History’s Atmosphere
The Matter of Air in the Enlightenment

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By the early eighteenth century, decades before the discovery of its constituent gases, air was recognized as mundane matter: heterogeneous and changeable, subject to human manipulation, the “subtle” substance of history rather than spirit. In James Thomson’s long locodescriptive poem The Seasons (1726-46), the atmosphere—the cyclic year, the world’s varied climes, the global circulation of wind—is the stable context in which history, “the rising world of trade,” unfurls. Yet Thomson also anticipates the modern energy regime and so another vision of history in which the atmosphere is not the context but the object of human action, a condition briefly disclosed in the moment of combustion, the energy-producing transformation of a solid into a gaseous vapor. Professor Menely suggests that the Romantic re-idealization of air—a naturalization of the evidently anthropogenic, a return to an idea of air as ethereal or auratic—underlies the challenges we face, in the Anthropocene, of learning, once again, to regard air as the matter of history.

A reception will follow the seminar.

This program is free and open to the public, but space is limited and registration in advance is required. Register online at:

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Organized by Timothy Campbell, University of Chicago; Lisa Freeman, University of Illinois at Chicago; John Shanahan, DePaul University; and Helen Thompson, Northwestern University.