Revisiting Wordsworth's Turncoatism:
From Radical Idealism to Conservative Realism

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Many literary scholars and historians of British Romantic period have paid enthusiastic attention to Wordsworth's "turncoatism"—his turn from radical idealism to conservative realism: E. P. Thompson, Kenneth R. Johnston, David V. Erdman, and James K. Chandler are a few who have contributed significantly to an understanding of Wordsworth's political involvement.1) Most critical responses to Wordsworth's apostasy from highly Paineite radicalism to Burkean conservatism do not fail to contrast the poet's early idealistic political position with his later realization of the mistakes in his earlier years.

which are reflected respectively in *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (1793) and *The Prelude* (1805, 1850). The older Wordsworth even regrets his thoughtless political radicalism of the earlier years by saying, “We [Wordsworth and James Watt Jr.] thus both began life as ardent and thoughtless radicals; but we have both become, in the course of our lives, as all sensible men, I think, have done, good sober-minded conservatives” (qtd. in Erdman, *The Age* 3).

Many of the responses try to show how democratic air in England was initially galvanized by the revolutionary spirit in France until the British radicals were eventually disenchanted because the initial democratic revolution developed into the extreme violence of the September Massacres, the Reign of Terror, and the invasion of other countries in the Napoleonic Wars. Still, many questions concerning Wordsworth’s politics remain. Did Wordsworth entirely give up the radical revolutionary spirit with which he had responded to the Revolution in France and shown in the early stage of his literary career especially in the 1790s? What were the major historical/political causes that might have affected the changes or at least discolored the poet’s political stance? What had happened to the poet to make him shift to a Burkean attitude in his writings? What did the poet realize through the experiences of the political situation during the late 1790s and early 1800s? Did his later poems, including the two later editions of *The Prelude* of 1805 and 1850, show any remaining radical hopes that the poet might have wanted to hold on to or hide from the eyes of the government? What made the poet meditate more on the growth of his poetic imagination and focus on a meta-poetic discussion in *The Prelude* (1805, 1850)—rather than writing as a “leveling” muse as Hazlitt called him when he describes the young poet before changing his political stand (132)—by expressing his socio-political interest in common people or paying more attention to the democratic ideals and highlighting social problems such as class, poverty, etc. Did the poet really abandon his early political philosophy? If so, how was this changed stance expressed in his later works, and what does this

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