“The Anthropocene” is a vague concept. It is unclear when it starts, and what it entails for us, whether as citizens or as scholars. In certain respects, the Anthropocene resembles an environment, or an atmosphere: we can’t draw a firm boundary around it that would define precisely when and what it is. Its margins are diffuse, fading into the histories, natural and human, that preceded it.

This paper examines some vague beginnings around 1800. I will discuss material drawn from a survey of four interlinking areas:

- disciplinary vagueness and meteorology, with Luke Howard;
- conceptual vagueness and the aesthetic, with Kant;
- medium vagueness and the picturesque, with William Gilpin; and,
- the vagueness of memory in Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey.

In each case, vagueness is understood in terms of atmosphere, and atmosphere in terms of vagueness.

Atmospheric vagueness is a distinctive Romantic cultural form—a cloudy language that allowed ideas to be stretched beyond the limits of the existing conceptual order. Gilpin called it “the scenery of vapour”: it blurred the distinction between the human and the non-human worlds. I read it as a vaporous dimension in the history of the Anthropocene.

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