shaped by relations of work and conflict, i.e. shaped by class struggle’. The main theoretical resources came from Voloshinov’s Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. McNally sought to flesh out the latter’s account of language, firstly by locating oppositional speech genres in day-to-day practices of struggle and resistance, and, secondly, by using Gramsci to help ‘in translating Voloshinov’s conception of speech genres onto the terrain of practical politics’. It was a good article. It was also a timely article, in that it came along just when the worst of the ‘crisis of confidence’ which beset Marxism in the early 1990s was over, when the star of postmodernism was waning, and the process of renewing and reasserting an emancipatory historical materialism was beginning to take shape. It was an article which gave the impression that its author would have an important role to play in the ongoing work of developing a materialist analysis of language, which can inform the practice of an emancipatory politics.

McNally has now published a book-length contribution to this work, and it confirms the impression left by the earlier article – but not quite in the way that one might have hoped. For, in his new work, McNally allows something to happen which previously he did not. He allows postmodernism to determine the starting point (‘the

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1 Thanks to David Collins, Michael Huspek and Colin Barker, and particularly to Darryl Gunson, John Foster, John Robert, Alex Law and Pete Jones, for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.
3 McNally 1995, p. 27.
body’) for his own ‘critical-materialist’ account of language. In this respect, the book seems to take a step backwards from the earlier article – almost as if it were written when postmodernism was at its most potent, and when an author might have felt in some sense obliged to begin from this. For now, ‘another critique of linguistic idealism’ is to be absolutely necessary in establishing the basis for McNally’s critical-materialist account of language. Perhaps unsurprisingly, allowing postmodernism to shape his project at such a profound level leads to some dubious outcomes. Voloshinov is now given rather short shrift, and the objection to his work is one which proponents of historical materialism might find somewhat unfamiliar – that he does not quite ‘cut it’ on the body. Ultimately, Voloshinov is supplanted by the same Walter Benjamin who has been so celebrated by many of those who one might imagine are among the targets of McNally’s initial critique. Notwithstanding McNally’s attempts to reclaim Benjamin for his own critical materialism, the outcome is an account of language which, at best, separates it from the conflicts and struggles of capitalist societies (which seems to be the reverse of the earlier article), mis-locates the emancipatory potentials in such societies, and all but crushes those that it does locate. Ironically, this means that McNally’s book will have an important role to play in the development of a Marxist account of language – but largely of a negative kind.

**Idealism, the body and materialism**

For many readers, one of the most pleasing aspects of McNally’s earlier article was his prompt dismissal of postmodernism, followed by his attempt to build upon the insights of Voloshinov. In *Bodies of Meaning*, however, we find a very different approach. Here we are told that a critical-materialist account of language must begin from a critique of linguistic idealism, for ‘the task of critical theory is to produce a knowledge . . . derived from attending to the fragments which have escaped the imperial ambitions of linguistic idealism’ (p. 4). The fragments that escape these ambitions are, for McNally, bodies. For, though postmodernism may be replete with talk of the body, the real human body, the ‘sensate, biocultural, laboring body’ exceeds ‘the sovereign pretensions of language and mind’. Thus the postmodernists end up seeking to banish it.4 But it hangs around, as an ‘excrescence’, to haunt its would-be banisher. So, for McNally, the body is the key both to the undoing of the new idealism, and the necessary starting point for an alternative critical materialism. As regards the former, taking inspiration from Bakhtin’s analysis of Rabelais, he will puncture the pretensions of postmodernism

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4 Or to retain only so much of it as can be turned into ‘the empty stuff of post-structural linguistics’ (McNally 2001, pp. 1, 10 and 12).