

# Air: The Breath of Life

*The air realm is the world of archetypal ideas behind the veil of the physical world*

- Stephen Arroyo

Without air we are unable to access the oxygen we need for our breath of life. With no air, we would hear no sounds, the skies would always be black. Air's atmosphere safeguards our Earth, like a warm and protective blanket. Its nature is to circulate, to communicate, to be in motion. Yet, when a change is in the air, it can be calm and still. Air is essential to life on our planet and a significant part of other vital processes like water and carbon cycles; hence it has always been personified and honoured in all traditions and myths.

## ***Aerial Mythology***

In myth, air is embodied by the winds, which are changeable and fickle - the portent of change or the herald of a new season; often destructive and devastating, yet when harvested, can be an alternate power supply. Because of the importance of the winds, they were personified by many deities such as Boreas as the North Wind, Zephyrus as the West Wind, Eurus as the East Wind and Notus as the South Wind. When Zephyrus blew, he would usher in Spring and the atmospheric changes would initiate a new season. The winds were so important to the ancients that a monument known as the Tower of the Winds was erected in the Roman agora in Athens.



*The Tower of the Winds, Athens*



*A modern wind farm*

Still today we speak of the 'winds of change', especially in context of larger global or collective movements. Our expression 'something in the air', while referring to changing climatic conditions, is used frequently to express the certainty that change is inevitable. Air is unsettled, never static. We all welcome a 'breath of fresh air'.

In myth winds are both damaging and distressing, as well as helpful and necessary – they can keep us on track or blow us off course. On his journey home, Odysseys received a sack as a gift from Aelous, the divine keeper of the winds. In this bag all the stormy winds were contained to ensure Odysseys' safe passage home to Ithaca. With the wild winds restrained, he was better able to guide his ship on its homeward journey. However, his crew became suspicious of what was in the treasured sack that Odysseys safeguarded so attentively. This curiosity compelled them to tear open the sack to identify its contents. But in the mayhem, the ravaging winds escaped and blew the ship and its crew in the opposite direction they intended to sail. Odysseys was blown off course. In this short episode from the *Odyssey* many of the images of Air are identified: hospitality, restlessness, disquiet, destruction, duality, inquisitiveness, unexpected change and conflict.

Weather, especially air and wind, in early medicine were associated with the origin of certain ailments and conditions. Today certain winds like the monsoon, mistral, chinook and foehn can herald a sudden

change in the atmosphere and effect health and wellbeing. Air is associated mainly with mental wellbeing; however, this also impacts the physical constitution, especially the nervous system, breathing and mobility. Air also symbolizes what circulates and travels through its element, such as the flight of birds or planes, emails, long-distance communication, as well as airborne diseases such as flus and viruses.

Heaven or Sky was the domain of the early air gods, who were mainly masculine, separated from the Earth, distant and aloof from the secular world. In Greek myth, Ouranus was the primal god of Heaven, a perfectionist and disengaged god who separated himself from the mundane spheres of life. Air can be aloof, disembodied, disconnected and perfection-orientated like Ouranus. As a symbol air is often identified with masculine values of heaven, ideas, ideals and intellect. Air desires social contact and through its capacity to communicate and commune, it can express its warmth and connectivity.

Air is integral to the motif of flight and in myth - magical flight. Myths of magical flight encapsulate air's tendency to be lofty with perfected thoughts, as well as the urge to escape the earthly incarnate realms for a more idealized and discarnate world. These flights were characterized in various ways, such as: the attempt to reach heaven (Pegasus and Bellerophon, Phaeton, Icarus); to conquer the dark feminine (Perseus and the Gorgon); or as a messenger between the various realms of the gods (Hermes). Bellerophon rode the winged horse Pegasus into the airy realm of the gods. With wings of wax, Icarus flew as high as he could before the Sun melted his wings and he crashed-landed in the Aegean. Phaeton stole the chariot of the Sun and tried to ride it across the heavens, resulting in his fall from heaven like Icarus. Perseus was able to fly when Hermes lent him his magic sandals. Symbolic of air is its urge to fly higher, to reach its ideal of heaven.



*Lament for Icarus* by AJ Draper (1898)

But air's fanciful thinking can become inflated, over idealized or ungrounded. Our language reflects this propensity of air in the phrases 'putting on airs' and 'castles in the air'. Being an element so closely aligned with communication, words, similes and analogies, air appears in many idioms. For instance, the phrase 'blowing hot and cold' reflects air's penchant for changing its mind, while 'up in the air' suggests its indecisiveness. As a symbol, air is multivalent.

## *Astrological Air*

The astrological trinity includes Gemini, Libra and Aquarius, a triumvirate of air signs compatible, at least theoretically, with the sphere of relationship, its astrological domain. Air is constantly seeking its other half through the process of relating. Air may not be the element we would first ascribe to relationship as it can be separate, non-attached and distant; however, through each air sign we encounter the motif of searching for a soul mate, or an equal other through the mirror of relationships. In Gemini, this is the sibling; in Libra, the partner; in Aquarius, the friend.

The three air signs are represented either as humans (the twins of Gemini and the water bearer of Aquarius) or an inanimate object (the scales of Libra). The three signs can be characterized as follows:

- ♊ GEMINI is the air of the intellect and communication, the changeable breezes, constantly in motion, changing its mind and direction. It is the endless search for its missing twin, the love of ideas, airwaves, books, magazines and gadgets. A guide, a sibling, a childhood friend, a classmate, a cousin, a neighbour
- ♎ LIBRA is the air of balanced wisdom and justice; the high winds that precede the stillness, or the calm just before the storm. It is the love of classical beauty, of harmony, of music and art and poetry and museums, spaces where we meet the muse of beauty. A partner, a close friend, a cooperative effort, an open enemy
- ♒ AQUARIUS is fixed air, the air of opinion and inspiration, the cold electric air of winter or the still suffocating humidity of summer air. It is bright, intellectual, non-traditional, the love of Platonic ideals, a lover of humanity and ideas that change the way we conceptualize our world. A friend, a colleague, a politically ally, a peer, a compatriot

The element of air embraces duality and consciousness. All air signs are symbolic of the process of linking, connecting, bridging, as well as separation, duality and polarity. All airy symbols include the quest for relationship, other-ness, two-ness, the need for judgment and balance of ideas, as well as the delivering and receiving of messages. Air is concerned with communication, the fostering of ideas and the development of language, links to others, and the process of relating. Air learns quickly and is able to think abstractly. Being rational in its approach to life, it can be fearful of irrationality and the unconscious, remaining objective about life's mysteries. To understand their nature, air individuals need to converse openly about their feelings, even if it does not make sense to them. Talking it through helps them to feel; then they go silent.

Air's quest for culture and its identification with ideas, communication, refinement, balance, equality and community suggests that the primitive and instinctual spheres of nature are where the shadow is located. When Air is emphasized, the tension between instinct and intellect is highlighted, which may be embodied by an individual in the environment or a current contradiction within themselves. The air element is the spectator, not always the participant, the messenger but not necessarily the message. However, air encourages equality, individuality and consciousness, which are necessary in relationship. Astrologically, this is represented by air preceding water in the zodiac suggesting the importance of separateness before merger can take place. It is natural for air to want to share its ideas and experiences.

Air encourages enough separateness to relate to someone different or unfamiliar. Separateness and symbiosis, two polar instincts that underlie life are continuously balanced by this element. Air's developmental process is separation. With separation comes consciousness of the other. It is this dichotomy of separateness and awareness of other that keeps the air flowing in relationships.

Like all elements, air needs relationship. It is comfortable with the issues of equality, sharing and the theory of relatedness, but has difficulty in the sphere of intimacy and emotional constancy. With air it is natural to experiment with a range of possibilities in relationship, satisfying the curiosity and inquisitiveness that are natural. These types need a great amount of space, emotionally, physically and psychologically, before they are comfortable enough 'settling down'. The ability to change is natural, and without enough space air feels stifled and unable to breathe, increasing the levels of anxiety. Communication on all levels within relationship is important, and while air attempts to be

clear and articulate, it is often emotionally very unclear and inarticulate, acting covertly rather than in an emotionally honest or direct way.

Air's inquiring and interactive manner can be mistaken for a deeper emotional or more intimate interest. The defensive side of air uses detachment and separateness as a barrier against relationship, mobilizing the intellect to criticize the irrationality of emotional encounters. Constantly questioning relationship is their defence against the uncertainty and lack of control that the actual experience of relating brings. The defence mechanism most easily employed by the air temperament is projection, finding their best 'hooks' to be siblings, partners and friends.

Air conjures up the image of a witty, gregarious, charming and insightful individual; however, their twin might be a flighty, aloof person who obscures other's ideas. This darker side can often be superficial or fearful of what lies below the surface because their ideas and theories have created a safe cover. By challenging assumptions, identity is threatened, especially when the self becomes identified with fixed concepts. Air is the element of perspective and distance; therefore, its ability to detach can often be very useful to defend an individual's feeling and interior life. While air needs to be fair, just and studied, it may also vacillate on important decisions, avoiding identifying contentious issues.

Astrologically the element of air is highlighted in 2021 as Jupiter and Saturn have just entered the sign of Aquarius where they have initiated their new 20-year cycle. These two planets conjoin every twenty years following the pattern of the elements. This sequence of conjunction in the element of air lasts for the next 200 years and this shift is known as the Great Mutation. Both being social signs the element of Air becomes featured sociologically and culturally for the next two centuries.

### ***Imbalance***

When air is over developed the thinking function may dominate, heavily reliant on perceiving the world through the mental faculties. Logic, rationale and thinking one's way through life's situations are emphasized. At the extreme end of the spectrum, this could suggest an eccentric with odd views or conspiracy theories. They may be out of touch with their feelings, their moods, even their physical body. Constantly attempting to rationalize and judge their feelings might lead to emotional excesses or mood swings. An over emphasis of air would tax the nervous system leading to a 'nervous' or 'anxious' temperament - an individual who lives in their head, disconnected from the feeling realm and unable to emotionally engage with others.

With little air, individuals may not be able to reflect on life or detach from highly volatile or emotional situations, being continuously swayed by their feelings. They may feel unable to break patterns or get enough distance or space to be objective and considered. A lack of air in a chart could suggest a lack of boundary with feelings or being swamped by feelings and overwhelmed by others' psychic life, unable to maintain appropriate boundaries.

### ***Tarot Air***

Air, the principle of *logos* or intellect is aligned with the suit of Swords. Swords are instruments able to cut through the complexity of any entanglement to clarify and resolve. However, they are also instruments that wound. Double-edged, they portray both the destructive and constructive sides of power. We have already met the Sword on the Magician's table, along with the other elements, as well as with Justice. Swords are aligned with justice as its function is to separate good and evil and penalize the guilty. In the Celestial Tarot Mars, a deity often aligned with swords, is holding one and striking down the Tower. Swords are powerful icons often used as an emblem of kingship or a warrior symbol. Knights especially are identified with defending the forces of good, which highlights the Knight of Swords as a personification of air's changing direction and champion of fairness. Therefore the suit is interlaced with themes of strength and courage as well as power and authority.

Throughout the suit, swords may be raised, crossed, left behind, gathered up – even the sword of Damocles is evoked. They can be used to cut through tangled knots, make a clean cut, discriminate and convince. But they also conjure feelings of despair, endings and at times, death; that is as a symbol



of psychological death. Yet due their double sidedness, the underlying opposites of hope, beginnings and rebirth are inherent.

Since the suit of Swords is affiliated with Air, it is not surprising that ‘word’ is embedded in sword, referencing the power of speech to confirm or criticize, to support or berate. Swords symbolize *The Word*, the power of words as well as the penetrating power of the mind and thinking function. Swords symbolize the ability to penetrate and often this can be through arguments, an inspiring lecture, a passionate speech or a judgment.

When Swords are emphasized in a spread there can be tension between the instinct and the intellect, as Air focuses on being separate and conscious. Throughout this suit we are engaged with abstraction and duality, born out of Sword’s quest to both understand and conceive life. Swords symbolize the cutting edge of the intellect and when overemphasized might point to misusing the power of the word, or when balanced are like the magician’s sword, carefully balancing the intellect and the feeling. The Swords are populated with ‘thinking, or ‘air’ types - those who seek the answer through the intellect, information and knowledge.



In the Celestial Tarot the journey through the Swords begins with the constellation of Crucis, the Southern Cross. Like a cross, swords have a blade and a handle referencing crossed purposes, which we will meet throughout the course of the Swords.

**THE ACE OF SWORDS: Crucis**

Initiating the journey into Swords is Crucis or Crux commonly known as the Southern Cross. In antiquity these four stars were part of Centaurus. From the sacred ground of Chiron, the celestial cross evolved into its own star pattern. The sword emerges from the heavenly cross, an ancient symbol of the Earth, depicting consciousness becoming separate from the body or instincts. Clarity and discrimination are necessary, as a new pattern is constellating and the old order is being questioned. When this card appears, new strategies emerge to birth a progressive way of understanding the current situation.

*from the Celestial Tarot by Brian Clark and Kay Steventon*

Minor Arcana	Astrological Harmonic	Constellation	Decanate		Decan Ruler
ACE	Conjunction	Crucis	Cardinal	1st Libra	Venus
2	Opposition	Lupus		2nd Libra	Uranus
3	Trine	Corona		3rd Libra	Mercury
4	Square	Pisces Australis	Fixed	1st Aquarius	Uranus
5	Quintile	Pegasus		2nd Aquarius	Mercury
6	Sextile	Cygnus		3rd Aquarius	Venus
7	Septile	Lepus	Mutable	1st Gemini	Mercury
8	Semi-Square	Canis Major		2nd Gemini	Venus
9	Novile	Canis Minor		3rd Gemini	Uranus
10	Element		Air		

**THE TWO OF SWORDS: Lupus**

Lupus, the Wolf, illustrates the polarity of the Two of Swords. Known as a wild beast in many cultures, the classical Greeks saw Lupus as the animal Chiron offered as a sacrifice at Ara, the altar. Symbolically the wolf represents the savage or primitive feelings being offered to the gods. Two swords suggest conflict or crossed purposes; however, the mythic underpinnings of the card suggest the need to sacrifice the instinctual and reactionary responses for a more balanced and reflective approach.

**THE THREE OF SWORDS: Corona**

In the *Celestial Tarot* the ancient northern constellation of the Corona Borealis, the crown of Ariadne, represents the Three of Swords. Ariadne betrayed her family to help her lover Theseus, but her heart was broken when he abandoned her. In the midst of her deepest grief her true soul mate, the god Dionysus, materialized to crown her. While a painful separation has occurred, Ariadne finds reconciliation through mourning. When this card appears it suggests that love and loss are intertwined and to experience true love, loss and grief must also be acknowledged.

**THE FOUR OF SWORDS: Pisces Australis**

Below the water bearer of Aquarius lies the Southern Fish drinking the waters being dispensed from the urn. The card is the first decanate of Aquarius and the fish symbolizes the vessel for this eclectic, highly charged energy. While the nature of this watery creature is at odds with Aquarian ideals the card is suggesting it is time digest what has passed. Through reflection, retreat and introversion energies can coalesce into a more coherent and organized plan. Meditative time is needed to assimilate the disconnected threads left hanging after a stressful and pressurized period.

**THE FIVE OF SWORDS: Pegasus**

From the severed head of the Gorgon Medusa, the winged horse Pegasus was born. Released from the curse Athena had placed upon his mother, Pegasus accepted his place on Olympus. Underpinning the myth is the conflict between Athena's rational intellect and Medusa's vulnerability. Similarly, the astrological correspondences of Mercury and Aquarius suggest far-sightedness and enlightened perceptions, however these may also eclipse feelings of uncertainty and resignation. The card suggests that clarity of thought emerges out of a difficult situation when darker feelings of conflict or a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty have been acknowledged.

**THE SIX OF SWORDS: Cygnus**

A complex cross cultural symbol, the swan also appears as a celestial image in the constellation of Cygnus. In the guise of a swan Zeus ravaged Leda and fathered the beautiful Helen and the twins Castor and Pollux. The swan is also sacred to Venus who is associated with the card as the ruler of the last decan of Aquarius. Alchemically the swan was emblematic of fleet-footed Mercury. Together they suggest the union of minds, the resolution of conflict or the ease of mental tension. Like a swan gliding across a lake, the card augurs a more harmonious journey across troubled waters.

**THE SEVEN OF SWORDS: Lepus**

Although Lepus has been identified as a variety of images throughout different cultures its contemporary name of the Hare has been known since Ptolemy. As Lunar creatures, hares have been associated with both the Moon and the Great Mother, sacred to Hecate the mistress of the crossroad and goddess of thresholds. As the first decan of Gemini, Lepus reminds us of the trickster side of the hare and its ability to dash in and out of the nocturnal shadows, vanishing then reappearing. When the card appears, it suggests the time to use intelligence, wit and cunning in a current situation.

**THE EIGHT OF SWORDS: Canis Major**

Larger of the two heavenly hunting dogs of Orion, this constellation includes the bright star Sirius whose heliacal rising ushered in the heat of the 'dog days'. The Greeks alternately saw it as a hound of Orion or Actaeon, even Cerberus the hound of Hades or Maera the faithful guide that led Erigone to her father's buried corpse. The Egyptians also associated Anubis their guide to the underworld with Sirius. Hence the card recollects both the hunting hound and the underworld guardian. Psychologically it reveals guarding an unconscious position that can be reversed through conscious self-exploration.

**THE NINE OF SWORDS: Canis Minor**

As the smaller of the two dogs Canis Minor rises first. While the Greeks did not name this star group the Arabs linked the constellations together in their legend of two sisters, one who eloped abandoning the other, a motif consistent with Uranus, the archetype of separation, and Gemini, the sibling. A split has occurred. Uranus is also symbolic of awakening therefore the card suggests an alternate vantage point to feeling disconnected. Duality and separateness constellate anxiety even panic,

however the appearance of the 'lesser dog' serves as the guide to healing the feelings of isolation and injury.

**THE TEN OF SWORDS: The Winds of Change**

Unpredictable and fickle, yet often forerunners of change, the four winds influence this card. Blowing from different directions each allows a different perspective of the centre suggesting the importance of looking at the current situation from all sides. Without air we cannot breathe; we are suffocated, smothered. Therefore it is time to breathe new energy into your social circle separating from those who no longer give you space to be yourself. On an oracular level the card suggests the winds of change clear the horizon so the future direction can be viewed more clearly.