

**Non-Standard Deviation:
Review of Saverio Tomaiuolo, *Deviance in Neo-Victorian
Culture: Canon, Transgression, Innovation***

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Saverio Tomaiuolo, *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture: Canon, Transgression, Innovation*
Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019
ISBN: 978-3-319-96949-7, €73 (HB)

In his new book, *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture: Canon, Transgression, Innovation*, Saverio Tomaiuolo argues that it is ‘deviance’ in neo-Victorian representations which presents an “alternative view of the nineteenth century” (p. 5). Indeed, his study also presents an “alternative view” to the standard consideration of sexual deviance, broadening out to address a variety of social and cultural deviances. Tomaiuolo’s central premise is that deviance in neo-Victorianism “both illuminate[s] our perception of ‘deviance’ in our own time, and suggest[s] that ‘deviance’ was equally prevalent in the Victorian age” (p. 7). Tomaiuolo claims that by focusing on ‘deviance’, neo-Victorianism reveals that “the Victorian age was much more ‘deviant’ than it is usually depicted, perceived and supposed to be”; thus neo-Victorianism is “at odds with the period’s own view of itself, as well as with the reputation of Victorianism in our own day” (p. 5). It is this ‘deviant’ or ‘alternate’ perspective that distinguishes neo-Victorianism from the nostalgia of heritage approaches to the Victorians.

The other side of the Victorians has been well-established, since at least the publication of Steven Marcus’s *The Other Victorians* (1966) and more recently in Laura Marks’s *Alice in Pornoland: Hardcore Encounters with the Victorian Gothic* (2018); yet the stereotypical image of the repressed Victorian persists in contemporary culture. However, it is not as

Neo-Victorian Studies
12:1 (2019)
pp. 190-200

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3471368>



simple as suggesting that neo-Victorianism works against these stereotypes to present a more accurate, 'deviant' account of the Victorians. The stereotypical images of the Victorians are in part perpetuated by contemporary re-imaginings of the Victorians, even ones which focus on the 'deviance' within Victorian culture. Although Tomaiuolo distances neo-Victorianism from nostalgic heritage approaches, he does not sufficiently engage with the ways in which neo-Victorianism is implicated in perpetuating such 'normative' cultural perceptions of the Victorians.

The idea of 'deviance' in neo-Victorian fiction has been widely discussed, particularly in relation to ideas of sexual deviance. Indeed, the journal *Neo-Victorian Studies* dedicated a 2017 special issue to *Neo-Victorian Sexploitation* (see Hernández and Romero Ruiz 2017). While the focus on neo-Victorian 'deviance' is not new, Tomaiuolo takes a somewhat new approach in grounding his understanding of 'deviance' within a sociological framework. Tomaiuolo adopts Émile Durkheim's sociological idea of deviance as "an integral part of the social system", which "helps [in] affirming stable, and shared, cultural values and norms (defining boundaries of behaviour and practice), promotes social cohesion and, in particular, encourages social change and evolution" (p. 6). Nonetheless, beyond establishing that 'deviance' is primarily deviance from *social* codes, Tomaiuolo does not engage with the sociological understanding of 'deviance'. Rather, the sociological framework provides the justification for a broader consideration of 'deviance' in the chapters that follow: Chapter 2 addresses dirt as an "epistemic deviance" (p. 17), Chapter 3 explores bodily deviance, Chapter 4 focuses on social deviance, Chapter 5 examines sexual deviance, and Chapter 6 engages with visual deviance.

In viewing Victorian 'deviance' as an agent for "social change and evolution", Tomaiuolo establishes a teleological narrative, which positions the contemporary moment as the inevitable endpoint of Victorian progress. Indeed, he suggests that the 'deviance' that neo-Victorianism reveals in Victorian culture is actually contemporary, since neo-Victorianism is involved in searching for analogies between the present and the past (see p. 4). Neo-Victorian Studies is often predicated on the premise that neo-Victorianism is multi-directional: it not only projects backwards from the present onto the past but also uses the past to understand the present. However, Tomaiuolo's argument about the contemporaneity of neo-Victorian 'deviance' is not located within this wider critical framework. His

engagement with the early theorists of neo-Victorian fiction in his introduction is limited to a brief consideration of the critical debates over the classification of neo-Victorian fiction. Moreover, Tomaiuolo does not address the implications of the teleological narrative of progress that underpins his understanding of neo-Victorian ‘deviance’. This is particularly surprising since he quotes Matthew Sweet’s *Inventing the Victorians* (2001) in the introduction – one of the most explicit examples of this project of retrospectively positioning the Victorian era as the starting point for the contemporary period.

Tomaiuolo dramatises this idea of the two-way communication between the Victorian and neo-Victorian period in the imaginary time-travel episodes that bookend his volume. In the introduction, Tomaiuolo imagines what Dickens’s reaction might be if he were transported to the modern world. Again, the teleological narrative is present in Tomaiuolo’s suggestion that Pip’s letter to Joe in *Great Expectations* (1850-1851) is “a telling example of Dickens’s *ante-litteram* ‘texting’” (p. 9). The imaginary time-travel continues with a consideration of how Dickens might react to the short-lived theme park *Dickens World* (pp. 10-12) and to Banksy’s ‘deviant’ theme park *Dismaland* (p. 13). He then proceeds, in the conclusion of the monograph, to offer a complementary time-travel episode, imagining how Banksy might react if transported back to the 1851 Great Exhibition. In both instances, Tomaiuolo adopts an ambivalent stance, at times seeming unsure of how his time-travellers would react, while at other times presenting their imagined responses with a clear-eyed certainty. To some extent, this undermines the effectiveness of these episodes, making their purpose seem less than convincing.

In the remaining chapters, Tomaiuolo not only explores various forms of ‘deviance’, but also addresses a variety of neo-Victorian representations. In addition to the oft-discussed neo-Victorian novels Matthew Kneale’s *Sweet Thames* (1992), Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), and Clare Clark’s *The Great Stink* (2005), Tomaiuolo examines the graphic novel *Victorian Undead* (2010), written by Ian Edginton with artwork by Davide Fabbri, the television series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), representations of the real-life Julia Pastrana (known as the Victorian ‘Ape Woman’), and the works of three neo-Victorian visual artists (Dan Hillier, Anthony Rhys, and Colin Batty). The consideration of neo-Victorian visual art in particular makes an important contribution to

Neo-Victorian Studies as this form has received comparatively little critical attention to date.

In Chapter 2, Tomaiuolo brings a new perspective to Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* by reading it through the lens of the "epistemic deviance" (p. 17) surrounding the meaning of 'dirt' in the nineteenth century. Tomaiuolo defines "epistemic deviance" as "a negation of the nineteenth-century systems of knowledge" (p. 17). Focusing on the slippage in the connotations of 'dirt' in the Victorian era between a material and metaphorical understanding, Tomaiuolo argues that the term became a "cultural construction", which was used to "define and confine unwanted subjects and behaviours that transgressed normative standardised cultural codes" (p. 28). Tomaiuolo explores how these cultural understandings of 'dirt' operate in neo-Victorian texts, arguing that they 'deviate' from the oppositions on which they are seemingly based, repeatedly confounding reader expectations. Tomaiuolo notes that, through the inclusion of references to a range of literary sources, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, *Sweet Thames* and *The Great Stink*

do not simply aim at evoking a sense of nostalgia (or worse an aestheticized recreation of the nineteenth century) but at radically revising assumed notions about the Victorian episteme through a dramatised and politicised aesthetics of dirt that, on the contrary, shows the ambivalence of nineteenth-century cultural politics. (p. 49)

This conclusion fits into the wider critical understanding of neo-Victorianism, commonly viewed as an attempt to show that the reality of the Victorian era was more nuanced and complex than our idealised or stereotypical ideas of the period. Although this argument is made in relation to all three texts, it is most fully elaborated in Tomaiuolo's reading of Faber's novel. Tomaiuolo focuses on the depiction of the prostitute in the novel, but argues that rather than emphasise sexual deviance, Faber associates the prostitutes, especially Sugar, with images of cleanliness. Tomaiuolo reads this as a form of 'deviance' which "revers[es] the traditional identification between prostitution and filth that was typical of Victorian medical and social discourses" (p. 35). The close reading of *The Crimson Petal and the White* in relation to the epistemic understanding of

dirt in the Victorian era is the strongest element of this chapter and makes an interesting contribution to existing criticism on Faber's novel.

Chapter 3 enters into dialogue with the growing critical discourse surrounding 'freaks', but despite the ostensible focus on "bodily deviance" (p. 17), Tomaiuolo stresses the role of culture rather than nature. Tomaiuolo frames his discussion of contemporary representations of Julia Pastrana, the "Victorian Ape Woman" (p. 65), in terms of Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History and Forgetting* (2004). He argues that Ricoeur explores "the antithesis between the *eikon* (defined as the real and fixed 'image' of the past) and the *phantasma* (its ghost-like appearance, its simulacrum)", thus linking neo-Victorianism to "the perennial interplay between *anamnēsis* (recollection, defined as 'the memory of an object of a search named recall') and forgetting" (p. 65). Tomaiuolo proposes that these issues are particularly important in the history of 'freaks' in Victorian Britain, since in spite of "a massive presence of documents, bills, photographs and articles dealing with the life of the [sic] so-called 'curiosities' [...] there are only rare examples of freaks speaking *directly* about themselves" (p. 66, original emphasis). This raises the question of agency and ethics in representations of 'freaks' which have been addressed in other critical accounts, such as Marie-Luise Kohlke's review of Anthony Rhys's exhibition *Notorious/Drwg-Enwog* (2016). Tomaiuolo somewhat sidesteps these questions of agency, even prefacing his discussion of "The Ape Woman" with a brief consideration of "Joseph Merrick (commonly known as 'The Elephant Man')" (p. 69). The asymmetry in the terms used to refer to these two subjects further removes agency from Julia Pastrana by identifying her solely by her 'freak-ish' label. Tomaiuolo connects the treatment of 'freaks' in Victorian Britain to the contemporary interest in bodily deviance evident in such shows as *Extraordinary People* (2003–) and *Bodys shock* (2003–). In doing so, he continues a trend in current criticism of neo-Victorian 'freakery'; thus Helen Davies's *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (2015) explores how neo-Victorian representations of 'freaks' both undermine contemporary assumptions about the Victorians and cause us to examine contemporary ideas about bodily diversity. Although he frames his discussion of Pastrana in terms of notions of 'bodily deviance', Tomaiuolo ultimately understands her as, in Rosemarie Garland Thomson's words, a "freak of culture" rather than a "freak of nature" (p. 72). He argues that "[b]y performing the role of the

submissive ‘angel in the house’ Julia replicated many of the stereotypes of the ideal Victorian family, albeit in a ‘bodily deviant’ form”, and that by doing so her performance “seemed to question many of the notions and assumptions that were given [sic] for granted by the Victorian public, demonstrating [...] that it was culture (rather than nature) that actually ‘made’ freaks” (p. 74). Tomaiuolo’s exploration of neo-Victorian ‘bodily deviance’ continues the existing work on neo-Victorian freakery, prompting further reconsideration of both past and present ideas about bodily ‘normativity’, but also extending this work via the focus on the crucial role of culture in discourses around ‘freaks’.

In Chapter 4 Tomaiuolo explores the relationship between neo-Victorianism and the Victorian past in terms of zombies, or the ‘undead’. He connects the concern with zombies to fears of public violence, which he understands in terms of social deviance. Tomaiuolo analyses Edginton’s graphic novel *Victorian Undead: Sherlock Holmes vs Zombies!* in relation to the recent cinematic mashups of nineteenth-century texts and horror tropes, most notably *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2016). Referring to the typically neo-Victorian trope of spectrality, highlighted by critics such as Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (see Arias and Pulham 2010), he suggests that the idea of the undead is fundamental to neo-Victorianism:

The Victorian (dead) past comes back and haunts readers under a deviant-like guise, since [...] it looks uncannily ‘familiar’ (readers recognise the nineteenth century traits of neo-Victorian works) and ‘unfamiliar’ (in order to be ‘neo’ the texts set in the Victorian age tend to approach the nineteenth century through a ‘deviant’ perspective, and at the same time aim at enhancing the ‘deviant’ undercurrents of the nineteenth century). (p. 110)

However, Tomaiuolo implicitly distances his approach from such critical understandings, noting that “[w]hen discussing neo-Victorianism and neo-Victorian works, many critics often resort to recognisable Gothic codes and metaphors to convey the idea of reanimating the nineteenth-century (presumably dead) heritage” (p. 110). Moreover, he seems to suggest that it is this critical approach to neo-Victorianism that prompts the fictional interest in ghosts and mediums, overlooking the fact that this interest also

emerges from the historical preoccupation with spiritualism in the late nineteenth century. Rather than conceiving of the relationship between the neo-Victorian present and the Victorian past in terms of a relationship with the ghosts of the dead, Tomaiuolo focuses on the idea of the ‘undead’ as zombies. He argues that the lineage of zombies goes back to Victorian literary history, specifically the figures of Bertha and Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre* (1847), and the sensation fiction trope of having (supposedly) dead characters reappear. Tomaiuolo grounds this neo-Victorian concern with zombies in the historical context of the Victorian era, specifically linking it to nineteenth-century discourses surrounding the fear of degeneration and reverse colonialism (pp. 114-115), as well as anxieties surrounding the disposal of the dead. In drawing out the connections to Victorian literary and cultural discourses, Tomaiuolo once again shows how neo-Victorian ‘deviance’ reveals the pre-existing ‘deviance’ within the Victorian era.

In Chapter 5, Tomaiuolo enters into more familiar territory in discussing sexual deviance, but here again he brings a broader perspective to standard accounts of the topic. Neo-Victorian critics often emphasise the presentation of the Victorians’ sex lives and, indeed, *Penny Dreadful* has been the subject of several scholarly articles to date that address this angle. Tomaiuolo’s analysis of the series, however, examines the idea of deviance not only in relation to non-heteronormative sexualities, but also in terms of the idea of the monstrous and the animal/human hybrid. Tomaiuolo argues that the meaning of vampires and monsters has shifted from the Victorian era to the present: whereas in Victorian representations they were used to explore issues of kinship and scientific advances in reproduction, in neo-Victorian representations they are connected to issues around the body and technological reproduction. While these concerns correlate to existing critical trends in Gothic Studies, Tomaiuolo’s analysis of the series is distinguished by a focus on the way it “self-consciously includes and exploits specific stylistic strategies derived from Baroque poetics” (p. 152). According to Tomaiuolo, the “‘sexually deviant’ characters” in the series are “representatives of a neo-Baroque poetics of excess”, which he argues is “based upon theatricality, metatextuality and disruption of boundaries” (p. 143). It is in this disruption of boundaries that the connection between neo-Baroque and ‘deviance’ becomes apparent. Indeed, the relationship between the Baroque and neo-Baroque seems to reflect that between Victorian and neo-Victorian deviance. Tomaiuolo notes that the term

‘Baroque’ derives from the Portuguese for “an odd or irregularly-shaped pearl” (p. 153); thus, as with neo-Victorianism, the deviance foregrounded in the neo-Baroque “disruption of boundaries” highlights the deviance that was already apparent in the Baroque. This raises some important implications for Tomaiuolo’s argument that ‘deviance’ is characteristic of neo-Victorianism, which are not fully addressed.

In Chapter 6, Tomaiuolo makes an interesting contribution to neo-Victorian studies in examining neo-Victorian visual arts, a still comparatively neglected and under-explored area of neo-Victorian criticism. Tomaiuolo argues that by incorporating visually deviant elements, neo-Victorian artists prompt viewers to question the dominant image of the staid and respectable Victorians. The chapter uses Roland Barthes’s theory of photography as a framework for its analysis, specifically his idea of the co-existence of the *studium* and the *punctum* within an image:

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes argues that within the ‘classical body of information’ that makes viewers receive these works as ‘political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes’ (what Barthes calls the *studium*) there could be an element that ‘rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow’. The detail that disturbs the *studium* is defined by Barthes as *punctum*. (p. 183)

The idea that photographs can be “enjoy[ed ...] as good historical scenes” raises the issue of the representational function of photography; through his discussion of neo-Victorian visual art, Tomaiuolo suggests that Victorians were more aware of the creative and disruptive potential of photography than is often assumed. The chapter presents a compelling case study in how the neo-Victorian representation serves as a *punctum*, which not only disrupts the *studium* of Victorian representation but also reveals the *punctum* already discernible in Victorian representations themselves. Tomaiuolo opens his chapter with a discussion of “[a] typical example of Victorian *studium*” in the form of photographs of the Benson family (p. 183). Unfortunately, these photographs are not actually reproduced in the text and so the reader has to imagine them. This is somewhat difficult, given that the majority of the discussion of the family focuses on presenting biographical information to reveal the ‘deviant’ sexual relationships behind

the supposedly stable image of the Victorian family in the images. Tomaiuolo then moves on to consider the work of three neo-Victorian visual artists – Hillier, Rhys, and Batty – who explicitly introduce a ‘deviant’ element, or *punctum*, into Victorian images through a range of artistic techniques. These ‘deviant’ elements often take the form of animal limbs, once again suggesting that the boundary between the animal and the human is a recurring concern in neo-Victorianism, as discussed in Chapter 3 on Pastrana and Chapter 5 on *Penny Dreadful*. Following discussion of the works of these artists, Tomaiuolo returns to the Benson images, this time imagining how they might be depicted by a neo-Victorian artist to make the *punctum* more visible. This hypothetical neo-Victorian response to the Victorian image is somewhat redundant, since Tomaiuolo opened the chapter by discussing the ‘deviant’ sexual relationships that served as the *punctum* to the *studium* of the Benson’s family portrait. Moreover, the discussion of a hypothetical neo-Victorian image is less effective than the preceding analysis of the actual neo-Victorian images.

Throughout the book, Tomaiuolo has made a convincing argument that the ‘deviance’ in neo-Victorian fiction prompts a reconsideration of both the Victorian and the contemporary era. Towards the end of his book, however, he turns to consider the relationship between the neo-Victorian and Modernism. He argues that

[w]hereas the aim of [...] this study at large, has been to show the cultural and textual dialogue between the Victorians and ourselves, it is important to remark that this artistic dialogue was not arrested and interrupted by the advent of Modernism. (p. 216)

Tomaiuolo’s argument ‘deviates’ from the usual trend in neo-Victorian studies which focuses on the connections between the neo-Victorian and the Victorian while overlooking or downplaying the connections to the Modernist period. In part this is due to the supposed distance that the Modernists established from their Victorian forebears, as Tomaiuolo comments of Lytton Strachey in the introduction to his book. Similarly, in his introduction to *Writing and Victorianism* (1997), J. B. Bullen argued that the Modernist rejection of the Victorians was a form of Oedipal rejection of the parent figures (Bullen 1997: 2). This genealogical framework has

persisted in critical accounts of the relationship between neo-Victorianism and Victorianism (see, e.g., Carroll 2010; Morey and Nelson 2012). Tomaiuolo seems to be hinting at a more interesting understanding of the role of Modernism in his suggestion that

it could be more critically productive to reflect on the neo-Victorian ‘cultural discovery’ of the nineteenth-century [sic] not simply as nostalgic return to the past but rather as a continuation and an uninterrupted ambivalent communication with Modernists. (p. 217)

In exploring the role of Modernism in neo-Victorianism, Tomaiuolo presents a ‘deviant’ approach to prevailing critical norms. However, these arguments come fairly late in the volume and are not really given sufficient consideration.

Overall, Tomaiuolo’s book builds on existing work in the field of neo-Victorianism and deviance and presents a clear framework for understanding the myriad ways in which various neo-Victorian media engage with ‘deviance’. Though the use of a sociological framework promises a new take on ‘deviance’, the full implications of this framework, and of Tomaiuolo’s underlying argument that the ‘deviance’ in neo-Victorianism only reveals the deviance that already existed in Victorianism, are not sufficiently explored. Similarly, Tomaiuolo’s argument about the relationship between Modernism and neo-Victorianism hints at an interesting new approach, but this again remains under-developed. The real contribution of Tomaiuolo’s study, however, is the expanded range of consideration he brings to both deviance and neo-Victorianism. While readers looking for a conventional approach focused predominantly on sexual deviance will not find it here, what they will find is a more nuanced understanding of ‘deviance’ in social, cultural and aesthetic terms. In terms of neo-Victorianism, Tomaiuolo also expands the range of representations and media that are considered, in particular presenting interesting readings of neo-Victorian visual art, a still relatively under-explored area, and of the graphic novel *Victorian Undead*. Indeed, the strength of Tomaiuolo’s book lies in his direct engagement with neo-Victorianism, and even when discussing Faber’s now-canonical *The Crimson Petal and the White* his close reading affords an original perspective that draws on his broader

understanding of ‘deviance’. Readers of this book will find a non-standard engagement with deviance and neo-Victorianism that opens up numerous possible avenues for future research.

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