On a paradox of the unnew

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Abstract. In this brief paper, I present a paradox of the unnew, derived from nineteenth and early twentieth century fiction, and consider an obvious solution.


I have written a novel: do not scorn
—By the name of “Death in the Early Morn.”

Certain works of nineteenth and early twentieth century fiction suggest a paradox, which I describe as a paradox of the unnew (Rossetti 2005 [1870]; Wharton 1990 [1905]). The paradox is an incompatible set of propositions:

(a) For something to merit my interest, it must be new.

(b) This merits my interest.

(c) There is nothing new about this.

Now just about anything is new in some ways but sometimes insignificant ways; and the judgment that something is “nothing new” may be made with the intention of setting aside these insignificant ways. For example, consider this dialogue:


Critic of critic: Well, there is a difference between E2 and E1. E2 was published later. And if there is a difference, then your argument fails. E2 has something new about it – a later publication date.

Critic (irritable): No, I am not accepting that.
This dialogue suggests a solution. Something can be nothing new according to a standard of newness which ignores certain qualities, but one of the ignored qualities merits interest. For example, a short story is sufficiently like a nineteenth century Russian fiction to say that it is nothing new, but there is this other quality, which merits interest: it was written in twenty-first century Manchester. According to various theories, you cannot even produce that in this context.

**References**
