The Poetry of John Gray

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1898 The Fourth 1898

and

Last Blue Almanack
January *

Saint Agnes

Agnes the Roman maiden dared defy
The tyrant's fury, and her tender frame
The bitter torment and the bitterer shame,
Unmoved, unmoveable, made light to die;

Counting death sweetness sooner than deny
The blessed stigma of the blessed name
Which quenches flame without with inward flame.
Challenged to choose, Saint Agnes made reply:

My Lord has set His seal upon my face,
Engaging all my love to make me sure;
He set the ring of faith upon my hand,
Upon my neck the necklace of His grace.
Chaste in His love, and, having touched Him, pure,
Receiving Him, His virgin still I stand.

February *

Saint Ignatius, Martyr

The bloody-handed Empire falls afresh
At Antioch, and lifts Ignatius thence,
A soul unconquerable, clad in flesh
To swell the arena's foul magnificence.

Ignatius does not measure the immense
Proportions of the circus, nor behold
The gesturing rabble to the topstone dense,
The gleam of scarlet and the glint of gold;

So brave the Image heart and thought enfold,
So wide the Court of Heaven already near:
Till, like an awning, earth together rolled,
The Sun of everlasting day shine clear.

The drowsy lions sniff the trampled mud,
Churned up of Roman dust and martyrs' blood.
March *

Saint Benedict

O blessed to have left the world and fled
To craggy fastness in the wilderness;
Blessed art thou whom sovereign graces bless
With love of solitude and tears to shed;

Blessed to make the naked rock thy bed;
Blessed whom penitence did richly dress;
Blessed art thou to whom the world-sick press,
To learn to pray and heavenward be sped.

Praying apart from men like Him who prayed
And mourned and suffered and was derelict,
With grace fulfilled, with heavenly nurture stayed,
Of all thy sowing see the seemly math:
The black-robed armies line thy glorious path
To God the only good, Saint Benedict.

April *

Saint Paul of the Cross

When England turned apostate at the will
Of mighty heretics, and was their thrall,
God raised up thee to plead for her, Saint Paul,
Long years of bitter penance to fulfil.

God suffered thee to agonise until
Thou hadst drunk fifty years her cup of gall:
Remember still, remember England's fall;
Entreat before the Lord for England still.

The Passion was thy daily food of thought;
The burden of the Passion filled thy days;
Till, God allowing, it was almost wrought
In miniature in thee, who mad'st thy ways
A mimic march to Golgotha. Ah, what
Must be thy consolation, what thy praise!

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May *

Saint Philip Neri

Good Father Philip, where the happy crowd
Is thick in heaven, art thou busy yet?
Is thy smile still not easy to forget,
Enough to break it, if there were a cloud?

Art thou in heaven no whit less endowed
With that keen glance there was no need to whet,
Piercing the gloss of life, the surface fret,
Seeing within the sovereign grace allowed?

Smile on, benign Saint Philip, as of old;
We, who are mostly sordid, harsh and cold,
Could we but answer faintly to thy care
For us, then would thy intercession bear
An overwhelming measure of relief
To Rome in chains, to London filled with grief.

June

Saint John Baptist

John the precursor of the Lord forsook
Companionship one could not now forsake,
(For want of such companionship) to make
His lodging in the wild beside the brook.

He who knew Jesus, Mary, undertook
The pathway of the wilderness, the ache
Of hunger and contrition, to awake
The Voice predicted in the ancient book.

Saint admirable in thy ruggedness,
Implant an apprehension stout and rough
Of that great sample of thy desert stuff:
He shall increase while I grow ever less.
Words gold among the golden, for if these
Are not a rule of sanctity, what is?
July

Saint Mary Magdalen

Great Magdalen, when Jesus sat at meat,
Thou, sin and grief polluted, stain on stain,
Didst pour the bitter torrent of thy pain,
Crouched in the dust beside His blessed feet.

Absolved and sanctified, in thy retreat,
Deep in the wilderness thou didst obtain
Through every bitter tear to see again
That bitter scene which made the bitterest sweet;

Thine eyes retaining the distracted stare
Once fixed at Calvary; and though the years
Gutter thy cheeks and wreck thine eyes with grief,
There was vouchsafed continual relief,
To raise a monument of grief so fair.
Blessed be God who gave such wealth of tears.

August *

Saint John Berchmans

To keep a simple rule from day to day,
While days build up the uneventful year,
To think on God and hold God's mother dear,
To be discreet, to heed and to obey,

To do the work required without display,
To make the utmost of the duty near,
To covet only to excel by mere
Minute performance in a simple way;

Angel of purity, an angel's face,
A gracefulness by nature graced with grace
The brightness of the white soul pierces through;
A splendour of example fit to raise
Men's thoughts to God, and to excite to praise
God in his creature whom such gifts imbue.
September *

Saint Jerome

Most pious Doctor, learned Hermit, sun
O erudition in an early age,
The Sovereign Pontiff called thee, desert sage,
To labour till a giant’s task was done.

Whether frequented or retired alone,
Or pondering the knotted Hebrew page,
None ever found thee loiter to engage
The rash assailants of Saint Peter’s Throne.

Little they thought who gave thy Lord a reed,
He dumb and meek and not resisting them,
That thou would’st fashion it to make afraid
His foes, thou Michael of the pen indeed.
Come to the end, alert and undismayed,
Thy valiant soul took flight from Bethlehem.

October

Saint Teresa

Aid, Saint Teresa, chosen child of God,
Beauty of Carmel, ornament of Spain,
Teresa, ardent votary of pain,
Prepared to tread the pathway to be trod,

Girdled with meekness, with obedience shod,
Alike in tender heart and virile brain
Most fearful of delusion and its train,
With which the fiend so scatters men abroad;

Mistrusting self and worldly wisdom’s worth,
Drastic and hardy, rising sheer above
Baulks which would desolate a common heart;
To suffer or to die addressed on Earth,
Behold in heaven the blessed counterpart:
Glory and consolation knit with love.
November  *

Saint Martin of Tours

How the centurion Martin split his cloak,  
Because a beggar shivered in the snow  
On Amiens common, very few but know  
The dazzling story of that happy stroke:

How in a dream our blessed Saviour spoke,  
Wearing the moiety of the mantle: Lo,  
Martin the catechumen clad me so;  
How Martin was baptised when he awoke.

To-day along the Loire one sees for miles  
The figure of the Saint above the shrine,  
The happy country owning with its smiles  
The Saint of Tours propitious and benign.  
The Saint seems still to wear his cloak in half:  
Ask for the poor in Tours and people laugh.

December

Saint Ambrose

One reads in Saint Augustine's masterpiece  
About the schools, the gladiatorial shows,  
The flail of heresy and faith's repose,  
The bondage of the soul and its release;

And suddenly one finds the turmoil cease,  
While quietly Saint Ambrose comes and goes  
Along the pages, where the story flows  
Mellifluously, a shape of calm and peace.

A clear and vivid figure none the less,  
In gleaming scraps of phrase: a voice not strong;  
A swift and silent reader. Then to turn  
And find this same Saint Ambrose chide and spurn  
Empress and Emperor, take up the wrong  
Inflicted, set his face, and force redress!