I wish to focus on how Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies* carries on one of the traditional modes of the novel: the intercalated or nonretrospective narrative. In what I am calling a mode, I mean to include that abundance of novels in letter or diary form which have been produced from the earliest years of the novel, which are still with us, and which require at least two principal fictions: that the narrative we read is written by at least one of its principal characters and that the time of its writing is contained by the time of the events recorded. *Malone* is the extremest example of the mode I know. So extreme is it that one is tempted to call it a travesty or grotesque satire. My argument is that it is in fact, in its extremity, not satire but a continuation of the mode, carried out in much the same spirit as that of its early practitioners. To tackle this, I must first reduce the field. There is an array of conventions, or *topoi*, that recur in a sort of loose confederation through the history of this mode, many of which can be found, faintly or vividly, in *Malone*. In my argument, I shall focus on three: two central and one peripheral. They are, respectively, the threatened manuscript, the merging of the times of narrative and narration, and the blank entry.

The *topos*, or motif, of the threatened manuscript gives us a good place to start because it bears directly on the crucial docu-
mentary character of the mode. It will allow me to expand a bit here at the beginning on the traditional importance, in this mode, of the text as a material object or empirical certainty. In studies of the eighteenth-century novel, this importance has generally been accounted for by its appeal to a conception of reality biased—by science and middle-class attitudes—toward the material and the measurable. Thus an art form came of age disguised as a form of nonart. It pretended not only to tell "true" stories in the words of "real" people (as opposed to professional authors), but also to provide the objective evidence of these stories in the form of letters or diaries that often comprised in themselves the whole of the narration.

But if this emphasis on the physical text had its roots in a bourgeois or vulgarly scientific fixation on the visible and the material, one of its major consistent functions was to give testimony to the invisible and nonmaterial. In a paradox that is perhaps more verbal than real, the text's degree of materiality and visible exactitude constituted its credentials as a testimony of the spirit. In the eighteenth century, this was particularly true of those novels that came out of a Puritan or sentimental frame of mind. When Pamela asks permission to rewrite one of her letters before turning it over to Mr. B., he protests that she must leave it exactly as it is "because," he tells her, "they are your true sentiments at the time, and because they were not written for my perusal."¹ The letters are an archeological record of precisely how what we cannot see in Pamela—that is, what is really important about Pamela—moved at the time. And as we read them, our invisible natures are moved too. Not to be so moved is to miss their significance—that is, to be hopelessly materialistic.

So what is curious is the combination. The spirit cannot be taken for granted. Correlatively, a story cannot be just a story. A material artifact is required as evidence of a particular spirit. As the time of her certain departure from this world draws near, Clarissa takes great pains to ensure the perpetuation of her letters—the literary evidence of her existence—in their exact form. The urgency of her concern is an odd element in the story of her life, considering her avowed confidence in the universe,
how it is constituted, by Whom and to what end. So it is possible that her concern for the texts of her letters in this material world expresses her—and no doubt her author's—submerged uncertainty about the invisible world.

Readers shared Clarissa's anxiety about the physical preservation of the manuscript, and for this reason threats to the existence of the document became standard equipment of the mode I am discussing. Manuscripts have been scorched and water-soaked, rescued from fire, mildewed, eaten by worms, stuffed in boxes, lost, buried, bottled and floated upon the sea. When the diaries of Lermontov's Pechorin are flung upon the ground in anger, one after the other, it goes to the heart. The drama of the survival of the text has become a part of the drama of the tale. Frequently augmenting this drama is the fact that the diarist or letter-writer is dead by the time we read the evidence of his or her life. The text is all that remains. Moreover, a good many of the writers are not only dead as we read but doomed or dying even as they write.²

This is the tradition that Malone dies into. In the context of Beckett's literary career, Malone Dies comes at that point when Beckett, moving closer and closer to the page, suddenly brought the document itself into focus before plunging on through it into the "Where now? Who now? When now?" of the monologue that follows. At the point of focus, Beckett brings the whole tradition of which I have been speaking into focus at the same time—but seen now, as it were, so close up that it appears a grotesque caricature. Never has there been so wasted a moribund. Rarely has the room in which he writes been so thoroughly an enclosure, so thoroughly an expression of his isolation. And rarely has the document itself been so continually at risk. Its existence depends not on a pen but on a pencil—and one so used that its life is barely that of the writer. Sharpened at both ends, it is reduced by the last pages to a small piece of lead. As for the exercise-book, it gets lost, falls on the floor, at one point is "harpooned" by Malone with his stick.

By such means does Beckett augment the metaphysical anxiety—for so long a part of the mode—that drives reader and writer alike to want to hold fast to the material document. This
anxiety is also brilliantly augmented by Beckett’s inclusion of a
distinct remnant of the novel’s middle-class origins: the in­
ventory of his goods and chattels that Malone is so concerned to
make. In evoking this annual rite of shopkeepers, here hope­
lessly botched, Beckett goes beyond satire to the heart of the
businessman’s very human ailment. You cannot take it with
you. Moreover, once he is fully launched on his enterprise,
Malone finds that by his definition (those things are his he can
lay hold of) “nothing is mine anymore . . . except my exercise­
book, my lead and the French pencil, assuming it really
exists.” Now the French pencil, he cannot lay his hands on.
And the lead is doomed. This leaves only one possession, as he
has anticipated: “No, nothing of all that is mine. But the exer­
cise-book is mine, I can’t explain” (p. 247). Malone’s text is his
only thing.

In Malone Dies, the whole business of possessions and in­
vventories, of the entire material universe, draws to a point.
Malone, at the end of this history, resigns himself to the sup­
pressed intuition that led Clarissa to expend so much energy on
the fate of her letters. “This exercise-book is my life,” he says at
last, “this child’s exercise-book, it has taken me a long time to
resign myself to that” (p. 274). But in resigning himself, Malone
at the same time relinquishes both the book and the “life.” In
coalescing words with things, Beckett puts them on one side of
a gulf, on the other side of which Malone maintains his alle­
giance, however reluctantly, to the wordless and immaterial. In
this Malone shows a deeper conviction of the invisible than
Clarissa, and a deeper commitment to it, just as his creator
exposes the book and its words as a snare and a delusion—not
the right vehicle after all. The skewered notebook brings to an
end the tradition of meticulous fictional editing that begins with
Richardson.

The next element that I wish to discuss is the tendency of
nonretrospective art to close the gap between the time of the
narrating and the time of the narrated, of discours and histoire.
To put this in other words, the narrative in this mode aspires to
the warmest possible relationship to time. Early intimations of
this can be seen in Milton's expansion of the conventional epic invocation of the muse to a periodic reunion with time in which he expands on what Malone would call his "present state." This aesthetic merging with time is essentially what Beckett focused on in his valuation of Proust as a romantic. The classical artist, by contrast, "raises himself artificially out of Time in order to give relief to his chronology and causality to his development." From this point of view, the dying Malone, whose time finally runs out, is the ultimate romantic artist; and his exercise-book, the final collapse of art into time.

What is missing in Malone and what is essential to many of his romantic predecessors is a belief that form and time are compatible: moreover, that genuine form (as opposed to artificial, classical form) can be tapped by merging with time. It is a theory that runs parallel to the theory of spontaneous artistic creation and resides in a faith that form is an aspect of the invisible. Goethe's Werther was guided by it in his effusions. Later, Coleridge, drawing on the ideas of Schlegel, called such form "organic" and opposed it to "mechanic" or imposed form. In his Conversation Poems, which are a species of diaristic moments, Coleridge sought to submit himself to this vital forming agency by submitting himself to time. Tennyson sought the same thing in his long poetic diary In Memoriam. As Tennyson points out in the poem itself, it was only through his submission to time that he achieved the form of In Memoriam, a form in the shape of a curve extending from grief to rejoicing.

The difference between Malone and his romantic predecessors is that for Malone form and time are completely at odds. This dissociation, of course, is not new with Malone. During the evolution of intercalated narrative, one can find it implicitly or explicitly in a number of late-nineteenth-century French and Scandinavian diary novels, many of them inspired by the intimate journals of Amiel. The most baldly explicit expression of the dissociation of form and time was developed by Sartre in his diary novel of 1938, Nausea. The difference between Malone and these later representatives of the tradition is that Malone maintains attention on the invisible, both as a mystery and as a kind of presence. Moreover, though one of his terms for the
invisible is now "formlessness," he carries over from his romantic precursors their awed regard for it. It is the source of seriousness and gravity. If it is the opposite of Milton's informing Spirit, Malone employs a very Miltonic intensity, echoing the fall of Satan, in expressing his devotion to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home, to him waiting for me always, who needed me and whom I needed, who took me in his arms and told me to stay with him always, who gave me his place and watched over me, who suffered every time I left him, whom I have often made suffer and seldom contented, whom I have never seen. (P. 195)

So, again, as in the case of the threatened manuscript, Beckett maintains our attention on the absent subject by accentuating a traditional element of intercalated narrative. He compounds the collapse of mechanic form by having Malone aspire hopelessly to the condition of the omniscient and omnipotent artist. Malone draws on what remains of the left lobe of his brain to fulfill the requirements of a plan, a plan that, as we know, not only falls in ruins but begins to break down the moment it is formulated. His stories are swamped by his present state; time lies heavy on the notebook. It does so because Malone cannot help but keep faith, more even than his romantic forebears, with the invisible power, shrouded in darkness, that is the source of his vitality—"the nourishing murk," as he calls it, "that is killing me" (p. 193).

The final convention I wish to consider is what could be called the Blank Entry. It is a more infrequent element than the two I have discussed already, one strictly limited to the diary strain of intercalated narrative. In the blank entry, one finds the date, followed by a blank, or a question mark or, at most, some verbal formula for blankness: "Nothing at all to report today." Its close relative is the Boring Entry, which could be any such desultory noncomment as "Ate at 7:00, fell asleep shortly thereafter." They are what can make the reading of real diaries such a low-yield, searingly tedious activity. Duhamel parodied both devices in Salavin's Journal when he had Salavin decide to be-
come a saint. Salavin buys a new journal, which he begins with great anticipation:

On with the new life! Would that I were older by one year, to be able to re-read this journal and weep with joy! I am ready. I’m waiting. I’m off to meet myself.
January 8—Nothing to report.
January 9—Nothing to report.
January 10—Nothing.
January 11—Nothing that has to do with the situation in any way.
January 12—Nothing.
January 13—Nothing. It’s snowing, but that’s of no importance.
(To be struck out if I copy this journal.)
January 14—Nothing.5

And so on for another fourteen entries. In *Nausea* Sartre parodied the same device when he had Roquentin make the entry, “Nothing. Existed,”6 which was especially coy, since Roquentin had just achieved insights into the linked nature of both Nothingness and Existence.

In fictional diaries, the blank or boring entry is an obvious liability, one that is rarely indulged in with any frequency. Its principal function is one that it shares with a number of those devices that Ian Watt collected under the heading Formal Realism. It is a way of saying, “This is not art” (assuming the logic that if this were art, there would not be this kind of wasted space). It increases the documentary illusion. But the matter is not quite as simple as this because inevitably we cannot help knowing that this is art and therefore necessarily concentrated, full of import. So the blank or boring entry is also a way of saying, “Watch out, something must be preparing itself.” The ratio of these two opposed functions would appear to depend on just how firmly we believe that, despite the nonretrospective appearance of the document, there is a secret teleology at work. Roquentin’s comment about the traditional fat of the retrospective story is apt even for the nonretrospective document: “It was night, the street was deserted.”7 As he says, we do not let these words pass unnoticed. We read them as annunciations of adventure, endowed with meaning by the future that pre-
exists them. Nonretrospective structure can at once increase the legitimacy of such dullness as it increases the excitement. *Malone Dies* is, in effect, an extension of the principle of the boring entry to the entire novel. It is one of the few books in which the teleological illusion Roquentin writes of, which redeems an entry of its tedium, appears to be convincingly demolished from the start. The only conclusion, a foregone one, is the writer's death, which, in the case of Malone, is basically a matter of being "quite dead at last." It is an arbitrary, radically unclimactic terminus for the words he writes. Its onset is marked by one of the blankest of blank entries:

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never anything
there
any more
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The only thing blanker is the blankness of the page that one may project from the last word to infinity.

But the actual blankness of the page is, in fact, something that plays a significant role in the body of this text. It pierces the text at points throughout—a whiteness separating blocks of prose. And it figures, if I am right, as the ultimate logical development, not only of the device of the blank entry, but of the mode in which I am locating the book. And it expresses in its blankness the same double quality I have been discussing, for it implies at once nothing and something that exceeds the importance of the text it sets off. There are modern examples one can find of an approach to this extreme. But I can think of few that, in the manner of *Malone Dies*, actually incorporate the total blank as a recurring element in the text—an element that operates, if you will, as a signifier.

"My notes," writes Malone, "have a curious tendency . . . to annihilate all they purport to record" (p. 259). But in the blanks, "the noises begin again . . . those whose turn it is" (p. 206). In one forty-eight-hour blank, he claims that the whole "unutterable" business of Malone and the other was brought to a "solution and conclusion" (p. 222). These blanks
are, in effect, the ultimate means of humbling the text. They are where the action is. They signify a presence not completely unlike that for which Derrida took Rousseau to task. In the very violence Beckett exerts against the text, here in the last outpost of the notebook tradition, he preserves not only the idea but the urgency of the text's referential function.

In reviewing these three conventions—the threatened manuscript, the merging of the times of narrating and narrative, and the blank entry—I find that my humanistic perspective on Beckett has acquired a distinctly romantic coloration. I have tried to show how he writes not simply in the mode of intercalated fiction but in the spirit of its early development. In bringing each of these elements to an extreme, Beckett is perhaps the last romantic, asserting his artistic allegiance to what is invisible and mysterious and forever beyond the text.

7. Ibid., p. 58.
8. I am thinking particularly of such works as Max Frisch's *I'm Not Stiller*, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, and Alberto Moravia's *The Lie*, all of them a part of the notebook tradition and all of them, in their individual ways, inviting us to look through the falsehood of words to an invisible and inexpressible internal reality.