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The shadows of knowability: Reading between opaque narrative and transparent text

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Abstract: The torch of ember and its puzzling knowability are my exemplars, serving to open the binary of opacity and transparency in narrativity. I highlight inadequacies in the binary of opacity and transparency by examining the works of Peter Lamarque and Clare Birchall on matters of narrative and secrecy. I will try to see how one can think about opacity/transparency through the lenses of speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy. I do so by drawing examples from memories of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1989) and explaining how the language of remembering becomes the realm of a tension between presence and absentia, between the un-said within the said. I explore how memory-as-narrative and narrative-as-memory sustain the potentiality that eludes Orwellian newspeak.

Subjects: Anthropology; Cultural Studies; Middle Eastern Cultural Studies; Humanities; Continental Philosophy; Critical Theory; Literary/Critical Theory

Keywords: shadow; perplexing knowability; narrative; memory; opacity; transparency

1. The tale of opacity along transparency

Standing with a torch of ember in the oubliette, I wonder whether the ember is fire or coal. It seems like fire; it has some of its qualities, yet it lacks a flame. The ember is alive as much as it is dying. Is it the fire that is dying or the ember which is burning? How can it make itself apparent to me—whatever that “it” it is? The torch of ember is an example of opacity. It is a puzzling knowability that stands in-between opacity and transparency.¹ It could be about to become fire and turn into a transparent knowable, even as it stands back and resists the flame. It retains an opaque knowability in a state of wonder. Thus, I wonder, is it the opaque state of the ember which appears to me as fire, imperceptible in its appearance, lacking all signification, or ...? There could be no end to “or,” “but,” and

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Scholars have been always engaged with discussions on how stories and narratives are understood. Some search for clarity and transparency and there are those who seek a manner to unveil ambiguity and opacity. Their debates stress on the idea that there are two sides to each stories, a side that is clear and the other aspect that remains ambiguous. However, I argue that these divisions and categorizations should be revisited by exploring in between the categories where shadows lay. I explain my approach by drawing examples from memories and narratives of violent past in the Middle East. These examples consolidate my critique and bring new theories that challenge the certitude on realities into the debates.

“however.” The never-ending conditional clauses may draw me to edifying meanings, or chains of signification around the torch of ember, just as they confuse the reader about something that may not be there at all. Am I being transparent enough in questioning the opaque aura of an object?

The torch of ember and its puzzling knowability are my exemplars, serving to open the question of opacity and transparency in narrativity. I highlight inadequacies in the binary of opacity and transparency by examining the works of Peter Lamarque and Clare Birchall. Lamarque, from the analytical tradition of philosophy, refers to modes of narrativity in his recent book, *The Opacity of Narrative*, and Birchall, less recently, wonders how transparent secrets can be. Birchall seems to be more comfortable with continental philosophy, if her citations and bibliography are any indication. I then move on to Agamben’s notion of “potentiality” (Agamben & Heller-Roazen, 1999) to develop what I learn from comparing the works of Lamarque and Birchall. However, I shall not be content or satisfied unless I am able to complicate things further and push puzzling knowability in a different direction. Hence, I will try to see how one can think about opacity/transparency through the lenses of speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy. I do so by drawing examples from memories of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1989) and my experience of reading the autobiographies of former Iranian combatants.

I “read” (Felman, 1977) the published memoirs and autobiographies to detect the transparency of the opaque and the obscurity of clarity within frameworks of remembrance forged under the influence of the authoritarian Iranian regime. The political climate of Iran has changed in the more than two decades since the war. Memories are becoming the narratives of resistance against the very regime that veterans defended during the war. They cannot be published without permission from the board of censorship, which is administered by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Authors must conceal their resistance beneath layers of intricate syntax and plays of semiosis in order to be able to talk beyond the impositions of accepted language. Thus, the language of remembering becomes the realm of a tension between presence and absentia, between the unsaid within the said. I explore how memory-as-narrative and narrative-as-memory sustain the potentiality that eludes Orwellian newspeak. I draw from memories of the war because violence pushes these memories under a cloak of opacity, even while the politics of memory try to render them transparent narratives. I examine the workings of opacity/transparency in the processes within which memories are fixed into narratives.

1.1. The opacity of narrative, and making sense of the yet-to-become-sense

The example of the torch of ember and the fire reminds me how to question the landscape of memory, narrativity, and narrative modes. Memories do not illuminate the oubliette of everyday life where we may forget them while immersed in banal affairs and mundane routines. At the same time, memories do not leave us alone in the oubliette. They are the ever-present *signs* in our oubliette, especially if they hail from the realm of a violent past. The burden of violence marks them with an intensity that renders them knowable and tangible. They become knowable in the twilight of appearing (transparency) in, and disappearing (opacity) from, the shadows of unspoken traumas. Hence, the memories of a violent past appear as puzzling knowability. However, the puzzling effect fades away when it is dragged out of shadows and forced into discourse, narrativity, and narrative modes. Yet, the shadows carry themselves into the new configurations of knowable memories of a violent past and render the narrativity, and narrative modes, opaque. Narrativity and narration modes force memories into a realm of language, to exist within (rather than with) language. Becoming-a-narrative can make the memories “be,” “become,” or even “signify.” But how does that happen? And how does that appear? The question of “how” brings me to the investigation of the economy of memory in itself. One may say I am exploring narrativity, structuration, content, appearance, or some other fancy jargon, of the memory.

The economy of memory in itself highlights its circulation and configuration within language, rhetoric, and narrative modes. Memory travels and changes since the moment of its conception in language which brings about a multifaceted economy all around it. This economy progresses and

processes in shadows, darkness, and light. It makes memories opaque/transparent, simulacra/real, said/unsaid, visible/invisible, or perhaps archive/trace. I choose to explore opacity/transparency since this opens up the possibility of studying narrativity more than other options. Therefore, I will begin by entertaining the question of opacity/transparency in the work of Lamarque, from an analytical side in order to diverge from the dominating philosophical spectrums.

Lamarque has chosen opacity to be the starting point of a journey into transparency. He is inspired by famous logician Quine (1960), who popularized the term “referential opacity.” Lamarque makes it clear that content (text, plot, and fabula) is determined by narrative and that they are both essentially, as well as contingently, connected to narrativity. He highlights the “connection” in order to show that opacity is not a given fact in every emergence of narrative. He limits his definition of narrativity in qualities of narrative to avoid the “an ontological trap” (Ranciere, 2004). Here, the ontological trap refers to the fact, some like White (1980), for example, look at narrativity as the opening window of *what* is told and *what* is molded into the intended closure and conclusion.

Furthermore, Lamarque suggests descriptions are limitation imposed over a narrative. He states that “there is no such thing as transparent glass—only an opaque glass, painted, as it were, with figures seen not *through* it but *in* it” (2014, p. 3). His suggestion serves as the introduction to propose how impositions bring opacity into a narrative and how opacity becomes constitutive of a narrative. According to Lamarque, the opaque glass only retains its opacity if the characters and constituting elements cannot be substituted with each other. He states:

The opacity of narrative occurs when substitution of co-existential terms are impermissible if the content of the narrative is to be preserved. Likewise transparency occurs when the very same content can be accessed in different ways. (2014, p. 6)

In other words, the narrative appears opaque when change alters the narrative’s content but transparency occurs if one is able to substitute different identities with each other and yet leave the content of narrative intact. The narrative (whatever it may be, i.e. memory, play, or story) is transparent as long as it is not dependent on a specific mode of representation and structuration. Therefore, a narrative shall sustain integrity (read transparency) as long as it is fixed and consolidated in its meaning. The fixity must be to such an extent that even exchanging identical elements with each other would not disrupt the narrative. Lamarque borrows Quine’s idea of the non-substitutivity of the identical which insists that no one can exchange “A” with “a” even though the only difference is that one is a capital letter and another is a lower case letter. Quine believes such change is “disturbing [to] the truth value of the containing sentence” (1960, p. 96). There is certainly a pristine and clear formula that Lamarque uses to distinguish between transparency and opacity in a narrative. Opacity occurs, for him, with “non-substitutivity of identities ... or intentionality of representation” and also, “opacity arises because the content is not merely loosely or contingently connected to its mode of presentation but is partially constituted by it” (2014, p. 6 and p. 12). In other words, opacity is fixed into the structure of the narrative.

I explain Lamarque in order to address the politics of his proposition and how this affects studying memory and narrativity. He treats opacity and transparency in form of binary oppositions because he prefers to “disregard the emotions the texts evoke” and would have us focus on “the way their content is shaped by their linguistic form and the way that attention to content can have a bearing on a reader’s own thought process and outlook on the world” (2014, p. 14). The difficulty with this proposition is not only the confinement of the method to binaries and dichotomies, but also that its disregard for emotions unsettles application of the method. The method’s application becomes difficult because Lamarque simply limits the text within the narrative and it seems the text, for him, is a linguistic craft isolated from its reader’s responses and reception. According to Lamarque, the mandate of a transparent narrative is to remain in a certain form in order to preserve the image implied by a text.

In other words, if the implied image is distorted a text is lost; its meaning is corrupted; and opacity overcomes a text. He loses sight of the transition from transparency to opacity, or the other way around (the esthetic response), by concentrating on the formal construct of a text. He states: “transparency and opacity are not intrinsic qualities of a text but ultimately rest on the interests brought to the text. We can read (or interpret) a narrative transparently or opaquely relative to the interest we bring to it” (2014, p. 12, emphasis added). He misses “the act of reading” (Iser, 1974) by attempting to find everything as it has been brought “[in]to the text” (Lamarque, 2014, p. 12). It seems a text is a coherent totality that engulfs readers through linguistic trickery and they indulge it with no reaction or reception. The explanation of Wolfgang Iser about the role of memory in the reading process is the counter to Lamarque. Iser notes that reading is an act of constant remembering to sustain the links and coherence in a text under study. Although, the constant remembering does not account for the totality, or coherence, of a text because memory and perception differ. He writes “the memory evoked, however, can never reassume its original shape, for this would mean that memory and perception were identical, which is manifestly not so. The new background brings to light new aspects of what we had committed to memory” (Iser, 1974, p. 278).

Diverse interests would bring about diverse interpretations of a text but none of them can be defined as opaque or transparent. Although, transparency and opacity can be achieved if we located a text an “it” (whatever that “it” it is) out there, according to Lamarque. A text is not an entity comprised of linguistic configurations that are consumed and responded to. A text is produced in interaction with the reader, the material entity known as a book, and then finally becomes the linguistic configuration that conveys authorial ideas. The text is “in between” and, because of its constant oscillation amongst these elements, remains both opaque and transparent. It never takes on a permanent shape. Lamarque, in his opacity of narrative, turns transparency into a consistent mode that never changes and thus cannot offer new symbolic resonance and semiotic emergences. Let us assume transparency as a consistent quality. What does it stand for? Why does it need to be transparent? “What is the secret of transparency?” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 7). What is the trajectory of its emergence? What is the semiotic configuration of a transparent text? I raise these questions despite the fact Lamarque states that the text must remain consistent and “figurative in its textual content [which] help[s to] give precise shape to the thoughts and beliefs that the content brings to mind” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 7). But, is the text a prisoner of its content and form? Thus, I ask, where is the text located? What are its latitude and altitude? Where does it flow to? Maybe I can now modestly propose: one should also pay attention to the ontology of a text.

1.2. Breaking the binary? Or maybe not quite yet

Clare Birchall provokes curiosities by asking “what is the secret of transparency?” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 7). She raises this question while keeping in sight that transparency is an elusive quality that never is achieved. She stresses that transparency cannot be achieved, even if it is enforced, because secrecy would then be sustained in another manner. Her notion is based on an analysis of secrecy and transparency in documentation and texts which she links to the realities of everyday life. Although I would argue that she does not dwell enough on what Iser called the “unexpressed reality of the text” (1974, p. 279). Birchall proposes to remain with the “aporia of transparency–as–secrecy and secrecy–as–transparency” (2011a, p. 7) in order to avoid forming new binaries. She does so by exploring the histories of secrecy within the indexes of laws and government policies (specifically in the United States). She infuses philosophical arguments with the examples of political governance to sidestep moral and political discourses and movements that denounce secrecy in favor of transparency. According to her, the Left is at “risk of forgetting to think through and with secret [because of]...the fear that secrecy is gateway to micro-fascism and a moral attachment to disclosure” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 8). Birchall avoids the debate of “moral alignments of both secrecy and transparency” in order to exemplify practices, such as psychoanalysis and poetry, which do not actively exclude secrecy (2011b, p. 66). Although She does not exactly explain what transparency is, she implies that information or data are transparent as long as they are not concealed or hidden from others (in her case people, citizens or employees versus state, statesmen or corporations). Thus, transparency is not a thing in and of itself, rather it is “merely the absence of concealment” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 8)

Transparency, for Birchall, is identified as an element that is constitutive of the workings of democracy. She traces transparency to find out how democracy forcefully and coercively tries to sustain itself. She points at the risk of transparency and its enactment in a democratic society, which may look “less like an agent of democracy and freedom and more like a tool of totalitarianism” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 12). Her point is clarified by Derrida who states “if a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space” (2011a, p. 59). Both, Derrida and Birchall warn about the demand that turns transparency to an enforcement that transgress the right of individuals to remain behind the veil of secrecy. As they find secrecy and transparency interlinked, Derrida highlights the privilege of secret and Birchall warns about moral policing and enforcement of transparency.

Birchall accordingly suggests that “secrecy functions as a constitutive element of transparency, while transparency defines itself as a reaction against secrecy” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 12). Transparency is defined, for her, by its functionality as well as its appearance in the form of the absence of concealment. The contour and textures of this “it” is dependent on secrecy. The information that is concealed or the data that are classified acquire a mode of existence in the relationship between secrecy and transparency. Transparency, like a good magician, renders secrecy visible by concealing its own movement. This mode is not a representative quality of the information and data but rather a proof of the “democratic” quality of those who encounter and handle them. Birchall proposes to find the qualities of transparency and secrecy in-between. In other words, by probing them and their process of transition into each other. She especially stresses that the in-between matters because there is nothing beyond transparency and secrecy. There is a two-way traffic between the two and she insists on a method that observes how information evolves and changes within that traffic instead of placing in it on one side or the other.

She highlights the opaque relationship of transparency and secrecy by referring to Kant’s famous phrase: “the very transparent veil of secrecy” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 12). But I wonder, after such a lengthy epistemology of secrecy, which made her realize transparency is some sort of absence, what is the ontological trajectory of secrecy and transparency? What are the temporal components of the tension between transparency and secrecy? Shouldn’t we break open the opacity of secrecy and ask what the secret of secrecy is? And if all the secrets are secret, must we jump ahead and ask, “What is the secret of transparency?” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 19). Could we deduce from the fact that “transparency might still be a kind of veil,” that transparency is a form of non-knowledge because of its yet-remaining tension with secrecy? (Birchall, 2011a, p. 19). In other words, could we deduce that transparency is always potent with some surplus of secrecy in itself? Or could it be a form of non-knowledge because of the temporal dimension of secrecy? Declassified documents of secret services are prime examples that become the interest of a select few after becoming transparent. For instance, documents related to operation TP-AJAX were recently declassified. The veil of secrecy was removed from the documents, which confirmed the role of United States in 1953 Iranian coup. However, their transparency does not render transparent the politics, or what made them secrets. These documents may imply transparency to some people, like historians, enthusiasts, and the Iranian propaganda machinery. Although, I argue that they raise many more questions than they answer. They remain secret by not revealing their temporal dimension, despite the documents now bearing the “declassified” stamp. Therefore, I wonder why Birchall has not extended her idea of the “relativity of knowledge” (Birchall, 2011a, p. 127) to the secrecy versus transparency debate. It becomes apparent that she derives her inspiration from Agamben’s potentiality but does not dwell on temporalities of knowledge and knowability.

Birchall uses the covenant of secrecy in psychoanalysis or WikiLeaks to exemplify how secrecy is the framework of transparency. She identifies the emergence of secrets as the condition of the relationship between secrecy and transparency, as if there is access to the secret itself or the moment of its emergence. She accuses metaphysics of taking politics out of epistemology, but I assume otherwise. Metaphysics calls for reading the politics of subject-object (or even object-object) in itself instead of *relating* them to other vectors. Not only do secrecy and transparency not stand side by side, they also don’t overlap. None are in each other’s framework; they erupt and emerge with

different intensities in different temporalities. The competing intensities make the contours and textures of secrecy and transparency visible to us. They remain alongside each other simultaneously. Their simultaneity leads to the opacity of their existence and consequently becomes the condition of our perceptions, perceptions which certainly exist in-between the speaking/spoken subjects and life. Therefore, I prefer to rephrase her statement that “secrecy is always already at work in transparency” (Birchall, 2011b, p. 71, emphasis added). Thusly, secrecy is always already at work with transparency. The aporia cannot be indulged by mere enforcement of a relational existence in secrecy-as-transparency or transparency as-secrecy. However, we may expose its trickery by turning the language of secrecy and transparency on its head.

2. The interplay of secrecy-opacity/transparency

I left Lamarque in the midst of the fact that his exploration of opacity and transparency peels subjectivity off of a text. Text without subjectivity becomes a linguistic craft without the interactive flows among the materiality of a book, the fluid voice of the author, and the ponderings of its readers. Lamarque acknowledges that the intentionality of readers or authors is causal to the production of opacity or transparency, but he asserts that the production is a one-way traffic. It seems, if we accept this, that either the author, or her reader, must be dead. The text, the opacity/transparency flow, and the language, are prisoners of the either the author’s delivery or the reader reception, and that they occupy different temporalities.

2.1. Somewhere in-between everything

Wolfgang Iser proposed a different notion of the text. His approach highlights the limitations of Lamarque’s style of reading. Iser states that “the literary work [and by extension any narrative] cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie half way between the two” (1974, p. 275, emphasis added). Iser sees a text in the form of an encounter between the “implied reader” and the reader’s “own treasure-house of experience” (1974, p. 30). The opacity and the transparency (produced by whatever formula) function as a regime of signification that impels the reader to “grasp the text” (1974, p. 34). The regime of signification is the “textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient” (1974, p. 34) into which opacity and transparency are embedded, awaiting the individual’s experiences and imaginaries. Allow me to offer an example: I shared a paragraph from the autobiography of an Iranian ex-combatant with a colleague. My intention was to exemplify why this particular ex-combatant preferred to remain alive and bear witness rather than pray for martyrdom (which means attaining the state of Grace for a Shi’i Muslim combatant). The ex-combatant exasperatedly asked the divine power during a high casualty operation: “keep me alive and let me return to the sinful city. Gift me a pen and paper in that house of sin to write what I have witnessed.”

My colleague, a Dutch man not entirely familiar with the dynamics of martyrdom in Iran, commented with a questioning undertone “And his prayer and intention seem to be much nobler than just becoming a martyr?” His reaction amused me; as an Iranian who spent his childhood and youth exposed to those dynamics, I was educated in the shade of a state-produced concept of martyrdom. I read the combatant’s prayer as a form of justification of why he remained alive; as an excuse he could use to respond to the mothers, the fathers, and the wives of his friends who were lost during the war. His words are simultaneously transparent and opaque. (Transparent:) a man who wants to witness and tell the story of oppression in order to continue the battle meanwhile (Opaque:) he has to pass houses in his neighborhood, exchange words with remarried widows, and visit and pay his respects to the aged mothers and fathers who see him as the reminder of lost sons. His prayers are an excuse and an answer to their recognition in an autobiography written 20 years after the war. (Opaque:) Or, the prayers in his war memoir could be just survivor’s guilt rather than born of any noble intentions.

The differences in experiences and exposures between my colleague and I brought about different encounters, and consequently produced two different texts. This is the simultaneous working of opacity and transparency. They can switch sides but they cannot leave the arena. Transparency remains at the heart of opacity, and vice versa. They are simultaneous potentialities that maintain a messy relationship, as seen in my example. It is messy because there is no precise way to promote my reading over my colleague's, or his over mine. And to add to the mess, one should not forget Iranian readers who may desire to be a witness in contradiction with the martyrdom doctrine of Islamic Republic of Iran. Hence, the narrative remains opaque in itself until and unless the author makes the meaning of his prayer transparent in some future interview. However, the anthropologist in me would like to ask about the politics of such an interview and "the secret of his transparency" because, as Iser aptly mentions, "history is full of situations in which the balancing powers of literature have been used to support prevailing systems" (1974, p. 77).

My reading of Clare Birchall should not be taken as critique or deconstruction of her proposition. I find that we both start on the same ground but that I prefer to continue where she has stopped. Birchall flirts with the idea of transcending dichotomies but she finds an escape route through the zone of contention and the tension between transparency and secrecy. She confines herself to the choice given to her by chosen dichotomies instead of breaking free of them. She leaves hints and possibilities here and there but she does not explore those options. I prefer to develop her notion of secrecy as the framework of the emergence of transparency by invoking Agamben's "potentiality" which Birchall is inspired by (1999).

The "aporia of transparency-as-secrecy," and secrecy-as-transparency, should be turned on its head by exploring the recondite corners of their unitary existence. Transparency-as-secrecy and secrecy-as-transparency are configured with a potentiality. A potentiality of immutable internal oscillation created because neither secrecy nor transparency can exhaust each other during their process of interaction. Transparency carries itself over in the form of gaps, blanks, silences, and conceptual and material semiosis, into secrecy. Secrecy becomes an apparent character of transparency by suspending the semiotics that constructed it in the first place. Transparency-as-secrecy and vice versa are "the impossibility of actualization" (Agamben & Heller-Roazen, 1999, p. 148) in the realm of the social and the cultural. Actualization, if any, is evolved around discursive production of the "bastard child of the humanities and social sciences" (Birchall, 2006, p. 153) Hence, opacity overwhelms the interactions between secrecy and transparency. Secrecy and transparency never actualize into each other because there is a surplus, left over, of one mode while it is turning into the other.

Allow me to draw an example from a war memoir in my study: Mr. X, legendary Iranian combatant, symbolizes all the meaning and associations of martyrdom. His friends, who are veterans and alive today, recall memories and narrate his braveries and valor at every occasion. However, no one speaks about the details of his martyrdom. His right-hand man, Mr. B, always uses a passive verb to reference the legendary martyrdom. Few people notice the link between deliberate opacity of his language and the fact that details of the military operation—which Mr. X commanded—are classified. The opacity of Mr. B's articulation did not raise much attention because even though "was martyred" (Be shahadat resid) and "became a martyr" (Shahid shod) imply the same outcome, their semiotic configuration differs completely. The veterans who are aware of the imposed limitations and the background of the story play with the language against itself. Mr. B is aware of the fact Mr. X "was martyred" by friendly fire. Martyrdom by friendly fire is not deemed appropriate for the legendary brave combatant; therefore, the Iranian state has classified the details of his demise. As a result, he was spoken about with such transparent opacity. This example is indicator of "potential potentiality" (Agamben & Heller-Roazen, 1999, p. 144). It becomes a martyrdom that is transparent but overwhelmed by clouds of opacity through the conjugation of a verb. It takes from itself and gives back to itself. Let's break it down: the demise Mr. X is martyrdom in the eyes of his friends, and

maybe God, since he was killed in action. However, it is a particular kind of martyrdom that is not in accordance with the state's discourse and propaganda requirements. Thus, it is concealed inside the notion of martyrdom according to the state but it is supposedly consumed according to the "authentic" notions of martyrdom in Shi'i Islam. In other words, it is martyrdom that is not martyrdom but is martyrdom. The *interplay* of secrecy-opacity/transparency, or the other way around, is just enactment and performance that makes us notice the modes of existence of potentiality within the "pure existence of language" (Agamben & Heller-Roazen, 1999, p. 6).

2.2. Ending while tracing shadows of knowability

I began with the example of the ember to make operational the idea of "puzzling knowability." I offered my reading of two scholars from opposing corners of the philosophical spectrum. Lamarque and Birchall try to make opacity transparent within the borders of their own theoretical allegiances. I critiqued Lamarque with the help of Wolfgang Iser and tried to extend Birchall by deploying Agamben. Birchall notes that we need to "modify the promise of transcendence of any 'beyond'" (2011a, p.19) while observing the game of politics and wondering if politics can even exist beyond the dichotomy of transparency/secrecy. I take notice of that need and ask: could we modify our knowledge of transparency/secrecy by distinguishing them from our experience of them? Or in other words: could we postpone the question of how we know transparency/secrecy for the benefit of how they actually are? Could one attempt to identify transparency more than as a reaction against the secrecy and avoid subordinating these concepts to the way they are experienced? Therefore, I propose we attend to the puzzling aspect of knowability before we decide what is known and what qualities we seek of knowable. Tracing this puzzling aspect is not merely wondering in awe and admiring the joy of concepts but rather indulging the shadows of knowability. Transparency and opacity are the shadows of knowability, and any knowledge construction.

Opacity, and by extension transparency, should not be reduced to the conditions by which they can be known, recognized, or verified. Then, the question turns toward what the alternative method of studying them can be. First, I suggest a shift from the politics of concepts to the poetics of concepts in order to create space for "the reality of things [and concepts which] lies outside the grasp of human knowledge" (Harman, 2012, p. 11). For instance, I don't need to limit narratives and memories of the violent past only to the way Iranian readers grasp, comprehend, and interpret them. I also see the necessity of including how the very book of memoir—in its total tangibility—charms and enchants the readers toward itself. I must attend to the lithography of the book. For instance, by exploring the impact of an affectively charged paragraph which is broken between two pages versus a single paragraph that makes the narrative appear whole, on a single page. The materiality of the book impacts how carefully it is read and received. Consequently, the affective gathering of the material, the reader, the author, the semiotic constructions, and the opaquely articulated transparent secrets produce poetics that point at the puzzling knowability of memories of a violent past among Iranians. Second, we can step backward and try to trace the inaccessible or puzzling existence after the shift to the poetics of concepts. I allow my ending to remain opaque, to stand alongside opacity, but I also offer the words of Harman, may they lend some transparency to the shadows of opacity:

The world is filled primarily not with electrons or human praxis, but with ghostly objects [and concepts] withdrawing from all human and inhuman access, accessible only by allusion and sending us by means of *allure*. Whatever we capture, whatever table we sit at or destroy, is not the real table. (Harman, Hess, Harman, & Harman, 2012, p. 12)

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Note

1. Taking a cue from Derrida, Lacan and others, I sometimes use italics within a word to pique the reader's phonemic awareness and thus inject potential additional implied meaning within a word.

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