

5-11-1998

A Study of Dante's Paradiso: Canto 23

Amy Elizabeth Greenbaum

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.lsu.edu/honors_etd



Part of the [Italian Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Greenbaum, Amy Elizabeth, "A Study of Dante's Paradiso: Canto 23" (1998). *Honors Theses*. 555.
https://repository.lsu.edu/honors_etd/555

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Ogden Honors College at LSU Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact ir@lsu.edu.

Senior Thesis Project:
A study of Dante's Paradiso: Canto 23

Amy Greenbaum
May 11, 1998
Dr. Robert McMahon

Amy Greenbaum

Thesis

May 11, 1998

Dr. McMahon

Canto 23 of Dante's Paradiso is second in a seven canto sequence in which Dante spends time in the heaven of the Fixed Stars and, more specifically, in his natal sign of Gemini. Dante first arrives in Gemini fairly late in canto 22 and upon this arrival, he invokes Gemini as though it were his muse, for he knows this constellation in the Zodiac is the source of his intellect. Beatrice then gives him instructions which are to prepare Dante for the spectacular event which will soon occur in canto 23: "look down and see how vast a universe / I have... put beneath your feet, / *so that your heart... / may greet that host of the Triumphant*" (22.128-131, *emphasis*).

As a result of this insinuation that Dante will soon witness "that host of the Triumphant," (22.131) canto 23 begins in anticipation of the triumph of Christ. The excitement and anxiety felt by Beatrice at this time is expressed through a detailed and tender simile in which she is compared to a mother-bird anxious for sunrise so that she may go and find food to nourish her young. Even though he is unaware of what is coming, Dante shares in her anxiety, as well, and with curiosity, he begins to stare up at the heavens in eager expectations. His wonder is sated quickly, however, as Christ soon appears exalted in triumph. This vision of Christ, though beautiful, is too brilliant for Dante's eyes and he, disappointedly, is forced to avert his glance. Beatrice comforts him, though, explaining that he is witnessing the power and wisdom of Christ, which none can endure. With this vision and explanation, Dante's mind is now so full with the knowledge

of Divine Love, Power, and Wisdom that it expands until his mind finally breaks its mortal bounds.

This scene is significant because it illustrates that Dante's experience of witnessing Christ in triumph has allowed Dante to grow spiritually. This growth is affirmed when Beatrice instructs Dante to gaze directly into her smile which, up to the present, has been too powerful for Dante's meager vision. Awe-struck by this glorious and ineffable image, Dante becomes fixated and stares too long at her smile. Beatrice then rebukes Dante for this straying from the vision of the glory of Christ and the heavenly hosts. Consequently, Dante again turns to the "battle of the light" and in doing so, he witnesses Mary in triumph (23.78). In the midst of this triumph, Mary is encircled by a ring of flames, which is revealed in canto 32 to be the angel Gabriel. This halo is to accompany Mary during her ascent into the Empyrean, the home of the heavenly host. Dante attempts to observe her journey, but his eyes are not yet strong enough to behold the realm of God. Therefore, as the canto closes, Dante is left to anticipate the remainder of his journey in the company of the Heavenly Host, who are still reaching up to Mary as a hungry infant would reach to its mother.

Obviously, the focus of this canto lies in the triumph of Christ. As a result, it is important to study the significance of this event before attempting to address any thematic or structural patterns within the canto. The triumph appears to mirror Christ's entrance into the physical world. In order to save mankind, Christ abandons the perfections of heaven and proceeds into time, alone, to become man. During his time on earth, Christ acquires a devout following of disciples whose souls are fulfilled and whose hearts are enlightened by His words and by the love of God. After his crucifixion and Resurrection,

though, Christ must leave not only these disciples, but he leaves his mother Mary in the care of these men as well.

Here, in this scene, Christ leaves his father's side and enters time, only now, he arrives accompanied by the "host of the blessed who were, so to speak, 'harvested' out of time..."(Singleton, 373). Here, however, the "host of the blessed," which later proves to include Peter, James, John, and Adam, does not appear in bodily form as on earth (Singleton, 373). This image is reminiscent of a passage in Augustine's Confessions where Augustine describes the choosing of certain "holy ones": "After this, you enkindled certain lights in the firmament, your holy ones, possessing the word of life and shining with ... authority of their spiritual gifts" (XIII, 34). The purpose of this descent into the physical universe is so Christ can provide Dante with similar grace as his earthly disciples. It is also in this scene, that Christ ascends to Heaven leaving behind his mother, Mary, who, instead of feeling devastation over the loss of her son, is now perceived in triumph and is soon allowed to follow her son to the Empyrean.

The significance of this triumph and the imagery of Christ, the sun, illuminating his devout followers, the stars, seems to dictate the reason why this event occurs in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars. However, Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez supplement this reasoning with the fact that in bringing Christ into Gemini, Dante is actually placing the sun in Gemini as it was at the time of his birth (Durling and Martinez, 242).¹

Scholarship has often studied the descent-ascent or procession and return pattern illustrated by this triumph. Even though this pattern occurs at every new planet Dante and Beatrice visit when souls come down from the Empyrean to greet them and then ascend to the Empyrean once more, the pattern found in canto 23 is distinctive because it is Christ

and Mary who descend. This paper, however, will not focus in general on that pattern, rather on the pattern of action within the canto that is not only described by the canto, but is also inscribed in the canto through a circular and chiasmic sequence of images.² The action of the canto follows a chiasmic or circular pattern. Through studying the correlations between this pattern and astronomical movements as well as the theological theme of salvation through a procession and return, the significance of this canto can be set in relation to the rest of the poem as it is revealed to be a prefigurement of Dante's salvation. Certain significant themes existing within this canto will also be examined as they too foreshadow events yet to come. This foreshadowing is due to the presence of Christ and Mary within the canto as Dante will soon face a similar scene when he enters the Empyrean. Therefore, not only because of the presence of Christ and Mary, but also because of the foreshadowing of Dante's final meeting with Christ and his subsequent salvation, this canto appears to be a transitional canto which brings Dante's reader into the last phase of the Commedia.

This argument unfolds in three sections. In the first part, I explain the chiasmic pattern of action within the canto. The second part strengthens and illuminates the explanation of the pattern as it is in this section that I explore the astronomical and theological themes which reveal the relevance of the pattern to the Commedia as a whole. Finally, in the third section, I show how the particular themes and images within this canto prefigure those which will appear again when Dante faces Christ, Mary, and the Heavenly Host for the last time on this journey.

I

With this understanding of the basic structure and meaning of canto 23, the chiasmic or circular pattern of this canto can now be examined. Chiasmus is a linguistic pattern which can be illustrated as **-A-B-C-B-A-** : In this pattern, each set of matching letters represents a pair of parallel themes and the unique letter (**C**) signifies the central point or theme in the pattern. Consequently, it appears that texts following this pattern will begin and end with parallel themes(**A—A**) with at least one other set of reflective themes between the start and finish (**A—B—B—A**). The single central point or theme is what separates these parallel ideas and as a result the entire pattern can be represented as a circular one. (See Fig. 1)

Within the framework of canto 23, seven movements work to form this pattern. There is an initial group of three movements followed by an intermediary or central movement and, finally, there is a concluding group of three movements which, in following the chiasmic pattern, parallel the initial group of three. The structure can, therefore, be expressed as **-A-B-C-D-C-B-A-**. (See Fig. 2).

The first important image of this pattern occurs at the commencement of the canto with Beatrice being compared to a mother-bird. This tender simile instills in the reader a sense of Beatrice's maternal feelings toward Dante and it is also highly effective in creating a suspenseful atmosphere. The image is of a mother-bird protecting her young in the blinding darkness of the night, while anxiously awaiting the sun so that she can feed her hungry child. However, Dante's soul is to be nourished rather than his body.

This maternal anticipation also provides for the second movement of the canto as it awakens Dante's child-like curiosity and he, consequently, looks toward heaven excited at the opportunity of witnessing an event so magnificent that it has never before been seen through mortal eyes.

The excitement of both mother and child is placated as the heavens quickly grow brighter and the awe-inspiring Triumph of Christ begins to take place. This marks the start of the third and final movement of the initial group of three. However, this particular event is best understood when broken into four stages. (see Fig. 2) First, the Triumph is introduced to the reader as well as to Dante when Beatrice directs our attention to it with the words, "Behold the hosts/ of Christ in triumph, and see all the fruit/ harvested from the turning of these spheres" (23.19-21). Second, Dante is still unable to witness Christ in his full glory and is consequently forced to describe the singular light of Christ through an analogy which illustrates how this light illuminates the myriad of surrounding souls. The only thing that Dante is able to associate with this glorious vision is the moon lighting the stars and he reveals this to his reader with an allusion to Trivia illuminating "the eternal nymphs"(23.26) Third, soon after this allusion, Dante finds himself confronted with the overwhelming brilliance of the light of Christ. The glow from this triumphant vision is so bright that Dante cannot yet endure it and he must avert his eyes.

Fourth, Beatrice soothes his disappointment when she instructs Dante to look into her face for he is now ready to endure the beauty and power of her smile. This moment has been highly anticipated throughout Paradise as illustrated when Dante arrives in the sphere of Mars earlier in the Paradiso in canto 14. Upon catching a brief glimpse of Christ's face on the cross of the martyrs and crusaders and hearing the glorious melody of

praise, Dante says that nothing could be as beautiful. He is quick to correct himself, however, saying that “forgetting as it were, those lovely eyes,/ the source of bliss in which my gaze finds rest,/ ... and since/ I had not turned to look at them as yet,/ one must excuse me...”(14.131-136). Also adding to the anticipation of this moment is that throughout all of Saturn, Beatrice cannot smile because her beauty grows with every step and if she does not temper her radiance, Dante would not be able to withstand its power.

This anxiously awaited experience also provides for the central portion of this pattern which is actually a stop-action. This pause in the movement of the action occurs because Dante finds himself unable to describe the perfection of her smile. The beauty of this spiritually unblemished soul’s smile is beyond words. Dante is amazed by the experience and, in an attempt to escape blame for this lack of description, he reminds the reader that he is only mortal.

Ineffability has posed problems throughout this canticle especially when trying to describe Beatrice’s beauty. This is previously exemplified while he is in Mars in canto 18, for the love in Beatrice’s eyes frees him from all longing and fills him with joy. This is all the reader can be told of this event because, as Dante says, the power and grace of what he sees in her eyes is “too much to be retold”(18.9). This particular episode of ineffability is clearly a sign of Dante’s growth, as he can now face a new level of grace, beauty, and perfection without having to turn away from its brilliance.

The first movement of the final group, reminds the reader that, despite this newly acquired strength of sight, Dante’s journey is not yet complete. Following the chiastic pattern, however, the three movements to come occur in an opposite order than the initial three movements in order to parallel them. (See Fig. 2) With these movements Dante will,

figuratively speaking, climb up the ladder that he just climbed down. Consequently, this first movement will parallel the final movement of the initial group which means that it can best be understood in four phases.

In the first of these phases, Beatrice rebukes Dante saying, “[w]hy are you so enamored of my face/ that you do not turn to the lovely garden/ flowering in the radiance of Christ?” (23.70-72) Beatrice’s dismay with Dante’s infatuation of her beauty, though this parallels her instructions to look into her face, seems to be a revocation of the privilege. However, Beatrice only wants Dante to realize that it is the light of Christ which has provided him with this strengthened sight and he should, therefore, witness more of Christ’s glory instead of fixating on her beauty.

Dante is naturally eager to obey Beatrice’s wise advice and in the second phase of this movement, he once again subjects his eyes to the “battle of the light” emanating from the garden of Christ. (23.78) This idea of struggling or fighting a battle to see the brilliant triumph parallels the third phase in the first group when Dante, in looking at the triumph, loses the battle and must turn away. His description of this Garden of Christ provides for the third phase of this movement. Christ has lifted himself on high so that Dante may observe the fruits of heaven and consequently when Dante sees this garden, it appears just as earlier when upon Christ’s arrival, Dante saw the myriad of souls lit by one source. The Garden seems to be lit from above by a single ray of Divine Love. The lighting of these souls is not compared, however, to the moon and stars as before. Rather, Dante alludes to a ray of sun breaking through the clouds to light and nourish “ a field of flowers.” (23.181).

In the fourth and final phase of this movement, the focus of the canto turns to Mary when Dante sees her triumphant, crowned by a ring of flames that is to accompany her on her journey back to her son. This image obviously parallels the triumph of Christ while at the same time, it prepares for the images of maternity which are necessary to complete this circular pattern.

The parallels between this movement which portrays the triumph of Mary and its counterpart in the first group which illustrates the triumph of Christ, are now evident as each triumph is divided into four phases of action which are reflective of each other. As is to be expected of this circular pattern, the second movement in the initial group, that of looking up to the heavens in anticipation of Christ's descent, must have a parallel in the concluding group as well. Here again, there is a shift from the image of Christ to an image of Mary as the second movement of this group commences with Mary's ascent to the Empyrean. As Mary begins her journey home, Dante attempts to follow her with his eyes up to her destination, the Empyrean, with the hopes of catching a glimpse of this most perfect of all realms. Yet, again, because Dante's eyes are still not strong enough to witness this glorious realm, he finds that his eyes cannot follow her all the way up to the Empyrean. Consequently, Dante is left looking towards the heavens in anticipation.

The final movement of not only this group of movements, but also of this pattern, parallels the premier movement of the pattern and in doing so it provides the proper closure for this chiasmic pattern. The image is one of maternity. As seen in the very first movement, Beatrice is compared to a mother-bird longing to feed her child and as already explained, she is yearning to feed Dante's soul rather than his body. Consequently, this image of Beatrice can be seen as a representation of spiritual motherhood. Here in this,

the final movement, the maternal imagery is given during Mary's ascension, as the souls of the Heavenly Host sing out her name and reach up to her as a hungry infant reaches to its mother. The correlation between the two exists in that both this image and that of Beatrice suggest the dependence of a child upon his mother for nourishment. Beatrice nurtures Dante's soul with this spectacular vision of the double triumph. Likewise, it is Mary upon whom Dante must gaze in canto 32 before he can witness Christ in all His glory. Therefore, even though it initially appears that Beatrice nourishes Dante and Mary cannot due to his weak vision, later revelations prove that Mary fulfills her duties as Dante's spiritual mother.

While this canto does move in a seemingly circular fashion by opening and closing with similar imagery, Dante, the pilgrim, is not the same at the close of the canto as he is at the start. This pattern represents a circle of growth in which each event that Dante experiences or witnesses acts as a stepping stone in his climb to new spiritual heights. Evidence of Dante's growth is exhibited as his range of vision expands giving him the strength to savor the magnificent sight of Mary in triumph. This newly acquired strength of sight also inspires Dante with confident hopes of moving towards the heavenly host, instead of anticipating their coming to him. Consequently, in achieving this new level of enlightenment, Dante's aspirations heighten to include reaching the final stage of his ultimate goal, salvation.

II

Clearly, Dante uses this pattern of procession and return to illustrate an important period of his spiritual enlightenment and growth. However, the correlations between this circular-chiastic pattern and certain astronomical and theological patterns compound the significance of this highly allegorical canto. The astronomical implications will be addressed first, as they act as a preface for the theological pattern of redemption through procession and return.

As illustrated by Figure three, medieval astronomers believed the earth to be the stable center of the universe with nine spheres, seven planetary, one stellar, and one invisible, revolving around it. However, existing beyond this physical universe is the Empyrean. “Educated Christians of Dante’s time...held that this was the abode of God, the angels, and the souls of the blessed”(Boyde, 135). It was also understood that the entire universe existed within this heaven or, more specifically, within the mind of God. In the *Convivio*, Dante calls the Empyrean “the supreme edifice of the universe, in which the whole universe is contained, and beyond which there is nothing; it is not in space, but was formed in the First Mind alone...”(Con. II, iii, 8, 10-11). The Empyrean does not move but, in reflecting the strength and stability of God, remains completely still.

The physical universe, in contrast, possesses two distinct motions. The first is the diurnal motion of all the heavenly spheres: it occurs from east to west along the celestial equator. It is the ninth sphere, the *Primum Mobile*, which is said to provide “the motive force for the diurnal revolution of all the heavenly bodies” because it exists closest to the

perfection of God. Consequently, it is the light and love of God which first sparks motion in the Primum Mobile and only then can the Primum Mobile sweep the other heavenly bodies around the earth with it. Plato, in the Timaeus, entitles this daily movement the Motion of the Same because of its consistency and constancy. Furthermore, because the image of a circle usually suggests eternity and perfection, this Motion of the Same is consequently paralleled with the stability and oneness of God. Dante even illustrated this entire explanation in canto 30 when the pilgrim sees God as a circle of light whose “expanse comes from a single ray / striking the summit of the First Moved Sphere / from which it takes its vital force and power” (30.106-108). Therefore, it appears that this diurnal movement is simply a reflection of God on this universe and its workings.

The second motion of the physical universe is the unique annual motion of each individual sphere, except for the ninth sphere, the Primum Mobile, which possesses only diurnal motion. These distinctive movements occur from west to east along the ecliptic which, as shown in Figure four, is set on a diagonal to the equator. Plato also assigns this motion a title in the Timaeus, calling it the Motion of the Other. This motion is typically associated with Christ, however, not with his divinity, but with his humanity. God created man with free will and in doing so, each man is unique and free to follow God or turn from him. In becoming man, Christ also becomes free to be tempted, free to choose, and free to fail or succeed. He can now feel the struggle for balance between the mortal's desires of the flesh and the immortal's needs of the soul. Christ, however, follows the true path and in dying to save man, He becomes an example for all of mankind to follow. Therefore, as God created mankind in his image and as Christ, becoming man, is also

created in the image and likeness of God, this secondary movement of the universe can also be considered reflective of God.

The symbolism of these two motions is furthered because they intersect to form the pattern of the letter “X” on the universe. First, this intersection can be viewed as representative of a cross. It is upon a cross which Christ sacrifices his life in order to provide salvation for all of mankind. The cross is a symbol to all Christians of the magnitude of Christ’s sacrifice and the gratefulness they should feel for the redemption that Christ has brought to them. Therefore, just as the two motions are reflections of God on the universe, this cross is a visible reminder to mankind of not only the gift of salvation which has been given to man, but also the pain and struggle which was undertaken in order to earn this gift.

Second, as already explained, this “X” is formed when the paths of the two motions representing the perfection of God and the imperfection of humanity cross. Durling and Martinez term this “X” (the Greek letter *chi*) as “[t]he celestial Chi” and explain that it is “the Creator’s mark in the heaven’s”(Durling and Martinez, 240). Therefore, it seems that just as the cross is an image of redemption, the *chi* acts as a reminder of God’s work as creator. Consequently, this “X” serves a dual purpose as it will always symbolize creation and salvation.

The ties between astronomy and theology are now apparent. Additionally, because much of the symbolism just described deals with Christ becoming human and sacrificing his life to save mankind, it is highly relevant to the chiasmic pattern in canto 23 of the Paradiso. This relevance is due to the fact that Dante’s quest for salvation reflects the pattern of procession and return which Christ follows in order to save the human race.

John opens his Gospel by proclaiming Christ not only as son of God, but also as the Creator: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being”(John 1:1-3). Christ must exit the Empyrean and proceed forth into time in order to become Man: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us...”(John 1:14). Therefore, in becoming man, Christ abandons the perfections of Heaven and the heavenly host and enters into the physical world which is filled with sin, sinners, and pain. However, even though “the world came into being through him,...the world did not know him,” and despite all of the good he inspires while on earth, he is condemned as a sinner and suffers his death on the cross (John 1:10). Three days later, however, after descending “into the lower parts of the earth,” Christ rises again to give final instructions to his apostles so that they may continue his mission of preaching the Word of God. Christ instructs Peter and the other apostles to “Feed my sheep” and only after this can he ascend to join his father once again in the Empyrean, for he has not only died for the sins of man but he has also left a legacy for mankind to follow (John 21:17). Consequently, the apostles become the first leaders of the Church and Christ, having finished his task, now returns from where he came, only now he returns victorious.

Christ’s journey is the salvational archetype of the pattern of procession and return. The format of the chiasmus in canto 23 seems to be an echo of this pattern. The reader is presented with two images of spiritual motherhood which compose the beginning and the end of a circular pattern. Within the confines of this pattern, Dante attempts to witness the brilliant light of Christ in triumph, but must turn away due to the weakness of

his vision. However, this event is not totally futile because his vision is strengthened as proven when he can look into Beatrice's smile and when he is able to endure the sight of Mary in triumph. Therefore, even though Dante does not physically move, the action of the poem does move away from an image of maternity and back to another maternal image. This action illustrates a period of growth which will aid in Dante's journey to finally facing God in all his glory and, consequently, gaining salvation. Evidently then, this chiastic pattern is representative of Christ's salvational procession and return.

There are at least two other representations of this pattern of procession and return occurring within this canto and also throughout the Commedia. One of these patterns is pagan and the other Christian, yet both are important.

The first example of this pattern is relevant to canto 23 since it involves the myth of Castor and Pollux, the Gemini twins, and during this canto Dante is in his natal sign of Gemini. Castor and Pollux are the twin sons of Leda; however, Castor is fathered by the mortal king Tyndareus, and Pollux's father is the immortal king of the gods, Zeus (Jupiter). When Castor is killed by Idas, a cattle owner, Pollux is inconsolable and he prays to Zeus for death as well, willing to sacrifice his immortality to be with his brother. As result of this unselfishness, Zeus allows the twins to spend half of every year on Mount Olympus and the other half on earth, never to be separated. Regardless of the pagan aspects of this myth, it still follows the salvational archetype, as Pollux relinquishes his immortality in a pagan Paradise in order that he may spend eternity with his brother. Dante does not directly apply this myth to the poem; however, because Dante and Beatrice are in Gemini the myth and the pattern it exemplifies remain a factor when understanding the canto.

The second representation of the pattern of procession and return possesses Christian overtones and is integral to the overriding themes of the Commedia. This pattern is represented by Beatrice's journey, which, like Christ's, includes leaving paradise in order to offer salvation. In Inferno 2, we learn how Mary sends Lucia to Beatrice with a plea for her to help Dante stay on the right path. Beatrice then journeys to the depths of Hell where she pleads with Virgil to guide Dante through Hell and Purgatory. Virgil recognizes her despair and the gravity of this request and he agrees to guide the pilgrim. Beatrice then returns to her place in Paradise and prepares to escort Dante through Paradise, where he will finally be able to comprehend the fruits of salvation.

Therefore, it is evident that like Christ, Beatrice temporarily relinquishes the perfections of Heaven by proceeding forth to save Dante's soul. She too returns victorious because her pilgrim has matured enough spiritually to witness God in His glorious paradise. This is the vision which will be the source of his salvation, however, not simply because he has completed the treacherous journey. Rather, he has learned and grown throughout his journey and the final vision of Paradise is what will keep Dante on the straight and narrow path when he returns to earth. Consequently, it seems that, like Christ, Beatrice proceeds forth into time in order to provide salvation for another. However, as Christ taught his disciples the way of god, Dante's salvation is granted because Beatrice introduces him to faithful souls whose words and love for God instructs and inspires the pilgrim.

With these two representations of salvation granted through a procession and return, the importance of this archetypal pattern within the Commedia is revealed. Dante the author applies the path that Christ undertakes to save man to not only the path that

Beatrice follows to save the pilgrim, but also the path that Dante, the pilgrim, follows to save himself.

III

Dante's journey is a long process of instruction, understanding, and spiritual growth. As already exhibited with the chiasmic pattern of action and Dante's growth through procession and return, canto 23 represents a significant part of Dante's growth. This canto is the beginning of a new stage in the poem, the final stage. This new beginning results from the presence of Christ and Mary within the canto, because with their presence, this canto offers a brief glimpse of Dante's final meeting with Christ and the Heavenly Host in the Empyrean. Consequently, this canto is the first of eleven cantos which illuminate Dante's final preparations for the end of his journey and also illustrate the fruits of this preparation when Dante stands faced with the brilliant Light of God.

Since this canto is a prefiguration of events yet to come, certain themes and images which appear in the canto act as foreshadowing as well. The overriding themes in the canto: guidance of vision, ineffability, strength of vision, the Light of God, and the Garden of Christ, all deal with clarity and strength of vision, for this is necessary preparation if Dante is to face the Light of God.

The first of these foreshadowing themes is the guidance and direction that Beatrice offers Dante. As a pilgrim, Dante remains in awe of the wonders of Paradise for the duration of his visit there. He is often overwhelmed and captivated by not only the beauty of Heaven but the ever-growing beauty of Beatrice as well. Consequently, Beatrice very

often has to direct his attention to what is of the most importance for his journey and his growth. This motherly guidance can be seen at three crucial points in canto 23. First, at the commencement of the canto, Dante is staring up at the Heavens in anticipation of an event, the nature of which he is ignorant. However, as the Heavens increase in luminosity, it is Beatrice who points out exactly what he is to witness when she tell him to “[B]ehold the hosts/ of Christ in triumph...”(23. 19-20). Second, this vision is too bright for Dante’s eyes to withstand and he turns away only to be guided by Beatrice again. This time, Beatrice does not direct him to the light or to look up; rather, she says, “[O]pen your eyes, look straight into my face!/ Such things have you been witness to that now/ you have the power to endure my smile”(23.46-48). These instructions are significant because they indicate that Dante’s vision has strengthened and, consequently, he has experienced spiritual growth. Third, Dante becomes so enraptured by the beauty of her smile that Beatrice is forced to direct Dante’s attention yet again. Beatrice understands his rapture, but she also knows there is something more important at hand for him to see. In what seems to be a reprimand, Beatrice questions Dante’s infatuation: ”Why are you so enamored of my face that you do not turn to the lovely garden/ flowering in the radiance of Christ?”(23.70-72). In a hurry to correct his innocent error, Dante follows her guidance and in doing so, not only witnesses the glorious garden of Christ but the triumph of Mary as well.

Advice and guidance similar to this continue throughout the rest of the poem and increase as Dante approaches the Heavenly Court. Beatrice, though, is not the only one to offer direction, because it is only through the guidance of the reverent and pensive St. Bernard of Clairvaux that Dante’s Journey can come to fruition. Beatrice does direct him

before she leaves his side to take her seat in God's Heavenly Court. However, because her final speeches tend to be bitter due to the corrupt clergy on earth, her direction of Dante's attention in Canto 29 is not to a magnificent sight, but back to a more heavenly topic: "We have digressed enough. Turn your mind's eye/ back to the road of truth; we must adjust/ discussion to what time is left us here"(29.127-129). The conversation to which she directs him is one that concludes her explanation of the structure and workings of Heaven and with this understanding, Dante moves into the Empyrean which means he is nearing the end of his journey. The last directions that Beatrice gives Dante point out to him the "white-robed consistory" and the "vast expanse...of the eternal Rose" of Heaven(30.129,130,124).

After this final advice, it is up to Bernard to guide her pilgrim. In Canto 31, Bernard's directions are very similar to Beatrice's in canto 23 when she guides Dante's attention to the garden of Christ. Bernard explains to Dante that "...this state / of blissful being will not be known to you / as long as you keep your eyes fixed down here / look up into the circles, to the highest /until your eyes behold,...the Queen"(31.112-116). This is significant because it is only through seeing Mary, Queen of Heaven, that Dante's vision can become strong enough to see God in all his glory. This has already been foreshadowed in Canto 23, for there also when his eyes are too weak to observe the light of Christ he is appeased with a vision of Mary. As a result of this recurring theme of guidance and direction of attention, Dante's spiritual growth is apparent as he is continually directed to look upon more glorious visions. This growth is most obvious in Canto 33 for instead of Dante requiring guidance he knows exactly where to look as he explains: "Bernard then gestured to me with a smile/ that I look up, but I already was/

instinctively what he would have me be”(33.49-51). It seems that Dante now understands his place and purpose in his surroundings and, consequently, no longer needs a guide other than his faith in God to help him along his journey both in Paradise and on earth.

Very often, however, while still in need of directions, many images and events to which his attention is guided are of such power and brilliance that Dante can find no words fit to describe the visions before him. This topic of ineffability is evident throughout Paradise, yet these incidences where Dante finds himself speechless increase as he nears his final destination and culminates when he is faced directly with the Light of God. Prior to canto 23, the problem of ineffability mainly arose as Dante and Beatrice ascended to a new planet, for as they near God, her beauty grows. This is exemplified when Dante and his guide arrive on Mars in canto 14 and Dante explains that, “Beatrice showed herself to me / smiling so radiantly, it must be left / among those sights the mind cannot retrace”(14.79-81). In Canto 23, Dante twice confronts such beauty and brilliance in Beatrice that he cannot describe for his reader exactly what he sees. As already explained, these are not the premier instances of ineffability in reference to Beatrice. However, they mark significant occurrences in Dante’s maturing spirituality and strengthening vision, as it is in this canto that he witnesses the light of Christ as reflected in Beatrice’s face and eyes.

The first example of ineffability in this canto is significant because Dante’s inability to describe the vision before him is due to the fact that he looks to Beatrice during the Triumph of Christ and, consequently, witnesses “her face aflame with so much light,/ her eyes so bright with holy happiness”(23.22-23). It is in Beatrice’s face and eyes that Dante first notices the brilliant light of Christ in Triumph and the magnificence of this light

together with Beatrice's sacred beauty obviously must be an image beyond the words of any mortal. The second example of this ineffability occurs after Dante tries to peer directly into the Light of Christ and in turning away is finally guided, after much anticipation, to look into Beatrice's smile. This is the very first time that Dante's eyes possess the strength to endure the perfect beauty of her smile especially this close to the Empyrean and in the presence of Christ and Mary. Dante explains his loss of words in the face of this perfection by saying:

If at this moment all the tongues of verse,
 which Polyhymnia and her sister nourished
 with their sweet milk, sang to assist my art,
 their singing would not come to one one-thousandth
 part of the truth about her sacred smile
 nor how it set her holy face aglow(23.55-60).

Consequently, it appears that the presence of Christ and Mary enhance the significance of these instances of ineffability, as this accompaniment has not occurred up to this point. However, as previously explained, this canto foreshadows Dante's final meeting with Christ. As a result, the instances of ineffability here in this canto foreshadow more to come when Dante and Beatrice are once again in the presence of Christ and Mary.

The next time after canto 23, that Dante and Beatrice are in the same realm as the Heavenly Host, occurs only after they enter the Empyrean in Canto 30. As this canto commences, Dante, not yet aware that he is in the Empyrean, notices some changes in his physical surroundings; however, he is overwhelmed when he turns to look at Beatrice and sees that her beauty has become so dazzling that he can find no words worthy to describe

her. Dante again must explain to his reader why he is allowed to witness this beauty and yet he cannot manage to relay even the slightest detail of the vision he has before him:

The beauty I saw there goes far beyond
 all mortal reach; I think that only He
 Who made it knows the full joy of its being.
 At this point I admit to my defeat
 ...I must stop trying to pursue
 her beauty in my verse, for I have done
 as much as any artist at his best.”(30.22-24, 31-33)

This seems to resemble many other instances of ineffability because it results from an enhancement of Beatrice’s beauty due to their move to a higher realm. However, not long after Dante’s explanation does he realize the reason that her beauty has become so considerable is because, yet again, they are in the presence of Christ, Mary, and the entire Heavenly Host. Beatrice is finally at home.

As the action of the poem continues, Dante is told to look into Mary’s face if he ever wishes to look into the Light of God. So, just as was prefigured in Canto 23, Dante raises his vision to see Mary glorified. However, now that she is in her true home, her beauty must remain undescribed as well. This lack of description, however, is also out of respect for the virgin as seen when Dante says that “even if I were as rich in words/ as in remembering, I would not dare/ describe the least part of such beauty’s bliss”(31.136-138).

Dante’s final moment of ineffability is, of course, in facing the glorious Light of God in all its power and not merely reflected in the face of another as in Canto 23. This

momentary pause from description is due to Dante's witnessing not only the Light of God but because as he looks deeply into it, he recognizes the Trinity as well. In the face of this, Dante is so bedazzled that he cannot even explain how weak words would be here: "How weak words fall short of my conception/ which is itself so far from what I saw/ that 'weak is much too weak a word to use'"(33.121-123).

In order for Dante to find these visions ineffable, however, his vision must be strong enough to endure the sight of them and as seen in Canto 23 and beyond, his vision is often subjected to temporary bedazzlement by directly facing the Light of God, which then leads to the required strength of vision. The failure of Dante's vision in Canto 23 occurs when he attempts to stare directly into the light of Christ in triumph and "through its living light there poured the glow/ of its translucent substance, bright, so bright/ that my poor eyes could not endure the sight"(23.31-33). Consequently, Dante, bewildered by his weakness, is forced to look away. However, this episode is not a total loss because what Dante is able to withstand along with his simply being in the presence of Christ causes his mind to break its mortal bounds. The fruits of this are immediately obvious because it is after his mind "breaks its bounds" that Beatrice directs him to look into her smile for now he has the power to endure it. However, his work is not complete yet, and he must again subject himself to the "battle of the light"(23.78). This time, though, regardless of the struggle it takes, Dante is allowed to view not only the Garden of Christ, but Mary in triumph as well. The fact that his vision is strong enough to see Mary but not Christ is an element which will be repeated later on in Canto 32 and , therefore, it is necessary to examine the action of this episode closely.

When Dante turns reverently to see Mary, he is soothed by her presence. However, not long after he turns to her, a ring or halo of fire descends emitting beautiful melodies and crowns her. This is the Angel Gabriel who has come to escort Mary home to the Empyrean. Dante's mortal vision is still faulty and this is the reason why he sees Gabriel as a ring of flames while later on, he can see Gabriel in true angelic form. Mary and her escort ascend out of the Heaven of the fixed Stars and as she leaves, Dante tries to follow her all the way up, but again because his vision is weak he cannot see her journey's destination. Therefore, while Dante's eyes strengthen in this canto signaling a period of growth, his vision is still lacking the strength and clarity necessary to see the Light of God.

Even though we witness Dante's weak vision a few times after Canto 23, as he nears the end of his quest, more examples of his strengthened senses arise. Just after Dante arrives in the Empyrean, he is struck by a glorious light which he says enfolds him "so tightly in its veil/ of luminance that I saw only light"(30.50-51). This is a very important step, for instead of blinding him or causing him to turn away, this light envelops him so that it is all he can see. The complete effect of this event is evident a few lines later when he reveals that his "senses now were raise beyond their powers;/ the power of new sight lit up my eyes/ so that no light, however bright it were/ would be too brilliant for my eyes to bear"(30.57-60). Yet, even though he can now bear any light, his vision is still not perfect, for at his point, he does not see the souls or angels of the heavenly court in their true forms but, as flowers and bees. Beatrice explains to Dante that "[T]hese things are not imperfect in themselves;/ the defect, rather, lies within your sight,/ as yet not strong enough to reach such heights"(30.79-81). It is only after his eyes have "drunk/ within

those waters” of the Empyrean which are representative of the Light of God that his vision is no longer confused (30.88-89). However, as is foreshadowed in canto 23, Bernard directs him to “look at that face which resembles Christ/ the most, for only in its radiance/ will you be made ready to look at Christ”(32.85-87). The scene where Dante turns to Mary remarkably resembles the one in canto 23 in more than theme alone, for when Dante turns to Mary, he sees the Angel Gabriel in his angelic form standing before Her singing “so much in love he seems to *burn like fire*”(32.105; *emphasis*). Obviously, with his strengthened sight, Dante is now able to see Gabriel other than symbolically. [Note: Gabriel appears in both cantos 23 and 32 in the same exact line, 94.]

The final image that I will offer of Dante’s strengthened vision, of course, comes in canto 33 when he is finally allowed to stare into the Light of God and he comments that “[I]f I had turned my eyes away, I think,/ from the sharp brilliance of the living Ray/ which they endured, I would have lost my senses”(33.76-78). Consequently, Dante moves from his mind breaking its mortal bounds because he stares too long at Christ in triumph, to losing his senses if he were to turn away from the most intense light possible, the Light of God.

No matter what the consequences of Dante’s staring into the Light of God, this Light is always described in canto 23 and beyond as a single ray or point of light which illuminates the myriad of souls who make up the heavenly host. Dante describes this ray of light twice in canto 23 in two distinct ways. The first representation of this light occurs when Christ begins to descend in triumph and the best way that Dante can depict the vision is to compare it to the sun lighting the stars: “I saw above a myriad of lights,/ one Sun that lit them all, even as our sun/ illuminates the stars of his domain”(23.28-30).

However, when faced with the full radiance of this beam, Dante must turn away. It is not until Christ lifts himself on high so that Dante can view the Garden of Christ that he is again able to witness Its luminary powers. When Dante turns to the Garden of the Heavenly Host, he sees each soul illuminated by a single ray which he compares to a ray of sun breaking through to light a field on a cloudy day.

Upon first reading, it might seem that Dante witnesses the light of Christ as a single ray here because he cannot tolerate any more than that. This theory is proven wrong in later cantos. In canto 28, Dante sees the light of Christ as no more than “a point that radiated light” and Beatrice explains that “[O]n that Point/ depend all nature and all of the heavens”(28.16,41-2). This light is also shown to illuminate the innumerable angels in Canto 30 just after Dante’s vision is cleared and he is allowed to see the Light of God in its true form of a circle. However, he concludes his explanation of this amazing image by remarking that “its expanse comes from a single ray”(30.106). The importance of this imagery of Christ’s light as a single ray results from the notion that in the nature of perfection, God’s love should only radiate from a single point as he is a single perfect being.

The final topic which is introduced in canto 23 and is carried out in the rest of the poem is the imagery of the Garden of Christ. The Garden of Christ is the symbolic representation of the heavenly Host and even at the point when Dante’s sight is no longer confused by symbolic vision, this imagery still remains valid because the Heavenly court is said to be seated in what is metaphorically a “white rose”. In Canto 23, Beatrice directs Dante’s vision to this garden when she says: “[T]here is the Rose in which the Word of God/ took on the flesh, and there the lilies are/ whose fragrance led mankind down the

good path”(23.73-75). While Beatrice specifically refers to certain members of the garden of Christ here, this is the first time in which Dante is directed to look at this garden. However, since he will again be in the presence of this garden, this scene exists in anticipation of that moment. It is not until canto 30 that Dante will again be in the presence of this garden. In this canto, he sees the Light of God as the water of a stream on whose banks grows flowers of red petals and gold centers with bees or angelic sparks flitting around as well. Obviously, just as this water nourishes the flowers, the Light of God nourishes the souls of the Heavenly Host. Dante, being in the Empyrean, is now allowed to see the garden in its entirety rather than looking only to specific members. It is also in this canto that first mention of the Rose is made: “...how vast the space/ of this Rose to its outer petals’ reach!”(30.116-117). A more vivid description of the Rose which houses the Heavenly Host, however, is offered at the commencement of Canto 31: “So now, appearing to me in the form/ of a white rose was Heaven’s sacred host”(31.1-2). Following this imagery from its prefigurement in canto 23 to the true vision in canto 30, it seems then, that the imagery of the Garden of Christ matures as Dante does.

As seen not only in the themes and imagery within canto 23, but also in its unique circular pattern of action, certain elements within the canto are significant because of the presence of Christ and Mary. It is this presence which allows the canto to foreshadow Dante’s final vision of God and, as a result, the themes and imagery present in the canto foreshadow this event as well. The themes of guidance, ineffability, strength of vision, the Light of God, and the Garden of Christ illustrate, in this canto, the preparations that Dante makes to see the unaltered Light of God in the final cantos. This illustration is effective not only because of the portrayal of his struggles to strengthen his vision, but also because

of the descriptions, when possible, of what it is that Dante is seeing or trying to see. In repeating these same images throughout later cantos which lead to his final vision of God, Dante's growth becomes evident in stages as each theme is repeated more than once. Consequently, the reader is not simply given two images, one before growth and one after growth, but is allowed to see the steps of Dante's spiritual enlightenment.

As the theme of guidance is repeated, Dante matures from needing Beatrice to direct his vision in 23, to Bernard guiding his attention towards Mary in 31, and finally, he is seen instinctively looking where he should without direction from anyone. The theme of ineffability illustrates Dante's growth in another manner. His growth, here, is depicted through the changes in images which are so perfect that he cannot describe them, as they move from Beatrice's face in the presence of the Light of Christ, to Beatrice in the Empyrean once again in the Light of God, to Dante actually witnessing the Light of God directly. Strength of vision is the pivotal theme here because it is only through strengthening his vision that Dante can witness God in all his glory. As this theme unfolds, Dante is seen struggling to see Christ in triumph and failing in canto 23. However, since this struggle causes his vision to strengthen, the next time that Dante is struck by a glorious light in canto 30, it envelops him so it is all he can see rather than blinding him so he must turn away. Finally, of course, Dante's struggles to see are compensated when he is allowed to see the Light of God in canto 33. The Light of God is also a poignant theme as it is Dante's ultimate goal to witness this light. This theme, like that of ineffability, depicts Dante's growth through a change in images. This ray is consistently described as a single ray of light illuminating the Heavenly Host throughout cantos 23 and 28. However, it is not until canto 30 that Dante is allowed to witness this

Light in its true form of a circle. Yet, even with this new clarity of vision, Dante points out that the source of light for this circle is a single ray. Finally, there is the image of the Garden of Christ which illustrates Dante's growth through a series of images in which Dante first sees Mary and the apostles as a rose and lilies in a garden in canto 23 to canto 30 where he sees the entire garden in its glory and finally to canto 31 where he sees the entire Heavenly Host seated in a white rose.

Therefore, as seen in the progression of these themes and images, Dante's growth and his final vision of God is prefigured by the themes and images in canto 23. This canto, then, acts as a transitional canto, bringing the reader into the final stage of the poem where Dante will complete his salvational journey. The reason that this canto acts in this manner is because the presence of Christ and Mary foreshadows the final scene of the poem where Dante witnesses the brilliant Light of God which is the image which will remain with him when he returns to earth and help keep him on the road to salvation.

As stated earlier, the circular or chiasmic pattern of action also derives significance from the presence of Christ and Mary. This pattern represents a cycle of growth in Dante's quest for salvation where his growth is represented through a strengthening of his vision. The action moves in a circle, beginning and ending with images of spiritual motherhood, yet between these images, Dante is seen struggling and failing to witness the Light of Christ. However, the fruits of this struggle appear when Dante is allowed to look not only into Beatrice's smile but also when he can endure the vision of Mary in triumph.

This pattern is first connected to the astronomical patterns of the two motions which by themselves represent God's mark on the universe which He created and together in the form of an X represent the sacrifice which Christ undertook to achieve

redemption for mankind. Consequently, the significance of the pattern of the circle is seen as it not only represents the perfection and eternal nature of God but as it represents the struggles Dante must undertake to achieve his salvation and enter the eternal realm of his Creator.

As a result of the astronomical pattern reflecting Christ's journey for salvation, it becomes necessary to look at the actual path that Christ follows to achieve this gift for man. In doing this, it is evident that Christ follows a pattern of procession and return as he proceeds forth from paradise into the physical world to teach and love his fellow man. However, during this time many men disliked what he taught, and despite his goodness, Christ is condemned as a sinner and put to death through crucifixion. Three days after his death, Christ rises again to give final instructions to his loyal and worthy apostles who He must leave behind to do God's will without Him. It is only after these final instructions that Christ returns to paradise victorious.

Examples of this procession and return can be found not only in the pattern of action of canto 23 but also in the triumph of Christ which takes place within the canto as well. Although Dante never physically moves throughout the action of the canto, he does achieve some measure of spiritual growth which helps to bring him closer to his final goal of salvation. Consequently, even though this growth is only a small step in Dante's journey for salvation, it is vital if he is to achieve successful completion of his quest. Therefore, since Dante's salvation cannot be obtained without the strengthening of vision that is represented within this pattern, this chiasmus appears to represent Christ's journey for salvation as well.

This pattern is also represented in the triumph of Christ which Dante struggles so much to see. In order for the triumph to occur, Christ must leave His father and Paradise and descend into the physical universe. His purpose here, much like His purpose when He came to save mankind, is to aid in Dante's search for salvation. It is this presence of Christ which allows for Dante's vision to strengthen and only after this occurs does Christ return to the Empyrean, once again successful. Consequently, not only is this a representation of Christ's first salvational procession and return but it also displays the relevance of the presence of Christ to this pattern.

Therefore, as has been witnessed in the themes of canto 23 as well as the chiasmic pattern of action, canto 23 derives its significance as a transition canto from the presence of Christ, Mary and the Heavenly Host.

Notes

1. At this point in the poem, the sun is in Aries.
2. For help in explaining the astronomy relevant to the chiastic pattern, I turned to Patrick Boyde's Dante: Philomythes and Philosopher, Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez's Time and the Crystal, and Charles Singleton's Paradiso: Notes.

Works Cited

- Boyde, Patrick. Dante, Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Durling, Robert and Martinez, Ronald. Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's Rime Petrose. Berkely: University of California Press, 1990.
- Singleton, Charles S. Paradiso: Commentary. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

*FIGURE ONE:
The circular movement of the chiastic pattern*

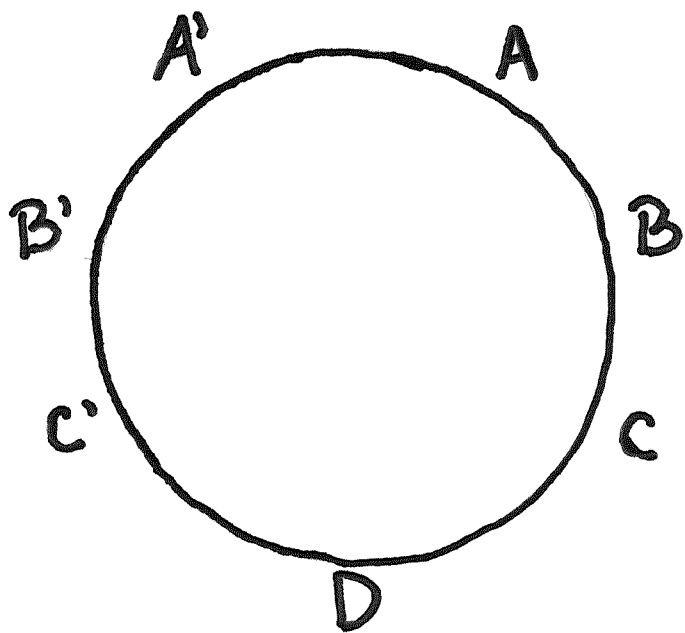


FIGURE TWO:
Canto 23--- chiasmic pattern

A. Image of maternity as seen with the comparison of Beatrice to a nested bird.

↓

B. Dante and Beatrice looking up to Heaven in anticipation.

↓

C. (1) Triumph of Christ as pointed out by Beatrice.

↓

(2) Myriad of souls are lit by one source.

↓

(3) The sight of the triumph is too bright for Dante's eyes.

↓

(4) Beatrice instructs Dante to look into her face.

↓

D. Dante can endure Beatrice's smile yet it must remain undescribed for there are no words worthy to describe the beauty and perfection of her smile.

A'. Image of maternity as seen with the souls reaching up to Mary as infants.

↑

B'. Dante looking towards Heaven in an attempt to see Mary's journey home.

↑

C'. (1) Dante witnesses the Triumph of Mary as the flame encircles her.

↑

(2) Dante sees the souls in the garden of Christ which is lit by one source.

↑

(3) Dante fights the "battle of the light" in order to look at the "garden of Christ."

↑

(4) Beatrice admonishes Dante for being so enamored of her face.

↑

FIGURE THREE:

The view of Medieval astronomers: the earth is the stable center of the universe

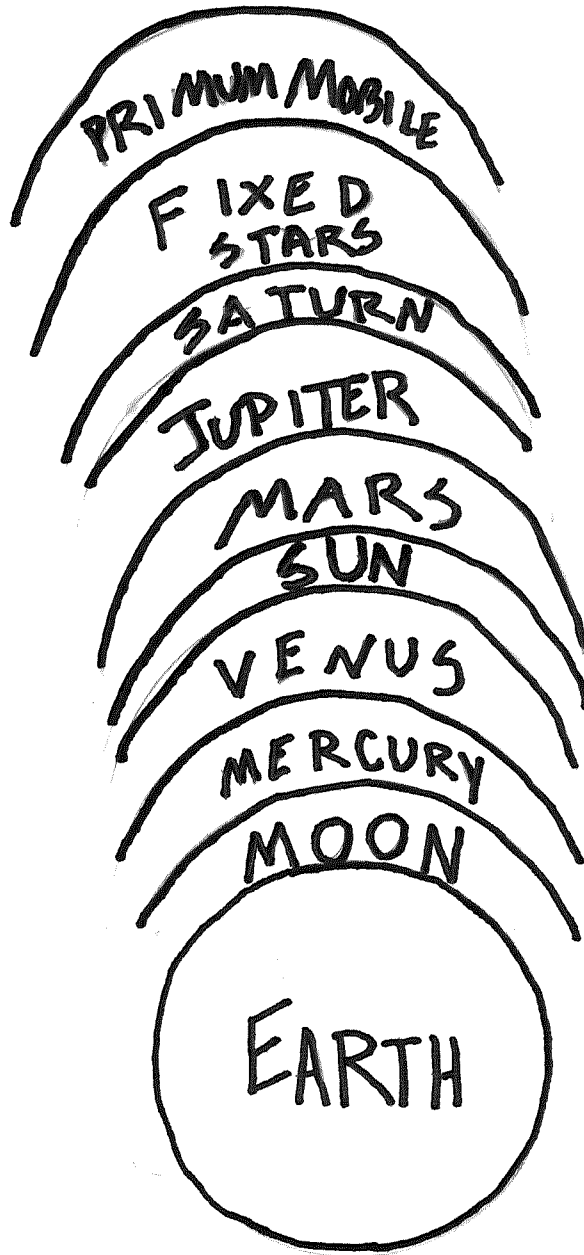


FIGURE FOUR:
The cross of the two motions

