Introduction

The crumbling ruin stands lit from the east. A sharp ray of light penetrates the clouds, making its way through a recess in the dome and illuminating the activities of the figures at the center of the painting. One holds a pickaxe in mid-swing while two others look on. A fourth tends to a fire over which a tripod holds an iron pot. A small pile of crumbled marble stands ready to meet the axe and in the foreground of the canvas larger piles still, having broken off in chunks from the original structure, suggest that they, too, may soon meet the same fate. To the right, beneath the clouds and bathed in an ethereal light, an elaborate series of columns and arches rise, partially crumbled, and partially intact, all in the process of being reclaimed by weeds and ivy, flowers and trees. The abundant revenge of nature's vegetation slowly creeps in to reclaim the ornate and mannered workings of culture. On the left side of the painting, the process seems complete as a thick grove of trees and overgrowth obscures the view of the building. The activities of the group at the painting's center are framed and to an extent overshadowed by the glorious, crumbling dome that sits above them open to the sky, its oculus edged by a series of statues, but it, too, is threatened by the relentless growth of vines and creepers (Figure 0.1).

With the flames of the small fire literally burning the past for the uses of the present, the painting might be read as one of a series of reminders that nothing man-made endures and that the needs of the present always trump the remnants of the past. Were we to pipe in the vespers of barefooted friars, the scene would come even more to resemble that which inspired Edward Gibbon to undertake his monumental work amid the ruins of Rome on October 15, 1764. And yet, modeled though it is on the ruins of antiquity and the aesthetic tradition of the picturesque through which they were seen by eighteenth-century Grand Tourists, this is no Roman scene. Neither does it represent any old building. Rather, the rotunda, and the larger complex of marble structures of which it stands as the monumental centerpiece, are meant to be John Soane's Bank of England, a building

Figure 0.1: Joseph Gandy, *Architectural Ruins — A Vision* (1798; 1832)

that, at the time of the painting's initial composition in 1798 by Soane's draftsman, Joseph Gandy, *had only just been built*. As Surveyor to the Bank of England, Soane had received a commission for rebuilding the bank and completed some of his designs, but construction had only begun on the rotunda in 1794, shortly before Gandy initially composed his painting.[1]

What are we to make of the fantasy of a building that has only just begun to exist projected into the future as a ruin? What, moreover, might be the significance that the ruined building is not a temple or a public forum, but a bank, *the* Bank of England, the symbol – depending on one's perspective – of the risks and dangers of speculative capital, or the stable, dependable foundation of a credit economy? If the light touch of Gandy's picturesque mode is any indication, the possibility of ruin is not one that inspires dread or fear. If anything, painting the fancied ruin would seem to be an act of confidence rather than crisis. The image of the ruined bank naturalizes credit-based forms of modern capital into a recognizably ancient and enduring form: yes, all things pass, the

image suggests, but when this building passes, its ruin will not disappear or be forgotten; it will instead continue to inspire the attention of the future with precisely the hold that the ruins of Rome now have over the imagination of the late eighteenth-century European present. That present will become the antiquity of the future.

Such a prospect would seem to stand for Gandy (and by extension Soane, who commissioned the painting) as a testament to England's greatness in a context where the magnitude of that greatness can only be gleaned from comparison with the most lasting examples that the Western tradition has to offer, the enduring legacy of Rome. In such a view, greatness comes not necessarily through economic, political, or imperial achievement, though this is requisite, but rather through the cultural markers of that achievement – through the built environment that celebrates it, and that, by implication, will endure if only in ruined form after the civilization that it commemorates has long passed. Culture, in other words, venerates and rescues the achievements of the empire after it has passed, never more so than in the grandest gestures of its buildings. Soane was building not for the present, but for the ages.

The image of Soane's unbuilt building in ruins suggests one way that the prospect of decline shadows later eighteenth-century Britain. And yet in Gandy's rendering such a prospect does not terrify; instead, the implied forecast of decline allows Gandy to imagine the form in which Soane's building will endure. There are, of course, other ways to imagine decline. Some saw decline as a frightening and frighteningly close prospect, a view that could often give rise to jeremiads like that of John Brown's screed against luxury and decadence, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (1757), and Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770), an elegy for a lost way of life marked by the depopulation of the author's native village. Both were alarmist works – mistrustful of the new population movements, new values, and new forms of credit associated with the contingencies of commercial society – that predicted the imminent decline of the nation. Others, however, were more optimistic about the prospects of commercial life and less sanguine about whether decline was in fact inevitable.

Gibbon, for example, despite writing a monumental work on decline, considered the technological sophistication and balance of power among European states as an assurance of stability that would prevent Europe from repeating the Roman narrative.[2] Similarly, one of the enduring features of political economy in the version consolidated by Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) was the insistence that arguments for or

against decline needed to be quantified or measured. Taking advantage of Smith's insistence on measurement, William Playfair later sought to combine the lessons of Smith and Gibbon into a comparative theory of empire designed to help Britain recognize and forestall the signs of decline. Meanwhile, alongside these responses to national and imperial decline, a range of newspapers, periodicals, and books in an incessantly generative market for print media speculated about the decline of literature in a commercial age.

These works and others discussed in the pages that follow all engage the problem of decline. By decline, I refer to a sense of continuous and ongoing loss or reduction that seems likely to extend into the future, where what is thought to be in decline could range from the empire, the economy, and the national character, to the Christian religion, or the quality of national literature and beyond. As this book will show, anxieties about decline – national and imperial, economic and political, cultural and literary – are a pervasive feature of British public discourse in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century. To follow this discourse is to see, time and time again, books and periodical articles, pamphlets and poems appear that are confident in their predictions that Britain is in a state of likely irreversible decline. Sometimes the pronouncements were limited to the literary, as when Isaac D'Israeli declared in 1795 that "The literary character has, in the present day, singularly degenerated in the public mind."[3] In other instances the concerns range more widely to population, the national wealth, and the economy. As Adam Smith suggested in the *Wealth of Nations*, "five years have seldom passed away in which some book or pamphlet has not been published, written too with such abilities as to gain some credence with the public, and pretending to demonstrate that the wealth of the nation was fast declining, that the country was depopulated, agriculture neglected, manufactures decaying and trade undone."[4] In response to this widespread forecasting of impending decline, Smith argued that such alarmist works were too focused on the local and short term and missed longer trends and wider patterns.

Smith thus underscores two prominent points about decline that this book will develop. First, the expectation of decline is a problem of time and time horizons, and hence an index of how those predicting decline understand and anticipate the future. Second, to foresee decline as inevitable does not make it so. Indeed, a frequent feature of declinist arguments in the later eighteenth century (and beyond) is that the possibility of decline can be forestalled and averted if changes are made. Such arguments show how

predictions of decline reveal a set of values. They suggest, moreover, that decline needs to be understood differently than as oppositional to progress.

But why, the question remains, was there so much concern about decline in a period when progress became the dominant paradigm of historical time? The answer, in part, relates to the expansion of commercial society and a market economy, which, while it was eventually understood to facilitate sociability and networks of interdependence, was also consistently seen, especially in the case of print culture, as pushing towards too much expansion and as producing too much stuff. This abundance of print media – the relentless proliferation of books and periodicals and newspapers and magazines and broadsides and playbills – also generated attendant temporal anxieties. Hazlitt, for example, worried that what was in print was ephemeral and could not stand the test of time as when he characterized modern literature as "a gay Coquette" that "glitters, flutters, buzzes, spawns, dies, – and is forgotten."[5] Related to Hazlitt's concerns about literature in "the bustle of the world"[6] were arguments that with so much in print there was simply no time to read it. As Vicesimus Knox noted in 1778, "in a commercial country like our own. . . only the short interval which the pursuit of gain, and the practice of mechanic arts affords, will be devoted to letters by the more numerous classes of the community" (*EML*, 2:4–5). Such concerns placed an attendant anxiety on how one used the little leisure time one had, and a sense of time pressure led to a correspondent sense of acceleration that left many feeling as if the speed of commerce would lead to social instability and inevitable decline.

But in addition to this historical explanation, the question requires a conceptual clarification. When we understand decline differently than as oppositional to progress, then the apparent discrepancy between the two blurs. Decline too can be productive of new future possibilities; moreover, because anticipations of decline see the future negatively – not as open-ended and unpredictable in the manner often associated with progress, but as closed and graspable – to expect decline, in contrast to expectations of progress, is to force a clarification of value by offering the possibility that decline can be avoided or at least forestalled. This can be seen in the range of possible remedies that commonly accompany anxieties about decline, including the renewal of national manners, the implementation of new policies, the recognition of previously hidden patterns, or in the case of the literary field, the development of new forms of literary experience.

Thinking about decline, then, enables new possibilities and new sources of value. From those who feared decline and announced its likelihood, to those who thought it was a problem that could be measured, managed, and

forestalled, through the combination of these extremes and the various positions in between, engagement with arguments about decline suggests that the anticipation of decline might be understood as generative and not disabling, as we see, for example, in Gandy's painting of Soane's bank in ruins. This book is not concerned, in other words, with whether those anticipating decline were correct in their predictions. Rather, its interest lies in how decline becomes a shorthand for discussing a generalized outlook on the future and, more specifically, a reaction to the new contingencies, confusions, and contradictions of an expanding commercial economy.

Decline spanned a variety of discourses and concerns around the turn to the nineteenth century. This book will focus, however, on the literary and cultural significance of decline. There is good reason for doing so. Not only is the later eighteenth-century press full of dire prognostications about the decline of literature, but such anxieties shape debates about the very meaning and efficacy of literature itself. They also impact literary form and literary experience. For a start, there is the issue of canon. Anxieties about the decline of literature commonly relate to the omnipresence of print, its seeming saturation of public and private life. This proliferation of print culture and the expansion of the reading public generated concerns about literary decline that highlight new problems: quality and quantity come to seem opposites, and questions arise about how, with so much material in print, a standard of quality can be maintained, and further, how one could find the time to read even a small portion of what was available. And, with so many readers, not all who read could be said to read literature properly. This is what Wordsworth suggests when he condemns the preference of the reading public in 1800 for "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse."[7] We should note here how the "deluges" of stories recall this commonplace sense of a flood of print, and the attendant threat implied by natural disaster. Such problems required a solution, a set of values that could narrow the mass of print media into a readily graspable selection of works: a canon of British literature. Here, quantitative overabundance translates into qualitative assessment. This book's focus on arguments about literary decline thus suggests that canon is not just a reaction to new market conditions created by changes in copyright law as William St. Clair argues, or a new economy of prestige that, in John Guillory's account, reflects the asymmetric distribution of cultural capital, but also a response to new temporal pressures and constraints that accompany commercial society, the same pressures and constraints that contributed to the forecast of literary decline.[8]

Thinking about decline also allows us to reconceptualize the significance of what is often called the Romantic cult of ruins and the aesthetic fascination such material decay held for so many Romantic writers. As numerous scholars have pointed out, ruins were everywhere in the Romantic imagination, where they were an example of decline made visible. In a society moving with apparent speed into an unknown commercial future, ruins join time past and time present and thus serve both as a discursive counterweight to and a sentimental icon of decline. Ruins have consistently been recognized as memento mori, and analyzed by recent critics for revealing a range of specific relationships to time, from the time of empire to the constructed nature of historical experience itself or the new attitudes towards futurity produced by the forward looking instabilities of a credit economy.[9] My suggestion, however, is that thinking about the temporal problems raised by ruins as the inflection of a broader range of concerns about decline reveals not particular issues with empire or history or credit, but a more generalized set of temporal instabilities generated by the rush of commercial society and by the compensatory strategies that develop in relationship to that sense of hurry and accelerated time. The Romantic ruin in this reading is about experiencing the incommensurability of multiple temporalities; it serves as an index for a series of new relationships to the future that emerge in the later eighteenth century in connection with decline.

A related but distinct counterpoint to the sense of decline associated with the rush of market society and the seemingly overwhelming expansion of print, commerce, and population is what I call "slow time," a way of experiencing time that while not necessarily stable at least offers a more secure basis of thought and new possibilities for how to live within accelerated time. The development of slow time reflects the new time pressures of a commercial economy and a society saturated with print. Slow time, however, is not simply a reaction to acceleration, but rather reveals the development of new kinds of literary experience. If, for example, the rush and press of commercial life and the seemingly endless proliferation of things to read helped to generate the sense of literary decline that we so often see articulated in the periodical press, then this might help to explain why action and event are downplayed in so much of Wordsworth's poetry and why verse like "The Old Cumberland Beggar," "Old Man Travelling," and "The Ruined Cottage" turn around the slow movement of marginal figures. In this reading, the lack of eventfulness in Wordsworth's poetry requires – and helps to generate – a particular mode of attentiveness. The experience of reading poetry that represents

slow time, and that offers a close and deliberate focus on experiences that transpire beneath the threshold of ready observation, models for its dedicated readers a resistance to the newsworthy eventfulness and rapid change on which the world of commerce appears to thrive. Representations of slow time in poetry, in other words, create new forms of literary experience by deploying a particular temporal framework to generate modes of attentiveness and habits of reading that counter the market's relentless generativity, the nonstop production of more and more print, and the anxieties about decline that are so commonly attached to such proliferation.

All three of these points, which will be developed in what follows, suggest that to trace the reciprocal shaping of eighteenth-century Britain's market culture and its literary culture through the lens of decline – to observe how the literary field seeks to manage and forestall anticipations of decline – offers a fresh way of thinking about how the kinds of emergent literary experience that we associate with British Romanticism handle the problem of time. If the abundance of print and the sense that later eighteenth-century Britain was awash and drowning in what *The Connoisseur* called an "ocean of ink,"[10] contributed to acute concerns about the decline of literature at this time, then we need to recognize that whether explicitly or not, much writing that appears circa 1800 can be understood as part of an intraliterary debate about how to manage and forestall this perceived decline of literature through new forms of literary experience. Hence the persistent posing from the later eighteenth century onwards of such fundamental questions as: What is poetry and who is a poet? What should poetry do in a developed commercial economy? From the framing of these questions in Wordsworth's "Preface" to Thomas Love Peacock's dismissal of "the degraded state of every species of poetry" in the present age of advanced knowledge, to Shelley's rousing "Defence of Poetry," these responses to the perceived decline of literature shape the literary field at the turn of the nineteenth century. A focus on decline thus frames the significance of these questions in new ways and encourages us to recognize that Romanticism itself, with its valorization of poetry and the observing consciousness, constitutes new forms of literary experience as a response to the temporal pressures of commercial society and the perceived decline of literature. Maureen McLane has used these same arguments about poetry by Wordsworth, Peacock, and Shelley to show how they distinguished poetry from literature and how this very distinction helped to produce lyric poetry as the dominant form of what Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe call "the literary absolute." For McLane, this is part of a story about the origin of language and how poetry

came to be linked with the origins of Man and hence with a timelessness distinct from the ephemerality associated with the contemporary sea of print and "literature" more broadly considered. Like McLane, I am interested in how poetry and imagination are consistently linked to futurity and immortality, and thus how they come to be defended from historicism, but as I develop the argument in this book, my suggestion is that lyric poetry comes to be the privileged mode of the literary as such not only because its timelessness is grounded in a form of elemental life that preceded the letter, but also due to its technical capacity to model habits of attentiveness that induce slow time.[11]

In my account, then, decline is a problem related to the new pressures on time imposed by commercial society, especially the widespread sense of urgency and rush that Adam Smith called "the hurry of life" in a commercial world, and that Hazlitt later termed "the bustle of the world."[12] My emphasis on commerce helps to explain what distinguishes my account of decline circa 1800 from accounts of "decadence" a century or so later. Stephen Arata has suggested that in decadence, the "perception of loss" outweighed its historical and material validity and he has shown how that perception was cast in narrative.[13] For Arata, the perception of internal decline produces opportunities for cultural regeneration through empire, an empire whose very strength is then understood to produce a propensity for cultural decay. Decadence, then, is an imperial problem, a symptom of Britain's perceived loss of control over its colonies and its citizens. In contrast, decline in my account is rooted in the perceived loss of control over cycles of commercial prosperity and over commercial production, especially of books whose overproduction in the literary realm produces anxieties about the decline of literature. More recently, Vincent Sherry has used the fin-de-siècle decadence movement to reveal an adverse, past-directed orientation in modernism, a movement more commonly understood as pointed firmly towards the future. Decadence, in other words, persists as a trace of "backward time" in a poetics of novelty.[14] I share with Sherry an interest in how a cultural obsession with decay exposes basic structures of time and temporality and an insistence that the "macro-narrative of cultural time may be told most closely and meaningfully... in the micronarratives of imaginative time itself."[15] Sherry locates the origins of this temporality in "the failure of the renewal of historical time in revolutionary romanticism," a lost political ideal that extended into "the feeling of declining times and exhausted time in the historical imaginary of decadence."[16] My account – which might be understood as stretching Sherry's story of conflicted temporality even further

backwards by rooting it in temporal complexities associated with the continued spread of commercial society through the eighteenth century – also sees politics here but one more closely grounded in the temporal effects of eighteenth-century cycles of commerce rather than revolutionary failure.

Such distinctions aside, my account of decline shares with arguments about later decadence like those of Arata and Sherry an understanding of decline as a way of anticipating the future negatively, not as a locus of improvement and progress but as a falling away or a withering of strength and value. Accordingly, at the dawn of the nineteenth century as at the dawn of the twentieth, decline and the structure of arguments about decline shift across discursive boundaries. While one of the goals of this book is to show what is distinctive about decline in the literary field, I also want to emphasize a common set of concerns that characterize anticipations of decline circa 1800 across a range of discourses. Decline understood as a general outlook toward the future is not readily constrained to economic, imperial, cultural, or literary terms and apprehensions of decline typically move across these categories of analysis. That is why this book, which has a particular investment in the analysis of literary and cultural decline, also engages attempts to analyze, predict, and prevent decline in a broad range of other discourses. Whether one frets about the decline of national wealth or the loss of territory within the empire or the lapse in the quality of the national literature, anxieties about decline can be understood broadly as worries that arise from a sense of rapid change and an awareness of the increasing uncertainty of the future. Thus, one salient feature of all concerns about decline is that, like the present-day discussion of climate change, such concerns raise questions not only about why decline happens, but when.

Decline, in other words, is a temporal problem keyed to new ways of perceiving time and the future in the later eighteenth century. What distinguishes decline from progress is the anticipation of the future as closing down and narrowing rather than opening up into uncertain realms of improvement. Nonetheless, decline is not necessarily oppositional to progress and might be understood as complementary to it in a number of ways. In all of my examples, new cultural practices, from political economy to statistical graphics to new forms of literary experience, emerge from the encounter with decline, and such practices collectively enable new ways to imagine the future. This creation of new future possibilities, then, is one shared feature of both progress and decline.

In addition, both progress and decline produce new modes through which to imagine the future, but the possibilities for that imagined future,