

“Of What Disaster Is this the Imminence” *“The Auroras of Autumn” and the Christian Apocalypse*

Benjamin Madden

Wallace Stevens’s late poems are remarkable both for their dense imagery and their seeming indifference to the momentous world events with which they coincide. Critics who have sought to historicise the later Stevens have done so in two ways: firstly by reading the opacity of the poems as itself a political stance irrespective of their content, and secondly by drawing heavily on correspondence and other biographical sources. This essay aims to take a different approach to Stevens’s “The Auroras of Autumn” by aligning the poem with its historical context. The breadth and meaning of historical reference in poetry is clearly at issue here. While many of his modernist contemporaries were eager to signpost the relationship between their works and historical contexts both distant and contemporary through extensive quotation and related techniques, Stevens’s poems tend towards self-sufficiency. This hermetic style poses fundamental questions about the nature of literary reference, and the risk of critical arbitrariness is always present. My argument is that Stevens’s poem engages directly with the discursive mobilisation of Christian apocalyptic surrounding the development of the atomic bomb. I will begin by describing how my own reading of the poem led me to this particular historical context, before arguing that the literature of nuclear war demands a critical frame that surpasses both language-centered and historicist criticism. Finally, I will argue that far from embracing opacity as an alternative to political commitment, Stevens’s late poetry opposes a set of values based on affirmation of the “commonplace” to the apocalyptic threats of his time.

Written during late 1947 and published in the *Kenyon Review* in 1948, “The Auroras of Autumn” begins with a series of dense figurations of the aurora borealis, or the northern lights, as a serpent with a head of air.¹ The second canto dismisses this first set of images brusquely (“Farewell to an idea...”) before replacing it with another:

1 J.M. Edelstein, *Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 224; Wallace Stevens, “The Auroras of Autumn,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 355. All page references for Stevens’s poems are to this edition.

A cabin stands,
Deserted, on a beach. It is white,
As by custom or according to

An ancestral theme...

And later:

The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach.
The long lines of it grow longer, emptier,
A darkness gathers though it does not fall...²

A sense of threat issues from both past and future; the abandoned cabin suggests that disaster may have struck already, and if it hasn't, the gathering darkness implies that it might be about to. Is it necessary for our reading of the poem that this disaster should take on a specific shape, or does the poem aim to impart only a generalised sense of menace and foreboding? Indeed, should readers transform that menace and foreboding into a form of existential angst, when the poem issues from an historical moment at which the fear of annihilation was insinuating itself into every moment of daily life?

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 revealed to people all over the world the existence of a vast and hitherto unknown source of destructive energy. As it became apparent that these weapons were likely to figure in any future global conflict on a wide scale, the media and the public became obsessed with projecting just how such a conflict might unfold and what its implications would be for the ordinary men and women who would bear its brunt. By 1949, the issue would become urgent as the Soviet Union successfully tested its own atomic bomb and the possibility of a world-wide nuclear war became concrete.³ But in the meantime, the fear and uncertainty surrounding this new technology struggled to find adequate expression. The atomic age might have represented a "new epoch" in humankind's relationship with nature, but it did not immediately prompt a similar renewal of language. Instead, scientists and journalists alike drew on a series of stock responses and scenarios to explain the new technology to the public.⁴

2 Stevens, "The Auroras of Autumn," in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 356.

3 David Holloway, "Nuclear Weapons and the Escalation of the Cold War, 1945–1962," in Melvin P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume 1: Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 378.

4 Spencer Weart, in his *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), cites the humorist Frank Sullivan's character Mr. Arbuthnot, an

Part of the reason for this is surely that atomic power had entered the discursive field well before development of the Bomb. Speculation about the utopian as well as the warlike potential of nuclear technology had swirled on both sides of the Atlantic since the discovery of nuclear fission in 1938. As a result, when the destructive power of the atom became widely known, there was already a reservoir of familiar tropes and expressions to draw on in describing it. As Spencer Weart argues in his exhaustive study, the history of nuclear technology is a "history of images," of representations whose history begins well before the advent of nuclear weapons themselves, in every artistic and journalistic medium. "The Auroras of Autumn," too, needs to be situated in that history of representations, as the major American poet of the mid-twentieth century's reflection on that era's decisive historical event.

By the mid-1950s, the stock of images associated with nuclearism had grown exponentially.⁵ One of the most indelible is the one that Stevens's "cabin on the beach" always calls to mind for me: that of a typical, two-story, weatherboard house destroyed in a nuclear explosion. Following the successful Soviet nuclear test, the possibility of a nuclear attack on the United States prompted the public to demand both information and concrete action from the government to defend them from the threat (Figure 16.1). The Truman administration's response was to create the Federal Civil Defense Administration.⁶ Under the aegis of this organisation, civil defense planners paired a series experiments, called Operation Doorstep, with the ongoing nuclear tests in Nevada in order to determine the probable damage inflicted on American cities by a nuclear attack. In the films and photographs generated by these experiments, we can see a vivid realisation of the apocalyptic fears that had always crowded around "the Bomb," redoubled for an American audience by their now being located, not across the ocean in Japan, but at home, in the most emphatically ordinary locales (Figure 16.2). It is the desolate landscapes and ruined, chaotic domestic locales produced in these experiments that cause me to intuit an affinity between Stevens's figurations and nuclear war.

The problem of situating Stevens's poetry in history is well summarised in a line from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": "The poem is the cry of its

acknowledged cliché expert on the subject of the atom. Arbuthnot answered questions with the aid of a familiar series of stock words and phrases: "new era," "harness," "unleash," "the philosophers' stone," "the alchemists' dream," and so on, 105.

5 I take the term "nuclearism" from Ken Ruthven's *Nuclear Criticism* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993), in order to denote the whole discursive field of nuclear science and technology, as well as its social ramifications.

6 Weart, *Nuclear Fear*, 129.



FIGURE 16.1 *Stills from footage of Operation Doorstep, showing one of the model houses demolished by a shock wave, 1953. Photo courtesy of National Nuclear Security Administration/Nevada Field Office*

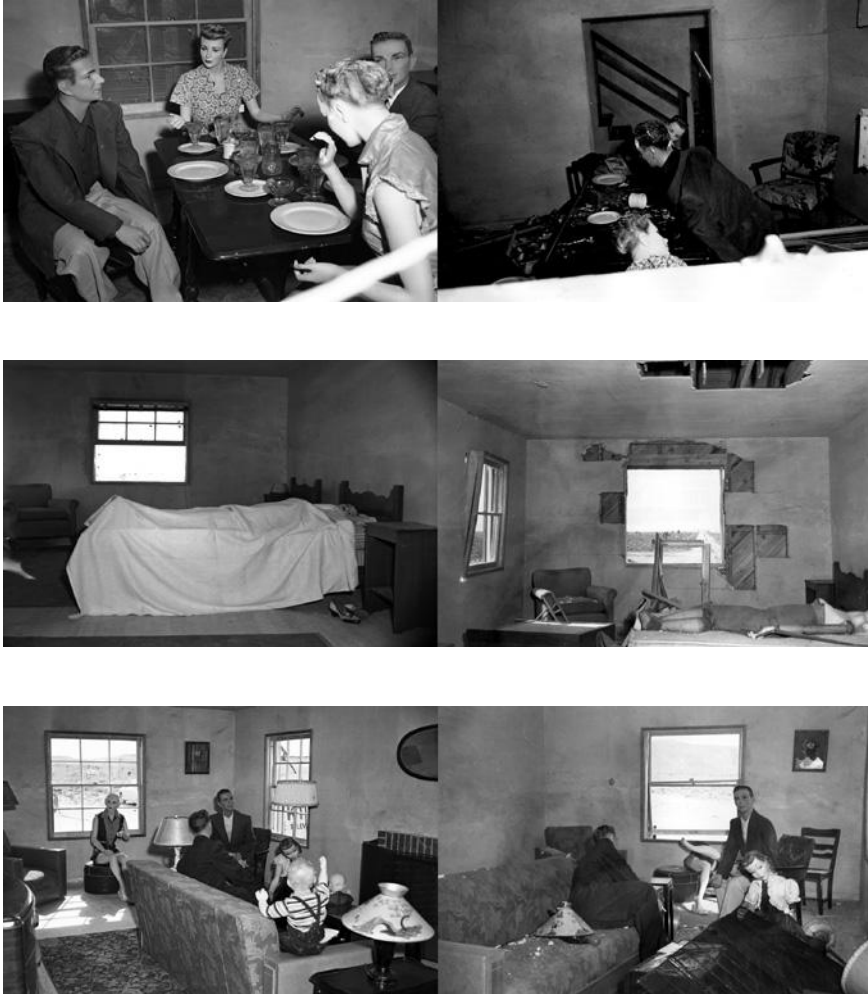


FIGURE 16.2 *Scenes from inside one of the Operation Doorstep houses, before and after the nuclear detonation, 1953. Photos courtesy of National Nuclear Security Administration/Nevada Field Office*

occasion.”⁷ From “occasion” we can extrapolate that the poem can only issue from a specific time and place; but a “cry,” defined by the OED as a “chiefly inarticulate utterance,” complicates the picture. The poem may issue from a specific time and place, but the relationship between that context and the content of the poem—if this view even admits of any content at all—must remain

7 Stevens, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 404.

Copyright © 2014, BRILL. All rights reserved.

obscure. The problem is intensified by the tendency of Stevens's critics to assign to even his most grandiose and abstract passages a personal referent. This argument is not without merit; take the following passage from "The Auroras":

...A capitol,
It may be, is emerging or has just
Collapsed. The denouement has to be postponed...

This is nothing until in a single man contained,
Nothing until this named thing nameless is
And is destroyed. He opens the door of his house

On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.⁸

The spectacular telescoping of time, the godlike perspective, and the hint of great power politics contained in the reference to a capitol suggest events on a cosmic scale. However, "This is nothing until in a single man contained": history can become meaningful only by being encapsulated in a single perceiving intellect. The poem, the cry of its occasion, bears an occult relationship to the external world legible only through the refracted preoccupations and anxieties of the mind that authored it.

As such, critics like Harold Bloom have long held that "The Auroras of Autumn" depicts Stevens's confrontation with a personal or poetic apocalypse.⁹ On this reading, the auroras themselves represent a kind of natural sublimity, which renders the poet awe-struck; this, and the persistent imagery of winter, reminds him of his declining poetic prowess. The only representation strategy available to him is the repeated askesis of the opening cantos, where a series of figurations of the auroras are set out before being curtly dismissed in favor of the next one: "Farewell to an idea..." This, at least, allows the poet the mobility to assay the phenomenon from a variety of angles.

But it may be precisely the shifting and amorphous nature of the threat and the poet's inability to definitively harness it in language that allows the poem to reflect its historical context. "Textualising" the Bomb became a pressing

⁸ Stevens, "The Auroras of Autumn," in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 359.

⁹ Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976), 256.

problem in the immediate aftermath of the Trinity test, on 16 June 1945, when details of the new weapon and its destructive force had to be relayed to President Truman and other military decision-makers. One of those to whom this task fell, Brigadier General Thomas Farrell, claimed that "words are inadequate tools for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical, mental and psychological effects it produced."¹⁰ Despite this invocation of the inexpressibility topos, Farrell nonetheless tried to encompass his experience with a barrage of adjectives: "unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying." And, striking a familiar tone in the annals of nuclear discourse, Farrell invoked a series of religious topoi, describing "the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty."¹¹ As Ken Ruthven notes, it is striking to witness an observer describe himself as "present at the birth of a new age—The Age of Atomic Energy"—while simultaneously "archaiz[ing]" to reproduce the voice of that much older theological opposition to 'forbidden' knowledge.¹² Thus the topos of Christian apocalyptic formed one of the main rhetorical means by which the development of the atomic bomb came to be textualised.

But Farrell's wrestle with the expressive limitations of language to capture "that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately" is only one facet of an effort to bring the mysteries of the atom into language that began much earlier. Farrell's eyewitness account bears all the hallmarks of that effort, especially in its deployment of the religious discourse of apocalyptic in an effort to convey the magnitude of the Bomb's power. As Ruthven has noted, the early atomic scientists and those who followed them were "obliged to mobilize themes and images from cultures so remote in time as to appear mythic and archetypal."¹³ Literary and religious discourses, in other words, have been redeployed in order to textualise the nuclear from the outset. One of the most glaring instances of this must be the first atomic test itself, the codename of which, "Trinity," was selected by J. Robert Oppenheimer in a direct allusion to John Donne's thirteenth Holy Sonnet: "Batter my heart,

10 Robert C. Williams and Philip L. Cantelon, eds. *The American Atom: A Documentary History of Nuclear Policies from the Discovery of Fission to the Present, 1939–1984* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 53.

11 Williams and Cantelon, *The American Atom*, 52–53.

12 Williams and Cantelon, *The American Atom*, 52; Ruthven, *Nuclear Criticism*, 33.

13 Ruthven, *Nuclear Criticism*, 19.

three-person'd God."¹⁴ Much can be inferred about the Los Alamos scientists' attitude to the Bomb from this choice. Perhaps most importantly, the poem emphasises self-abnegation and the dislocation of received modes of perception in order to apprehend transcendent realities.

In a similar vein, Oppenheimer famously expressed his reaction to the Trinity test by quoting the *Bhagavad Gita*: "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds."¹⁵ This invocation serves two aims at once: in content, it intimates the feeling of possessing near omnipotence. But as a quotation, it also assigns Oppenheimer's pronouncement, and by extension the work to which it refers, to an agency other than himself and his fellow scientists.¹⁶ Canaday speculates that this rhetorical move, common enough amongst the Los Alamos scientists and other physicists, is the kind of fiction designed to mitigate the ethical strain caused by the scientists' work. In the various pronouncements of the Los Alamos scientists, Canaday finds references that go beyond the Bible, John Donne, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, including Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, H.G. Wells, the Faust myth, and the letters of Christopher Columbus.¹⁷ This cacophony of voices produces a screen of allusion behind which authorial identity and agency vanishes. In doing so, it recalls nothing so much as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a poem whose title phrase takes on a new and prophetic poignancy in the nuclear age. The Los Alamos scientists could be said to be engaged in a variant of modernist citational practice, a textual version of the self-abnegation celebrated in Donne's poem.

The scientists, then, found themselves in a situation analogous with that of the speaker of "The Auroras of Autumn": in confrontation with forces whose magnitude seems to overwhelm their expressive capacities. One of the most troubling aspects of this early nuclear discourse is that, in its recourse to such a strange array of literary and religious topoi, it seems to undermine the special status sometimes attributed to scientific language, whereby it is presumed to offer unmediated access to the real. Instead, we find only chains of allusion produced by authorial figures in the act of constructing fictions. For Stevens, however, the effort to create consoling fictions is a typical, indeed, a necessary, human activity. It is the construction of these fictions in the context of the pervasive and diffuse fears of the nuclear age that I take to be the subject of "The Auroras of Autumn." In doing so, I am moving broadly within the

14 John Canaday, *The Nuclear Muse: Literature, Physics and the First Atomic Bombs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 201.

15 Cited in Canaday, *The Nuclear Muse*, 183.

16 Canaday, *The Nuclear Muse*, 188.

17 Canaday, *The Nuclear Muse*, 19.

parameters of an approach to Stevens suggested by Frank Kermode in *The Sense of and Ending*. Accepting Stevens's premise that we are story-telling creatures whose accounts of the world around us are ineluctably fictional, Kermode distinguishes between what he calls "fiction" and "myth." Whereas fictions maintain their self-awareness, their provisionality, and a sense of their nature as heuristics ("Farewell to an idea..."), myths are dangerous because they are ossified, and have lost the sense of their own limitations.¹⁸

This powerful distinction bears on nuclear discourse in important ways, most clearly in the case of its deployment of apocalyptic tropes. The science of nuclear apocalypse suggests that it ought to be conceived of as a world-ending catastrophe. But instead, nuclear scientists themselves have consistently deployed tropes that align nuclear technology with other types of apocalypse. One conception emphasises the revelation of hidden knowledge, as in Farrell's alignment of the atomic age with "blasphemy" and the usurpation of God's powers. Another is the almost Yeatsian rhetoric of the crisis that attends the transition from one era to the next, as in Farrell's description of the Trinity test as the birth of the "Atomic Age."¹⁹ Finally, there is the apocalypse rendered as a moment of personal crisis or revelation, as in Oppenheimer's figuration of the bomb as a route to self-transcendence. All are aspects of the Christian apocalyptic.

In Oppenheimer's fellow physicist Victor Weisskopf's memoir, *The Joy of Insight*, he describes the test in the following terms: "When the brightness subsided, we saw a blue halo surrounding the yellow and orange sphere, an aureole of bluish light around the ball."²⁰ Weisskopf reports that the bluish light, caused by ionising radiation released by the explosion, reminded him of Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, the right panel of which shows Christ rising up out of his tomb, surrounded by an enormous yellow aureola with a blue tinge on its outer edge (Figure 16.3).²¹ Weisskopf displays a higher

18 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 38.

19 The "birth of a new era" metaphor was also a feature of press reports surrounding the development of the atom bomb. The Manhattan Project and the Trinity test were revealed to the public the day after the bombing of Hiroshima, and the *New York Times* included on its front page an article headed "New Age Ushered," already describing nuclear energy as "a tremendous force for the advancement of civilization as well as for destruction." Sidney Shalett, "New Age Ushered," *New York Times*, 7 August, 1945.

20 Cited in Canaday, *The Nuclear Muse*, 196.

21 The semantic slippage apparent here from Christ's "aureola" to the bomb's "auroras" is obvious. Even before outer atmospheric testing of nuclear bombs made artificial auroras

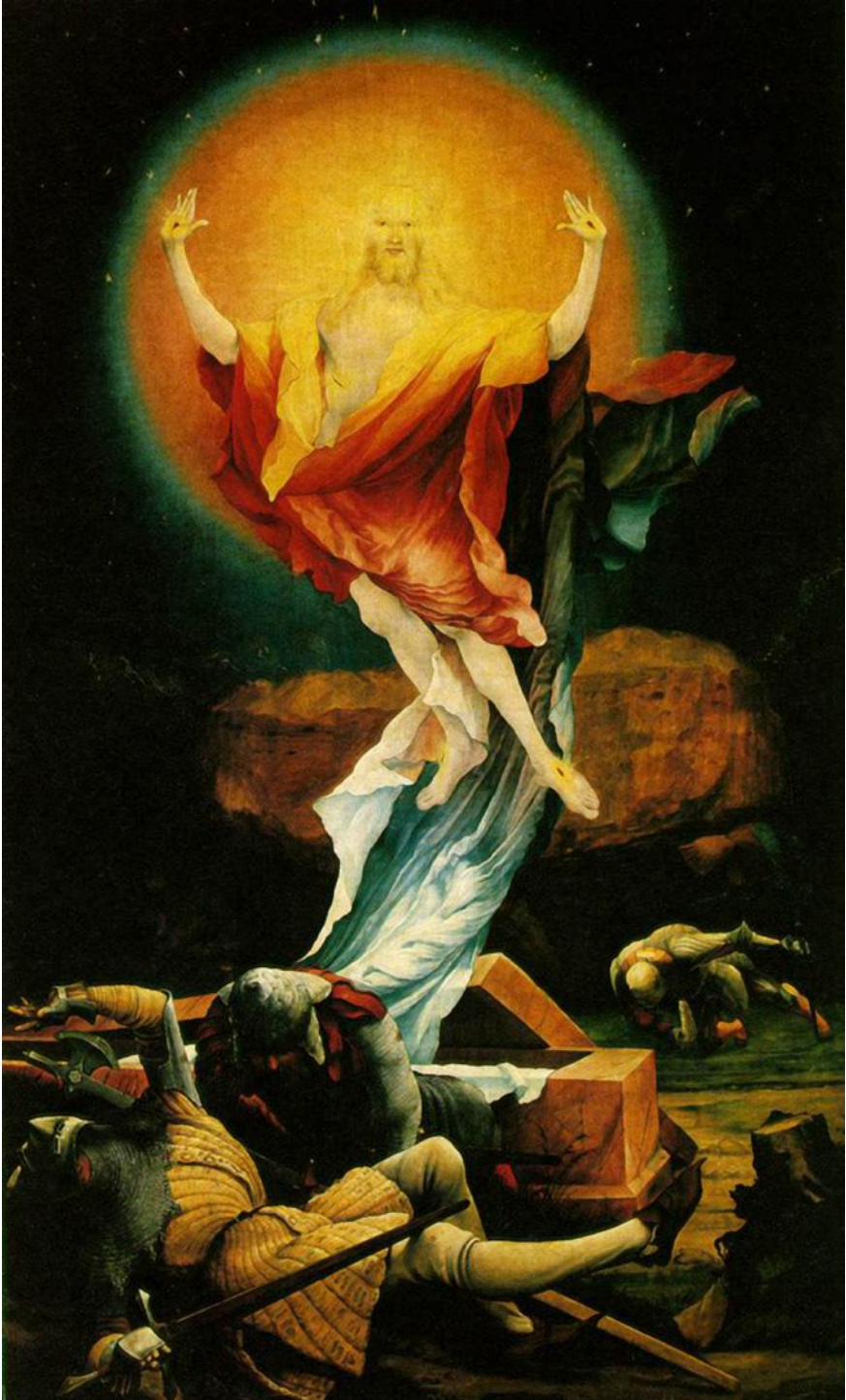


FIGURE 16.3 *Matthias Grünewald, Resurrection panel from the Isenheim Altarpiece, 1512–16, in the Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, Alsace*

degree of self-awareness than Oppenheimer, at least, by remarking: "The explosion of an atomic bomb and the resurrection of Christ—what a paradoxical and disturbing association!"²² But as we have seen, paradoxical and disturbing associations of this kind, whereby nuclear power becomes a portent of historical crises and transformations, runs throughout nuclear discourse. Indeed, it is implicit in the very application of the term "apocalypse" to the nuclear at all.

Thus we have some sense of the discursive context in which "The Auroras of Autumn" was written, and some indication of how the poem might function as a critique of that emerging discourse. But there is another aspect of nuclear discourse that bears on my reading of the poem: its frequent use of prophetic rhetoric. All eschatological discourse is, of course, prophetic insofar as it looks towards an event or events that are yet to arrive. Nuclearism, too, is taken up with hypothetical scenarios, and one of its chief fascinations is the sheer variety of doomsday scenarios envisaged under its aegis. It is fitting, then, that the association that prompted my own apocalyptic reading is based on an anachronism: whereas "The Auroras of Autumn" was first published in Winter 1948, the civil defence experiments took place in March 1953. In other words, there is no way for the images in my head to correspond with the images in Steven's head as he wrote those lines, nor with the images in the heads of the poem's contemporary readers. But despite my pious aspiration to be a good historicist, I've never quite managed to break the connection. Is it necessary to do so? Can good literary interpretation risk appearing to impute prophetic qualities to the text under discussion?

There is a certain historicist fundamentalism at work here, whereby setting limits to interpretive possibilities by emphasising the specific conditions of textual production ceases to be merely a heuristic device, and instead becomes a hermeneutic absolute. Instead, I would urge that we remain open to different modes of criticism, particularly those that emphasise thinking *with* a text, rather than treating it wholly as an object of critical dissection. The concept of prolepsis is useful here; while it usually refers to the foreshadowing of future events within the frame of a fictional narrative, we might also think of it as operating within the frame of history itself. This is particularly the case with representations of the nuclear, which form an almost inherently proleptic genre. Indeed, this was one of the central objects of study in the short-lived enterprise called "nuclear criticism."

visible over the Pacific in the 1960s, newspaper accounts of atomic explosions applied the term "aurora" to their fireballs. See "Pacific Aurora Laid to U.S. Bomb Test," *New York Times*, 16 November, 1958.

22 Cited in Canada, *The Nuclear Muse*, 196.

In 1984, a special issue of *Diacritics* announced the project of “Nuclear Criticism” with the proceedings of a colloquium at which the keynote was delivered by Jacques Derrida. Nuclear criticism, presupposing as it does a detailed account of the development of nuclear technology and weaponry, might seem like an intrinsically historicist field of enquiry. But in fact, it drew its inspiration largely from poststructuralism, and was displaced by the emergence of the new historicism in the mid 1980s. Derrida’s point is crucial to appreciating the special relevance of nuclearism to the deconstructive project, and vice versa: for most people living in the nuclear age, the bomb is only a notional entity, not something of which we are likely to have, or indeed to desire, any direct experience. The phenomenon of nuclear war, insofar as it exists, is “*fabulously textual*”; that is to say, “nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it.”²³ One consequence of this textuality is that politics and policymaking of the most consequential kind must deploy textual models with origins and covert assumptions of which participants in these discourses may not be fully conscious.²⁴ The disarmament campaigner and the war planner alike are motivated by visions of an imaginary future.

As such, both are implicated in the “concept and a discursive practice” of eschatology, which “has a textual tradition, a social history, and a logic which deserve to be recalled.”²⁵ In other words, nuclear criticism must approach “literary and nonliterary texts as constituents of historical discourses that are both inside and outside of texts”—precisely the words that Catherine Gallagher used to describe the new historicism.²⁶ What, then, might explain nuclearism’s failure to attract serious new historicist enquiry? For one thing, the humanities have tended to resile from claims like Derrida’s, that “We [scholars of the humanities] can therefore consider ourselves competent because the sophistication of the nuclear strategy can never do without a sophistry of belief and the rhetorical simulation of a text.”²⁷ For poststructuralism’s implicit claim of the primacy of texts, new historicism reasserts the primacy of historical conditions. But as we have seen from the example of the metaphors deployed by the

23 Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” *Diacritics* 14.2 Nuclear Criticism (Summer 1984), 23.

24 This point is made with special force in Richard Klein’s “The Future of Nuclear Criticism,” *Yale French Studies* 77 Reading the Archive: On Texts and Institutions (1990), 76–100.

25 “Proposal for a Diacritics Colloquium on Nuclear Criticism,” *Diacritics* 14.2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer, 1984), 2.

26 Catherine Gallagher, “Marxism and The New Historicism,” in H. Aram Veeseer (ed.), *The New Historicism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 37.

27 Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” 24.

Los Alamos scientists, nuclearism highlights the possibility of chains of causation that run through representations in determining ways. This outlook bears a strong affinity with Stevens's insistence on the inseparability of reality from human fictions, and adds context to the central question posed by "The Auroras of Autumn" about the adequacy of the poet's fictions in the face of overwhelming natural forces.

As I've pointed out, however, nuclear criticism is far from a going concern today. So why insist on this reading of the poem now, and in doing so disturb the dust on a bowl of Cold War anxieties? In part because the sense of narrative closure imparted by the collapse of the Soviet Union obscures the ongoing threat posed by nuclear weapons, in a world where the obsolescence of strategic stockpiles has paradoxically coincided with a slackening in the effort to dismantle them. In the specific context of literary criticism, the threat posed by nuclear weapons has been subsumed in the practice of literary criticism into the considerably more diffuse field of ecocriticism, a move that obscures the extent to which the contemporary apocalypticism of ecocatastrophe inherits many of its own images from the nuclear forebodings that preceded it.²⁸

As I mentioned earlier, one common interpretation of "The Auroras" sees them as an account of a personal apocalypse, the poet wrestling with his own waning imaginative powers. This is not to say that criticism has not recognised a broader sense of apocalyptic at work in the poem, but it has rarely ventured into specifics.²⁹ Readers of Stevens tend to "resist any suggestion of topicality," observes Charles Berger, "where only dark sublimity or generalized *angst* might reign."³⁰ Berger's *Forms of Farewell* offers the suggestion that the auroras in the poem might figure in a variety of ways for nuclear weaponry quite directly: "Gusts of great enkindlings," he rightly points out, "is a phrase that had great resonance in 1947, capturing the aerial terrors of the recent past as well as prefiguring a greater fire next time."³¹ Berger's observation resonates with the poem's fourth canto, which is redolent with Dante and particularly Milton's "war in heaven" trope. In one striking, synecdochic invocation, the poem turns over the idea of a deity who

28 Ruthven, *Nuclear Criticism*, 91.

29 See James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 289.

30 Charles Berger, *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 36.

31 Berger, *Forms of Farewell*, 47.

...measures the velocities of change.
 He leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly
 Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames.³²

This brief allusion affirms Suzanne Hobson's important observation that the Second World War prompted a sea-change in the reception of Milton: "For some of their critics, the first-stage modernists had been wilfully blind to the approaching catastrophe and never more so than when they dismissed the Miltonic tradition in English poetry."³³ G. Wilson Knight, for instance, declared *Paradise Lost* a "prefiguration" of "our own gigantic, and itself archetypal, world-conflict."³⁴ Berger and Knight are also engaging in styles of criticism that acknowledge the proleptic qualities of the texts under discussion.

But Berger's suggestion about "The Auroras of Autumn" drew an outright dismissal from no less an authority on Stevens than Alan Filreis. Yet Filreis's *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* was highly influential in the 1990s reappraisal of Stevens, which reoriented criticism of Stevens's poetry towards its embeddedness in real contexts; it is a little odd, then, to find Filreis declaring that Berger's reading of the poem fails.³⁵ All of this prompts the question of Stevens's directly expressed attitudes to the Bomb, or the lack thereof, and Filreis turns to an exchange between Stevens and his young Cuban correspondent José Rodríguez Feo. Despite Feo's direct reference to the nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, in his response to Feo, not strictly a reply, Stevens pointedly refuses to engage with this subject. Instead, he presses on with his usual set of concerns: his routine, his book collecting, and so on.³⁶ According to Filreis, "This image tells us a great deal about the poet of early modernism, who lived nine years into the nuclear age: a portly, well-dressed Wallace Stevens, striding obliviously above fall-out shelters, toting his precious copy of Marcel Schwob's *Imaginary Lives*."³⁷ The implication is that by the latter phase of his life, Stevens was so withdrawn into his world of routine comforts and exotic luxuries that the advent of the atomic bomb could not have registered strongly enough to enter into his poetry.

32 Stevens, "The Auroras of Autumn," in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 357.

33 Suzanne Hobson, *Angels of Modernism: Religion, Culture, Aesthetics 1910–1960* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 148.

34 Cited in Suzanne Hobson, *Angels of Modernism*, 148.

35 Alan Filreis, "Review of Charles Berger, *Forms of Farewell*," *New England Quarterly* 58.4 (1985), 631–633.

36 Wallace Stevens, *Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo*, ed. Alan Filreis and Beverly Coyle (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 191–192.

37 Filreis, "Review of Charles Berger," 631.

It is true that Stevens rarely mentions the atomic bomb directly, either in his prose or in his letters. But, *pace* Filreis, that reticence was hardly atypical; as most nuclear critics have noted, "Only in allusive and tentative ways does the atomic bomb begin to make its appearance in post-1945 American literature."³⁸ Hence the two-pronged approach of the *Diacritics* group: on the one hand "uncovering the unknown shapes of our unconscious nuclear fears," and on the other investigating how "the terms of the *current* nuclear discussion are being shaped by literary or critical assumptions whose implications are often, perhaps systematically ignored."³⁹ Nuclearism thus takes shape as a covert discourse as well as an overt one, demanding subtler hermeneutic tools and a more capacious understanding of literary reference than those allowed by strict kinds of historicism. So the question to be put to "The Auroras of Autumn" is, I claim, not the one addressed by Berger and Filreis, "do they or do they not refer to the atom bomb," but rather "how might the poem simultaneously draw on and contribute to a wider discourse of apocalypticism that continues to shape our understanding of midcentury American culture and much else besides?" Moreover, how can we think *through* and *with* "The Auroras" so as to better understand our own situation in the history of nuclearism?

In an important contribution to discussion of Stevens's politics, Paul Bauer describes Stevens's stance during the Cold War as a "politics of reticence," indeed, even a variant of Cold War liberalism.⁴⁰ But whereas Bauer links Stevens's political reticence, typical of his age and social class as well as expedient in the context of McCarthyism, with the "calculated obscurity of his later poetry," I want to conclude with the contention that Steven's late poetry offers both a counter-apocalyptic politics and a counter-apocalyptic poetics. As Bauer recognises, the key to Stevens's politics is his insistence on the persistence of the everyday even against the threat of catastrophe, and indeed of the everyday itself as the "vital center": "specific, contingent, local, individual, personal, and intimate."⁴¹ "The Auroras of Autumn," then, is engaged in measuring the adequacy of the various consoling fictions we have devised to cope with the nuclear threat. For instance, the fourth canto offers a sustained meditation on the idea of a fatherly, creator deity:

38 Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), xvii.

39 "Proposal for a Diacritics Colloquium," 2.

40 Paul Bauer, "The Politics of Reticence: Wallace Stevens in the Cold War Era," *Twentieth Century Literature* 39.1 (Spring 1993), 3, 28.

41 Bauer, "The Politics of Reticence," 3, 29.

Master O master seated by the fire
 And yet in space and motionless and yet
 Of motion the ever-brightening origin,

Profound, and yet the king and yet the crown,
 Look at this present throne. What company,
 In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?⁴²

A quotidian force like “the naked wind,” the poem seems to suggest, cannot or can no longer be made consonant—to “choir” with—the fiction of a creator deity. Humankind is responsible for the creation of its own fictions, a responsibility that rebukes the abnegations of the Los Alamos scientists with their religious rhetoric of transcendence and aesthetics of sublimity.

The strongest challenge to Stevens's cold war politics comes from James Longenbach, who argues that “Stevens dismantles the threat as if it were just one more of the mind's illusions, easily replaced by another [...] it depends on a faith in the power of ‘as if,’ sustained only by willed ignorance of the threat.”⁴³ But this outlook reverts to a pre-critical understanding of nuclearism, and discounts its discursive constructedness. Stevens memorably described simile as “the intricate evasions of as”; but the Los Alamos scientists are far more evasive on this score than is Stevens himself.⁴⁴ “Soldier, there is a war between the mind/And sky,” reads the final stanza of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” and in lines redolent of the Los Alamos scientists' awe at their own creation: “How simply the fictive hero becomes the real.”⁴⁵ Stevens's rigorous insistence on the imbrication of the imagination with reality makes him, in a sense, the ideal poetic interpreter of nuclearism. But his counter-apocalypticism is predicated upon its ability to assert the value of the everyday as a position apart from and counter to the master-narratives that threaten it from outside: “An ordinary day...does more for me than an extraordinary day,” he reports to Feo: “The bread of life is better than any soufflé.”⁴⁶ When Filreis argues that “‘Auroras’ is a poem about [the] relative safety” of home (and by extension the ordinary), he neglects that the ordinary of the poem is rendered spectral and uncanny, brought to light only by the apocalyptic threat insinuating itself within.

42 Stevens, “The Auroras of Autumn,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 358.

43 Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens*, 289.

44 Stevens, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 415.

45 Stevens, “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 351–352.

46 Stevens, *Secretaries of the Moon*, 192.

The counter-apocalyptic myth that Longenbach attributes to the poem, then, is in fact the one that the poem subjects to its most scabrous criticism in its concluding cantos, that of simply refusing the facts:

...in the idiom
Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth,
Not of the enigma of the guilty dream.

We were as Danes in Denmark all day long
And knew each other well, hale-hearted landmen,
For whom the outlandish was another day

Of the week, queerer than Sunday.⁴⁷

"Of what disaster is this the imminence," asks the poem soon after, articulating the question I have pursued throughout this paper. The prelapsarian world, the "idiom of an innocent earth," is now lost to us. The disaster, presumably the "it" of the following lines, is more likely to be engendered by "innocence" than averted by it:

It may come tomorrow in the simplest word,
Almost as a part of innocence, almost,
Almost as the tenderest and the truest part.⁴⁸

These lines conjoin the threat of annihilation with Stevens's characteristic scepticism towards the anti-modern modernism of the New Critics, the nostalgic agrarians whom Stevens satirises as "hale-hearted landmen."⁴⁹ The challenge is to live without prelapsarian myths, and to cope with the changed realities of everyday life in new ways.

This counter-apocalyptic politics of everyday life emerges as one of the major themes of Stevens's late masterpiece, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," which declares that "The serious reflection is composed/Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace."⁵⁰ For a poet frequently given to puns formed by splitting multisyllabic words, the "commonplace" is also literally the

47 Stevens, "The Auroras of Autumn," 362.

48 Stevens, "The Auroras of Autumn," 362.

49 Bauer, "Politics of Reticence," 20.

50 Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," 408.

“common place,” not the everyday as a philosophical abstraction, but the literal places in which our communal existence happens. In this sense, Filreis is right to note that when the scholar of one candle in “The Auroras of Autumn” “opens his door on flames,” he is doing so from within his home. The domestic plays host to all of the specific, contingent, local, and individual attachments that constitute the everyday; as “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” puts it:

A thing final in itself and therefore, good:
 One of the vast repetitions final in
 Themselves and, therefore, good, in the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
 Until merely going round is a final good,
 The way wine comes at a table in a wood.⁵¹

The sing-song rhyme at the end of these lines should not obscure the fact that Stevens is quite in earnest: the anti-utopianism that marks his later poetry is never more in evidence. The repetition that marks the everyday can be a final good to stand against the eschatological fantasies of politicians, technocrats, and ideologues.

It is only by asserting the positive value of the everyday as the central level of experience against the techno-political edifice of nuclearism that we can achieve a discursive standpoint free from its eschatological biases. Visions of the “end” that symbolise it in terms of renewal or revelation are manifestly inadequate to the nature of this particular threat. This becomes especially clear in the ghoulish detail of *Operation Doorstep*. Many of the houses that made up the so-called “bombtown” contained within them mannequins arranged in typical domestic poses, so that the investigators could gain some idea of the effect of a shock wave on occupants (Fig. 16.2). These images epitomise the stark contrast between the commonplace and the apocalyptic, and we are reminded of what is at stake in the possibility of nuclear war: the very continuity of the everyday that Stevens celebrates as “a final good.” Stevens’s poetry does not, as some critics have suggested, ignore the threat of catastrophe; rather, it models a form of quiet refusal to engage in an eschatological discourse already implicated in the nuclear threat.

51 Wallace Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 350.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Stevens, Wallace. *Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo*. Edited by Alan Filreis and Beverly Coyle. Durham: Duke University Press, 1986.
- . *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.

Secondary Sources

- Anon. "Proposal for a Diacritics Colloquium on Nuclear Criticism," *Diacritics* 14, No. 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer, 1984): 2–3.
- Bauer, Paul. "The Politics of Reticence: Wallace Stevens in the Cold War Era," *Twentieth Century Literature* 39, 1 (Spring 1993): 1–31.
- Berger, Charles. *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Bloom, Harold. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976.
- Boyer, Paul. *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- Canaday, John. *The Nuclear Muse: Literature, Physics and the First Atomic Bombs*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000.
- Derrida, Jacques. "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," *Diacritics* 14, 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer 1984): 20–31.
- Edelstein, J.M. *Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973.
- Filreis, Alan. "Review of Charles Berger, *Forms of Farewell*," *New England Quarterly* 58, 4 (December 1985): 631–635.
- Gallagher, Catherine. "Marxism and The New Historicism," in H. Aram Veveser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, 37–48. New York and London: Routledge, 1989.
- Hobson, Suzanne. *Angels of Modernism: Religion, Culture, Aesthetics 1910–1960*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Holloway, David. "Nuclear Weapons and the Escalation of the Cold War, 1945–1962," in Melvin P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume 1: Origins*, 376–397. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Klein, Richard. "The Future of Nuclear Criticism," *Yale French Studies* 77 Reading the Archive: On Texts and Institutions (1990): 76–100.

- Longenbach, James. *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- New York Times*. "Pacific Aurora Laid to U.S. Bomb Test," 16 November 1958.
- Ruthven, Ken. *Nuclear Criticism*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993.
- Shalett, Sidney. "New Age Ushered." *New York Times* 7 August 1945.
- Weart, Spencer. *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Williams, Robert C. and Philip L. Cantelon, eds. *The American Atom: A Documentary History of Nuclear Policies from the Discovery of Fission to the Present, 1939–1984*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984.