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Original article

Necro-Aesthetic Creation in Keats's *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*

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Abstract

This study examines John Keats's "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" through the theoretical lens of necro-aesthetics, demonstrating how the poem presents the transformation of necropolitical violence into artistic production. Drawing on the theories of necropolitics, as proposed by Achille Mbembe, as well as the description of necropolitics as a regime of sensation developed in The Aesthetics of Necropolitics and Christina Sharpe's "wake work" as a form of living with the dead, the study argues how Isabella's grieving becomes mourning-as-making, in which tending to the dead emerges as sustained artistic labour rather than pathological fixation. The brothers' act of murdering Lorenzo illustrates necropolitical sovereignty where life becomes disposable based on an economy that values class, use-value, and futurity. Isabella's act resists this because she turns life into form by unearthing Lorenzo's severed head and placing it in a basil pot to grow it as a living aesthetic object that embodies life through intimacy achieved through material and semiotic engagements. As she stops engaging with society temporally, this act is perceived not as negation but as concentration that corresponds to Sharpe's notion of wake work. The article further argues that this necro-aesthetic practice is disrupted, almost brutally, through the theft of the basil pot by the brothers, who commit a second necropolitical violence, this time not just on the dead but also on the aesthetic that facilitates sustaining. Ultimately, Isabella's demise shows that the ethical premise in this poem is that evil lies not in death but in the forbiddance of artistic expressions in which the dead would be able to linger or be in some form present in life.

Keywords: Necro-Aesthetics, Necropolitics, Wake Work, Keats, Isabella; or, *The Pot of Basil*

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INTRODUCTION

In John Keats's "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil", the poetic form establishes a landscape in which Isabella can serve as a necro-aesthetic figure, the subjectivity of whom is determined through her relationship with her beloved's body, that is, the body of Lorenzo. The aesthetic quality of Keats's verse, with its attention devoted to the body and its transformation into a focus of ritual devotion, creates a mode that is surely aesthetic, whereby the corpse becomes the base of that devotion. Such practices originate in the murder of Lorenzo by Isabella's brothers, further develop into an act of aesthetic creation through death. The murder corresponds to the principles of Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, which reveals the modern formulations of power, determining who is to die and imbues the dead with symbolic and political meanings. Isabella's aesthetic creation from death can thus be explored by extending this terrain into realm of aesthetics. *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics* (2018), edited by Natasha Lushetich, questions how power over death is also power over sense, texture, and mode of being: "the conduits that lead to irreparable destruction, systemic violence, and devalued death also function as a discursive and sensorial loop that produces hopelessness and devalues death and, by implication, also life" (Lushetich, 2018, pp. 1–2). In this light, necropolitics not only ends life but also prescribes the sensory experience of death, framing how the deceased are to be known, appraised, and incorporated into the world of the living. Here, at the site of sensory experience, is also where the narrative of Keats's Isabella resists the erasures implied by the logic of necropolitics, when the body fails to disappear and instead becomes the site of death itself, where it is remodelled and brought into contact with the sensibilities of the living. Isabella's engagements with Lorenzo's decapitated body, exhuming it, planting basil on top of it, and caring for it each day, are gestures towards converting the very flesh exposed by death into an aesthetic relation. In particular, Christina Sharpe's work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) on the visual, temporal, affective dimensions of Black death provides ways in which "necropolitical" conditions might also be translated into aesthetic forms that focus not merely on death, but more specifically to survival, care, and other modes of relationships. Thus, Isabella's tending to Lorenzo's corpse emerges as an act of aestheticization of her beloved's remains, transforming death into an object of consecration. Such devotion reflects a broader trajectory in which there exists a narrative of subjects and their respond to necropolitical violence not merely through mourning but through creative, affective, and material practices. "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil," thus, turns into a productive space to explore how Mbembe's necropolitical paradigm develops into a truly necro-aesthetic mode, as proposed via contemporary feminist scholarship, suggesting beauty's intertwinement with the patterns and remains of death.

Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics serves as a paradigm shift redefining modern sovereignty due to its inherent link with death, claiming that political power is most fully effective not in the realm of fostering life but in the authority of controlling its demise. His influential work *Necropolitics* (2019), first published in the form of essay "Necropolitics" (2003), draws heavily on

Michel Foucault's biopolitical framework, showing how colonial powers, occupations, and racialized state power generate "death worlds," which are spheres of population, existing under the jurisdiction of being degraded, made unseen, caught between life and death, forcing them into a zone of neither/nor constituents. As Mbembe explains, drawing on Foucauldian insights, necropolitics is the fusion of terror, economic extraction, as well as militaristic control, thus leading subjects to experience "living death." Highlighting through histories of colonial domination, as well as more recent studies on states of exception, scholars, including Mbembe, argue that necropolitics is more than the politics of killing, as its focus is on creating worlds through the systems of regulation, dramatization, and normalization of death. Through this perspective, life or death can be conceived as political tools or measures that shape the existence or actions of individuals in terms of their relations under a particular system that dictate life or death through determinations over life.

Mbembe argues that "the current power matrix is defined by 'forms of subjugating life to the power of death' and transforms the nexus of violence, resistance, and political power in profound ways" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 92). He argues that "the category of biopower is insufficient to capture current forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 92), thus suggesting the beginning of a new paradigm in necropolitics in which sovereignty unfolds in all its forms in exposing life to premature death, slow death, or unfreedom. This results in the production of what Mbembe describes as "death-worlds," "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of living-dead" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 93). It marks a realm in which the lines between life and death are removed, producing a type of existence characterized not by life or vitality but by endurance in the face of constant threats of life. Mbembe's examples, from plantation slavery social formations to late-modern situations of occupation, show how necropower operates not only through spectacular violence but through ordinary terror or infra-structural power and the institutionalized regularity of suffering. The necropolitics here is not quite the spectacle of violence but more the atmosphere or climate in which "to live' means a life in death or a life in death-in-life" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 93). By highlighting the lived character of death's power, Mbembe provides the conceptual foundation from which cultural aesthetics or aesthetic representation in literary texts may be first accounted for or understood in the context of technological necro-power in late modernity.

Drawing on the theoretical insights of Achille Mbembe's formulation of the concept of necropolitics, the volume *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics* focuses on the translation of the sovereignty of death into aesthetic regimes. In the first chapter by Marina Gržinič, "What Is the Aesthetics of Necropolitics?," the author establishes a clear correlation between the concept of Mbembe's necropower and the understanding of "sovereign entities" such as the "the sovereign war state, the sovereign bank, sovereign debt and the ubiquitous sovereign multinational corporation which decide "who may live and who must die" (Gržinič, 2018, p. 17). She defines them as "global neoliberal necrozones in which misery, exclusion and death are manufactured, administered, normalised and, ultimately, aesthetised"

(Gržinič, 2018, p. 17). In this context, aesthetic is not defined as an independent realm of beauty but is, rather, the arena within which the power of necropolitics manifests. Gržinić states:

> The financialized biopolitical aesthetics is part of the Western necropolitics, and the necropolitical South is characterized by the fact 'that there is nothing but necroaesthetics. The world is 'organized around the ordering of bodies—bodies that are expendable: black bodies, transgender bodies, Roma bodies, 'white trash' bodies, migrants…" (Gržinič, 2018, p. 28).

In financialized bio- and necropolitical regimes, there is "uncontrollable violence as the only aesthetic intensity that profoundly reorder space and time." Then, "the body of the refugee is taken the ultimate political figure of necrocapitalism, the emergent necroaesthetic parameters are: a) hyperviolence, b) the body as a corpse and c) hyperimmobilisation, all of which are predicated on the erasure of history" (Gržinić, 2018, p. 29). In light of the observations afforded by Mbembe, it can be argued that the realization of necropolitics occurs aesthetically on the basis of the representation of certain bodies as either already deceased, immobile, or historically empty, while necroaesthetics recognizes the configuration wherein death, corpses, and immobility are the determining factors of visibility and sensation. Each scholar of the volume, *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics,* discusses various aesthetic strategies of necropolitical defiance regarding death and deathliness, which could render death again a material and ethical part of existence, and unmake the anti-death infrastructures.

If *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics* reveals how today's power arrangements target the sensory and affective invisibility of death, then Sharpe's *Wake Work* articulates how the lived practice of remembrance, care, and intimacy re-positions the presence of death within perception, evidencing that death is not an eliminated destination but, on the contrary, a lived relation. Christina Sharpe shifts her focus away from the structures that produce death and instead explores the practices that survive and persist after the fact of death. In her critically acclaimed text, she argues that to be "in the wake" means that one "occupies and is occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 13-14). Sharpe concentrates instead on that which persists after the fact of Black lives that are subsumed by the very disposability that characterizes their existence, and how, specifically, "Black life [is] lived in, as, under, despite Black death" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 20). Whereas her attention is, surely on slavery and Black life, but more crucially on the significant shift that indicates the passage from the politics of exposure and death as expressed through the lens of necropolitics, her work extends necropolitics into the sphere of representation and aesthetics. Thus, here the medium of death becomes, instead, the means through which the definitions of new modes of living are formed giving way to a new term necro-aesthetic existence: modes of expression, care, and intelligibility that emerge from conditions of "ongoing and quotidian atrocity" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 20–21). Sharpe uses the term "wake work" for her analytical and practical engagement and thus identifies it as tending to the dead and living-dead through intimacy, memory, creative rupture that go against the situation's demand to move on. Thus, she theorizes the nature of care "in excess of the places where we are" not a "state-

imposed regime of surveillance" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 21). This is done to signify an aesthetic ingrained in death's proximity yet resistant to its erasure. Her work moves Mbembe's necropolitics further into the realm of representation, sensation, and relationality, where the politics of death becomes, rather, the medium to produce new and subversive aesthetics of being and feeling. Focusing Black life, Sharpe argues that the death-bound state of existence is not an endpoint for subjectivity; instead, it becomes a way of production:

> I'm interested in ways of seeing and imagining responses to terror in the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation; ways that attest to the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, and despite Black death. … to think through what it calls on 'us' to do, think, feel in the wake of slavery—an ongoing present of subjection and resistance. (Sharpe, 2016, p. 20)

Sharpe's observation that life is "insisted from death" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 17) recodes the domination of life that occurs through necropolitics. Here, death does not mark the end of experience but rather recirculates it. The body, the wound, and the trace are the material that subjects use to express ways of being that subvert the intentions of sovereign power, arising as a form of resistance. This wake work transforms the state's disposability of populations into the possibilities for aesthetic creation, the tending, the witnessing, the intimate love that keeps the dead alive. As such, the politics of the dead, the necropolitics, leads to the aesthetics of the dead, the necro-aesthetics, wherein the populations that are marked as dead produce meaning, care, and beauty out of the very same apparatus of destruction.

According to Sharpe's theory, the deceased are never completely gone but are, rather, very much active participants within the present. This, too, demands aesthetic and ethical engagements. She asks, "How do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the immensity of Black life, Black life asserted from death? I propose that this may resemble wake work" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 22). Here, it should be noted that creative and artistic acts are not commemorative of lived experience but, rather, are gestures towards sustaining a life that has been interrupted, towards giving it care, touch, and visibility when the state has reduced it to erasure. Rather than submitting to the closure advocated by necropolitics, wake work gives life to modes of existing, feeling, and imagining, which are produced along the spectrum of the lived experience of death. The aesthetic, in Sharpe's words, emerges as the medium through which the dead stay with the living, felt, cared, and carried forward in forms that never let them go for good.

Art, within Sharpe's lens, is where the dead continue to be part of everyday life, and so they can continue to be part of the world of the living. In wake work, artistic practices in the forms of poetry and visual performance are used to illustrate and oppose the unfolding presence of death among Black people. She continues, "My work attends to specific 'forms of Black expressive culture … [that] aesthetically demonstrate the impossibility of such resolutions' and therefore 'demonstrate 'the paradoxes of Blackness inside and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity'" (Sharpe,

2016, p. 14). In Sharpe's work, the act of art is part of un/survival, which tracks the afterlife of people who have been deemed ungrievable by the state. In wake work, the wake itself is realized, imaginatively, visually, and artistically and is a critical site within which the dead are also part of the world of the living, not merely as a resolved memory, but also as an unsettling presence. Sharpe's question "How do we remember the dead … and those still arriving?" is asked particularly within the context of art as a mode of tending, defending, and witnessing the dead's ongoing presence in the everyday (Sharpe, 2016, p. 20). This framework argues that art should not be used as a commemorative practice but, rather, a practice of co-presence, wherein the deceased mandate attention, touch, and ethical obligation. In other words, aesthetic practice is offered as a practice of care, which resists the erasure commanded by necropolitics, allowing the deceased to act within the world of the living. In relation to the subject point of view, it can now be said that necro-aesthetics is the site wherein mourning is not merely the endpoint but is practiced in acts, objects, and performances, which insist on the meaning and influence of what has been killed.

The mobilization of the dead into living presence through art can be compared to haunting which reconceptualizes the persistence of the specters not as pathology but rather as social existence inscribed within memory and emotion. Gordon writes:

> Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known… The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence… of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention… notifying us that what's been concealed is very much alive and present. (Gordon, 2008, pp. xvi–xvii)

That the ghost "has a real presence and demands its due" suggests that haunting is beyond a psychological disturbance, but a form of relation formed with the living. Lorenzo's apparition in Keats's "Isabella" exemplifies this: he does not visit Isabella as a terrifying specter but as a summons, a demand that Isabella attends to his brutal murder and refuses his disappearance into the silence inflicted by her cruel brothers. Therefore, his haunting appears as a call for care, leading Isabella to turn the brutalized remains of his body into a mode of aesthetic tending. Her burying his severed head in the basil pot and nurturing it into life is her response to the ghost's demand; she creates art from death, ensuring that Lorenzo's presence remains with her and flourishes in her world.

In turning to the practice of Romantic textuality, it becomes possible to apply such a framework to texts which, intuitively, operate within the interstitial region between death and beauty, loss and preservation. The poet not only laments the loss of the loved but also lingers on the preservation of the loss itself, on the act of grief not merely as grief but also on grief as craft. In such a sense, it is possible to see texts on death, decay, remembrance, and obliteration not merely as elegies but also as narratives of necro-aesthetic practice. The poet is not unlike the mourner, shaping what has died into something

more permanent, turning to the cliché, yet essential, to such texts: beauty and death are necessities to each other. The aesthetics of Keats's own poetry also express the necro-aesthetic impulse, since Keats came to think of death in the end "as the ultimate source of the peace which he desired so much, turning grief into the very condition of eternal poetry, "he, nevertheless, simultaneously resisted and rejected death" (Miller, 1965, p. 1-2). This is portrayed in Isabella's rejection of Lorenzo's death and keeping her alive through her artistic practice. In such a sense, mourning is not merely a surrender but an active labour, the labour of the mourner to tend to the ruin, to water the basil, to shape the poem, and to raise the shrine. This theoretical framework also uncovers new paths within the field. While the tradition of Romantic studies has long focused on the role of melancholy, elegy, loss-inspired urge, and commemoration, more specific work has not been conducted on how precisely death is aestheticized in Romantic poetry, on how the mourners are transformed into artists, and on how the series of mourning is exchanged for a series of creation. In recognizing such a gap and, by articulating necro-aesthetic production and 'mourning-as-making' as specific and separate phenomena, this study can establish a new paradigm to uncover: a new line of interpretation, which privileges creation rather than mourning, craft rather than disaster, form rather than fracture. In doing so, it also recalls an aesthetic genealogy: the Romantic poet, who is the maker of the dead, transforming his grief into a workshop. Moreover, it can also forecast what will emerge next, as the subject of art is not merely the 'beautiful corpse' but also, potentially, the relic and shrine-object, and the subject of nineteenth century art, in which the motif of 'the beautiful corpse' and so on, is aestheticized.

Romantic poetry tackles the materiality of death head-on. In Keats's poem, the decapitated head, the basil pot, the tomb, and the plant are converted into palpable spaces of preservation, where death and life are made to intersect. In caring for the relic, the grieving individual assumes the role of the maker. The aesthetic object is manufactured by death. This is what is meant by 'necro-aesthetic', and it raises several questions regarding the relationship between art and death, and the role of mourning and loss within the creative process. In light of such considerations, it is possible to understand Keats's "Isabella" not merely as a story, but also, and perhaps more so, as a narrative wherein the love of the dead is the engine of aesthetic production. In the poet's works, the contrast between beauty and decay, life and death are frequently represented. Here, beauty is seen not only as a medium of rejecting and transforming death but is also accompanied by the possibility of loss. As Mario Praz suggests, "the indissoluble union of the beautiful and the sad" (Praz, 1951, p. 31) underlies all of Romanticism, and the juxtaposition of these two ideas that Keats seems to focus on has been termed the "love of death and darkness" and the "joy of grief" (Pettet, 1957, p. 305-310). Keatsian beauty cannot be separated from the specter of extinction in which the close proximity of death serves to accentuate aesthetic pleasure. Thus, the reassuring statement 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' made in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819) is overshadowed by the awareness of the impermanence of beauty. In "When I Have Fears" (written in 1818 but published in 1848) and "Ode to a Nightingale," (1819) death is the factor which magnifies

desire and stimulates artistic expression, and beauty is rendered urgent and fragile. In "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats portrays the contrast between the immortal song of the nightingale and the world of humans, characterized by tiredness, fever, and fret. The voice, which is heard by the emperor and the clown through the passage of time, portrays the universality of beauty and the transience of the speaker's life.

In Keats' letters, too, the imagination is revealed to be a place of toil because beauty is not merely to be admired but also made and sustained. His claim to be "the most unpoetical of anything in existence, and the most poetical—he has no identity" (Keats to Woodhouse, 27 Oct. 1818, p. 387) expresses an aesthetic of self-abnegation, the poet giving and indeed losing himself to ensure the survival of beauty, which is tentative, mortal, and coveted. In his aesthetic, mutability and decay are also important elements. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the "still unravish'd" (Keats, 1905, p.194, l. 1) beauty of the urn immortalizes a moment which the Natural World cannot long support: lovers who shall never kiss, music which shall never fade away. In "To Autumn," (1820) ripeness and decay are also juxtaposed: "Autumn" is at once "mellow fruitfulness" (Keats, 1905, p. 205, l.1) and "soft-dying day" (Keats, 1905, p. 205, l. 25). As Helen Vendler has pointed out, Keats translates moments of transience into symbolic tokens which preserve emotion, and his aesthetic is founded on the role of decay in the existence of beauty, and on the role of art in sustaining the transitory. She writes that the lyric imagination of Keats "combines the powers of music and the powers of plastic art," to produce artworks that "benefit the world" but never forget the subject matter that art transforms (Vendler, 2003, p. 285). Moreover, beauty is important to Keats because it is transient, and art is important to him because it gives shape to what is otherwise fleeting. As Allen Tate notes, "Keats was filled with the compulsive image of the identification of death and the act of love and it is only an exaggeration of emphasis to say that death and love are interchangeable terms throughout his poetry" (Allen, 1948, p. 175). Death is not opposed to beauty but is, in fact, what defines it. Beauty is important not because it is permanent but because life is fleeting.

These components, in creative labour, the interplay between life and death, and the fragility and urgency of beauty, provide the groundwork of necro-aesthetic creation. Within the poetic economy represented by Keats, death serves merely as the catalyst, and beauty serves merely as the memorial, such that the act of the poem is to create the artifact of beauty. "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" materializes such a dynamic, whereby the act of caring for Lorenzo's decapitated head serves to raise grief into craft, and into aesthetics. Poetry is the workspace wherein grief is shaped. So, the aesthetic ideals of Keats form a material theology of death, wherein beauty is predicated on death and preservation is founded on loss. Life and death, and beauty and death, are not contraries but concurrent. His notion of poems ripening "as naturally as the leaves to a tree" (Keats to John Taylor, 27 Feb. 1818, p. 238) suggests that artwork and transience are inexorable because artwork is predicated on life, which is lost.

This aesthetic/historical framework establishes the location of Keats and his work within the romantic binary of death and beauty and suggests a very specific dynamic wherein the transience of life

is what haunts him, and beauty is his solution, and art is the stuff of preservation. Within such a framework, it is possible to define the concept of necro-aesthetic creative practice within the context of his poetic, wherein the poem is a mortuary workshop, the mourner is the artist, and death is the material. An understanding of such context is clearly necessary prior to speaking to such a demonstration within "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil." In this study, Christina Sharpe's insights into wake work is used as the overarching framework, along with Achille Mbembe's necropolitics and the volume's, *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics,* edited by Natasha Lushetich, description of necropolitics as a regime of sensation, to argue that the caring of Lorenzo's corpse by Isabella is a necro-aesthetic creative wherein death serves as a medium of presence, beauty, and survival.

From Mourning to Artistic Labour

In "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil," John Keats depicts a story that demonstrates control over death at the outset and later transmutes grief into productive activity. Indeed, the end of the young Lorenzo involves more than mere dying. Instead, he is damned. Isabella's brothers kill him in a display of the hegemonic power to give life or take life, itself the "right to decide who may live or die," or the very "expression of the sovereign's biopower." As Mbembe argues, sovereignty lies in "the power to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death" (Mbembe, 2019, p.12). The brothers wield the same degree of authority:

> And many a jealous conference had they,
> And many times they bit their lips alone,
> Before they fix'd upon a surest way
> To make the youngster for his crime atone;
> And at the last, these men of cruel clay
> Cut Mercy with a sharp knife to the bone;
> For they resolved in some forest dim
> To kill Lorenzo, and there bury him. (Keats, 1905, p. 169, ll. 169-176)

Their climax involves their invitation to ride "towards the Apennine" (Keats, 1905, p. 170, l. 186), which is a ruse; they ride with "their murder'd man" into the forest (Keats, 1905, p. 170, l. 209), where "Lorenzo [was] slain and buried" (Keats, 1905, p. 171, l. 217). The brothers represent the sovereignty, and Georges Bataille provides insights into the concepts of sovereignty, political, and subject:

> Sovereignty has many forms; it is only rarely condensed into a person and even then it is diffuse. The environment of the sovereign partakes of sovereignty, but sovereignty is essentially the refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have us respect in order to ensure, in a general way, the laboriously peaceful life of individuals. Killing is not the only way to regain sovereign life, but sovereignty is always linked to a denial of the sentiments that death controls. Sovereignty requires the strength to violate the prohibition against killing, although it's true this will be under the conditions that customs define. It also calls for the risk of death. (Bataille, 1997, p. 318)

Therefore, the brothers' act emerges as both crime and the display of power in the context of the Batailleian definition of sovereignty. They overstep the ban prohibiting murder for the purposes of

family and economic gain when they render the life of Lorenzo dispensable, thereby exercising the politics of the "logic of death," where the guarantee of both authority and order rests in death. Mbembe expounds on the nature of modern sovereignty: "One of the many imaginary elements characteristic of sovereignty…is the will to kill in order to live" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 72). Within Keats' story, the economic and social dominance of the brothers enables them to see the expendability of Lorenzo; in erasing him, their own safety and position are secured. Moreover, in the international tradition of power, the phenomenon of sovereignty takes place "outside the law… where 'peace' is more likely to assume the visage of 'endless war,'" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 76) especially when the "other" poses a threat. In this context, the forest becomes a space of necropolitics: the 'borderland' in which the rule of law no longer operates but in which the sovereign privilege of 'killing' takes place. Indeed, the body of Lorenzo becomes the instrument of the sovereign to affirm its own power over the forest.

With the appearance of Lorenzo's specter, Keats portrays the very same dynamic of haunting that Gordon argues: haunting is the point at which the dead make a demand on the living. In the poem, the specter appears to Isabella in a dream form, "It was a vision. — In the drowsy gloom, / The dull of midnight, at her couch's foot / Lorenzo stood, and wept" (Keats, 1905, p. 172, ll. 273-275). Later in the poem, the specter specifically commands her to the spot where the murder took place:

> Saying moreover, "Isabel, my sweet!
> Red whortle-berries droop above my head,
> And a large flint-stone weighs upon my feet;
> Around me beeches and high chestnuts shed
> Their leaves and prickly nuts; a sheep-fold bleat
> Comes from beyond the river to my bed:
> Go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom,
> And it shall comfort me within the tomb. (Keats, 1905, p. 173, ll. 297-304)

Such visits turn Isabella's grief into action; the specter spurs her on. According to Gordon, haunting indicates the point at which repressed violence breaks into the present in the following way:

> When your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time… The ghost… has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi)

This theoretical framework helps to distinguish the nature of the haunting in the case of the spectral self: haunting is a movement to uncover the truth buried. Additionally, Gordon writes that the ghost appears when the social violence ceases to be repressible: "Haunting is… an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). Thus, haunting can be conceived not as a metaphysical effect but rather as a call for recognition that challenges the living to recognize histories that have been structurally silenced.

Isabella's exhuming Lorenzo's body and severing his head is the ultimate overturning of the necropower in the poem. Keats makes the point that Isabella's act in the poem is not the act of slaying a monster but the act of extraction of beauty out of death:

> With duller steel than the Persean sword
> They cut away no formless monster's head,
> But one, whose gentleness did well accord
> With death, as life…
> 'Twas love; cold,—dead indeed, but not dethroned" (Keats, 1905, p. 176, ll. 393-400).

The imagery shifts from the act of decapitation, which is a strong pictograph of royal power, to one of gentle aesthetic touch. Where the brothers had claimed dominion over Lorenzo's life, the sovereignty over his death becomes now that of Isabella. The "duller steel" substitutes the ambiance of heroically violent action for one that is feminine and private. "Love is not dethroned," yet the power of death does not annul the claim of beauty to form; on the contrary, beauty springs from death. As pointed out by Sarah Juliet Lauro in *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics*, Gilroy transforms the Hegelian dialectic to read it as a resistance to the encounter with death: confrontation with death, the ordeal to which all living beings are subjected, is what makes human beings a subject (Lauro, 2018, p. 44). In other words, to be human, as Mbembe writes, "the human truly becomes a subject—that is, separated from the animal—in the struggle and the work through which death is confronted" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 68). He maintains that:

> Through this confrontation with death, the human being is cast into the incessant movement of history. Becoming a subject therefore supposes upholding the work of death. To uphold the work of death, such is precisely how Hegel defines the life of Spirit. The life of Spirit, he says, is not the life that is frightened of death and spares itself destruction, but the life that assumes death and lives with it. (Mbembe, 2019, p. 68)

In this way, Isabella's encounter with Lorenzo's body must be read as one of subject-formation, as it becomes, instead, an encounter with death and the assumption of death as a way of entering into the historical process of translating mourning into aesthetic creation. What Isabella produces a redistribution of sensory relations, through which the dead is repurposed into new mode of presence. She takes the decapitated head home, marking the beginning of her necro-aesthetic labour. This action of Isabella is exactly what serves as a resistance to erasure. This is where she reinstates Lorenzo as a living artifact. Art does not console grief. Art is the materialization of grief. In this regard, the work of Isabella aligns with what Christina Sharpe refers to as life in the wake, when she argues, "the wake is a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 18). As Isabella lives with the death (basil pot), she destroys the brothers' intention of disappearance since the pot of basil is not memory; this is reanimation. This is a spatial and horticultural structure through which the dead impact the lives of the living. The severed head is transformed into a basil-icon, and mourning is turned into art. In this process, the body refuses its proper location in the

brothers' economics of disappearance. Rather, she locates Lorenzo in the very centre of a shrine-like domestic sphere where beauty and decay converge.

The first stage of Isabella's necro-aesthetic practice is characterized by care, enclosure, and withdrawal. This form of enclosure and repetitive care echoes the politics of maintenance, rather than heroic production, as described by Verónica Tello in relation to the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, which resists necropolitical erasure not in a disruptive, but in a constant and caring manner (Tello, 2018). While Isabella brings home Lorenzo's severed head "in anxious secrecy," (Keats, 1905, p. 176, l. 401), wishing for his "eternal return," she does not shrink from the corpse; rather, she engages in caring actions of of grooming and cleansing. The wild hair is soothed "with a golden comb," the "smeared loam / With tears," (Keats, 1905, p.176, ll. 403;405;406) and the focus lingers on the face with its repeated, almost obsessive, touches. There is no attempt here at restoration; instead, there is an aestheticized intimacy that figures the substitution of the impossibility of erotic life with care for the dead body, mourning that is conflated with tactile experience and interpreted as love. This should be clandestine, so she hides the head in a garden pot after wrapping it with a silken scarf:

> Then in a silken scarf, — sweet with the dews
> Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,
> And divine liquids come with odorous ooze
> Through the cold serpent-pipe refreshfully, —
> She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did choose
> A garden-pot, wherein she laid it by,
> And cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set
> Sweet basil, which her tears kept ever wet. (Keats, 1905, p. 177, ll. 409-416)

The process of hiding the head away within a "garden- pot" signals a triumphant transfiguration of death into form. In selecting a domestic, natural container instead of a grave, Isabella moves Lorenzo from the public concept of death to a private, tended environment. The pot itself becomes at once a tomb, a shrine, and a work of art: a hideaway for the brutal fact of decapitation, which becomes instead a mediator of a new kind of presence. As Julia Kristeva states, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Thus, Isabella's preservation of the head eradicates abjection through her transformation of the corpse into something that must be cared for and cultivated. With the head safely entombed and topped with a crown of basil, Isabella's very connection to the world suffers a profound contraction. She "forgot the stars, the moon, and sun," (Keats, 1905, p.177, l. 417) forgot time, seasons, and cycles, and exists instead within a closed loop of care, hovering "over her sweet basil evermore" (Keats, 1905, p. 177, l. 423). But this contraction will not be examined as a simple form of lunacy or pathologization of grief; instead, it will remain the enabling condition of necro-aesthetic production itself, which requires a shut-out relationship to the world for the shrine-object to exist.

Crucially, Keats positions Isabella's willed living-dead mode as productive rather than sterile and dull. This is even more defined in contrast to the domestic stasis that Çameli observes in Tennyson's Mariana: a life in which existence itself is "encrusted with dullness and an overwhelming sense of negativity within the farmhouse" (Çameli, 2023, p. 249). Where Isabella is living in a state of domestic stasis, her situation is defined by repetition but with a twist, it is production in the transformation of the basil pot. The basil thrives because it receives "nurture besides, and life, from human fears," (Keats, 1905, p. 177, l. 429) the legacy of Isabella's tears and attention. Love had once focused on the living flesh of the beloved, it is redirected now from the dead body to the artistic production of it, the visible, sign of the impossible union. Such mourning, according to Peter M. Sacks, requires "a deflection of desire, with the creation of a trope both for the lost object and for the original character of the desire itself" (Sacks, 1985, p. 7). Isabella's passion is deviant only by societal norms; viewed through the lens of the poem, it stands for something coherent, if radical, different from the conventional consummation. Rather than ceasing with death, love loops back into the production of something through artistic labor, it continues existing, something that is both trace and memorial and living. As Sacks argues, "each elegy is to be regarded… as a work," not only a product but an active "working through" of loss, "-the sense that underlies Freud's phrase 'the work of mourning'" (Sacks, 1985, p. 1). On this reading, Isabella does not simply mourn Lorenzo, she makes him, enacting intimacy through the aesthetics of the loss.

In the latter stanzas, Keats depicts a radical turn: necro-aesthetic production is replaced by its violent disruption. The addresses to "Melancholy," "Music," and "Echo" (Keats, 1905, p. 177, ll. 433-435) appears as form of a chorus, raising the individual devotion of Isabella to a group, like ritualistic level of mourning. However, this move is tentative. The aesthetic environment, "pale light," "cypress glooms," "marble tombs," (Keats, 1905, p. 177, ll. 439-440) indicates that Isabella has already reached a liminal point in her activities, caught between life and death. Indeed, she is "soon to be / Among the dead" (Keats, 1905, p. 178, ll. 446-447), not because it is love that is destructive, but because it is the world that is not able to allow her way of loving and attachment.

In stanza 57, the social intolerance of necro-aesthetic devotion is revealed:

> O leave the palm to wither by itself;
> Let not quick Winter chill its dying hour! —
> It may not be — those Baalites of pelf,
> Her brethren, noted the continual shower
> From her dead eyes; and many a curious elf,
> Among her kindred, wonder'd that such dower
> Of youth and beauty should be thrown aside
> By one mark'd out to be a noble's bride. (Keats, 1905, p. 179, ll. 449-456)

Isabella refuses to marry, to produce, to be part of cycle as in the lines, "withers, like a palm / Cut… for its juicy balm" (Keats, 1905, p. 179, 447-448)is deemed wasteful by her brothers. The symbolism here is significant, since Isabella comes to embody a body that is valuable for its utility,

similar to Lorenzo before her. Her love is inexplicable in a way regulated by "pelf," and her necro-aesthetic devotion comes to signify deviance. The brothers' surveillance in stanzas 58-59 is particularly significant. As Sharpe insists:

> And I want to think about what this imagining calls forth, to think through what it calls on "us" to do, think, feel in the wake of slavery—which is to say in an ongoing present of subjection and resistance; which is to say wake work, wake theory. *I want, too, to distinguish what I am calling and calling for as care from state-imposed regimes of surveillance*. How can we think (and rethink and rethink) care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation than that of the violence of the state? In what ways do we remember the dead, those lost in the Middle Passage, those who arrived reluctantly, and those still arriving? (Sharpe, 2016, p. 20)

Although, as mentioned earlier, Sharpe's articulation arises out of the afterlife of slavery and systems of racial subjection, her care/surveillance dichotomy provides a useful tropological approach to a reading of Isabella's situation. Within Keats's poem, the brothers' surveillance enables a domestic analogue to those systems of care. When interpreted through Sharpe's critical framework, their gazes are aimed at making Isabella's tending readable only in relation to utility, future anticipated product, and social utility. Isabella's attachment to the basil pot, on the other hand, represents just that sort of lateral, intramural care described by Sharpe, a care that refuses to be readable or comprehensible within systems of value, oriented to social productivity. Here, then the brothers "…wonder'd much / Why she sat drooping by the basil green," (Keats, 1905, p. 178, ll. 457-458) and are baffled that "…such / A very nothing" (Keats, 1905, p. 178, ll. 461-462) could take away youth and pleasure and the future. The point that the brothers miss is that the basil is not "nothing" at all but a compressed aesthetic relic, one that lives through mourning. When the brothers see Isabella is fixated upon the pot "patient as a hen-bird," (Keats, 1905, p. 178, l. 471) they see her not as neurotic or obsessive but as methodical and keenly engaged. However, the simile itself proposes otherwise: Isabella's behaviour is rhythmic, listening, and sustaining, typified by tending and nurturing, and not by excessive desire. As Sharpe argues, such a mode of care must be recognized as labour, as "to tend to the dead and dying…It means work. It is work: hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that requires vigilant" attention (Sharpe, 2016, p. 10). Isabella's ignorance of the stars, the seasons, and social temporality is therefore not negation but concentration: a transformation of life into regular vigilance over the dead. Taking care of the basil is the performance of wake work, which is the way of living with the dead described by Sharpe. It would seem, then, that Isabella's profound commitment to these characters indicates a form of necro-aesthetic labour that the brothers adamantly ignore due to their commitment to a logic of utility and futurity. As Kang-Po Chen asserts:

> Isabella's performance is one kind of 'artistic devotion'… and she illustrates Keats's view of the 'material sublime,' for which 'poetic imagination is an erotic process of self-annihilation.' Lorenzo's head is 'the raw material' of this process, 'the primitive source of the sublime—death,' which Isabella/Keats 'beautifies' through bodily and material poetics" (Chen, 2019, p. 56).

In stanza 60, the second act of necropolitical violence occurs. The theft of the basil pot by the brothers repeats the crime of murder in aesthetic terms: that which was initially murdered is now undone. Seeing that "they knew it was Lorenzo's face" (Keats, 1905, p. 179, l. 476) reinforces that indeed the basil pot was no fetish, no illusion; it was the successful necro-aesthetic production, the place of death that was contained, formulated, and sustained. In stealing it, the brothers do not restore order but simply complete their crime. In this regard, based on the definition provided by Mbembe, necropolitics relate to the "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 92). The second act of violence perpetrated by the brothers not only eliminates Lorenzo's corpse but also subordinates Isabella's living relationship to the power of death itself, which had been undermining the aesthetic structuring of love. Their running away "with blood upon their heads" (Keats, 1905, p. 179, l. 480) implies that the crime is not Isabella's attachment but her brothers' habit of attempting to completely eliminate the dead. Now the aftermaths of erasure follow, inevitably. To lack the basil is to lack the foundation for Isabella's lamenting. "She pined, and so she died forlorn," (Keats, 1905, p. 179, l. 497) but not because of the fact that the power of love has reached its limits, but because the aesthetic framework for the reception and expression of love has been dismantled. In death, the productive ends are not met: "too lone and incomplete" (Keats, 1905, p. 179, l. 487). Here the repetition in "O cruelty, / To steal my basil-pot away from me!" (Keats, 1905, p. 179, ll. 503-504) marks the ethical core of the poem. Ultimately, the cruelty is not in death but in the prohibition against 'mourning-as-making,' the violent disruption of a precarious and productive art. Isabella escapes death through art, yet she cannot survive the refusal of the world to permit this art to exist. The poem reveals the tragic imbalance here: the power of sovereignty kills once but must kill again to eliminate the aesthetic endevaour and forms that emerge as a defiant response to this killing. It is not that Isabella dies because she loved the dead; she dies because she is not allowed to continue to love him in form.

CONCLUSION

"Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" provides a landscape for the critical translation of a text situated between the realms of necropolitics and the production of the necro-aesthetic. The poem launches into a world where the sovereign reign of necropolitics obtains and the murder of Lorenzo signifies the ultimate example of necropolitics, the regulation of the life to be sacrificed within the realm of profit, futurity, and circulation. However, Keats's poem defies the proposition that life achieves closure via death. Rather, the critical move initiated by Isabella's act indicates a translation out of the sovereign reign of necropolitics and into the critical zone of the necro-aesthetic, as theorized by recent discourse, where the dead are not effaced or sublimated but operate as matter that circulates as form. This critical translation in the poem is accentuated by the action of Isabella, placing the head of the deceased in the pot of basil, where the dead, now positioned outside the economy of the real, operates as a productive force in the construction of the world. This represents the ultimate move into the creative materialization of the world.

Within this framework, Isabella's repeated acts of tending of water, watching, and sustaining, are a necro-aesthetic practice that turns mourning into production. Her withdrawal from social temporality is a mark not of pathology, but of concentration, a requirement for maintaining a shrine-object that keeps the dead alive. This corresponds with a necro-aesthetic framework, particularly notions of care, vigilance, and continued relationship outlined within studies on wake work, where the tending of the dead is a labor rather than a superfluity of feeling. In this poem, however, it is a tragedy because necropolitical forces reassert through a second moment of violence: theft of the basil pot by the brothers. This is no restoration of order but rather the completion of the original crime insofar as it undermines the aesthetic form that has temporarily allowed death to be sustained, formed, and lived with. Stripped of the pot upon which her mourning-as-making depended, Isabella can no longer live. Her own death signifies less the failure of love but rather the forced dissolution of necro-aesthetic potential. Ultimately, the poem reveals the tragic disparity underlying all sovereignty: the ability to kill once must kill again in order to erase the transitory aesthetic forms that oppose death, or any form of closure. The poem asserts then that art is no solace in mourning but one of the only ways life can coexist with death.

Ultimately, and sadly, the poem shows how the bleak ethical imperative can never be otherwise than the victory of necropolitics over necro-aesthetics. Isabella's work indicates how death can be transvalued into a provisional life, and how art can momentarily translate loss into a means of sustenance. But such economies are not possible when subjected to the persisting regime of sovereign violence. Isabella dies because the world will not allow the persistence of love in its forms. In Keats's bleak worldview, evil succeeds not by destroying the power of art but by undermining the very terms under which the life of art, produced from death, can go on.

Additional Declaration

This study is developed from Tülay Dağoğlu's PhD Dissertation "Images of Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Visual and Textual Narratives." Advisor: Assoc. Prof. Yıldız Kılıç. Istanbul University, Department of Comparative Literature, 2022. It departs from the dissertation's pathologizing approach, offering a reading of Isabella not as a madwoman but as an artist and necro-aesthetic agent.

Author Contributions

In this study, the contribution of the authors was equal; both authors contributed equally to the development of the research idea, data analysis, writing and proofreading stages.

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Responsible Artificial Intelligence Statement

In this study, artificial intelligence, in particular, *Grammarly* was used in language editing to correct grammar and style.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this study.

Ethics Approval

This study does not require ethics committee approval as it does not involve any direct application on human or animal subjects.

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