DÜRER’S JEROME

The saint, before he is a saint, is comfortably at work in a room like one of Dürer’s own in his fine house in Nuremberg. Sun streams through windows. It’s warm. The dozy lion blinks. Jerome is pouring out his eyes on a holy text that is brittle, that is already crumbling into dust, already burning. His dry pen scratches down the cold meaning of a word he’s just translated. The Latin is so good and clean it shines a halo around his head. What he wants is not to copy meaning but explain. He’d rather be writing marginalia, but he won’t. All the marks he makes have a meaning like every object in his room, his books, slippers, cushions, scissors—all cut finely in the plate like iron filings drawn into place by those meticulous fingers. He will stay until his work is done. His dog curls up asleep.

How much of this is true? None of the light through the windows, nor the windows (from early Renaissance Italy), nor the fine wood timbers of the ceiling, the carefully cut lines of new theories of perspective. These Dürer etched to furnish the European mind—the vita contemplativa, Jerome in his Study, though truly curmudgeon, a worried soul, and, of course, brilliant. Actually, he came from the Syrian desert to live in Bethlehem in a lightless cave, adjacent to the cave of the Nativity, where animals were born in hay. His walls were black with smoky oil from the lamp by which he worked. Almost everything is artificial, made up in scratch, one translator of another. The skull’s a nice touch. Only the words and the work and the lion are true.

In a dark room of the British Museum, the picture is lowlit behind glass. Dürer, Jerome—each hunched over the page, the plate in its acid bath; each bent into what he believes will bring him closer to what he desires. Truth for Dürer, a God, for Jerome. And for us? We don’t know
who we are, unless: we look in
to inwardness itself, an odd light streaming
through bull’s-eye glass, magnified and burning.
It’s a holy text. The mind moves through it,
painstakingly apprehending a mind remote,
what we desire most: the intimacy of a room
where we lose who we are, the *via negativa,*
and ciphers fill with ink black as stars.