RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Genealogy of Postmodernism in Absurd literature

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Abstract:
Some selected extracts from Ionesco’s The Bald Soprano and Rhinoceros, Pinter’s Caretaker, Beckett’s Trilogy, Waiting for Godot, and some other prominent absurd works are taken into account in this paper. And a discussion of the works in terms of theme and poetics shows that some common elements can be traced which typically associate postmodernism with absurd literature. Furthermore, the common features of antinationalism, the fall of grand narratives, passage to ontology, schizoid voice, nonrealism, deconstruction of language, antiliterariness, metafiction, and simulacrum are examined. The aim of the study is to investigate whether the traces of postmodernist elements can be found in the works of absurd literature. In other words, the writer seeks to extend absurdists’ models to the motifs or techniques used by postmodernists, discussing selected typical absurd works.

Introduction
Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Harold Pinter are considered prominent figures in absurd literature. Major productions of absurd literature are Ionesco’s The Bald Soprano, Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, Genet’s The Balcony, Pinter’s The Birthday Party, Beckett Krap’s Last Tape, Ionesco’s Rhinoceros, Beckett’s Happy Days, Beckett’s Trilogy, Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Pinter’s The Caretaker, Pinter’s The Homecoming, and Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Esslin introduced the term “Absurd” to describe the pioneering work of some writers who appeared in the early 1950s such as Ionesco, Beckett, Genet as well as of the younger generation of writers who were inspired by them, including Harold Pinter. Absurdists are those post-war writers with the sense of loss and disappointment after weakening of religious faith and sense of disbelief in rationality.

If the works of absurd literature are investigated, we can find how much absurd literature heralds postmodernism. The absurdists offer an anti-theatre with works that lack plot in the traditional sense, consistent characters or conventional use of language; instead they have deconstructed traditional conventions and play of language. William Spanos, a postmodern critic, considers Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, and Pynchon as “postmodern absurdists”. Like Esslin, he thinks the absurdists put aside well-made writing traditions and use anti-formal and anti-artistic conventions: “They strip the audience of their protective garment of rational explanation.” Spanos claims that some absurd plays like Play, Not I, Waiting for Godot, etc. are “the examples of postmodern absurdist plays;” because they decompose “form and structures” and violate the tradition of well-made plays. At the very beginning, absurd works tended to foreshadow postmodernist elements by deconstructing the traditional conventions. Alfred Jarry’s Ubu roi is the first work with absurd overtones. To deconstruct Shakespearian grand narrative, Jarry reverses all binary oppositions. Undoing Shakespeare’s moral ending; Jarry has the Ubus sail away to a golden exile. Jarry, unlike Shakespeare, dispenses with plausibility to deconstruct realism, with complex psychology to deconstruct traditional characterization, with literary propriety (the vocabulary is scatological throughout and peppered with nonsense neologisms) to deconstruct language.

Some critics consider Camus and Sartre as absurdists. Yet Esslin differentiates between Ionesco, Beckett, Pinter and some other writers such as Anouih, Sartre, and Camus who reflect the “senselessness” of life as well as the former group. The later dramatists like Camus differ in one important respect. “They present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning,” while the theatre of the absurd does not cling to “logically constructed reasoning.” Instead, they try to show the inadequacy of
rational approach by "open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought." So, the formers represent anti-rationalism in which postmodernists believe. It is inferred that Camus is rather near to modernism, and Beckett and Ionesco going a step further approach postmodernism. However, Esslin asserts that Sartre, Camus, and the other like-minded writers express "the new content", they did it in "the old convention." But the absurdist transcends both the old conventions and the old forms. Another reason that leads us to consider Sartre and Camus to be closer to modernism, and Pinter, Beckett and the likeminded to postmodernism is that the former, unlike the latter, can offer valid solutions. Moreover, unlike "absurdist", they hold that "the analysis of language will lead to uncovering of basic concept." While one of the differences between modernism and postmodernism, as Hassan holds, is that postmodernists unlike modernists do not believe in a valid solution, apocalypse, or reliability of language to reach truth or a basic concept. Esslin considers absurdism similar to "poetic avant-garde." Both rely on fantasy and dream reality to the same extent. And both of them reject traditional axioms like basic unity, consistency of characters and the need for a plot. It is not so difficult to see the similarity of these features to those features related to postmodernism.

Hassan in "Towards a Concept of Postmodernism" deems Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Kafka, and Borges etc. as the ancestors of postmodernism. He considers mastery/logos as a modernist feature as opposed to exhaustion/silence which is a postmodernist feature. Both exhaustion and silence which are prominent features of postmodernism reverberate enormously in the absurd literature (absurd literature is called "literature of exhaustion" and "literature of silence" by John Barth and Hassan.) As a typical example, one can refer to the exhaustion that hovers throughout Beckett’s trilogy and Pinter’s silences and his famous “Painteresque" pauses.

I. The Postmodernist nature of Drama

The nature of drama itself can imply postmodernist inclination because of its unique logical and ontological status. Dramatic worlds which deconstruct the ontology of other kinds of fiction are seen in progress here and now without a narrator to mediate between the reader and the character. John Searle, a language philosopher, says "A fictional story is a pretended representation of a state of affairs, but a play, that is, a play as performed, is not a pretended representation of a state of affairs but the pretended state of affairs itself." However absurd literature may contain other genres like novel, the term "absurd" was used specifically with regard to theatre, and the phrase theatre of the absurd is widely used in criticism. Theatre, the most social of art forms, has special connotations in its very nature. Thus, absurdist have found this genre more convenient for their trend. Theatre enjoys an inborn self reflexivity for instance; asides and soliloquy are both selfreflexive in this sense. Play-within-the-play is another metafictional technique. Besides, direct addresses to the spectators in prologues, concluding sections of epilogue are selfreflexive in nature, for they refer to the play itself and acknowledge the theatrical situation. Metafiction and the ontological themes arising from theater (from which the absurdist take advantage mostly) give it a postmodernist quality.

II. Literature and philosophy

Literature and philosophy no doubt have been always closely related even from the time of Plato who acknowledging the power of literature excludes the poet from his Republic. Postmodern philosophy is as much or even much more intertwined with literature (for in postmodern era one loses his trust in the seemingly legitimate rationality of science and resorts to self reflexive literature) as is postmodern literature entangled with philosophy. Here absurd literature and postmodernism or in Deleuzequottarian terminology the plane of composition (literature) and the plane of immanence (philosophy) will be taken into account and the traces that foreshadow postmodernism in absurd philosophy and works will be found. Uhlmann says, "Both the philosopher and the writer…oscillate between the boundaries set up between literature and philosophy, and, further, they encounter one another in this no-man’s land." Nevertheless, we do not intend to reduce the absurd literary works to the philosophy of postmodernism, because literature and philosophy, although interrelated and overlapping, cannot be reduced to each other. Absurdist also may not be considered as typical postmodernist writers the way Kurt Vonnegut or John Barth is. But, despite the fact that they lived in a modernist era they were no doubt ahead of their time. Ihab Hassan considers the end of modernist period before 1960 and considers postmodernism to start after that. While, for instance, Beckett’s Murphy which Hassan believes to be a postmodernist novel was written in 1938. Chronologically most absurdist were probably unfamiliar with postmodernist thinkers and almost all of the postmodernists came after absurdist had published their works. Still absurd literature is not a far cry from postmodernist’s thought, because they share the same milieu. Absurdist literature breaks the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism. It calls into question the traditional conventions of writing with what Esslin calls, his nonrealistic and anti literary work. Its subversion of the conventions springs from a kind of skepticism that postmodernist thinkers like Derrida and Foucault have absorbed from Nietzsche. In fact, the
skepticism causes absurdists to be chaotic enough to collapse modernist’s dead-ended structures and move toward postmodernism.

III. Common Milieu

Post modernism and absurd literature shared same milieus, France after WWII. It created a climate of tension and distrust, which appeared to leave no room for hope of legitimacy of rationality. In fact, the emergence of the early twentieth century art coincides with the dawn of the concept of relativity and impermanence of civilization. This art is the consequence of the radical developments in thought brought about by Einstein’s principle of relativity, Bergson’s understanding of time as a continuous flux, and Nietzsche’s declarations that centers like God and man have been removed. All these backgrounds, especially that of Nietzsche, prepared the ground for the common milieu for absurdism and postmodernism. Both postmodernism and Absurdism are located in France and both are considered as a reaction against World War II. Ionesco’s definition suggests that the conviction of life’s absurdity follows from what Nietzsche called the “death of God,” with the result that humans inhabit a desacralized universe, one without divine plan or purpose. Although the theatre of the absurd was by no means confined to France, the authors identified by Esslin as being its main figures are four French-writers: Genet, Adamov, Ionesco, and Beckett. All the four dealt with the atrocities of the Second World War.

Postmodernism has a problem of definition, because it was used for a wide range of phenomena and consequently a wide range of styles. It is worthy to mention that, to solve the definition problem is neither the intention nor within the scope of this paper. But all share some elements such as, antinationalism, the fall of grand narratives, passage to ontology, schizoid voice, nonrealism, deconstruction of language, antiliterariness, metafiction, and simulacrum. These elements can be traced back in the typical absurd works.

2. Antirationalism

As a starting-point, I check whether the approach that the absurdists take in their works toward the concept of rationalism has anything to do with that of postmodernists. Absurd originally means “out of harmony” in a musical context, says Esslin. Hence, its dictionary definition is out of harmony with reason or property; unreasonable; and illogical. This can just give us the impression of its propinquity to postmodernist antirationality. Ionesco defines absurdism in an essay on Kafka: absurdism is “cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots.” Loytard, on the other hand, proposes about postmodernism that “there is no longer a horizon of universalization of general emancipation before the eyes of postmodern man.” Additionally, he says people are skeptical of truth. He believes the idea of progress was rooted in the certainty that the development of art and knowledge (rationality) and liberty would be profitable to mankind, but the development of techno-science has become a means of increasing disease not of righting it. He also refutes the theory of enlightenment. We can easily observe this theme in absurdists’

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For Camus ‘the feeling of the absurdity of the world’ springs from the confrontation between man’s conscience, his consciousness, his thirst for rationality and the inert, irrational, unknowable world. An example of this “confrontation” with rationality is Ionesco’s most meaningful and captivating work, Rhinoceros. Everyone gets sucked into the rhino epidemic like a snowball. Berenger’s position in the play seems to be a useless and uncultured drunkard, while his comrades seem logical (like the Logician) and cultured (like Jean his intimate friend). Still, this is only Berenger who is not inflicted by the epidemic. The Logician’s circular comic train of thought focuses on all the wrong questions and ends up completely with incorrect answer. Here is an example of the Logician’s syllogism: a cat has four paws, a dog has four paws therefore a dog is a cat! The Logician’s circular, comic train of thought, which focuses on all the wrong questions and ends up completely with incorrect answers or answers that re-pose the original question. He is parodied for his comic missteps in proving even a simple syllogism. On the other hand, Berenger deconstructs the famous sentence of Descartes “cogito ergo sum” by saying “I sometimes wonder if I exist myself.” For Descartes, the ability to think is the only proof of existence. For Berenger, thought not only fails to certify existence, it even casts doubt upon existence. All these illustrations and the irrational, contradictory nature of their works prove the absurdists’ affinity to postmodernists in this stance.

3. The Fall of the Grand narratives
Absurdists expel metanarratives in their works. According to Martin Esslin, Absurdism is "the inevitable devalorization of ideals, purity, and purpose" Esslin mentions "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots." This is very close to the definition Loytard gives to post modernism and its incredulity toward grand narratives (Grand narratives or grand recites are hegemonic and totalitarian narratives that believe in finality and absolute truth.) Jurgen Habermas in “Modernity Versus Postmodernity” refers to Max Weber, who characterizes cultural modernity as the separation of the subversive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres: “science, morality and art.” Habermas thinks enlightenment movement which formulated modernity struggles to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. They believed that the art and sciences would promote moral progress and happiness of human being, but the twentieth century has shattered this optimism. In Loytard’s terms these all are grand narratives that continue their existence in modern era, but they are subverted in postmodern era. In this sense, absurdists are not merely belated practitioners of modernism; rather they are tending toward its alternative, postmodernism. Hassan proposes that their antiliterature unsettles critics with a firm humanistic bent and repels others like Marxist Socialists, who “are committed to certain idea of realism.” In other words, it unsettles those committed to certain metanarrative. Hassan contends that in Beckett’s works (such as Endgame and How It Is) “There is something close to a “total rejection of western history and civilization.” This is the disbelief in metanarrative which Loytard believes postmodernism dispels. The skepticism of Loytard toward grand narratives can be traced throughout Beckett’s works like Waiting for Godot, and Ionesco’s like Rhinoceros. For instance, in many aspects Godot in Waiting for Godot can stand for the grand narratives waiting for which seems useless. However, it is simplistic to narrow down Godot to a certain interpretation. Godot can as well stand for “metaphysics” (as there is a similarity between the words Godot and God) as Derrida claims the western civilization suffers from. Waiting for Godot can be a parody of religion as a grand narrative which has resonated throughout in his other fictions. For instance, as McHale has notified in Postmodernist Fiction, The Unnamable is a parody of St Anselm’s so called “ontological argument” for demonstrating the existence of God. God is one than which no greater can be thought, said Anselm. Now if that, than which no greater can be thought existed only in mind, then a greater could still be thought after all. Therefore, so runs the syllogism, God must exist not only mentally but also in reality. Beckett in fact parodies this idea by showing how high his imagination goes, no matter how many recursive authors and authors-above-authors (like Trilogy) one projects, one can never get outside of his own imaginings to the reality of his ultimate creator. The ultimate being, God, is Samuel Beckett himself who cannot be reached and the ceiling which retreats is the unreachable border between the fictional world of trilogy and the real world of Beckett. In Ionesco’s Rhinoceros those who claim metanarratives like science, logic or religion are the first ones who catch the rhinoceros epidemic, as if grandnarrative is an epidemic which everybody suffers from. The theme of disillusion of tracing metanarratives exists in other works of Beckett, Ionesco and some other absurdists.

4. Ontological theme
Using ontological themes is one of the distinguishing features of postmodernist writers whereas, modernist writers use epistemological themes. As a matter of fact, the critique of Husserl led Derrida to shift the emphasis from an epistemological phenomenology, knowledge or consideration of the world, to an ontological phenomenology.
knowledge of being which proceeds and conditions consciousness of the world. Epistemological themes are accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the different structuring of the same knowledge by different minds and problems of “unknowability or the limits of knowledge.” But after World War II there was a shift of dominance from epistemology to ontology. It means from the problems knowing to problems of modes of being. The absurdists were influenced by or even influenced this shift. Ontological questions can be traced in Ionesco’s, Beckett’s, Pinter’s and other absurdists. For instance in Malone Dies, the novel came after Molloy; Malone alters the ontological status of Molloy’s and Moran’s world (of Molloy novel) by claiming to be its author. The same ontological question arises this time by the Unnamable, the hero author of the last novel of the trilogy. He claims to be the author of Malone’s, Molloy’s and all the heroes of Beckett’s previous fictions. In other words, he foregrounds the ontological discontinuity between the fictional world and the real world of Beckett (But this is not only a matter of ontological question. It also has a tinge of self conscious writing).

5. Schizoid and self fragmented characters

The theme of self and identity repeats itself throughout absurd literature. Lacan, deconstructing the traditional concept of self like other post-structuralists, rejected “the unity of subject”. He posits instead a subject who accepts “the signifier as the determinant of the signified,” “through an enunciation that makes a human being tremble due to the vacillation that comes back to him from his own statement.” This trembling marks “the moment of fading or eclipse of the subject- which is closely tied to the spaltung or splitting he undergoes due to his subordination to the signifier…” Absurdists, as well, deconstruct the previously held, clear-cut and epistemological concepts of self and its integrity. In doing so he approaches what poststructuralists like Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, and Lacan believe about self and identity. For example, false identity of Pinter’s characters can be a reconstruction of the conventional self. The characters often use false name or have more than one name. The Unnamable begins with “Where now? What now? When now? unquestioning. I, say I. unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, this is the beginning, call that on…” At the end of Malone Dies, the previous novel of the trilogy, the self of Malone as the narrative of the story has died and dissolved. Now at the begging of the unnamable it emerges again. Self perception traditionally means to specify self to requested or fixed features. That’s exactly what the absurdists want to escape from. The flight from self-perception is one of the recurring themes of their writing according to Esslin. Many critics believe most of Beckett’s and Pinter’s fictions to be monologues. It means that all the characters in each fiction are different aspect of a certain identity or self. For example in Molloy, Molloy and Moran seems to be two opposing but complementary sides of the same self. In other words we have fragmented self.

Schizoid characters and schizoid speech repeat themselves in absurdists’ works. Ihab Hassan in his “Toward A Concept of Postmodernism” draws a chart in which he contrasts the features of modernism and postmodernism where modernism’s paranoia opposes postmodernism’s schizophrenia. There has always been a potential analogy to be drawn between the worldview of postmodernists and the way the schizophrenic leads his life. The disintegration and chaos hovers in both. Harland mentions one basic schizoid tendency is the tendency to self-fragmentation. The schizophrenic often refuses to speak the word I and prefers to refer to himself as third person. The absurdists, especially Beckett, make use of such technique, for instance, Malone sometimes refers to himself as a third person. The schizophrenic refuses to deal with social meanings as society would have them dealt with because he refuses to observe boundaries between them. For Deleuze and Guattari it represents, a non-exclusive logic of either, or, or … in place of the old exclusive logic of ”either/or”. This is not that the schizophrenic is simply unaware of differences between say the self and the other, the child and the parent, but he is aware of the differences only cross over them. He recognizes the boundaries only to transgress them. He is the child or the parent, not both but one at the end of the other, like the two ends of a stick in a non decomposable space. For example, in Molloy Moran’s self or character is dominated by the father figures Youdi and Moran himself. However, Molloy mentions at the beginning of his account that he may have a son somewhere, nearly as old as himself, and later on he notes that his own mother would take him for his father. Thus Molloy is both father and son, and the same is true of Moran, who has given his son the same Christian name as himself. Another example of Beckett’s schizoid characters is Lucky’s long speech in Godot when Pozzo says Lucky is demonstrating a talent for "thinking aloud":

Lucky: Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment...

While he is speaking seemingly endlessly, others try to stop him. In fact, many of schizophrenics live in silence and catatonia but according to Deleuze and Guattari, this is merely a secondary state brought about by society which
medicalizes them. We observe a silence in absurdist’s, if not schizophrenic, quasi-schizophrenic characters, a silence which is broken into abrupt flow of speech. This silence can be a secondary state of catatonia. For instance we can refer to the fragmented and schizoid monologue of lucky in the Waiting for Godot. Edward Albee the chief American exponent of the theatre of the absurd has come to try and make sense of the chaos, he uses normal people but they present a grotesque, meaningless, nihilistic world peopled by dangerous, self-seeking lunatics. In Ionesco’s Rhinoceros the character of Brenger is a character with schizophrenic tendencies as against other normal but paranoid characters.

6. Nonrealism

Absurdism was a reaction against realism. The absurd literature is considered as nonrealistic, but it is not literally nonrealistic. Absurd theatre emphasizes not on logical acts, realistic occurrences, nor on traditional character development. Loytard admires avant-garde experimental art over realistic art which by association panders to capitalism, a dangerous universal devoid of aesthetics that subjugates everything to monetary value. He believes “all that has been received if only yesterday, […] must be suspected.” Each artist is experimenting and expanding the pervious pushed boundaries. However, in the hegemony of realism and capitalism the will to continue this exploration deteriorates.

As we know realist fictions, especially those of nineteenth century realism, claim to represent the real life by describing external details and call it “realism”. But this logical and external reality is not the true reality of life. Absurd literature deconstructs realism (in its traditional usage) and echoes reality inside one’s heart and mind and the reality the condition of human beings in a (post)modern world of no grand narrative and no belief in metaphysics. It envisages man’s alienation in world of aporia (whether aporia of signs or subjects). In Esslin’s exact words, life is “the unending quest for reality in a world in which everything is uncertain.” He continues all human beings carry the seeds of “depression” and “disintegration” within deeper layers of their personality. In this sense, then the true reality is not the clear and detailed reality of the outside world, but that obscure and disintegration of the inside.

7. Deconstruction of language

Absurd literature retards the referential transparency of conventional writing. It abandons the idea of representation with his deconstruction of structure, language and western metaphysics as identified by Derrida. Needless to say, one of these decentered structures is language. We can see the play of language (as used by Wittgenstein, Derrida and Loytard) in the very first absurd work Ubo roi with the vocabulary which is scatological throughout and peppered with nonsense neologisms. Language is deconstructed throughout Beckett’s, Pinter’s and Ionesco’s oeuvres as well. The important point here is that the inability of language to reflect life is demonstrated by the absurdist ultimately self-consciously. Absurdist, as poststructuralists, demystify the conventions about language and structure of it which have been taken for granted. In other words, they stand against the conventional notion of language. And they do so by using obscure and highly allusive language and para-verbal language such as pauses, silence and gags. The way the absurdist use language is analogous with Derrida’s idea that there is no actual signified or meaning. Esslin believes we shouldn’t restrict our interpretation to one single meaning. For example, the uncertainty about the meaning of Godot cannot be narrowed down to only one single and simple signified. When Alan Schneider, the director of the first American production of Waiting for Godot asked Beckett who or what was meant by Godot, Beckett replied, “If I knew I would have said so in the play.” To put it simply, the interpretation of Beckett’s works is multiple. There is no clear-cut signified for Godot, instead there is multiplicity of meaning and as a result ambiguity and dissemination or chain of signifiers in Derrida’s terms. Anthony Uhlmann assimilates Beckett, a prominent figure of absurd literature, to Derrida, because as he holds both are deeply concerned with the problems of “aporia”, deeply interested in the play of language which always eludes us as we try to find an essence. The absurdist imply that language as a complex system of signs do not necessarily communicate a certain meaning, and they suggest that an infinite flow of signifiers exists which signifies “nothing” at all. For example, In Ionesco’s The Lesson, a professor tries to force a pupil to understand his nonsensical philology lesson:

Professor. ... In Spanish: the roses of my grandmother are as yellow as my grandfather who is Asiatic; in Latin: the roses of my grandmother are as yellow as my grandfather who is Asiatic. Do you detect the difference? Translate this into ... Romanian
Pupil. The ... how do you say "roses" in Romanian?
Professor. But "roses", what else? ... "roses" is a translation in Oriental of the French word "roses", in Spanish "roses", do you get it? In Sardanapali, "roses"...

Here Ionesco wants to suggest that the words of Spanish are as meaningless as those of French or Latin etc. no one signifies something. This postmodern characteristic notion of language and the lack of shared meaning can be traced in Waiting for Godot's dialogues, for instance, Vladimir asks something and Estragon replies something irrelevant. One cannot decode what the other has encoded with the same intention. This technique is reiterated throughout all the play. This is seen in All That Fall as well when Winnie’s speech is not understood by her husband and others and vice versa. In a Derridaian manner, absurdists do not provide the reader with a logocentric text with one outcome and limited interpretation. That is to say, they reject the tyrannical modernist tendency toward linguistic idealism. The recurrent irony of absurdists’ works is that for the characters to speak is to exist, but in order to speak one has to use language system which is absurd and has no inherent meaning. This recalls us of Deleuze who says philosophers both have hostility toward language and are obsessed with it. As a good example, in Watt the hero, Watt discovers that however he needs language to tell about himself and his agonies, language can not reflect his condition as it really is. In fact, words do not stand exactly for what they intend to signify:

Looking at a pot...or thinking of a pot...it was in vain that Watt said Pot pot. Well, perhaps not quite in vain, but very nearly. For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, it was almost a pot, and be comforted."

The inadequacy of language is reflected in the absurdists’ oeuvres. Using babblings, irrational words and fragmentary speeches plus the silence and gaps they create in the conversations echo Derrida’s concept about language and its unreliability to represent the whole truth. Derrida deconstructs the conventional bound between the signifier and the signified, in which each signifier refers to a clear-cut signified. Derrida decentres the clear-cut structures that the structuralists considered as center of language. As a general feature, literature of absurd deals with language in a special manner by decentring traditional structures of languages. Esslin believes the absurd literature is an “anti-literary” movement which “devalues language radically.” Language has a postmodern function for the absurdists. They reflect the inadequacy of language through devaluing language and through gaps and silences they leave in the text. The Bald Soprano, for example, was inspired by a language book. It is replete with dialogues which never lead to true communication. Likewise, the characters in The Bald Soprano—like many other Absurdist characters—go through routine dialogue full of clichés without actually communicating anything substantive. Or take Harold Pinter, who is famous for his "Pinter pause". He often replaces words by ellipsis or dashes. The dialogue between Aston and Davies in The Caretaker is typical of Pinter:

Aston. More or less exactly what you...
Davies. That's it ... that's what I'm getting at is ... I mean, what sort of jobs ... (Pause.)
Aston. Well, there's things like the stairs ... and the ... the bells ...
Davies. But it'd be a matter ... wouldn't it ... it'd be a matter of a broom ... isn't it?"}

By all these, they suggest that their texts are not closed hermeneutic systems and that they challenge the reader to participate in the filling the silences and gaps. Or in the terms of the poststructuralist thinker, Barthes, their works are rather writerly Brain Finny says in Samuel Beckett’s postmodern fiction “words, the enemy, continued to signify beyond every defeat he inflicted on them.” Finney holds that Beckett’s fictions are progressive record of his flight to subdue language so that the silence of the real might make him his presence felt. In The Bald Soprano, an antiplay, six vaguely English characters are under the delusion that you need only open your mouth to say something. In reality, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, their guests the Martins, the fire-brigade captain and the maid have nothing to say. That’s why they talk and talk incessantly. Their speech full of clichés is a parody of speech, just as the play is a parody of theatre. He thought he had written the “tragedy of language”. The Bald Soprano has no plot, a deceptively naturalistic set, no consistent characters; it is based on an ever-shifting ground of nonsense dialogue, of arbitrary entrances and exits, of unexplained appearances.

Distinctively Absurdist language will range from meaningless clichés to Vaudeville-style word play to meaningless nonsense. Language frequently gains a certain comedic playfulness. Using clichés, nonsequiturs and meaningless phrases is to demonstrate the limits of language while questioning or parodying the determinism of
science and the determinacy of truth (That reminds us of Loytard’s abjection of self proclaimed determinism of science and the determinacy of grand narrative.) For instance, the use of clichés in Albee’s Who Is Afraid of Virginia Wolf and the way language is used in Pinter’s Bold Soprano can be taken as an evidence of this.

Nonsense may also be used abusively, as in Pinter’s The Birthday Party when Goldberg and McCann torture Stanley with apparently-nonsensical questions and nonsequiturs:

Goldberg. What do you use for pyjamas?
Stanley. Nothing.
Goldberg. You verminate the sheet of your birth.
McCann. What about the Albigensenist heresy?
Goldberg. Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?
McCann. What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?
Goldberg. Speak up Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?xx

The Postmodernist or Wittgensteinian play of language rather than reliable referential language exists in Beckett’s Trilogy, Endgame, Waiting for Godot, and almost all his other works. For instance, Malone in Malone Dies repeatedly refers to his writing as a fiction. Or the game of language we observe in Endgame. In Not I distorted repetition of language brings into mind the concept of its absurdity and being a mere play. The Mouth acts like a language machine producing randomly and playfully words. Here Beckett reduces language to a noise and plays with it.

The absurdists problematize the refrentiality of language the way realists used language. However, they endeavor to reflect the reality of human condition by language despite its gaps and inefficiencies, the absurdists primarily tend to imply the inadequacy of language to reflect the human condition as one of the main themes in their works. Not only language but character and setting are totally imagistic and nonrealistic. Like the capsule the characters of The Lost Ones live in, the way the women is buried in sand in Happy Days, or the way all changed into rhinoceros in Ionesco’s Rhinoceros.

In Ionesco’s Bold Soprano husband and wife are garrulous beyond belief and there is no cliché that they do not use in the incessant jabbering between one another or to the crowd of invisible guests that, little by little, fill the stage: the people are invisible, but a chair is brought in as each guest enters. They expect that the professional speaker they have hired will expertly deliver the message. The ‘Orator’ is the only other real character, but he is only capable of uttering inarticulate sounds and scribbling meaningless signs on a blackboard.

8. Antiliterature

Absurdist undermine the idea of art itself. What they produce is rather nonliterature (in Deleuze’s terms) than literature. Clemen Greenberg, who was the most influential art critic for more than thirty years, defines modernism in terms of “a wholly autonomous aesthetic, of a radically antirepresentational selfreflexivity.” On the other side, he holds that postmodernism gives up on this and is “a cowardly return to pictorial narrative.” But this is not the case for most of the critics. For many critics such as Hans Bertens postmodernism is the move away from representation and turning toward selfreflexiveness in the so called metafiction of the period. Hans Bretens believes this turning is practiced by Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, etc. Seen from this perspective, unlike what Greenberg believes, postmodernism is a move towards self-reflexivity and aesthetic autonomy. The artist of the latter category deconstructs the modernist attitude of “art as institution” and its “self-sufficiency.” In other words, “art willingly accepts its impotence.”xxxi Absurdist with their antiliterary works remind us of Derrida. Derrida believes literature denies itself: “Literature annihilates itself through its illimitability.” As Leslie Hillxxii refers to Maurice Blanchot, The Book to Come was first to consider Beckett’s trilogy noticeable because of its [post]modern writing. He claims literature’s question not to be related to past, i.e. tradition, order, certainty and truth, but to the future- the promise and challenge of what lies beyond the horizon of the familiar. Blanchot believes literature is heading toward disappearance (la disparition). In this point literature no longer serves the cause of truth, so art and literature reaching the heart of human language comes to be characterized not as monuments vying with eternity but that which is without beginning or end and they tolerate neither justification nor purpose. So literature appears to itself as disappearance. Blanchot argues that literature limits have become indeterminate, because literature’s relationship to itself and its limits has become limitless. Or in Loytard’s terms literature unlike science does not try to legitimize itself and it confesses its fictionality beforehand. Blanchot says art falls from legitimacy into errancy. He considers art’s fall a happy one, for it brings into the possibility of art’s radical self-questioning. The same concept is put by Beckett who defines art as: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.”xxxi This happens in The Chairs and Happy Days and All That Fall.
9. Metafiction

Selfreflexivity or metafiction considered a key feature in postmodern poetics is seen in the works of absurdists. Metafiction is fiction that is about fiction. It draws attention to its own artifice, announcing its status as fable rather than reality, or exposing, in a systematic way, the writer’s process of tale-telling. Metafiction exists largely in the absurd literature. Metafiction has the power to create a feeling of absurdity, blurring the self-proclaimed boundaries of reality and fiction, of true and false. In *Electheria*, Beckett shows traces of metafiction when the spectator asks “actually, who wrote this rubbish?” and the other replies “Beckett (he says ‘Beke’), Samuel Beke, Beke, he must be a cross between a Jew from Green Land and a peasant from the Auverge.”xxxiv Or take *Endgame* when Hamm is talking about “warming up for the last soliloquy.” Hamm is aware of his fictionality. This is conspicuous in the word “soliloquy” and the fact that he knows it is the end of the play as he uses “the last” soliloquy. In fact, here we have “meta theatre”. Metadrama or metatheatre is drama about drama, or it is any moment of self-consciousness by which a play draws attention to its own fictional status as a theatrical pretence. In *The Unnamable* Beckett applies a true self-reflexive way of writing. The unnamable always refers to the hero-narrators of the previous fictions. “Malone is there of his mortal liveliness little trace remains….I am almost sure it is he… Perhaps it is Molloy, wearing Malone’s hat… to tell the truth I believe they are all here, at least from Murphy on, I believe we are all here, but so far, I have only seen Malone…xxxi Metafiction or meta-theatricality is also used enormously in *The Balcony* of Genet. Most of the action takes place in a brothel in which its owner performs her profession in a house of limitless mirrors and theaters which underscore the metafiction technique of the work. Hassan illustrates self-reflexivity of art by referring to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. “The play is a game that is conscious of itself as game.”xxviii Hannah Case Copeland says Beckett’s character “realizing that he cannot exist except in language, the protagonist spins out an existence for himself through the novel, while at the same time revealing the essence of fiction to be nothing more than words a man mumbles to himself.”xxviii Another complex example of this is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: these characters, in turn, have various encounters with the players who perform *The Mousetrap*, the play-with-in-the-play in *Hamlet*.

10. Simulacrum

Absurd literature changes the realistic function of representation which was limited to external logical reality. It creates a vicious circle by their own way of representation in which life, death, identity and nonidentity merge into each other and make an inexact simulacrum. Simulacrum is Baudrillard’s postmodern concept of the reality effect, which relates to the ways in which reality is often established and becomes replaced for some individuals and cultures; hence, simulacrum refers to the image, representation or reproduction of a concrete other in which the very idea of the real is no longer the signified of which the simulacrum is the signified. Simulation, the process whereby simulacra assume their function, belongs to what Baudrillard terms the second order: there is no anterior real, the idea of the real only coming into being through the cultural dissemination of images or simulacra.xxiv In this sense, there is no more a clear-cut borderline between truth and imagination but a dissemination of a mixture of reality and illusion. This is what is implied in Genet’s *The Balcony*. The brothel patrons take on elevated positions in role-playing games, but the line between theatre and reality starts to blur. The absurdists, just as their fictious characters, make no distinction between reality and illusion. In fact reality changes into what Baudrillard call a simulacrum. It may be several times removed from reality. In other word this confusion of reality and illusion is taken for granted. There is no attempt (or there is failed attempt at least) by the writer to clarify the confusion. It’s no surprise that in Beckett’s narrative *Godot* never shows up, or in *Pinter* there seem to be no reason for the threats, or etc. These can stand for signifiers devoid of referentiality to an exact reality. Here is only linguistic game and no logic system of language (or any other semiotic system) referring to “real” world and miming outside world. This rhizomatous (in Deleuze terms) undecidability reoccurs itself in Beckett’s trilogy especially in *Malone Dies* when Malone left himself and others undecided about some details. Or in Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* the neat distinction between truth and illusion is totally blurred. George and Martha speak about their son ascribing to him different features regarding his age, his ‘history’, the color of his eyes and hair, etc. vary from account to account, causing some perplexity to the reader and George and Martha’s guests. Or take when Martha accuses George of killing his parents while George had attributed the same story to one of his friends. Albee like other absurdists tends to imply that in our world of dissemination of images and signifier one can’t recognize the line between reality and illusion but rather one is entrapped in simulacra.
11. Conclusion

The origin of absurd literature goes back to many years ago. It has been a hidden complex, a rankling wound, which has revealed itself occasionally. It has shown itself completely in the “New Theatre” of the 1950s, overturned twenty-five centuries of tradition by rejecting all traditional rules and by facing the chaos totally and the effect of this overturning continues through postmodern era. In Herakles, Euripides posits the ultimate absurdity: Herakles, the absent father, returns home in the nick of time to save his children from certain death, only to kill them minutes later in a fit of madness, believing them to be dangerous and monstrous enemies. Shakespeare often paints a bleak and meaningless world, and never more so than in King Lear (“As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, They kill us for their sport”) or in Macbeth’s ‘it is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing’. Still this tide reached its zenith in absurd literature. Although absurd literature proceeds postmodernism, as Hassan also believes we can’t restrict postmodernism to a special era. Considering the common characteristics or conventions of absurdists (as mentioned above) and the way they deconstruct traditions, we may reach the conclusion that absurdists’ unconventional and ground breaking conventions, if not directly procreate, foreshadow those of postmodernists’.

Notes

3 See also (“Literature of Exhaustion” 64). John Barth define postmodernist fiction as “‘the literature of exhausted possibility’—or, more chichly, ‘the literature of exhaustion.’”
9 Esslin, 1995, 24
16. Here after The Literature.
18 Mc Hale, 8.
20 Beckett, the unnamable, 1.
33 Hassan, The Literature 182.
34 Copeland, 55.
References

___ (1991): The Caretaker. DPS, pg. 32