

# JENNY OFFILL'S *DEPT. OF SPECULATION* AND THE REVIVAL OF FRAGMENTARY WRITING

WOJCIECH DRĄG

University of Wrocław  
moontauk@gmail.com

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## Abstract

The last decade has seen a revival of interest in novels that follow a fragmentary structure. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2005), J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and Richard McGuire's graphic novel *Here* (2014) are among the most notable examples of recent works that reject a linear plot narrative and a set of standard "readerly" expectations. This article outlines the scope of the current proliferation of fragmentary writing—a category which rarely features in Anglophone (as opposed to French) literary criticism—and delineates its characteristic ingredients. After introducing the main tenets and examples of the six most common categories of fragmentary texts, the article discusses two theoretical frameworks for analysing such works: Joseph Frank's notion of the spatial form and Sharon Spencer's idea of the architectonic novel. The latter conception is applied to a close analysis of the structural variety and randomised composition of one of the most recent and critically acclaimed fragmentary novels—Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), which offers a non-linear and highly intertextual account of a marriage crisis narrated with the use of several hundred loosely connected paragraphs, composed of narrative snippets, multiple quotations, seemingly unrelated anecdotes and scientific curiosities.

**Keywords:** fragmentary writing, experimental literature, collage, architectonic novel, spatial form.

## Resumen

En las últimas décadas ha habido un renovado interés por las novelas que siguen una estructura fragmentada. *Cloud Atlas* (2005) de David Mitchell, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) de J.M. Coetzee y *Here* (2014), la novela gráfica de Richard McGuire están entre los ejemplos más notables de obras recientes que rechazan la narrativa lineal y una serie de expectativas de lectura. Este artículo analiza el alcance de la proliferación actual de escritura fragmentada —una categoría que, al contrario de lo que sucede en la crítica literaria francesa raramente figura en la crítica anglófona— y define sus características. Tras introducir estas características y una serie de ejemplos de las seis categorías de textos fragmentados más comunes, el artículo se centra en dos aproximaciones teóricas usadas en el análisis de dichos textos: la noción de forma espacial de Joseph Frank y la idea de la novela arquitectónica de Sharon Spencer. Este último concepto se aplica a una lectura detallada de la variedad estructural y la composición aleatoria de una de las novelas fragmentadas recientes más aclamadas por la crítica —*Dept. of Speculation* (2014) de Jenny Offill— que ofrece una narración no lineal y bastante intertextual de una crisis matrimonial narrada a través del uso de cientos de párrafos indirectamente conectados, compuestos de fragmentos narrativos, múltiples citas, anécdotas aparentemente no relacionadas y curiosidades científicas.

**Palabras clave:** escritura fragmentada, literatura experimental, collage, novel arquitectónica, forma espacial.

## 1. Introduction

“The novel is dead. Long live the antinovel, built from scraps”, announces David Shields in his much-quoted artistic manifesto *Reality Hunger* (2011: 115). Although few critics would probably agree with Shields’s sweeping (and not entirely original) assertion about the death of the novel, it would be difficult to dismiss the second part of his claim —the observation that literature is becoming increasingly fragmentary. That tendency is noticeable in a number of novels (or antinovels, both terms being notoriously capacious and elusive at the same time) written in Britain and the United States over the last decade. The aim of this article is to examine the properties of contemporary Anglo-American fragmentary writing and to analyse one of its most critically acclaimed examples —Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation* (2014)— with reference to Sharon Spencer’s theory of the architectonic novel.

Fragmentary art is often considered to have originated in the previous century. American painter Robert Motherwell argued that “regardless of the medium,

whether it is in Eliot or Picasso or a TV thirty-second advertisement [...] collage is the twentieth century's greatest innovation" ("Robert Motherwell"), whereas American short-story writer and novelist Donald Barthelme went so far as to proclaim that "the principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century" (in Hoffmann 2005: 203). Among the most notable fragmentary works of the first half of the century were several canonical texts of modernism, both in poetry and prose: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, as well as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. The late 1960s and 1970s saw another proliferation of disjointed works by such authors as B.S. Johnson, John Barth, Robert Coover and Barthelme. The rise of fragmented forms in that period could be ascribed to a general distrust of totalisation, which is a common attribute of postmodern sensibility.

## 2. Fragmentation in Contemporary Anglophone Literature

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), a seven-hundred-page multimodal labyrinthine novel published in the last year of the previous century, could be regarded as a harbinger of a new revival of fragmentary writing, or, in other words, fictional works that renounce a linear plot narrative and a set of conventional reader expectations, favouring non-linearity, lack of chronological order, metatextuality and the frequent use of citations, repetitions and lists. Such texts pose a greater challenge to the reader, who needs to focus maximum attention in order to trace cross-references, find thematic connections and make some sense out of the apparently chaotic wealth of heterogeneous scraps. Fragmentary literature can therefore be described as a "writerly" (*scriptible*) mode of writing—defined by Roland Barthes as a rejection of narrative conventions and an invitation to the reader to participate in the construction of the plural meanings of the text (1974: 5).

Among the examples of fragmentary writing that have been released over the last decade, one can single out six major categories. The first group comprises works composed of disparate elements which have been combined in an aleatory or, at least, a seemingly arbitrary manner. The most radical type of such texts are the so called card-shuffle novels modeled on B.S. Johnson's novel-in-a-box *The Unfortunates* (1969). In 2005 the American veteran of daring postmodernist fiction Robert Coover published his collection of short stories *A Child Again*, which comes with a pack of large-size cards attached to the back cover. The reader is asked to shuffle the cards and construct out of the resulting order a humorous whodunit about the robbery of a tray of the king's tarts. Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*

(2014), likewise, allows for either of its parts to be read first. Although the book is bound, it comes in two versions, the first of which opens with one part set in the Renaissance Ferrara, and the other one —with a story of a precocious young girl living in Cambridge at the beginning of the twenty-first century. David Markson's tetralogy culminating in *The Last Novel* (2007) and Richard McGuire's graphic novel *Here* (2014) are composed of hundreds of fragments —textual and pictorial, respectively— that have been arranged in a non-sequential order, which, for the most part, resembles a haphazard juxtaposition. The second category consists of novels that feature multiple voices which are not mediated by a single narrator. Will Eaves's *The Absent Therapist* (2014) and Max Porter's *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers* (2015), both shortlisted for the Goldsmiths Prize, are the most recent examples of this strategy (earlier practised, most notably, by William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf).

One may also notice authors' interest in blurring the distinction between novels and collections of short stories, which manifests itself in creating meticulously structured novels out of different narratives (containing distinct sets of characters and following disparate generic conventions) which are granted a qualified degree of coherence through common thematic concerns and recurrent motifs. Such is the general design of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2005) and Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer-awarded *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). Mitchell's short story "The Right Sort" (2014) could be cited as an example of yet another category —of texts whose fragmentariness is a result of being published, in bite-size chunks, through social media, in this case Twitter. Another group are works constructed, entirely, or almost entirely, out of fragments of other texts. The earlier mentioned *Reality Hunger* is an amalgam of snippets of numerous primarily critical sources focusing on contemporary literature and the arts. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010), in turn, is a treated novel which obliterates a number of passages in Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934), creating its own oblique narrative out of the surviving fragments of the original. Foer's "Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease" (2002), alongside Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow!* (2012), could be included in the last category, which includes multimodal works making use of experimental typography and combining text with geometrical patterns, drawings and photographs.

### 3. Theorising the Literary Fragment: Joseph Frank and Sharon Spencer

Despite the fair number of notable examples of fragmented works in English and American literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there has been

relatively little interest in theorising fragmentary structures in Anglophone literary criticism. (A far greater academic interest in the issue can be found in French criticism, where the term *l'écriture fragmentaire* is an established critical category, customarily applied to the work of such writers as Barthes, Maurice Blanchot and Pascal Quignard).<sup>1</sup> Among the critics who have written about literary fragmentation as a symptom of postmodern aesthetics are Ihab Hassan and Theo d'Haen. In "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective", Hassan attributes postmodernism's preference for "montage, collage, the found or cut-up literary object" to its ultimate distrust of "totalization" and "any synthesis whatever, social, epistemic, even poetic". He cites Jean-François Lyotard's call to "wage war on totality" and paraphrases the credo of one Barthelme's narrators, "[f]ragments are the only forms I trust" (1990: 19). D'Haen maintains that the postmodern wariness of unity stems from the conviction that "larger wholes are only figments of metanarratives" and that "explanatory discourses" are "lies" (1990: 220). An interest in the fragmentation of literary works has also been displayed by several scholars associated with phenomenology, narratology and cognitive criticism. In "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," Wolfgang Iser discusses the mechanics of the construction or realization (*Konkretisation*) of the text by the reader. He is particularly concerned with the ways in which readers respond to narrative gaps and attempt to fill in the blank spots between consecutive fragments. "With 'traditional' texts", Iser argues, "this process was more or less unconscious, but modern texts frequently exploit it quite deliberately. They are often so fragmentary that one's attention is almost exclusively occupied with the search for connections between the fragments" (1974: 285). The concept of narrative gaps has also been an important concern of cognitive narratologist H. Porter Abbot, whose article "How Do We Read What Isn't There to Be Read" is an examination of the notions of shadow stories and permanent narrative gaps in literature and film. Finally, Brian Richardson's *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2016) should be referenced in the context of fragmentary writing as it examines a number of contemporary novels that replace conventional narrative positions with multiple narrators, which produces a complex and disorienting reading experience.

Arguably, the two critics who devoted most attention to examining the properties of fragmented literary forms in English were two American academics Joseph Frank and Sharon Spencer. Frank's widely discussed article "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945) can be regarded as the first attempt to create a critical framework for analysing texts that resist a temporal development of narrative. Frank's main thesis is that much of modernist literature "is moving in the direction of spatial form" (10). In other words, he argues, such works as *The Waste Land*, *Cantos*, *Ulysses* and *Nightwood* ask their readers to approach them "spatially" —as

a juxtaposition of various images and fragments experienced “in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence” (1945: 10). He asserts that the perception of such texts should ideally be similar to that of a painting, in which different parts of the image are taken in simultaneously. Reading *Ulysses*, according to Frank, involves “continually fitting fragments together and keeping allusions in mind until [...] [one] can link them to their complements” (20). Frank considers Eliot’s and Pound’s poetry as a quintessence of what he refers to as the “anecdotal method”, which relies on combining fragments without a discernible framework —temporal or otherwise (14).

Two and a half decades after Frank’s essay, Spencer took his ideas as a basis for a more systematic approach to literary fragmentation, which she formulated in *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel* (1971). Spencer coins the term “architectonic novel”, which she defines as a text “constructed from prose fragments of diverse types and lengths and arranged by means of the principle of juxtaposition”,<sup>2</sup> whose aim is to create “the illusion of a spatial entity”. In order to comprehend such a novel, the reader needs to examine “a great many relationships among the fragments that make up the book’s totality” (1971: xx-xxi). The critic argues that the architectonic novel renounces omniscient narration, smooth narrative progression, causality and logical connections between consecutive sections. The loss of interest in narrative development is accompanied by the decline in significance of character, which serves the role of a persona —a perspective or a mere “vehicle of expression” (2, 5). Such works also frequently draw on what Spencer calls “visualization” —the use of visual elements such as photographs, illustration and typographical variation (146).

Spencer distinguishes between two kinds of architectonic novels: the closed and the open. The closed type uses a very intense single, first-person perspective, as a result of which the reality constructed is to a great extent subjective and independent of the laws of realism. The often improbable, distorted constructions are —in Hugh Kenner’s words— “queer mental worlds”, frequently possessed of surrealistic or expressionistic elements (Spencer 1971: 25-26). Closed architectonic novels fuse reality and fantasy, which results in a dreamlike atmosphere, and occasionally incorporate lengthy lyrical passages (28, 32-35). Whereas the closed type is confined to a single point of view, the open is informed by a variety of perspectives and voices. Hence its portrayal of the world is more diverse and nuanced —it conjures up “a vast, diffuse, confusing, complex world”, which is constantly in motion (2-3). Another feature of open architectonic novels is their essayism, which manifests itself in their frequent use of lengthy passages of “undisguised philosophical speculation, theoretical discussions on the nature of art”, as well as metafictional musings on the creative process and openly

autobiographical references on the part of the author —with a view to breaking the frame and blurring the distinction between fiction and non-fiction (52-53).<sup>3</sup> Besides the closed-open distinction, Spencer introduces another one —that between mobile and stable constructs. If the fragments that constitute the novel are interchangeable, then the work is a mobile structure (the most radical example of this type are card-shuffle texts); if the individual sections, despite their disjointed character, cannot be rearranged (owing to a certain, however loose, overarching narrative), the text can be classified as a stable construct (181, 189).

#### 4. *Dept. of Speculation* as an Architectonic Novel

In the remaining part of the article, I will argue that Spencer's category of the architectonic novel is an apt theoretical framework to examine the complex fragmentary structure of Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*. Offill, an American novelist, children's author and creative writing teacher, published her second novel fifteen years after her celebrated debut *Last Things* (1999). The topics of writer's block and the fear of not living up to artistic expectations feature prominently in *Dept. of Speculation* (which is a tangible proof that Offill ultimately overcame them —the novel made the shortlists of the Folio Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award). Its narrator is —to a considerable degree— an alter ego of the author: a married woman in her thirties, with a child, working as a creative writing instructor in a Brooklyn College and struggling to earn a living and fulfil her literary ambitions. Nonetheless, like the other important characters, she remains nameless. The narrow range of characters includes “the wife”, “the husband”, “the daughter” and their few acquaintances.

For the first half, *Dept. of Speculation* portrays a reasonably happy couple facing various problems (from sleep deprivation to a plague of lice in their apartment). Near the middle, it turns into an account of a severe marriage crisis, occasioned by the husband's infidelity. The marriage is on the verge of collapse, but by the end that danger seems to have been averted. In the *New York Review of Books*, Elaine Blair calls the book an unusual adultery novel, since it adopts the rare perspective of the “wronged” wife, rather than the betrayed husband (as is the case with Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*) or the “adulterous partner”.

However, the word “unusual” is much more suited to describing the form rather than the content of *Dept. of Speculation*. This short novel (under 180 pages) is composed of 46 chapters and around 800 separated one-paragraph (often one-sentence) fragments.<sup>4</sup> The narrative of the marriage crisis (with all its accompanying strands restricted to the narrative present) is conveyed through about a third of the

paragraphs. The remaining majority could be subsumed under Boris Tomashevsky's notion of free (as opposed to bound) motifs, which are not relevant to the progression of the plot (and are in that sense unnecessary) but remain important for aesthetic reasons (1965: 74). The "unnecessary" fragments lend the work a poetic quality (according to critics James Wood and Lidija Haas), and moreover offer various insights into the narrator's memories and intellect, her state of mind, her erudite associations and her current reading.

The first two chapters (amounting to eight pages and 28 fragments) may serve as a sample of Offill's method of composition. The book opens with the following passage: "Antelopes have 10x vision, you said. It was the beginning or close to it. That means that on a clear night they can see the rings of Saturn" (Offill 2015: 3). Besides introducing the "you", which in the first half of the novel is used consistently to refer to the husband, the first fragment also prepares the reader for a number of similar entries that present scientific facts and curiosities (mostly about astronomy). The remaining passages in the chapter offer glimpses into the narrator's random memories of travel. The third paragraph of the second chapter takes the form of an italicised sentence, "*Life equals structure plus activity*" (7), which is in no apparent logical relation to the preceding or following passage. Only three paragraphs later a clue is offered —the narrator announces that she has recently happened upon an advice book titled *Thriving Not Surviving*, whose probable excerpt is cited in the next paragraph. Such unacknowledged, implied quotations feature prominently throughout the novel. Two fragments further, a proper quotation appears, preceded by the words, "What Coleridge said" (7). The next page contains an anecdote about Vladimir Nabokov's refusal to waste time on such menial tasks as folding an umbrella or licking stamps, which is interspersed with the narrator's admission that she never planned to get married and her memory of a "beautiful" boy in New Orleans who "made [her] sing along to all the bad songs on the radio" (8-9). Other paragraphs in the chapter focus on art, work and love life; among them are the narrator's questions to self (e.g., "Are animals lonely? Other animals, I mean" [8]), which usually in some way correspond to the neighbouring passages.

As the above sample indicates, *Dept. of Speculation* amply demonstrates the structural variety of the architectonic novel, which is meant to mirror the construction of a physical building out of "different types of materials: bricks, steel and concrete" (Spencer 1971: 174). The most distinctive building blocks of Offill's novel that are not essential to narrative progression are quotations, anecdotes and scientific trivia. The book contains 26 acknowledged quotations and proverbs (which function as self-contained paragraphs) —mostly by writers (from Hesiod and Ovid to T.S. Eliot and John Berryman) and philosophers (such



as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Simone Weil). Moreover, there are at least as many italicised quotations whose source is not provided. There are also numerous fragments which convey anecdotal references to a great variety of writers, religious leaders and thinkers from Thales to Buddha to Nabokov. One of the passages focuses on Anaxagoras, an Athenian philosopher who believed that everything is composed of small particles designed by an eternal intelligence. Although the particle claim is not mentioned, the reference itself may be interpreted as a subtle self-reflexive comment on the novel's own fragmentariness.

Other common components of *Dept. of Speculation* are lists and question-and-answer sequences, often preceded by an organising heading, such as “Personal Questionnaire”, “Three things no one has ever said to me” or “Three questions from my daughter” (Offill 2015: 43-44, 68, 74). In a section headed “Student Evaluations”, Offill includes —like B.S. Johnson in *Albert Angelo* (1963)— pieces of original feedback on her teaching:

*She is a good teacher but VERY anecdotal.*  
*No one would call her organized.*  
*She seems to care about her students.*  
*She acts as if writing has no rules.* (45, emphasis in original)

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As with the reference to Anaxagoras, the first, second and fourth statements could be interpreted as metafictional, since they may correspond with some readers' impressions of Offill's highly digressive and eclectic writing. Other lists enumerate such incidental elements as the sounds that NASA recorded for the aliens and the narrator's “really American” slogan ideas for fortune cookies (83-84, 52). The ironic slogans that the narrator has composed are reminiscent of the bland and glibly reassuring catchphrases projected on city walls by American visual artist Jenny Holzer (such as “Money creates taste” or “If you have many desires your life will be interesting”):

*Objects create happiness.*  
*The animals are pleased to be of use.*  
*Your cities will shine forever.*  
*Death will not touch you.* (52, emphasis in original)

Spencer argues that the organisation of the many constituent parts of the architectonic novel needs to retain a degree of haphazardness, because if “such elements are arranged according to a controlling design of some sort, then they actually lose their individual identities as building blocks and become indistinguishable aspects of the total structure” (1971: 143). *Dept. of Speculation* meets the criterion of the qualified degree of structural unity. Its form has been described by James Wood (2014) as informed by “a managed ratio of randomized

coherence”. Wood maintains that many of Offill’s “paragraphs link with their successors, so that a continuous narrative is not hard to construct; but some are opaque, eccentric, so that we experience deliberate discontinuities and obstructions”. Elaine Blair (2014) adds that the novel’s “chain of fragments” is comprehensible because it “proceeds by analogy”. Roxanne Gay (2014), in turn, notes that the *Dept. of Speculation* poses a challenge to the reader by compelling them to consider “the *why* of each fragment and how it fits with the others”. In accordance with Spencer’s above-quoted principle, the “why” of each non-narrative passage in Offill has to be determined anew, in default of any overarching key.

An insight into the analogy-driven arrangement of fragments in *Dept. of Speculation* can be afforded by examining the structure of a sample excerpt. One of the most important and most representative parts of the novel is Chapter 22, which marks a turning point both in terms of form and content —it signals the onset of the marriage crisis and represents a shift from a consistent first-person to a third-person narrative (in which the ex-narrator begins to be referred to as “the wife” and her husband as “he” or “the husband”, instead of “you”). The chapter opens with the heading “How Are You?” followed by an eighteen-line sequence of “soscaresoscaresoscaresoscaresoscaresoscaresos”, which resembles a concrete poem (Offill 2015: 94). This piece of typographical experimentation is an example of a common technique in architectonic novels which Spencer calls “visualization” (146). The litany of fear is followed by a short statement about “the wife praying [...] to Rilke” and a longer passage warning the reader against answering unthinkingly the question about their happiest memory: before replying, the reader is advised, they should consider the questioner and be careful not to hurt them by describing a time that did not involve them (95). The next section is a note about Hipparchus’ discovery of a new star in 134 BC, which made him realise that stars were impermanent entities capable of appearing and disappearing. The ten consecutive paragraphs describe the consequences of the wife’s failure to include the husband in her happiest memory: the look on his face, his absence at home one of the subsequent evenings, their ensuing bitter conversations, whose cryptic fragments function as three distinct paragraphs. The last of them —“*That’s not what I asked you*”— is followed by one-sentence paragraphs reporting on Thales’ belief that the Earth was flat and Anaxagoras’ conviction that there were people living on the moon (97). After a note that the sister is coming from Pennsylvania to help look after the daughter, comes a piece of advice from Ovid on what to do when one has been caught in the wrong. The penultimate section contains what seems a snippet of a conversation between the wife and the husband about the woman with whom he has begun an affair:

Taller?  
Thinner?  
Quieter?  
Easier, he says. (98)

The chapter ends with another scientific fact —the note that in 2159 BC astronomers Hi and Ho were killed for failing to foresee an eclipse.

In the section considered above, as well as in the remaining parts of the novel, Offill skilfully interweaves bound and free motifs —narrative elements that enable the progression of the marriage crisis plot and the meditative, contextual or explanatory tidbits of erudition. The latter's function is to comment on the narrative advances, offer insight into their motivation, indicate possible consequences or draw analogies with a wealth of artistic and factual knowledge that the narrator has at her disposal. The free motifs in the chapter analysed exemplify cases of famous thinkers and scientists being wrong about the universe or failing to predict a crisis. Although none of them makes any reference to the narrative situation, the notion of misjudgement clearly corresponds to the wife's inability to assess the effect of the fateful conversation with her husband. The juxtaposition of fragments in *Dept. of Speculation* follows the technique of film-like montage, which Spencer considers particularly suited to architectonic novels. The lack of explicit cross-references between bound and free motifs is a characteristic of montage defined as a combination of "diverse and contrasting elements" which are arranged "without transitions or explanatory passages" (Spencer 1971: 113). The links between the narrative and non-narrative passages are therefore to be supplied by the reader.

The co-existence of the plot-driven paragraphs with erudite analogies in the novel does not come across as contrived or pretentious, as the bookishness of the narrator—a writer and writing teacher herself—justifies her resorting to knowledge at the time of emotional upheaval. The novel's intense intertextuality is reminiscent of Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), whose narrator relies on the author of *Madame Bovary* to explain and make sense of his personal tragedy.<sup>5</sup> Offill's narrator, in turn, chooses to "pray" to Rainer Maria Rilke and seek advice from John Berryman.

The novel's oscillation between narrative progression and intellectual examination is an indication of its partial dependence on spatial (rather than exclusively temporal) form, as understood by Joseph Frank. "When an event in time is [...] halted for an exploration or exposure of its elements", Spencer argues, "it has been spatialized" (1971: 156). Whenever the narrator offers a quotation or draws a learned analogy, narrative time freezes and the spatial axis is activated. Despite the profusion of such moments in the text, it has to be conceded that *Dept. of*

*Speculation* has an unusually robust temporal sequencing for an architectonic novel. The strong narrative framework accounts for the non-interchangeability of its constituent parts, making it an example of what Spencer classifies as a stable—rather than a mobile—construct. The reordering of paragraphs in Offill’s novel is not possible either in the case of its loose motifs, which—by thematic analogy—are in a way attached to the bound motifs representing plot development. If certain lines are repeated (“Why would you ruin my best thing?” [Offill 2015: 59, 102]), or repeated with a difference (“I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?” [sic, 69] and “I CAN HAS BOYFRIEND?” [111]), their reoccurrence is not aleatory but tied to a specific narrative situation, in the light of which it gains a new significance.

Alongside the relatively heavy dependence on plot, Offill’s novel focuses on character more than a textbook example of an architectonic novel would, being—in Spencer’s words—marked by “avoidance of character developed for its intrinsic interest” (1971: xx). In *Dept. of Speculation* the narrator-protagonist is more than a mere point of view or a transparent vehicle of expression. The representation of her experience of marriage crisis is filtered through her highly individualised perspective—that of a very well-educated, bookish artist. A number of distinctive features allotted to the narrator (and consistent with what is known about the author) have given rise to speculation about the extent to which the novel is autobiographical. For those reasons, Offill’s novel is less an account of a universal response to infidelity than, for instance, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *nouveau-roman* novel *La Jalousie* (1957), which is narrated by a silent, nameless and, in a sense, transparent, husband figure. And yet an element of distancing from character can also be found in *Dept. of Speculation*. The earlier mentioned unexpected shift that occurs in Chapter 22—the transition from an intense first-person narration to a third-person account focalised by the wife—has been interpreted by Blair as “a kind of dissociation, perhaps brought on by a crisis” and by Wood as putting “some distance between the rawness of the emotion and the reader”. However, when the crisis abates, on the last page of the novel, the “I” and “you” return.

The fact that *Dept. of Speculation* has only one overt focalizer—the wife—may seem to undermine its status as an open architectonic novel, which needs to be told from “a great variety of perspectives” (Spencer 1971: xxi). Nonetheless, points of view in the novel are not restricted to specific characters—they can take the form of various intertextual references. Spencer notes that perspectives in architectonic texts are frequently derived from “citation of [...] lines, paragraphs, or pages from other books; song lyrics; advertisements; newspaper headlines; letters; poems [...] and allusions to well-known myths and works of art” (141). Each quotation from an external source is an act of importing the source text’s perspective with a whole set of its associations. Offill’s novel can therefore be said

to incorporate as many perspectives as the authors it quotes or references. Hesiod, Martin Luther and Yuri Gagarin thus become observers and advisors or commentators on the personal problems of the narrator-protagonist.

## 5. Conclusion

Spencer's concept of the architectonic novel is not the only—or the most recent—critical framework through which contemporary examples of fragmentary writing may be interpreted.<sup>6</sup> But it remains useful and relevant, because it accentuates several of the most conspicuous characteristics of fragmentary novels in the twenty-first century (including *Dept. of Speculation*): the use of a wide range of material juxtaposed without a clear cause-and-effect order, the inclusion of a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, typographical variation, metafictional elements and a general distrust of plot and character. Another quality which Spencer does not emphasise but which is essential to most contemporary examples of fragmented novels is a maximum level of condensation. Offill has admitted in an interview that one of her prime concerns as a writer is “trying to figure out how you can say the most with the least” (Haas 2015). The relative brevity of such books—rarely in excess of 200 pages—is a result of retaining intense, information-laden fragments and leaving out connections and transitions. That strategy is particularly noticeable in Renata Adler's *Speedboat* (1976), David Markson's tetralogy inaugurated by *Reader's Block* (1996) and much of Lydia Davis's fiction. Its politics seems partly rooted in a disenchantment with the novel form, forcefully articulated by David Shields in *Reality Hunger*: “This is the case for most novels: you have to read seven hundred pages to get the handful of insights that were the reason the book was written, and the apparatus of the novel is there as a huge, elaborate, overbuilt stage set” (2011: 128).

Offill and the other practitioners of fragmentary writing could be said to construct novels without (to pursue the architectonic metaphor) the conventional scaffolding of the novel. What their fragmented structures need in order not to collapse is the reader's ability and readiness to fuse the building blocks and supply the missing bricks. As one of Offill's passages relates, when the “Zen master Ikkyu was once asked to write a distillation of the highest wisdom[,] he wrote only one word: *Attention*” (76). Pay attention and connect, that curious amalgam of advice from Ikkyu and E.M. Forster, is what the reader of a “writerly” novel like Offill's needs to do in order to tie its loose (and bound) ends.

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<sup>1.</sup> Among the most notable examples of French critical works about fragmentary writing are *L'écriture fragmentaire: définitions et enjeux* (1997) by Françoise Susini-Anastopoulos and *L'écriture fragmentaire: théories et pratiques* by Ricard Ripoll (2002).

<sup>2.</sup> The structure of the architectonic novel could also be described in the way that Roland Barthes characterises the composition of Michel Butor's *Mobile*: "the general organization, or plan, is non-existent and detail has been raised to the level of structure. The ideas are not developed. They are distributed" (in Spencer 1971: 169).

<sup>3.</sup> Spencer cites *Nightwood* and the works of Gertrude Stein and Alain Robbe-Grillet as examples of closed architectonic novels. The open type is represented by Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities*, André Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* and John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* (1971: 26, 52).

<sup>4.</sup> The fragmentary structure of the novel was noted by most of its reviewers, who referred to it as "fragmented," "fractured" (Beth Jones) and "shattered" (John Self). The shortest chunk of text consists of a single word ("Loneliness" [17]), whereas the longest extends to four pages.

<sup>5.</sup> Geoffrey Braithwaite is aware of the limitations of his strategy: "Books say: She did this because. Life says: She did this. Books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't. I'm not surprised some people prefer books" (Barnes 1984: 168).

<sup>6.</sup> Other theoretical frameworks include the literary collage —as theorised in Thomas P. Brockelman's *The Frame and the Mirror* (2001) and Rona Cran's *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture* (2014)— and the notion of "deejaying" as defined by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay* (2002).

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