Medieval View of the Cosmos
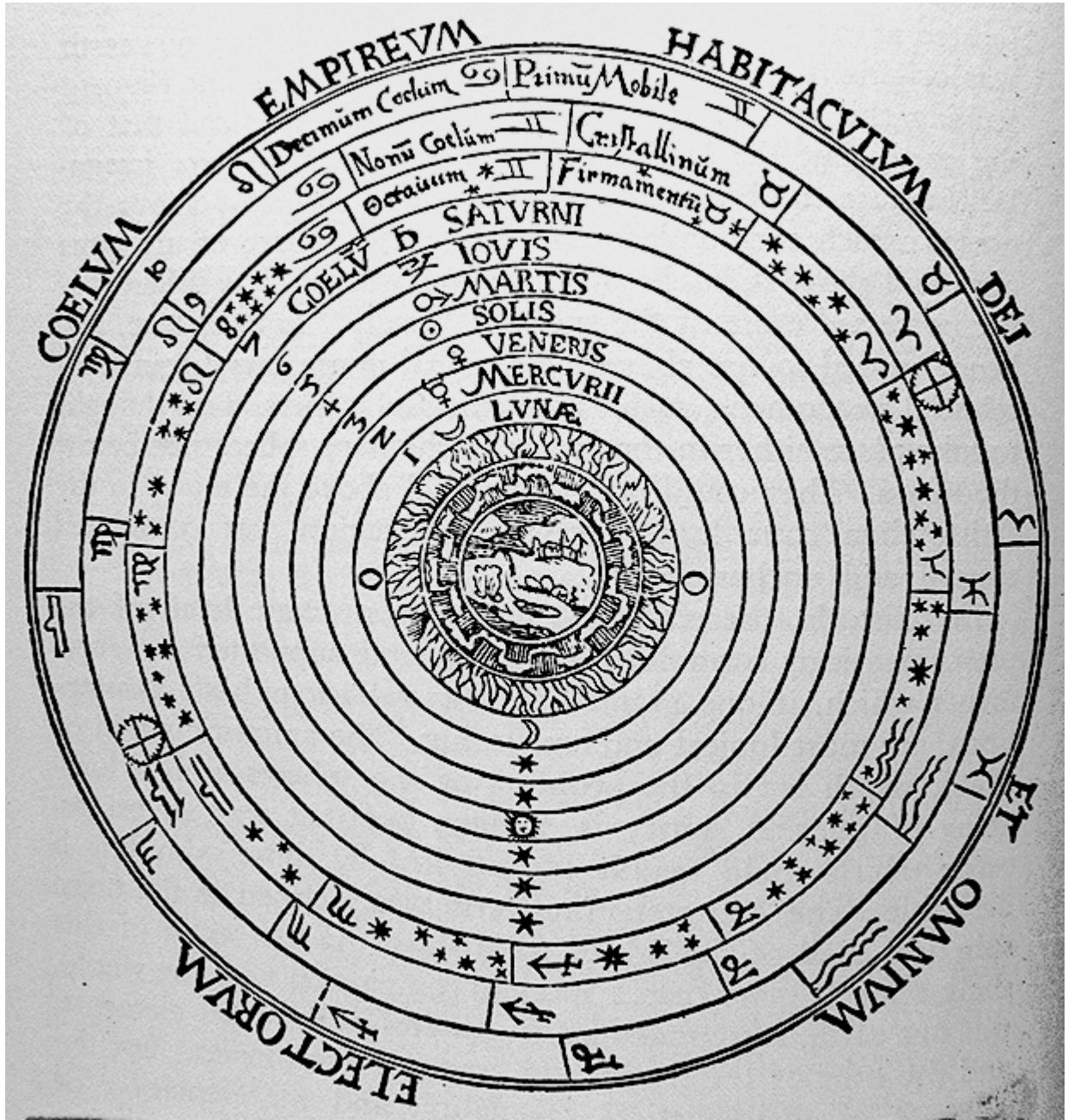
Medieval World Map from 13th century

THE EMPYREAN

PARADISE

IX CRYSTALLINE SPHERE   THE PRIMUM MOBILE

VIII SPHERE OF THE FIXED STARS
THE ZODIAC

VII SPHERE OF   SATURN

VI SPHERE OF   JUPITER

V SPHERE OF   MARS

IV SPHERE OF   THE SUN

III SPHERE OF   VENUS

II SPHERE OF   MERCURY

I SPHERE OF   THE MOON

EARTHLY   PARADISE

FIRE

AIR   PURGATORY

HEMISPHERE   OF WATER

HEMISPHERE   OF EARTH

THE DARK WOOD

HELL

JERUSALEM
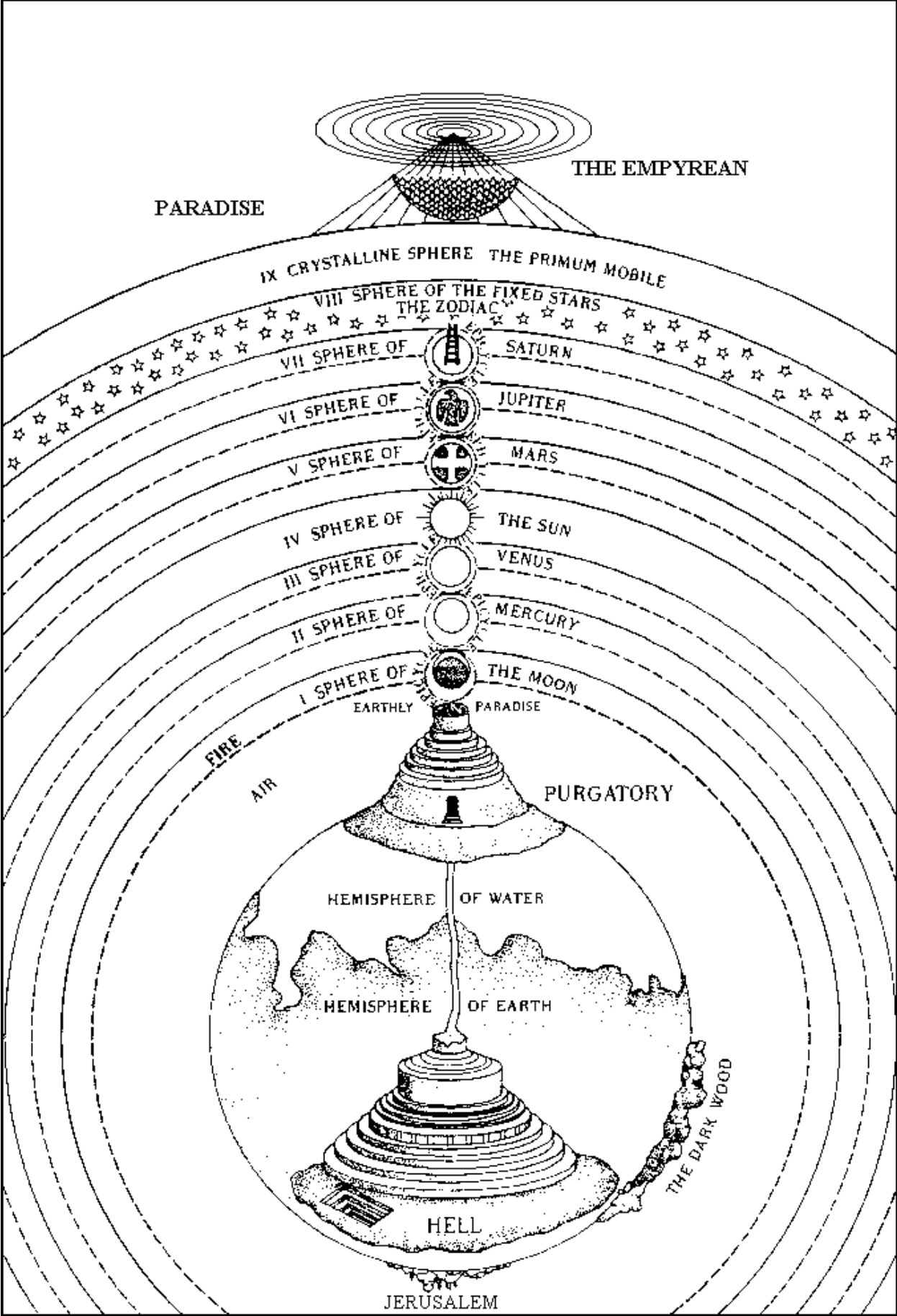
Side-by-Side Comparison of Dante Translations

Longfellow Translation	Cary Translation	Musa Translation
Midway upon the journey of our life I found myself within a forest dark, For the straightforward pathway had been lost. Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say What was this forest savage, rough, and stern, Which in the very thought renews the fear. So bitter is it, death is little more; But of the good to treat, which there I found, Speak will I of the other things I saw there. I cannot well repeat how there I entered, So full was I of slumber at the moment In which I had abandoned the true way. But after I had reached a mountain's foot, At that point where the valley terminated, Which had with consternation pierced my heart, Upward I looked, and I beheld its shoulders, Vested already with that planet's rays Which leadeth others right by every road.	IN the midway of this our mortal life, I found me in a gloomy wood, astray Gone from the path direct: and e'en to tell It were no easy task, how savage wild That forest, how robust and rough its growth, Which to remember only, my dismay Renews, in bitterness not far from death. Yet to discourse of what there good befell, All else will I relate discover'd there. How first I enter'd it I scarce can say, Such sleepy dullness in that instant weigh'd My senses down, when the true path I left, But when a mountain's foot I reach'd, where clos'd The valley, that had pierc'd my heart with dread, I look'd aloft, and saw his shoulders broad Already vested with that planet's beam, Who leads all wanderers safe through every way.	Midway upon the road of our life I found myself within a dark wood, for the right way had been missed. Ah! how hard a thing it is to tell what this wild and rough and dense wood was, which in thought renews the fear! So bitter is it that death is little more. But in order to treat of the good that there I found, I will tell of the other things that I have seen there. I cannot well recount how I entered it, so full was I of slumber at that point where I abandoned the true way. But after I had arrived at the foot of a hill, where that valley ended which had pierced my heart with fear, I looked on high, and saw its shoulders clothed already with the rays of the planet[1] that leadeth men aright along every path.

Terza Rima: Dante's poetic style

The opening lines of the *Divina Commedia*:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita (a)
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura (b)
> ché la diritta via era smarrita. (a)
>
> Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura (b)
> esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte (c)
> che nel pensier rinnova la paura! (b)
>
> Tant'è amara che poco è più morte; (c)
> ma per trattar del ben ch'i' vi trovai, (d)
> dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte. (c)
>
> Io non so ben ridir com'i' v'intrai, (d)
> tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto (e)
> che la verace via abbandonai. (d)

Edward Hirsch also writes about the terza rima in his book *A Poet's Glossary* (Harcourt, 2014):

terza rima: A verse form of interlocking three-line stanzas rhyming *aba*, *bcb*, *cdc*, etc. The terza rima form was invented by Dante Alighieri for the *Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*, ca. 1304–1321), using the hendecasyllabic (eleven-syllable) line common to Italian poetry. In *De vulgari eloquentia* ("On eloquence in the vernacular," 1304–1307), Dante called rhyme *concatenatio*("beautiful linkage"), and the triple rhymes beautifully link together the stanzas. Rhyming the first and third lines gives each tercet a sense of temporary closure; rhyming the second line with the first and last lines of the next stanza generates a strong feeling of propulsion. The effect of this chain-rhyme is both open-ended and conclusive, like moving through a series of interpenetrating rooms or going down a set of winding stairs: you are always traveling forward while looking back.