The Poetry of John Gray

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January *

Saint Sebastian

Soldier of Diocletian! thou didst wield
A large command; an archangelic spark
Thou didst advene where men lay chained and dark;
At thy bright touch their sicknesses were healed.

Soldier of Christ! thou'rt led into the field
By wicked hands; and, being bound and stark
Naked, for arrows thou art set a mark;
Yet is thy martyrdom by this not sealed;

For Diocletian, nothing faltering,
Holding thee still in fierce and rank despite,
Commandeth thee to perish by the mace.

Patron of archers! guide our prayers aright
(Mercy the bow, and penitence the string)
To strike the centre of the gold of Grace.

February *

Saint Agatha

When Quintian was consul in the isle
That nursed thy beauty into perfect flower,
The tyrant thought to have thee in his power;
And used thee ill as he himself was vile.

Prison and torture could not reconcile
Thy liberal mind with guilt; nor stripes make cower
Thy constant heart. Thy heavenly Spouse doth dower
Thee, Virgin, with the martyr's palm and style.

Agatha, glory of Catania,
Gem among holy virgins, thou art set
A rose where once the cruel thorns were wet;
Thou, with Saint Ursula and Margaret,
Hast Catherine of Alexandria
Among thy fellows, good Saint Agatha.

March

Saint Joseph

The delicate Bambino slept and stirred,
In thy strong arms reposing, poor and weak;
Against thy knee his tongue began to speak
Who spoke stupendously, the living Word;

Whose very voice, Saint Joseph, thou hast heard
In earthly speech like that of those who seek
Thy intercession, praying to be meek
As thou wast meek, above all men preferred.

Heaven makes room for thee, thou chosen man.
Still mayst thou stand astounded at the grace
Which gave thy lowliness so great a place:

The church has not a stouter pillar than
Thyself on which to lean and be secure,
Thou faithful on, thou silent one, thou pure!

April *

Saint Paul the Simple

Thou wast an aged yokel long ago;
Thou, antic clown, discoverest through a wife
A hut can hide a complicated life,
And bran-fed man with grief walk to and fro.

Anon into the desert dost thou go;
Wherein there is not much whereon to thrive;
Rough Anthony is very apt to drive
Thee further onward in thy course of woe.
Anthony, spilling honey, bids thee glean
The same again; and, having torn thy coat,
Upbraids thy raggedness. Thy outward gear
Was dumb obedience and godly fear,
And all simplicity. Let us take note
How wise a man a simpleton has been.

May *

Our Blessed Lady

Mother of sovereign mercy, who didst bear
By faith the Pearl of Life, the Hope of men,
The Conqueror, the Lily of the glen,
The Rose of beauty most exceeding fair.

Strengthen our prayers, who art incarnate prayer,
To him who answers prayer; and even when
We think not of thee, have us in thy ken.
Oh, shield us when we wander unaware.

Give us to love thy Son as thou didst love;
Assure us faith like thy faith; give us hope
In thy entreaties for us lest we fail.

We walk in darknesses we know not of.
A bitter path is ours; in which we grope
Pitiable, unless thy prayers avail.

June *

Saint Aloysius Gonzaga

The noble house Gonzaga gave thee birth.
In rich-wrought stones and medals still survives
The fame of its renowned and pious lives.
While thou wast yet of tender age and girth
Thy spirit had no longer eyes for earth;
Called to a glorious company, it strives
To lay thy youthful flesh in rigid gyves,
And school it to contempt of this world's worth.

Thou art the topstone of thine ancient house.
And in the company where thou hast spent
Thy scarce six years of cloistered penitence

They set thee high. But greatest recompense
Of all thou hast, thou art with Stanislaus
Kotska in Heaven a tender ornament.

July

Saint Ignatius Loyola

Ignatius, glory of Segovia town,
Thou wast not bred a knight at arms for naught,
With holy discipline and fervour fraught,
The church's foes to batter and smite down.

Called to the name above all names' renown,
Banding thy knights of constancy and thought,
Thou fightest with them still as thou hast fought,
That company's foundation and its crown.

These follow thee, withstanding and withstood,
Steadfast and meek, obscure and glorious,
To-day, to-morrow, and to distant days.

To thee, with all the nobles of thy brood,
With Francis Xavier, Aloysius,
With Robert Southwell, Edmund Campion, Praise!

August

Saint Bernard Abbot

Thy name of Amber and of Nard is spelt.
A smoke of odorous Incense are thy songs.
A reek as of Assyrian Gum belongs
To Bernard's memory that in Clairvaux dwelt.
Words which for their ecstatic sweetness melt,
Like tears of oozing Camphor, twice were throngs
To lash the spirit of impetuous throngs,
And sharper swords than ever hung in belt.

The age that knew thee saw thee through the grace
Which marked thine ardent being on the earth,
And figured thee a noble incense cloud.

Still unto us the favour is allowed
To know thine eloquence and wisdom's worth,
O Doctor, in thy most exalted place!

September

Saint Michael Archangel

General of the heavenly armies! Chief
Among the angelic hosts! It is thy lance
Subdues the Dragon's ultimate advance,
And lays him conquered in his place of grief,

Bound with the Liar in an evil sheaf.
Thou art men's warden from so grim a chance;
Their knowledge of thy staunchness doth enhance
Resistance of thy foe, to all relief.

Leading the blessed from the cleansing flame,
Blithe on their lips is still thy noble name,
The cry of victory: Who is like to God?

Thou art the guide of such as take the road;
And we are pilgrims, every one of us;
Thou art found an universal patron thus.
October

Saint Francis of Assisi

Hail to thee, Francis, father of the poor;
Soul of humility and tenderness;
For thee the world was empty emptiness,
And poverty grew richness more and more.

Thou wast self abnegation to the core;
Thou, being nothing, didst proclaim thee less;
Wherefore the blessed Saviour deigned to bless
Thee with his noble wounds in miniature.

Melodious Jacopone was thy son,
Who set thy vibrant sentences in rhyme.
Thou mad’st thee with God’s whole creation one;
With stones and brambles not refusing kin;
The while thy holy vision pierced the thin
Appearances of all the fruits of time.

November

Saint John of the Cross

Praise to thee, gentle friar, John of the Cross!
The body was the only living thing
Whereof thou hadst not pity: thou dist wring
Its Frailty till it knew not thorns from moss.

Above where this mean world’s vexations toss,
Thou art a flame on Carmel; thou’rt a wing
Thyself of contemplation; thou dost fling
All pediments aside; thy wealth is loss.

Thine ecstasy demands the utmost night,
Wherein to espy the Lover’s glimmering light;
Thy dearest hope abandonment of men,
Whereby to know the beauty beyond ken.
Sweet lilies mark the desert thou hast trod.
The steep of Carmel traced thy path to God.
December

Saint Catherine of Alexandria

Thou wast a noble virgin, whom the Child
Espoused in heaven before the assembled court;
Whence, armed with rose and lily, thou didst thwart
Maxentius, and wouldst not be beguiled.

To break and maim a maid like thee so mild,
And shame thy modesty, was hellish sport;
Whence angels bore it far from men's resort,
And sepulchred thy body in the wild.

Thy tomb, in Sinai, drips a precious oil,
Potent to heal, and cleanse from earthly soil;
Thy prayers are medicine for men's sick souls;

(How many a penitent thy power extols!)  
And weaponed warriors, passing by thy shrine,
Pray for a heart invincible as thine.