

Conversation Pieces
Volume 12

Absolute Uncertainty

$$\Delta p \Delta q \geq \hbar/2$$

Short Fiction

by

Lucy Sussex





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Contents

Duchess	1
Kay & Phil	21
Matilda Told Such Dreadful Lies	50
Frozen Charlottes	64
A Small Star of Cold	81
A Sentimental, Sordid Education	95
Absolute Uncertainty	111
Interrogating the Past:	146
A Conversation with Lucy Sussex by Maureen Kincaid Speller	

Duchess

I saw her first in the gloom of a Milan fashion show, moments before kick-off, or as us fashionistas say, frock-off. She was more than fashionably late, she was as rudely late as a celebrity, pushing her way through the assembled throng. That would have been permissible for a Face from the gossip glossies, but to judge from the outraged looks, she was an unknown. Moreover the seat she was headed to was middle-ranked: two down from me, in fact, in my capacity as fashion journalist for an antipodean newspaper, and a long, long way from the rarefied front row, with its Hollywood stars and the heavy armaments of Anna Wintour, from American *Vogue*, and Suzy Menkes of the *International Herald Tribune*.

Full marks for a meteoric entry, I thought. Unlike most fashion journos, I choose my words carefully. For her the crowd was merely a dark backdrop, a sky against which she left a trail of dazzle, head and toe. Her shoes were state of the art basketball-players', with cute little inserts in the heels that flashed lightning with each step. From her ears depended an equally cutting edge iPod, the new model for cyclists, which shone luminously pink and green. When she neared I further noticed the silhouette of her skirt, unmistakably vintage Miyake,

with concertinaed, tiered pleats dangerously close to resembling a Chinese lantern. Finally, as she brushed past me, I registered, with the split-second timing of the seasoned fashion watcher, the other elements of her ensemble: vintage lace camisole, classic English tweed waistcoat, a fur stole, and a toque. There was something avant-garde in the jewelry line too, but my concentration was broken by her looking me briefly in the eye and murmuring, a very carrying murmur, as only the English upperclass can do:

“Live like bats and owls indeed!”

Oh, it was apt, for all of us fashion workers huddled together in the dark, a parliament of night-creatures, waiting for the fashion spectacle to begin. As it did, fashionably late to the point of rudeness, with a blast of sound, a candy-pink spotlight, and this year’s Miss Anorexia Supermodel, posed in Bride of Frankenstein wig and cape—

—which she threw off to reveal not very much at all, ribbons of artfully slashed chiffon, as she sashayed down the catwalk. I opened my notepad (lo-tech, hard-back, art paper) and started making descriptions, either drawings or shorthand. I was barely aware of a hi-tech, very slim and dainty Notebook being opened two seats down, and a flurry of typing. Then I forgot about everything except the show.

X number of outfits later Miss Anorexia made her last appearance, as a bride, still with overtones of Frankenstein, and on the designer’s arm. Both sported cocaine-eating grins. I made my last notes: bias drapes, laser-cuts, Retro-meets-Space-Age. Then I felt someone brush past me again.

And my jaw dropped, as it hadn't throughout the entire show, as the latecomer made an early exit. And in the light I could register her colors: emerald in the skirt; heather/lichen tints in the waistcoat, of Donegal tweed, I guessed; yellowing ivory of the vintage lace; offset by peacock feathers covering the toque; red fox tails in the stole, and amethysts in the jewelry (along with silver, and what looked like well-nibbled bones).

It shouldn't have gone together. But it did. That's fashion genius.

I turned, and looked into the square-framed glasses of my neighbor, a demure little Chinese lady from some Hong Kong glossy. But she said it first:

“Who the fuck was that?”

I had no idea, but a notion I would need to find out.



When in doubt, ask a PR lady, even if she is paw-paw-colored, with platinum-blond tresses and cerulean contact lenses. But Carla's English was dodgy, and the name she gave me sounded very much like a malentendu: Lady St Parry. Not in Debretts, nor on Google, either. Rather more promising was the affiliation: *Twenty-First Century*, a new webjournal with some serious money behind it. Yet upon investigation the issue up on the Net seemed serious, boyish, and technogeeky. It certainly lacked the witty eclectic femininity of the Lady, if she was a lady with a capital L.

I sighed, and got down to work. Writing my copy, to be filed across several time zones and half the world away, is a ritual demanding perfect quiet, all alone in my hotel room. But tonight I was having difficulty

maintaining my concentration. When I tried to detail just *what* about the collection was Retro-meets-Space-Age (what did I mean, and more importantly, what did the designer mean, apart from business?), a concertinaed skirt, a flash of lightning, the kiss of fur would come to mind and stop me in mid-phrase. Drat the girl! I thought. (Yes, she had been little more than one, quite petite....)

I wasn't being paid to describe this interloper, however intriguing. Drastic measures were needed. I ordered an affogato from room service, double strength, and on an alcohol and caffeine-fuelled burst of energy, wrote my 800 words of fashion column and emailed it into the ether. It was right on deadline in Sydney; and 2 a.m. Italiano time.

Tomorrow would be Prada, Emporio Armani, and several very important parties. Thanks to the affogato, I would now have the greatest difficulty getting to sleep. Drat the girl, indeed.



Milan passed, as it always did, in a high-speed blur. Frocks, lights, blaring music, more frocks, shopping, long taxi rides, coffee, frantically typing my copy, air kisses, "*Ciao, Bella!*", alcohol, more coffee, guilty cigarettes, insincerity by the bucket. The only relief came from the few old fashion friends I trusted, and Lady Whatever. I used to think a sight for sore eyes was a cliché, but not with her. I was red-eyed from the insane hours, but she always was not only eye candy, but eye balm. For Prada she wore a titanium corselet, milkmaid frills, a fur muff and jackboots, with a diamante

comet in her long and undyed brown ringlets. Miuccia sent a flunkey out after her with his cell phone camera, I heard, which had to be a sign of approval. For Emporio Armani, she wore a leather bustle under a sequined tartan jacket, the muff again, and a hat I can only describe as deconstructed (with nail clippers, by the look of it). Isabella Blow eat your cold little heart out, I thought.

Oh, she diverted me, into a persistent piquant curiosity as to just who she really was, and where she was coming from (a direction of the compass, I surmised, where there was fresh, rarefied air). She also unsettled me profoundly. Precisely what about her had such an effect was harder to identify. I began to get an inkling at one of the avant-garde shows, held in a converted abattoir. Much dry ice was used, and every model wore buckled leather, even the obligatory bride. At the finale the buckles and models were attached to a gun carriage, on which the designer (a Slovakian, I think) was drawn solemnly down the runway.

The Lady sat there open mouthed, then remarked, loudly: "Have you no pride? You women labor like beasts! Carthorses or oxen à la mode!"

A comparison no girl, let alone a vain model, would appreciate, but luckily none of those on the catwalk understood English.

I frowned, something rare in the fashion world, thanks to Botox, and wrote in my notebook: *Déjà vu*. Not that I had *seen* her before, because I've trained a good natural memory to fashion-police level. It was her words, and the coincidence of interests she represented: English aristo+ fashion+technology+the old-fashioned+feminism=????

But something was missing, some vital component. I underlined *déjà vu* and snapped my notebook shut. Now I followed my quarry through the milling throng. She had worn her iPod throughout the show, sensible given the fad for pain-volume disco at this year's Milan. As I neared, close enough to kiss, I could hear a faint tinkle from the iPod...surely not harpsichord music?

We were blocked briefly by the slow passage of one of the US buyers, a massive man on crutches. As if sensing my presence, she turned:

“You even dress like bats or owls, all of you, or Puritans!”

Just to one side was Carine Roitfeld from French *Vogue*, who claims only to wear colors in the countryside, and her crew of rockstar-wannabe minions, all of them clad inky somber. I blushed, and looked down: at my classic Jasper Conran jacket, Collette Dinnigan dress, and Prada boots, a perfectly coordinated outfit in basic...now suddenly boring, conformist black. All I needed was a Bible, a big white collar, and a stovepipe hat.

In the moment I glanced down, the crowd cleared, and off she went, striding through at speed, unimpeded by stiletto heels or other fashion foot-binding arts. I gazed at her retreating shape, a riot of colors, with hardly an item of her outfit which could be visually sourced to a designer (op or vintage shop, dressmaker?) and saw, unlike anyone else at the show, an individual, a true original. I thought again, *déjà vu*. Something about her resonated from deep in my past, from long before I could have appreciated the art in her personal styling...but from where?

It took me less than eight hours, my mind chewing on the problem while I drank wine, partied, showered, filed my copy, and got ready for bed. At 3 a.m. I suddenly sat up from a troubled sleep. Snap! I had it, the *déjà vu* was identified, and from a most unlikely source: the Duchess.



Once upon a time, I was a grad student, thesis underway, sessional tutoring for the experience, conference papers and articles in preparation, my life shared equally between my computer screen, the coffee shop, and the Rare Books section of the university library. It was intensely intellectual, also lonely as hell, but not without its passions. When I encountered like minds, we would go into a huddle over Mary Wollstonecraft, Kristeva, Irigaray...and more rarely, the Duchess of Newcastle. You had to be into the seventeenth century for her, but she had a small select fandom, including, somewhat reluctantly and backhandedly, Virginia Woolf, who namechecked her in *A Room of One's Own*.

For those of you not familiar with the history of feminist thought, a brief life:

Newcastle, Duchess of (1623–73), Margaret Cavendish, née Lucas. Younger daughter of the minor English gentry. Lady in waiting at the Court of Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria during the English Civil War. Fell in love with and married the Duke of Newcastle, when they were penniless exiles in France. Both were writers, she most unusually for the time, which liked its women fecund and unlearned. She wrote and published under her own name poems, plays, works

of natural science, novels, utopias—all imbued with a formidable facility for words, a vindication of women's rights, and a fanciful imagination.

Not least, she was a fabulous and inventive dresser. As she herself wrote:

And if a Lady dress, or chance to wear,
A gown to please herself, or curl her hair,
If not according as the Fashion runs,
Lord, how it sets a-work their Eyes and Tongues!
Straight she's fantastical, they all do cry,
Yet they will imitate her presently,
And for what they did laugh at her in scorn,
With it think good themselves for to adorn.

Get the picture? None alas survives of her fantastic regalia, but we do have her words, in quotable quantity. It was she who said (and I who recognized) the words: “Women live like bats or owls, labor like beasts, and die like worms.”

In a different world, like Afghanistan, or seventeenth-century England, or even academia under economic (ir)rationalism, I might have lived like that too. It was thanks to the Duchess and her many successors, from Wollstonecraft to the Pankhursts, that I didn't. Even after I had belatedly realized that a professional love of the Duchess would condemn me to short-term contracts and slave labor working hours, and that my increasing addiction to designer clothes meant I would have to get a real job...I still loved her, as an amateur.

And I had no problem with someone else loving her too in sincere imitation (the greatest flattery), even quoting her. Postmodern intertextuality they call it in the academy, a polite way of saying outright theft, in

areas where true originality has vanished, such as architecture, and above all fashion. Even the name, Lady St Parry, I could now recognize as coming from the Duchess too: “Lady Sanspareille,” without compare. It was a paradox of her personality that the Duchess could also use the personas of Lady and Mistress Bashful: shy, yet with a sense of her own worth.

I could read that fanciful display at Milan Fashion Week as both the calculating act of a sharp operator, out to create an effect, and as a (secondhand) visionary. Not many people would have spotted the referencing, not in the frivolous world of fashion, I could pride myself on that. But did it go even further? The Duchess was in her time popularly regarded as mad, and anyone who used her as a performative model could run the risk of getting too close for sanity. To quote from another era, the 1960s movie *Performance*: “the only performance that makes it, that really makes it all the way, is the one that achieves madness.”

I checked the quote on Google, and also spent a happy half hour rediscovering the words of the Duchess online, no longer only available in dusty rare books and dustier rare book shops. Then I shut my laptop down. Light was dawning outside, and I had to catch a plane, not to the antipodes, but to London, for an all-too-short respite before the Paris Fashion shows started. Would I see her again there? I wondered. I certainly hoped so.



My antidote to Milan was an old school-friend’s cottage, an amiable timeshare arrangement, in the bucolic

English countryside of Kent. I bought organic produce from the hippie neighbors, spent a lot of time in country walks, and on the internet. It should have been ideal chill-out time, but the Lady continued to unsettle me.

First I saw her report on Milan, as posted on *Twenty-First_Century.com*. As I had suspected, her brief for the shows was fashion vs new technology; and she generally found them wanting in that area...and others. It was quite the most uninhibited fashion journalism I'd read in years, and thus hugely enjoyable, not least for the way in which she kept sneaking in quotes from the Duchess. "Debauched...and loves his luxuries" (on a San Francisco buyer who would, I knew, regard it as a compliment); "necessity is a great Commandress" (on fixing up a torn hem with a safety pin and having it taken for a fashion statement); "sweet marmalade of kisses" (on the orange lipstick used exclusively for the Fendi show).

And yet, as I read on, with side trips to online archives of seventeenth-century poetry, women's writing, and the like, I found myself frowning again. It was not just the quotations and the odd occasional archaisms of style and vocabulary. Nor the fact of the writer speaking her (erudite) mind, with considerable passion and no care for what anyone else might think. The problem, to me, was that it read precisely as if the Duchess of Newcastle had been transported into our era via time machine, locked into a room with an internet connection to bring her up to our 24/7 speed, given an expense account, then set free.

The Duchess had in fact died at the age of fifty, prisoner of the seventeenth century, and that more mundane time machine, the ageing meat of the human body. She most definitely had not done an *Orlando* (thanks Virginia). And yet the words in front of me suggested otherwise.

Uncanny, I thought. Then, some ghost from my litcrit days said: no, when Todorov used that word, it was in reference to Ann Radcliffe's Gothic (another interesting woman, but several centuries after the Duchess), in which there was a physical explanation for all the apparently supernatural events of the narrative. How about Todorov's fantastic? I thought...where the supernatural is problematic, and the reader keeps oscillating endlessly between belief and disbelief. That was more how I felt.

I could hardly hope for the marvelous, where the supernatural is simply accepted as a feature of the world, for Lady Sanspareille to be the Duchess in actuality.



When I got onto my fashion contacts again, as the Paris shows inexorably neared, I found I was not the only person intrigued by Lady Sanspareille. Her article had created a stir, especially the quip that Versace was suitable only for frowzy, tatterdemalion bawds—which must have had the PR flaks reaching for the dictionary. Someone had found a blog site: GloriousFame.com. I spent an instructive hour there reading more channeled Duchess: she was in favour of technology, foxhunting (natch!); monarchy, but found the Windsors dreadfully dull and unstylish (as you would, I thought, after the

Stuarts); and despised the current Poet Laureate. Yet most valuable was the information that someone else had recognized the lady...as one Charlotte Lukes, formerly a high-flyer with a distinctly staid English advertising firm and responsible for a notorious television ad for condoms.

I begged, pleaded, threatened, and finally got a copy of the ad sent to me, quite illegally, over the web. And I burst out laughing. In a charming English country garden, nymphs frolicked around a trellis containing a manic cucumber vine, over whose fruit they innocently fitted...you-know-what.

Virginia Woolf had written: “What a vision of loneliness and riot the thought of Margaret Cavendish brings to mind! As if some giant cucumber had spread itself all over the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death. What could bind, tame, or civilize for human use that wild, generous, untutored intelligence?”

What indeed? Even death, it seemed, could not bind her...so that she could apparently arise from the grave and take an intertextual revenge on the divine Virginia.

That did it. Paris might be imminent, but I had to satisfy my curiosity.



I took the train up from Kent, my destination not Knightsbridge, but one of the few seventeenth-century residential buildings left in London. It was in a tiny, forgotten corner, listed but disheveled, and not yet totally yuppified. Nervously I pushed the buzzer beside the name “C. LUKES.” It rang, rang again, and then I

thrust my hand into the pocket of my black coat, bitterly disappointed. The address I had obtained via an outrageous act of bribery (a Prada personal-organizer case, the latest model) had been correct. But my bird of paradise had flown.

I dawdled back towards the tube station, just as all hell broke loose. A crowd of commuters boiled out of the escalators and onto the pavement. Police sirens wailed, and it seemed like the entire cast of *The Bill* miraculously converged on the scene. They must be shooting an episode of the new *Doctor Who*, I thought. Then my brain belatedly registered the absence of lights and cameras in this action.

“Damned heathens,” said a voice behind me, an upper-class voice, impeccably politically incorrect. A girl’s voice...and I turned, to see my quarry, on a new, state of the art pushbike. She had dressed down slightly for the London streets: tweed knickerbockers, a military dress jacket, purple boxers’ boots, and a safety helmet. The latter normally was most unchic, but she managed with hers to look alluring, a very simple effect achieved by letting the stray ringlet flow free.

“Another bomb attack?” I said.

“Or just a very good scare,” she replied. Now she was eyeing me, an unmistakable *déjà vu* look. I held out my hand, and after a suspicious pause, she shook it.

“We met in Milan...Duchess,” I said.

Not a blink in that steady gaze, but I knew she had registered the words.

“Ah, Madame Puritan,” she said. “Amongst all the other Puritans. Except for the silly shoes.”

“They’re Manolos,” I said.

From her expression she clearly pronounced the designer's name *Blab-nik*. "Still silly. The tube's closed now, and so are the buses. You'll have to walk."

Ohshit, I thought. "I've got to get to Waterloo...."

She looked severe. "Heaven does not always protect the persons of virtuous women traveling without their parents, husbands or particular friend to guard them....But sometimes lends a human help."

"That's from *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*...I think."

A nod. Writers are vain, and I had just gratified her vanity. She stepped forward and onto the pedals, leaving the seat free, and jerked her head at me: come hither! I cautiously mounted behind her, and we set forth, via alleyways and mews, through the streets of London town.

The real Duchess, a protected aristocrat, would have been lost on her era's roads: her modern incarnation seemed thankfully more streetwise, and very well-informed, thanks to the GPS receiver mounted on the handlebars. I sat back, and watched the ringlets blow free in the newly unpolluted London air.

"What are you?" I murmured, half to myself. "A reincarnation?"

She gave no sign of having heard, but nonetheless answered. "That's more heathenism."

"Also Pythagorean, whom you doubtless read."

Another nod. "But it's not true."

"You are a relation, I checked you out. Lukes, a variant spelling of Lucas, descended from one of Margaret Cavendish's brothers, a cadet branch. She was fond of her family, and it makes sense that she would follow the line."

She dodged a clump of grumpy commuters. “Per-adventure. Or as Charlotte Lukes would have said, maybe. She’s not herself anymore, not the Home Counties girl from the lesser gentry, who got herself to university, and a good job in the city. Someone else is wearing her, as if she were a dress tried on, and found a becoming fit.”

“Is that how you refer to your...her breakdown?”

“Breakdown? Fie! You have advertising industry gossips?”

I said nothing. Our current climate of terrorism means governments collect information on even their most law-abiding citizens—and there are ways to access it, connections in the most unlikely places with a taste for fashion industry freebies.

“I wore grey suits,” she suddenly said. “A parrot-hued pashmina, that was the first sign. And a sudden addiction to rare book shops, eBay auctions for the strangest of things suddenly become desirable. A carmine velvet pixie hat, 1950s. It was only after I had bought a subscription to the *New Scientist* and the collected works of the lady whom great-aunt Eliza used to refer to as Mad Madge that the penny started to drop. The office was selling tickets for a charity ball, and I dressed myself up in a paste pearl cap, with a half-moon of diamante brooch at the front; blue bugle bead and pearl coat, fringed with red; green glittery boots, the whole finished with a spear, also glittery, in the shape of a comet. I said I was an Empress, and won first prize.”

“The Empress in *The New Blazing World* wore real diamonds and pearls,” I said. “But near enough.”

“As I found when I got home, my head swimming, and opened the book.”

“The Duchess wasn’t of her time,” I said cautiously. “That’s why they mocked her. But perhaps she had intimations of ours.”

She continued, on a roll like her bike, which was picking up speed down a slight incline. “I swear I’d never read the description before, but I’d aped it faithfully. I got dressed up the next day in my grey suit, last time I wore it, the pashmina, and the pixie hat, carrying the spear under one arm. I hung it on the wall of my cubicle, and wrote an ad that day which earned me a promotion.”

She glanced over her shoulder briefly at me.

“Charlotte Lukes was hardly that silly slattern Bridget Jones. But she was unhappy, and rather uninteresting. Far better to surrender, and let myself be a far more interesting person.”

If this was madness, it was perfectly methodical, I thought, as an awkward silence fell. I knew I had to keep the conversation going, but my opener neared the banal.

“I’ll owe you for this trip,” I said—as if the Lady were a taxi service. “Shall I buy you dinner in Paris?”

She glanced back over her shoulder. “Milan was *quite* enough for me. I asked *Twenty-First Century* for the test-drive column.”

“Test-drive?”

“New tech...like this bike. The editor said: ‘provided you don’t make the column too girly.’”

She chuckled. I had no idea if the Duchess had chuckled, maybe this sense of humor was Charlotte Lukes'. I foresaw an extremely girly column.

"Margaret Cavendish was constrained by the sex roles of her time, just like your feet, Madame. Here she, or her shadow, can do anything she likes. I might go back to university and study science. Join the Royal Society, which now admits women. Find a nice older man, like her husband, the Duke."

"I dare you," I said, "to find a real Duke."

"Via the internet?" She chuckled again. "But he'd better be fertile. She always wanted a baby, no woman in her era was complete without one. I'd like to give her that, at least."

"If you have given her something," I said, "then it is far more than her wildest dreams, even in *The New Blazing World*."

A ladylike grunt, as we hit a rut in the road. Next she negotiated a group of police, who clearly didn't regard two women on a bike as terrorists. She kept sneaking glances at the GPS screen, and muttering a mixture of mouth-filling oaths and admonitions at it:

"God's blood! We're not in Dulwich!"

I tried to speak, but she waved me silent. It dragged on as we passed more homeward-bound commuters, women carrying their office shoes in their hands, and walking stocking-foot, fat men sweating in their Saville Row suits, the fitness fanatics looking smug. Now we neared the Thames and the great station. She brought the bike to a neat halt outside the main entrance, set both booted feet on the ground, and waited, back turned to me.

I'd once interviewed a Japanese designer, a man forthcoming only for 30 minutes at a time. Then he abruptly retreated into himself, recharging his batteries for the next design, or encounter. I sensed something similar here: a shy person performing sociability, but only in bursts.

"Thanks," I said awkwardly, since she clearly did not want to prolong the goodbye.

There was a pause, in which she should have answered. Instead, she hit the pedals, accelerating almost from standstill, around a corner and out of sight, ringing her bell as she went.

I gasped. There is a verb of somewhat flexible meaning: to duchess. It can imply anything from condescension to co-option to doing someone over. Whatever, right now I felt as though I had been thoroughly duchessed. After a moment I added, or *she* has. What an egomaniac! The whole length of the trip she had not asked me who I was, nor where I came from. I'm Livia! I mentally shouted after her. I'm from Sydney! And I know where you live, both places: the second being a magnificent tomb in Westminster Abbey, erected by the loving, grieving Duke of Newcastle.

I went into the station and checked the time for the Eurostar. Around me the tabloids shouted: TERROR ATTACK FOILED! something for which I could not have cared less. Paris beckoned, and it was the nature of my bread and butter for me to follow.



I still don't know how I got through the next week. It was Milan, but *en Française*, Chanel instead of Prada,

but the same old faces, to my jaded eyes almost the same clothes. I air-kissed, I filed my copy, I partied, but never was I so thankful when I could finally settle into my Business Class seat in the metal tube taking me home, to my sunburnt, blazing New World.

And somewhere over Kamchatka, a plan hatched in my mind, a revenge, and also a means to satisfy my curiosity. Lady Sanspareille was new tech; and new tech could analyze words in a way which the Duchess of Newcastle, sitting in her study at Welbeck Abbey, could never, ever have dreamed.

Way back, in my grad student days, I had eked out my grant by doing typing for a Professor, rendering the greats and not so greats of English literature into machine readable form. Mary Perdita Robinson, Mary Shelley, the Brontë sisters. Professor Burrows, of the University of Newcastle (yes, carrying coals to, indeed!) had developed one of the first stylistic recognition programs, determining how the vocabulary, grammar, especially the commas, could reveal a writer's signature. Even in anonymous texts.

I would need a large quantity of the Duchess' works, for comparison and statistical analysis purposes. Easy-peasy! Had not Virginia Woolf noted Margaret Cavendish's "torrents of rhyme and prose, poetry and philosophy...congealed in quartos and folios"? For Lady Sanspareille I would have the articles from *Twenty-first-Century.com*, also the eighteen months' worth of blog entries since Charlotte Lukes had taken a lucrative package from the advertising world. That should suffice.

And now I sit in front of a computer screen, waiting as the silicone chips crunch through an author's

words. There are no two identical writers, especially in style. The vocabulary would be a point of difference, as so much has changed since the seventeenth century. But underneath, as the Professor says, remains the punctuation, the distinctive grammar, and prosody of the writer.

I had thought Charlotte Lukes' imitation of the Duchess uncanny, but there was no physical explanation. It was fantastical for me to vacillate between belief and disbelief as to whether she had been possessed by the ghost of a poet or not.

Yet was it too much to hope for the marvelous, that they were one—the individual, inimitable, indivisible Duchess of Newcastle?