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Wordsworth's Apocalypse

Jonathan Roberts

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Abstract

‘Apocalypse’ has been a key term in Wordsworth criticism over the last century, though it appears only once in the poetry. I begin by offering a short reception history of the critical use of this key term through a century of Wordsworth scholarship, the majority of which has focussed on the Simpon Pass episode of *The Prelude* in which the word appears. I argue that the majority of these critics adopt an eschatological two-term approach to

apocalypse that splits it into an allegorical relationship between textual anticipation and historical fulfilment. In contrast, I argue that Wordsworth had a different model of apocalypse in which text and history meet and are fused in personal situation, a moment of revelation: in Wordsworth's writing, apocalypse is particular, not general, and is understood in retrospect, not through prophetic foresight. Moreover, I argue that these eschatological-universal and retrospective-personal models of apocalypse correspond to Wordsworth's models of bad and good poetry. In 'allegorical' apocalypse, as in 'bad' poetry, word and feeling are in an arbitrary relationship sustained only by convention; in personal apocalypse, as in 'good' poetry, there is a natural fusion of word and feeling. I conclude by discussing Matthew 25 as a heuristic device to show a biblical parallel (rather than a source) to Wordsworth's non-violent, non-eschatological approach to apocalypse.

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