Brothers, who when the sirens roar
From office, shop and factory pour
'Neath evening sky;
By cops directed to the fug
Of talkie-houses for a drug,
Or down canals to find a hug
Until you die:

We know, remember, what it is
That keeps you celebrating this
Sad ceremonial;
We know the terrifying brink
From which in dreams you nightly shrink.
'I shall be sacked without', you think,
'A testimonial.'

We cannot put on airs with you
The fears that hurt you hurt us too
Only we say
That like all nightmares these are fake
If you would help us we could make
Our eyes to open, and awake
Shall find night day.

On you our interests are set
Your sorrow we shall not forget
While we consider
Those who in every county town
For centuries have done you brown,
But you shall see them tumble down
Both horse and rider.

O splendid person, you who stand
In spotless flannels or with hand
Expert on trigger;
Whose lovely hair and shapely limb
Year after year are kept in trim
Till buffers envy as you swim
Your Grecian figure:

You are not jealous yet, we know,
But we must warn you, even so
So pray be seated:
It isn't cricket, but it's true
The lady who admires us, you
Have thought you're getting off with too,
For you're conceited.

Your beauty's a completed thing.
The future kissed you, called you king.
Did she? Deceiver!
She's not in love with you at all
No feat of yours can make her fall.
She will not answer to your call
Like your retriever.

Dare-devil mystic who bear the scars
Of many spiritual wars
And smoothly tell
The starving that their one salvation
Is personal regeneration
By fasting, prayer and contemplation;
Is it? Well,

Others have tried it, all delight
Sustained in that ecstatic flight
Could not console
When through exhausting hours they'd flown
From the alone to the Alone,
Nothing remained but the dry-as-bone
Night of the soul.

Coward; for all your goodness game
Your dream of Heaven is the same
As any bounder's;
You hope to corner as reward
All that the rich can here afford:
Love and music and bed and board
While the world flounders.

And you, the wise man, full of humour
To whom our misery's a rumour
And slightly funny;
Proud of your nicely balanced view
You say as if it were something new
The fuss we make is mostly due
To lack of money.

Ah, what a little squirt is there
When of your aren't-I-charming air
You stand denuded.
Behind your subtle sense of humour
You hide the boss's simple stuma,
Among the foes which we enumer
You are included.

'Brothers who when the sirens roar ...' from The English Auden by WH Auden.
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Because you saw but were not indignant
The invasion of the great malignant
Cambridge ulcer
That army intellectual
Of every kind of liberal
Smarmy with friendship but of all
There are none falser.

A host of columbines and pathics
Who show the poor by mathematics
In their defence
That wealth and poverty are merely
Mental pictures, so that clearly
Every tramp’s a landlord really
In mind-events.

Let fever sweat them till they tremble
Cramp rack their limbs till they resemble
Cartoons by Goya:
Their daughters sterile be in rut,
May cancer rot their herring gut,
The circular madness on them shut,
Or paranoia.

Their splendid people, their wiscacres,
Professors, agents, magic-makers,
Their poets and apostles,
Their bankers and their brokers too,
And ironmasters shall turn blue
Shall fade away like morning dew
With club-room fossils.

August 1932

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907–1973) was the son of the pioneering school medical officer and public health scholar George Augustus Auden (1872–1957). GA Auden qualified in medicine in 1896 and after 14 years of a conventional medical career he became the first school medical officer for Birmingham, UK. Except for his period with the Royal Army Medical Corps in Egypt, Gallipoli, and France during World War I, he remained working in Birmingham until the end of his career. He retired as Professor of Social Medicine at the University of Birmingham at the end of the World War II, a post subsequently held by Thomas McKeown. GA Auden wrote extensively on child nutrition and health, carrying out a prospective study of the effect of providing an extra milk ration to schoolboys on their growth and haemoglobin levels.1 He was interested in German experiments with open-air schools, considering the opportunity for exercise, good nutrition, and lack of nervous strain they provided to be important for child health and development.2 He also demonstrated that, within Birmingham, height and weight were greater for children in areas with lower infant mortality rates,3 predating later work relating infant mortality to health outcomes as a way of investigating potential early-life origins of adult disease.4,5 Along with this work he also maintained a strong interest in general and medical history, publishing extensively on issues such as the guild of barber surgeons and, in particular, Scandinavian antiquities, in which field he also served as a translator.

The interest that GA Auden and his son shared most was psychology. GA Auden wrote extensively about psychological problems of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, including a still-cited report of a case of auto-erotic asphyxiation (involving a woman’s high-heeled shoe, stocking and a bedstead).6 GA Auden became honorary psychologist to the children’s hospital in Birmingham as well as medical advisor to the Birmingham Institution for the Mentally Handicapped,7 and wrote on topics such as (what would now be called) dyslexia, ‘the biological factors in mental deficiency’ and juvenile criminality.

WH Auden was also fascinated with psychology, and particularly with psychosomatic disease. During recuperation for an operation for a rectal fissure in 1930 WH Auden started writing a ‘textbook of psychology in doggerel verses’, in which sexual guilt was equated with ill health:

Love your cock
Stand a shock
Hate your cock
Soon a crock7

And particular attitudes were seen to bring immunity from infection:

If a whore shocks you
Then she will pox you.7

WH Auden’s well-known ballads, Miss Gee and Victor, suggest that suppressed emotions can cause cancer, and that inability to deal with feelings—inculcated from an oppressive family background
—would lead to insanity. WH Auden’s account of his parents reflects his psychosomatic views, when in 1965 he wrote:

On the whole the members of my father’s family were phlegmatic, earnest, rather slow, inclined to be miserly, and endowed with excellent health, my mother’s were quick, short-tempered, generous, and liable to physical ill health, hysteria and neuroticism.7

The poem we reprint here was originally titled ‘A communist to others’ and the first line read ‘Comrades, who when the sirens roar’. It lost both its title and its first word when it appeared in book form8 in Auden’s 1936 collection Look, Stranger! We republish the final revised version of the poem, but it is worth noting that the earlier version contains several extra stanzas, including, after the present stanza 14:

The worst employer’s double-dealing
Is better than their mental healing
That would assist us.
The world, they tell us, has no flaws
There is no need to change the laws
We’re only not content because
Jealous of sisters.

Once masters struck with whips; of recent
Years by being jolly decent
For these are cuter
Fostering the heart’s self-adulation
Would dissipate all irritation
Making a weakened generation
Completely neuter.

These additional stanzas add to the already evident disapproval Auden felt towards the attribution of psychological and psychosomatic outcomes to failings of the individual, rather than to the broader social environment, from the family level up to that of the state. In stanza 14, for example, Auden both castigates those who ‘show the poor by mathematics’ that ‘wealth and poverty are merely mental pictures’ and points out that inculcating this viewpoint in people suffering from the oppression of poverty is something carried out for the defence of the wealthy. He goes on to lambaste those in service to the wealthy and powerful—poets, bankers, brokers, and professors among them—showing his disdain for those that he considered were agents of impaired social and psychological progress, summed up perhaps best in his aside in his magnificent mixture of prose, drama and poetry, The Orators, the Oxford don who says, ‘I don’t feel quite happy about pleasure’.

G DAVEY SMITH

References
1 Auden GA. An experiment in the nutritive value of an extra milk ration. Journal of the Royal Sanitary Institute 1923;44:236–47.