How far is it true to suggest that the Spectre of revolution overshadows the writing of the Romantic period?

The period in which Wordsworth and Coleridge were writing was marked by revolution. Industrial developments were the undercurrent to the French and American revolutions, each of which combined to form what is defined as the ‘spectre of revolution’. In explicit subject matter and subtler ideology, writers of the period were influenced by their contemporary situation. Yet, the term ‘overshadowed’ suggests ‘appear[ing] more prominent and important than’ (“overshadowed”). This is true of some of the poetry of the Romantics: in both Wordsworth and Coleridge’s work, ideas of revolution permeate into works that are expressly not about the latter. However both men have demonstrated, through their position in any canon of English Literature, that their writing is not overshadowed by events of one particular historical moment. Their endurance signals that there is something more transcendent to their work than its historical significance.

Wordsworth and Coleridge were ‘centrally political and social poets […] these writers were obsessed with the realities of their era’ (Abrams 101). As is anticipated, theme of the two authors’ work was revolution. Explicitly, Wordsworth’s Prelude and Coleridge’s ‘France: An Ode’, among others, look back on the initially positive view of the French Revolution. However each author also offers subtler engagement with the theme. The industrial revolution caused seminal changes in man’s conception of ‘self’. In moving from working in villages to working in factories, men no longer saw their livelihood as a ‘gift from God or from nature’ instead ‘if the society of masters rejected his handiwork […] there was something wrong with society’ (Bronowski 4-5). The industrial revolution ‘forced men in the long run to seek their destiny […] in their own hands […] he became simply himself: a person’ (Bronowski 5). The ideological changes created by the industrial revolution were the same ideas driving both the American and French revolutions, a ‘common restlessness runs under that time, a discontentment with the traditional ways of doing and thinking’ (Bronowski 4). In Lyrical Ballads, these principles of revolution are noticeable in the ideology of the work.

Wordsworth’s ‘Lines’, in its first-person perspective, is a solipsistic meditation. The landscape he describes has not changed, the speaker ‘again’ sees the same ‘hedgerows’, but his spirit towards the landscape has shifted since his first visit (289). When the speaker first ‘came among these hills’ he ‘like a roe’, ‘bounded o’er the mountains’, on his second visit he was overwhelmed by nature, it ‘haunted [him] like a passion’, but in the poetic present he has ‘learned / to look on nature’
and has ‘power to chasten and subdue’ (290). Confirmed by the prevalence of the ‘I’ pronoun, the transformation in the poem is personal; the author uses the poetry to discover realities of his own psychology. The very fact that ‘Lines’ is written from such a perspective on a self-involved subject matter engages with ideas of revolution: Wordsworth, like the workers forced from village to town, sees himself as ‘simply himself: a person’ and so reflects on his own nature (Bronowski 5). Perhaps not yet overshadowing, we can see the direct and subtler influences of revolution on Romantic poetry.

However in ‘Lines’, despite its ostensive unique engagement with ideas of Wordsworth’s self, cannot help but be overrun by hints at the French Revolution; revolution seems to force its way into the poem. The serenity of the scene, the ‘orchard tufts’, ‘groves and copses’ and ‘little lines / Of sportive wood run wild’ all inspire ‘tranquil restoration’ which seems far removed from the terrors of the French Revolution (290). The setting on the ‘the banks of the Wye’ is, as David Bromwich points out, ‘as far inland as [Wordsworth] can get in his native land, and as far as possible from France’ (81). Yet despite this perhaps pedantic distancing from the idea of the French Revolution, Wordsworth cannot help but allow politically loaded language into his poem. In describing his first visit to the scene he describes himself as ‘more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he loved’ (290). Even readers with limited knowledge of Wordsworth’s biography will notice the parallels to the poet’s movements in France: he ‘sought the thing he loved’, in moving to France to be with his wife, before having to fly from ‘something he dread[ed]’, the French Revolution. The word choice too of ‘dread’ seems incongruous with the tranquility of the scene. Bromwich notes, Wordsworth’s dating of the poem July 13th is ‘the day of the actual walk but also, as he obliges us to bear in mind, the eve of Bastille Day’ (Bromwich 82). After taking pains to dissociate the scene from the French Revolution, the poem soon is tainted by hints of the terror; the French Revolution is the unspoken presence in the poem, threatening to overshadow the serenity of the scene.

Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ too is a seemingly apolitical poem. The opening stanzas place the reader in the realm of fantasy: caverns, ‘measureless’ to man, are described alongside ‘incense-bearing tree[s]’ (460-1). The imagery of the poem becomes increasingly fantastical, from the heavenly garden, the vision moves to a ‘savage place’ where a ‘mighty fountain’ throws ‘huge fragments’ like ‘rebounding hail’ (461). Coleridge’s descriptions, like the ‘measureless’ caverns, are unlike anything on earth. The imagery in the poem is densely layered to form a highly complex scene, it is the ‘shadow’ of the ‘dome of pleasure’ that ‘float[s] midway on the waves’ (461). Rather
than substantiate Coleridge’s imagery, the layers of perception, the ‘shadow’ and the pedantic assertion that the dome floats ‘midway’, join to form an impenetrable whole. The unordered rhyme scheme – the poem shifts between rhymed couplets, alternate rhymes, and leaves other lines unrhymed – and the fragmentary nature of the poem further serve to confuse the scene. Coleridge’s imagery may be precise, but it is intentionally incomprehensible. The retreat into fantasy is apolitical. Unlike Coleridge’s earlier ‘France: An Ode’, which explicitly refers to events of the revolution, and uses the language of the dissenters - ‘liberty’, and ‘free[dom]’ – ‘Kubla Khan’ takes its subject from the poet’s vision (243).

Allegorical interpretations of the poem are equally apolitical, as Dorothy Mercer surmises, ‘it is symbolic of life in its fullness which, for Coleridge in 1797, was life viewed from the vantage point of the creative imagination’ (65). The confounding ‘shadow’ of the ‘dome of pleasure’, and the ‘mingled’ sounds can be interpreted as the fading of creative inspiration, which Coleridge questions whether he can ‘revive’ (461). Both the retreat into fantasy and the broader interpretations of ‘Kubla Khan’ do not reference the politically revolutionary age. However, ‘given the circumstances […] this very absence of political content is itself political’ (Kitson, 197). The retreat into fantasy can be read, like Wordsworth’s retreat into the idyll in ‘Lines’, as Coleridge seeking refuge from the terror of the revolution; as Kitson surmises of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, within the era of revolution a utopia ‘could only exist as a state of mind’ (197). In this new light ‘Kubla Khan’s’ highly fantastical imagery seems a desperate withdrawal from the horrors of the revolutionary age, be it the terror of the French, the violence of the American or the changes of the Industrial. In an age in which the very spirit was that of revolution, ‘Kubla Khan’, in all its attempts to depoliticize, can still be read as political: this questions whether any text from the era can be untainted by ideas of the revolution.

Wordsworth’s Prelude is more readily associated with the French Revolution as books nine and ten explicitly refer to events from the contemporary situation. Yet even with its frank confrontation, there is still a sense that revolution infiltrates into the entirety of the poem. Unlike ‘Lines’, which was composed, with ‘spontaneous overflow’, in the location the poet describes, Wordsworth writes The Prelude retrospectively looking back on events (Preface to Lyrical Ballads 295). In the description of Wordsworth’s first visit to the Alps in the sixth book, the language is overtly optimistic; France ‘standing on top of golden hours/ And human nature seeming born again’ (384). Yet Wordsworth’s language betrays that this moment has been tainted by knowledge of the failure of the ideals French Revolution: his memories are now seen as ‘youthful fancy’, his hopes
irregular’ (384). Jonathan Bishop argues that ‘the memories we have seem to acquire their meaning from other and more remote sources’ (457). This scene of The Prelude gains its significance through present knowledge of the situation – it acquires a degree of pathos as the reader, along with Wordsworth himself, recognises that this ‘time when Europe was rejoiced’ has ended (384). With knowledge of his contemporary situation, the Wordsworth writing The Prelude is a different man than the youthful wanderer of the Alps. Knowledge of the true nature of the French Revolution taints the poet’s memories of his former self; the spectre of revolution is affective.

Yet, Wordsworth shows that the retrospective knowledge of a situation influences in other ways; his ideas are more transcendent. In the moment of writing about the disappointment of having ‘crossed the Alps’, Wordsworth is struck by a moment of ‘immediate emotion’ (Wordsworth 386) (Bishop 458). What follows is a ‘spontaneous overflow’ of ‘imagination’, the inspiration comes ‘unfathered’ and the poet is ‘lost as in a cloud’ (Wordsworth 386-7). What is significant about the moment is how Wordsworth breaks from memory to interrupt the narrative with thoughts conceived during the moment of production. The Prelude, rather than merely recounting past events, includes the poets spontaneous feelings during the production of the text itself; it is not something planned in its entirety, but is a work that, during the act of creation, constantly reflected on itself. Wordsworth recognises imagination’s mercurial power as something ‘evermore about to be’ (387). In Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria the poet identifies two sides to imagination: firstly it is ‘the prime agent of all human perception’, humans are the ‘infinite I AM’ in that they create the world around them using imagination; the first side to imagination applies to initial perception (491). The second is an ‘echo of the former’ which ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate’ and is ‘essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead’ (491). This second, ‘essentially vital’, imagination is what Wordsworth uses to interrupt the narrative of the Prelude; rather than experiencing the world around him, he reflects on past events as moments for poetic inspiration. Coleridge too uses this second form of imagination in ‘Kubla Khan’, reinterpreting the lines he read before composing the poem to form the poetic vision of ‘Xanadu’ (460). The existence of the second aspect of imagination is what ultimately prevents revolution from overshadowing Romantic writing. With the liberating force of imagination, writers are no longer tied to the historical events of their era. The revolution may be something that inspires poetic thought, but once writers have the ability to reflect and to imagine; they cannot be superseded by historical moments.

Despite the politically revolutionary age in which they were writing, Coleridge and Wordsworth are remembered for their imagination; it would historically inaccurate to suggest that
revolution overshadowed their work. Elements of the revolution certainly infiltrated their poetry in sometimes uncontrollable ways, yet the fundamental power literature has over history, as defined by Coleridge himself in his insights on imagination, suggests that there is something more timeless to the work than its historical import. The writings of the Romantic period are not just historical texts tied to the period of revolution, in their lively mode of production they engage with the world from a distance. Using the present situation as a mere starting point, the texts in fact use the political situation as sources of inspiration for spontaneous imaginative outbursts. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge give voice to the imaginative process - a process that makes their writing distinct from history.
Works Cited


