In his memoir of Walter de la Mare, Forrest Reid finds it necessary to distinguish de la Mare’s tales of haunting from those of Poe: Poe’s stories, Reid says, ‘are forced from the writer by some dark, secret collaborator; they are written with the terrible intensity of one who abandons himself to an obsession’.1 Such a process of writing, no matter to whom it might attach itself, would be haunted and haunting, would be the product of an unimaginable other who steals the pen from the writer’s grasp in the very moment of inception and yet who cannot be glimpsed, is shrouded in a lasting opacity.

I want to try to avoid generalising about the many-faceted ‘object’ which is modernism; nevertheless it is perhaps admissible to draw attention to a certain rhetoric of the transparent which flourished during modernism’s heyday. In the preface to Amy Lowell’s *Some Imagist Poets*, published in 1915, Richard Aldington quotes a relevant passage from Remy de Gourmont:

> Individualism in literature, liberty of art, abandonment of existing forms […] The sole excuse which a man can have for writing is to write down himself, to unveil for others the sort of world which mirrors itself in his individual glass.2

The practice conjured by this remark, I suggest, would be akin to that of Virginia Woolf; it would seek to establish the possibility of an all-encompassing stream of consciousness within which, like flies in amber, moments of perception could be securely embedded and displayed for inspection. I would particularly draw attention to the words ‘unveil’ and ‘mirrors’, which between them offer the suggestion that the dark other might be banished, that the opacity which trembles at the centre of the
gaze might be penetrated, that the pen might be snatched back by its lawful but impotent owner. ‘Modernist poetry’, Graham Hough is hardly alone in pointing out, ‘placed great weight on conscious craftsmanship’; de la Mare’s short story, ‘An Ideal Craftsman’, to which I shall turn at the end of this essay, shows us graphically what might lie hidden at the root of this notion of ‘craft’; Conrad’s ‘The Secret Sharer’, on which I shall also offer some comments, demonstrates for us the frailty of this craft, a craft in which it is impossible to sail alone, in which the prospect of ‘individualism’ is perpetually invaded, the inner sanctum of the cabin holds the shape of the other, the very bed of ‘the noon’s repose’, as Eliot will have it, that bears the mark, the trace, of an unimaginable twin.

Thus, then, would the terrain of the finely shaped individual turn into the terrain of the ghost, a world, as Strindberg – writer of The Ghost Sonata – put it, ‘of allusion where people talk in semi-tones, in muted voices, and one is ashamed of being human’. Statement turns into allusion; a speech one might have considered one’s own becomes the echo of another voice. Pirandello’s ‘madman’ Moscarda also has an experience of mirrors, of being mirrored in his father’s ‘glassy blue eyes’, but this experience is principally one of ghosting and hallucination:

Suddenly the person who was so close to us is miles away: catching sight of him we see a stranger. And our lives feel utterly torn to shreds, except at one point which still connects them to that man. It is a point of shame – the fact of our birth, detached and cut off from him, as though it were an everyday happening. Perhaps not unforeseen, but involuntary, in the life of that stranger – the evidence of a gesture, the fruit of an action, something in short that now, oh yes! makes us feel shame, that arouses resentment and almost hatred in us.

What seems undecidable in this account of a gesture – a gesture perhaps similar to another gesture, in T. S. Eliot’s ‘La Figlia Che Piange’, from which I have already quoted and to which I shall return – is whether it is father or self that is being glimpsed, described: it is as though the one moves to obscure, to obliterate the other, as though the opacity derives from a certain elision, an impossibility of separation, a point where ‘craft’ – the making of a separable object – fails and closes down, the eyelid blinking shut at the moment when a salving perception appears on the point of being offered.

To return for a moment, however, to Strindberg’s ‘semi-tones’ and ‘muted voices’: the scenario is surely that of death, or perhaps rather that of the funeral or the wake, of speech in hushed whispers for fear