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 The breadth and meaning of historical reference in poetry is clearly at issue here.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:

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...

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. 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.

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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