İSTANBUL UNIVERSITY PRESS

Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi
Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Book Review · Open Access

The Philosophical and Social Power of Poetic Language: A Review of Mills' *Book Poetry, Performativity, and Ordinary Language Philosophy*
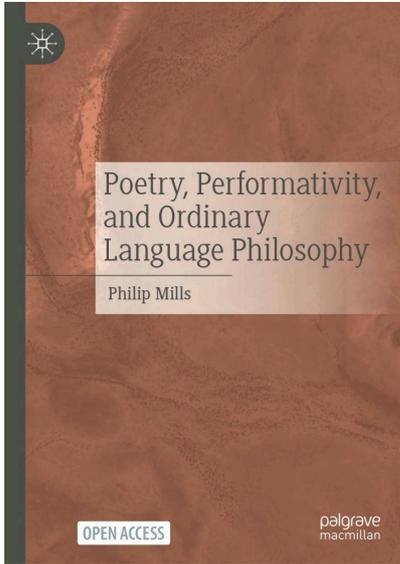
Recep Baydemir [1]

[1] Ahi Evran University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Sociology, Kırşehir, Türkiye

"Poetics thus becomes a form of philosophy of language concerned with the new, with invention, with the generation of significance. It is in this sense that poetics is performative: it aims at producing effects in the world. As we have seen, these effects cannot be totally controlled as they function on the mode of perlocution rather than illocution, but this does not certainly mean that poetry is ineffective. It is effective in an alternative way, in changing our ways of seeing and being in the world" (Mills, 2025, p. 193).

Corresponding author: Recep Baydemir recep.baydemir@ahievran.edu.tr

The interaction between literary theory and the philosophy of language has, in recent years, increasingly opened up discussions on the influence of philosophical discourse on aesthetic forms and the intellectual potential of poetic language. In this context, Philip Mills' work *Poetry, Performativity, and Ordinary Language Philosophy*offers an interdisciplinary and original approach, arguing that poetry can be understood both as an aesthetic form of expression and as a philosophical act that reveals the world-constituting nature of language. Mills argues that poetic language, which Austin dismissed as 'non-seriousness' and 'parasitic' in his work *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), can actually be at the centre of performative language theory. Mills enriches this claim with references to figures such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Friedrich Nietzsche, and successfully grounds it with examples drawn from contemporary French poetry.

The book transcends Austin's traditional boundaries and emphasises the linguistic and social transformative power of poetry. Engaging in dialogue with Nietzsche's early thoughts on the performative origins of language and Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games,' the author redefines poetry's relationship with 'ordinary language.' For example, Writer addresses Austin's distinction between illocution and perlocution (pp. 52-54) and argues that the perlocutionary effects of poetry (e.g., emotional or political transformation) have been overlooked. The author's re-reading of Austin also intersects with queer theory. Referencing Judith Butler's ideas on performativity, Mills examines the role of language in the construction of gender and identity in works such as Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) and Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (2013) (pp. 81-90). In this context, the author argues that poetry is a 'creative performative' that subverts traditional norms (pp. 96–98).

In this work, Mills approaches poetry as a 'dispositive'. Drawing on Christophe Hanna's *Nos dispositifs poétiques* (2010), author emphasises that poetry is a tool that transforms linguistic practices. Natacha Guiller's work *J'ai fait fermer U Express* (2019) is a concrete example of this approach. Guiller questions the relationship between language and consumer culture by altering the Google reviews of a supermarket through poetic interventions (pp. 35–40). This example also demonstrates how poetry can influence social reality by taking on a 'documentary' form.

The volume consists of two main sections, in addition to the introduction. In the introduction, titled 'Introduction: Poetic Promises—Austin Meets Nietzsche' (pp. 1–16), Mills questions the theoretical background of J.L. Austin's exclusion of poetry as 'parasitic' in his theory of speech acts. By establishing a dialogue between Friedrich Nietzsche's pioneering views on the performative nature of language and Austin's approach, the relationship between speech acts and poetry is discussed at a conceptual level. Mills conducts both an ethical and ontological analysis through the expression 'I promise' and argues that poetry is both a 'representing' and a world-building act in this context (pp. 1–9).

The first section of the book is titled 'Part I: Parasites, Viruses, and Baisetioles' (pp. 17–104). This section is structured to show how Austin's excluded poetic discourse actually infiltrates and transforms the inner workings of language in a 'viral' manner. In the subsection titled 'Austin's Parasites and the Resistance of Poetry' (pp. 19–50), a critical reading is presented of Austin's exclusion of poetry as a 'parasitic' and 'non-seriousness' use of language. Mills argues that this exclusion is not philosophically defensible and that the performative potential of poetry is overlooked. In this context, Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games' is also brought into play to show that poetic discourse is an extension of everyday language (pp. 23–28). In another subsection, 'Intentional Misfire: From Parasitic Illocution to Viral Perlocutions' (pp. 51–80), Mills focuses on the performative effects of poetry within the framework of the distinction between illocution and perlocution. Manuel Joseph's work *Baisetioles* is analysed to show how poetry behaves like a 'virus', infiltrating the language system and disrupting and restructuring the process of meaning production (pp. 62–63). The final subsection of the first section is titled 'Viral Poetics as Performative Philosophy of

Language' (pp. 81–104). Here, Mills points out that poetry is not merely an aesthetic but also a political and bodily field of transformation. A connection is established between queer poetics and viral language through the poetic and theoretical texts of Paul B. Preciado, Maggie Nelson, and Kae Tempest.

The second main section of the book is titled 'Part II Performative Poethics' (pp. 105–188). In this section, it is argued that poetry is not only an aesthetic phenomenon but also an ethical one. Based on Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games,' the relationship between language forms and ways of life is discussed. Readings of poets such as Henri Meschonnic, Emmanuel Hocquard, Muriel Pic, Claudia Rankine and Rosa Alcalá aim to show that poetry not merely describes the world but also constructs it. Mills' approach, which he calls 'poethics' (poetic ethics), emphasises the transformative power of poetry on both a formal (poetic) and existential (ethical) level. The first subsection of this section is titled 'Wittgenstein's Performative Poetics and Contemporary French Poetry: Henri Meschonnic, Emmanuel Hocquard, Christophe Hanna, Florent Coste' (pp. 107–136). In this section, the connection between Wittgenstein's concept of 'forms of life' and poetic form is established through contemporary French poets and thinkers such as Henri Meschonnic, Emmanuel Hocquard, Christophe Hanna and Florent Coste. This subheading argues that language is a means of communication and a practice that shapes life itself (pp. 110–115). In another sub-section, 'Poetic Documents: Transforming Forms of Language, Transforming Forms of Life' (pp. 137–162), the document-based works of poets such as Caroline Zekri, Frank Smith and Franck Leibovici are examined, and the relationship between poetry and the production of knowledge and political truth is evaluated. Mills positions poetry as a kind of archival action (pp. 140–144). The final subsection of this section is titled 'Poethical Force: Muriel Pic, Claudia Rankine, Rosa Alcalá' (pp. 163–188). In this section, the ethical power of poetry is evaluated in the context of language's capacity to reproduce or disrupt social hierarchies. In particular, the texts of Claudia Rankine and Rosa Alcalá are examined within the framework of political poetics, focusing on the themes of race, gender, and migration.

In the volume's 'Conclusion: Poetic Stitching, or Recovering the World' section (pp. 189–194), Mills argues that poetry plays a transformative and restorative role both in the intrinsic structure of language and in its relationship with the social world. Centring on the metaphor of 'poetic stitching,' the chapter argues that poetry is not merely an aesthetic form of production but also a praxis with the potential to 'reweave' the world and repair the structures of meaning that have been disrupted in the social context (pp. 189–192).

Mills's basic thesis is that poetry should be understood not as a form of discourse excluded from ordinary language philosophy, but rather as an intrinsic part of that philosophy. Poetic discourse, evaluated particularly in the context of Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of 'forms of life,' is presented as a field of action that enables the transformation of forms of life (p. 191). Furthermore, the concept of 'poethics' (poetic ethics), which is defended throughout the book, is revisited in the conclusion, pointing to the ethical power of poetry. Author emphasises that poetry is not merely a carrier of a world it represents or aesthetically organises, but also of an ethics that opens up a sphere of responsibility. In this sense, poetry is positioned as a tool that enables the rethinking of social relations on both individual and collective levels (p. 193):

> 'Our personalities arise from this very gap between body and reality'. This opposition between inner and outer is overcome in the poetics of ordinary language. Insofar as, following Wittgenstein and OLP, language is public, the expression of any inner life is a making public, is a connection between my body and reality. If the task of the philosophy of language is to understand the relation between language and the world, poetry becomes as an experimental philosophy of language. By focusing on OLP and the pragmatics of language, I hope to have shown how our uses of language are concerned with our ways of being in the world. (p. 193)

The book's main arguments, theses, and theoretical framework stand out as noteworthy aspects of the book. One of the main theses put forward in the book is that Austin, by excluding poetic language, actually disregarded the poetic dimension of the performative. This is because, according to Mills, both Austin's and Nietzsche's approaches, which understand language as an action, necessitate a re-examination of poetry in this context. Mills takes a critical approach to Austin's distinction between illocution (speech acts performed with intention) and perlocution (speech acts that have an effect) and emphasises the perlocutionary effect of poetry in particular. At this point, poetic texts such as Manuel Josep's *Baisetioles* are analysed to illustrate the 'viral' and transformative power of language. Again, the author, who argues that Nietzsche offers a performative philosophy of language, relates his concept of 'the right to speak' in *The Genealogy of Morals* to poetic discourse. In this context, 'promising' becomes not merely a promise but also an ethical and ontological act that shapes the world. The writer evaluates poetry as a 'poethical act,' positioning it as a field that enables the transformation of both language and ways of life.

The volume establishes a productive dialogue between poetry and philosophy, offering an important contribution that questions the established assumptions in both fields. The author's attempt to bring together figures from the OLP (Ordinary Language Philosophy) tradition, such as Wittgenstein and Austin, with Nietzsche's more expressive and literary approach is quite original and bold. One of the most original aspects of the work is the ethical-poetic relationship woven around the concept of 'poethics.' Within this framework, poetry is not merely considered an aesthetic practice that plays with linguistic forms, but also an ethical field of action that shapes ways of life. Mills's construction of poetry as a form of poetic agency, drawing on Wittgenstein's 'forms of life' and Nietzsche's 'promise', expands the boundaries of poetry in the intellectual realm.

The volume brings together the fields of language philosophy, literary theory and poetic production in an impressive way, offering an interdisciplinary framework. Mills strongly argues that poetry is an ontological and ethical form of discourse by bringing together J. L. Austin's speech act theory, Ludwig Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy, and Friedrich Nietzsche's expressivist understanding of language with poetry. This synthesis is unique in that it establishes a direct relationship between Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games' and the understanding of poetry in a social context. Furthermore, the book centralises the concept of 'poethics' by considering the formal aspects of poetry alongside its capacity for vital and ethical transformation. In this context, Mills analyses the texts of contemporary poets such as Muriel Pic, Claudia Rankine and Rosa Alcalá to demonstrate the expressive and performative power of poetry. This approach makes a unique contribution to the literature by arguing that poetry is not merely a representational field but also a praxis that shapes the world. Furthermore, Mills reverses Austin's exclusion of poetic language from seriousness through his critical perspective, thereby making the performative potential of poetry visible. At this point, highlighting the perlocutionary (effect-oriented) aspects of poetry is an important contribution to speech act theory. In addition, linking theoretical discussions to the texts of poets such as Henri Meschonnic, Christophe Hanna and Manuel Joseph allows the book to move away from abstract theorising and offer concrete analyses to the reader. In this respect, the work is balanced in terms of both literary theory and philosophical analysis.

However, the theoretical intensity of the work and the explanation of its philosophical references sometimes lack detail. In particular, references to and interpretations of the original texts of theoretical figures such as Nietzsche, Derrida, Wittgenstein and Austin may be considered insufficiently clear for some readers. Furthermore, the fact that the poetry examples are predominantly selected from French and Anglo-American poetic traditions limits the universality of the conceptual framework. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this does not detract from the originality and intellectual depth of the study. In addition, while the concept of 'Poethics' offers a creative approach to establishing the relationship between poetry and

ethics, the philosophical foundation of the concept remains vague in places. How the poetic and ethical aspects of the concept are intertwined could have been explained more systematically, especially on the normative level.

Overall, we can say that Mills's work makes a strong theoretical and conceptual contribution to rethinking the place of poetry within the philosophy of language. In this respect, the book is an important and original attempt to rethink the relationship between poetry and the philosophy of language. Thanks to its theoretical depth, interdisciplinary approach, and connection to contemporary poetry, it deserves a prominent place in the literature. However, its conceptual density and theoretical limitations limit the impact of this contribution to a certain extent. Nevertheless, we can say that the work is a striking study that reconstructs the philosophical seriousness of poetry and redefines poetry as a performative act.

In conclusion, *Poetry, Performativity, and Ordinary Language Philosophy* is an important contribution that redraws the boundaries of the relationship between poetry and philosophy and re-evaluates literary discourse on a philosophical basis with its interdisciplinary approach. This book can serve as both a theoretical resource and a methodological source of inspiration for researchers working in fields such as literary theory, poetic ethics and political poetics, and the philosophy of language. Mills's work clearly demonstrates that the relationship between poetry and thought is not merely a central debate of the past but also of the present and the future.

Author Details **Recep Baydemir (Assistant Professor)**
[1] Ahi Evran University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Sociology, Kırşehir, Türkiye
🆔 0000-0002-6263-5242   ✉ recep.baydemir@ahievran.edu.tr

References

Mills, P. (2025). *Poetry, Performativity, and Ordinary Language Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan.