In 1891 Henry James found it impossible to leave the site of Browning’s ashes in Poets’ Corner without a sense that the poet should have been there to give his own thoughts on the deposition of his remains. It was ‘exactly one of those occasions in which his own analytic spirit would have rejoiced and his irrepressible faculty for looking at the human condition in all sorts of slanting coloured lights have found a signal opportunity.’¹ The entombment was a historic moment in Browning’s long-delayed entry into the canon of English poets. He has always been a debatable figure since the mixed reception of Pauline in 1833, which included William Johnson Fox’s ‘Eureka!’ at the discovery of an authentic new poet and The Literary Gazette’s summary verdict ‘this is a dreamy volume, without an object, and unfit for publication’.² It took thirty years before Browning became popular with the 1863 Poetical Works and Dramatis Personae in 1864. Academic honours were awarded in the late 1860s and 1870s but it was still possible to claim in print that he was no poet, as Alfred Austin’s ‘The Poetry of the Period’ did in 1869. Indeed, Matthew Arnold commended the article for its independence of thought and clear critical criteria. In 1881 the Browning Society was founded, an event which delighted the poet but, as he put it, undoubtedly had ‘a grotesque side’. By that time there was a consensus that Browning was highly fit for publication: the debate had shifted to defining where exactly his strength lay. He was received as a philosopher, but found wanting in consistency of thought.³ He was admired as a creator of characters, but found deficient in verbal poetry.⁴ He was entombed in Westminster Abbey, but there was no lasting agreement about why.

James was the most acute contemporary observer of the Browning phenomenon. (Browning haunted James, the writer of ghost stories,
even while he was still alive. The novelist wondered ceaselessly how the Browning who appeared so ordinary and predictable in London society of the 1880s could write such rare strange poetry. He wrote a story about it, but ‘The Private Life’ (1893) was less an answer than another rehearsal of the question.) According to James’s ‘Browning in Westminster Abbey’ part of the poet’s audience, at its most modern, was canonized with him. With his passing into Poets’ Corner ‘something of our latest sympathies, our latest and most restless selves, passed the other day into the high part – the show-part, to speak vulgarly – of our literature’ (p. 533). The poet was a socially active contemporary, a ‘figure of London’, but James also suggests that through that context he both haunts and anticipates his readers. Browning even, at the end of James’s short tribute, becomes the legatee of his age, as if those left behind would predecease him: ‘we leave our sophisticated modern conscience, and perhaps even our sophisticated modern vocabulary, in his charge among the illustrious’ (p. 534). He has already outlived those who survive him and by his death we are in a sense bereft of ourselves.

I include us, now, in the age of Browning. He is still a contemporary in publishing terms, widely available in a range of printed selections, academic editions and recorded readings. Some half-remembered lines – ‘God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world!’ (Pippa Passes, 1841), ‘Oh, to be in England’ (‘Home Thoughts from Abroad’, 1845), ‘It was roses, roses, all the way’ (‘The Patriot’, 1855) – have passed into the language. And in terms of reading, Browning poems can still seem to anticipate our intense private experiences: ‘Never the time and the place / And the loved one all together!’ (1883) or, more compellingly, make experiences we will never have stay unforgettably with us: ‘My first thought was, he lied in every word, / That hoary cripple, with malicious eye . . .’ (‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’, 1855) or ‘It happened thus: my slab, though new / Was getting weather-stained’ (‘Bad Dreams IV’, 1889). The poetry is Browning’s monument, regardless of the demotion of Westminster Abbey and England from their former identification with the culture of the whole English-speaking world.

What does it mean to call poetry a monument? The question seems to me to lie at the heart of the project of a literary life. In the English poetic tradition reading literature has been associated with bereavement at least since Milton’s ‘Epitaph on the Admirable Dramatic Poet W. Shakespeare’ (1632). The ‘Epitaph’ is a powerful shaper of Romantic and Victorian conceptions of imaginative experience.